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# Volume 10 Issue 1: Editorial

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This issue of the *Journal of Working-Class Studies* comes at a tumultuous time. The war on Gaza continues, with ongoing destruction and devastation. Despite ongoing protests around the world (including [an historically large march](#) across Sydney's Harbour Bridge), progress towards a ceasefire and withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza has been slow. But Palestinians and allies refuse to give up hope, and the announcements from some western governments to formally [recognise Palestine](#) are a welcome development. We hope to see a ceasefire soon and a move towards permanent peace – people have suffered for too long.

The tumult has also occurred in the US with the start of the second Trump presidency. When we wrote our editorial in December 2024, we were unsure of the impact, but now it is clear. Trump has wrought chaos and harm onto the country, and the effects are deep and may be long-lasting. We send solidarity to those who fear being kidnapped, detained and deported and to those who worry that they might be the next target of Trump's bigotry and hatred. These are very scary times. Again, we don't lose sight of hope, and we look towards the people who are resisting and organising. Solidarity to all.

Closer to home, we are experiencing our own disruptions, with a massive restructure underway at the University that your editors work for. A plan to [cut hundreds of jobs](#), and gut important areas of teaching and research is devastating for staff, students and all who benefit from our work. Important areas are targeted such as public health, teacher training, international studies and languages – areas that attract working-class and First Nations students and which are mainly taught by women. Alas, this kind of restructure is not limited to our institution, and many other universities in our country (Australia) and around the world are suffering from the same assaults on programs and disciplines. The humanities seem to be particularly under threat at a time when we need critical and creative thinkers more than ever. Needless to say, the restructure at our university has pulled us away from some work in order to support our colleagues (in our roles as union reps). This is why this issue of the Journal is coming to you in August rather than June! We appreciate the patience of the authors included in this issue during the disruptions to our usual workflow.

And so, here we are! With a bumper issue of the Journal, with five articles, one analysis piece, three essays, four poems, two non-fiction creative pieces and six book reviews! The pieces in this issue cross geographical regions and historical periods, but all have the interests of working-class people at their core.

The issue begins with two articles relating to Bangladeshi workers. Md.Mizanur Rahman explores the effects of changing technology in “Motorization of Paddle Rickshaws in Bangladesh: A Socio-Economic Evaluation”, and explores the positive and negative impacts of the increase of motorised rickshaws on the workers who rely on them for their livelihoods. Bangladeshi migrant workers in

the Middle East are the topic of “From Migration to Psychological Distress: Depression, Suicidal Thoughts and Associated Factors among Bangladeshi Migrant Workers”. In this article, Pavel Ahmed, Mst.Safia Akter and Rashed Ahmed Hawlader look at data relating to the mental health conditions of the workers, and discover some concerning findings.

The next two articles are focused on historical topics, spanning the US and Europe. Thomas A. Castillo explores the passage of Florida’s ‘right to work’ constitutional amendment in the 1940s in “The ‘Sweetest Sounding’ Words of Civil Rights: A Labor Origin Story of the ‘Right to Work’”. Castillo looks at the ways that the term ‘right to work’ was used to confuse voters who assumed the idea was pro-worker, when in reality it was anti-union. Scott Weiss follows with “The Emergence of the Proletarian Cinema in the Weimar Republic” which argues that the 1929 film *Mother Krause’s Journey to Happiness* could be considered the epitome of proletarian film art.

The last article in this issue is from Kenneth Oldfield who in “From the Particular to the Generic: Fostering a More Socioeconomically Diverse Professoriate” argues that structural nepotism in public administrations needs to be taken into account in order to improve class diversity in institutions.

Following on from the articles is an analysis from Lawrence Eppard, David A. Boatwright and Thomas C. Hatvany who present statistical data on American poverty in “Cross-National Comparisons of Poverty and Working-Class Earnings: How the United States Measures Up”. This analysis operates as a follow-up on work previously published in this Journal and adds further data to create a picture of the earnings of the American working class.

A photo essay is the next piece – “Politics, Pandemics and Protest: A Case of 2020 Health Workers Strike in Hong Kong” by Hong Yu Liu, Bill Taylor and Alex Tsz Yuk Chan, recounts the events during a period of union activism in a hospital setting during the Covid-19 pandemic. This is followed by “In Youngstown, Ohio, Deindustrialisation Erodes the Old City, but Palimpsests of Place Yield Insights for Workers, Artists, and Activists, Including Me” which is a personal photo essay by Alice Whittenburg that explores the ways that places are used, and how art might be made in deindustrialised cities such as Youngstown. Ganesh Trichur’s “Working Class Politics and Identity Politics: An engagement with Michael Zweig” is the last essay in this section, and it offers a deep engagement with the work of Working-Class Studies leader Michael Zweig.

This issue has a number of creative pieces – a poem “Into the Sun” by Ian C Smith that evokes summer youthful memories, and three poems by William J. Doan, “The Ballard of My Frist Communion” (which also comes with original illustrations), “The Our Father Working-Class Riding Mower Blues” and “Duck, You Dumbass”. These poems also offer a look at the past, with a non-romantic description of working-class youth. Two creative non-fiction pieces complete this section, with Lita Kurth’s “Wisconsin Milk Strike” telling the fictionalised story of a 1933 attempt by farmers to try and force a decent price for their product, and “To the Woman Ordering Salad” by Debbie Chase that is set in the kitchen of a wine bar and told from the worker’s perspective.

We have six book reviews curated by Dr. Christie Launius, and all the books look very interesting! The range of topics is diverse and includes representation of poverty, the preservation of

endangered languages in urban areas, definitions of ‘work, experiences of call centre workers, stories by Asian workers and prison stories. Plenty to read and engage with as usual!

Many thanks to all of our authors – and to all of our readers. We hope you find something in this issue to inspire, stimulate and to strengthen solidarity.

# Motorization of Paddle Rickshaws in Bangladesh: A Socio-Economic Evaluation

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## Abstract

There has been a dramatic increase in the number of motorized rickshaws in Bangladesh in recent years. The development represents an improvement over traditional paddle rickshaws in several ways, including speed, comfort, and convenience. This study aimed to examine the process of motorization of paddle rickshaws in Bangladesh and its socio-economic impacts on the rickshaw pullers. The findings revealed that the motorization of rickshaws has significantly impacted the socio-economic conditions of rickshaw pullers in Bangladesh. The motorization of rickshaws has led to an increase in their daily income and improved their working conditions. The process of motorization of rickshaws has been driven by the desire for improved financial stability and the desire to provide better services to customers. However, the motorization of rickshaws has had some negative impacts, such as the lack of safety measures in locally designed motorization, an increase in the risk of fatal accidents, and a relatively high initial cost. This study provides valuable insights into the process and impacts of the motorization of rickshaws in Bangladesh. The findings highlight the need for policy interventions to address the challenges faced by rickshaw pullers in motorizing their rickshaws while also ensuring that they reap the maximum benefits from motorization. It contributes to the growing body of research on the socio-economic impacts of motorization in developing countries and can inform policy-making aimed at improving the lives of rickshaw pullers in Bangladesh and beyond.

## Key Words

Motorization of paddle rickshaw, rickshaw pulling, rickshaw pulling in Bangladesh, rechargeable battery rickshaw, rickshaw pullers in Bangladesh

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Rickshaws have historically been one of the primary modes of transportation in both Bangladesh and South Asia as a whole. Rickshaws are commonly thought to have originated in Japan. Because of the influence of Victorian phaetons, the first type of rickshaw, a *Jinrikisha*<sup>1</sup>, was invented in Japan in 1869. The traditional rickshaw was essentially a cart-like bicycle pulled by a person. Because of this, it is known as a pulled rickshaw (Warren, 1997). The pulled rickshaw was gradually phased out and replaced by the cycle rickshaw, which relied on mechanical power rather than human force. Then the rickshaws were motorized, which further modernized this means of transportation and brought the human labor required down to an absolute minimum. The idea of a cabinet motor tricycle made for carrying loads was accepted by the Italian company "Piaggio" immediately following the end of World War II. In 1948, the first such vehicle, known as the "Ape," entered the market (Mort, 2008). Vehicle localization is unavoidable as an urban landscape

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<sup>1</sup> A two-wheeled, open-topped cart that can be pulled by a single person

feature. The elements must interact with the geographical, cultural, economic, and other conditions of the land in order to gain access to citizens' shared memories (Rahmdel, 2015).

Though human-powered rickshaws had previously been introduced in Bangladesh, cycle rickshaws were first imported from Calcutta in 1938 by jute exporters living in Narayanganj and Netrokona (Imtiaz, 2011). Designed with brilliant, dynamic colors and embellished with colorful, lively tassels, glitter, plastic, and artwork that is one-of-a-kind and represents Bengali culture and tradition. Following the introduction of motorized rickshaws around the world, Bangladesh has also started using imported motorized auto rickshaws (Buliung et al., 2014). Electric motorized rickshaws have also been introduced in recent years. The inhumanity of rickshaw labor in Bangladesh has significantly decreased as a result of the motorization of these vehicles (Rahman, 2013). Both rickshaw pulling and its motorization have significant impacts on society and people's way of life.

BBS (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics) (2020) reported that the informal sector employs 51.4 percent of the total national workforce or approximately 64 million people. They include rickshaw pullers, agriculture workers, construction workers, hawkers, rag pickers, transport workers, and part-time domestic workers, among others. Millions of people in Bangladesh work in the rickshaw-pulling sector, which is one of the largest sources of informal work. According to Wipperman & Sowula (2007), there are approximately two million rickshaw pullers employed throughout Bangladesh, and approximately 14% of the country's total population depends on rickshaw pulling indirectly for their livelihood (rickshaw-pullers families, manufacturers, garage owners, painters, and repairmen). In Dhaka alone, this equates to approximately 2.5 million people. Therefore, rickshaw pulling is essential to Bangladesh's socio-economic structure and employment generation, particularly for the most underprivileged people in the country (Momotaz et al., 2009).

Motorization and mechanization of rickshaws have been a continuous process since the second world war. In Bangladesh motorization of rickshaws has been in many forms and ways. Recently there have been improvisations in the motorization of rickshaws in Bangladesh. Traditional rickshaws have been motorized by simply adding rechargeable batteries and motors. This special type of motorization has changed many socio-economic aspects of rickshaw pulling in Bangladesh (Basri et al., 2014).

The broad-scale objective of this research is to assess the impacts of the motorization of cycle rickshaws in Bangladesh. The specific objectives are— (a) to analyze the process and forms of motorization of paddle rickshaws in Bangladesh and (b) to assess the socio-economic impacts of motorization of paddle rickshaws in Bangladesh;

Since the end of World War II, rickshaws have been steadily becoming more motorized and mechanized. Different types of motorized rickshaws have emerged in Bangladesh. In recent years, rickshaws in Bangladesh have been upgraded with motors. Adding rechargeable batteries and motors allowed traditional rickshaws to become motorized. The introduction of this novel form of propulsion has revolutionized the socioeconomics of rickshaw pulling in Bangladesh. There are various types of motorized rickshaws in Bangladesh. Adding motors and rechargeable batteries to classic rickshaws made them suitable for urban transportation. Though significant studies have already been done on different aspects of rickshaw pulling, including its impact on internal

migration and informal job creation, no study has been conducted on the socio-economic impacts of the motorization of traditional paddle rickshaws with rechargeable batteries and motors in Bangladesh.

The purpose of this research is to examine how and why paddle rickshaws in Bangladesh have been converted to electric power and to weigh the resulting social and economic effects. The study area covered four districts (Dhaka, Rajshahi, Pabna, and Satkhira) of Bangladesh, where the author was sent as a part of the 74<sup>th</sup> Foundation Training Course for district and village attachment as well as under the “Explore Bangladesh” program. This research included both densely populated urban areas and less populated rural ones.

Due to time and resource constraints, the researcher was unable to cover majority areas of the country. Similarly, the researcher was unable to reach a larger number of respondents for the same reasons. In addition to that, the scope of this study is restricted to the investigation of the motorization of paddle rickshaws alone, despite the fact that there is plenty of other types of motorization.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

The motorization of paddle rickshaws in Bangladesh has been a topic of significant interest in recent years. This phenomenon has been studied from various perspectives, including economic, social, and environmental. In this literature review, we will examine the existing research on the motorization of paddle rickshaws in Bangladesh, with a focus on its socio-economic impacts. Gallagher (1992) wrote a classic book titled "The Rickshaws of Bangladesh" offering an in-depth analysis of the cycle-rickshaw's role in Bangladesh's transportation sector. Despite their significant contribution, rickshaws have been largely overlooked by policymakers, often viewed as inefficient and emblematic of underdevelopment. The government's stance has been to phase them out in favor of motor vehicles. However, Gallagher (1992) argued for their acceptance and integration into future urban planning. Replogle (1994) examined transportation challenges in developing countries, focusing on sustainable and equitable solutions and highlighted the importance of rickshaws as urban transport.

After surveying of 450 rickshaw users across six locations in Dhaka, Hossain and Susilo (2011) revealed that rickshaws are a primary mode of transport for commuting, social engagements, and recreational activities. They also concluded that rickshaw pullers would face increased social exclusion if rickshaws were banned. Tiwari (2014) argued that cycle rickshaws remain a crucial mode of mobility in South Asian cities, despite being marginalized by transport policies that blame them for congestion and exploitative labor conditions. Using data from previous studies, he challenged these views, demonstrating that rickshaws serve as essential feeder modes for expanding public transport networks, such as the Delhi Metro. Khan and Quaddus (2021) discussed the role of e-rickshaws in urban transportation, particularly their impact on sustainability. They highlighted that e-rickshaws are economically viable, contribute to reducing carbon emissions, and improve urban mobility.

Bangladesh is a rapidly urbanising country with an average annual urbanization rate of 5.34% since 1974. It projects that by 2050, 56% of the country's population will reside in urban areas

(Roy et al., 2018). To support its urban transportation system, Bangladesh has been making massive investments in infrastructure, including the construction of expressways, metro rail lines, bridges, and railway networks (Barma et al., 2024). At the same time, policy decisions have been made to gradually phase out slow moving mode of transportation like rickshaws and discourage individual vehicles blaming them for congestion. On the other hand, motorization of rickshaws has not only reduced the physical labor required for it to a minimum; it has also added speed which made it a very convenient mode of urban transportation specially for the middle income people.

In a study by Nakshi and Debnath (2021), the authors analyzed the process and forms of motorization of paddle rickshaws in Bangladesh. They found that the process of motorization was driven by several factors, including the increasing demand for faster and more convenient transportation and the need to overcome the physical strain of pulling rickshaws by hand. The authors also noted that the most common form of motorization involved the installation of rechargeable battery kits, which can be fitted to existing rickshaws, transforming them into motorized vehicles.

A subsequent study by Mowla and Khaleida (1999) investigated the environmental impacts of the motorization of paddle rickshaws in Bangladesh. They found that motorized rickshaws have led to increased air pollution, particularly in urban areas, due to the emission of harmful pollutants from the engines of these vehicles. They also noted that the increased use of motorized rickshaws has resulted in increased noise pollution and traffic congestion in urban areas. However, they did not find any such environmental impact for motorized rickshaws through the installation of batteries. On the contrary, this type of motorization has been labeled as green transportation compared to fuel engine motorization (Majumdar et al., 2015; Nadimuthu and Victor, 2021 & Sameeullah and Chandel, 2016). However, the possible battery hazards arising from excessive and inconsiderate usage of Lithium-ion batteries is a matter of concern (Mohanty and Kotak, 2017; Kaushal, Panda and Kumar, 2020 & Khan et al., 2022)

In a more recent study by Mazumder and Roy (2018), the authors conducted a comprehensive assessment of the socio-economic impacts of the motorization of paddle rickshaws in Bangladesh. They found that motorized rickshaws have increased the daily income of rickshaw pullers and improved their working conditions. Additionally, the authors noted that motorized rickshaws have increased the speed and efficiency of transportation, making it easier for people to get around.

Given the potential consequences of motorization, it is important to understand the process by which rickshaws are motorized and the impact it has on the livelihoods of rickshaw pullers. A study by Goni and Uddin (2015) investigated the motivations of rickshaw pullers for motorizing their rickshaws. The author found that while the primary motivation was to increase income, there were also other factors, such as a desire to improve working conditions and to overcome the physical strain of pulling rickshaws by human force.

While the existing research provides a good understanding of the process of motorization of paddle rickshaws in Bangladesh, there is a need for further research in this area. In particular, there is a need for studies that examine the long-term socio-economic impacts of motorization, as well as the impact of motorization on the environment. Additionally, there is a need for research that

considers the views and experiences of rickshaw pullers themselves in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the impact of motorization on their lives.

### 3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study adopted both qualitative and quantitative approaches to analyze the data and fulfill the objectives of this study. The first objective of this work is to analyze the process and forms of motorization of cycle rickshaws in Bangladesh. To fulfill this objective, both literature review and questionnaire survey of the rickshaw pullers, garage owners, and workshop operators involved in motorization were conducted. This study adopted quantitative approach using data gathered from questionnaire survey to fulfill the second objective of assessing the socio-economic impacts of motorization of paddle rickshaws in Bangladesh. There was a questionnaire survey of 86 rickshaw pullers. In addition to that 17 rickshaw pullers, 3 garage owners and 2 workshop owners were interviewed to gather qualitative data on the lives of rickshaw pullers/drivers and the process of motorization. The study area was limited to 4 districts (Dhaka, Rajshahi, Pabna and Satkhira) of Bangladesh where the researcher was sent as a part of 74<sup>th</sup> Foundation Training Course for district and village attachment as well as under “Explore Bangladesh” program. This research included both densely populated urban areas and less populated rural ones. Likert Scale (Allen and Seaman, 2007) was utilized to collect data on the items shown in the table 01. The respondents were asked to respond against a five-point likert scale (1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neither Disagree not Agree, 4= Agree and 5= Strongly Agree)

**Table 01: Questionnaire Description**

<b>Sections</b>	<b>Items</b>
<b>Section A: Demographic Information</b>	This section includes demographic information about rickshaw pullers such as age, family size, number of school-aged children, district, gender, and marital status.
<b>Section B: Socio-economic Condition</b>	Consists of 7 items to measure Socio-economic Condition: I earn enough to cover basic needs of my family. My living conditions are good. Sometimes I struggle to buy food for my family. My economic condition is good. I have a decent level of education. My health condition is good. My job is decent.
<b>Section C: Earning Capacity (After motorization)</b>	Consists of 4 items to measure Earning Capacity: My income increased after having a motorized rickshaw. Earning is now easier with a motorized rickshaw. My living standard increased Access to nutrient food increased

<b>Section D: Physical Labour and Health (After motorization)</b>	<p>Consists of 4 items to measure Physical Labour and Health:</p> <p>My health conditions improved.</p> <p>I feel less physically exhausted.</p> <p>I can now work longer hours.</p> <p>The decency of my job improved.</p>
<b>Section E: Safety, Risk and Price Barrier (of motorization)</b>	<p>Consists of 4 items to measure Safety, Risk and Price Barrier:</p> <p>Motorization of local rickshaws has been designed ensuring safety.</p> <p>Accidents did not increase due to this motorization.</p> <p>Price of motorized rickshaw is not a barrier to entry in this job.</p> <p>Risk of fatal injury is low.</p>

## 4.0 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of data was performed using SPSS version 23 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The analysis and interpretation of the data are organized by variable.

### 4.1 Demographic Data

#### 4.1.1 District-Wise Distribution

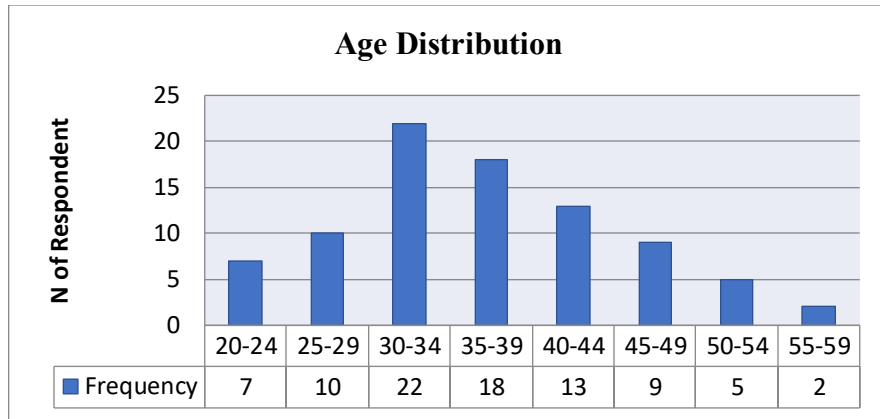
This study used information from 86 rickshaw drivers in the four studied districts of Dhaka, Rajshahi, Pabna, and Satkhira. All the respondents are male and almost 92% of them are married. Table 02 shows the breakdown of the responses across the four different regions.

**Table 02:** District-Wise Distribution of the Respondents

District	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<b>Dhaka</b>	13	15.1	15.1	15.1
<b>Pabna</b>	20	23.3	23.3	38.4
<b>Rajshahi</b>	28	32.6	32.6	70.9
<b>Satkhira</b>	25	29.0	29.0	100.0
<b>Total</b>	86	100.0	100.0	

#### 4.1.2 Age Distribution

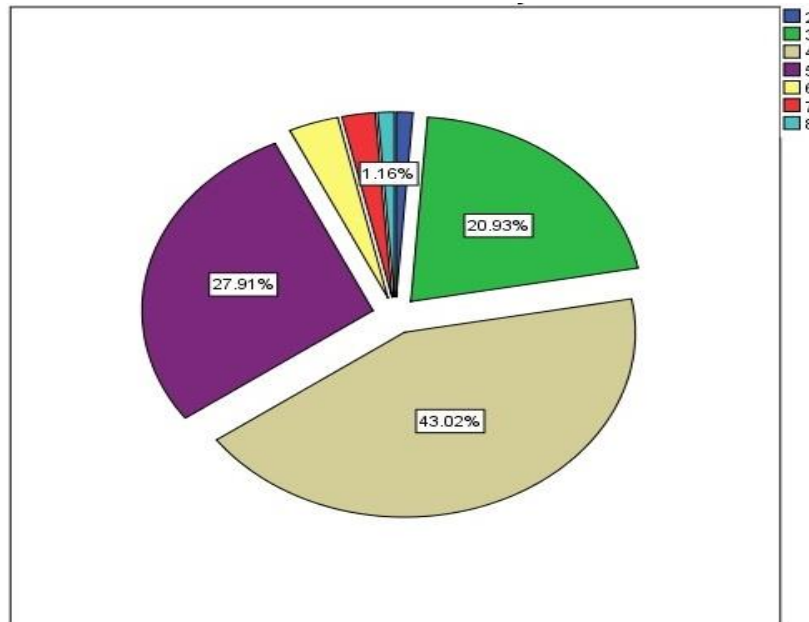
Figure 1 shows the age distribution of the respondents. Around 46.5% respondents are 30-39 years old. The data on age distribution is centered around this range.



**Figure 01:** Age Distribution of the Respondents

**4.1.3 Family Members**

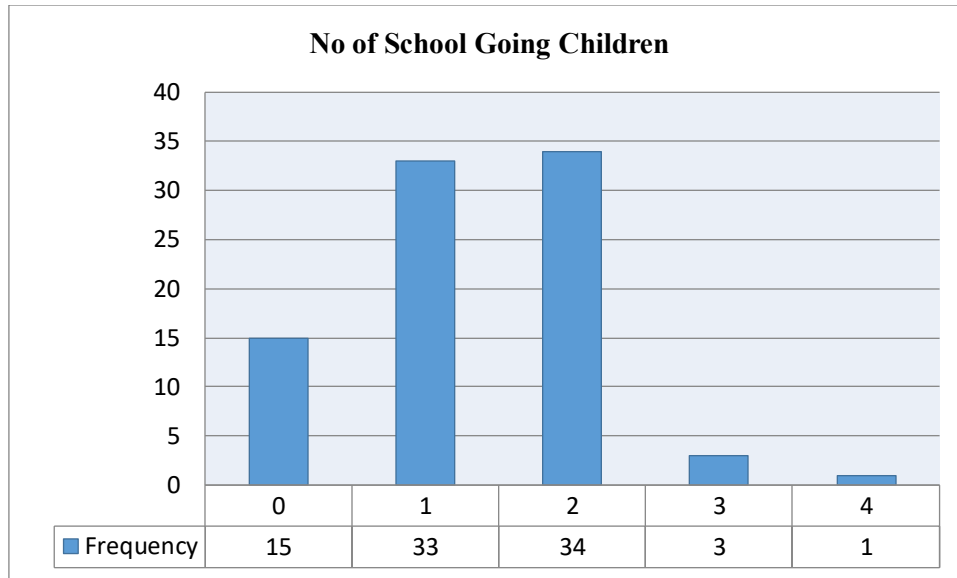
43.02% of the respondents have family size of 4 members, while 27.91% families consist of 5 members and 20.93% consist of 3 members. This data shows that the family size of the respondents is moderate.



**Figure 02:** Family Size of the Respondents

**4.1.4 School Going Children of the Respondents**

Most of the respondents (77.9%) have one or two children who go to school. 15 respondents do not have any school going children either because their children are not in school going age group or because of their financial inability to send them to school.



**Figure 03: No. of School Going Children**

## 4.2 Descriptive Statistics

According to Manikandan (2011), mean refers to the midpoint of a collection of numbers. It calculates a value that represents the mean and can be used to demonstrate central tendencies.

**Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of the Variables**

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
<b>Socio-economic Condition</b>	86	1.71	4.00	2.8870	.51350
<b>Earning Capacity</b>	86	1.50	4.75	3.4390	.65970
<b>Physical Labour and Health</b>	86	1.75	4.50	3.0843	.80221
<b>Safety, Risk and Price Barrier</b>	86	1.00	3.50	1.9622	.67139

The means and standard deviations for the dependent and independent variables are shown in Table 4. The “Socio-economic Condition dependent variable has a mean score of 2.8870 and a standard deviation of 0.51350. “Earning capacity” has the highest mean (3.4390 on a five-point scale with a standard deviation of .65970) among the independent variables, while “safety, risk, and price barrier” has the lowest mean (1.9622). The high mean of “earning capacity” indicates that motorization has increased their potential to earn more, however the low mean of “Safety, Risk, and Price Barrier” indicates the absence of safety precautions in the motorization process, which creates risk, and the existence of a price barrier.

## 4.3 Reliability Test

The consistency and steadiness with which an instrument assesses a hypothesis and contributes to determining how well the data is produced is what is meant by a measure's reliability (Churchill and Pete, 1984). Cronbach's Alpha indicates the internal consistency, or the degree of similarity

between items in a set (Streiner, 2003). Table 3 displays the various Cronbach's Alpha range values for measuring the value of Cronbach's Alpha.

**Table 03:** Reliability Statistics of the Variables

<b>Variable Name</b>	<b>Number of Items</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>	<b>Relationship</b>
<b>Socio-economic Condition</b>	7	.832	Good
<b>Earning Capacity</b>	4	.791	Moderate
<b>Physical Labour and Health</b>	4	.806	Good
<b>Safety, Risk and Price Barrier</b>	4	.776	Moderate

With a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.832 and 7 items, the reliability of the dependent variable (respondents' socio-economic condition) is good, as seen in the table 3. The next step is to check the reliability of the independent variable, "earning capability," for which the Cronbach Alpha is 0.791. In this case, the reliability was moderate, with four questions showing some degree of validity. The Cronbach Alpha for the four-item measure of "physical labor and health" is 0.806, suggesting that it is reliable. Finally, results for the independent variable "Safety, Risk, and Price Barrier" indicate a reliability of 0.776, suggesting sufficient internal consistency in the measurement.

#### 4.4 Analysis of Correlation

The statistical method of correlation can reveal the existence of a significant relationship and the degree to which two variables are linked (Taylor, 1990). One dependent variable (DV) is correlated with three independent variables (IVs) as measured by Pearson's Correlation Coefficient (IV). The magnitude of the link between DV and IV can be measured from the value of the correlation coefficient. Relationships are considered statistically significant when the p-value is less than 0.01 and 0.05 respectively for 99% and 95% confidence interval. The following is a description of the relationship using the scale model:

**Table 5:** Analysis of Pearson's Correlation

		<b>Socio-economic Condition</b>	<b>Earning Capacity</b>	<b>Physical Labour and Health</b>	<b>Safety, Risk and Price Barrier</b>
<b>Socio-economic Condition</b>	Pearson Correlation	1	.789**	.636**	-.400**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	N	86	86	86	86
<b>Earning Capacity</b>	Pearson Correlation	.789**	1	.718**	-.600**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000
	N	86	86	86	86
<b>Physical Labour and Health</b>	Pearson Correlation	.636**	.718**	1	-.637**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000
	N	86	86	86	86

<b>Safety, Risk and Price Barrier</b>	Pearson Correlation	-.400**	-.600**	-.637**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	
	N	86	86	86	86
<b>** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).</b>					

Table 5 shows that all of the relationships between the independent and dependent variables are statistically significant. The strength of the relationships in this study ranges from good to moderate. It illustrates the connection between socio-economic conditions and factors like earning capacity, physical labor and health and safety, risk, and price barrier. Table 5 shows that a positive correlation (0.789) between earning capacity and socio-economic condition is statistically significant at the  $p < 0.01$  (0.000) level. In addition, there is a positive correlation between socio-economic condition and physical labor and health (0.636) and significance at  $p < 0.01$  (0.000). Moreover, there is a negative association (-0.400) between safety, risk, and price barrier and socio-economic condition ( $p < 0.01$ ; 0.000). Safety, risk and price barrier is also negatively correlated with earning capacity and physical labour and health at -0.600 and -0.637 respectively at 99% significance level.

#### 4.5 Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

The purpose of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) is to compare the dispersion of means (or averages) among different groups using a statistical formula (Anderson, 2001). In a variety of contexts, it is used to test the hypothesis that some groups have significantly different means from others. The following table (Table 06) shows the result of ANOVA test.

**Table 06: Result of ANOVA Test**  
ANOVA<sup>a</sup>

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	14.615	3	4.872	51.233	.000 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	7.798	82	.095		
	Total	22.413	85			

a. Dependent Variable: Socio-economic Condition

b. Predictors: (Constant), Safety, Risk and Price Barrier, Earning Capacity, Physical Labour and Health

The p-value of 0.00, which is less than 0.05, indicates that there is significant relationship between the dependent variable (Socio-economic condition) and independent variables (earning capacity; physical labour and health and safety, risk and price barrier). The F-value of 51.23 indicates that the variation between the group means is greater than the variation within the groups. This supports the hypothesis that enhancing earning capacity can improve the socio-economic condition.

#### 4.6 Regression Analysis

According to McKelvey and Zavoina (1975) regression analysis is a method used in statistical modeling that entails a series of calculations to estimate the relationships between a dependent variable and a number of independent ones.

**Table 07: Result of Regression Analysis  
Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	.185	.327		.567	.572
Earning Capacity	.577	.076	.741	7.631	.000
Physical Labour and Health	.142	.065	.223	2.207	.030
Safety, Risk and Price Barrier	.142	.067	.186	2.122	.037

a. Dependent Variable: Socio-economic Condition

The regression analysis of the four variables showed that Socio-economic Condition is significantly influenced by Earning Capacity, Physical Labour and Health, and Safety, Risk and Price Barrier. The results of the regression analysis indicate that Earning Capacity has the strongest positive relationship with Socio-economic Condition, with a correlation coefficient of .577 and a p-value of .00. This suggests that a 1% increase in Earning Capacity will result in a .577% increase in Socio-economic Condition, holding all other variables constant. Physical Labour and Health had a correlation coefficient of .142 and a p-value of .03, while Safety, Risk and Price Barrier had a correlation coefficient of .142 and a p-value of .037. The adjusted R Square value of .639 indicates that the independent variables in this analysis explain 63.9% of the variation in Socio-economic Condition. This result suggests that these independent variables are important predictors of Socio-economic conditions.

The results of this regression analysis suggest that Earning Capacity is the most significant predictor of socio-economic Condition, with a strong positive relationship. This highlights the importance of earning capacity in determining the socio-economic status of individuals. Physical Labour and Health, and Safety, Risk and Price Barriers also showed a significant positive relationship with socio-economic Condition, though to a lesser degree than Earning Capacity. This suggests that other factors such as physical labour and health, and safety, risk and price barriers also play an important role in shaping socio-economic status.

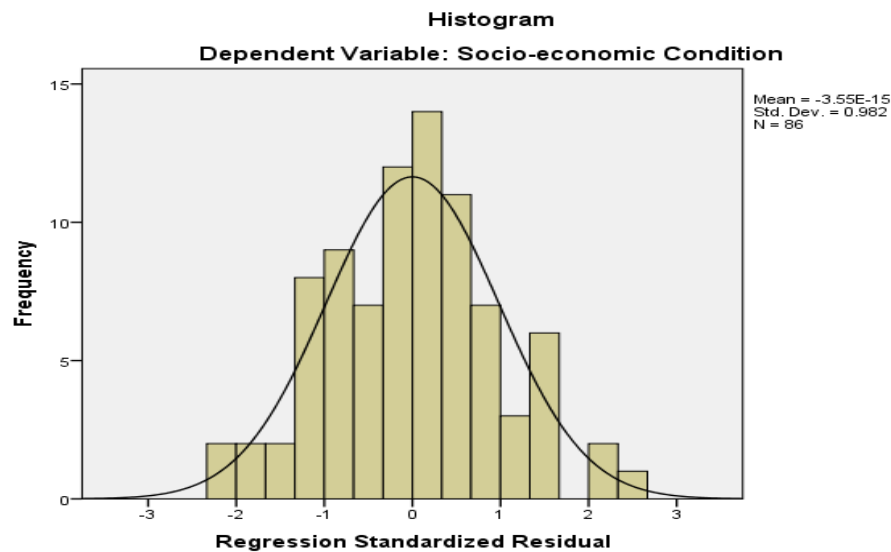
It is worth noting that while these results are statistically significant, they do not capture all the complexities and nuances of the relationship between socio-economic conditions and the independent variables. Further research could explore these relationships in more detail and with a larger sample size to strengthen the results.

#### 4.7 Data Normality Test

Testing for normality in data is a crucial statistical technique for establishing if a data collection is roughly normally distributed. The normal distribution is represented by a bell-shaped curve that is symmetrical about its mean and has clearly outlined values for the mean, median, and mode. The assumption of normality is made in many statistical tests, and the findings may be unreliable if the data does not conform to the assumption. There are several methods available for testing for normality. We have utilized the following two methods to test normality for this study.

#### 4.7.1 Histogram

A histogram is a graphical representation of the distribution of a set of continuous or discrete data. It is a representation of the frequency of the data points in each interval or bin. The height of each bar in the histogram represents the frequency of the data points that fall within the corresponding interval or bin.

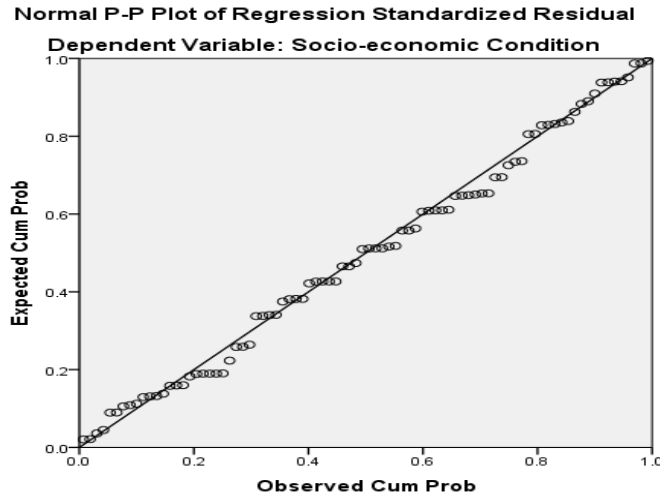


**Figure 04:** Histogram of the Regression Standardized Residual

Given the mean and standard deviation of a histogram with  $N=86$  data points, the mean of  $-3.55E-15$  and standard deviation of  $0.982$  suggests that the data is approximately symmetrical and distributed around the mean. The mean of  $-3.55E-15$  is close to  $0$ , which indicates that the data points are centered around  $0$ . The standard deviation of  $0.982$  suggests that the data points are spread out with most of the data points falling within 2 standard deviations of the mean.

#### 4.7.2 P-P Plot

A Probability-Probability (P-P) plot is a graphical representation used to compare two probability distributions. The basic idea behind a P-P plot is to plot the cumulative distribution function (CDF) of the observed data against the CDF of a theoretical distribution. The CDF of the theoretical distribution is usually a normal distribution, and the CDF of the observed data is estimated from the data itself.



**Figure 05:** P-P Plot of the Regression Standardized Residual

Given the mean and standard deviation of a P-P plot with  $N=86$  data points, the mean of  $-3.55E-15$  and standard deviation of  $0.982$  suggest that the data is approximately normally distributed. If the observed data is indeed from a normal distribution, then the points on the P-P plot should form a roughly straight line. A straight line indicates that the observed data is consistent with the theoretical normal distribution, while deviations from a straight line suggest that the observed data is not normally distributed.

#### 4.8 Process and Forms of Motorization of Paddle Rickshaws in Bangladesh

Motorization of paddle rickshaws in Bangladesh has been a significant development in the country's transportation sector. A paddle rickshaw, also known as a human-powered tricycle, is a common mode of transportation in Bangladesh, particularly in urban areas. The motorization of these rickshaws has had a profound impact on the lives of rickshaw pullers and the transportation sector as a whole.

The process of motorization of cycle rickshaws in Bangladesh can be traced back to the late 1980s and early 1990s, when rickshaw pullers started to adopt motorized rickshaws to improve their financial stability and provide better services to customers. The process of motorization was driven by several factors, including the increasing demand for faster and more convenient transportation and the need to overcome the physical strain of pulling rickshaws by hand.

The forms of motorization of cycle rickshaws in Bangladesh are diverse, ranging from simple engine kits that can be attached to existing rickshaws to fully motorized rickshaws with advanced features such as electric starters and hydraulic brakes. The most common form of motorization involves the installation of rechargeable battery kits, which can be fitted to existing rickshaws, transforming them into motorized vehicles. This type of motorization is the cheapest one. Lithium-ion batteries are being used for these innovations. However, safety measures are completely overlooked here. The traditional rickshaw has gained speed through these batteries but the

mechanical structure is not suitable for this speed. Moreover, brake capacity has not been enhanced which leads to fatal accidents very frequently. However, some recent models of motorized rickshaws are modernized and added a better brake capacity which reduces risk and increases safety significantly.

*“The design and technology used in motorized rickshaws are changing very rapidly. A few years ago, they were essentially the same paddle rickshaw with just a motor. But now, they are more mechanized, with better build quality, braking systems, mileage, and comfort” – Workshop owner #2, Dhaka, January, 2025*

Besides this easiest type of motorization of the paddle rickshaws, imported electric rickshaws known as easy bike has emerged as the most convenient and comfortable mode of transportation. This easy bike is considered more efficient and relatively safe than the locally motorized rickshaws. During this study the author observed that the roads of Satkhira and Rajshahi are full of these easy bikes. Installing diesel engines to traditional tricycle vans is another type of motorization. Perhaps this type of motorization has been the most creative in terms of design, innovation, modification and improvisation. Diesel engine vans are in fact the first type of motorization in Bangladesh in pulling vehicle category and are usually found in the rural area.

*“Diesel engine vans (tricycles) have different local names depending on the region and their use, such as **Nosimon** (mainly used in rural and peri-urban areas for transporting goods and sometimes people), **Karimon** (similar to Nosimon but generally smaller and more commonly used for carrying people), and **Bhotbhoti** (named after the 'bhut-bhut' sound it makes). These engine vans have undergone various modifications and are commonly used in rural areas, primarily for transporting goods and occasionally people” – Workshop owner #1, Rajshahi, December, 2024*

In the past, there were numerous rickshaw garages in the big cities where marginal rickshaw pullers could rent paddle rickshaws on a daily basis. It was a profitable business for garage owners, who typically recovered the cost of a rickshaw within one year. Marginal pullers were also able to earn a livelihood, as they could not afford to buy a rickshaw themselves. Now, traditional paddle rickshaws have been almost entirely replaced by motorized ones. Workshops now primarily build and repair motorized rickshaws, while garage owners rent them out and sometimes handle minor repairs. However, building and renting motorized rickshaws has become a challenge for garage owners due to the high capital requirements and increased risk factors involved.

*“Earlier, we used to only repair paddle rickshaws (simple frame, wheels and brakes). But now, motorized rickshaws come with electric wiring, batteries, lights, and gear systems. We had to learn new skills and invest in new tools to keep up. It’s more work, but also more business. The demand is high because people prefer the speed and comfort. Still, we worry about regulations. sometimes the authorities say these are illegal, sometimes they don’t. We just want clear rules so we can run our business peacefully” – Garage owner #3, Dhaka, January 2025*

However, the process of motorization has not been without its challenges. The high cost of motorized rickshaws and limited access to credit have hindered the process of motorization. Additionally, the increased expenses for maintenance and fuel have reduced the financial gains made from motorization. Therefore, the process and forms of motorization of paddle rickshaws in

Bangladesh have had a profound impact on the lives of rickshaw pullers and the transportation sector as a whole. While motorization has brought many benefits, it has also faced challenges that need to be addressed through policy interventions aimed at improving the lives of rickshaw pullers and ensuring that they reap the maximum benefits from motorization.

#### 4.9 Lives of the Rickshaw Pullers

While rickshaw drivers are often portrayed solely in the context of their urban presence, this framing overlooks the broader socioeconomic realities that shape their lives. The majority of rickshaw drivers in Bangladesh are not permanent urban dwellers but rather circular migrants (Hasan, 2019). Landless farmers and laborers come to cities during agricultural off-seasons or in times of economic distress. Many migrate after being affected by natural disasters such as river erosion, coastal flooding, and drought. Others come to big cities in search of better earning opportunities. This mobility is not just economic but also deeply social and political, as these individuals navigate a dual existence between village life and the urban informal sector. However, once in the city, their rural identities are often erased, and they are reduced to their occupation, stripped of context.

Rickshaw pullers in urban Bangladesh often endure unfair treatment from the very passengers they serve, reflecting deep-rooted class divisions and social hierarchies. Many passengers speak to them with disdain, issue commands rather than requests, and often refuse to pay fair fares. Physical and verbal abuse is not uncommon, especially when drivers assert their rights or resist exploitation. This everyday humiliation is part of a broader system of antagonistic class relations, where the urban poor are expected to provide labor without dignity.

*“The people of this city don’t see us as human beings. There’s no respect at all. They even raise their hands against elderly. I’m trapped here for survival—if I weren’t forced by necessity, I wouldn’t be here. My home was swallowed by the river, and now I have no choice but to struggle every day just to earn enough for two handfuls of food”* – Rickshaw puller #11, Dhaka, January, 2025

The living standards of rickshaw pullers in urban Bangladesh are alarmingly low, reflecting their broader socioeconomic marginalization. Due to their limited and unstable income, most rickshaw pullers reside in densely populated informal settlements or slums, where housing is overcrowded, poorly constructed, and lacks basic amenities. These areas are typically located in environmentally degraded parts of the city, exposing residents to severe air and noise pollution, contaminated water sources, and unhygienic sanitation facilities. Consequently, rickshaw pullers and their families face a high risk of contracting waterborne and communicable diseases. Access to nutritious food and adequate healthcare remains severely limited, both financially and logistically. The cumulative impact of these conditions significantly deteriorates their physical and mental well-being.

*“We live in crowded slums because we can’t afford anything better. The water is dirty, the toilets are broken, and the smell never goes away. Sometimes we fall sick, but going to a doctor costs more than we earn in a day. We eat just to fill our stomachs, not for health. All this makes our bodies weak and minds tired. Still, we have to go out and pull rickshaws every day, what else can we do?”* – Rickshaw Puller #17, Dhaka, February 2025

However, the motorization of rickshaws introduces a transformative dimension to the sector. The shift from manual paddling to motorized propulsion significantly reduces the physical labor involved, thereby enhancing driver comfort and productivity. In addition, the increased speed associated with motorized rickshaws allows drivers to complete more trips in a shorter time, potentially leading to higher earnings. Although the cost of acquiring a motorized rickshaw remains out of reach for many, access to informal credit from local garages has mitigated this barrier to some extent. Despite these benefits, motorized rickshaws face considerable regulatory challenges; they are often barred from VIP streets and busy urban areas. It not only limits their operational scope but also exposes drivers to potential mistreatment by traffic police and law enforcement agencies. Nevertheless, the overall impact of motorization on the living standards of rickshaw pullers appears to be predominantly positive, enhancing both economic opportunities and working conditions.

*“Motorized rickshaw has really changed my work life. With motorized rickshaws, the physical strain is much less, and I can travel faster, which means I can earn more every day. Even though buying one is too expensive for me, I have taken one on rent from a garage. One problem, I can not go to VIP roads and main roads, and sometimes the traffic police treat us unfairly. But overall, motorization has definitely improved my life” – Motorized Rickshaw Driver #6, Dhaka, February 2025*

The lack of collective bargaining power among rickshaw pullers has historically excluded them from influencing policy decisions regarding rickshaws in Bangladesh. Policymaking in this sector has often been one-sided, failing to incorporate the voices and perspectives of the pullers themselves. Authorities have repeatedly taken initiatives to ban rickshaws from so-called VIP roads, and there has been a longstanding reluctance to recognize motorized rickshaws as a legitimate mode of urban transport. However, recent developments have significantly altered this dynamic. Following the student-led protest in July 2024, the changing socio-political climate has encouraged various marginalized groups to bring long-standing demands to the forefront of national discourse. Rickshaw pullers, too, have made unprecedented moves to assert their rights and concerns.

On August 26, 2024, paddle rickshaw pullers organized rallies across different parts of Dhaka and staged a blockade at the prominent Shahbagh intersection under the banner of the Dhaka City Corporation Rickshaw Owners' Unity. They submitted a memorandum to the Chief Adviser of the interim government, presenting a seven-point demand that included banning battery-powered rickshaws, which they argued created unfair competition and disorder on the roads (Abedin, 2024). They also called for inclusion in policy decision-making processes. In response, on the same day, drivers of battery-powered rickshaws organized a counter-protest, driving through several major streets of Dhaka, including Shahbagh, in support of battery-powered rickshaws. As a result of this rising tension and visibility, battery-powered rickshaws have since been allowed to operate freely in most parts of Dhaka, with the exception of select VIP roads. Notably, the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority Advisory Council had earlier decided on May 15 to ban battery-powered rickshaws in the city; however, this decision was revoked on May 20 following strong protests by battery-rickshaw drivers.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The rickshaw has long been an integral part of daily life in Bangladesh and throughout South Asia. The prevailing belief is that Japanese culture is the cradle of the rickshaw. The motorization of rickshaws in Bangladesh has greatly reduced the inhumanity of rickshaw labor there. Whether a rickshaw is pulled by a human or powered by a motor, it has important consequences for culture and daily life. This study analyzed the process and forms of motorization of cycle rickshaws in Bangladesh and evaluates the subsequent social and economic impacts. From the viewpoints of social knowledge and policy in relation to this significant informal sector of Bangladesh, the findings of this study will be highly significant.

Over the past few years, there has been a rise in the number of motorized paddle rickshaws in Bangladesh. It is an improvement over traditional paddle rickshaws in several ways, including speed, comfort, and convenience. It also changed the socio-economic conditions of the rickshaw pullers. This study found positive and significant correlation between the motorization of paddle rickshaws and the socio-economic conditions of the rickshaw pullers. These developments, however, have raised concerns regarding congestion, safety, and environmental impact. The following policy suggestions are made to solve these issues and promote sustainable development:

**Safety on the Road:** The government should enact and strictly enforce safety restrictions for the use of motorized rickshaws on public roads. Passengers should be required to wear helmets, vehicles should be inspected regularly, and drivers should be required to participate in training programs to enhance their driving skills.

**Environmental laws:** Excessive and inconsiderate use of Lithium-ion batteries and their random disposal may lead to battery hazards. Appropriate laws should be enacted to minimize the environmental risks associated with improper battery disposal.

**Controlling Traffic Congestion:** The proliferation of motorized rickshaws in Bangladesh's urban areas has become a serious issue for traffic management. So that people can use motorized rickshaws without endangering themselves or others, the government should put money into traffic management infrastructure like traffic lights, road signs and dedicated lanes for motorized rickshaws.

**Ensuring Safe Design:** There is serious lack of safety measures in the design of locally motorized rickshaws leading to an increase in the number of fatal accidents. Government can invest in R&D to develop new designs ensuring safety measures.

**Financial Support:** Switching to motorized rickshaws can be costly for the poor rickshaw pullers. To ease the financial burden of making this change, the government can offer incentives including tax breaks, subsidies, and low-interest loans.

Governments should promote motorized rickshaw use by launching public awareness programs to inform citizens of the advantages and precautions associated with this mode of transportation. Sustainable mobility, pedestrian and bike safety, and the environment could all be topics for discussion. The administration should set up a framework to keep tabs on and assess how well the

proposed reforms are working. This will be useful in making sure the policy's intended effects on the motorization of paddle rickshaws in Bangladesh are being realized. As a whole, these policy suggestions are made to strike a balance between the advantages of motorization and the necessity to guarantee sustainable development and deal with the problems caused by it. The government can play an important role in ensuring the motorization of paddle rickshaws in Bangladesh is done in a sustainable and responsible manner by enforcing these rules.

This study has shed light on the socio-economic transformations associated with the motorization of paddle rickshaws in Bangladesh, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges embedded in this evolving urban phenomenon. While motorization has improved income potential and reduced physical strain for rickshaw pullers, it has also introduced new risks related to safety, informality, and regulatory uncertainty. These findings underscore the urgent need for inclusive transport policies that not only address infrastructural and environmental concerns but also recognize and support the labor force that sustains this informal mobility sector. Future research may build on this work by exploring the gendered dimensions of motorized informal transport, long-term environmental implications of battery use, or comparative studies across South Asian cities. As Bangladesh navigates its path toward urban modernization, a socially just and evidence-based approach to transport policy will be crucial to ensuring that marginalized workers are not left behind in the name of progress.

#### **Author Bio:**

**Md. Mizanur Rahman** studied Economics at the University of Dhaka and is a member of the Bangladesh Civil Service (Administration) cadre. He is currently serving in field administration and has previously worked as an Upazila Family Planning Officer under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and as a faculty member at the Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre (BPATC), where he was involved in health welfare management, research, and capacity-building programs. Earlier in his career, he gained practical experience in field research and data management as a research assistant at two prominent research institutions: the Economic Research Group (ERG) and the Institute of Policy and Social Sciences (IPSS). His professional experience across administrative and health sectors has strengthened his interest in evidence-based policymaking. He has authored several peer-reviewed publications on topics including public expenditure allocation, digitalization of public procurement, local governance, regional economic integration, and economic development. As an early-career bureaucrat with a strong commitment to research, Mr. Rahman is committed to contributing to the areas of evidence-based policymaking, public policy, governance, public finance, and regional and international development.

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# From Migration to Psychological Distress: Depression, Suicidal Thoughts and Associated Factors among Bangladeshi Migrant Workers

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## Abstract

There is hardly any research on Bangladeshi migrant workers' mental health conditions. This study fills this void and explores symptoms of depression and suicidal thoughts among Bangladeshi returned migrant workers. We used the convergent mixed methods design and collected data using a modified Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9), adapting Blades et al.'s (2018) questionnaire, and creating open-ended questions for interviews. We collected quantitative data from 63 participants (56 males and 7 females), and interviewed 19 of them. We analyzed data using descriptive statistics, the Pearson chi-square test, a binary logistic regression model, and the thematic analysis technique. The findings indicate that 52 participants had depression, with 50% expressing severe depression. 41 (65%) participants had suicidal thoughts at least once. Country of destination, experiences of sexual victimization, physical victimization, and financial victimization have significant associations with depression and suicidal thoughts. Interview findings strengthens these findings. Participants who went to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries or suffered from any of these victimizations are approximately two to five times more likely to be depressed or have suicidal thoughts than participants who did not go or suffer. We suggest documenting victimization, providing social support, setting up a hospital, and proper rehabilitation as possible intervention strategies to alleviate migrant workers' mental health problems. Suggestions have been provided for future research.

## Keywords

Migration, migrant worker, mental health, psychology, victimization

## Introduction

Migration is a complex global phenomenon. No universal definition can define this concept in all circumstances (Sinha, 2005). Clarke (1965) also opines that the definition of migration is unresolved as it encompasses a wide range of elements, making it impossible to form a unanimous

definition. Trewartha (1971) defines migration as having multifarious meanings; he stretched the definition by emphasizing the distance, will, and permanent change in residence and included numerous mobility of people. Generally, this involves a movement of some distance. This concept can be, however, defined as a permanent or a temporary change of residence. There are no limitations on the distance moved, whether voluntary or not, and no differentiation between external and internal migration. Moving within a country and from one country to another can be called migration (Lee, 1966), and international migration is the movement of citizens beyond their country's geography to another country to stay in the second country for some time (OECD, 2006). Bell et al. (2010) identified three forms of international migration—labor migration, forced migration, and international retirement migration.

Providing a universal definition of labor migration is difficult. This can be defined as the transnational movement intended to find employment (Dakua, 2019). This movement involves financial purposes and happens when a person moves to another country for financial gain through labor (IOM, 2020). The International Labor Organization (ILO) defines a migrant worker as a person who moves or has already moved with a view to finding employment (Simon et al., 2015). The United Nations Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families identifies a migrant worker as someone who is currently employed, or will be employed, or has been employed in a country other than their place of origin for financial reasons (Usher, 2004).

The World Migration Report 2022 shows that the number of international migrants worldwide was approximately 281 million in 2020. International migrant workers were 169 million (IOM, 2020). Although higher-income countries were the most preferred destinations for migrant workers, this trend underwent a shift due to legal and economic factors, including strict immigration policies and higher cost of migration, and middle-income countries have become the primary hosts of migrant workers (IOM, 2019).

Immigrants face intersectional discrimination in host countries (Ahmed & Akter, 2024). Specifically, migrant workers are generally employed in dangerous, dirty, and difficult (3Ds) jobs (Orrenius & Zavodny, 2009; Premji, 2018). The workers work in poor working conditions, they are paid less than native workers, work overtime, and face different types of abuse in the workplace (Moyce & Schenker, 2018). Risks in the job and poor working conditions affect migrant workers' mental health. They face more mental health-related problems than the native workers (Aalto et al., 2014; Cayuela et al., 2015; Devkota et al., 2021; Pham et al., 2019). Depression is the most prevalent psychological problem among migrants (Khaled & Gray, 2019; Lam & Johnston, 2015; Mucci et al., 2020). Besides, due to discrimination at the workplace, they go through different psychological problems that can lead them to drug and alcohol addiction and dependency (Brondolo et al., 2011). Their psychological problems and mental health issues stem from aging (Anjara et al., 2017; Attal et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2019), increased demands from employers and associated job risks (Daly et al., 2019), low living standards (Organista et al., 2019), physical abuse (Tilahun et al., 2020), financial abuse (Htay et al., 2020; Tilahun et al., 2020), and violence and harassment (Mauney et al., 2023).

South Asian workers constitute one-third of the total workforce of the international labor market (Weeraratne, 2020). Bangladesh's Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) data show that Bangladesh alone sent 236,837 workers to the international labor market from January to March 2024. Most of the workers went to the GCC (United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi

Arabia, Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait) countries in search of work (BMET, 2024), where xenophobic treatment of workers is common (Ullah et al., 2020).

Bangladeshi migrant workers make significant contributions to the country's economy by sending remittances (Siddiqui and Mahmood, 2015) and send approximately 20 billion dollars each year (Ara, 2022). Despite their contributions, migrant workers' issues remain unrecognized. Although a few research shows that Bangladeshi migrant workers face financial victimization (Azad, 2019; Miah & Aziz, 2013; Sarker, 2016) by recruiters and employers (Ahmed & Miah, 2023), sexual victimization (Akond, 2017) and abuse (Ahmed & Miah, 2023), and maltreatment from the police (Ahmed & Miah, 2023), which results in psychological trauma (Ahmed & Miah, 2023). However, studies regarding the impacts of victimization on Bangladeshi migrant workers' mental health are insufficient. Our study fills this void and unearths the aftermath of victimization on migrant workers' psychological well-being. To this end, this study finds out the effects of gender, country of destination, physical victimization, sexual victimization, and financial victimization on depression and suicidal thoughts of Bangladeshi migrant workers. We focused specifically on depression and suicidal thoughts because depression is the most prevalent psychological problem migrants go through (Khaled & Gray, 2019; Lam & Johnston, 2015; Mucci et al., 2020), and violence can make migrants suicidal (Mauney et al., 2023).

### **Labor exploitation: a brief global scenario**

Labor exploitation is the suppression of workers to work in unhealthy working conditions. This definition covers the traditions of nonpayment and forced labor, which can become modern slavery (Boufkhed et al., 2022). ILO's Global Estimates of Modern Slavery report shows that 24.9 million people are victims of oppressive labor. The private sectors employ 16 million of these 24.9 million. The report shows that 5.4 out of 1000 people are under modern slavery, 25% of whom are children (ILO, 2017). Despite its prevalence everywhere, modern slavery is highly prevalent in Asian, East Asian, African, Latin American, and Middle Eastern countries (Crane, 2013), where women experience more exploitative practices. Gender clearly determines exploitation patterns, and different social constructs exploit women (LeBaron & Gore, 2020). The existing laws to protect laborers exist only in organized sectors, such as those formally established businesses that offer job security. Workers in the unorganized sectors face multifaceted exploitations. They receive less payment, live in substandard conditions, work in risky environments, get no sick leave, and face discrimination and harassment (Chatterjee, 2016). Also, the laborers become victims of human trafficking, and researchers hardly focus on the unorganized institutions that exploit workers. This lack of focus keeps workers' issues unaddressed, and they keep going through sufferings (Crane, 2013).

### **Risk factors behind migrant workers' psychological distress**

There are numerous factors behind migrant workers' adverse mental health conditions. They keep facing problems from the moment they think of migrating (Rayee, 2023). The types of issues they face are based on their status as migrants. All immigrants, such as immigrant workers, refugees, and asylum seekers, are at risk of increased mental health problems (Guillot-Wright et al., 2022).

Financial constraints and healthcare inaccessibility make migrant workers vulnerable to mental health issues. They are found to be more depressed than native workers. Besides, numerous sociodemographic factors and discrimination also affect their mental health conditions (Hasan et al., 2021). Specifically, age affects their mental health conditions (Anjara et al., 2017; Attal et al.,

2020; Chen et al., 2019). Also, migrant workers' coping strategies influence their psychological well-being (Gambaro et al., 2020; González-Castro et al., 2020). In addition to these, higher job demands, risk, and insecurity are also reasons behind higher psychological pain (Daly et al., 2019), and deteriorated living standards can also make migrant workers depressed (Organista et al., 2019).

Additionally, various socio-environmental factors, including lower pay and higher risks, impact migrant workers' psychological well-being (Mucci et al., 2020). Physical abuse also creates mental health problems (Tilahun et al., 2020), and financial deprivation while at work triggers depression (Htay et al., 2020; Tilahun et al., 2020).

Female migrant workers also go through severe stress (Hargreaves et al., 2019). Women migrant workers undergo numerous mental health problems due to violence and harassment (Mauney et al., 2023). An IOM report shows that 70% of female migrant workers undergo inhumane torture (The Daily Star, 2022). The perpetuating effects of violence and harassment can drive them toward suicide (Mauney et al., 2023). Research found that migrant workers' families also suffer along with them (Mahat et al., 2021; Rayee, 2023), and go through severe emotional hardship, including depression (see Ahmed & Zainulabdin, 1991).

## **Methodology**

### **Ethical consideration**

We received approval<sup>1</sup> from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Mawlana Bhashani Science and Technology University. The participants in this study provided informed consent prior to data collection. We did not write participants' names to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. We ensured that the participants received no harm as a result of the research.

### **Study design and data collection procedure**

We used the Convergent Mixed Methods Design<sup>2</sup> to explore and understand migrant workers' experience, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Since no governmental or non-governmental organization in Bangladesh has information on victimized returned migrant workers, reaching the participants was difficult. Therefore, we contacted two returned migrant workers whose victimisation experience was known to one of the researchers. We collected data from them and collected information about other victimized migrant workers. We then followed the snowball sampling process and collected data from the participants. The data collection period lasted from February 2024 to June 2024. Quantitative data were collected from 63 participants (both male and female) from Gazipur, Cumilla, and Chandpur districts in Bangladesh. Nineteen of them were interviewed.

This research includes returned migrant workers, both male and female, who are currently living in Bangladesh and have experienced some victimization during the migratory process. The participants are over 18 years old.

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<sup>1</sup> The reference number of the approval is MBSTU/SCI/EC/2024/11.

<sup>2</sup> In this design, the quantitative and the qualitative data are collected parallelly, analyzed separately and merged to ascertain similarities or differences (Fetters et al., 2013).

The survey questionnaire included inquiries about different socio-demographic variables, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Each questionnaire had an item on participants' consent. We included only those individuals who gave informed consent and participated voluntarily.

For interviews, we created a semi-structured interview guide and asked questions to nineteen participants who were willing to participate and provide detailed accounts to their victimization experiences and the subsequent mental health effects. We recorded the interviews with their consent. The interviews were 20-35 minutes long.

## Variables

For the quantitative analysis, we used several independent covariates to ascertain the variables linked to depression and suicidal thoughts among returned migrant workers. We inquired about the following variables: gender (male or female), country of destination (GCC or non-GCC), experience of physical victimization (yes or no), sexual victimization (yes or no), and financial victimization (yes or no).

We modified the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9)<sup>3</sup> and used it to ascertain the participants' depressive symptoms. We asked questions regarding their mental health during their time abroad, rather than asking about their mental health conditions over the couple of weeks. PHQ-9 codes range from "0=not at all" to "3=virtually every day". Based on the PHQ-9 score, we categorized depression as minimal (PHQ-9 score: 0 to 4), mild (5 to 9), moderate (10 to 14), moderately severe (15 to 19), and severe (20 to 27). We diagnosed depression among the participants who scored 10 or more (see Rahman et al., 2022). We adapted Blades et al.'s (2018) questionnaire on suicide and asked if the participants thought of committing suicide during their migratory process or after they returned to Bangladesh. Based on their answers—yes or no, we assessed suicidal thoughts among the participants.

## Data analysis methods

To analyze the quantitative data, we used descriptive statistics to report socio-demographics, depression, and suicidal thoughts. The level of score on the PHQ-9 questionnaire and answering "yes" on the suicidal thought question indicate participants are depressed and having suicidal thoughts, respectively. We also utilized the Pearson Chi-square<sup>4</sup> test to ascertain the correlation between the selected variables and depression and suicidal thoughts. We kept depression and suicidal thoughts as dependent variables in our binary logistic regression model.

Additionally, we ran the Shapiro-Wilk test<sup>5</sup> to determine the normality of our variables. Using a correlation matrix, we analyzed dataset multicollinearity. Besides, with the Kolmogorov-Smirnov

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<sup>3</sup> It is a nine-item instrument/questionnaire used to diagnose and determine depression. It examines the prevalence of 9 problems in participants' lives. See [https://med.stanford.edu/fastlab/research/imapp/msrs/jcr\\_content/main/accordion/accordion\\_content3/download\\_256324296/file.res/PHQ9%20id%20date%2008.03.pdf](https://med.stanford.edu/fastlab/research/imapp/msrs/jcr_content/main/accordion/accordion_content3/download_256324296/file.res/PHQ9%20id%20date%2008.03.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> It is a statistical test that tests whether two categorical (nominal/ordinal) variables have a significant association. See <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23894860/>

<sup>5</sup> The Shapiro-Wilk test examines whether a sample is extracted from a normally distributed population or not. That is, whether the values or the information of the data are almost identical or not.

test<sup>6</sup>, we verified data dependency, normality, independence, and non-multicollinearity. We calculated ORs and 95% CI for the categorical variables. For all our analyses, we used SPSS 26.0.

For qualitative data, we used the thematic analysis method and arranged four themes based on our quantitative variables (country of destination, experience of physical victimization, sexual victimization, and financial victimization), and outlined participants' experiences and their mental health effects. We then merged and reported the interview findings with those from the quantitative analysis.

## Findings

### Demographic characteristics and the prevalence of victimization experiences

Table 1 depicts the major demographic characteristics and preferred country of the participants. Most participants are male (88.89%), while a few are female (11.11%). Regarding preferred destinations, most participants went to GCC (76.19%), while a minority went to non-GCC (23.81%) countries. Moreover, a large number of participants reported physical victimization (74.60%), and the number of financially victimized participants is even higher, with 92.06% of the participants reporting instances of financial victimization. Only 5 participants reported experiencing sexual victimization. However, all of them are female, which is 71.43% of the female participants. The participants' stories also outline their victimization experiences. While we asked them if they could recall any incident of victimization, all the interview participants told us their dreadful experiences in foreign lands. For instance, Participant-13, who went to Oman 5 years ago, told about his experience, saying-

My employer demanded that I work for 15 hours a day despite paying half the salary.... and most of the time, I did not get my monthly salary. He (the employer) used to beat me if I demanded my salary on time.

Other interview participants expressed similar experiences. In their words-

The biggest mistake I made one day was asking for food. I was starving for a day, so I asked for food.... but I got a slap instead. You do not pay me my full salary, nor feed me....at least treat me as a human! (Participant-14, male, 24, 3 years in the UAE)

I could hardly send money home as I did not get the promised salary. One day, I demanded the promised salary and threatened my employer that I would complain to the police. The next day, he handed me over to the police, accusing me of stealing money...the police did not listen to me...surely took a bribe to beat me. (Participant-19, male, 23, 1 year in Kuwait)

I had no vacation and no sick leave. My employer also wanted me to work during the holidays for the same low salary. I was afraid to ask for overtime pay because he often warned us that he would send workers to jail if anyone requested extra pay... he even kicked me once for asking for sick leave and money to buy medicine. (Participant-23, male, 27, 1.5 years in Bahrain)

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<sup>6</sup> A statistical method of testing whether samples are derived from a referenced distribution or whether two samples are extracted from the same distribution

Promised job and salary? These were dreams for us. Asking for a salary would invite threats and beatings. (Participant-21, male, 22, 3 years in Qatar)

These narratives indicate the prevalence of simultaneous occurrences of physical and financial (non-payment/wage theft) victimization. The workers become vulnerable the moment they enter the destination countries, as evident by their fear of being reported to the police. Also, the employers often withhold the workers' passports to restrict their movements and subjugate them. Thirteen of the interview participants reported that their passports were withheld. Participant-28, who went to Saudi Arabia five years ago and worked there for four years, highlighted this saying-

I could not move elsewhere, even though I was not receiving my full salary on time. My employer withheld my passport and threatened to report me to the police. I was technically undocumented because I had no papers to show and prove my legal entry. I felt compelled to work for him.

Their vulnerability forces migrant workers to work under precarious conditions. Apart from their physical and financial sufferings, some workers, specifically the female workers, expressed experiences of sexual victimization. While we asked whether Participant-17 experienced any sexual victimization, she recalled her experience saying-

My recruiter told me my job would be to help with household work... but I did not know that there would be no woman in the house... only men, five men, and they would want to touch me inappropriately...who should I complain to? I was confined, with no way to call home, and one day, the youngest one beat me and wanted to do inappropriate things. He injured my head, and I was rushed to the hospital.... thank God! They were scared of being caught, so they sent me home to Bangladesh. (Participant-17, female, 25, 3 months in Saudi Arabia).

Another participant had a similar kind of experience. In her words-

My employer used to touch me inappropriately. I got my passport back after I had complained to his wife. (Participant-31, female, 22, 2 months in UAE)

Similarly, Participant-32 said-

The house-owner used to slap me for making mistakes while cleaning his house. One day, he grabbed my waist and assaulted me. I got faint and woke up with bruises on my body. I was taken to the nearby hospital and then sent home. (Participant-42, female, 21, 8 months in UAE)

These female participants' experiences highlight the prevalence of sexual assault and sexual victimization of female migrant workers. These vulnerable workers, who are primarily domestic workers, go through severe assault in addition to the denial of fundamental human rights. Both the female and male participants' narratives highlighted the disregard for workers' problems by the authorities, including the legal and justice systems, as well as Bangladesh missions in destination countries.

Table 1. Participants with victimization experiences, depression, and suicidal thoughts

Variables		Total, N(%)	Depression			Suicidal thoughts		
			Yes	No	P-value	Yes	No	P-value
Age		Mean 23.3						
Gender	Male	56 (88.89 %)	45 (80.36 %)	11 (19.65 %)	0.733	36 (64.29 %)	20 (35.71 %)	0.778
	Female	7 (11.11 %)	7 (100 %)	n/a		5 (71.43 %)	2 (28.57 %)	
Country of destination	GCC	48 (76.19 %)	41 (85.42 %)	7 (14.58 %)	<0.001	32 (66.67 %)	16 (33.33 %)	<0.05
	non-GCC	15 (23.81 %)	12 (80 %)	3 (20 %)		5 (33.33 %)	10 (66.67 %)	
Sexual Victimization	Yes	5 (7.94 %)	5 (100 %)	n/a	<0.001	5 (100 %)	n/a	<0.05
	No	58 (92.06 %)	49 (84.50 %)	9 (15.50 %)		38 (65.52 %)	20 (34.48 %)	
Physical Victimization	Yes	47 (74.60 %)	42 (89.36 %)	5 (10.64 %)	<0.05	39 (82.98 %)	8 (17.02 %)	<0.001
	No	16 (25.40 %)	6 (37.5 %)	10 (62.25 %)		5 (31.25 %)	11 (68.75 %)	
Financial Victimization	Yes	58 (92.06 %)	58 (100 %)	n/a	<0.05	46 (79.31 %)	12 (20.69 %)	<0.05
	No	5 (7.94 %)	1 (20 %)	4 (80 %)		n/a	6 (100 %)	

### Prevalence of depression and suicidal thoughts among the participants

Both our quantitative and qualitative findings provided rich data on depression and suicidal thoughts among participants. We asked the participants if they had experienced depression or if they had thoughts of suicide recently, due to their experience abroad. Findings from the interviews indicate the gravity of such psychological distress.

We found depressive symptoms among 52 participants, with 50% of them reporting severe depression and approximately 36% of them having moderate levels of depression (Figure 1). On the other hand, Figure 2 depicts that approximately 65% of participants have had suicidal thoughts.

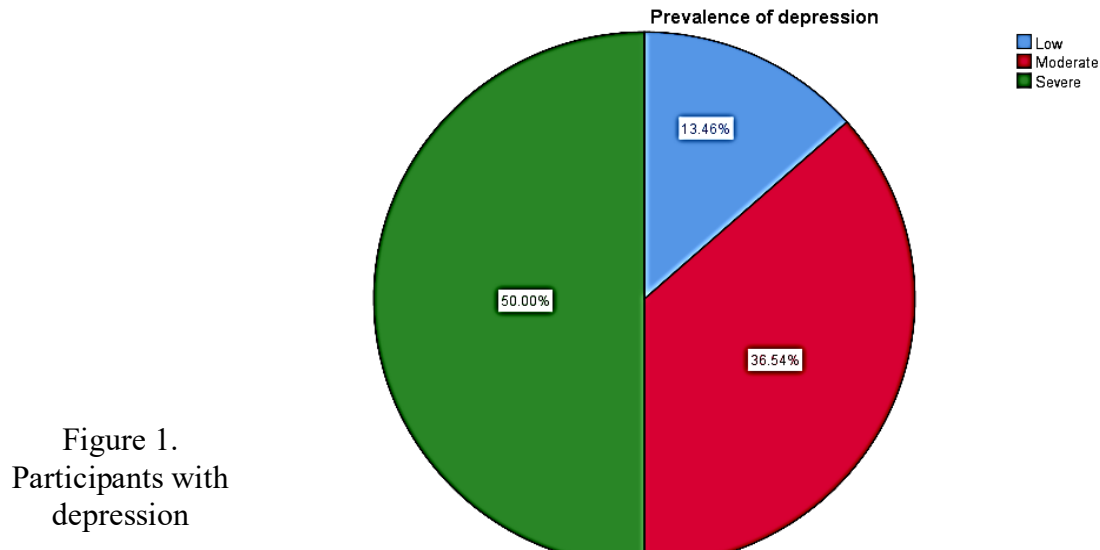


Figure 1.  
Participants with depression

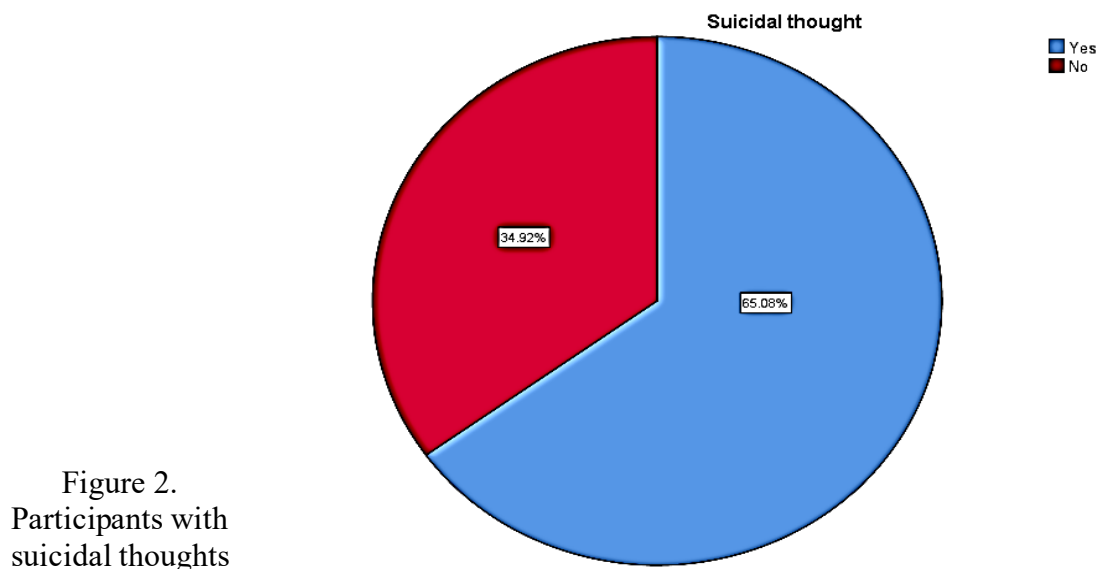


Figure 2.  
Participants with suicidal thoughts

### Factors related to depression and suicidal thoughts

Our analyses present the factors behind depression and suicidal thoughts, both quantitatively and qualitatively. For the purposes of this study, we examined whether the destination country and different victimizations have positive relationships with being depressed or having suicidal thoughts. Additionally, we used interview data to support the claims of the quantitative findings.

Based on our quantitative findings, Table 1 shows that gender does not have any specific relation with depression and suicidal thoughts. However, Table 1 reveals that country of destination (<0.001), experiences of sexual victimization (<0.001), physical victimization (<0.05), and

financial victimization (<0.05) have a significant association with depression. Also, these factors affect suicidal thoughts significantly.

Table 2. Binary logistic regression model of factors for depression and suicidal thoughts

Variables		Depression		Suicidal thoughts	
		Exp(B) (Lower – Upper)	P-Value	Exp(B) (Lower – Upper)	P-Value
Country of destination	GCC non-GCC	Reference 1.8 (0.89–8.17)	<0.001	2.9 (0.67–4.83)	<0.05
Sexual Victimization	Yes No	Reference 2.9 (1.93–7.56)	<0.001	4.8 (1.87–8.64)	<0.05
Physical Victimization	No Yes	Reference 3.4 (1.65–6.46)	<0.05	4.2 (2.27–10.51)	<0.001
Financial Victimization	No Yes	Reference 3.5 (1.86–6.61)	<0.05	5.4 (3.61–21.69)	<0.05

Table 2 shows the results of binary logistic regression. It shows the factors that are responsible for depression and suicidal thoughts. Participants who went to GCC countries are 1.8 times more likely to be depressed (OR=1.8; 95% CI: 0.89-8.17) and have 2.9 times more suicidal thoughts (OR=2.9; 95% CI: 0.67–4.83) than the participants who went to non-GCC countries.

Participants who experienced sexual victimization reported more depression (2.9 times more) and suicidal thoughts (4.8 times more) than those who did not face sexual victimization. Table 2 also indicates that participants who experienced physical and financial victimization are more likely to be depressed and have suicidal thoughts than participants who did not face such victimization.

The participants' narratives support these quantitative findings. While we asked them questions regarding depression and suicidal thoughts while they were abroad, their answers highlighted how their experiences had impacts on their depression and suicidal thoughts. In their words-

I went abroad to help my family financially... what's the outcome? Every time my employer bet me, I felt like killing myself. I could not send money home... I became frustrated, depressed, and thought dying was better than this life. (Participant-13, male, 26, 5 years in Oman)

I thought of committing suicide the day he (the employer) slapped me. The humiliation, in front of everyone, was unbearable. I could barely sleep at night. I borrowed money to go abroad, but I didn't receive regular payments. I felt frustrated thinking about how I would pay my debt! (Participant-14, male, 24, 3 years in UAE)

I felt dead inside, thinking of my family back in Bangladesh. The creditors would come demanding money and threatening my wife. When he turned me over to the police, I thought that committing suicide would be the easiest solution to my never-ending financial problems. (Participant-19, male, 23, 1 year in Kuwait)

Depression was a daily experience. The beatings and non-payments motivated me several times to die. (Participant-21, male, 22, 3 years in Qatar)

I cry every day since this incident... cannot forget what happened to me... I made several suicidal attempts. (Participant-17, female, 25, 3 months in Saudi Arabia).

I could not sleep at night because I was scared, thinking that the owner of the house might come into my room at any moment and touch me. I was tired of being afraid. I thought I would take my life if I failed to go to Bangladesh. (Participant-31, female, 22, 2 months in UAE)

While I was in the hospital, I thought that killing myself would be better than going back to work and getting assaulted. (Participant-42, female, 21, 8 months in UAE)

These narratives highlight participants' pathways to depression and suicidal thoughts. The vulnerable participants experienced severe depression and thought of committing suicide as they lived in despair, with the burdens of paying debt and the pains of victimization.

## **Discussion**

We examined the prevalence of depression and suicidal thoughts among Bangladeshi migrant workers who worked abroad for some years and returned home. Our findings show that depression and suicidal thoughts are common among the participants. However, gender does not affect depression or suicidal thoughts.

Our findings indicate that Bangladeshi migrant workers prefer GCC countries, as evidenced by BMET's (2024) report. Participants who went to GCC countries exhibited higher levels of depression and suicidal thoughts compared to those who went to non-GCC countries. Previous research also shows similar findings, revealing that migrant workers in GCC countries exhibit greater levels of psychosis and suicide attempts (Al-Ghafry et al., 2012). Several studies on migrant workers' mental health conditions across various GCC countries indicate that these workers experience severe mental health issues or suicidal incidents (see AbuMadini & Rahim, 2002; Adhikary et al., 2011; Al Ansari et al., 2007; Al-Maskari et al., 2011; El-Hilu et al., 1990; Zahid et al., 2004). Additionally, studies show that migrant workers encounter more mental health issues than natives (see Aalto et al., 2014; Cayuela et al., 2015; Devkota et al., 2021; Pham et al., 2019).

Additionally, our findings provide evidence of other risk factors, such as sexual, financial, and physical victimization, which increase the likelihood of depression and suicidal thoughts. The participants' narratives also outlined their different victimization experiences, which made them depressed and triggered their suicidal thoughts. In line with previous studies, it is certain that physical abuse results in mental health problems (Tilahun et al., 2020), and being paid less triggers depression (Htay et al., 2020; Tilahun et al., 2020).

Our findings are novel because we focused on both workers who went to GCC countries and those who did not. Furthermore, this is the first mixed-method study involving Bangladeshi migrant workers that explored various victimization experiences as risk factors for depression and suicidal thoughts.

## **Conclusion and policy recommendations**

Millions of people move abroad in search of a better life, making them more vulnerable than native citizens. Migrant workers, specifically those working in the unorganized sector, are the most vulnerable group. Their vulnerability makes them victims, which triggers depression and suicidal thoughts among them. As Bangladesh is among the top countries that send the largest labor force to the international labor market, understanding the conditions of these workers is warranted. Our study employs both quantitative and qualitative data to achieve this.

Numerous factors fuel depression and suicidal thoughts among migrant workers. Financial instability, physically demanding work, and illness impact depression and suicidal thoughts (Al-Maskari et al., 2011). We found factors behind depression and suicidal thoughts as well, and our findings show that sexual, physical, and financial (non-payment, wage theft, higher cost of migration) victimizations are linked to depression and suicidal thoughts. Workers who experienced such victimization reported higher levels of depression and suicidal thoughts than those who did not experience such incidents. Previous studies also reported that financial deprivation depression (Htay et al., 2020; Tilahun et al., 2020) and physical abuse (Tilahun et al., 2020) affect migrant workers' psychological well-being.

Several studies have focused on the mental health conditions of migrant workers in numerous host countries. However, research focusing solely on Bangladeshi migrant workers' mental health conditions is almost non-existent. The underreporting of migrant workers' mental health conditions affects millions of workers worldwide. Discriminatory policies, ineffective laws, and xenophobia against immigrants contribute to migrant workers' human rights violations (Varia, 2011). They go through mental health issues even after they return home. The participants in this study reported receiving little to no help with rehabilitation. Also, there was no intervention from the stakeholders to minimize their mental health problems. Therefore, our suggestion is to provide migrant workers with social support. Social support has a positive impact on the psychological well-being of immigrants (Alegría et al., 2017; Awuah et al., 2022).

There is no official documentation of victimized migrant workers in Bangladesh. Therefore, we suggest that the authorities and the stakeholders should document victimized migrant workers and alleviate their mental health issues. The government should set up a hospital for treating migrant workers suffering from physical and mental illness. Labor laws should include provisions regarding the rehabilitation of victimized migrant workers.

Future studies can benefit by addressing the limitations of our study. For instance, future research should include a larger number of participants, including those currently abroad, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their issues. Additionally, recruiting workers from all the preferred destinations of Bangladeshi migrant workers would help develop more effective policies. Studies should collect data from government and non-government authorities involved in the migratory processes to understand gaps in policies and develop better ones, which would stop workers from experiencing psychological distress during the migratory process.

## **Acknowledgments**

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# The “Sweetest Sounding” Words of Civil Rights: A Labor Origin Story of the “Right to Work”

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## Abstract

This essay revisits the idea of “right to work” by offering historical context of Florida’s passage of its 1944 right to work constitutional amendment. A brief overview of the history of the term right to work and its contested nature indicates how the phrase likely led to confusion especially in the arena of political economy. A close evaluation of the amendment and its incongruent nature reveals the intent of its proponents was to deceive voters with the “sweetest sounding” words of civil rights while weakening their ability to organize labor unions. The history of safeguarding the free market entailed disciplining the working class. In the context of the New Deal developing labor regime and hopeful signs of worker empowerment, advocates of “free enterprise” sought to tame democracy through its own governing mechanisms.

## Keywords

Right to Work, “Right to Work” movement, labor history, labor unions, anti-unionism, union security, Florida, misinformation, disinformation

The historical record reveals how the idea of “right to work,” at least in the United States, has been mired in an intellectual miasma that at best confuses most people and at worst angers others aware of its direct attack on working-class power. Take for instance Gilbert Gall’s wonderful book *The Politics of Right to Work: The Labor Federations as Special Interests, 1943-1979* (1988), a dense study packed with impeccable qualitative and quantitative research of the labor union response to state level right to work campaigns and efforts to repeal section 14(b) of the 1947 Labor Management Relations Act (Taft Hartley Act). Section 14(b) of the Taft Hartley Act allowed states to pass “right to work” laws which translated to the disallowance of the union shop (sometimes derided by anti-unionists as the closed shop). The union shop meant all workers at a job site, once the majority of workers voted to join a union, either became union members or were required to pay dues from costs incurred from all the efforts included in contract negotiations and related union work related business. Modifications, reflecting efforts to work within the confines of a highly restrictive union security political atmosphere, have included efforts to isolate union job related fees from other union political activities into union agency fees.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Among many sources, Jane McAlevey, *A Collective Bargain* (2020) offers extensive discussion of the attacks on agency fees (sometimes called fair share fees) especially in public sector unions.

Gall's study begins with the early state efforts to upend the 1935 National Labor Relations Act (NLRA and also known as the Wagner Act after its chief proponent Senator Robert Wagner of New York) before the Taft-Hartley Act was passed in 1947; however, the vast majority of the book engaged the post 1947 period. As definitively demonstrated by scholar James A. Gross magisterial studies on the National Labor Relations Board, the resistance to unionism and union security existed within months of the passage of the 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act's and section 7(a) protection of workers' right to form their own unions. Employer resistance persisted through the entire period which culminated with the passage of the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act (Gross, 1974; 1981). As Gross notes, employers sought to take advantage of the break between craft and industrial unions in 1936, the internal conflicts within the National Labor Relations Board, and Franklin Roosevelt's wavering support of union security (Gross, 1981, p. 61-72, *passim*), especially in their efforts to emphasize worker choice whether to support a company union or other non-affiliated union (with either the AFL or CIO) or not choosing to be part of a union at all.<sup>2</sup> Many of the NLRA reforms in the Taft-Hartley Act had been proposed in 1940 by Representative Howard Smith after a highly political, propagandistic committee hearings in late 1939 through 1940. While his proposals did not pass, Gross argued that "the Smith Committee's investigation triggered drastic and long-lasting changes in American labor policy by the NLRB" (Gross, 1981, p. 221-225). Throughout the years after 1933 and increasingly after the passage of the 1935 Wagner Act, the discourse of the right to work emerged as an employer rhetorical strategy. Gross did not analyze the rhetoric of the right to work, while Gall focused mainly on the union institutional and political party efforts to support or resist union security measures.

Gall's study, nonetheless, was sprinkled with evidence of how confused voters tended to be about the idea of the "right to work" and thus generally represented an enormous challenge for labor union public educational efforts (Gall, 1988, p. 14-27, *passim*). To take just one example, Arkansas's AFL-CIO's 1971 efforts to repeal the state's 1944 right to work law (with Florida, the first of two states to pass such a law) ran up against a very confused electorate. Union analysts found that voters were "highly confused" with what the term "right to work" meant (Gall, 1988, p. 192-194). This is striking when one considers that the term had been around nearly three decades in its anti-union employer connotation. Such confusion suggested a civic knowledge gap so deep that years of education at the minimum would have been needed in order to have a fighting chance of repealing the Arkansas law. What that education project would entail was unclear, especially in the context of an educational system disinterested in teaching labor history. When combined with the particular dynamics of right to work campaigns, the uphill battle of securing pro-union, including union security, laws appear quite daunting. Gall notes, for instance, how in a 1958 Ohio right to work campaign, a researcher for a pro-union public relations firm commented that "the fact is proponents of the 'right to work' law can—by skillful selection of the right years and by ignoring pertinent factors—'prove' anything they wish" (Gall, 1988, 114-115).

The pertinent and undeniable facts Gall establishes included how Republicans and conservative Democrats (mostly from the South) voted consistently, at the federal and state level, against the union security issue of the union shop and other labor issues between 1943 and 1979. Understandably missing from his work was a more careful evaluation of what an education project

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<sup>2</sup> The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations merged in 1955. The CIO was founded in 1935 in a valiant effort to organize industrial workers who had too often been ignored or abandoned by the craft-oriented AFL.

about the nature of the right to work struggle would look like. The 1958 public relations analyst's insight about how anti-union advocates could "prove" anything implied how the issue of right to work could be distorted by omission and exaggeration, likely perpetuating disinformation, spreading misinformation about power and class relations, and generally contributing to the stifling of honest constructive discourse.<sup>3</sup> What education program could combat this? Analysis of one historical moment in the early 1940s—Florida's effort to undermine the NLRA—will help offer insight into the dynamics of civic consciousness relevant then and pertinent in the contemporary post-truth context. This is undoubtedly murky ground and the proposal here is not to offer a counterfactual history.

Rather this essay revisits a sort of origins story of the history of the right to work as a way to tackle how to educate individuals about its history and, thus, empower them in the clear class struggle that has been underway for quite some time. The discourse of the "golden era" of twentieth century capitalism (the lessening of inequality in the 1940s-1970s period) too often forgets the context of class struggle and worker and unionization precarity. Engaging "the right to work's" contested history will help document this story, one that challenges the neatness of the American Dream narrative of equal opportunity. Only a small segment of this long and deep history will be offered here; it's an elaborate story, one suitable for a larger book project on the subject. However, a close analysis of the origins of Florida's early 1940s right to work state constitutional amendment and the incongruent nature of its language, in the context of its contested history, reveals the intent of its proponents was to deceive voters with the sweet-sounding words of civil rights. Disempowering the working class represented the larger goal. The use of "rights" language and the flawed processes shaping the legislative and electoral components of governance enabled bad actors to undermine working class-power.

### *A Brief Historical Overview*

Often forgotten is how the term "right to work" had its roots in a rich progressive and moral economic, social, and political tradition that contested the debilitating effects of capitalism. The details of this history are rich and elaborate, but a few brief points may offer a window into this story. The history of workers organizing since as early as the eighteenth century indicates consistent and concerted efforts to safeguard a living wage, shorter hours, just working conditions, and generally a moral economic outlook on how to order society.<sup>4</sup> In times of economic recession and depression, workers have expanded this perspective to include calls for the government to provide employment.<sup>5</sup> Soon social reformers, politicians, academics, and intellectuals in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries joined these workers' calls by seeking to alleviate the worse aspects of a capitalist order. This centuries long struggle gained concrete traction in various labor

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<sup>3</sup> The American Psychological Association makes a useful distinction between disinformation (false information deliberately intended to mislead) and misinformation (false and inaccurate information): "Misinformation and Disinformation," <https://www.apa.org/topics/journalism-facts/misinformation-disinformation> (last accessed March 11, 2025). The APA Council of Representatives agreed on a consensus statement. For that and other related material, see "Using psychology to understand and fight health misinformation," <https://www.apa.org/pubs/reports/health-misinformation> (last accessed March 11, 2025).

<sup>4</sup> The literature documenting this story is too vast to do it justice here. A good start is Murolo's *From the Folks Who Brought You the Weekend* (2018).

<sup>5</sup> Gutman (1965); Schwantes (1985). The idea of the right to work as a call for full employment was reviewed as early as 1952: Bachrach, (June 1952) "The Right to Work: The Emergence of the Idea in the United States."

laws and other gestures—from workmen’s compensation, health and safety regulations, child labor laws, anti-convict labor laws, and several other work and labor union laws—culminating in the New Deal labor regime of the 1935 National Labor Relations Act and the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act.

The phrase and idea of the right to work had long been used by workers and progressives. The labor economist John Commons used the term “right to work” in 1893 in his advocacy of having government serve as the employer of last resort; the American Federation of Labor President William Green also used it in a similar vein in 1931, as did Senator Robert Wagner and Maryland Representative David Lewis in 1932; and, later, Nels Anderson, prominent sociologist on unemployment and homelessness, wrote a book entitled *The Right to Work* (1938) about the public works projects of the Works Progress Administration.<sup>6</sup> Amid this progressive rendering of the term right to work was the Congress of Industrial Organizations drive beginning in December 1937 to assure employment for everyone.<sup>7</sup> Less than two years later, the Workers’ Alliance of America, an unemployed workers organization, held a “Right-to-Work Congress” conference in the Labor Department (early June 1939) to tackle the problem of economic insecurity. It was a week-long conference that included various Congressional members participating in it, Eleanor Roosevelt giving a speech, and several demonstrations and targeted protests of Congress members.<sup>8</sup> No doubt, the CIO and the Workers Alliance sought to build on President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal, fiery rhetoric, and progressive vision. His 1936 Democratic Party renomination acceptance speech called out the “economic royalists,” noted that “Necessitous men are not free men,” and argued that the government needed to protect the “right to work and live.” Roosevelt reconfirmed this expansive notion in his 1938 State of the Union speech asserting the right of the unemployed to “call upon government for aid” including providing “useful work” for “any needy American who can and is willing to work.” Roosevelt’s 1941 (Four Freedom’s Speech) and 1944 State of the Union (Second Bill of Rights or Economic Bill of Rights) reiterated this hopeful message.<sup>9</sup>

Capitalists who argued for the right to work never did so in the spirit that each individual had a right to a job let alone one with a living wage and decent working conditions that prioritized health, safety, and reasonable work hours. Instead, their embrace of the idea of the right to work had its roots in their efforts to block unionization and protect the employers’ right to employ who they pleased; so logically they argued for the free market and a laborer’s right to choose not to join a union. Perhaps the most prominent group in the struggle against working class power and labor unions was the National Association of Manufacturers, one of several employer organizations that

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<sup>6</sup> Commons, (1893, pp. 80-81 & 107-111); Commons, (Feb 1899); William Green, *The Right to Work* (Washington D.C.: American Federation of Labor, 1931) which was an AFL pamphlet transcribing Green’s speech given in the AFL convention held in Vancouver, Canada, October 1931; Wagner, (1932, pp. 185-193); *Legalizing Worker’s Right to Work and to Share of Available Employment, Hearings Before the Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives, Seventy-Second Congress, First Session, June 9, 1932* (1932); Anderson, (1938).

<sup>7</sup> “C. I. O. Opens Drive for Right to Work,” (1937, Dec 7).

<sup>8</sup> “Work Congress Opens,” *Work* (bi-weekly newspaper of the Workers Alliance of America), June 3, 1939, 1 & “Work Congress Maps Recovery Drive,” June 17, 1939 (thanks to Julie Day, Librarian at the Labor Department’s Wirtz Library who kindly scanned for me copies from their wonderful collection); see the extensive coverage of the conference in the *Daily Worker* in early June 1939.

<sup>9</sup> “Text of Roosevelt Speech.” (1936, June 28); Roosevelt (1938); Roosevelt (1941); Roosevelt (1944). Philip Murray, chairman of the Steelworkers Organizing Committee, quoted FDR’s 1936 renomination speech during an intense labor organizing drive, “Labor Charges Intimidation,” (1936, June 29).

took on this crusade.<sup>10</sup> The fight for the “open shop”—that workers in a job site could be union and non-union—began in the early twentieth century and appeared in the NAM’s 1903 Declaration of Principles. It declared that “the doors of no industry be closed against American workmen because of their membership or non-membership in any labor organization.” The following year, the NAM revised its Declaration of Principles, adding “its unalterable antagonism to the closed shop.” NAM president George Pope in 1915 framed the point in a manner that would define the later connotation of the right to work when he declared “equal rights to all, and the right of every man to earn a living.” The high-sounding rhetoric of inclusivity obscured the political project of disempowering the working class or rather forcing them to submit to the mandates of the market.<sup>11</sup> The right to work, though, did not mean an obligation to secure full employment.

Employers’ arguments for the right to work emphasized the thuggish and illiberal dangers of an empowered labor union movement while boosting the familial, paternalistic characteristics of the workplace and employer. While legitimate concerns existed with union corruption, the records of such instances were rare and the historical context of its manifestations much more complicated than ever presented by anti-unionists.<sup>12</sup> The accusation of “labor bosses” usurping and concentrating power became increasingly more common in the 1930s and especially from the 1940s on in the context of the New Deal labor regime and totalitarianism on the world stage. Employers engaged in a seemingly ceaseless public relations campaign that argued the worksite as a sort of family setting with the minimum expectation of unwavering worker loyalty. It was within this paternalistic context that employers argued for the workers’ right to work free of any “outside” interference disruptive of the harmonious employer-employee relations cultivated in employee representation plans (also known as company unions).

Employers framed their concerns for the workers’ well-being, especially their “right to work,” as embedded in a noble act upholding law and order one meant to protect them from these “outside” unions. On June 29, 1936, the American Iron and Steel Institute announced it would resist any effort “to compel its employes to join a union or pay tribute for the right to work.” This included protecting “its employes and their families from intimidation, coercion and violence” apparently from independent labor union efforts to organize workers. Several steel companies operated company unions, which according to the Institute, were freely selected through “elections... conducted by the employes themselves by secret ballot.”<sup>13</sup> The Institute published this statement, according to a 1939 Senate hearing, in 382 newspapers in 34 states including the District of Columbia.<sup>14</sup> Shortly thereafter, the NAM published in their July *N.A.M. Labor Relations Bulletin*

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<sup>10</sup> Two excellent studies of this anti-union movement are: Pearson’s *Reform or Repression* (2016) and Hulden’s *The Bosses’ Union* (2023).

<sup>11</sup> *Proceedings of the Eighth Annual Convention of the National Association of Manufacturers*, New Orleans, LA, April 14-16, 1903 (New York: Secretary’s Office, 1903), p. 165). The closed shop provision was added the following year: *Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Convention of the National Association of Manufacturers*, Pittsburgh, PA., May 17-19, 1904 (New York: Secretary’s Office, 1904), p. 173; *Proceedings of the Twentieth Annual Convention of the National Association of Manufacturers*, New York City, May 25-26, 1915 (New York: Secretary’s Office, 1915), p. 269. T. A. Castillo, *Working in the Magic City*, p63-99.

<sup>12</sup> The literature is quite broad, but the work of Sidney Lens (1949), Andrew Cohen (2004), and David Witwer (2009) offer powerful correctives of simplistic binary narratives. A deep evaluation of the history of capitalism, including employer collusion in maintaining sweetheart contracts, is an important place to start.

<sup>13</sup> “Challenge Hurlled to Lewis Group,” *Pittsburgh Press*, June 29, 1936, 1.

<sup>14</sup> *National Labor Relations Act and Proposed Amendments, Hearings Before the Committee on Education and Labor, United States Senate, Seventy-Sixth Congress, First Session, Part 9, June 5-7, 1939* (1939), 1641.

a report on Remington Rand's May-June successful union squashing effort in upstate New York which introduced the innovative and notorious Mohawk Valley Formula. This anti-union counterinsurgency formula implemented a psyop-like public relations set of tactics, including astroturf politics, to undermine unionization drives. The *N.A.M. Labor Relations Bulletin* described the effort as one revealing a "community" organizing to protect "the right to work."<sup>15</sup> In that 1939 Senate hearing, Senators Elbert Thomas of Utah and Allen Ellender of Louisiana pressed Walter S. Tower, executive secretary of the Institute, for the clear propagandistic use of the term right to work as a vehicle to maintain open shop conditions. When mockingly challenged by Thomas if the Institute would embrace "the theory of Karl Marx, that every man has a right to work," Tower priggishly rejected it commenting, "I doubt if I would accept personally any theory of Karl Marx... none whatever."<sup>16</sup> Clearly, Tower sought to squash any suggestion of an expansive project about the meaning of the right to work, preferring to limit its scope as narrowly as possible thereby stripping it of its longer and deeper historical meaning.

By the eve of World War II, anti-union employers had identified a deceptive rhetorical tool that would obscure the dynamic of power and politics in the workplace. The realm of the market and the workplace, in their opinion, ought to be outside the sphere of politics. There was a striking parallel between the organized employers' anti-union arguments of the apolitical nature of the workplace and the emerging neoliberal arguments for having the state protect the market as a means to safeguard the liberty of the individual. This history cannot be unpacked here.<sup>17</sup> However, the brief outline offered above helps contextualize subsequent discussion of Florida's 1944 vote on a right to work amendment to its constitution.

### *A Right-to-Work Moment in Florida History*

Florida's 1885 Constitution, a revision of the 1868 Reconstruction Constitution, mandated in Article XII (pertaining to education), Section 12 that "White and colored children shall not be taught in the same school," rectifying for racial purists one of the abominable wrongs of that dark period, though positively and patriotically remembered by some as the nation's Second Founding.<sup>18</sup> Adopted eleven years before the infamous Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which helped institute what amounted to an American apartheid for more than half a century, Florida proudly stood by its racist past in this segregationist turn. Interestingly, the state would again embrace the role of honoring repressive traditions and seek once more to lead the Union sixty years later. This time it would be accomplished deceptively and surreptitiously though, perhaps ironically, in a more performative way.

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<sup>15</sup> "N.A.M. Labor Relations Bulletin," No. 14, July 20, 1936, reproduced as Exhibit 3860 in the *Violations of Free Speech and Rights of Labor, Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor United States Senate, Seventy-Fifth Congress, Third Session*, Part 18, Employers Association and "Citizens Committees," National Association of Manufacturers, March 4, 7, & 8, 1938 (1938), 7924-7930. Exhibit 3861 (7947-8014) reproduced the National Labor Relations Board decision on the Remington Rand case (C-145). The nine-step Mohawk Valley Formula was neatly outlined on 7969-7970.

<sup>16</sup> *National Labor Relations Act and Proposed Amendments*, 1636-1648 (Marx quote on 1637).

<sup>17</sup> The literature is quite broad here. See Whyte, *The Morals of the Market* (2019) and Slobodian, *Globalists* (2018) for a thoughtful engagement relevant to my discussion here.

<sup>18</sup> For a copy of the 1885 Florida Constitution, see <https://library.law.fsu.edu/Digital-Collections/CRC/CRC-1998/conhist/1885con.html>. The literature on the Second Founding is vast but a good starting point is W.E.B. Dubois' *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (1935; 1998) and Foner, *The Second Founding* (2019).

Amid a devastating world war with thousands of resident Floridians serving at home and overseas, Florida voters in 1944 faced a perplexing state Constitution referendum. Florida Attorney General Tom Watson and his legislative allies (especially State Representative Joe Jenkins of Alachua, Florida, a primarily agricultural area) succeeded in passing a “right to work” state constitution amendment in the 1943 legislative session after a failed though nearly successful attempt in May 1941 (Shott, 1956; Lowe, 1956). Before 1969, Florida’s legislature met biannually. The 1885 Constitution mandated that once a state constitution amendment was passed by each house of the legislature by a 3/5<sup>th</sup> vote, the amendment had to “be submitted to the electors of the State, for approval or rejection ... immediately preceding the next general election of Representatives.” The amendment amended section 12 of the Constitution’s Declaration of Rights which consisted of 24 total amendments or “sections.”

Section 12 of the 1885 Declaration of Rights read as follows: “No person shall be subject to be twice put in jeopardy for the same offense, nor compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself, nor be deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken without just compensation.” Mirroring the Fifth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, Section 12 outlined a clear framing of civil rights, that is, it protected the individual against potential abuses of state power by setting limits (double-jeopardy, self-incrimination, due process, just compensation for eminent domain) of how far a state could impose its power against an individual. The 1943 “right to work” advocates decided to add to this civil rights amendment a “right to work” provision which read as follows: “The right of persons to work shall not be denied or abridged on account of membership or non-membership in any labor union, or labor organization; provided, that this clause shall not be construed to deny or abridge the right of employees by and through a labor organization or labor union to bargain collectively with their employer.”

What a ballot actually looked like is unclear given no extant example exists in the State Archives of Florida holdings.<sup>19</sup> What we do know is that in addition to the various offices being voted for at the city, county, state, and federal levels, the ballot consisted of eight other amendments. The right to work amendment, also discussed as the “anti-closed shop” and less frequently as the “open shop” amendment, was listed as amendment 5 on the ballot. The ballot was nearly a yard long (33 inches), though it is unclear what font size and print type was mandated by the State (“Monroe Must Alter Ballots,” 1944, Oct 19, 1944, p. 6-A). It is clear that voters’ civic conscience, understanding, and focus were being challenged in very anxious times. This vote did occur amid World War II. Undoubtedly, the legalese would twist the sharpest legal minds, and the patience of anyone would be tested wading through a yard-long ballot of dense language and the many political offices up for election. Interestingly, voters were saved from an even longer ballot when the Florida Supreme Court in early October removed a tenth constitutional amendment from consideration, because it dealt with more than one subject. It happened to also be a very long amendment pertaining to local government divisions in two counties, and it consisted of nine

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<sup>19</sup> I asked the very helpful Florida State Archives archivist, Dylan S. James, in a May 2024 visit to Tallahassee if the Archives held any sample ballots. He noted none were extant (confirmed in an email with author, 2/27/2025); the Archives do have sample ballots for elections in the post-1958 period. What did exist was the final tallies for the general election. See *General Election, Series S 1258, vol. 57* (1944), State Archives of Florida.

sections.<sup>20</sup> The Constitution (Article XVII, Section 1) mandated that legal notices of the constitutional amendments needed to be “published in one newspaper in each county where a newspaper is published.”

The official announcement of the pending referendum that circulated months, weeks, and days ahead of the November 7, 1944 election did not publish the text of Section 12 of the Declaration of Rights section separately indicating simply and clearly that the “right to work” text was being added.<sup>21</sup> The announcement appeared in extra small print, much smaller than the text in the adjoining newspaper sections, and this “legal notice” included the other amendments under consideration. Voters were briefly informed in legalese that “A JOINT RESOLUTION Proposing an Amendment to Section 12 of the Declaration of Rights in the Constitution of the State of Florida, Relating to Double Jeopardy, Self-Incrimination, Due Process of Law, and the taking of Private Property with Just Compensation, *by Providing* the Right of Persons to Work Shall Not be Denied or Abridged on Account of Membership or Non-Membership in any Labor Union, or Labor Organization; and Providing that the Right of Employees to Collectively Bargain Shall be Preserved” (the italics and underlining the author’s emphasis).

The text then noted, “BE IT RESOLVED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF FLORIDA: That the following amendment to the Constitution of the State of Florida Section 12 of the Declaration of Rights of said Constitution, be and the same is hereby submitted to the qualified electors of the State of Florida for the ratification or rejection... that is to say, that Section 12 of the Declaration of Rights of the Constitution of Rights of the Constitution be amended so as to read...” The text of the entire amended Section 12 then appeared, that is, the 1885 text with the added right to work language. The words “*by Providing*,” as explanatory language, was doing heavy analytical work creating the relationship between the existing Section 12 of the Declaration of Rights and the new right to work language, yet the nature of that relationship remained wholly mysterious.

Was the latter clause (the right to work phrasing) dependent on the first part (civil rights phrasing)? How did the former allow for the latter? What exactly, that is, did “*by Providing*” mean? The text of Section 12 that appeared divided the civil rights section with a definitive punctuation mark, a period, while its various clauses (due process, etc.) were separated by commas or semicolons. The right to work section was merely added on leaving the voter likely perplexed about the relationship between these two parts of Section 12. What exactly would they be voting to accept or reject? Who, in their right mind, would reject civil rights protections such as double jeopardy, self-incrimination, due process, and just compensation when the state executed its right to eminent domain? A civilian with no apparent dog in the fight could have easily misread the amendment and been torn on what to do. Rejecting the amendment, if not informed of the power struggle at stake, would seem like rejecting well-accepted civil rights.

The “right to work”—a vague phrase with contested connotations especially in the early 1940s—had never been a protected civil right. The principle of association was already protected in theory,

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<sup>20</sup> “Hillsborough Amendment Stands,” *Tampa Morning Tribune*, Oct 7, 1944, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Examples include: (all entitled “Legal Notice”) *The Tampa Morning Tribune*, Sept 8, 1944, 11; *The Vero Beach Press-Journal*, Oct 13, 1944, 7A; *The Pensacola Journal*, Oct 26, 1944, 3; *The Clewiston News*, Nov 3, 1944, 3 (quotes taken from this source).

though not explicitly, by the first amendment in the U.S. Constitution and sections 5 (freedom of religion), 13 (freedom of speech), and 15 (freedom of assembly) in the Florida Constitution's Declaration of Rights. Such constitutional provisions were intended to limit the power of the government from preventing individuals from exercising the freedom of association as supported by such rights as speech, assembly, and religion. The novelty and confounding nature of the "right to work" language and this political maneuver of having voters decide on such a complex dynamic as labor relations was both profound and deceptive, perhaps more so than can superficially be discerned by the common eye. The intentional framing of it within the context of civil rights further obfuscated what right was given with the "right" to work.

The right to work provision essentially operated in a fantasy land. Section 12 of the Declaration of Rights protected the individual from state power. When had the state denied or abridged a person's ability to attain a job other than in a racist or sexist framework? This legislative action was a clear attack on federal sanctioning of labor union power as had been established by the 1935 National Labor Relations Act. Tom Watson and his legislative allies asserted state's rights in their effort to block federal labor law from impeding "free enterprise" within the boundaries of Florida.<sup>22</sup> The second clause of the "right to work" amending text alleging one's right to join a union and to collective bargaining rights served two purposes: (1) it was a convenient addition to help prevent it from being overridden by a potential federal supremacy ruling and (2) it sought to appease labor unionists by elevating unionization and collective bargaining to an apparent civil right—a right then compromised by the contingencies of the market and the appearance of choice.

In addition to mirroring wording from the 1903 NAM Declaration of Principles, this "right to work" language created a logical incongruity that is not self-evident on the surface. The "right to work" provision in Section 12 of the Declaration of Rights created an illogical construction: instead of limiting state power, the "right to work" expanded state power by inserting the state into labor market relations. The state was now to serve an apparent paternalist role for workers exercising its police power, protecting their "right" to not be part of a union, a clear counterreaction, perhaps even dismissive and contemptuous, of the New Deal's apparent empowerment of workers through labor union power. Tom Watson, Joe Jenkins, and their allies sought to put the state's finger on the scale by helping employers exploit the market and the general desperate reality of a worker's need to work in order to live and thereby encourage working-class division. The "right to work" provision did not protect the individual from the state; it protected the employer from an empowered working class. In attempting to create the legal apparatus to shield workers from the politics of the workplace—that is, the struggle over power in terms of wages, hours, benefits, and working conditions—the "right to work" offered an ostensible protection of worker "choice." It appeared neutral in that it seemed to empower choice in the marketplace of jobs as well as the freedom to potentially join or not join a variety of associations while mainly protecting the sanctity of the market. As the narrative went, labor union bosses (and the mob workers behind them) blocked economic opportunity while the employer, in the paternal role and protector of families, offered the American worker a chance to survive and advance economically.

Walter Tower of the American and Iron Steel Institute argued as much in his advocacy for the open shop in 1939 when he claimed non-union workers had the right to break strikes and then framed it

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<sup>22</sup> See Glickman, *Free Enterprise* (2019) for an excellent history of the problematic term "free enterprise."

as a “right to work.” In the end, Tower argued labor strikes prevented “the free flow of commerce” by interfering with “the right to work” (i.e., strikebreaking) and therefore functioned “as a direct obstruction” of commerce. Tower sought to turn the NLRA on its head by delegitimizing industrial democracy by both suggesting that company unions were legitimate institutions and explicitly and implicitly arguing that the AFL and CIO were generally ineffective entities or, worse, corrupting forces of workplace harmony. So, while the principle of voluntarism was a critical component of the liberal tradition that likely informed the framers of the Florida amendment, its explicit protection was an unprecedented state act, and in the context of “the right to work,” intended to block unionization.

The market operated at its most optimal level (i.e., free flowing commerce) when workers were compliant or at least acquiescent, submitting to its expectations signaled by price (wages), duration (hours), and efficiency (pace). Or as Tower expressed it, the state ought to afford an “employee any protection against the interference with their right to work or not to work as they shall see fit.” A labor strike, within this logic, equated to a mere choice between working or not working, a relational context devoid of politics. Tower argued that the NLRA “tended to increase industrial unrest and strife” and therefore should be reformed so “that nothing therein shall be construed as to interfere with or impede or diminish in any way the right to work.”<sup>23</sup> The “right to work” represented a developing anti-union theory of how to undermine the growing worker solidarity. Nonetheless, it was not a civil right as indicated by the components in the original Section 12 of the Declaration of Rights; the reality that an individual’s right was not being protected from an overreach of state power also highlighted this fact.

The logical incongruency in the amended version of Section 12 highlighted its innovative nature. It also suggested the framers’ intentions: they had no concern about creating a new civil right or empowering workers. This effort represented a multitiered experiment in performative democracy and state intervention in disciplining the working class. Florida revised its Constitution in 1968 (June 24-July 3, 1968), updating it and correcting such incongruencies as the right to work amendment. The civil rights component in Section 12 of the 1885 Constitution became Section 9 (Article I) of the Declaration of Rights (due process, double jeopardy, and self-incrimination) and Article X, Section 6 (just compensation). The right to work became Section 6 of the Declaration of Rights with the added provision that “public employees shall not have the right to strike.” This latter addition was itself a reaction to the growing national public workers’ union movement as well as the teachers strikes occurring across the country in the 1960s and in Florida in the spring of 1968.<sup>24</sup> Conservatives embraced a long tradition of using the state to maintain law and order strictly defined and often applied in work and worker collective actions, especially in the public sector.<sup>25</sup>

While amendment 5 received the most votes of the eight other amendments on the ballot, the number who cast votes fell far below the overall number who voted in the presidential election. The total Florida vote for president was 482,803 while only 270,630 bothered to cast a vote for or

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<sup>23</sup> *National Labor Relations Act and Proposed Amendments*, 1635-1636.

<sup>24</sup> For the 1968 constitution: <https://library.law.fsu.edu/Digital-Collections/CRC/CRC-1998/conhist/1968con.html>. Baxter, “We are Not Hired Help” (Winter 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Much of labor history literature documents this phenomenon. For public unions, a good start is Joseph Slater’s *Public Worker* (2004) and McCartin’s *Collision Course* (2011).

against the amendment 5 (56% of the total vote): 147,860 voted for it (30.6 of the total votes) while 122,770 voted against it (25.4%) (Scammon, 1965, p. 13; Gall, 1988, p. 234). Forty-four per cent ended up not voting at all. One post-election editorial commentary in the *Miami Daily News* made this telling insight: “the vote on the nine proposed constitutional amendments revealed the usual disinclination of many voters to interest themselves in the issues. The controversial labor amendment (No. 5) produced twice as many votes as any other amendment” (“Official Canvas,” 1944, Nov 24, p. 14A). The comment the “usual disinclination of many voters to interest themselves in the issues” while pointing to a degree of condescension and ruthless accuracy, also sidestepped a glaring problem by blaming the apparent apathy. The straight ticket “party lever” voting option likely encouraged such apathy in helping voters skip voting for the amendments; the option’s attractiveness was possibly increased given voters chose electors for the electoral college by party affiliation and did not vote directly for president.<sup>26</sup>

While I have yet to find any primary sources that would offer insight into the large voting gap, my discussion above points to how the amendment’s confusing nature had an effect. The unwillingness of voters to cast a vote on the amendments (including no. 5) suggested that voters may have been uncomfortable in deciding so many matters. The overloading of the ballot with complex issues was an example of poor governance—whether by design or not—not a failure of the democratic process. The common sense of the “usual disinclination” insight points to an underlying strategy used by the legislator sponsors of the amendment. The “right to work” project, guided by anti-union motivated politicians, sought to take advantage of this “usual disinclination.” Gilbert Gall noted that the state’s AFL federation’s plea for help in an education campaign fell on deaf ears from the national AFL (Gall, 1988, p. 22-25). However, the anti-leftism, the war context, the ambiguous meaning of the “right to work,” the innovative nature of the democratic approach to undermine worker collective power, and the civil liberties framing which was so easily claimed in the “right” to work, represented steep challenges to overcome.

The performance of democratic process (holding an amendment referendum) forced the financially strapped national, international, and state organizations to correct systemic problems apparently endemic to democracies. It remains unclear how the state labor federation, national, and international organizations would have been able to correct the situation. Setting aside the education offered by the schooling system and its effectiveness or even the quantity or quality of news coverage over amendment 5, all challenging if not impossible topics to study, Florida continued to be a growing and changing state. Florida experienced continued growth throughout the early twentieth century, but the state saw a large uptick in population between 1935 and 1945. After experiencing a slower rate of growth between 1930 and 1935, Florida’s population jumped from 1,606,842 in 1935 to 1,897,414 in 1940 (an increase of 290,572, 18.1%) to 2,250,061 in 1945 (352,647 increase, 18.6%), the largest since the ballyhoo days of the roaring land grab twenties (Bureau of the Census, 1942, p. 213; Mayo, 1936, p. 9; Mayo, 1946, p. 9). Political scientist V. O. Key Jr. in his classic 1949 book, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, noted the “flux, fluidity, uncertainty” that characterized the state’s growing population. He wrote “almost half the Florida’s people were born in other states; half the people have no roots in the state... the consequence [likely has led to] a relatively uncrystallized social structure” (V. O. Key, 1984, p. 86). Indeed, he entitled his chapter on Florida “Every Man for Himself.”

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<sup>26</sup> While an official ballot is unavailable, a partial one appeared in the *Tampa Morning Tribune*: “Sample Ballot” (1944, Oct 24, p. 6) which showed the “straight ticket” party lever.

## Conclusion

Economist John Shott, in his excellent short 1956 history of Florida's right to work effort, quoted the *Florida Advocate* (Feb 11, 1944), a Tampa labor paper, as critiquing the sponsors of the amendment for "shrewdly" selecting "one of the sweetest sounding sections of the State Constitution [which] many voters will not realize [was] already in the State constitution and has been for years" (Shott, 1956, p. 25). He suggested there was validity to their insight. The analysis I have presented here helps explain why the words had a sweet sound: its framers sought to confuse voters by linking the positive connotation of well-accepted civil rights to a newly constructed and narrowly conceived framing of the right to work. Indeed, Tom Watson and Joe Jenkins carried out the larger anti-union project stirring in the country. Instituting a limited conception of the right to work into Florida's state Constitution represented a deep hope to solve the labor problem, as Joe Jenkins highlighted, "now and for posterity" (Barker, 1943, p. 1).

This essay has purposely sidestepped various strands of the history of the "right to work" to focus on one critical larger point of logical inconsistency and intentional effort to misinform and confuse the electorate. It represents a critical origin point of the modern neoliberal attack on the legitimacy of unionization. A month after the 1944 election, a fascinating article argued that labor history ought to be taught in Florida schools. Henning Heldt, the *Miami Herald* political writer, noted how voters likely had a bad opinion of unions given that their knowledge of this dynamic institution would have been limited to "newspaper stories of strikes and the latest escapade of some labor racketeer." Hence, in Heldt's opinion, those who voted were likely "governed by emotions rather than reason" in the past election (Heldt, 1944, p. 19).<sup>27</sup> I would add that the ambiguity of the term right to work—especially in the context of a contested history of the meaning of the term—combined with the discordance of pairing it with a concrete framing of the sweet sounding civil rights provisions of Section 12 of Florida's Declaration of Rights helped confuse uninformed voters who either voted against it or failed to cast a vote on it. A good serving of labor history may have had a positive effect on the citizenry and may very well have prevented the passage of the right to work amendment.

Extending Heldt's suggestion to the present, it would be a positive development to teach a robust amount of labor history in primary and secondary education. Though I was firmly rooted in the working class, I do not recall much labor history in my own Florida education experience at the middle school, high school, or college levels in the 1980s and 1990s; it wasn't until graduate school that I studied labor history but even then the history of the right to work was not widely engaged in the historiography (Castillo, 2022, vii-x). In a recent conversation with a long-time Miami-Dade social studies teacher regarding the history of Florida's right to work law revealed how he had not known any of it (no fault on his part given the scarcity of the literature on it) meaning that he had never taught such content in his classes, regardless if the subject was American History, Government, or Economics. In fact, it is unclear to what extent the history of the changes to Florida's constitution is incorporated into the educational system let alone the history of the right to work. A quick perusal of *Florida's State Academic Standards—Social Studies 2023* does not

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<sup>27</sup> The literature on this persistent theme in U.S. history is vast and is engaged by most authors of labor union history.

highlight any lessons on labor unions nor the right to work.<sup>28</sup> A review of an economics textbook used in Miami-Dade County public schools revealed a wholly inadequate and sometimes inaccurate discussion of labor unions and the right to work (Clayton, 2024, p. 306-321).

These gaps line up with my own experience teaching American Government and Economics in Miami-Dade County in the late 1990s to night school students completing high school graduation requirements. There were no lessons or content in the textbooks that engaged either Florida's right to work constitutional history or labor union institutional dynamics nor its elaborate and complex history. Henning Heldt's 1944 recommendation was never heeded and perhaps for good reason given the still very political nature of union security. The omission or limited treatment of labor history has likely been the case in many if not most other states in the country. The complexities of the history of the right to work are magnified by the liberal power of its underlying idea of free will and choice, a dynamic particularly morally powerful in the context of the history of union exclusionary practices. Yet engaging this history, warts and all, will help focus the analytical lens on power and class struggle as well as represent a step toward enhancing general civic consciousness and community. U.S. democratic traditions are far from neat. Unfortunately, a part of this democratic tradition has been the darker layer of the history of distortion and misrepresentation, perhaps especially when it has pertained to class power.

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# The Emergence of Proletarian Cinema in the Weimar Republic

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## Abstract

Seldom does an epoch produce as dynamic a progressive presence as did the Weimar Republic in Germany (1919-1933). This included two substantial party presences; the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) as well as the Communist Party (KPD), as well as other offshoots engaged vibrantly in journalistic, social and cultural activities. Within these activities across the various groups, discussions on the proletariat tended to be holistic including, but not limited to, economic, social and educational matters of the working class but also including thoughts on what a “proletariat culture” is, a concept that remains ambiguous to this day. In this paper I examine this era and the ideas of a proletarian culture and how it would be manifest in proletariat-inspired art. I would like to do this specifically by looking at the development of Prometheus Film (Prometheus Film-Verleih und Vertriebs GmbH), a German subsidiary of the Soviet company Meshrabpom-Film, which produced films for the left, and specifically the Communist Party. I would then like to support my assertions by using as an example one of the most famous of the proletariat film projects, Piel Jutzi’s 1929 film *Mutter Krausens Fahrt ins Glück* (*Mother Krause's Journey to Happiness*).

## Keywords

Weimar Republic, German Social Democratic Party, Communist Party, Prometheus Film, proletariat film, *Mutter Krausens Fahrt ins Glück*

The Weimar Era in Germany (1919-1933) stirred an enormous flourishing of intellectual and artistic activity. Recording this in his seminal study, Peter Gay noted this as another “Pereclian Age” (Gay, 2001, p. xiv). Of all of the arts that flourished, the new technology of cinema was fresh and unknown. Germany was one of the world leaders in cinematic innovation, and has been celebrated for its technical artistry, particularly what it adopted from Expressionist theater (Eisner, 2008) and for the ensuing depth of its social insight that could be gleaned from many of the films (Kracauer, 2004). Less recognized is the creation of a “proletarian cinema” which was a significant and noteworthy part of Weimar film history. Both the conspicuously active Socialist (SPD) and Communist (KPD) parties promoted through propaganda efforts during the Weimar era working-class conscious film production. Scholarship that has covered the cinema of the left has focused on its genesis within German film production through the International Worker’s Aid (Horak, 1981; Kepley, 1983) and its use as a tool of propaganda (Welch, 1981). The most comprehensive study in English remains *Film and the German Left in the Weimar Republic: From Caligari to Kuhle Wampe* (Murray, 1990) which includes a detailed comprehensive history of the political,

economic and social events which together stirred the creation of distributors to lease Soviet films and production firms to create films with a collectivist message. The volume also gives a detailed overview of the films distributed and created by leftist firms during Weimar.

There have also been significant works on individual films, particularly the two most celebrated works of proletarian cinema, *Mutter Krausens Fahrt ins Glück* (*Mother Krause's Journey to Happiness*, 1929) (Freund, R. & Hanisch, M., 1976; Korte, Happel & Michaelis, 1980; Horak, 1982; Frey, 2019) and the Bertolt Brecht scripted *Kuhle Wampe oder: Wem gehört die Welt* (*Kuhle Wampe or Who Owns the World*, 1932). For my modest purposes here I will focus concluding discussion on *Mother Krause's Journey to Happiness* and leave aside *Kuhle Wampe*, though, due to its Brecht pedigree, significant scholarship in both German and English has been published on the film.

The concurrent development of a commercial film industry was very relevant to the debates about the creation of a proletarian culture. The impact on artistic expression in film was, of course, a game-changer. Film as artistic expression was a live debate among the German left, particularly through the influence of Soviet social theory and discussions on proletarian art. Art or no, the role it would play in communication and consciousness had yet, at the time of the Weimar Republic, to be fully understood.

The creation and development of film technology at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was concurrent; spanning America and Europe. Its inventors were all of a similar kind; gifted engineers who were industrious and business-minded. The Edisons, Lumières and Skladanowskys of the first technologies presented their instruments as practical and profitable; of value for teaching and trade. None of these men thought of their creations as suitable for what was understood as artistic expression, nor would it have occurred to them to present it as such. So thrilling and sensational was the phenomenon of projected moving images to its first audiences that its allure would have been anything but serene and reflective as was associated with the hitherto established arts. Perhaps the most famous discussion on audience reception of early cinema was by Tom Gunning who spoke of a “cinema of attractions”. He defined this as “a cinema that wants to *show* something... a cinema that displays its visibility, willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of the spectator.” (Gunning, 1990, p. 57) Relating the term “attraction” back to Eisenstein’s theory of theater where an attraction possesses a ‘sensual or psychological impact,’ Gunning incorporates Eisenstein’s insight into what he views as revolutionary developments in the arts, where theatre should “consist of a montage of such attractions, creating a relation to the spectator entirely different from his absorption in ‘illusory depictions’” (Gunning, 1990, p.59), a hallmark of “bourgeois art”. Also tellingly, Gunning notes that the creation of cinema is contemporaneous with the emergence of the avant-garde, sharing at least the inspired zeitgeist with audiences, “enthusiasm of the early avant-garde for film was at least partly an enthusiasm for a mass culture that was emerging at the beginning of the century, offering a new sort of stimulus for an audience not acculturated to the traditional arts.” (Gunning, 1990, p. 59) Film was, at its naissance, a novel and lucrative fairground attraction, although as Gunning notes, subversive and revolutionary for its audiences.

The early years of cinema were international, and Western audiences in technologically advanced industrializing countries where film-craft was developing was developing shared many of the same

experiences. The first audiences in Germany who visited the parlors and storefront movie theaters (*Kinotopp*), which were appearing in the heavily trafficked nonexclusive parts of cities, were by-and-large of the working class. The reasons for this is not hard to understand. Unlike the established arts, the expense for admission as well as the demands on literacy and education were modest. While the working class made up the first audiences, enquiring visitors of the middle class debated in newspapers and journals what, if any, value for edification had this new entertainment. In what became known as the *Kino-Debatte* (cinema debate) in Germany, the question was asked if film was a refined art akin to the classical arts which made up the humanistic education of the educated or was it merely a technical novelty (Kapczynski & Richardson, 2012, p. 18); perhaps one insidious to the morals of its viewers, especially the working class? Opinions differed but as film craft and form developed one thing did become clear: that once film emerged from its early novelty stage its considerable source of profits would rest upon the use of the medium to tell dramatic narratives to a paying broad audience from across society for purposes of entertainment and enlightenment.

It would be useful here to point out the genesis of the major German film production unit UFA (Universum-Film Aktiengesellschaft). In the early 1910s, because of the enormous demand for films and Germany's generally smaller production capabilities, 80 to 90 percent of films shown in Germany were from England, France, Italy and Denmark. As World War I unfolded, French films (which dominated the international market) were banned in Germany, and other nations slowed in export. Germany, hoping to increase domestic production and, with encouragement from the Kaiser who saw the potential of film for propaganda purposes in stirring the masses, saw the benefit in the centralization of the film industry for military and political purposes. By 1917 it had become clear to the German High Command that the war was lost and that it was only a matter of time before capitulation. As the United States entered the fight, General Ludendorff was frustrated with the overwhelming amount of filmic propaganda that was being generated by the Allies and the inadequate means Germany had to counter such efforts. In an attempt to remedy this disparity, he helped bring together various production companies operating in Germany, as well as government, the War Ministry and Deutsche Bank to create a single unit to produce propaganda films. This collection of interests is what became UFA. (Kapczynski & Richardson, 2012, p. 19; Kreimeier, 1996, pp. 23-25)

UFA never succeeded in creating the pro-German propaganda films, documentaries and newsreels as had been envisioned. Instead, friction developed between the government and militarist wing and the interests of capital which wanted to invest in the demand for inexpensive entertainment demanded by the population. With the end of the war, film production seemed a broad horizon and UFA went on to turn out immensely creative films including historical spectacles, melodramas and comedies. (Kreimeier, 1996, pp. 31-33) Many of the films of early Weimar are international cinematic classics today as much innovation in areas like mise-en-scene, lighting and camerawork were products of the staggering growth of UFA and the German film business. Indeed, within a few years of UFA's founding the vast majority of films shown in Germany were domestically produced.

It should be noted here, as Richard Taylor has pointed out, that there was "an unbridgeable gap between the proletarian and commercial cinema in Weimar Germany." (quoted in Welch, 1981, p. 3) Clearly the motivations of the investments and creative work of each cinema were different.

While both cinemas competed in a profit-driven market it could be argued that the commercial cinema, backed by conservative interests such as marketability, profit and financially driven expansion were in *de facto* opposition to the ideological aspirations of a proletarian cinema. Contradictions could occur; commercial cinema in Weimar could present subjects of progressive social concern while proletarian cinema often employed melodramatic elements to deepen audience involvement in the narrative. The engagement of such “Hollywood-style” artifice to storytelling, a hallmark of commercial cinema, presented a clear challenge to the ideas of artistic representation to which the traditional German left were accustomed.

During the Weimar Republic the greater part of the leaders of these parties on the left, especially the dominant SPD, were university educated members of the bourgeois. In Germany *Kultur* was a concept related to not only secondary and higher education but brought about in class identification as well. For German reformers of the left in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century attempts to “lift up” the working class were focused not on developing a critique of bourgeois culture or in nurturing an alternative culture of the working class, but on making the objects of bourgeois culture accessible to the uneducated working class. Culture, as understood at the time and place, was not generally recognized as the battleground. (Kapczynski & Richardson, 2012, p. 16; Murray, 1990, p. 19)

Indeed, in *Literature and Revolution* (1924), which was widely read among reformers of the left, Trotsky sees the creation of a unique “proletariat culture” as an impractical pursuit, at least until such time as basic daily necessities of the proletariat were met. Trotsky saw the value of established bourgeois *Kultur* and believed its works had elevated mankind as it would, but that the proletariat had no access to its benefits because of their place in society. The goal of human society is to first conquer nature and from that struggle is a society’s culture created and defined.

All science, in greater or lesser degree, unquestionably reflects the tendencies of the ruling class. The more closely science attaches itself to the practical tasks of conquering nature (physics, chemistry, natural science In general), the greater is its non-class and human contribution. The more deeply science is connected with the social mechanism of exploitation (political economy), or the more abstractly it generalizes the entire experience of mankind (psychology, not in its experimental, physiological sense but in its so-called “philosophic sense”), the more does it obey the class egotism of the bourgeoisie and the less significant is its contribution to the general sum of human knowledge. (Trotsky, 1925, p. 197)

Trotsky notes that “culture feeds on the sap of economics, and a material surplus is necessary, so that culture may grow, develop and become subtle.” (Trotsky, 1925, p. 200) Without a material surplus the pursuit or creation of a culture is futile; the energies of the proletariat are best spent conquering power and establishing a new economic base. These tasks are transitional and to concentrate on “cultural tasks” would be a distraction to the eventual creation of a such proletariat culture when its time has come.

Lenin, meanwhile, had enormous foresight into the value of cinematic art in his famous dictum, which he allegedly said in a conversation with A. V. Lunacharsky in February 1922, “You must remember always that of all the arts the most important for us is the cinema.” (Lenin, 2003). It was clear to the founding head of the Soviet state that the relatively new technology of film had

enormous potential to reach the widely scattered, multiethnic and often illiterate populations of the nascent transcontinental Soviet Union. In a decree by the Kremlin dated August 27, 1919, Lenin specifically placed the film trade and industry under the province of the People's Commissariat of Education, the agency charged with the administration of public education and most other issues related to culture signifying the exceptional role that film would play in the edification of the Soviet population (Mackenzie, 2021, p. 19).

Lenin's decree cogently recognizes the educational value of film at a time when much of the world viewed it, however successful, as little more than an entertainment novelty. Film, unlike established "bourgeois" arts such as literature, theater and painting, required of its viewers neither substantial financial means nor advanced literacy to access; it was an uniquely democratic in its appeal. The distinct power of film as a tool to create and sustain a "new" democratic and socialist culture was clear to Lenin, echoing views he expressed in 1913 in several *Prosveshcheniye*:

The elements of democratic and socialist culture are present, if only in rudimentary form, in every national culture, since in every nation there are toiling and exploited masses, whose conditions of life inevitably give rise to the ideology of democracy and socialism. But every nation also possesses a bourgeois culture (and most nations a reactionary and clerical culture as well) in the form, not merely of "elements", but of the dominant culture. Therefore, the general "national culture" is the culture of the landlords, the clergy and the bourgeoisie. (Lenin, 1972, p. 24)

One person who contributed greatly to the promotion of film in the service of leftist ideals was Willi Münzenberg. Münzenberg was a media maven, "a cultural impresario of genius" according to Walter Laqueur, and referred to by some historians as a "Marxist Rupert Murdoch". (Hett, 2014, p. 126) As Sean McMeekan discusses extensively in his biography, Münzenberg was the unusual German Communist leader who truly was of working-class origin, coming from abject poverty in Thuringia. The son of a violent alcoholic innkeeper, Münzenberg became a socialist activist through experience working in a shoe factory as a teenager (McMeekan, 2003, pp. 8-17). As a youth organizer he quickly rose through the ranks of the far left of the Social Democratic Party, meeting the exiled Lenin in Switzerland during the first World War. After the war, when the German Communist Party was founded in 1919 Münzenberg belonged to its sectarian ultra-left and held the role of secretary of the Young Communist International.

In 1921 one of the most devastating famines in history threatened the lives of millions of Russians as well as the continuance of Soviet rule. Responding to a plea for help from the Soviet government the Executive Committee of the Comintern the Comintern commissioned Münzenberg with establishing the *Internationale Arbeiter-Hilfe* (IAH), (International Workers' Aid (IWA) and known in Russian as *Meshrabpom*), working as an emergency leftist campaign to alleviate widespread famine in civil-war torn Soviet Russia, one which might be born of leftist sympathies and counter relief efforts by ideologically opposed governments such as Herbert Hoover-led American Relief Administration (McMeeken, 2003, pp. 105-107).

As the German left-wing parties became more professionalized and engaged in give and take politics with other political factions, Lenin thought it best for Münzenberg to devote himself to organizing aid for people starving in Soviet Russia.

Münzenberg proved a most effective leader, being an aggressive fundraiser and possessing an aggressive, hard-headed management style. In its first year of existence the IAH had raised 5 million dollars through European and American contributions. By 1922, owing to the catastrophic post-war depression in Germany and other countries, the IAH broadened its geographic reach. In many places the human misery as well as relief efforts were documented by IAH-funded filmmakers. Münzenberg correctly and quickly foresaw that showing footage of the squalor and suffering created by the famine would motivate sympathizers to contribute to relief to the Soviets. Therefore, much of this documentary film was used to rally left-wing organizations in Germany both communistic and socialistic. By 1924, through the merger of the Soviet operation Studio-Rus and the film department of the International Workers' Aid (IAH), which opened in 1922, "Meschrabpom-Rus" (later "Meschrabpom-Film") was established to produce films in the Soviet Union. (Murray, 1990, p. 118).

By the mid-1920s the IAH's work had since expanded from assistance to cultural exchange with the Soviet Union thanks to the work of Münzenberg and Otto Nagel, an important leftist painter. In 1925 Nagel put together an exhibition of current German art, including the contemporary Bauhaus, to be shown in the Soviet Union. The Soviets were already impressed by the leftist mechanisms, structures, and products in Germany. Anatoly Lunacharsky, the first Soviet People's Commissar of Education believed that the Germans had "surpassed nearly all other artists in their assimilation of the revolution and the creation of revolutionary art." (Green, 2019, p. 176).

Münzenberg also expanded the newspaper of the IAH to become the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* (Worker's Illustrated) a much denser and fuller staffed enterprise, as well as acquiring other local leftist papers to create something of a media empire. To this Münzenberg recognized the importance that film would have and that it should play a big role in the revolutionary educational program of the proletariat. Many of the intelligencia on the left didn't see film and the cinema as much more than a distraction; crude lower-class entertainment and at worst a source for the reinforcement of bourgeois values. In his film manifesto *Erobert den Film!* ("Capture the Film!", 1925) Münzenberg addresses the shift in media influence caused by the proliferation of film:

Even if the press were granted the greater numerical dissemination, let it not be forgotten that the film through the medium of the visual picture, influences its patrons far more strongly and emphatically than does the printed word its readers (...) We must develop the tremendous cultural possibilities of the motion picture in a revolutionary sense.... The film must truthfully reflect social conditions instead of the lies and fables with which the workers, etc. (Mackenzie, 2021, p. 490).

He goes on to reproach working class organizations for being "timid and tardy in the effort to put this new medium to their use," noting:

(the) time is not far past when social-democratic leaders in common with bourgeois ideologists, in all seriousness proposed to boycott films because of their competition with theater, their flattering of public taste and destruction of literary standards. (MacKenzie, 2021, p. 490)

Contrary to the social democrats (think “bourgeois leftist”) the reactionary bourgeois recognizes the potential and value of film as a tool of powerful propaganda:

The bourgeoisie, and especially the extreme nationalists and militarists, very early recognized the significance of the film as a propaganda weapon and constantly and most extensively put it to their service. (MacKenzie, 2021, p. 491)

In the same work he cites Clara Zeitkin, theorist and fellow activist:

Film should reflect social reality instead of lies and fairy tales about it with which the bourgeois mass cinema deludes and defrauds the working people. Social reality, however, will be lent form through the class contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie and through the effects of this class contradiction. The film with revolutionary content must therefore convey knowledge of the class situation of the proletariat, develop proletarian class consciousness, awaken and strengthen resolve and the willingness to sacrifice for the revolutionary struggle. (Kaes, Jay & Dimendberg, 1994, p. 228)

Determined to offer the proletariat a cinema distinct from the well-heeled bourgeois industry. IAH, along with raising funds for Soviet famine relief and providing social benefits for workers maintained or founded various proletarian film production and distribution companies such as Prometheus Film-Verleih und Vertriebs GmbH and Filmkartell „Weltfilm“ GmbH. After aligning its film division with the Soviet Studio Rus to form Meschrabpom-Rus in 1923, *Prometheus Film* was founded by the IAH in December of 1925 as a response to the restrictions of German film censors. Prometheus’ regularly distributed Soviet films though none would have a greater impact than its distribution of Eisenstein’s Броненосец “Потёмкин” (rom. *Bronenosets “Potyomkin”*) (*Battleship Potemkin*) (Murray, 1990, pp. 118-121).

In January of 1926 Soviet trade representatives invited Prometheus management to a showing of *Potemkin* at the Soviet embassy. The Soviets, who would have preferred more a more firmly established distribution firm, gave the task to the relatively new Prometheus, thinking perhaps that the film was surely, on any account, going to be censored. Prometheus management handed it over to Piel Jutzi for an edit and had composer Edmund Meisel (who had worked with leftist theater director Erwin Piscator) to write a fresh score. Eisenstein himself came to Germany to discuss the score with Meisel, as he wanted the images to be given the maximum effect. The film was, in fact, banned on its run-through with censors. Nonetheless Prometheus managed to appeal and, despite various cuts which had to be made to some of the material in the film for both political reasons as well as excessive violence, the ban was lifted. (Bulgakowa)

The film was, of course, stunning, revolutionary, - something to write home about. Prometheus knew they would have a hit. Recognizing the innovation of Eisenstein’s film compared with the industry fare, cultural critic and film theorist Siegfried Kracauer wrote in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on May 16, 1926:

(*Battleship Potemkin*) represses the only content that would matter by way of historical costume dramas, private psychological or high-life bagatelles, and even

the ultimately formally irrelevant slapstick comedies. The film does not repress anything. It allows – what miracle! – the klieg lights to keep focusing on the struggle of the oppressed against the oppressors. It shows a moment of *revolution*. The wall is perforated; a true content emerges (Kaes, Baer & Cowan, 2016, pp. 353-54).

The Berlin premiere of the film served as a gateway for the film to the rest of Western Europe and America. Though competing against commercial studio fare in Germany and elsewhere, the film performed unusually well both critically and with audiences (Leyda, 1960, pp. 197-198).

Germany and the Soviet Union had particularly notable film production during this era, notable for its artistic and technical innovations. Germany, of course, known primarily for its “Expressionist” films (an umbrella term that often is used beyond Weimar films that were strictly “expressionist) and the Soviet Union for “Montage,” films based on various Marxist-inspired theories of editing. Nonetheless, film in Western European and American markets, was dominated by capitalist production firms creating entertainment which, of course, promoted an ethos conducive to the established norms and motivating messages of a nascent consumer culture. The reasons were clear, that the cost of producing films were prohibitive to small concerns and could only be the purview of larger investments made by profit-oriented backers. Here, finally was a revolutionary cinema.

Soviet films were to be distributed in Germany. However, to distribute Soviet films, a radical company/distributor was needed, as mainstream distributors frequently shied away. Around this time Münzenberg had received information that the KPD wanted to unload a small firm called Prometheus which had just produced a leftist film called *Namenlosen Helden* (Nameless Heroes). Münzenberg jumped at the opportunity to distribute Soviet films with Prometheus. The Soviets themselves weren’t too excited to work with an untried entity, but Münzenberg was successful in convincing them to do so. (Green, 2019, p. 176) Prometheus distributed the first Russian-German co-production *Überflüssige Menschen* (*Superfluous People*, 1926) and was responsible in the following years for distributing many films now considered classics of Soviet cinema like *Storm Over Asia* (1928) and *Bed and Sofa* (1927), making Germany one of the largest export destinations for Soviet film. (Murray, 1990, pp. 124-125)

Aside from distribution activities Prometheus produced several films during its short existence, most famously perhaps being the last three productions: *Mother Krause’s Journey to Happiness* (Phil Jutzi, 1929); *Jenseits der Straße* (*The Other Side of the Street* but titled *Harbor Drift* in English) (Albrecht Viktor Blum, Leo Mittler, 1929); and *Kuhle Wampe oder: Wem gehört die Welt?* (*Kuhle Wampe or Who Owns the World?*) (Slatan Dudow, 1931/32), which was completed under the Zurich company Praesens-Film when Prometheus went bankrupt in 1932. (Murray, 1990, pp. 204-24) These were films produced by the leftist Prometheus company with the intent of helping serve propoganda purposes. At the same time, they were works of art as well as documentation of social despair and societal challenges during the Weimar era, not unlike *Stassenfilme* (films of street life) such as *Hintertreppe* (*Backstairs*, 1921), *Die Straße* (*The Street*, 1923), *Die Freudlose Gasse* (*The Joyless Street*, 1925) *Sozialdramafilme* (social dramas) such as *Die Verrufenen* (*The Outcasts*, known in English as *Slums of Berlin*, 1925), *Die Unehelichen* „The Illegitimate“, also known as *Children of No Importance*, 1926), *Menschen untereinander*

(*People to Each Other*, 1926), or *Kammerspielfilme* (films of lower middle class life) such as *Sylvester* (*New Years Eve*, 1923), *Scherben* (*Shattered*, 1921), and *Der letzte Mann* (*The Last Man*, known in English as *The Last Laugh*, 1924). Despite having several important aspects in common with these other genres, Prometheus films are recognized today with the distinctive designation *Proletarischer Film* (proletarian film), as they were purposefully created to highlight the lives of the working class and educate on their struggles. This nomenclature was the result of the encounter with Soviet films and the recognition of the revolutionary potential of the film's messaging.

Several proletariat films were made with sponsorship of the German Communist Party (there were also film associated with the Socialist Part of Germany, which had its own production outlet: *Filmgesellschaft Film- und Lichtbilddienst*), through Prometheus (as well as *Weltfilm*, another, smaller production arm of the IAH). Its most notable success came with the silent 1929 classic *Mother Krause's Journey to Happiness*, a film based on satiric illustrations by Heinrich Zille, a Berlin graphic artist and illustrator whose works captured the social zeitgeist of the Berlin metropolis by satirizing and humanizing the lives of the urban poor in his drawings, photographs and captions. By the time of his death in 1929 he had developed a cult following and the influence of his work made its way into other avenues such as albums, music, "Zille Balls" and film, a sub-genre of which came to be known as Zille Films, as several films were made which incorporated his work including most famously the above but also the earlier *Slums of Berlin* (1925). (Murray, 1990, pp. 81-85)

*Mother Krause's Journey to Happiness* (1929) was directed and shot by Piel Jutzi, who had worked extensively as a documentarist for *Weltfilm* as an assistant cameraman on other film productions for Prometheus and *Weltfilm*. While the film under discussion is his most well-known legacy, he completed several film projects of social criticism during this period, most notably socially critical projects such as the documentary *Hunger in Waldenburg* (1929) about Silesian coal miners as well as the first film adaptation of Alfred Döblin's panoramic novel of Weimar Berlin *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1931). (Jelavich, 2006, pp. 201-03; p. 207)

The melodramatic story of Mother Krause and her family is set in Wedding, the working-class district of Berlin (known during the Weimar Republic as "Red Wedding" for intense leftist activity). Mother Krause lives a precarious existence in a small, poor apartment with her children Paul and Erna. A crook (identified only as a "Schlafbursche" – night lodger) and his fiancée Friede, a prostitute, also live there as subtenants, along with their small child. Mother Krause also earns a little pittance of money delivering newspapers. Paul steals twenty marks from her newspaper till and drinks it with friends, she is threatened with being reported to the authorities because she cannot pay the money back to her employer. Erna, who has met the respectable and politically active worker Max, wants desperately to earn money for her, even through prostitution, but backs away from it at the last moment. Paul lets the night lodger persuade him to break in to rob a jewelry store, but the two of them are caught by the police. While Erna and Max join the communists triumphantly marching through Berlin in demonstration, Mother Krause, given her desperate situation, opens the gas tap and kills herself along with the sleeping little child of the prostitute Friede: "What do you poor creatures have to lose in this world. Come on, you're going to "Glück" (Happiness) with Mother Krause" is the final intertitle.

The grim ending of the film pulls no punches in the portrayal of the devastated working-class quarter and its inhabitants. The characters are vividly portrayed and present types inherent to the Wedding milieu. Vice, immorality, and sloth are depicted at every turn. No one is spared and everyone is brutalized, the female characters in particular. There are no heroes, no twists or turns in the plot. Catastrophe is inevitable because the conditions under which the characters exist is a downward spiral. The last image in the film, after the discovery of the bodies, are of demonstrating workers marching through the streets of Wedding, the only antidote to the victimization of the working class is collective action and organized solidarity, embodied in the triumphant, self-assured joining of the workers march by Max and Erna. Nothing else is possible.

Several aspects of the film are exceptional to narrative film of the time. First is the use of the actual location of Wedding. In reviewing the film, *Die Rote Fahne*, a popular Marxist news organ of the time, called the film “the first German revolutionary proletarian film” and noted the worker district a “character” in the narrative. (Durus, 1930) The district, shown in opening shots of the film, has the quality of a documentary. As would not be the case with the use of studio sets, Wedding is given breadth and space. The streets are shot shakily in a *verité* style that show them being walked upon, where housewives barter for goods, where vagrants lounge about on benches. In this style of camerawork we can see a precursor to leftist documentary films of Great Britain and the United States as well as post-war Italian neo-realism. Secondly, the film makes use of some non-professional actors and less well-known actors. There were no “movie stars” in the cast. This follows the spirit of Soviet montage cinema where directors like Eisenstein chose actors for the character their features brought to the role but also the authenticity of self. This is before later movements in film made a virtue of such quirks. Third, along with the on-location shooting there is clear attention paid to the socializing and leisure of the working class such as in the wedding scene, the activity in the bar, and the time spent out at the fair and how the qualities of the characters are molded as creatures of the surroundings of their urban spaces (Hughes, 2022) and especially how their opportunism (Friede and the “night lodger), indifference (Paul) or despair (Mother Krause) contrasts with the “enlightened” stance of Max who is dedicated to collective action. (Horak, 1981)

There is a study being pursued in *Mother Krause’s Journey to Heaven*, not just creating a melodrama out of the poverty displayed but an examination of the economic restraints of poverty on social life. In this way the film undermines the dramaturgy of popular entertainment, so preferred by the commercial cinema. The setting plays a significant role in establishing both a fateful social and economic context to the action, while the characters and what they each represent and how they interact between themselves offer a dialectical contrast which journeys towards a progressive resolution. This above all is the distinction of “proletarian film”.

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# From the Particular to the Generic: Fostering a More Socioeconomically Diverse Professoriate

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## Abstract

In an introductory editorial to a 2023 symposium issue of *Public Administration Review*, Stivers et al. recount the contents of several publications about social justice and social equity. She and her colleagues end their editorial by proposing that public administration scholars develop a normative plan leading to greater social equity and social justice for members of the disadvantaged groups they, Stivers and her coauthors, identify in their editorial.

Responding to this call for reform, the present project addresses the problem of structural nepotism (inherited wealth based on Bourdieu's three identified forms), a notable concern that Stivers and her colleagues and the nine symposium contributors fail to consider in full despite what the former say about how "canonize[d]" values limit the range of social equity and social justice questions public administration scholars confront. Employing comments and citations Stivers et al. offer throughout their editorial, the second part of this discussion offers a plan for resolving many of the harmful effects of structural nepotism on both the theory and practice of social equity and social justice in one academic discipline. The reform suggested herein is generic and thus readily adaptable to all fields of study.

## Keywords

Working-class academics, diversity, first-generation college, *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, social class

Assume you have just finished a masters level Introduction to Public Administration class with a ninety eight percent average for the four tests that Professor Jones gave during the semester. One week after the class ends, you receive your final grade, a C. Believing you deserve an A in her class, you meet with Dr. Jones at the start of the following term. You begin the discussion by explaining that your grade should be an A based on your class average.

Jones replies that your grade is correct. She explains that she evaluates each student by combining the final averages of the previous five people who were sitting in the same seat with that of student number six. Jones further notes that this is why she requires every student to sit in the same seat throughout the term. Dr. Jones says that in your case, the mean of the combined scores of the past five students sitting in your seat was seventy-four percent. After including your final average with that of the preceding five students who were sitting in your seat, your final course average is seventy-eight percent. Jones smiles and says, "A seventy-eight percent in this class is a C."

Recognizing that you are upset Jones acknowledges that you and many others might consider her grading standards unfair, but she claims they are realistic. She explains, “If you remember, at the start of the semester I promised to make this course as true-to-life as possible, and everyone liked that idea.” She continues,

My grading standard demonstrates how inherited advantages and disadvantages play out in the real world. I call it “structural nepotism.” Seeing the importance of this idea might be the most important lesson you learn in college, although it may not seem like it now. Knowing how the real-world works will help you become a more empathetic public sector employee, if you choose a career in government. Heck, your greater empathy will affect how you think no matter what happens from now on.

You respond, somewhat angrily, “I don’t understand why my final grade should depend on the class averages of the last five people who sat in the same seat as I sat in. I couldn’t control that. I didn’t know my grade would hinge on something as simple as choosing the wrong seat.”

Jones smiles slightly and says, “When newborns leave the womb, they have no idea what they are getting themselves into, whether good or ill.”

Jones calmly opens a drawer in her desk and removes a sheet of paper saying, “Here’s what William Ayers had to say about sitting in the right seat and not the wrong one.” Jones hands you the sheet and asks you to read it aloud.

You read these words: “Choose the Right Parents! If you choose parents with money, access, social connection, and privilege, your choices and your chances will expand; if not, sorry, you’re on your own” (Ayers, 2009, p. 391).

Jones asks if you understand Ayers’s point. Begrudgingly, you say, “Yea, I guess.” You rise from your chair and leave her office without saying anything more.

### **A Revealing Oversight**

In an introductory editorial to a 2023 symposium issue of *Public Administration Review (PAR)*, Stivers et al. recount the contents of several publications about social justice and social equity. She and her colleagues explain that equity requires treating everyone the same while justice entails favoring some people over others to balance the scales. A sampling of the groups Stivers and her coauthors identify as deserving more attention in the context of social equity and social justice by public administration scholars include references to a) examining “racial and gender hierarchies,” (p. 233, citing Portillo, 2022); b) Gooden’s 2015 analysis of “*PAR*’s social equity footprint” (p. 233, quoting Gooden) revealing that since 1940, only 4.26% of the articles published in the discipline’s most prestigious journal addressed issues of “gender, race/ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation” (p. 233, citing Gooden); c) the need to go beyond categorical formulations to more nuanced understandings of gender and race as social “institutions, structures, and processes” (p. 235, citing Pandey et al. 2022); d) Portillo et al.’s (2022) challenge to public administration scholars to concentrate on the assorted ways, in the words of Stivers and her colleagues, “race, gender, and other identity-based inequities” were and remain integral to our field’s academic

studies and culture (presumably with the intention of eliminating racial and gender biases, and “other identity-based inequities”) (p. 233); e) giving individualized attention to certain communities depending on the respective contexts, notably “those having to do with race, gender, sexuality, and disability” (p. 233, citing Cooper 2004); and f) depictions of social justice that entail distinctions in “identity” that applies not just to race and gender considerations, but also “physical, and other abilities” (p. 234.).

Stivers et al.’s only mention of social class inequalities is their reference to Fredrickson’s 1980 piece in *PAR* where he proposes that governments place greater emphasis on counterbalancing the misfortunes faced by the “economically disadvantaged” (p. 230). However, Stivers and her coauthors do not interpret Fredrickson’s notion of “economically disadvantaged” to include inherited advantages in the same spirit as Professor Jones’ demonstrated with her grading system; choosing the right parents can make all the difference in one’s chances of achieving social equity and social justice.

Stivers and her colleagues end their editorial by proposing that public administration scholars develop a normative plan leading to greater social equity and social justice for members of the disadvantaged groups they, Stivers and her coauthors, identify in their commentary.

Finally, the authors’ editorial is followed by nine articles written by “eminent public administration scholars in collaboration with *PAR* editors” who address social equity and social justice concerns, but like the symposium’s editors do not address these two subjects in the same way as Professor Jones did with her grading system (p. 229). (Henceforth all undated parenthetical citations refer to Stivers et al.’s article).

### **A Revealing Oversight**

Under the Distributive Justice heading, Stivers and her coauthors explain that the fundamental concern with this topic focuses on how a society allocates its resources; are the costs and benefits allocated fairly (p. 231).<sup>1</sup> The budget is one measure of a society’s priorities. The greater the percentage of resources devoted to an item, the more important the item. The inherent question in decisions affecting the distribution of resources involves separating the cases where everyone should be treated equally and those situations where certain groups should be treated differently to mitigate their disadvantages. In discussing distributive justice, Stivers et al. cite my criticism of public administration scholars for “disregard[ing] the importance of [socioeconomic status] including inherited wealth...To date, the field has narrowly viewed disadvantaged mostly to include women and minorities” in studies of social justice and social equity (p. 234, second set of brackets in the original). This is the authors’ only reference to the heirs’ unearned advantages, notwithstanding the countless ways bequests shape social equity and social justice means and ends.

Despite this oversight, Stivers and her coauthors argue that public administration scholars have begun addressing the effects of social class on policy outcomes, social class, but not inherited wealth as a separate concern. The first source the authors cite is An and Bostic’s 2021 finding that the “power structure of regional planning boards shapes the geographical distribution of [public] investments” (Ibid.).

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<sup>1</sup> Stivers et al. (2023) use “fair” in one form or another numerous times in their article.

The second source is Gilmour's 2012 article indicating that when cities and states lease revenue generating properties to private sector interests, the rewards fall in the early years while the costs are shifted to the later years, which raises the question of what Stivers and her colleagues call "intergenerational fairness" (Ibid.). Clearly, "intergenerational fairness" should include inherited social class advantages, again the point Dr. Jones was making.

In sum, Stivers and her coauthors cite research findings about numerous other demographic categories and social class in general but nowhere do they or any of their symposium contributors detail how bequests greatly affect social justice, social equity, and, in turn, cultural interpretations. An example of this last idea is the commonplace fear that government welfare checks threaten a recipient's work ethic while the same standard is seldom applied to financial inheritances.

### Closed Questions

In my article, I proposed that as a subset of social class, inherited wealth is what George Bernard Shaw considered a "closed question," a supposedly unassailable truth, a topic unworthy of further debate because the answer is self-evident to most people (2003, Oldfield, p. 446, quoting Shaw, 1928, p. 1). Even asking that a closed question be opened risks the inquirer's request being rejected out-of-hand as silly or the questioner being labeled an extremist or some other *ad hominem*. Consider, for instance, Tevya, the lead actor in *Fiddler on the Roof*, who has five daughters. Perchik, another character in the play, says he earns money "[by] giving lessons to children," volunteering that he will teach Tevya's daughters because "Girls should learn too. Girls are people." "Radical," Mendel, a man in the crowd, shouts upon hearing what in 1905 Zartist Russia was considered revolutionary thinking...a closed question (Harnick and Bock, 1964, p. 18).

In the spirit of closed questions, Stivers et al. write, "injustice tends to be buried under the status quo, making it hard to surface" (p. 235, citing Denzin, 2010). Elsewhere in their editorial they note,

[Our] taken-for-granted assumptions can limit our understanding of social justice and hinder our ability to address issues of inequality and fairness in public policy and public administration. It is important to be mindful of these underlying assumptions and to consider a wider range of perspectives and approaches to develop a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of social justice... (p. 231).

On the same page and in a similar vein, Stivers and her coauthors write, "Although we lack abundant philosophical theorizing in public administration, increasing attention is being given to underlying worldviews and default assumptions" (p. 231, citing Bhati, 2023; Bishu et al. 2019; Moloney et al. 2023; Pandey et al. 2023; Pandey, Bearfield, and Hall, 2022; Portillo et al. 2022b). Evidently this rethinking excludes inherited wealth.

Lastly, Stivers and her colleagues consider our field's closed questions to be matters that have become "canonize[d]." (p. 236). Accordingly, the authors argue that such a presumptive mindset "pervades and privileges the underlying philosophies of whiteness, masculinity, and Western ideals that currently shape public administration discourse, both academically and practically" (p.

231). These three characteristics are likely what Stivers et al. had in mind when writing about how our discipline's "taken-for-granted assumptions can limit our understanding of social justice and hinder our ability to address issues of inequality and fairness in public policy and public administration" (Ibid.).

### Forms of Wealth

*A NOTE ABOUT WORDING: For brevity and readability hereinafter: a) "parent" or "parents" includes caretakers and like overseers; b) "working class" includes poverty class parents and caretakers who held blue-or pink-collar jobs (or were unemployed), and never attended an academic college during their children's youth; and c) "college" and "university" are used interchangeable as are "socioeconomic status," "social class," and "class." The meaning of all these terms will be clear in context.*

When speaking of inheritances, too often people mean financial assets alone, ignoring other forms of wealth that benefit the heirs. Pierre Bourdieu proposed that besides financial capital, inherited wealth involves two other considerations, social capital, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Alone or in some combination, these three factors play a major role in Stivers and her colleagues' idea of "intergenerational fairness," although these authors do not reference Bourdieu's three forms of inherited wealth in this characterization (p. 234).

*Social capital* is the first of Bourdieu's (1986) three constituents of wealth. This asset involves knowing a person or persons who can help you obtain, directly or indirectly, something you want. An example of social capital is knowing someone who can help you or your child gain acceptance to a prestigious college (see, e.g., Martin, 2018; Medina et al. 2019; Chetty, Deming, and Friedman, 2023).

*Cultural capital* is Bourdieu's (1986) second aspect of wealth and consists of having specialized knowledge and skills. For instance, a college degree is preferred for many jobs inside and outside of government. Better educated parents can provide their children with knowledge that eases their offsprings' transition into and through college, information that allows their children to more readily navigate higher learning. This transfer of cultural capital includes, among others: parents reading to their children starting when the kids are young (Larson et al. 2015); children seeing their folks reading books and newspapers (Larson et al. 2015; Fox, 2020; Anderson, 2018; Ecker, 2018); children exposed to intellectual conversations among family members (Lareau, 2011; Ecker, 2018; Hart and Risley, 1995); having parental help with homework (Lareau, 2011; Martin, 2018); living with parents who read "the 'right' books" (Mullins, 2018, p. 88). (See also Lareau, 2011); and having parents who watch the "right" television shows (Lareau, 2011; Pifer and Riffe, 2018).

These inherited rewards of cultural capital also include having parents who: understand the importance of taking advanced placement classes in high school (Calarco, 2020); encourage their children to enroll in test preparation (SAT) classes (Engle, 2007; Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen, 2018); promote the idea of attending college (Lareau, 2011; Engle, 2007); help with applying for college financial aid (Engle, 2007); take their kids to visit different campuses and then choose a

school that is the “best fit” (i.e., shopping for college) (Hurst, 2019; Lareau, 2011; Engle, 2007, citing Horn and Nunez, 2000).

Once these culturally advantaged children are on campus, their parents are better qualified to advise them about: navigating the higher education maze (“playing college”) (Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen, 2018; Lareau 2011; Pruitt and Bhardwaj, 2024); choosing an academic major and minor, preparing for inside and outside class exams, gaining an internship, and constructing a resume (Stephens, Hamedani, and Mesmin, 2014, citing Reay, Crozier, and Clayton, 2009); and helping their children see college-going in a broader socioeconomic framework (Martin, 2018). In *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, Lareau, concisely summarized many of these inherited rewards this way: “middle-class children benefit in ways invisible to them, and to their parents, from the degree of similarity between the cultural repertoires in the home and those standards adopted by institutions” (2011, p. 237).

In sum, if you want to succeed in higher education (and most other aspects of life, including becoming a professor), it helps to grow up in a family where at least one parent has an undergraduate degree or more...someone with a demonstrated ability to “play the academic game” (Mullins, 2018). (See also Tokarczyk, 2018; Engle, 2007, citing Hossler et al., 1999.)

*Financial holdings* is Bourdieu’s (1986) third component of wealth. These economic resources include liquid assets, e.g. cash, a savings account, a checking account, and illiquid assets, e.g. stocks, bonds, real estate, and art works. Growing up in a financially well-resourced home improves a person’s odds of attending and completing college (Martin, 2018, citing Executive Office of the President, 2014; and Bailey and Dynarski, 2011). Children raised in households with abundant financial capital are more likely to: attend preschool (Crosnoe, 2016); go to a prestigious prep or high-quality public school (Morgan, 2022; Mitchell, 2024; Kozol, 1991; Santos, 2019); hold an internship (Santos, 2019; Stephens, Hamedani, and Mesmin, 2014; Hirudayaraj, 2018; Smith, 2018); not have to work at an outside job (Perna and Odle, 2020; Davis et al. 2020); or if they do, they work fewer hours (Carnevale and Smith, 2018; Engle, 2007); receive advice from admissions counsellors (Simonton, 2019); and afford foreign travel (Serravallo, 2018; Brunsting and McGlynn, 2023).

Table 1 displays the latest Federal Reserve Board findings on the distribution of financial wealth in the United States (Distribution, 2025, First Quarter). The noted disparities are striking and relevant to Stivers et al.’s assertion that “[b]oth social equity and social justice are concerned with promoting fairness and equality within a society” (p. 229).

A	B	C	D
% of US Population	by Category in Trillions	% of Available Wealth	Cumulative %
Top 0.1%	\$22,194,486	13.85%	13.85%
99-99.9%	\$27,202,211	16.97%	30.82%
90-99%	\$58,380,613	36.43%	67.24%
50-90%	\$48,494,665	30.26%	97.50%
Bottom 50%	\$4,003,987	2.50%	100.00%
TOTAL	\$160,275,962	100.01%**	100.00%

\*Source: <https://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/z1/dataviz/dfa/distribute/chart/>  
 \*\*Due to rounding.

Column C shows that 0.1% of the population controls nearly fourteen percent of the available financial wealth, while the bottom half of the population holds less than three percent, a 5.54:1 ratio between these two extremes ( $13.85/2.50 = 5.54:1$ ).

Column D shows the cumulative percentages of financial wealth held by the five Census categories. The numbers indicate that the top ten percent of the population owns over two-thirds of the nation's wealth. Comparing the top and bottom halves of the population shows the former owns thirty-nine times more financial wealth than the latter category controls ( $97.5/2.5 = 39$ ).

The figures in Table 1 equate to Stivers and her coauthors' concern with structurally induced inequalities and their statement about "mapping out interrelationships between social order and social justice" (p. 235). Certainly, the heirs of parents in the, say, top ten percent will receive many more intergenerational benefits than the offspring of parents in the remaining wealth categories, especially the bottom half of the population.

Money solves a lot of problems and buys a lot of opportunities. "The more money you have, the more problems you can solve and the more opportunities you can afford," as Ayers (2009) might say. Trickle-down economics includes the seldom mentioned passing of financial holdings from parents to their children. Just as sitting in the right seat can raise your final grade in Jones' class, choosing the wrong seat can lower your grade. Thus, choosing the right parents can greatly enhance a child's odds of *affording*, including affording college, affording a prestigious college, affording foreign travel, affording high quality health care, affording high quality housing, affording a better diet, etc. However, if you select the wrong parents... "[S]orry, you're on your own" (Ayers, 2009, p. 391).

### **Responding To Stivers et al.'s Call for Prescriptive Theory Building**

Stivers and her coauthors argued that public administration scholars committed to increasing social equity and social justice must, in turn, "embrace and elevate philosophical inquiry," meaning committing themselves to devising normative theories to justify the changes they champion (p. 231). In an essay in *Harvard Magazine*, Bowen et al. (2005) argued that to increase diversity on campus, universities should grant extra credit to student applicants who grew up in the working class. These authors reasoned that traditional merit standards (an example of Stivers and her colleagues' structural impediments) should be revised to include weighing the distance an applicant has traveled – obstacles overcome – when deciding student admissions. Bowen et al. (Ibid., p. 11) likened their counterbalancing approach to "putting a thumb on the admissions scale (maybe even a thumb and a half)" to compensate applicants for the challenges associated with growing up disadvantaged. (See also Kahlenberg, 2025.)

Today, colleges use Bowen et al.'s compensatory approach to increase social equity, social justice, and intellectual diversity among students at their schools. For instance, University of Michigan officials solicit information about whether an applicant is "the first in their family to attend a college or 4-year university" for integrative and democratizing purposes (First Generation at UM, n.d.).

Until recently, University of Wisconsin officials, among others, had expanded Bowen et al.'s recommended standard to include faculty hiring. According to the Division of Diversity, Equity and Educational Achievement website, one of the school's goals was to "recruit and retain a more diverse faculty and staff (Division of Diversity, Equity and Educational Achievement, n.d.). If University of Wisconsin officials did not consider socioeconomic origin as a diversity criterion – apply the "thumb and a half" criterion when recruiting and hiring faculty, and there is no evidence they did – this omission evokes Stivers et al.'s writings about "canonize[d]" values and Shaw's comments about an unopened question.

There is good reason to weigh the effects of this ongoing lapse in faculty diversity efforts based on socioeconomic background. In 2022, Morgan et al. published the results of a questionnaire they distributed among 46,693 tenure-track professors from summer 2017 through autumn 2020 at "1,360 Ph.D. granting departments...in Computer Science, Business, History, Psychology, Physics and Astronomy, Sociology, Anthropology and Biology" (p. 1626). The researchers chose these academic fields "for their diversity of scholarship and [because they] represent a broad sample of tenure-track faculty at research intensive institutions in the United States" (Ibid.).

The survey results revealed that professors from these schools were "between 12 and 25 times more likely to have a parent with a Ph.D." compared to national statistics for this level of education (Ibid.). Morgan and her colleagues reported that not only does the noted discrepancy nearly double at the nation's elite universities, but this imbalance has not changed over the last fifty years (p. 1625). The researchers blame this lack of diversity in large part on the cultural, financial, and social capital entitlements bequeathed to the heirs of the "socioeconomically privileged," to use Morgan and her colleagues' (Ibid.) wording, or "class privilege," according to Phillips and Lowery (2020, p. 1403).

Some of the trickle-down advantages Morgan et al. cite coincide with many of the social, financial, and cultural benefits mentioned earlier, including, in this case, having immediately available educational role models, having ready access to people who understand the workings of formal learning, and how to become an academic (p. 1626.) (See also Bowen, 2004; Clotfelter, 2017, Chapter 9; Rosser, 2009.) For Morgan et al. (p. 1625), these "micro-class advantages" help explain why the country's professoriate is highly unrepresentative of the general population and is self-replicating, the problem of like hiring like by defining merit using standards that reinforce the status quo. (See also Michels, 1919, 1962; Light, 1994. For more about the socioeconomic origins of university faculty, see Ryan and Sackrey, 1984; Dews and Law, 1995; Grimes and Morris 1997; Samarco and Muzzatti, 2006; Tokarczyk and Fay, 1993; McMillan, Shepard, and Tate, 1998; Towers et al. 2020; Stansberry and Schultz, 2023; Aldridge et al. 2022; Roscigno, et al. 2023; Oldfield and Conant, 2001).

The troubling consequence of self-replication in higher education, according to Morgan et al., is that it results in, to quote Stivers and her coauthors, a lack of "representative bureaucracy" (p. 230, 233, 237). This underrepresentation of certain groups invariably narrows the range of subjects, approaches, and interpretations academics and their students address in their pedagogy, publications, and other actions, e.g. conference presentations and grant proposals (Morgan et al.,

p. 1625). This restricted intellectual diversity is inevitably carried forward by the students who become professors (Ibid.).

Consistent with Stivers and her colleagues' concern with what they call "the structural and organizational factors that drive the perpetuation of inequitable patterns" (p. 233, citing Gooden), Borthwick and Schau reference an American Bar Association report describing the potential harms of selective breeding among, in this case, America's elite law school professors. According to the ABA report: "Were we biologists studying inbreeding [among professors at America's top law schools], we might predict that successive generations of imbeciles would be produced by such a system. . . ." (Borthwick and Schau, 1991, p. 232 quoting an ABA report). It is unlikely that elite law schools are alone in fostering these "inequitable patterns" (Stivers, et al., p. 233 citing Gooden) in faculty hiring. (See also Vander Putten, 2018 for more on faculty inbreeding.)

### **The Law, Social Equity, and Social Justice**

Writing in 1979, Antonin Scalia, a "[c]onstitutional [c]onservative" (Francisco, 2017, p. 2169) and later a US Supreme Court justice (1986-2016), explained that although he rejects race-based affirmative action plans, he accepts social class-based programs even if they disproportionately benefit racial minorities. In an article later published in the *Connecticut Law Tribune*, Taylor described weighing socioeconomic background for diversity purposes as "legally unassailable" (1991, p. 23). In *The Remedy* Kahlenberg (1996) documented that the US Supreme Court has never rejected a public policy based on social class considerations.

In 2023 the US Supreme Court found that race based affirmative action programs are unconstitutional (*Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, 600 U.S., 181- 412). The Court's decision overturned rulings on using race-based diversity policies in higher education. The Justices referenced "socioeconomic" or "socioeconomically" thirteen times in their opinions, suggesting the Court understands the need for greater social class diversity in higher education and apparently its willingness to support such plans. In his concurring opinion Justice Gorsuch spoke to this lack of social class diversity at the nation's so-called elite schools by citing these words from *The New York Times Magazine*: "In the Ivy League, children whose parents are in the top 1 percent of the income distribution are 77 times as likely to attend as those whose parents are in the bottom 20 percent of the income bracket" (Ibid., p. 14, note 3, Gorsuch quoting *The New York Times Magazine*, February, p. 41).

Presently, and to the disadvantage of the disadvantaged, the interpretation of merit when hiring public administration faculty does not readily include socioeconomic obstacles overcome; notices of faculty job openings in the field do not commonly solicit and consider an applicant's class origin for diversity ends. Consequently, it is impossible to consult an individual program's website or internal publications to see how many, if any, of its professors grew up working-class, yet another example of Stivers and her colleagues' politics by omission. (See also Kahlenberg, 2025, pp. 109, 111.) Thus, the PhD daughter of two custodians who were forced by economic circumstances to quit school after ninth grade is viewed in the same light as the child of two PhDs who taught at an esteemed university. If this daughter of the two custodians has her degrees from a community college and two small, less prestigious public universities and the other applicant who attended a

prep school, has all her post-high school degrees from elite private institutions, the comparison will heavily favor the offspring of the two PhDs even more. (See, e.g., Posselt, 2016.)

### Opening A Closed Question

Responding to Stivers et al.'s call for counterbalancing the disadvantages that have limited opportunities afforded certain marginalized groups, the just-mentioned judicial rulings and related writings, it is reasonable to argue that public administration programs, and all other disciplines for that matter, should expand their faculty diversity efforts to include soliciting and weighing information about each job applicant's socioeconomic background. (See, e.g., Rosario, 2014.)

This proposition has several justifications. First, the proposed reform concurs with Stivers and her coauthors' recommendation that public administration scholars devote more time to intellectual speculation (p. 231). The thinking behind this diversity initiative will inevitably prompt most public administration scholars, students, and practitioners to expand their understanding of how those born of working-class families are disadvantaged throughout formal learning and beyond. In turn, this expanded awareness will motivate more people in public administration to suggest reforms to counteract these socioeconomic disparities. Recognizing class origin as a diversity criterion in faculty hiring fits with Stivers and her colleagues' calls for measures intended to more easily mitigate the social, financial, and cultural impediments associated with, in this case, growing up working class. Such a diversity plan is also consistent with Bowen et al.'s "thumb or thumb and a half" idea, only in this case the digit or digit-and-a-half favors potential faculty instead of prospective students.

Second, this proposal conforms with Stivers and her coauthors' reference to Rawls' normative vision of providing "the greatest benefit to the least advantaged, ...and the attachment of liberty and rights to offices and positions open to all under...equality of opportunity" (p. 230, quoting Hart, 1974, p. 7, quoting Rawls).<sup>2</sup>

Third, granting special consideration to working-class applicants seeking academic positions comports with Stivers et al.'s observation that one goal of the Civil Rights Movement was and is to include the disadvantaged from a broad swath of socioeconomic groups to achieve "social justice in economic, political, and cultural life in society" (p. 230, citing Morgan & Davies, 2012).

Fourth, the proposed policy change fits with many of Stivers and her coauthors' comments and citations relating to defining social justice to include: a) "a fair redistribution of resources, opportunities, and responsibilities" (p. 232, citing McCandless and Blessett, 2022); b) challenging "the roots of oppression and injustice (Ibid.); c) "empowerment of all people to exercise self-determination and realize their full potential" (Ibid.); d) and enabling everyone to shape their own fate and fully realize their innate capacity (Ibid.).

Stivers et al. argue that achieving these objectives will "ensur[e] that everyone has the same opportunity to succeed" (p. 229). In other words, equalizing opportunities will yield a more

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<sup>2</sup> The Rawls' quote from Hart (1974, p. 7) should read, "to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged" "attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity."

equitable distribution of outcomes, in the same way that eliminating inherited grades in Jones' course would equalize opportunities.

Last, soliciting and weighing socioeconomic background information for faculty diversity purposes will encourage all public administration professors to recognize the strong connection between social class origin and the maldistribution of educational opportunities along with the consequences of these disparities. This new policy will help dispel, first, the bootstrap folklore about the endless possibility of upward mobility in America among those born of humble origin and, second, the myth of schooling being the great equalizer in the United States (Torche, 2011; Erickson, 2015; Grove and Montgomery, 2023; Mullins, 2018, p. 83, citing Redford and Hoyer; Martin, 2018, p. 182, citing Executive Office of the President, 2014; and Bailey and Dynarski, 2011). As is, the evidence shows it is appropriate to call them "class rooms."

### **WHAT is Gained?**

Opening the closed question of faculty socioeconomic diversity for social justice and social equity purposes will strengthen public administration programs and practices in several ways. First, Dennett's revolutionary *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1995) addressed how the theory of evolution changed the way people think about a host of disciplines and activities. Acknowledging the existence and consequences of structural nepotism will have a similar effect on the study and practice of public administration...the rewards of inspiring awareness, as happened when we began recognizing the plight of the previously ignored groups Stivers and her colleagues mention throughout their editorial as well as what the symposium authors say about these same groups. (See also e.g. Smith's (2018, p. 237) discussion of structural nepotism.)

Second, expanding the definition of diversity to include social class origin will show that public administration is, as claimed, a "cutting edge" discipline (ASPA South Florida Chapter History, n.d.) (See also Who We Are, n.d.; George H. Frederickson Center for Social Equity, n.d.; ASPA 2024 Annual Conference, 2023; NASPAA Standards, 2023.) Pursuing this personnel goal will demonstrate that, indeed, our field is forward thinking about challenging "the structural and organizational" conditions (p. 233, citing Portillo et al. 2022b) that sustain the earlier noted "inequitable patterns" (Ibid., p. 233 citing Gooden).

Third, while other disadvantaged groups have professed their status and advocated for better representation and treatment, working-class academics have yet to assert their equally valid social equity and social justice claims. Yeskel's (2008) "*My First Closet Was the Class Closet*" effectively captures the reluctance of too many professors from humble backgrounds to publicly embrace their working-class origin, fearing that doing so will diminish their standing among their students and colleagues. (On this point and related topics, see, e.g., Dahlberg, 2009; Morgan et al. 2022.) Expanding the definition of diversity to include socioeconomic background will spark a long overdue social class pride and confidence among working class academics in the same way similar efforts have affected the thinking and actions among other marginalized groups. (For discussions about imposter syndrome and related matters among working class academics, see, e.g., Tokarczyk, 2018; Ecker, 2018, citing Julie Charlip; Swindle, 2018; Pifer and Riffe, 2018, p. 73, citing Huxford.)

Finally, graduating the beneficiaries of writings and teachings about the importance of social class origin on the trajectory of people's lives – and thus the need or lack thereof for certain compensatory government services – will inevitably lead to professors and practitioners who are more likely to advocate for greater equality among recipients of government programs. After all, equal treatment under law remains a widely proclaimed example of Rawls' theory about the role of mythology in maintaining political stability. Calling attention to the lifelong consequences of the interrelationship between and among financial, cultural, and social capital will change what faculty teach and publish, what students learn, how they learn, and the way public administration practitioners perform their duties. Indeed, being “cutting edge” means that other disciplines are sure to follow this expanded interpretation of social equity and social justice.

## Conclusion

As noted, Stivers et al. argued that a budget is one measure of an organization's values (p. 230). Correspondingly, public budgets reveal how much inequality and social injustice a society willingly allows (Ibid., p. 230). By this logic, we can measure public administration programs' commitment to social equity, social justice, and diversity by gauging how much socioeconomic inequality they countenance among their faculty.

We can use three criteria to gauge each program's tolerance for inequality. The first standard involves determining which programs collect information required to establish how closely, if at all, the social class backgrounds of their respective faculties parallel those of the, for instance, educational attainment of the population at large.<sup>3</sup> The results of this analysis will show in the same way that we can judge a university's values by its budget priorities how much each public administration program values socioeconomic diversity (Hirudayaraj, 2018; Smith, 2018).

Second, for transparency and accountability purposes, each program should be judged by whether and how often it assembles, aggregates, and posts socioeconomic background data on its website (see Kahlenberg, 2025, p. 124).

Lastly, Stivers and her colleagues (p. 230) cite Piketty's observation that every society relies on a dominant ideology to justify its inequalities, a rationale for why a group or groups are entitled to better treatment and more wealth than the rest of society enjoys...why some of Orwell's (1945, 1974) animals are more equal than others. The American ideology is an amalgam of two contradictory myths. We are a classless society, a nation where anyone from the working class can rise from the bottom to the top. Given the prevalence of these conflicting beliefs, perhaps Stivers and her coauthors can be excused for overlooking the importance of socioeconomic background information in general in their discussions of social equity, social justice, and diversity. That said, public administration scholars should begin treating obstacles overcome – having chosen the wrong seat in Dr. Jones's class – as strong evidence of merit when recruiting and hiring faculty. Certainly, this reform comports with public administration's claim of being both a cutting-edge discipline and a field constantly striving to achieve Stivers et al's social equity and social justice ideals.

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<sup>3</sup> Given the close relationship among income, occupation, and educational attainment, investigators frequently use years of formal schooling completed as a proxy for social class (see, for instance, Grbic, Garrison, and Jolly (2010); Stansbury and Robert Schultz (2023)).

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# Cross-National Comparisons of Poverty and Working-Class Earnings: How the United States Measures Up

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## Abstract

In a previous *Journal of Working-Class Studies* article, we found that the earnings of both the American poor and working class fared well compared with the whole world. When compared with only OECD countries, the U.S. absolute poverty rate was in the middle of the pack. This paper updates our 2022 analysis with more recent data, more countries, and a different absolute poverty measure. The new analysis presented here shows that the earnings of the American poor and working-class still fare well when compared with the rest of the world. Compared with a subset of the 30 wealthiest OECD countries, the American working class was still near the top of the rankings while the U.S. absolute poverty rate was in the middle of the pack. Thus, these new calculations update and largely confirm our earlier findings.

## Keywords

Absolute poverty, cross-national, economic inequality, educational attainment, Gini coefficient, inequality, JWCS, LIS, Luxembourg Income Study, OECD, Palma ratio, poverty, relative poverty, working class, World Bank

## Overview

In a previous article in the *Journal of Working-Class Studies* (JWCS) published in December 2022, we compared the earnings of the American poor and working class with other countries around the world. We also used an absolute poverty measure similar to the U.S. Census Bureau's official poverty line<sup>4</sup> to compare poverty's prevalence in the U.S. versus other Organisation for Economic

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<sup>4</sup> See U.S. Census Bureau (2025) for these thresholds.

Co-operation and Development (OECD)<sup>5</sup> countries (see Eppard et al., 2022). In that paper we found that the earnings of both the American working class and the poor fared well when compared with the whole world. When compared with only OECD countries, the absolute poverty rate in the U.S. was in the middle of the pack (Eppard et al., 2022). In this paper we update that 2022 analysis.

First, we update our previous work by providing more recent data on the earnings of the American working class. The most recent year available from the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) for that earlier paper was 2019, while the most recent year available to us today is 2022.

Second, we update that earlier poverty analysis by (a) using a different absolute poverty measure and (b) including far more countries than our previous analysis. The measure we used previously was the U.S. Census Bureau's official poverty line<sup>6</sup> applied to LIS data. This paper's absolute measure comes from the World Bank (Hasell et al., 2025) and defines poverty as having less than \$30 (in USD) to spend per day.

### **Working Class Americans in Cross-National Context**

According to the U.S. Department of Education, about 29% of Americans between the ages of 25-34 had a bachelor's degree (but no higher degree) in 2022, a number that placed the U.S. above the average (26%) for OECD countries (see Figures 1-6 below for cross-national educational attainment/performance visualizations) (NCES, 2024).

For a household where the householder had a bachelor's degree or higher, the median household income was \$123,000 in that same year, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (Guzman & Kollar, 2024). Those are impressive earnings—but what about the working class?

For the sake of this discussion, we will consider the working class to be those with no more than a high school degree—they may have some college experience, but no completed college degree (for a discussion of the various working-class definitions, see Eppard et al., 2022).

The median income in 2022 was \$53,510 for households where the householder had a high school diploma but no college, and \$71,420 for high school graduates who had some college but no college degree (Guzman & Kollar, 2024).

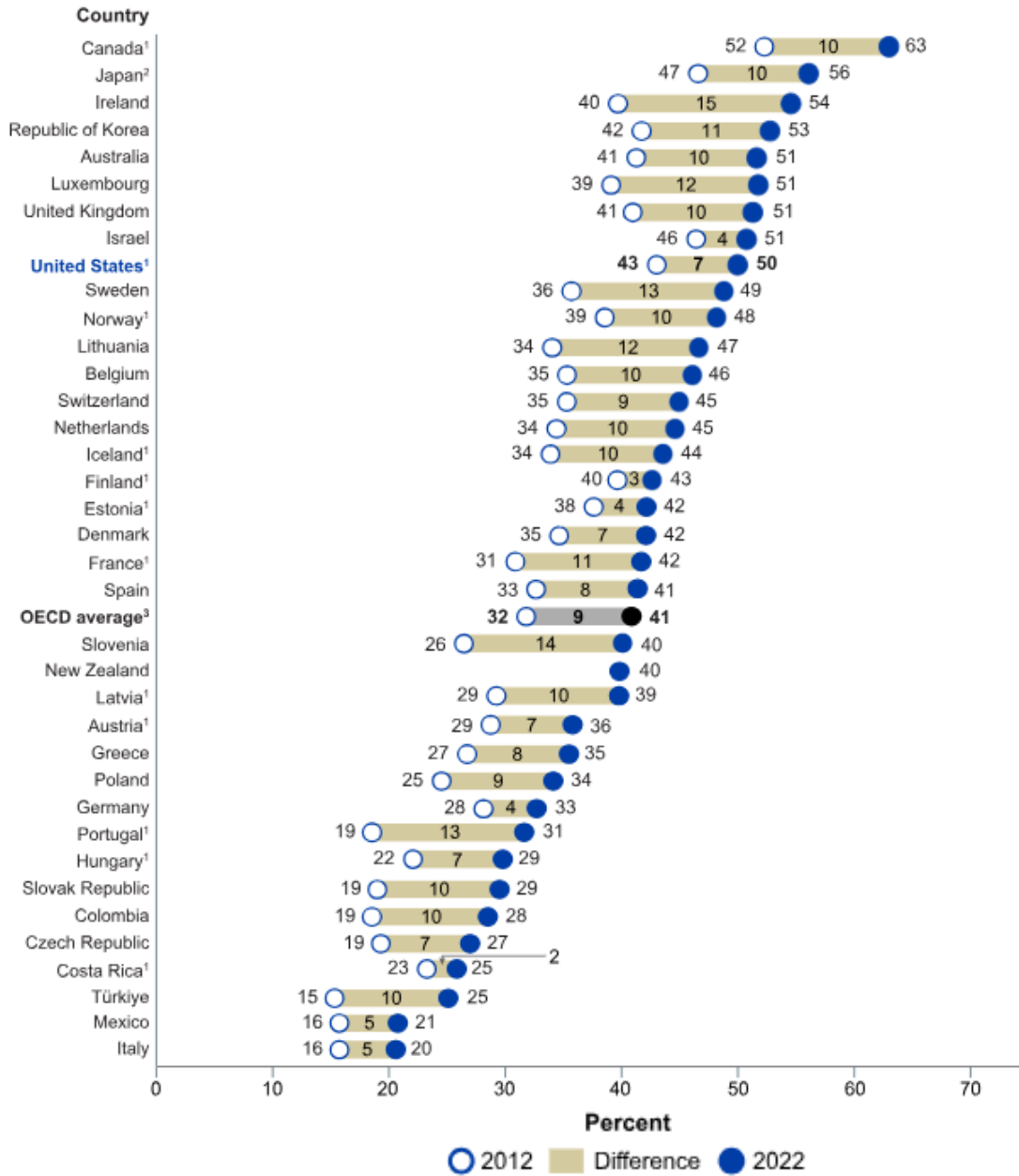
To assess how the American working class compares with their counterparts in other countries, we examined the incomes of people in the 3rd and 4th income deciles—not quite at the national median income, but also not poor. This would be the area of the U.S. income distribution, for instance, where you might find a single-income household headed by a high school educated general maintenance/repair worker or construction laborer/helper (BLS, 2025a & 2025b).

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<sup>5</sup> The OECD is an intergovernmental organization of 38 member countries committed to democracy and liberal economic markets. Scholars like us compare the U.S. to OECD countries when needing apples-to-apples, wealthy-to-wealthy country comparisons. If one wants to see how the U.S. compares with only wealthy, high-HDI countries, this is a (admittedly imperfect) shortcut that excludes most middle- and low-income countries.

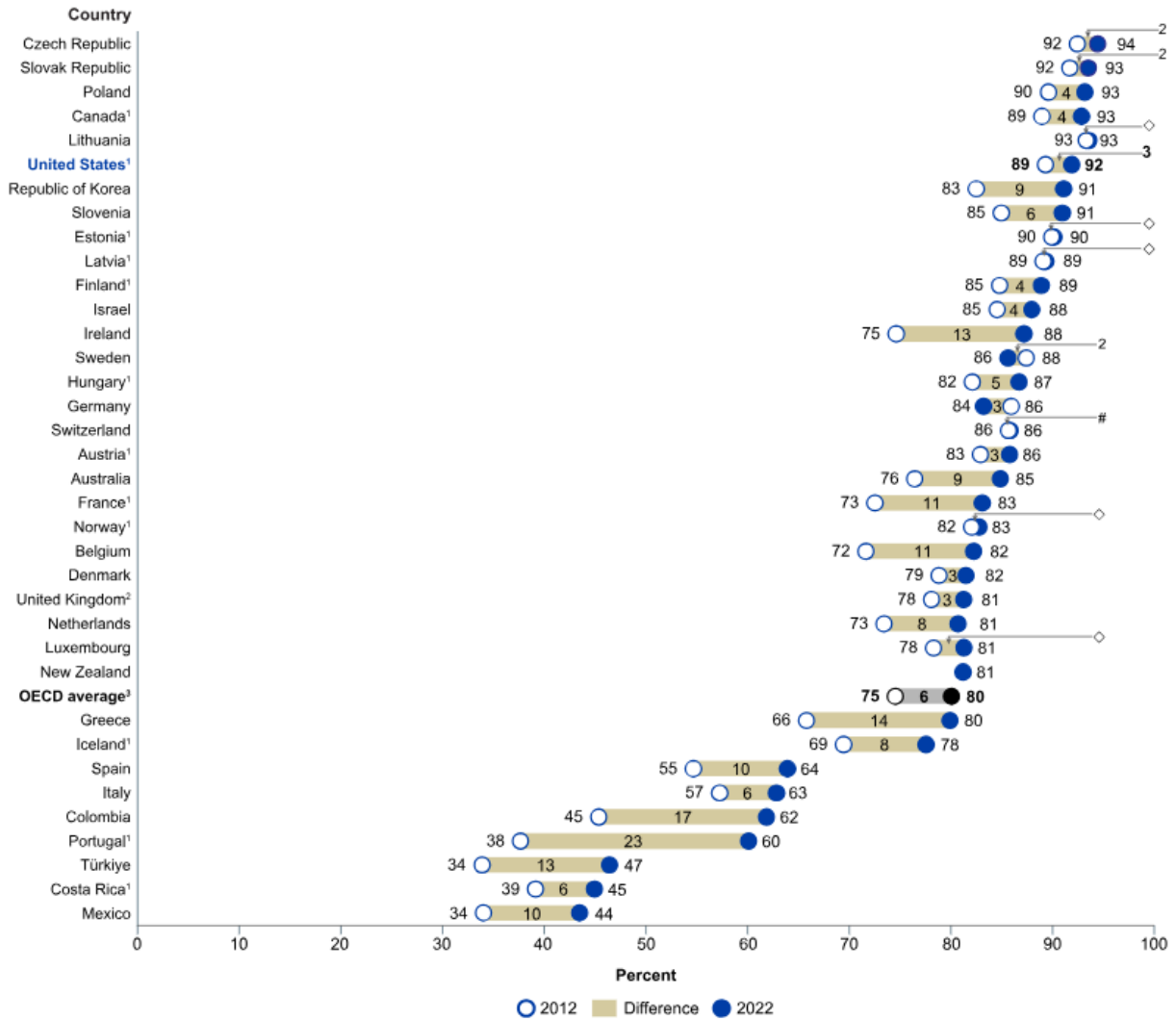
<sup>6</sup> See U.S. Census Bureau (2025) for these thresholds.

**FIG 1.** Percentage of Population with Any Postsecondary Degree, OECD Countries.



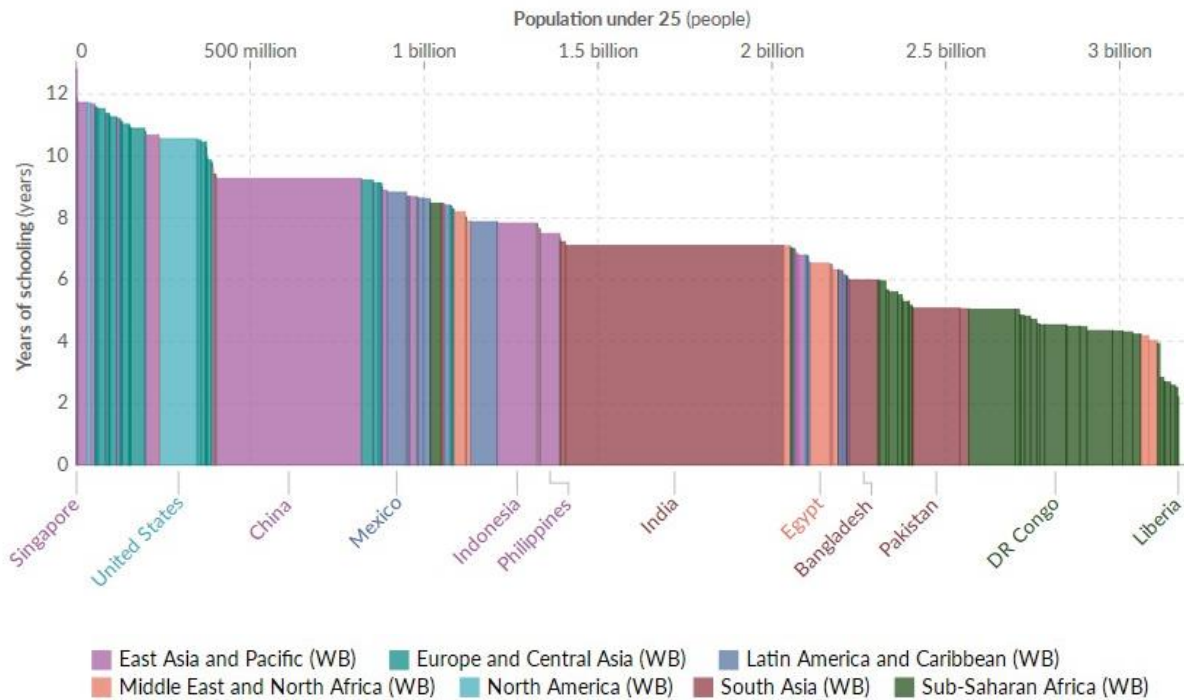
Source: NCES (2024).

**FIG 2.** Percentage of Population Completing High School, OECD Countries.



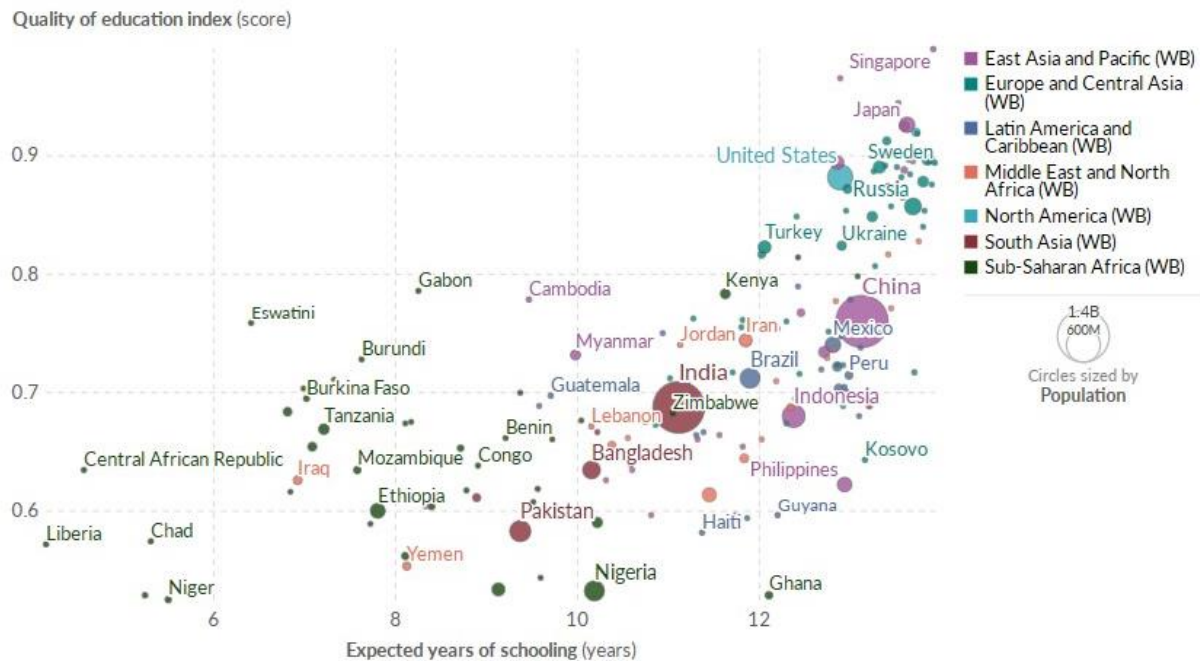
Source: NCES (2024).

**FIG 3.** Learning-Adjusted Years of School Around the World.



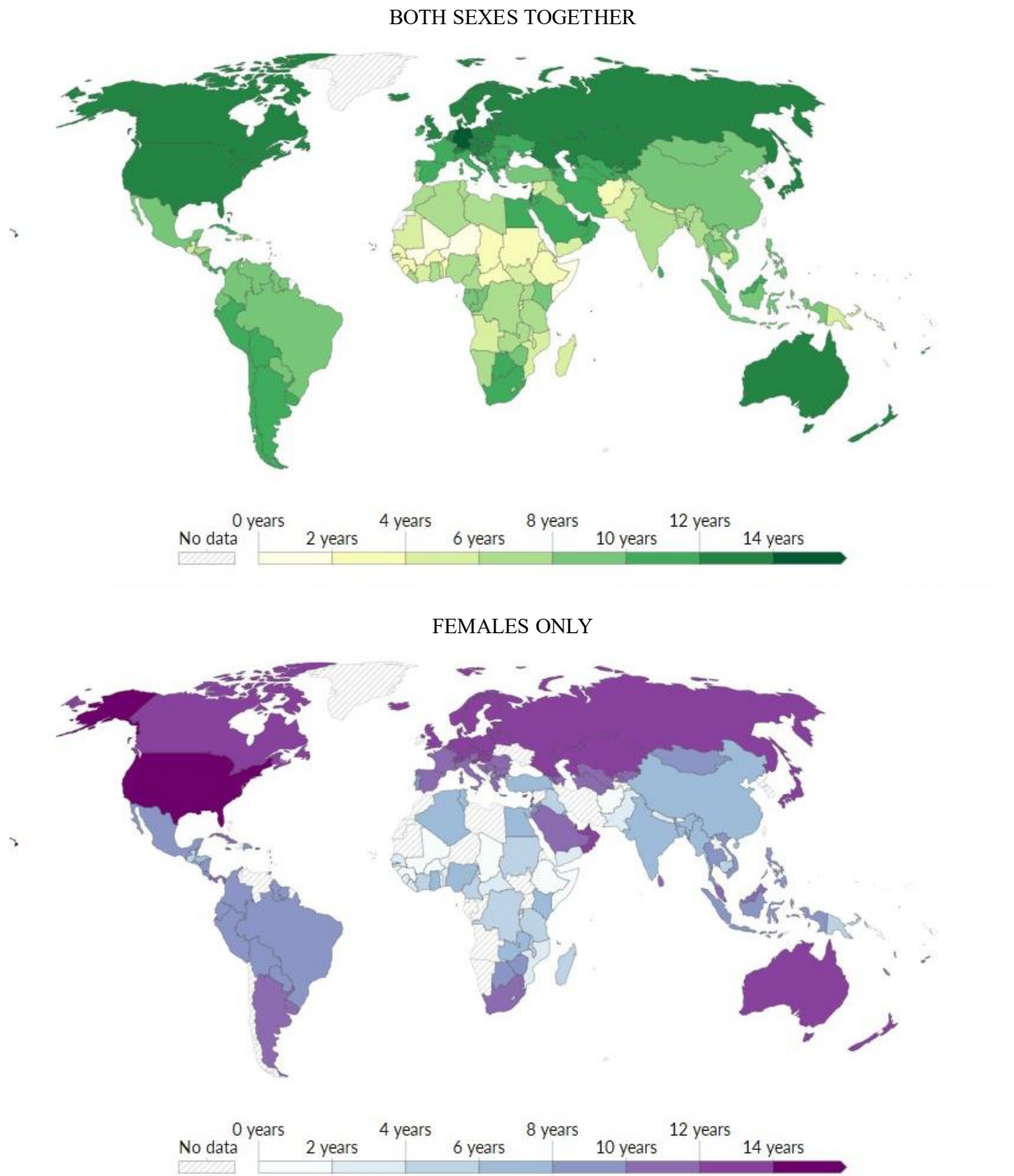
*Note:* Indicator merges the quantity and quality of education into one metric to account for the fact that similar durations of schooling can yield different learning outcomes. Data from 2020.  
*Source:* OWD (2025).

**FIG 4.** Quantity versus Quality of Schooling Around the World.



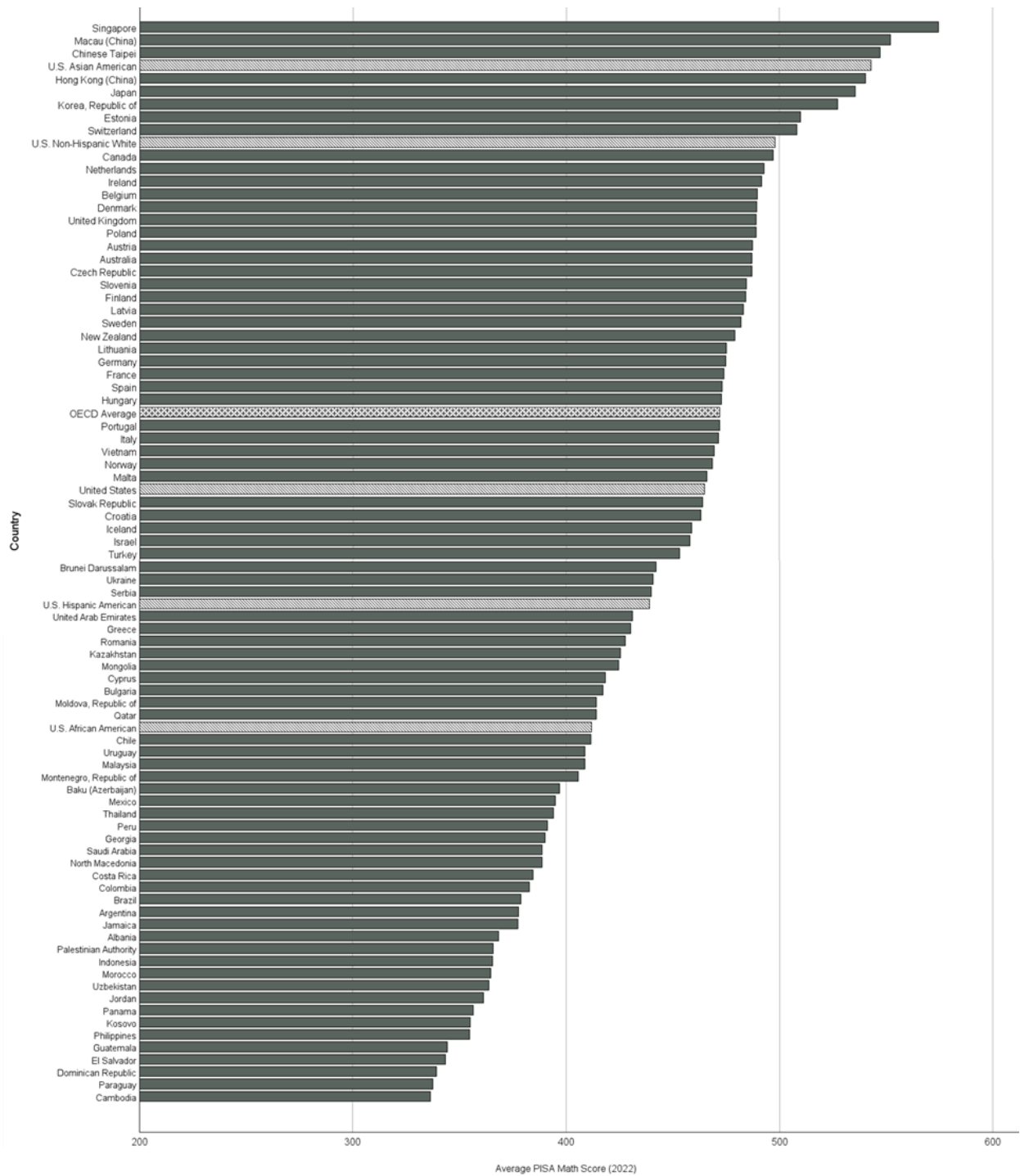
*Note:* Data from 2020.  
*Source:* OWD (2025).

**FIG 5.** Average Years of Formal Education Around the World.



*Note:* For adults over 25 years old in 2023. Top map for males and females together, bottom for females only.  
*Source:* OWD (2025).

**FIG 6.** Average PISA Math Test Scores Around the World.



*Note:* For 15-year-old students in 2022.  
*Source:* NCES (2025).

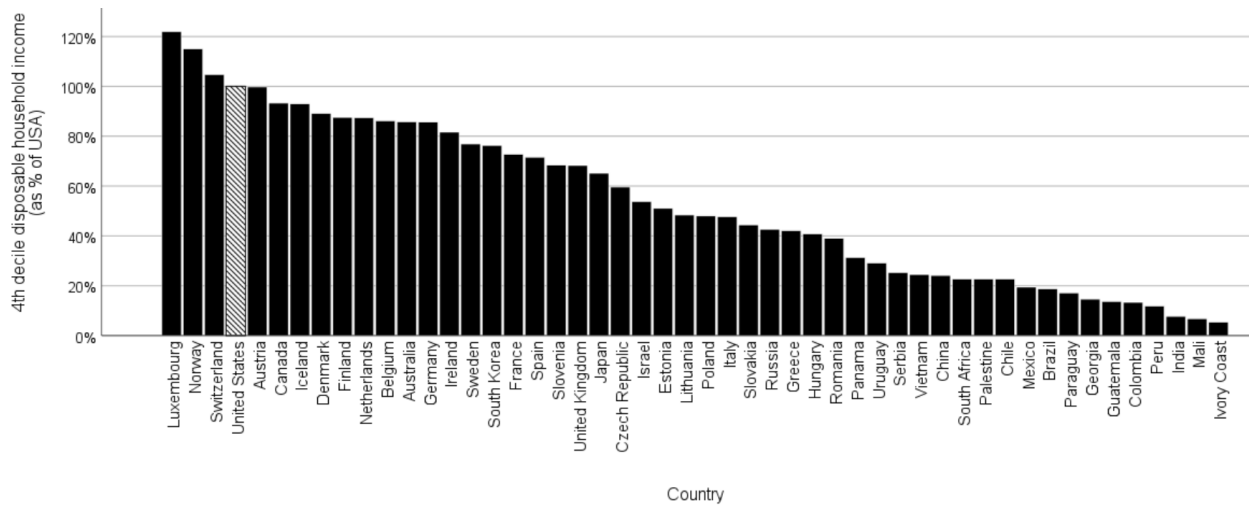
We express the cross-national working-class earnings comparisons as a percentage of U.S. income:

$$\left( \frac{\text{country decile income}}{\text{USA decile income}} \right) \times 100$$

The median disposable household income of the 3rd income decile in the U.S. fared very well versus the same decile in other countries, coming in at 6th best out of 50 countries with recent data in the LIS database. The top five countries were Luxembourg (129% of U.S. 3rd decile income), Norway (125%), Switzerland (112%), Austria (107%), and Iceland (101%). The bottom five were South Africa (11%), Peru (11%), India (8%), Mali (7%), and Ivory Coast (5%).

As you can see in Figure 7 below, the U.S. fared well at the 4th decile as well, coming in at 4th best out of 50 countries. The top five countries were Luxembourg (122% of U.S. 4th decile income), Norway (115%), Switzerland (105%), United States (100%), and Austria (99.8%). The bottom five were Colombia (13%), Peru (12%), India (8%), Mali (7%), and Ivory Coast (5%).

**FIG 7.** American Working-Class Household Income Relative to Other Countries.



Source: Authors’ computations using LIS data (DART, 2025).

It appears that not much has changed since our 2022 analysis (Eppard et al., 2022) in the JWCS: the working class in the U.S. continues to compare favorably, at least in terms of income, to their counterparts around the world.

It is important to note that the database we rely upon for our working-class analysis, LIS, is disproportionately composed of wealthy countries. If most countries in the world were included, such as more middle- and low-income countries, it is safe to assume that the American working class would look even more impressive in comparison.

## American Poverty in Cross-National Context

It is common for social scientists to use a relative poverty measure when comparing two or more countries' poverty rates. Depending upon which relative measure one chooses to use, people are considered poor if they live in a household that earns less than 50% or 60% of their country's median national income (after taxes and government transfers).

Using a relative measure to compare countries, the U.S. has one of the highest poverty rates (18.3% under the 50% threshold) not only among OECD countries—a group containing some of the world's wealthiest countries—but among *all countries* in the world (at least among those 91 countries for which we have data). As you can see in Table 1 below, under the 50% relative threshold the U.S. ranks 79th out of 91 countries (with 91 being the highest-poverty country). Under this measure, the U.S. has more poverty than underdeveloped countries like Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Niger, and Sierra Leone.

The country with the lowest poverty rate in Table 1 is Pakistan (3.6%), followed by Kyrgyzstan (3.7%), Kazakhstan (3.8%), Moldova (3.9%), and Czechia (4.9%).

To many people, this probably seems a bit off. For example, the *richest 10%* have about \$3.31 to spend a day in the Democratic Republic of Congo and \$8.07 in Pakistan—compared with \$22.93/day for the *poorest 10%* in the U.S. (see Figure 8 below). In Pakistan, 94.5% of people lived on \$10/day or less in 2018, compared with only 2.5% in the U.S. (see Figure 9 below).

Considering this, how could Pakistan not only have significantly less poverty than the U.S., but the lowest poverty rate in the world? How is it possible that countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo (99% living on \$10/day or less) outperform the U.S. (2.5%) when it comes to poverty (see Figure 9)?

If different poverty measures lead to dramatically different cross-national poverty comparisons, which one is *really* measuring poverty?

In a previous article that was published in the JWCS (see Eppard et al., 2022), we used an absolute measure to compare countries, relying on data from LIS (see Figure 10 below). Absolute measures of poverty are calculated based on the assumption that, below the chosen income threshold, people cannot afford their basic needs. The absolute measure we used was designed to mirror, as closely as possible, the official poverty line published each year by the U.S. Census Bureau (see Table 2 below for the most recent Census poverty thresholds for different family sizes).

Unlike analyses which use a relative measure and find that the U.S. has one of the highest poverty rates among OECD countries, our absolute measure suggested that poverty in the U.S. was rather average for a wealthy country. We were limited in how satisfied we could be with that earlier analysis—including data issues that lead to imprecise estimates and a limited number of countries with recent data—so we decided to pursue this question further with different data in this paper.

**TABLE 1.** Absolute and Relative Poverty Rates Around the World.

Country	Absolute poverty rate (%)	Rank	Relative poverty rate (%)	Rank
Norway	6.96	1	8.04	16
UAE	7.67	2	11.43	45
Switzerland	9.11	3	11.25	42
Denmark	9.33	4	6.59	9
Luxembourg	10.55	5	14.31	64
Netherlands	11.47	6	8.09	17
Finland	11.94	7	6.79	11
Austria	12.59	8	10.24	31
Germany	13.25	9	10.75	35
Belgium	14.56	10	9.64	24
Canada	14.75	11	12.25	54
Australia	15.25	12	11.74	48
Sweden	16.12	13	10.77	36
France	16.26	14	10.03	30
United States	17.50	15	18.25	79
Ireland	19.44	16	7.11	12
Malta	22.85	17	9.67	26
United Kingdom	24.50	18	12.25	53
Cyprus	25.41	19	7.47	13
South Korea	26.75	20	14.25	62
Slovenia	27.15	21	5.30	8
Taiwan	29.49	22	8.50	19
Italy	31.06	23	15.23	68
Spain	34.64	24	15.71	71
Czechia	39.06	25	4.93	5
Estonia	43.48	26	9.89	28
Israel	43.74	27	20.49	87
Lithuania	53.96	28	13.25	56
Poland	55.71	29	9.53	23
Portugal	57.57	30	11.46	46
Latvia	60.22	31	11.87	50
Malaysia	61.33	32	17.02	75
Panama	64.82	33	22.32	88
Uruguay	66.09	34	16.91	73
Croatia	66.69	35	11.48	47
Greece	68.42	36	13.80	58
Slovakia	70.85	37	9.33	22
Hungary	71.14	38	10.93	39
Bulgaria	74.48	39	14.13	60
Costa Rica	74.82	40	19.30	83
Turkey	75.94	41	17.37	76
Russia	80.12	42	10.78	37
Seychelles	80.22	43	14.26	63
Grenada	80.57	44	14.48	65
Romania	81.66	45	18.12	78
Brazil	82.98	46	23.56	90
Bolivia	83.52	47	20.05	85
Paraguay	85.03	48	18.29	80

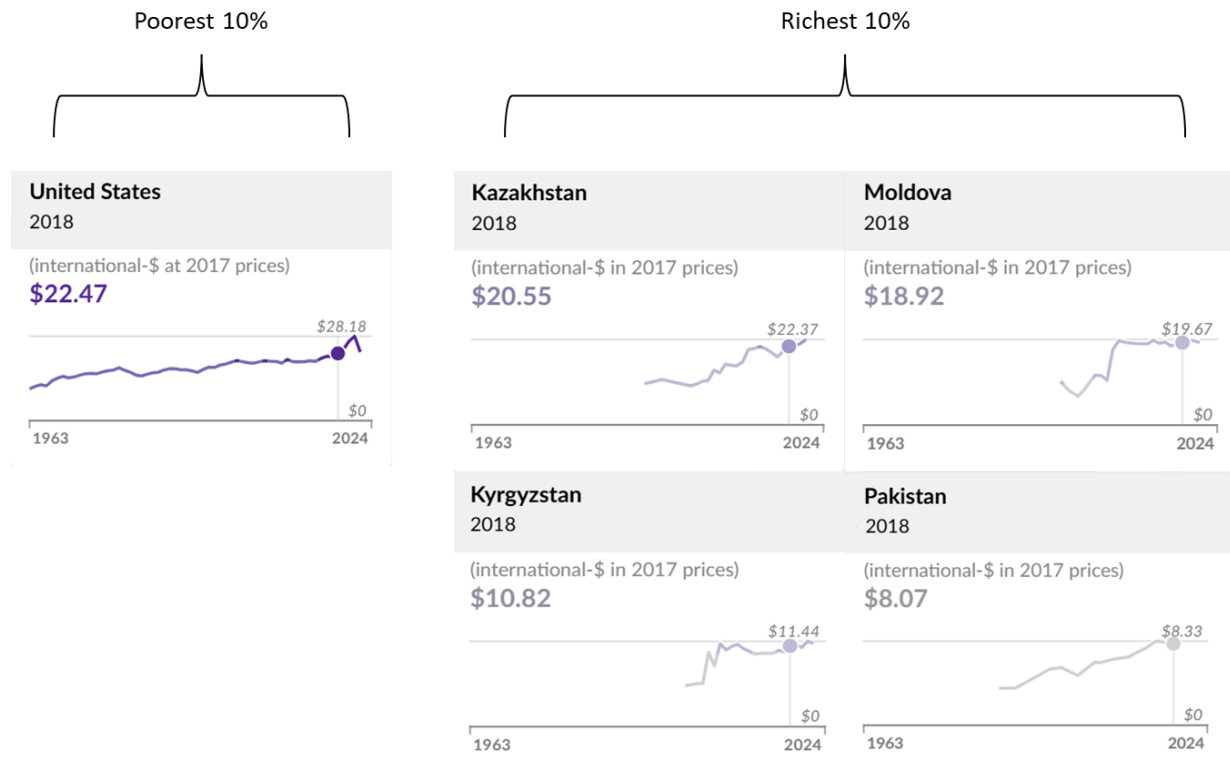
**TABLE 1 (continued).**

Country	Absolute poverty rate (%)	Rank	Relative poverty rate (%)	Rank
Jamaica	85.10	49	12.02	52
Montenegro	88.04	50	19.92	84
Ecuador	88.91	51	19.26	81
Colombia	89.65	52	20.43	86
Thailand	90.09	53	11.32	44
Dominican Republic	90.66	54	14.19	61
Mexico	90.90	55	16.03	72
Belarus	91.82	56	5.20	7
Serbia	92.11	57	16.96	74
Peru	92.42	58	19.28	82
China	93.18	59	14.75	67
Iran	93.48	60	12.37	55
Vietnam	94.18	61	13.97	59
Honduras	94.99	62	24.50	91
El Salvador	95.39	63	15.30	69
North Macedonia	95.64	64	17.45	77
Albania	96.28	65	11.77	49
Ukraine	96.78	66	5.02	6
Kazakhstan	97.07	67	3.77	3
Armenia	97.82	68	7.84	15
Moldova	97.94	69	3.86	4
Mongolia	98.22	70	9.86	27
Georgia	98.75	71	14.61	66
Philippines	98.84	72	11.21	41
Angola	98.86	73	22.79	89
Laos	98.90	74	10.34	33
Indonesia	99.04	75	10.30	32
Senegal	99.18	76	10.51	34
Cote d'Ivoire	99.55	77	11.88	51
Togo	99.55	78	15.66	70
Burkina Faso	99.58	79	11.27	43
Kyrgyzstan	99.63	80	3.70	2
Benin	99.64	81	11.00	40
Pakistan	99.74	82	3.55	1
India	99.75	83	6.75	10
Guinea-Bissau	99.76	84	9.08	21
Tanzania	99.77	85	9.90	29
Mali	99.82	86	9.04	20
Sierra Leone	99.83	87	7.49	14
Chad	99.84	88	10.82	38
Niger	99.86	89	8.12	18
Nigeria	99.93	90	13.32	57
Guinea	99.99	91	9.64	25

*Note:* Poverty rates from 2018.

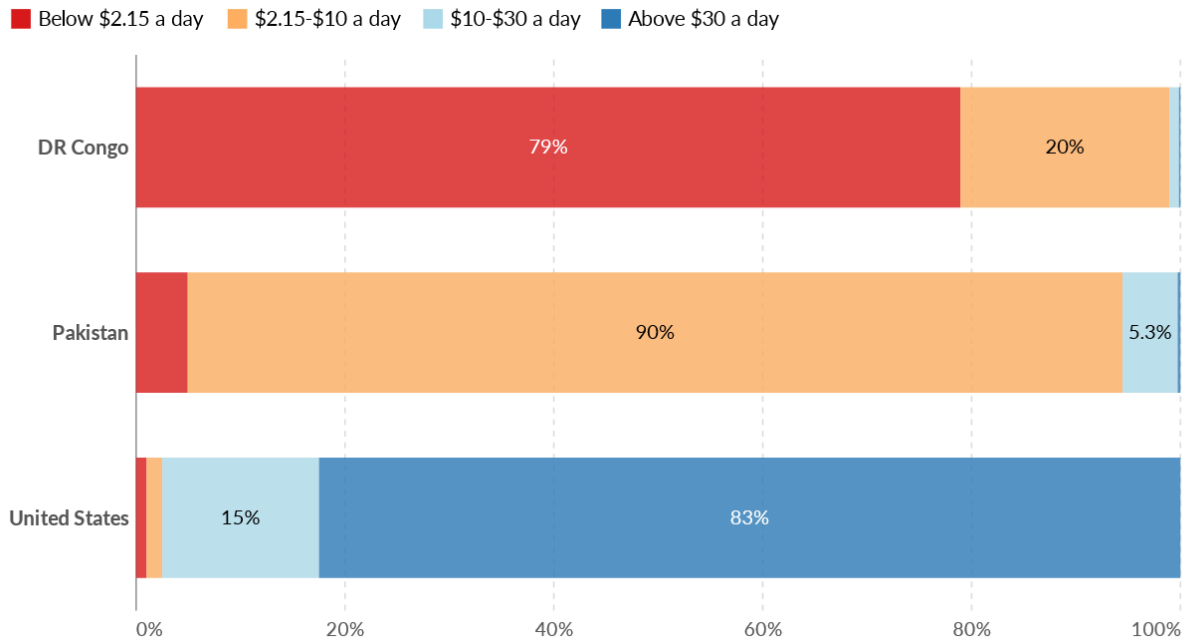
*Source:* Hasell et al. (2025).

**FIG 8.** Consumption Per Day, Poorest Americans versus Richest Citizens in Select Countries.



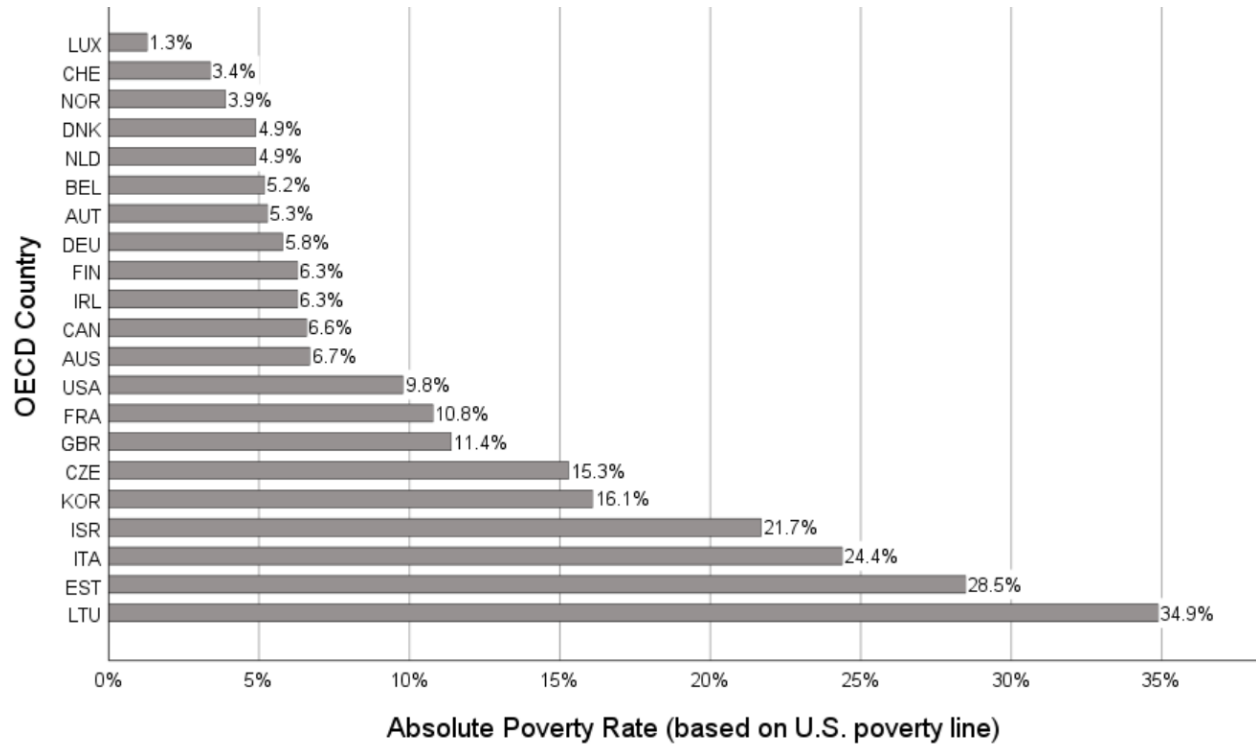
Source: OWD (2025).

**FIG 9.** Distribution of Population Between Different Income Levels for COD, PAK, and USA.



*Note:* Data from 2018 and adjusted for inflation and for differences in cost of living between countries.  
*Source:* OWD (2025).

**FIG 10.** Absolute Poverty Rates Using U.S. Census Bureau Official Poverty Line, Select OECD Countries.



*Note:* Average poverty rate of 11.1% among the countries displayed.

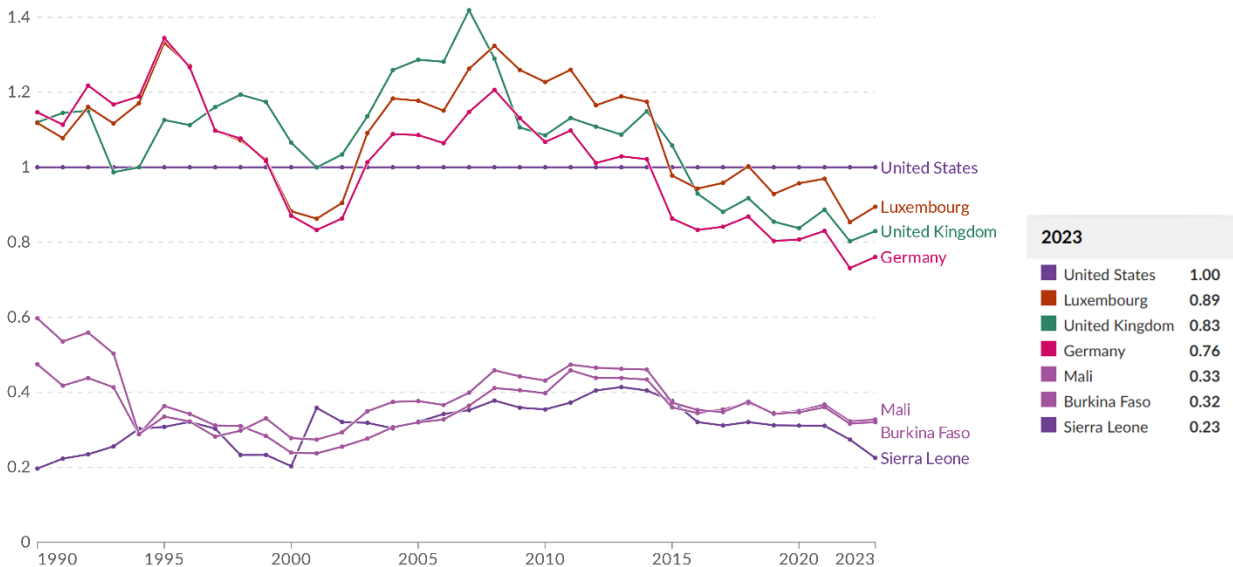
*Source:* Eppard et al. (2022).

**TABLE 2.** U.S. Census Bureau Official Poverty Thresholds for 2024 by Family Size

Size of family unit	Related children under 18 years old									
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8+	
One person (unrelated individual):										
Under 65	\$16,320									
65+	\$15,045									
2 people:										
Householder under 65	\$21,006	\$21,621								
Householder 65+	\$18,961	\$21,540								
3 people	\$24,537	\$25,249	\$25,273							
4 people	\$32,355	\$32,884	\$31,812	\$31,922						
5 people	\$39,019	\$39,586	\$38,374	\$37,436	\$36,863					
6 people	\$44,879	\$45,057	\$44,128	\$43,238	\$41,915	\$41,131				
7 people	\$51,638	\$51,961	\$50,849	\$50,075	\$48,631	\$46,948	\$45,100			
8 people	\$57,753	\$58,263	\$57,215	\$56,296	\$54,992	\$53,337	\$51,614	\$51,177		
9+ people	\$69,473	\$69,810	\$68,882	\$68,102	\$66,822	\$65,062	\$63,469	\$63,075	\$60,645	

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2025).

**FIG 11.** The Importance of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) Adjustments.



**GDP price levels relative to the US, 1990 to 2023**

This indicator measures differences in general price levels relative to the United States. A value below 1 means that a given sum of US dollars purchases more goods and services than in the US.

Source: Ortiz-Ospina & Molteni (2017).

In this paper, we will use an absolute poverty measure from the World Bank (see Hasell et al., 2025) to compare poverty rates cross-nationally. Our absolute measure is the percentage of the population living in households with income/consumption per person below \$30 per day (after taxes and benefits wherever possible). All incomes are converted into USD using Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) adjustments (see Figure 11 above).

The reason we chose the \$30/day threshold (rather than any of the other thresholds available, such as \$1.00, \$2.15, \$3.65, \$3.85, \$10.00, \$20.00, or \$40.00), is that \$30/day was the closest to approximating the U.S. Census Bureau's official poverty line. The \$20.00/day line resulted in a poverty rate that was far too low for the U.S., while \$40.00/day was far too high.<sup>7</sup>

As for the year we chose to analyze, 2018, we (a) wanted to use the most recent year in the database that had a large number of countries reporting data and (b) wanted to avoid any years where the COVID pandemic created odd distortions in the data. With these considerations in mind, we settled on 2018—a non-pandemic year where 91 countries reported data.

Like our analysis in our 2022 JWCS article, the U.S. poverty rate was not high compared with most other OECD countries when using the World Bank's \$30/day absolute threshold. In fact, the poverty rate for the U.S. (17.5%) was below both the average and median rates for OECD countries (36.5% and 26.7%, respectively). The average and median rates for just the wealthiest 30 OECD countries were 27.1% and 18.5%, respectively, placing the U.S. right in the middle of the pack (15th out of 30).<sup>8</sup>

Compared with all countries reporting data, the U.S. performed very well, coming in at the 15th lowest poverty rate among 91 countries (see Table 1 above).

To recap:

- Under the *relative* measure,<sup>9</sup> poverty in the U.S. was:
  - **High** compared with all countries (79th out of 91 countries).
  - **High** among OECD countries (34th out of 37).<sup>10</sup>
  - **High** among just the 30 wealthiest OECD countries (29th out of 30).
- Under the *absolute* measure,<sup>11</sup> poverty in the U.S. was:
  - **Low** compared with all countries (15th out of 91).
  - **Below average** among OECD countries (15th out of 37).
  - **Average** among just the 30 wealthiest OECD countries (15th out of 30).

As you can see, these two measures tell two very different stories about U.S. poverty in cross-national context. So which one is actually measuring poverty?

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<sup>7</sup> For how changing thresholds changes poverty rates, see Hasell et al. (2025).

<sup>8</sup> Comparing the U.S. to just the wealthiest 30 OECD countries is illustrative, as this excludes countries with much lower GDP per capita—countries like Costa Rica, Colombia, and Mexico.

<sup>9</sup> Earning less than 50% of the national median income in one's country.

<sup>10</sup> New Zealand did not have data, reducing our OECD dataset from 38 to 37.

<sup>11</sup> Having less than \$30/day in USD to spend.

To try to answer this question, we first calculated the Pearson bivariate correlation between the relative poverty measure (less than 50% of median national income) and our absolute poverty measure (less than \$30/day in USD to spend). The Pearson formula is as follows:

$$r = \frac{\sum (x_i - \bar{x})(y_i - \bar{y})}{\sqrt{\sum (x_i - \bar{x})^2 \sum (y_i - \bar{y})^2}}$$

As you can see in Table 3 below, their association is not statistically significant. The r-value was 0.14, with a *p*-value much higher than 0.05 (*p* = 0.198).

**TABLE 3.** Bivariate Correlations, Poverty Dimensions and Poverty Measures.

Variables	Absolute poverty measure	Relative poverty measure	N
<i>Poverty dimensions</i>			
Life expectancy	-0.74***	0.07	91
Infant mortality	0.58***	-0.11	90
Moderate or severe food insecurity	0.62***	0.16	76
Maternal death	0.42***	-0.08	90
Safe water access	-0.71***	-0.04	70
Consumption of bottom 10%	-0.97***	-0.27**	91
High school completion	-0.51***	-0.10	68
Internet access	-0.76***	-0.00	89
HDI (inequality adjusted)	-0.76***	-0.08	87
<i>Poverty measures</i>			
Absolute poverty measure	1	0.14	91
Relative poverty measure	0.14	1	91
<i>Economic inequality measures</i>			
Palma ratio	0.61***	0.78***	32
Post-tax/transfer Gini coefficient	0.49**	0.86***	35

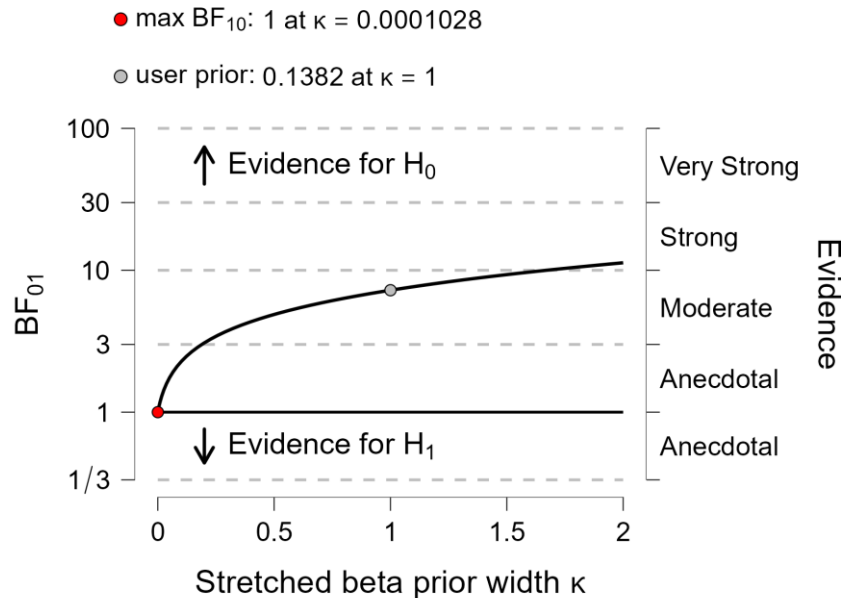
The relationship between absolute poverty and relative poverty was also tested using Kendall's tau because of a violation of normality ( $W = 0.90$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The results indicated that there is no relationship between absolute poverty and relative poverty ( $\tau_b = -0.01$ ,  $p = 0.883$ , 95% CI = [-0.15, 0.13]).<sup>12</sup>

To further demonstrate that no relationship between absolute poverty and relative poverty is present in the data, a Bayesian Kendall's tau was conducted between the variables with the

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix Tables 1 & 2 for more Kendall's tau analyses.

stretched beta prior width  $\kappa$  set to 1.0 (the default prior in JASP version 19.3). The results demonstrated *moderate* evidence in support of the null hypothesis that absolute poverty and relative poverty were not related ( $\tau_b = -0.01$ ,  $BF_{01} = 7.23$ ). Figure 12 below provides evidence regarding how the bayes factor changes at different prior probability settings.

**FIG 12.** Bayes Factor Robustness Check.



*Note:* Bayes factor robustness check shows strength of bayes factor at different stretch beta prior widths.

Absolute poverty is not normally distributed given a very large ceiling effect. Kendall's tau, which is robust to any violation of normality, shows the same pattern of results as our Pearson correlations (see Appendix Tables 1 & 2).

If absolute poverty and relative poverty are not correlated, and thus they are not measuring the same phenomena, this begs the question: which one is measuring poverty?

To determine this, we first identified several dimensions of poverty beyond income where a poor person would struggle. Somebody who is poor, for instance, is not just struggling financially, but also when it comes to things like their health and access to food. Any poverty measure should be correlated with these measures, as they should rise and fall together.

So while we included the amount of money available to the poor (bottom 10% consumption), we also selected the following non-income poverty dimensions: food insecurity, high school completion, inequality-adjusted HDI (IHDI), infant mortality, internet access, life expectancy, maternal death, and water access:

- “Bottom 10% consumption” refers to the level of after-tax income or consumption per day per capita in the bottom 10% of the population in a given country (expressed in USD). These data come from the World Bank (OWD, 2025).
- “Food insecurity” refers to the percentage of the population in a given country that is either moderately (the inability to regularly eat a healthy, nutritious diet) or severely (an insufficient quantity of food) food insecure. Food insecurity is defined by the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES). These data come from the United Nations (OWD, 2025).
- “High school completion” refers to the percentage of people who have completed upper secondary education in a given country. Upper secondary education refers to education that typically happens between ages 15 and 18 and prepares students for tertiary education and/or the workforce. These data come from the United Nations (OWD, 2025).
- “Inequality-adjusted HDI” (IHDI) data come from United Nations (OWD, 2025). “HDI” refers to the Human Development Index, which examines three dimensions of human development in a population: living a long and healthy life, educational attainment, and having enough income to maintain a decent standard of living. The IHDI measure accounts for inequalities in these dimensions across a given population. The higher the value (values range between 0 and 1), the more evenly these dimensions of human development are spread across a given country’s population. A country’s score on the IHDI would be the same as its HDI score if there is no inequality in its population. The greater the level of inequality, the lower the IHDI relative to the HDI (OWD, 2025).
- “Infant mortality” refers to the estimated percentage of newborns in a given country who die before they reach one year of age. These data come from the United Nations (OWD, 2025).
- “Internet access” refers to the percentage of the population in a given country who used the internet at some point in the last three months. These data come from the International Telecommunication Union via the World Bank (OWD, 2025).
- “Life expectancy” refers to the average number of years a newborn is expected to live in a given country, assuming that the mortality rates that were present at the time of their birth stayed constant throughout their life. These data come from a variety of sources compiled by economist Max Roser’s team at OWD (2025).
- “Maternal death” refers to the estimated number of women who die due to childbirth in a given country per 100,000 live births. These data come from a variety of sources compiled by OWD (2025).
- “Safe water access” refers to the percentage of the population that has an improved water source located at home that is available when needed and is free from contamination. These data come from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations (OWD, 2025).

The values of these nine poverty dimensions, we believe, should rise and fall in relation to the degree to which a valid poverty measure rises and falls. A good metaphor would be a thermometer—if the air temperature rises a given number of degrees, the reading on a thermometer should rise the same number of degrees. Likewise, if the number of people suffering from hunger

increases in a given country during a given period of time, one would expect a valid poverty measure to increase in a corresponding fashion—otherwise, it is not clear that it is measuring poverty.

Table 3 (above) and Figures 13 & 14 (below) display the Pearson correlations between our absolute and relative poverty measures and the nine poverty dimensions. All nine of the poverty dimensions had statistically significant ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) correlations below the 0.001 level with our absolute poverty measure. Eight out of nine were strongly correlated ( $r > 0.50$ ) and one (maternal death,  $r = 0.42^{***}$ ) was moderately correlated (r-value between 0.30 and 0.49) (see Cohen, 1992)

Eight out of nine poverty dimensions did not have statistically significant correlations ( $p > 0.05$ ) with our relative poverty measure. The one that did was bottom 10% consumption, with a weak correlation (r-value between 0.10 and 0.29) of  $-0.27^{**}$ . Bottom 10% consumption was much more strongly correlated with our absolute poverty measure (r-value of  $-0.97^{***}$ ).

The results in Table 3 are quite striking. All of the poverty dimensions are much more strongly associated with our absolute poverty measure. This supports the notion that, if absolute and relative poverty are measuring different things, whatever our absolute variable is measuring is much closer to poverty than what the relative variable is measuring.

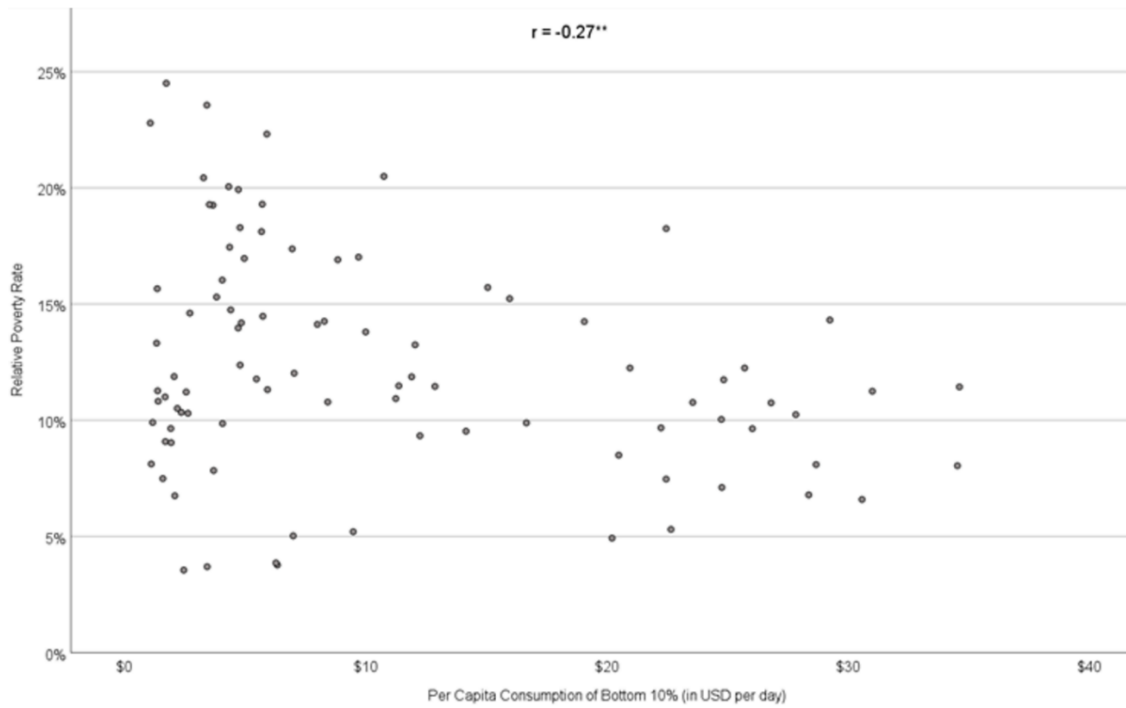
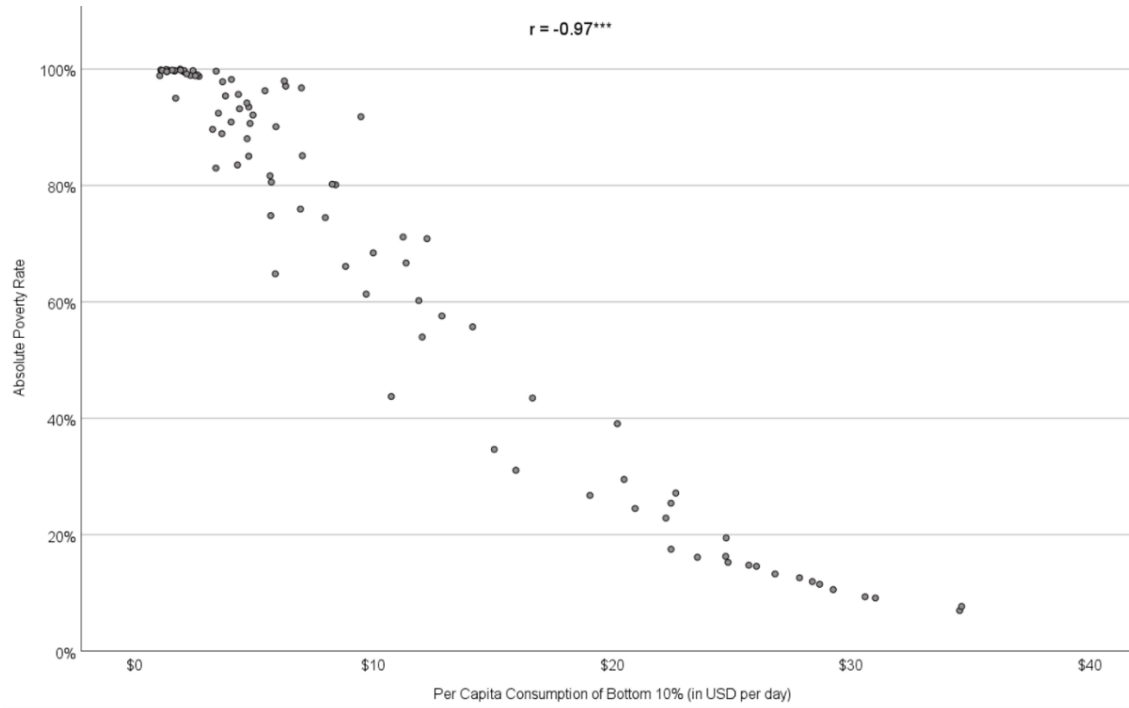
We then calculated where each country ranked on the nine poverty dimensions and averaged each country's rank across all nine dimensions. We also calculated each country's rank on both poverty measures. Then, we calculated Pearson correlations between countries' average poverty dimension rankings and their relative and absolute poverty rankings. As you can see in Table 4 and Figure 15 below, the correlation between poverty dimension ranking and relative poverty ranking was not statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ). The correlation between poverty dimension ranking and absolute poverty ranking, however, was incredibly strong ( $0.92^{***}$ ).

In a regression model predicting poverty dimension ranking, absolute poverty ranking ( $0.930^{***}$ ) had a much larger standardized coefficient than relative poverty ranking ( $0.179^{**}$ ) (model r-square  $0.886^{***}$ ).

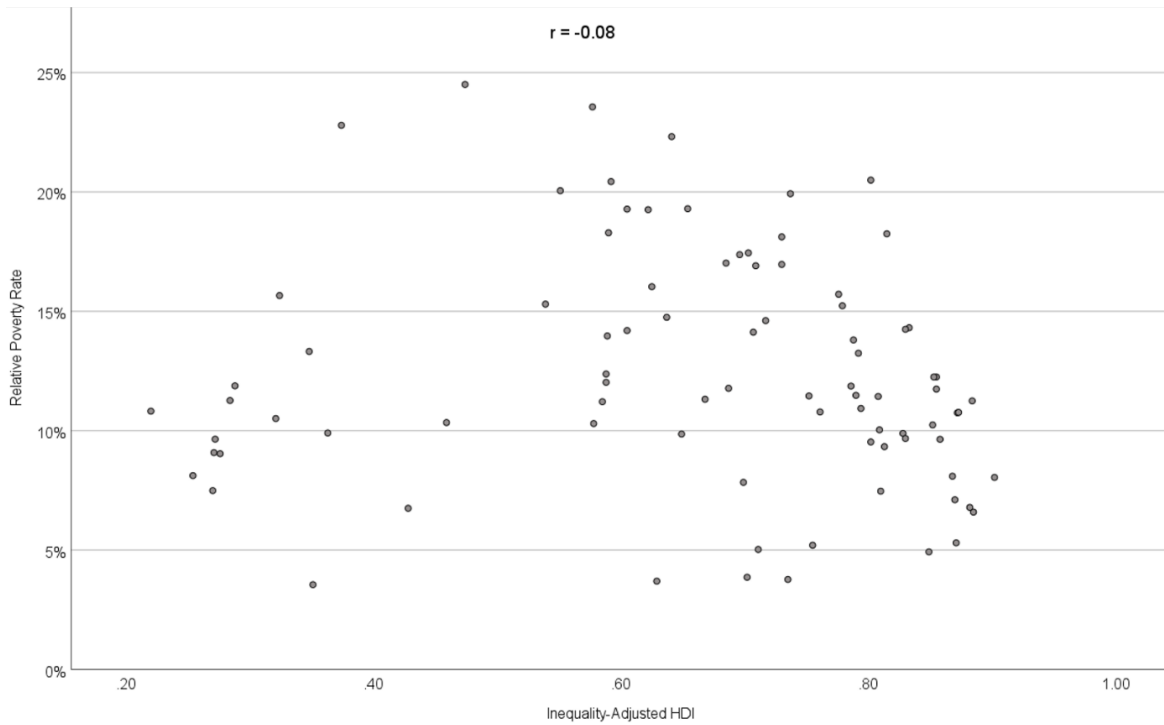
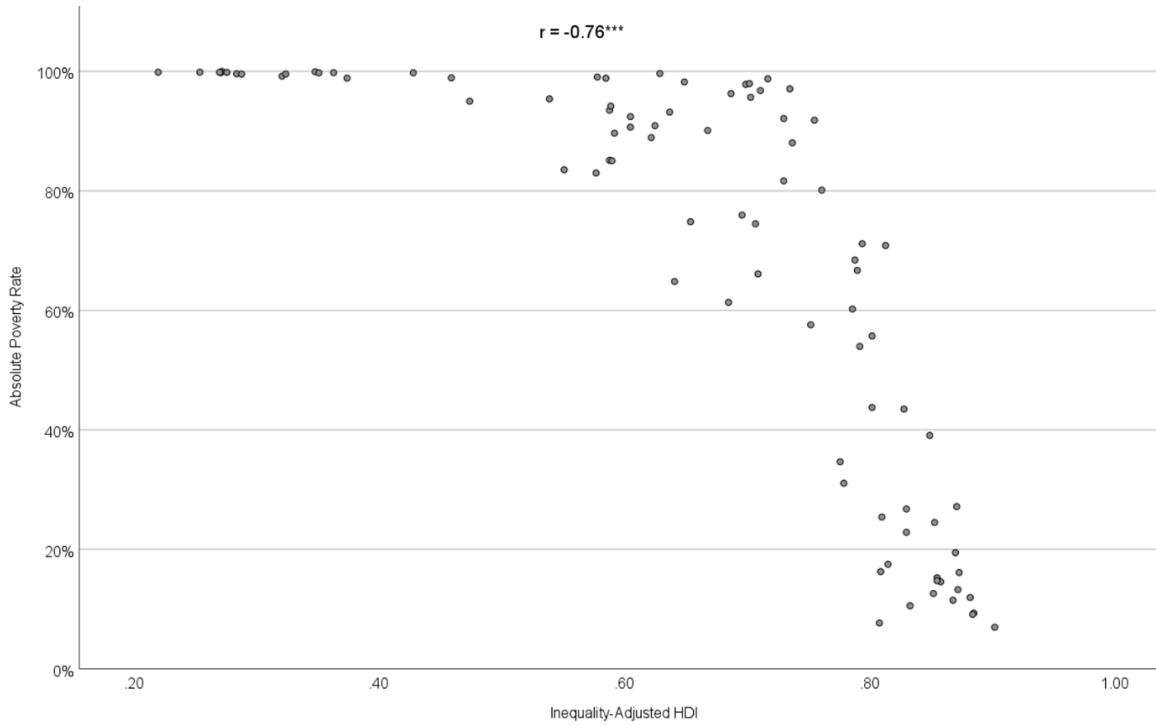
We then calculated a cross-tabulation table (Table 5 below) demonstrating the average values across the nine poverty dimensions in high-poverty and low-poverty countries based on both our absolute and relative measures. Whichever poverty measure is more accurately measuring poverty should have worse averages across these dimensions.

And in fact, all of these dimensions were worse under the absolute poverty measure than under the relative poverty measure. Life expectancy, for instance, was only 62.3 years in the poorest countries in absolute terms, but 75.5 in the poorest countries in relative terms. The same pattern held for infant mortality (5.0 deaths under absolute poverty versus 1.2 deaths under relative poverty), food insecurity (44.3% versus 23.5%), maternal death (431.8 deaths per 100k versus 52.9), safe water access (27.0% versus 78.2%), bottom 10% consumption (\$1.88/day versus \$5.95/day), high school completion (28.1% versus 71.0%), internet access (24.5% versus 65.3%), and IHDI (0.35 versus 0.64).

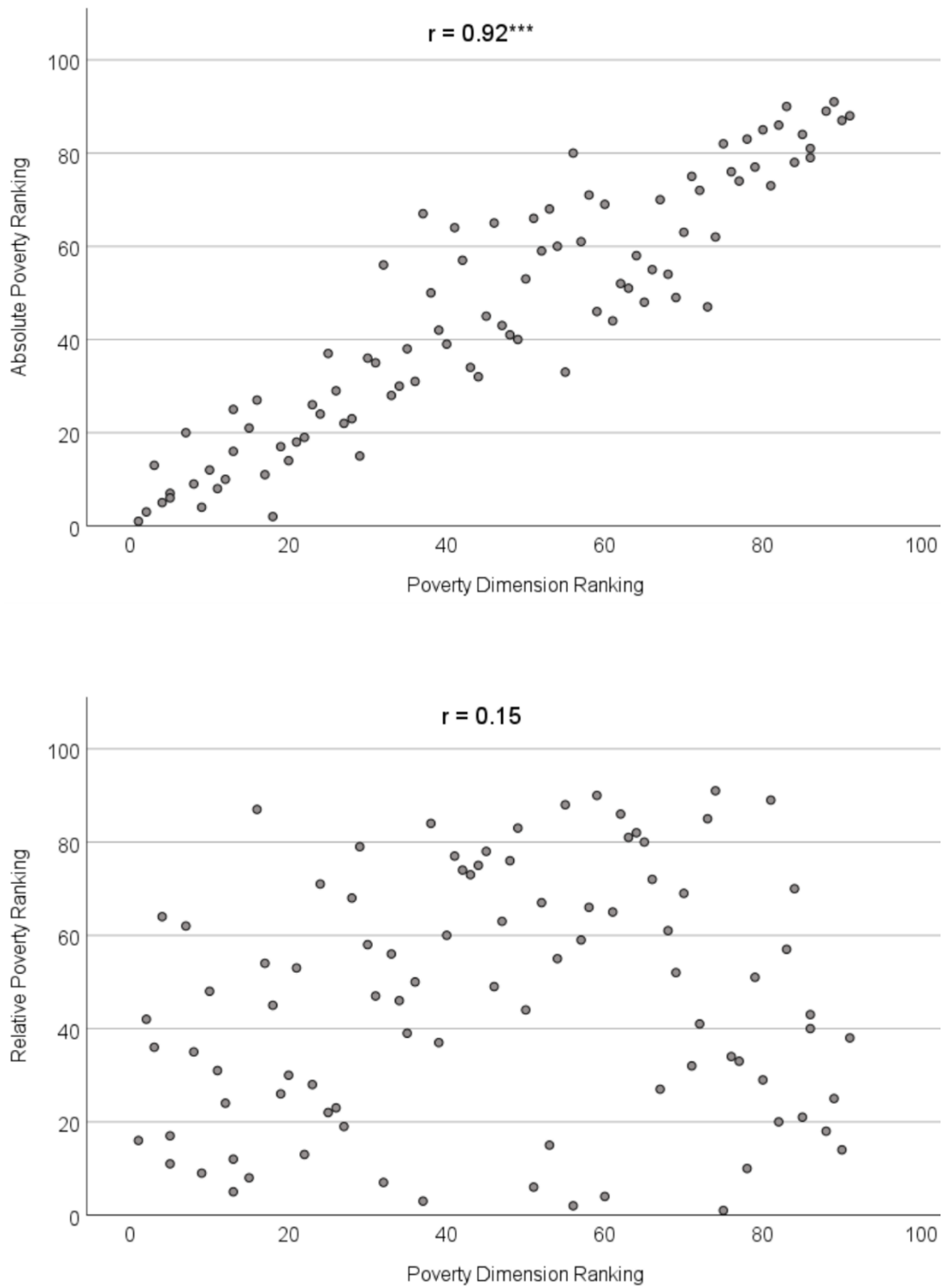
**FIG 13.** Bivariate Correlation Between Bottom 10% Consumption and Both Poverty Measures.



**FIG 14.** Bivariate Correlation Between IHDI and Both Poverty Measures.



**FIG 15.** Correlations Between Rankings on Poverty Dimensions and Poverty Measures.



**TABLE 4.** Correlations Between Rankings on Poverty Dimensions and Poverty Measures.

Rankings	Rankings		
	Absolute rank	Relative rank	Dimension rank
Absolute rank	—	-0.03	0.92***
Relative rank	-0.03	—	0.15
Dimension rank	0.92***	0.15	—

**TABLE 5.** Poverty Dimension Averages in High- and Low-Poverty Countries.

Poverty dimensions	Averages			
	Absolute pov bottom 20% (poorest)	Relative pov bottom 20% (poorest)	Absolute pov top 20% (least poor)	Relative pov top 20% (least poor)
Life expectancy (yrs)	62.3	75.5	81.9	74.6
Infant mortality (%)	5.0	1.2	0.4	1.7
Food Insecurity (%)	44.3	23.5	5.7	17.4
Maternal death (per 100k)	431.8	52.9	6.8	77.5
Safe water access (%)	27.0	78.2	99.0	84.0
Poor consumption (USD/day)	1.88	5.95	27.06	14.21
High school completion (%)	28.1	71.0	84.8	76.3
Internet access (%)	24.5	65.3	90.5	68.2
IHDI	0.35	0.64	0.86	0.69

The relationship holds at the top as well—there is less suffering in low absolute poverty countries than in low relative poverty countries. In low absolute poverty countries, for instance, the average life expectancy is 7.3 years longer than in low relative poverty countries. The same pattern holds for infant mortality (0.4 deaths per 100 versus 1.7), food insecurity (5.7% versus 17.4%), maternal death (6.8 deaths per 100k versus 77.5), safe water access (99.0% versus 84.0%), bottom 10% consumption (\$27.06/day versus \$14.21/day), high school completion (84.8% versus 76.3%), internet access (90.5% versus 68.2%), and IHDI (0.86 versus 0.69).

We calculated linear regression models for each poverty dimension—with both poverty measures as independent variables in the models and the poverty dimensions as the dependent variable (see Table 6 below). The basic formula for multiple linear regression is as follows:

$$y = \beta_0 + \beta_1x_1 + \beta_2x_2 + \cdots + \beta_kx_k + \epsilon$$

For each poverty dimension there are two models—one with relative poverty alone, and a second with absolute poverty added. This of course allows us to see the relative contribution of each independent variable in predicting the poverty dimensions. But it also demonstrates how much of the variance in the dependent variable (r-square value) is explained by relative poverty alone (Model 1) and then how much is added once absolute poverty is included (Model 2).

The only Model 1 that was statistically significant was for bottom 10% consumption. The standardized coefficient for relative poverty alone was  $-0.272^{**}$ , explaining only 7% of the variance in the dependent variable. In Model 2 the r-square increased significantly, explaining 96% of the variance. In Model 2 the standardized coefficient for relative poverty decreased to  $-0.142^{***}$ , while the standardized coefficient for absolute poverty was  $-0.952^{***}$  (see Table 6 below).

Interestingly, the bottom 10% in the U.S. have more to spend per capita per day than most countries in the world, with only sixteen countries outperforming the U.S. (\$22.93/day) (see Figure 16 below). In fact, the poor in the U.S. have more to spend than the poor in most OECD countries. Additionally, the bottom 10% in the U.S. have more to spend per day than the *top 10%* have to spend in 42 countries for which we have data.

Like the bottom 10% consumption regression models (r-square change from 7% in Model 1 to 96% in Model 2), there were large increases in r-square values in the rest of the models as well (from  $<1\%$  to 58%, 3% to 39%, 1% to 37%,  $<1\%$  to 20%,  $<1\%$  to 51%,  $<1\%$  to 26%,  $<1\%$  to 59%, and  $<1\%$  to 58%). Absolute poverty had a much larger standardized coefficient than relative poverty in each Model 2, and relative poverty was not statistically significant in six out of nine of these second models (see Table 6).

### *Just Wealthy Countries?*

Some scholars may counter this analysis by arguing that the relative poverty measure is useful as long as it is only applied to wealthy countries, while the absolute measure is appropriate to use when comparing poor countries (for an example, see Brady, 2009)

The pattern in our analyses does not change, however, when we restrict the comparisons to only wealthy countries (see Table 7 & Figure 17 below).

Take a look at Table 7 below. In this table, we recalculated our regression analyses, but this time only with the 30 wealthiest OECD countries, excluding the lowest GDP per capita countries.

In all of these models, the r-square value increased from Model 1 (where only relative poverty was an independent variable) to Model 2 (both relative poverty and absolute poverty included). And in all of the models, absolute poverty was a stronger predictor of the dependent variable than relative poverty.

The dependent variables high school completion, infant mortality, and maternal death did not return statistically significant models, so we focus our discussion on the six statistically significant dependent variables.

In most cases in Table 7 (below), the difference in coefficients was rather large. For life expectancy, for instance, relative poverty was not statistically significant while the absolute poverty standardized coefficient was  $-0.693^{***}$ . The same large differences existed for internet access (not significant versus  $-0.771^{***}$ ), safe water access (not significant versus  $-0.471^*$ ), bottom 10% consumption ( $-0.265^{***}$  versus  $-0.882^{***}$ ), and food insecurity (not significant versus  $0.371^*$ ). A difference for IHDI was present but smaller ( $-0.445^{***}$  versus  $-0.680^{***}$ ).

**TABLE 6.** Standardized Regression Coefficients, Poverty Measures Predicting Poverty Dimensions.

Independent variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
	<u>Life expectancy</u>		<u>Food insecurity</u>	
Relative pov	0.071	0.175*	0.157	0.062
Absolute pov	—	$-0.764^{***}$	—	$0.615^{***}$
(r-square)	(0.005)	(0.577 <sup>***</sup> )	(0.025)	(0.394 <sup>***</sup> )
	<u>Infant mortality</u>		<u>Maternal death</u>	
Relative pov	-0.109	$-0.186^*$	-0.077	-0.132
Absolute pov	—	$0.604^{***}$	—	$0.440^{***}$
(r-square)	(0.012)	(0.371 <sup>***</sup> )	(0.006)	(0.197 <sup>***</sup> )
	<u>Safe water access</u>		<u>Bottom 10% consumption</u>	
Relative pov	-0.040	0.063	$-0.272^{**}$	$-0.142^{***}$
Absolute pov	—	$-0.723^{***}$	—	$-0.952^{***}$
(r-square)	(0.002)	(0.514 <sup>***</sup> )	(0.074 <sup>**</sup> )	(0.963 <sup>***</sup> )
	<u>High school completion</u>		<u>Internet access</u>	
Relative pov	-0.095	0.028	-0.001	0.107
Absolute pov	—	$-0.512^{***}$	—	$-0.778^{***}$
(r-square)	(0.009)	(0.255 <sup>***</sup> )	(0.000)	(0.594 <sup>***</sup> )
	<u>IHDI</u>			
Relative pov	-0.080	0.017		
Absolute pov	—	$-0.763^{***}$		
(r-square)	(0.006)	(0.580 <sup>***</sup> )		

### *Relative Poverty and Economic Inequality*

Supporters of the relative poverty measure have made several arguments in its favor, including that it measures poverty as it is culturally understood in a particular place and time. They argue that a poverty measure should capture what it means to be poor to people in a particular culture at a particular moment in time. Being poor might mean going hungry in one culture, for instance, while in another culture the poor are well-fed and higher-order needs like the ability to afford childcare delineate the poor from the nonpoor.

By this logic, relative poverty measures are not so much measuring poverty (at least as it is generally understood by many) but economic inequality, social exclusion, capability deprivation, social isolation, marginalization, or something else. It is fine to measure those things, but it would then be much more appropriate in our view to make the argument that directly refers to what you are measuring. Using imperfectly aligned terms like “relative poverty” seems to obfuscate the analysis. If you are measuring social exclusion, call it that.

Divorcing the meaning of “poverty” from what many people understand it as—lacking the means to afford one’s basic material needs—is unnecessary in our view. We already have a vocabulary to describe the relative difference between income groups in a society: economic inequality. We already have appropriate measures for this as well, like the Gini coefficient and Palma ratio.

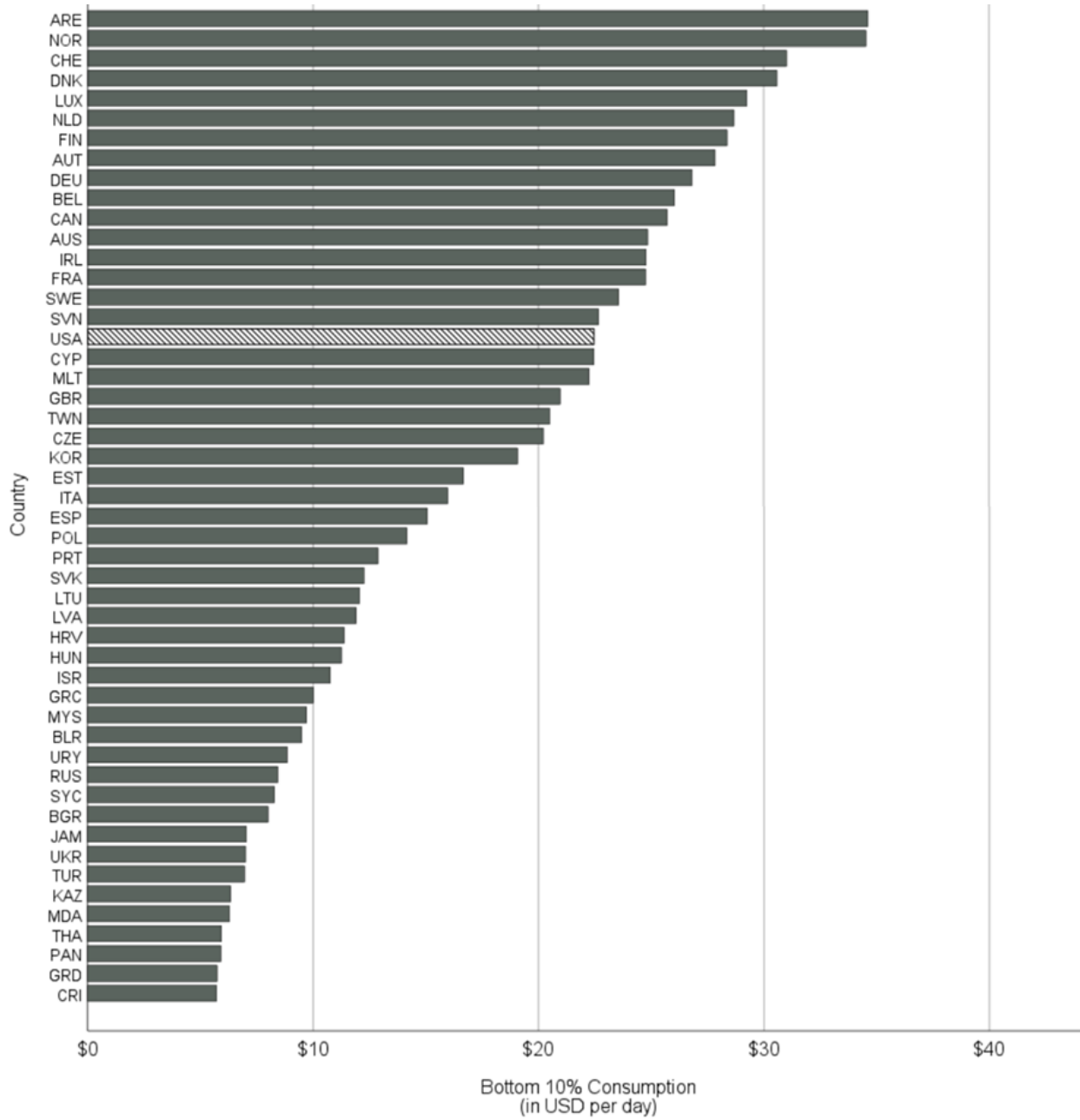
**TABLE 7.** Standardized Regression Coefficients, Wealthy Countries Only.

Independent variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
	<u>Life expectancy</u>		<u>Food insecurity</u>	
Relative pov	0.121	0.240	0.369	0.308
Absolute pov	—	-0.693***	—	0.371*
(r-square)	(0.015)	(0.480***)	(0.136)	(0.270*)
	<u>Safe water access</u>		<u>Bottom 10% consumption</u>	
Relative pov	-0.024	0.060	-0.416*	-0.265***
Absolute pov	—	-0.471*	—	-0.882***
(r-square)	(0.001)	(0.216*)	(0.173*)	(0.923***)
	<u>IHDI</u>		<u>Internet access</u>	
Relative pov	-0.562***	-0.445***	-0.070	0.063
Absolute pov	—	-0.680***	—	-0.771***
(r-square)	(0.316***)	(0.765**)	(0.005)	(0.583***)

To test the relationship between relative poverty and poverty dimensions after controlling for income inequality, a series of hierarchical linear regressions were conducted. The hierarchical linear regressions were conducted by regressing a measure of income inequality, post-tax Gini coefficient values, and relative poverty onto poverty dimensions. Post-tax Gini coefficients were entered into the first block and relative poverty was added in the second block. Results indicated that, after controlling for income inequality, relative poverty provides no additional predictive contribution. These results are displayed in Table 8 below.

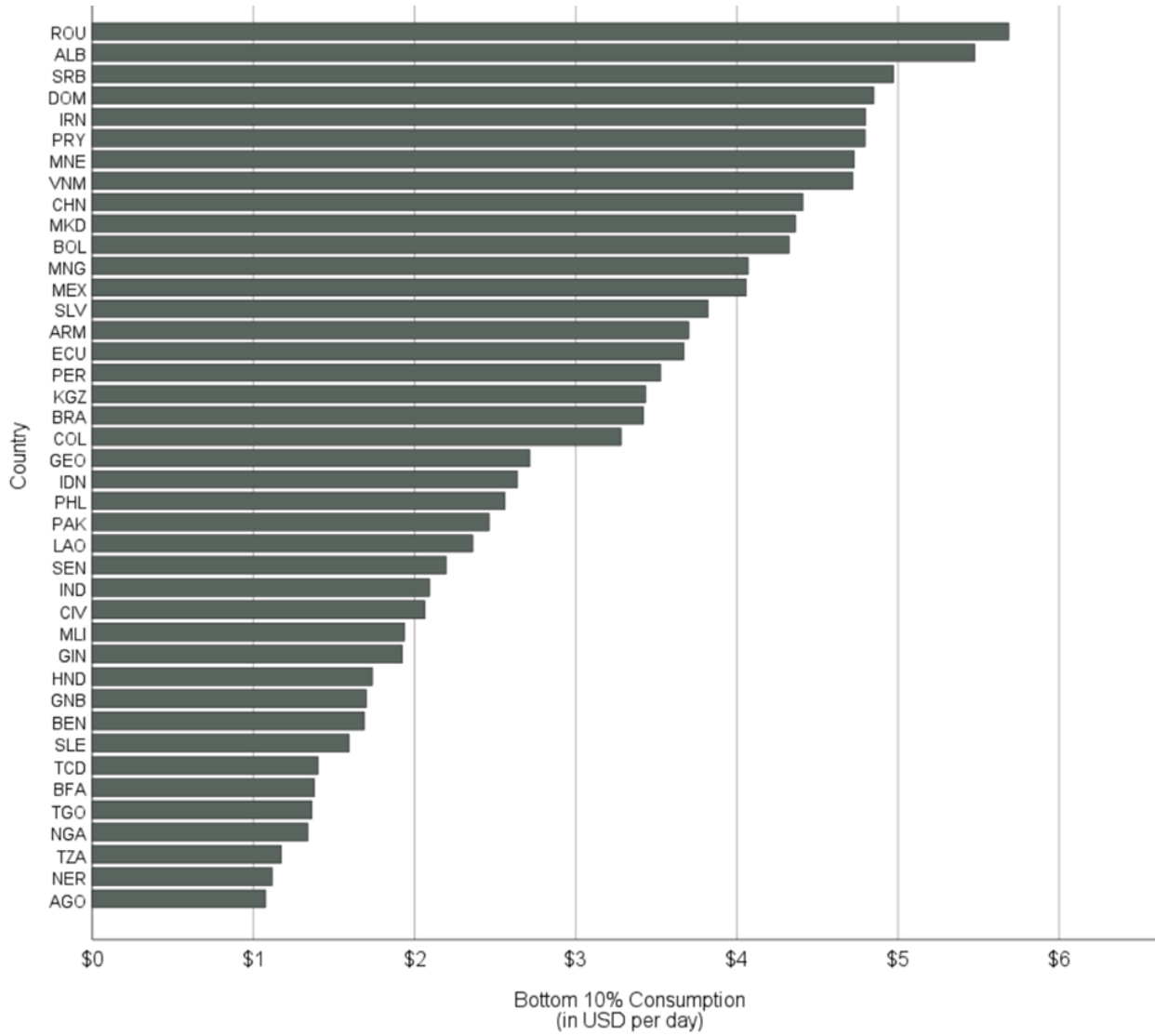
It is important to note that, while not displayed in Table 8, this pattern of results holds if Palma ratio values are used as a substitute for post-tax Gini coefficients as a measure of income inequality.

**FIG 16.** Bottom 10% Consumption Per Capita Per Day (countries 1-50).



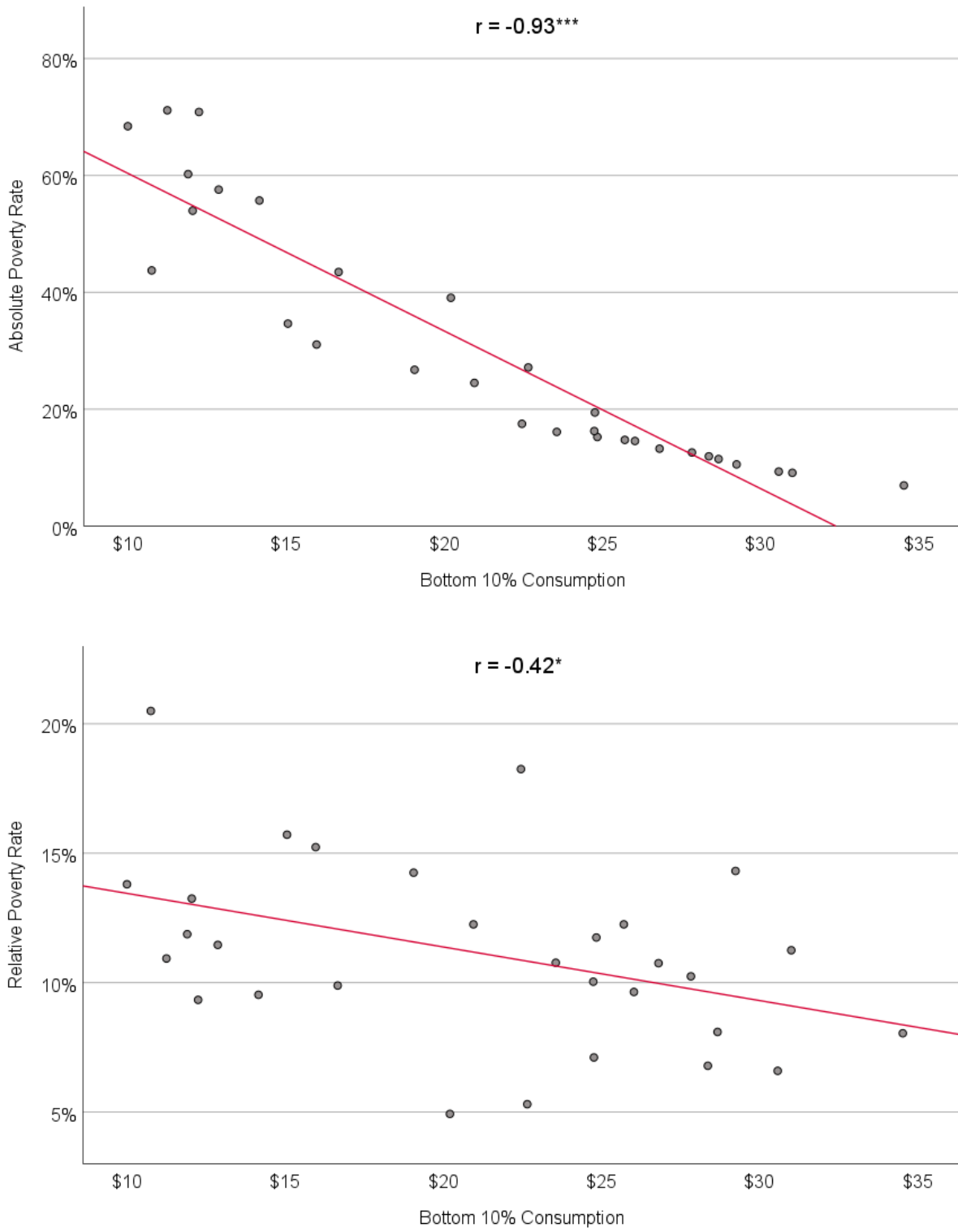
Source: OWD (2025).

**FIG 16 (continued).** Bottom 10% Consumption Per Capita Per Day (countries 51-91).



Source: OWD (2025).

**FIG 17.** Association Between Poverty Measures and Bottom 10% Consumption, Wealthiest OECD Countries.



**TABLE 8.** Relative Poverty Predictive Power Controlling for Gini Coefficient.

Poverty dimension	R <sup>2</sup> change	$\beta$	t	p
Life expectancy	0.039	0.388	1.23	0.230
Infant mortality	0.006	-0.151	-0.61	0.549
Maternal death	0.026	-0.317	-1.34	0.189
Food insecurity	0.002	-0.063	-0.27	0.872
Safe water access	0.026	0.311	1.02	0.316
Bottom 10% cons.	0.037	-0.379	-1.39	0.174
HS completion	0.038	0.374	1.33	0.194
Internet access	0.001	0.048	0.16	0.876
IHDI	0.002	-0.084	-0.39	0.697

**TABLE 9.** Absolute Poverty Predictive Power Controlling for Gini Coefficient.

Poverty dimension	R <sup>2</sup> change	$\beta$	t	p
Life expectancy	0.485***	-0.800	-6.30	< 0.001
Infant mortality	0.171***	0.475	3.94	< 0.001
Maternal death	0.104**	0.370	2.93	0.006
Food insecurity	0.119**	0.391	2.62	0.014
Safe water access	0.241***	-0.648	-3.69	< 0.001
Bottom 10% cons.	0.585***	-0.879	-16.44	< 0.001
HS completion	0.001	0.032	0.19	0.854
Internet access	0.537***	-0.824	-8.25	< 0.001
IHDI	0.273***	-0.614	-9.52	< 0.001

To test the relationship between absolute poverty and poverty dimensions after controlling for income inequality, another series of hierarchical linear regressions were conducted. The hierarchical linear regressions were conducted by regressing the measure of income inequality, post-tax Gini coefficient values, and absolute poverty onto poverty dimensions. Post-tax Gini coefficients were entered into the first block and absolute poverty was added in the second block. Results indicated that after controlling for income inequality, absolute poverty provided additional predictive value of most poverty dimensions above and beyond that of income inequality. These results are displayed in Table 9 above.

These results suggest that absolute poverty is a distinct predictor of poverty dimensions. There is one notable exception to this pattern in that high school completion is not predicted by absolute poverty over that of income inequality as measured by post-tax Gini coefficients. It is important to note that, while not displayed in Table 9, this pattern of results holds if Palma ratio values are used as a substitute for post-tax Gini coefficients as a measure of income inequality.

For additional insights, refer to both Table 3 (bivariate correlations) and Appendix Table 3 (additional regression analyses), which demonstrate how much more strongly relative poverty is associated with Gini coefficients and Palma ratios than absolute poverty.

### Summary

In a previous JWCS article, we found that the earnings of both the American poor and working class fared well compared with the whole world. When compared with only OECD countries, the U.S. absolute poverty rate was in the middle of the pack. This paper updates our 2022 analysis with more recent data, more countries, and a different absolute poverty measure.

The new analysis presented in this paper largely confirms those earlier findings. The earnings of the American poor and working-class still fared well when compared with the rest of the world. Compared with a subset of the 30 wealthiest OECD countries, the American working class was still near the top of the rankings while the U.S. absolute poverty rate was in the middle of the pack.

We also find that absolute poverty is a much better predictor of poverty dimensions than relative poverty. Since relative poverty does not measure the condition of poverty as it is generally understood by most people, we believe it inappropriate to use this measure to study poverty.

Finally, we find that (a) relative poverty appears to be measuring economic inequality instead of poverty and (b) other established measures, like the Gini coefficient and Palma ratio, seem to be better measures of economic inequality than relative poverty.

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## Appendix

**TABLE A1.** Kendall's Tau Correlations, Absolute Poverty.

			Kendall's tau B	<i>p</i>
AbsoPov	-	LifeExpect	-0.726	< .001
AbsoPov	-	Infant	0.667	< .001
AbsoPov	-	FoodInsec	0.581	< .001
AbsoPov	-	MomDeath	0.561	< .001
AbsoPov	-	Water	-0.716	< .001
AbsoPov	-	PoorConsump	-0.839	< .001
AbsoPov	-	HighSchool	-0.379	< .001
AbsoPov	-	Internet	-0.761	< .001
AbsoPov	-	IHDI	-0.738	< .001
AbsoPov	-	POSTGINI	0.338	0.004
AbsoPov	-	PREGINI	0.123	0.309
AbsoPov	-	Palma	0.484	< .001

**TABLE A2.** Kendall's Tau Correlations, Relative Poverty.

			Kendall's tau B	<i>p</i>
RelPov	-	LifeExpect	0.038	0.590
RelPov	-	Infant	0.068	0.341
RelPov	-	FoodInsec	0.196	0.012
RelPov	-	MomDeath	0.082	0.254
RelPov	-	Water	-0.092	0.263
RelPov	-	PoorConsump	-0.138	0.053
RelPov	-	HighSchool	-0.155	0.061
RelPov	-	Internet	-0.053	0.465
RelPov	-	IHDI	-0.136	0.063
RelPov	-	POSTGINI	0.718	< .001
RelPov	-	PREGINI	0.388	< .001
RelPov	-	Palma	0.665	< .001

**TABLE A3.** Standardized Regression Coefficients Predicting Economic Inequality Dependent Variables.

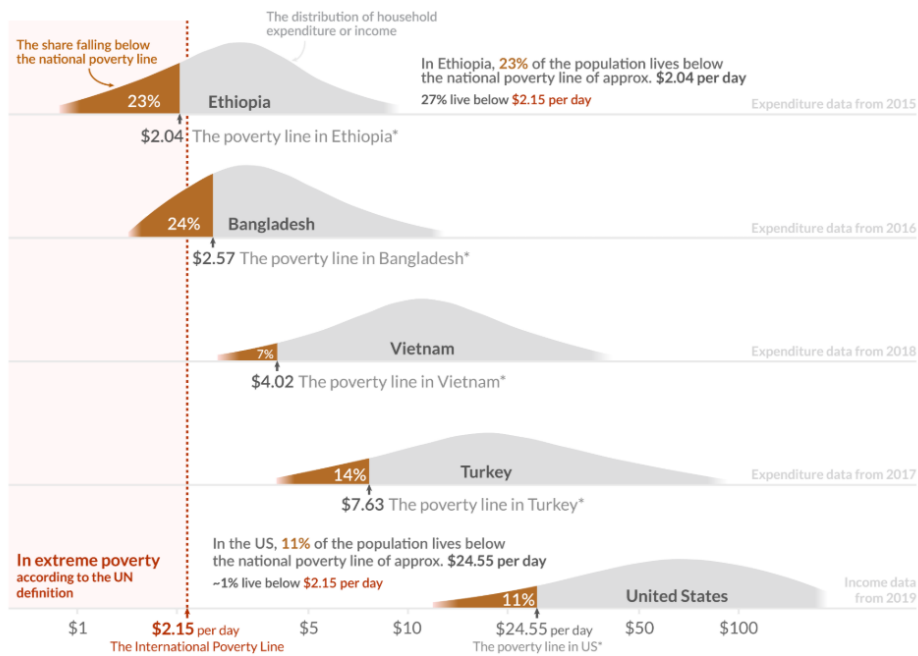
Independent variables	Dependent variables		
	Palma ratio	Pre-tax/transfer Gini coefficient	Post-tax/transfer Gini coefficient
<i>Model 1</i>			
Absolute poverty	0.284*	—	—
Relative poverty (r-square)	0.637*** (0.673***)	—	—
<i>Model 2</i>			
Absolute poverty	—	-0.115	—
Relative poverty (r-square)	—	0.655*** (0.374***)	—
<i>Model 3</i>			
Absolute poverty	—	—	0.127
Relative poverty (r-square)	—	—	0.803*** (0.753***)

**FIG A1.**

National poverty lines, poverty rates & incomes in five countries



All figures are adjusted to account for differences in the cost of living across countries.



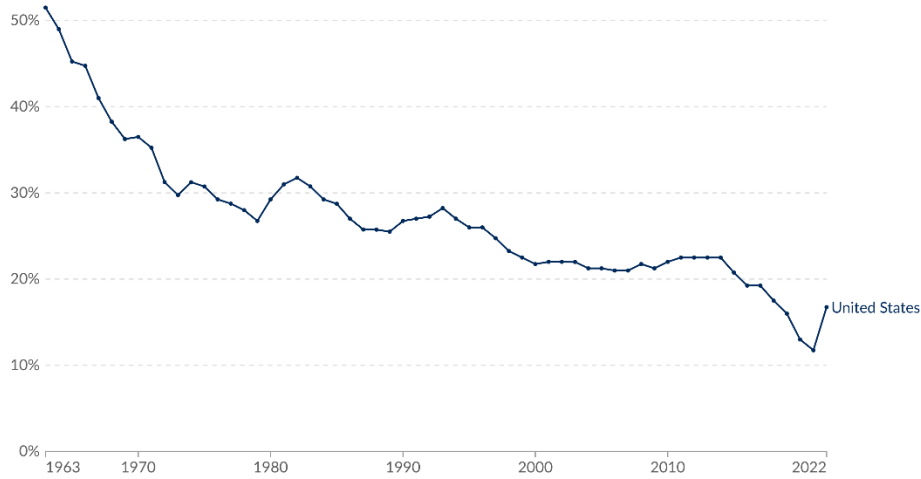
Source: OWD (2025).

**FIG A2.**

**Poverty: Share of population living on less than \$30 a day, 1963 to 2022**



This data is adjusted for inflation and for differences in living costs between countries.



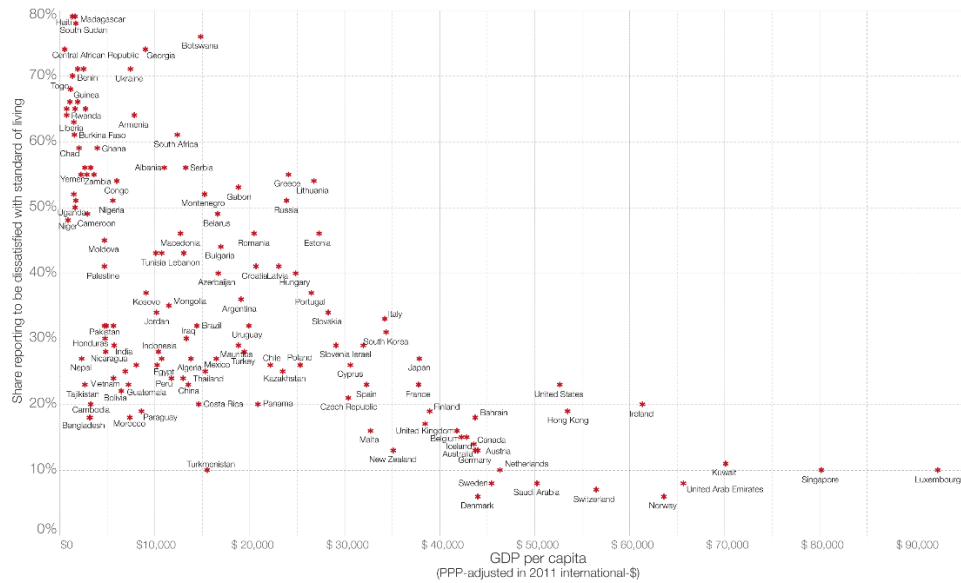
Source: OWD (2025).

**FIG A3.**

**Dissatisfaction with standard of living vs GDP per capita**



Shown on the y-axis is the share that answered 'dissatisfied' to the question 'Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your standard of living, all the things you can buy and do?'.



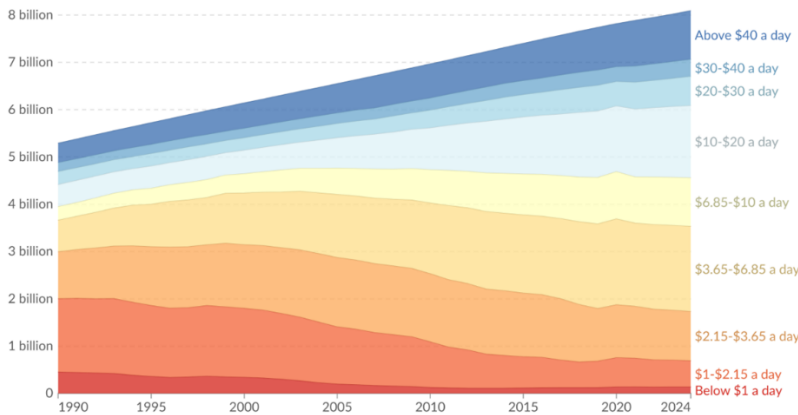
Source: OWD (2025).

**FIG A4.**

**Distribution of population between different poverty thresholds, World, 1990 to 2024**

Our World in Data

This data is adjusted for inflation and for differences in living costs between countries.



**2024**  
in people

Above \$40 a day	1.03 billion
\$30-\$40 a day	363.00 million
\$20-\$30 a day	613.35 million
\$10-\$20 a day	1.53 billion
\$6.85-\$10 a day	1.03 billion
\$3.65-\$6.85 a day	1.80 billion
\$2.15-\$3.65 a day	1.04 billion
\$1-\$2.15 a day	554.28 million
Below \$1 a day	137.48 million
<b>Total</b>	<b>8.10 billion</b>

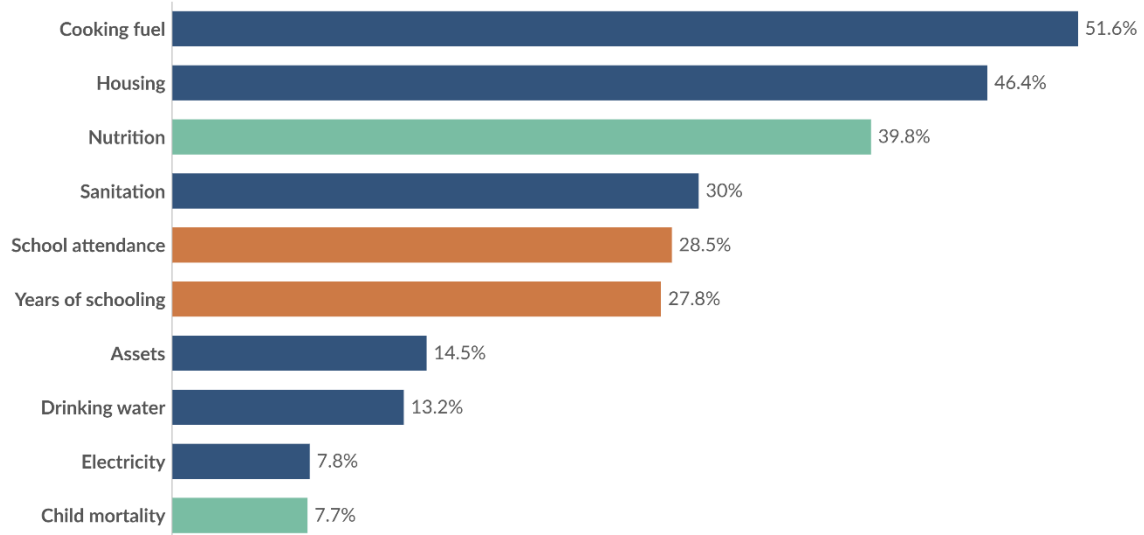
Source: OWD (2025).

**FIG A5.**

**Share of population deprived by multidimensional poverty indicators, Pakistan, 2017**

Our World in Data

Multidimensional poverty is defined as being deprived in a range of health (green), education (orange) and living standards (blue) indicators.



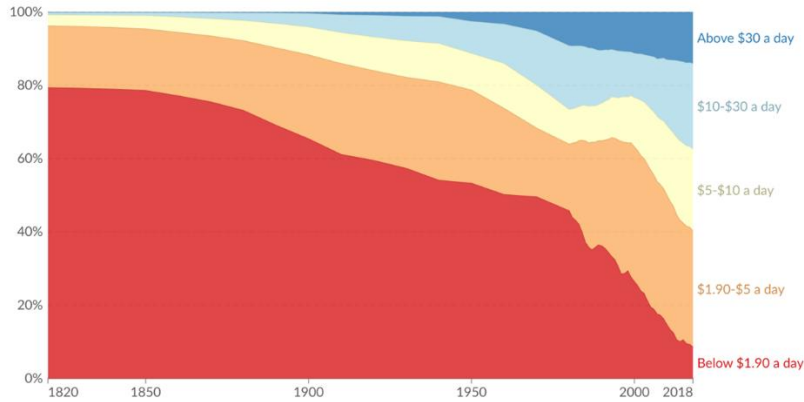
Source: OWD (2025).

**FIG A6.**

**Distribution of population between different poverty thresholds, World, 1820 to 2018**



This data is adjusted for inflation and for differences in living costs between countries. Data after 1981 relates to household income or consumption surveys collated by the World Bank; before 1981 it is based on historical reconstructions of GDP per capita and inequality data.



**2018**

Above \$30 a day	14.02%
\$10-\$30 a day	23.32%
\$5-\$10 a day	22.37%
\$1.90-\$5 a day	31.67%
Below \$1.90 a day	8.61%

**1820**

Above \$30 a day	0.05%
\$10-\$30 a day	0.71%
\$5-\$10 a day	2.95%
\$1.90-\$5 a day	16.92%
Below \$1.90 a day	79.36%

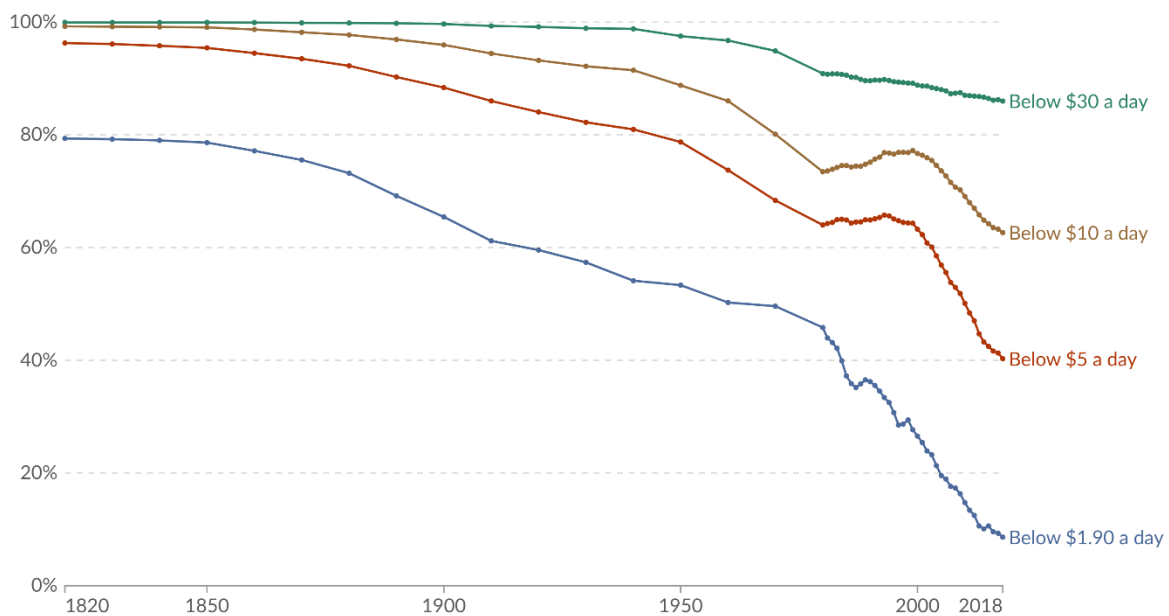
Source: OWD (2025).

**FIG A7.**

**Share in poverty relative to different poverty thresholds, World, 1820 to 2018**



This data is adjusted for inflation and for differences in living costs between countries.



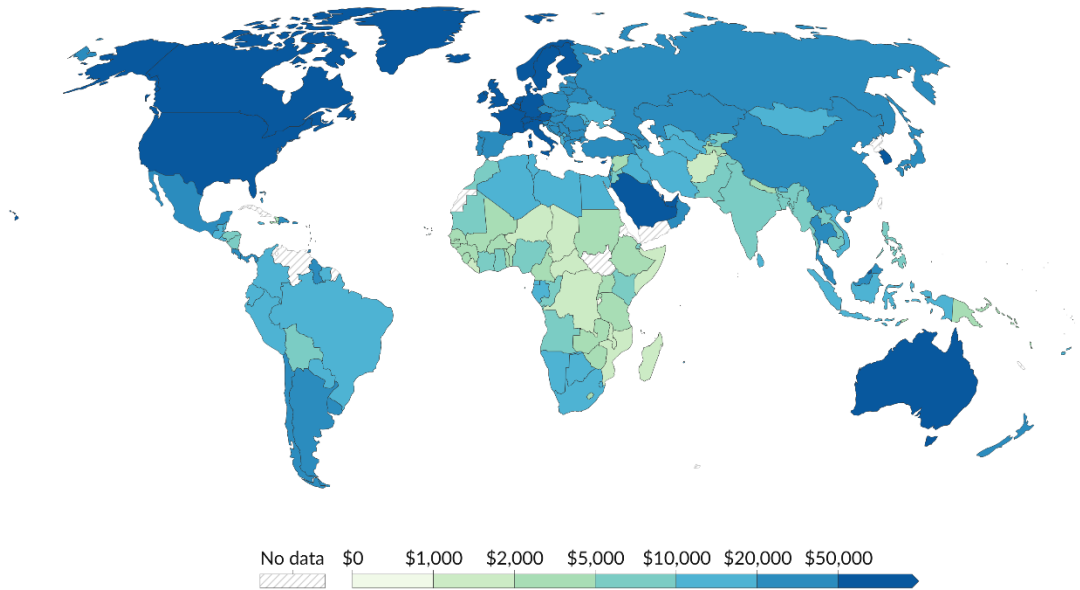
Source: OWD (2025).

**FIG A8.**

### GDP per capita, 2023



This data is adjusted for inflation and for differences in living costs between countries.



Source: OWD (2025).

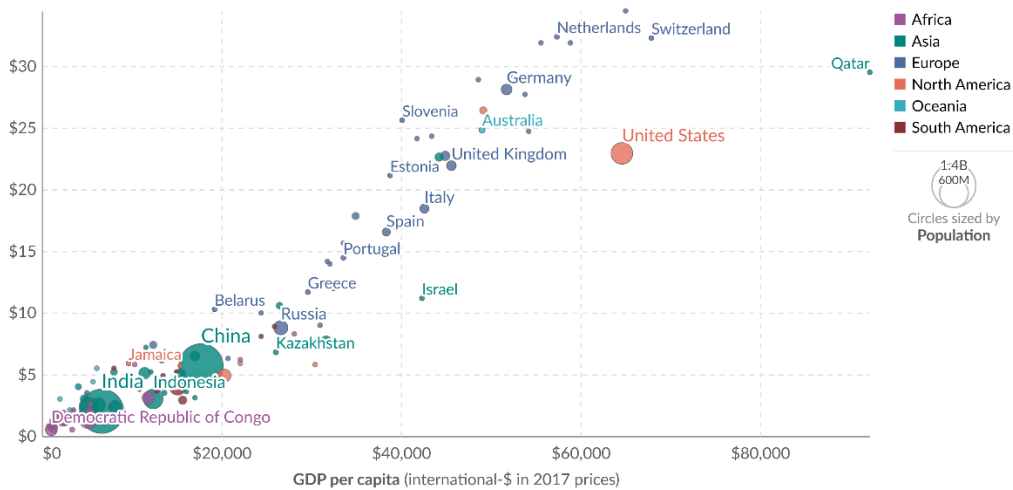
**FIG A9.**

### Income or consumption of the poorest 10% vs. GDP per capita, 2022



Level of income or consumption per person per day below which 10% of the population falls, plotted against GDP per capita. This data is adjusted for inflation and differences in living costs between countries.

Income or consumption of the poorest 10% (international-\$ at 2017 prices)

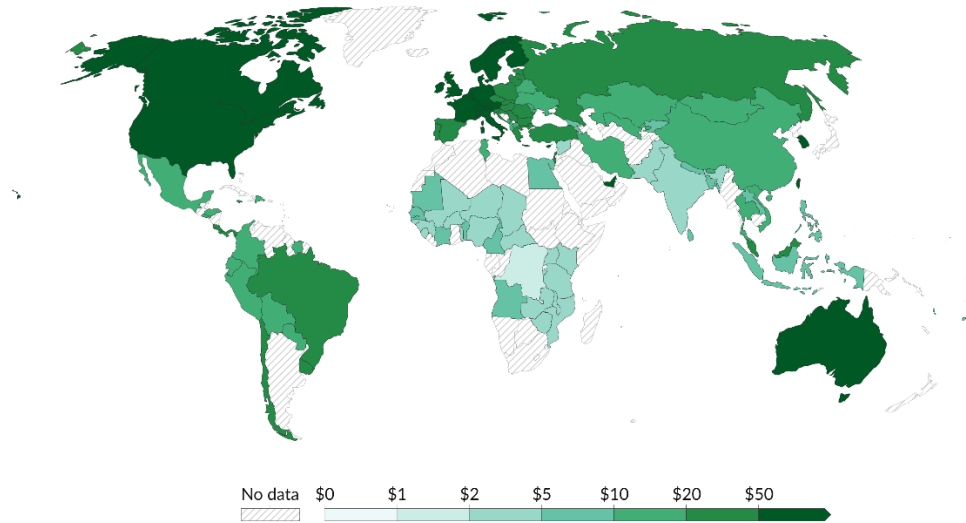


Source: OWD (2025).

**FIG A10.**

### Mean income or consumption per day, 2023

This data is adjusted for inflation and for differences in living costs between countries.



Source: OWD (2025).

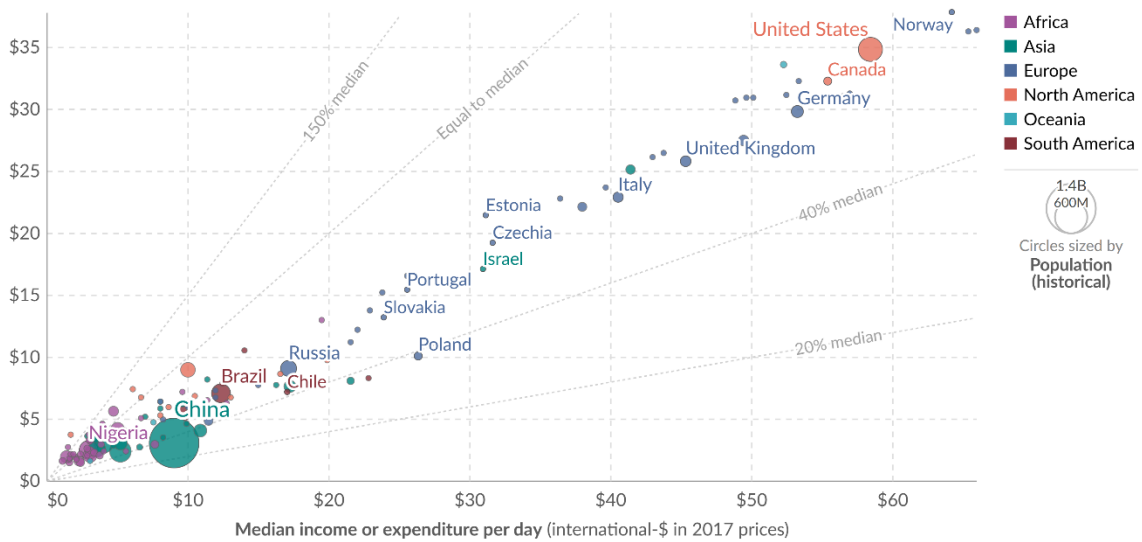
**FIG A11.**

### National poverty line vs. median income or consumption per day, 2017

This data is adjusted for inflation and for differences in living costs between countries.



National poverty line (international-\$ at 2017 prices)



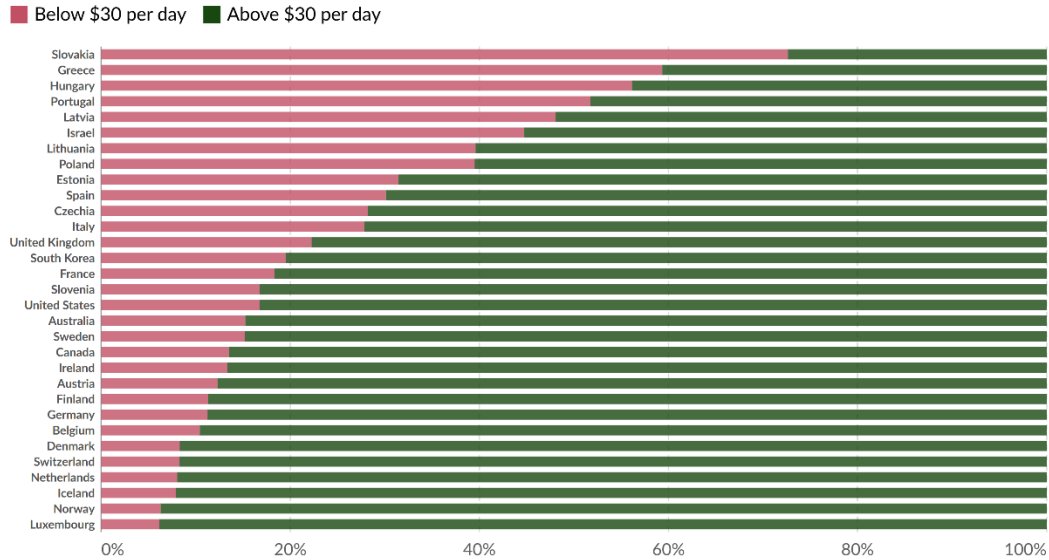
Source: OWD (2025).

FIG A12.

### Share of population below and above \$30 per day, 2022



This data is adjusted for inflation and for differences in living costs between countries.



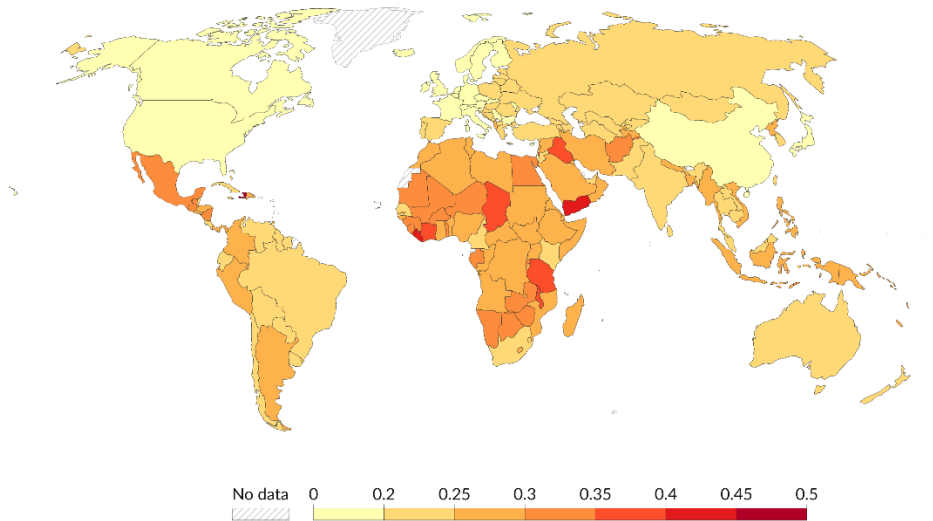
Source: OWD (2025).

FIG A13.

### Inequality in per capita calorie intake, 2018



The inequality in dietary calorie intake is measured as the coefficient of variation in energy intake. It represents the spread of intakes around the mean. Higher values represent larger levels of dietary inequality.



Source: OWD (2025).

**TABLE A4.**

### Total daily supply of calories per person, 2018

Quantity that is available for consumption at the end of the supply chain. It does not account for consumer waste, so the quantity that is actually consumed may be lower. This is the total of all agricultural produce, both crops and livestock.

Our World  
in Data

Table | Map | Chart

Filter by: All (242) Search for a country

Total daily supply of calories per person kilocalories per day per capita

Country ↑↓	↑ 2018
Ireland	3,907.90 kcal/day
Belgium	3,807.82 kcal/day
Northern America (FAO)	3,801.04 kcal/day
United States	3,790.30 kcal/day
Austria	3,754.12 kcal/day
Turkey	3,716.22 kcal/day
Saudi Arabia	3,706.50 kcal/day

Source: OWD (2025).

**TABLE A5.**

### Inequality in per capita calorie intake, 2018

The inequality in dietary calorie intake is measured as the coefficient of variation in energy intake. It represents the spread of intakes around the mean. Higher values represent larger levels of dietary inequality.

Our World  
in Data

Table | Map | Chart

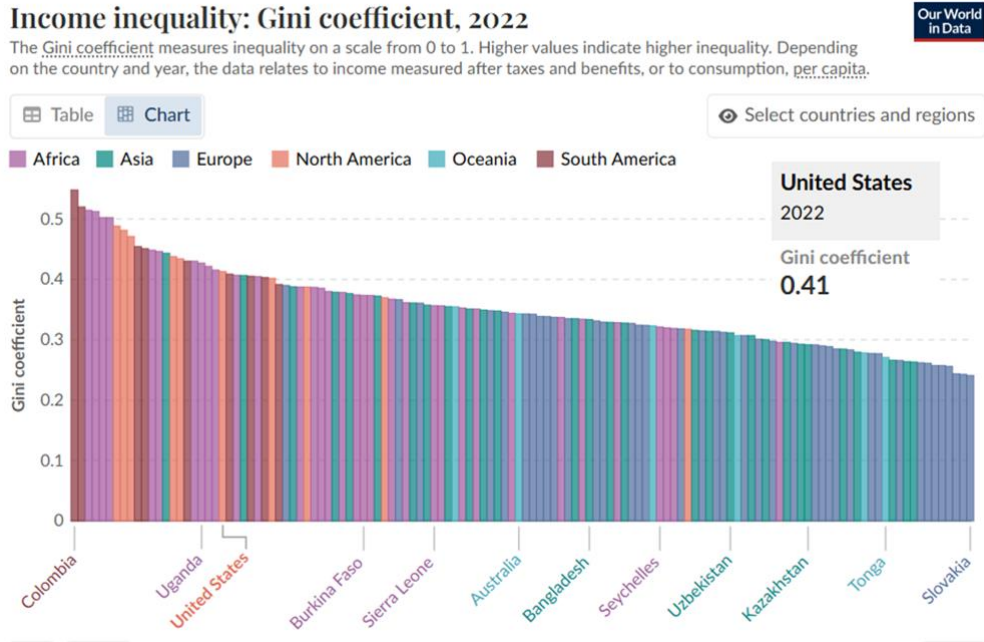
Filter by: All (185) Search for a country or region

Coefficient of Variation (CV) of caloric intake

Country or region ↑↓	↓ 2018
United States	0.17
Japan	0.17
Cyprus	0.18
Bulgaria	0.19
Moldova	0.19
China	0.19
United Kingdom	0.20

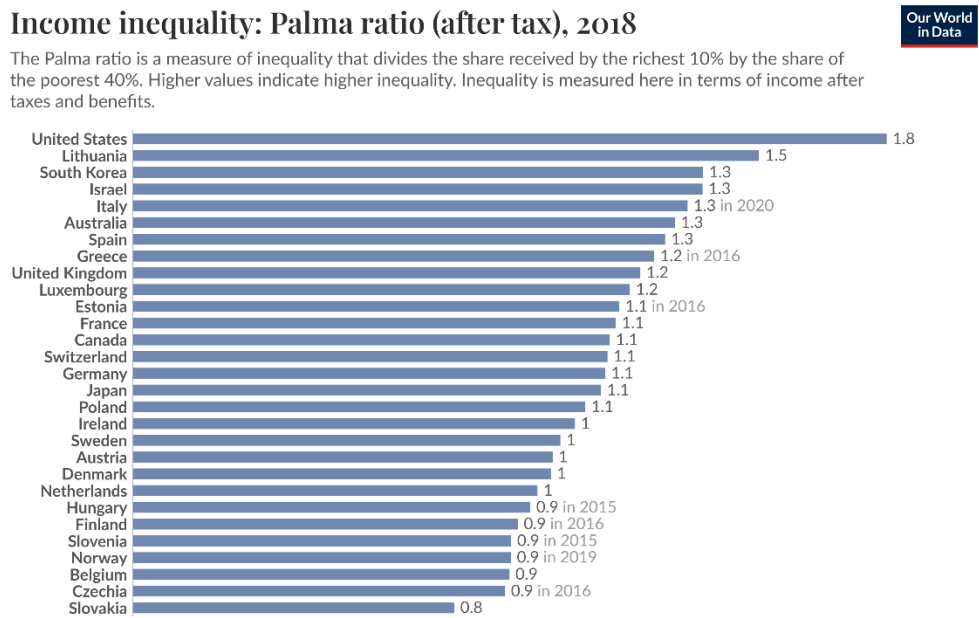
Source: OWD (2025).

FIG A14.



Source: OWD (2025).

FIG A15.



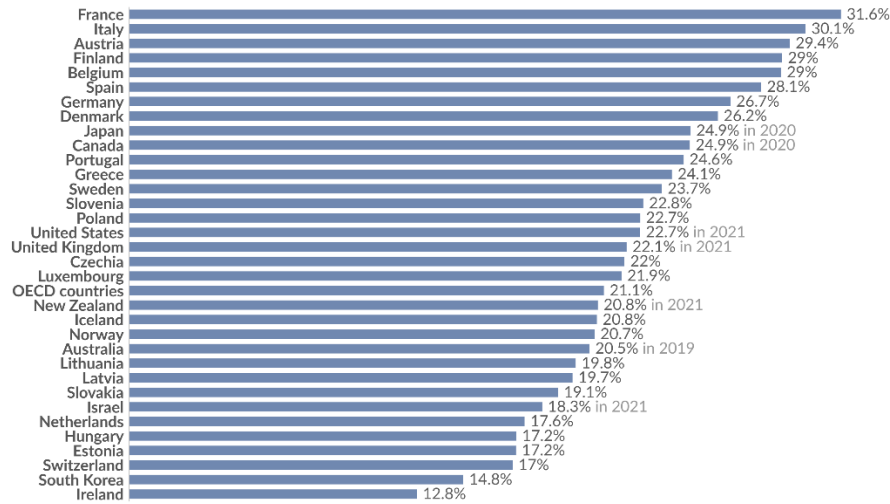
Source: OWD (2025).

**FIG A16.**

**Public social spending as share of GDP, 2022**



Social spending includes, among others, the following areas: health, old age, incapacity-related benefits, family, active labor market programmes, unemployment, and housing.



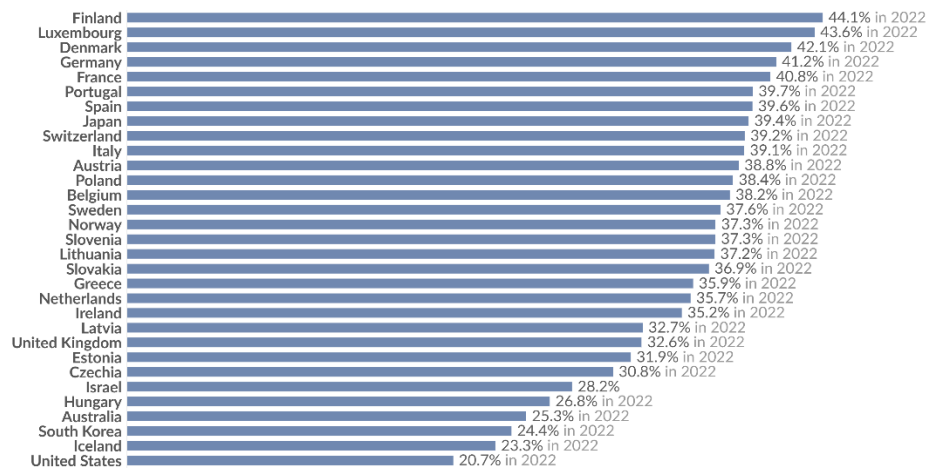
Source: OWD (2025).

**FIG A17.**

**Social protection spending as share of total government spending, 2023**



Social protection includes the following main areas: sickness, disability, pensions, housing, unemployment, family and children.



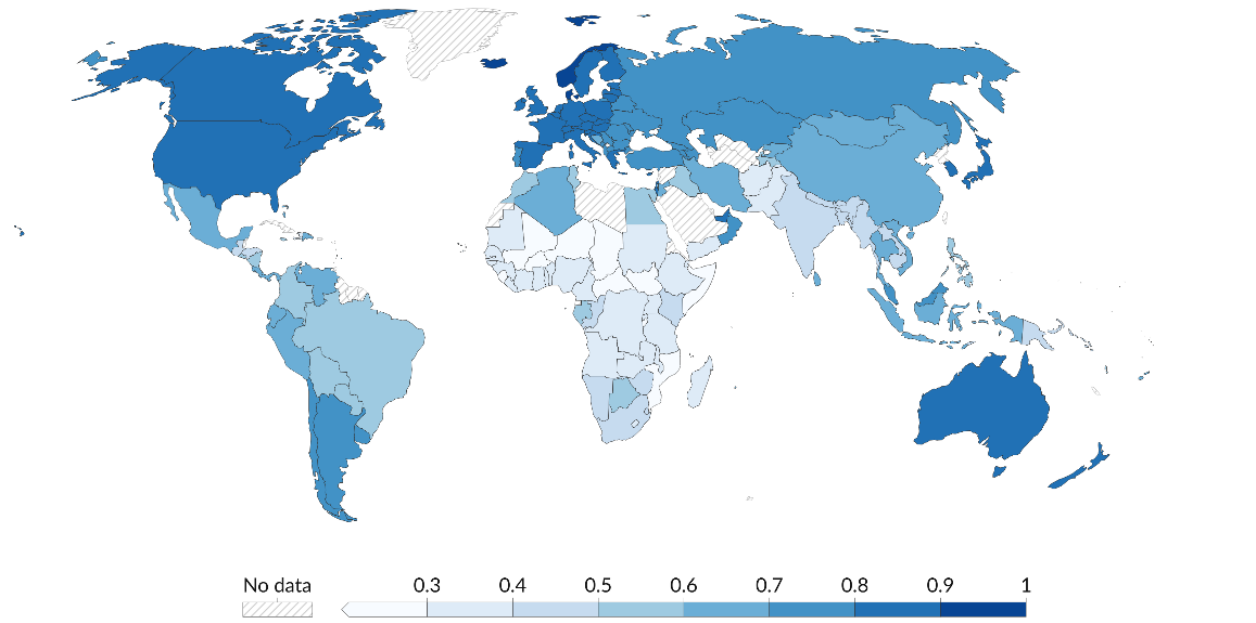
Source: OWD (2025).

**FIG A18.**

### Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index, 2023



The Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI) is a summary measure of key dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, a good education, and a decent standard of living, adjusted for inequalities in these dimensions. Higher values indicate higher and more equal human development.



Source: OWD (2025).

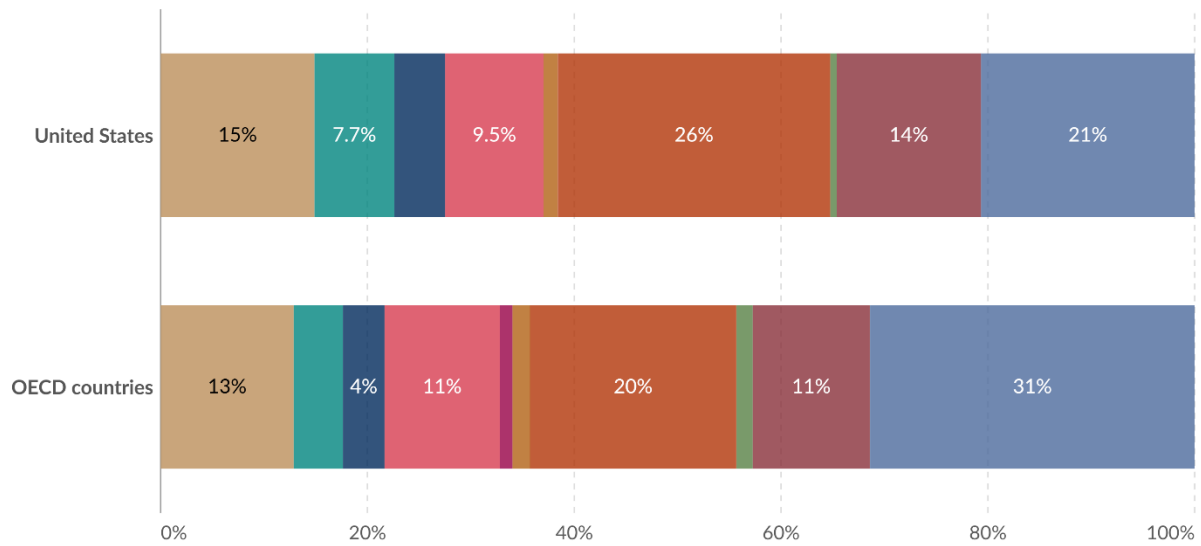
FIG A19.

### Government spending by function, 2022



Share of total government spending by purpose of government activity. Categories are based on the Classification of the Functions of Government (COFOG).

- General public services
- Defense
- Public order and safety
- Economic affairs
- Environmental protection
- Housing and community amenities
- Health
- Recreation, culture and religion
- Education
- Social protection



OECD countries in % of government expenditure		United States in % of government expenditure	
General public services	12.8%	General public services	14.9%
Defense	4.8%	Defense	7.7%
Public order and safety	4.0%	Public order and safety	4.9%
Economic affairs	11.2%	Economic affairs	9.5%
Environmental protection	1.2%	Environmental protection	0.0%
Housing and community amenities	1.7%	Housing and community amenities	1.4%
Health	20.0%	Health	26.4%
Recreation, culture and religion	1.6%	Recreation, culture and religion	0.6%
Education	11.3%	Education	14.0%
Social protection	31.4%	Social protection	20.7%

Source: OWD (2025).

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# Politics, Pandemics and Protest: A Case of 2020 Health Workers Strike in Hong Kong

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## Abstract

This photo essay presents a strike that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in Hong Kong. While the literature shows that industrial actions in the healthcare sector are not uncommon, they are rarely discussed through a visual approach. Indeed, healthcare workers are very difficult to organise and mobilise due to the challenges in justifying the action and the potential conflicts to their professionalism. This photo essay offers a descriptive and visual account of the strike, explaining the workers' motivation, demands, the negotiation process, and the result of the strike. It provides much insight into understanding healthcare workers' struggles during the pandemic and facilitates more discussions on the politics of industrial actions.

## Keywords

Hong Kong, pandemic, health workers, strikes Hong Kong

This photo essay is one of the outputs of a research project investigating a wave of new union activism in Hong Kong in 2019-20, focusing particularly on a strike organised by one such new union formed by hospital employees. This event compressed into a short period (4<sup>th</sup> December 2019 to 7<sup>th</sup> February 2020) in a dense urban space – a nexus between a strong political clash essentially between democracy and authoritarianism and the emergence of a global medical pandemic as experienced by those knowledgeable about and directly impacted by these twin crises. Hospitals are on the front line of pandemics, and Hong Kong experienced a foretaste of Covid-19 in 2003<sup>1</sup>. The violence on campuses and streets since the summer of 2019 was also reflected in the A&E wards and the daily experience of workers.

Industrial actions and labour activism occur across a range of sectors, in Hong Kong, from construction and dock workers through to police and teachers, but never in healthcare (HK Labour Rights Monitor, 2022) Elsewhere, industrial actions in the healthcare sector are not uncommon (Essex and Weldon, 2022), healthcare workers are exceptionally difficult to organise and mobilise due to the ethical concerns associated with impacting care for the sick. (Li and Ng, 2021; Chan et al., 2023).

In this photo essay, we present a descriptive account of the hospital workers' industrial actions in 2020 and aim to draw more academic attention towards labour activism in the healthcare sector. As observers, we asked (1) what motivates hospital staff in Hong Kong to participate in the strike? And (2) how did it happen? Photographic images are a particularly rich source of information; they are 'holistic, direct, personal and emotional' (Grady, 1991: 30), and can offer

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<sup>1</sup> In 2003 Hong Kong experienced a severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic.

some unique contribution to the understanding of labour activism (Liu and Chan, 2024). The first and second authors are responsible for the academic content as part of a government-funded project to understand the political crisis, and all photos presented in this essay were taken by the third author, who is an award-winning photojournalist in Hong Kong.

It is important not to see this narrative as winning and losing or even right and wrong but as an examination of a moment in time. This is not just because there is what amounts to a legally enforced interpretation of correct thought now in Hong Kong on aspects of our history, but because the reader may view these pictures through the eyes of a doctor working in a Gaza hospital in Palestine or an exclusive private clinic on the Upper East Side of New York.

### Background of the strike

Dating back to the colonial period, unions in Hong Kong have been constrained by the complication of union politics in the city (see, e.g., Chan et al., 2019). In addition, labour policies in Hong Kong have significantly undermined workers' power by denying their rights of collective bargaining (ITUC, n.d.). However, the growth of new unions during the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) Movement in 2019, with possibly 4000 groups applying to register (Human Rights Watch, 2021), demonstrated a much higher level of militancy and willingness to participate in mobilisation and protest (Chan, 2020).

The Hong Kong Hospital Staff Strike took place in the context of the looming COVID-19 epidemic. Wuhan, the city in China that was first observed for the COVID-19 outbreak, recorded thousands of infections in December 2019. A Wuhan visitor was preliminarily tested positive for COVID-19 on January 23, 2020. The development has flustered many; immediately on that day, five medical unions, along with nineteen other unions and organisations, released a statement demanding border control. The next day, one of the five medical unions, the Hospital Authority Employees Alliance (hereafter HAEA), revealed in a press conference that they were planning a general strike to force the government to suspend tourists from mainland China entering Hong Kong (Taylor and Chan, 2020). At the same time, emails were sent to its members calling them for an Emergency General Meeting for the motion.

*Figure 1. The HAEA rallies their members at the Hospital Authority Building*



## About the Hospital Authority Employees Alliance

The HAEA was established on the December, 2019 initially as the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) Movement in Hong Kong (BBC, 2019). The executives were employees of the Hospital Authority (HA), a public organisation managing all public hospitals in Hong Kong. Membership grew slowly, organised through social media, such as Telegram, posters and mass meetings (Figure 1), a union Executive Committee was formed and the number of members proliferated after the union announced a strike call, with membership reaching 8000 on January 27, 2020, and around 20,000 members the day before the strike (approximately 25% of total Hong Kong Hospital Authority employment).



*Figure 2 An executive member of the HAEA, a white ribbon as a symbol to support the strike*

## The Alliance's Demand

The first and primary demand made by the HAEA was the request for border control that no tourists should enter the Hong Kong border from mainland China. Later, the HAEA further evolved their demands into five: In addition to the border control, they urged for a government appeal for the public to put on facemasks, a sufficient supply of isolation wards and suspension of the non-emergency services, a follow-up on escaping patients and assurance of workplace safety, as well as sufficient support to medical practitioners in charge of quarantine patients. Whilst these five demands echoed the political movement slogans, the focus was on the human crisis of the pandemic. Likewise, the ribbon of support was white, not yellow (Figure 2) to distinguish this from the 2014 Yellow Umbrella movement<sup>2</sup>, which carried over to the 2019 protests.

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<sup>2</sup> The 2014 Yellow Umbrella movement was a pro-democracy movement named after the ubiquitous umbrellas used to protect protesters from the police.



*Figure 3 Members of the HAHE holding demonstration posters: “on strike” (red) and “close the border and save Hong Kong” (yellow)*

On January 31, it was reported that 6700 members had their names signed to support the five demands, representing 8% of the total HA employees (figure 3). The low signing rate and the politics around closing the border between Hong Kong and the rest of China gave the impression the government was not responding.

As a result, the HAEA announced a five-day strike and only non-emergency service workers would be absent from duty on the first day. If the first day of the strike did not result in a positive response from the authorities, healthcare workers from all positions would then participate in the strike. In the end, all five days of the strike proceeded and orderly, non-obstructive picketing occurred at several locations (Figure 4).



Figure 4. A sit-down strike at the lobby of the Hospital Authority Building, where the negotiation take place.

### Employer's (the Hospital Authority) Action

The demands of the HAEA targeted both the Hong Kong government and their employer, the Hospital Authority. Their demand for border control requires the government to change the immigration policy; the remaining demands are related to the hospital staff's working conditions and hospital recourses. The government launched the border control policy on January 29, HA Chief Executive Officer Tony Ko said he welcomed the policies as they reduced the flow of people to Hong Kong. Furthermore, Henry Fan, the Chair of HA, urged the government to enforce stricter border control, although both also stated a lack of support for the industrial action.

On January 31, HA updated its policy that any hospital staff who require quarantine after taking care of (suspected) COVID-19 patients are able to take leave without deducting the amount of their sick leave. However, numerous hospital staff were furious at the new arrangement because this special unit of hospital staff, also known as the "Dirty Team" (see also figure 5) among peers in the healthcare sector, was formed in an urgent manner at the beginning at the pandemic; they were expecting the HA to provide a washout period but their wishes were not granted.



Figure 5 hand written Poster on the left hand side: "Sorry! I am a nurse and I am on strike. I am not afraid of frontline duties, I will join the "Dirty Team", but I worried that everyone in Hong Kong will be sent to the frontline to fight the virus. Close the border, save Hong Kong"

Despite the authority's efforts to urge workers not to engage in the strike, 50% of the non-emergency services and operations were cancelled due to the lack of staff on the first day of the industrial action. The union was able to paralyse the non-emergency service as planned. On February 4, the second day of the strike, when employees from every job position walked out, the union announced that there were at least 7000 absentees; the HA said that 4500 staff were absent. The HAEA announced that the negotiation broke down and urged workers to return to work (Figure 6). Over the following two days, 4600 and 5000 hospital workers were reported absent from duty, according to the HA.



Figure 6 A representative from the Hong Kong Hospital Authority urging medical workers to get back to their duty

The second negotiation took place in the form of a private session and was launched on the fourth day of the strike (February 6). Lasting for 1 hour and 30 minutes, the union raised eleven extra demands on top of the previous five demands approved in the HEHA's Emergency General Meeting. These demands included a provision of a washout period, compensation for infected or deceased hospital staff, sufficient uniforms for daily substitution, etc.



Figure 7 "Salute to the medical workers"

After the meeting, HAEA again pointed out that no progress had been made and expressed extreme disappointment. On the last day of the strike, HAEA attempted to make another negotiation with HA but was not answered. With hundreds of hospital staff surrounding the management's office, the management refused to meet with the workers (Figure 7). As a response, the HAEA launched an online balloting from 10 am to 4 pm: if 6000 members supported the extension of the strike, until February 12. In this vote, among the 7,000 members who participated, around 4,000 opposed continuation. The HA welcomed the decision, and the industrial action ended.

While it seems that there was no progress made during the industrial action, some of HAEA's demands were implemented weeks after the industrial action, although no credit was given to the union. After the pandemic, the HAEA continued to comment on the public health policy of the Hong Kong Government. However, in 2021, Winnie Yu, the Chairperson of the HAEA, was arrested under the national security law, specifically its provision regarding alleged subversion. She was sentenced to 6 years and 9 months in prison. On 24<sup>th</sup> June, 2022, the HAEA called for an extraordinary meeting and eventually voted to break up.

Publishing these photos will anger some, remind others of hopeful or sad times but they are a record of what happened. However, without words, they have no context but the politics is in the context and strikes are deeply political events.

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# In Youngstown, Ohio, Deindustrialization Erodes the Old City, but Palimpsests of Place Yield Insights for Workers, Artists, and Activists, Including Me

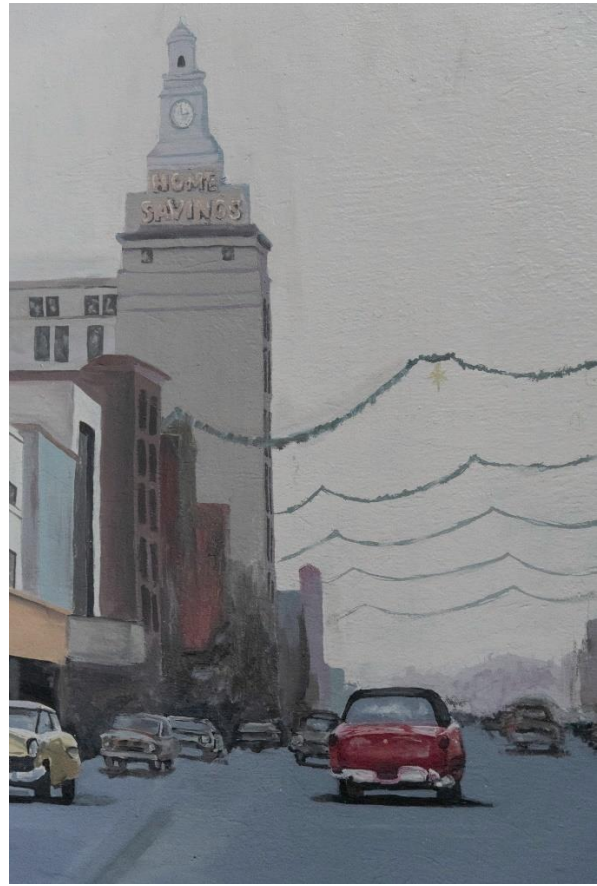
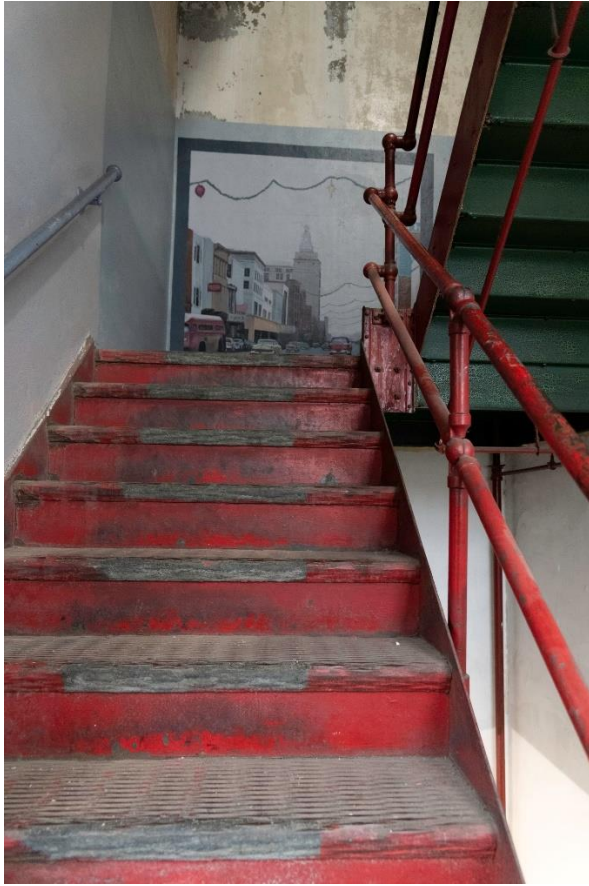
Alice Whittenburg

## Abstract

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization*, Jasper Bernes says that artists, workers, and countercultural activists began to demand changes in the conditions of life and work in the 1970s, sometimes through participatory movements. He concurs with Andrew Ross who writes in *No Collar: The Humane Workplace and Its Hidden Costs* that these participatory movements didn't do as much to improve working conditions as workers and artists might have hoped. As a consequence, today there is a “generalization of the ‘mentality’ of artists’ work across the entire economy, not just among creatives.” This becomes easier to see as more workers enter the gig economy and are forced to be as flexible, adaptable and without job security as artists have long been. In this creative essay, I use a visit to Albert Street in Youngstown, Ohio, on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my time as editor of an alternative magazine, as an occasion to compare the 1970s, a time when Youngstown was a steel center with thousands of good jobs and I was involved in a countercultural project there, to the 2020s when Youngstown is a deindustrializing city and I work as a freelancer. The essay includes photos which record palimpsests of place, showing how much of the past still can be viewed in the present and the insight these contrasts provide.

## Keywords

Deindustrialization, palimpsest of place, Youngstown, participatory art, worker participation



Photos by Diane Beatty, used by permission; the mural pictured is by Youngstown artist Hector Gonzalez

Look at the image of a shabby red stairway (above, left) with treads that have been eroded by years of steady foot traffic. Notice that there's a city street scene painted at the top of the stairs; to the right you can see a detail of that street scene. Strictly speaking, that painting is a mural since it was applied directly onto a wall, and if I could have gone to the Ward Bakery Building when I was in Youngstown in the summer of 2024, I would have gone to see that mural at the top of the stairs. Sadly, by the time I arrived, the building had been [bought by U-Haul Storage of Youngstown](#). It was no longer open to the public, and the artists who had studios there had already been evicted. Of course, I can still see the photos Diane Beatty took on the day the artists were forced to leave their studios (June 10, 2024), which is how I learned about the mural in the first place. Beatty posted the images on Facebook in an album she called "[End of an Era, Ward Bakery](#)." The album includes pictures of a forlorn chair with a ripped seat; various hallways, stairways, doorways, signs and mailboxes; and some artwork, including what had been painted on the walls, though no images of the artists themselves.

Beatty is an outstanding photographer who excels at creating sometimes wistful and sometimes stark portrayals of things that have outlived their usefulness and of buildings that have deteriorated over time or are being demolished. She is **not** a purveyor of images that fixate on extreme devastation, what some people call "ruin porn." She does, however, like to show the details of objects and structures that have seen better days, both in Youngstown's deindustrializing environment and elsewhere. In the case of the Ward Bakery Building, the structure isn't by any

stretch of the imagination in ruins but is simply worn and tarnished. [U-Haul has promised to preserve and restore it](#), though the hundreds of storage units they plan to install will leave no room for artists' studios.

The wear and tear that can be seen on the stairway in Beatty's photo make it obvious that the building is aging – it's been more than a hundred years since bakery workers first started making bread there. The pipelike handrails are scratched and worn, and they direct the eye to the top of the stairs and the small cityscape mural. Signed "Hector 2017," the mural shows Federal Street in downtown Youngstown decorated for the holidays at a time [when the landmark tower was still the Home Savings building](#).<sup>1</sup> Judging from the looks of those sedans, it's supposed to be sometime in the 1950s, when Youngstown was thriving for the most part. But by the time that cityscape mural was painted in 2017, Youngstown was part of the Rust Belt, and the artists who worked in studios and held markets at the Ward Bakery Building were manifesting what some call [Rust Belt chic](#).



Photo by Diane Beatty, used by permission

The above photo was also taken by Beatty on the day the artists were evicted. Old paint shows through a scrawled attempt to communicate the urgency of the situation, and the message "EVERYTHING IS FOR SALE" draws attention to the tile-sized artworks lined up as last-ditch offerings along a ledge on the blotchy wall. This image appeals to my own sense that, though Youngstown is full of creative people who never stop trying to solve the problems arrayed against them, the Mahoning Valley can never quite recover from the unnatural disaster that is

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<sup>1</sup> Hector is Youngstown artist Hector Gonzalez whose recent work was on exhibit at the Havana House in Niles, Ohio, in April 2024. See <https://www.facebook.com/events/304341656017418>

deindustrialization. And when artists at the Ward Bakery Building are evicted from a single valued workspace, their experience is yet another evocation of what has been lost since the steel mills closed down.

In her book *The Half-Life of Deindustrialization*, Sherry Lee Linkon tells us that deindustrialization doesn't occur all at once. Instead, "the struggle with loss and change" persists in the environment and continues to have harmful effects over time, the way a dangerous radioactive isotope does. (Linkon 2018, 5-6) As the book's subtitle indicates, Linkon uses "working-class writing about economic restructuring" as a kind of Geiger counter with which she measures the changes that are taking place. She says, "...deindustrialization literature provides insight that neither journalism nor social science can offer because it tells stories not merely about but also from the perspective of working-class people." (Linkon 2018, xvii)

One of the stories Linkon cites, which is set in Detroit, shows the strong influence of what remains of the industrial past, even on people who never worked in factories or mills. Michael Zadoorian's "Spelunkers" is about a young urban explorer who is also a freelance photographer, a working artist of the Rust Belt. He visits abandoned buildings and photographs them, then posts his photos on his website. He says he doesn't like the idea that the "past has become cool," though Linkon suggests that his "attachment to the past and his ambivalence about his uses of it reflect the contingency of his own experience as a freelance graphic designer." (Linkon 2018, 100)

At the end of the story, he gives up his urban spelunking but decides to go on one last trip to the Fine Arts Building, which will soon be torn down. From its roof, he looks out over the city and thinks about "the darkened carcasses of the empty buildings [he] had explored -- all that history soon to be gone." He then focuses on new buildings going up, which will have to surmount this history, effacing it and making the place he calls home less recognizable, and he says, "I saw that the old city was going away." (Linkon 2018, 101) Though the reader might be tempted to see the description of new building and growth as optimistic, Zadoorian suggests that the city's future remains uncertain, while the constant erosion of the past is the one sure thing.

In the chapter on deindustrialized landscapes, Linkon explores the terminology geographers use to describe the difference between landscape and place, and then she introduces the ideas of French scholar Michel de Certeau who says place can be a palimpsest<sup>2</sup> in which "fragmentary and inward-turning histories" may be discovered beneath what remains (Linkon 2018, 113), and the place itself can certainly be a building or other built environment. Such an experience is implied in Zadoorian's story. It can also be seen in the photos of the Ward Bakery Building where all those layered meanings reveal fragmentary histories that will be further fractured by the changes that will take place when the building's interior becomes storage units. But of course, change is relentlessly being wrought in every city in the world, so what is the significance of artists being forced to

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<sup>2</sup> "...a palimpsest reveals a condition where layers of previous work can be seen, creating rediscovery and reinterpretation. A palimpsest can also serve as an artefact that embodies a history and memory, reminding us that we are constantly building on the past.

"The metaphor allows architects, urban planners, and designers to analyse the layers of history embedded within a site to understand not only what came before but also how to move forward to create a sense of place." Tran, Ke Leng (2011). *Architecture as palimpsest : a strategy of intermediacy*. Toronto Metropolitan University. Thesis. <https://doi.org/10.32920/ryerson.14656560.v1>, pages 7-8.

vacate a building in a city like Youngstown in which tens of thousands of workers lost their jobs as industry disappeared?

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization*, Jasper Bernes states that “the *work of art* and *work in general* share a common destiny” (Bernes 2017, 1), and he argues that art and literature have not only depicted the changes that have taken place in the world of work in the post-World War II period but may have made a significant contribution to these changes as well. Like Linkon, he also uses examples of creative writing to support his argument, but before he begins to cite any literature, Bernes gives some relevant analysis of the post-1945 period. He starts by reminding us that in the 1950s there was great prosperity in the United States, and a compromise was reached between management and labor to assure that workers would get higher wages without undermining company profits. The introduction of Taylorism or “scientific management” and a continuation of Fordist automation of production were the techniques that were used to make labor more productive. (Bernes 2017, 4) As a result, the owners’ profits increased and the workers got a larger share of the wealth – in return for less control over their working conditions.

This compromise began to break down in the 1960s. As speedup and deskilling affected industrial workers and as white-collar jobs such as keypunch operator and production typist began to resemble factory work, alienation increased among both blue- and white-collar workers. The breakdown was hastened by the rise of anti-authoritarianism among students, artists, and workers. In the case of artists and students much of this sentiment grew out of protesting the War in Vietnam, though as Jefferson Cowie says, the anti-authority mood among the working class was more likely to be a result of having served in the war. (Bernes 2017, 8)

As students made demands for more relevant curricula and artists turned against the elitism of the galleries and museums, manufacturing and industrial workers expressed their revolt against “routinized work, against the new forms of technocratic management and control” through increased absenteeism, job turnover, sabotage and waves of strikes. In 1970 in the U.S. alone there were 5,000 stoppages. And such resistance took place in Europe, too, as in France after the events of May-June 1968. In the United States, there was alarm about this dissatisfaction which “seemed to threaten that the revolt among students would spill into the organized working class, as had happened in Europe...” (Bernes 2017, 7)

In a chapter on the feminization of speedup, Bernes reminds us that, beginning in the 1960s, the economy of the United States began to be based more on services and information technology and less on the production of manufactured goods; by the late 1970s this trend had become more obvious as deindustrialization proceeded apace. And there was also a kind of “feminization of labor,” both as more women entered the workforce and as the nature of work changed. (Bernes 2017, 122) (As Donna Haraway puts it, “To be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labor force; seen less as workers than as servers; subjected to time arrangements on and off the paid job that make a mockery of a limited workday.” (Bernes 2017, 212 note 6)) During this period, many of the women who entered the workforce continued to shoulder the major burden of household tasks. As a result, the possibility of “flexible labor” suited women workers who still had many domestic responsibilities.

Bernes says, “Workers are flexible when they are not defined by a permanent assignment but constantly adapting, taking on different roles, attributes, skills, and qualities depending on the task

or *project* at hand.” (Bernes 2017, 130-131) He notes that this sort of flexible, project-oriented work means that workers won’t be alienated by any single task, but it asks them to perform several alienated tasks at once, leading to the familiar concept of multitasking.

This chapter focuses on avant-garde writer Bernadette Mayer’s 1970 project *Memory* for which she photographed and wrote down everything possible about her own life for a month and then turned her archival process into poetry. She recorded domestic tasks that she had to perform as a woman responsible for chores and dishes, as well as the other tasks she needed to accomplish to create her art. *Memory* was published in book form in 1975 and appeared as an installation piece in various galleries [as recently as 2017](#). There the photographs were presented in a large grid on the wall and audio recordings of Mayer reading her daily journal could be heard. Bernes describes the text that makes up *Memory* as “one of the most vivid literary descriptions of multitasking and the frenetic harried subject it entails” and says that in this case multitasking may mean “...engaging with multiple media and multiple mechanical apparatuses: mimeographs, typewriters, cameras, tape recorders, slide projectors, automobiles.” (Bernes 2017, 133)

This description reminds me in retrospect, in ways that surprise me, of a project I worked on in 1974 when I was part of a small collective of people who produced three issues of *Grassroots Magazine* in Youngstown.<sup>3</sup> Bernes makes reference to the work of Boltanski and Chiapello, who say that “...anything can attain the status of a project, including ventures hostile to capitalism,” (Bernes 2017, 131) and such was the case with our magazine. Multitasking was central to our project because we typeset and printed the magazine ourselves after we wrote large portions of it. But in the case of *Grassroots*, we were trying to record what was happening to poor and working people in a variety of situations in the Youngstown area and not only what was going on in our own lives.

When I knew that I would be visiting Youngstown in 2024, the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the magazine, my notion of a commemoration was to arrange to meet with the one *Grassroots* writer I still have contact with, Jim Saulino, and later to make a visit to 1019 Albert Street where the office had been located fifty years before. *Grassroots Magazine*, in that it was an attempt to make up for the shortcomings of mainstream media coverage, was also influenced by that spirit of anti-authoritarianism that characterized the 1970s, by the desire to participate in reporting the news instead of simply consuming it. We hoped to describe and make known events that took place in the lives of those whose struggles were under-reported and under-represented, including women and African-Americans. We rented space on Albert Street and bought two used offset presses because in those days no local printer would print countercultural or so-called underground publications. The magazine, though it accepted no advertising and never sold enough copies at 75 cents apiece to make any money, really was a project that required great flexibility from the members of our collective.

We took courses at the Mahoning County Joint Vocational School where we learned about everything from typesetting to running an offset press. And then, with the assistance of a helpful member of a printing collective in Oberlin, Ohio, we honed our skills some more until we were ready to paste up the pages and print the magazine. We called that part of our operation Progressive

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<sup>3</sup> The magazine, though short-lived, can still be found in a variety of archives, including [the Staughton and Alice Lynd Collection at Kent State University](#) (Box 34).

Printers and joined the IWW so we would have a union affiliation, then did some printing jobs to make money to pay the rent and the paper bills. All this was, of course, after we had written many of the articles that appeared in the magazine. A few local African-American writers joined us to cover events they brought to our attention, and we received some submissions from local photographers, though we also took a lot of pictures, processed film ourselves and had a working darkroom. For reasons I no longer remember, my photo of the trainyard at the Brier Hill Works of Youngstown Sheet & Tube was on the front cover of the first issue (see below).

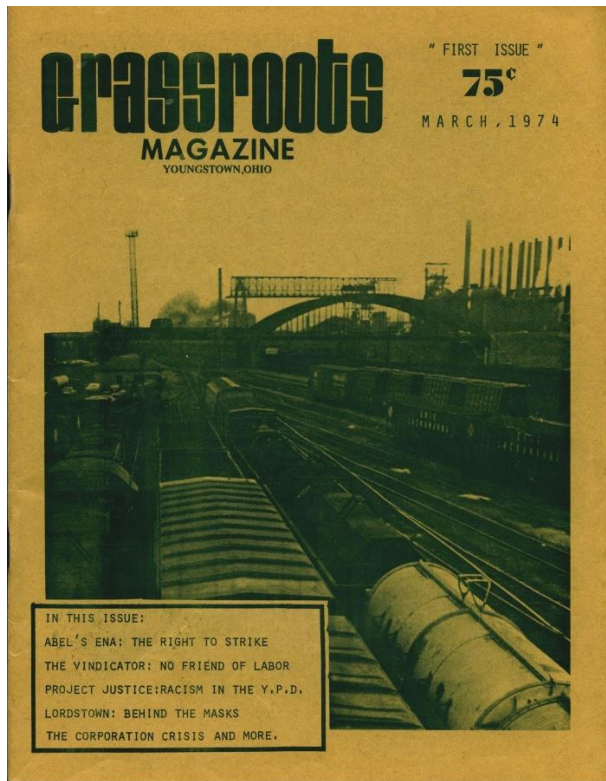


Image courtesy of the author

And so, as well as being citizen journalists, we became production workers of a sort, just a few blocks away from the machines at Aeroquip Rubber that I imagined I could hear thundering like a giant's heart as I walked across the McGuffey Bridge with a fellow *Grassroots* staffer. We never covered any events at Aeroquip, though we sometimes ate lunch at a café just north on Albert Street where Aeroquip workers cashed their paychecks. And now when I pull out my copies of *Grassroots Magazine* and leaf through them, they jog my memory of what life was like then, just as surely as Bernadette Mayer's *Memory* project must have done for her.

In the first issue of the magazine, Jim Saulino's article, "Lordstown GM | Behind the Masks: 10,000 Grievances" explored the reasons for an action that had recently taken place at the nearby Lordstown General Motors plant. In October of 1973, four hooded picketers were arrested for protesting the firing of six union officials, and the story was briefly covered in the local press but then not much more was heard about it. "There seemed to be some kind of mystery about the incident," Jim wrote, "that the media failed to probe into by choice or chance. The media never asked why the picketers wore hoods or whether they wore hoods at all." But this story was just the kind of thing *Grassroots* was looking for, both because it wasn't being covered elsewhere and

because of the militancy of the autoworkers' actions. We were aware that, as Jasper Bernes notes, "[w]hereas earlier analysts would speak of the auto industry as the central example of the so-called compromise between capital and labor, now it was 'the *locus classicus* of dissatisfying work; the assembly-line, its quintessential embodiment.'" (Bernes 2017, 7)

It's important to remember that a wildcat strike at Lordstown in March of 1972 had received national media attention, even from the *New York Times*. According to Andrew Ross in *No Collar*, during this strike workers "exhibited attitudes ('irreverent of all decision makers,' according to *Time*) previously associated with the middle-class students and other refuseniks who had made their mark on the mores of the 1960s." He adds that the strikers were protesting against the quality of work, though they were certainly also reacting to the brutal pace of work – at 101.6 cars per hour or one vehicle every 36 seconds, the line at Lordstown was the fastest in the world. But this 1972 strike was also "widely perceived as evidence that the ethos of Woodstock--with its protest against the authoritarian suppression of pleasure and its demand for creative expression in everyday things--was being embraced by working-class people." (Ross 2003, 5-6)

Bernes says, "In the United States, toward the end of the 1960s, the mainstream press featured article upon article about the new 'blue-collar blues' and the 'new resistance to certain forms of work.'" (Bernes 2017, 7) Yet Youngstown's only newspaper, *the Youngstown Vindicator*, was an exception to this, which is why *Grassroots* also included an article called "The *Vindicator*: No Friend of Labor" in its first issue.

But however it was viewed by the media, the 1972 strike at Lordstown was a legal activity, whereas the actions of the hooded picketers in 1973 were even more controversial because they were not sanctioned by law. Would they have seemed so radical if the truth were known? In his article in *Grassroots*, Jim Saulino wrote, "The public never learned what the issues were, nor did it learn the extent of the complaints... The information furnished by the media was unreliable if only because of its brevity." So Jim interviewed all four of the hooded picketers to give them a chance to speak for themselves, and all of them agreed that it was the newly created managerial division called General Motors Assembly Division (GMAD) that had led to greater worker-management conflict. One of the dismissed picketers told Jim that an immediate change had taken place in the attitudes of the foremen, one of whom said, "We're going to take this plant away from you guys and show you how it should be run." That's when the grievances began to pile up.

Whereas in the early days of the plant, sixty cars per hour was considered to be impressive, under GMAD, the speedup to over 100 cars per hour led to absenteeism, which in turn led to disciplinary actions and more grievances. After a while, unsettled grievances neared "an unbelievable ten thousand." And when union committeemen who were trying to represent the interests of workers were laid off or dismissed, the four hooded picketers acted. As a result, they not only lost their jobs but at their trials they received bigger fines and more jail time than an individual on trial at the same time for assault and battery. According to the men's attorney, the picketers were tried under an old "Anti-Hood Statute," which was passed when highwaymen and Ku Klux Klansmen were wearing hoods and terrorizing the populace. "Although the local media have been known to bring up instances of irrelevant old laws (such as the Sunday closing blue laws) when they are used against businessmen," Jim wrote, "the media just happened to be looking the other way when an antiquated law was used against labor."

The 1972 strike at Lordstown and actions like those of the hooded picketers were part of a growing revolt against speed-up and technocratic management, and soon working people began to demand changes in their workplaces. These demands, according to Bernes, "...usually consisted of calls for a greater participation in decision making, for a democratization of the workplace, for more varied and creative work, for greater autonomy, and even for worker's self-management." (Bernes 2017, 8) And though there was no single connection that linked changes in workers' demands with changes in the art world, Bernes says that the concept of participation is the most relevant to his notion that work and the work of art share a common destiny. During this time, the evolution of participatory art was also underway, which included the happenings of Allan Kaprow, the avant-garde performances of the Fluxus group, and other artistic trends in which the spectator becomes a participant. (Bernes 2017, 10-11) And not surprisingly, this was also a time when countercultural activists were calling for more participation as they looked for ways to create institutions that vied with the mainstream – everything from food co-ops to alternative publications – like *Grassroots Magazine*.

Were workers who were looking for ways to escape alienation on the job being influenced by countercultural and aesthetic trends? Bernes says, "Though it would be absurd to suggest that artists and writers precipitated such rebellions – this discontent had been brewing, somewhat quietly, since the 1950s – what is more plausible is my argument that they provided some of its key terms and coordinates." As a result, workers who were criticizing the alienation they experienced on the job, at least in part used what Bernes calls "aesthetic categories, concepts, and ideologies." (Bernes 2017, 9)

But though it would have been hard to predict at the time, the results of this rebellion weren't always entirely positive for working people. The management response to the call for less intensification in the workplace was to institute a different kind of intensification in which the rigidity of the "Fordist system, with its 'seemingly immovable force of deeply entrenched working-class power'" was replaced by "new 'flexible arrangements,'" which led to more part-time, temporary, or sub-contracted jobs, less powerful unions, and cuts in pay and benefits. (Bernes 2017, 18-19)

Even in cases where the attempts at self-management were freely chosen and largely negotiated by the workers themselves, a positive outcome could be stymied by economic forces, as was the case at Aeroquip/Republic Rubber. *Grassroots Magazine* never published a story about Aeroquip/Republic Rubber, even though the plant was just north of us on Albert Street, but recently I read Sean Posey's history of the plant in *Lost Youngstown* and was reminded that, in the late 70s as deindustrialization began to get seriously underway, the workers there took the participatory approach of buying their workplace and running it for a while. This occurred at a time when the steel mills were closing down in Youngstown, so saving jobs was of paramount importance.

Though Republic Rubber had been a significant part of the industrial life of the Youngstown area since the beginning of the twentieth century, it wasn't until the 1960s that it came to be known as Aeroquip, which is what it remained during the time I spent on Albert Street. In April of 1978, Aeroquip closed its doors, but months later, a group of Aeroquip employees decided to buy the plant and run it themselves. The situation for the workers at what became known as Republic Hose

Manufacturing Corporation [was a mixed bag](#). Only 130 employees kept their jobs, and with union approval, workers' wages dropped to a flat \$5 from as much as \$6.50 per hour. There were also fewer salaried employees, and they took pay cuts, too. Paid holidays and vacation time decreased, along with the pension plan, though shareholder-employees could choose from improvements in insurance benefits, bonuses, and profit-sharing plans. Though Republic Hose Manufacturing Corp., which opened in 1979, did well in the early 80s, it had to look for more capital by 1985. Trelleborg AG of Sweden bought control in 1986 and laid off the remaining 55 workers by the end of 1989.<sup>4</sup>

Workers at Republic Hose Manufacturing were unable to participate in worker-ownership for long, and maybe because of this, I sensed an affinity between the participatory nature of worker ownership at Republic Rubber and the participatory project of *Grassroots Magazine*. So while I was in Youngstown in the summer of 2024, I wanted to see what Aeroquip/Republic Rubber looked like after standing idle for more than thirty years, just as I wanted to see what had become of the old Grassroots office, which wasn't far away. But first I met with Jim Saulino, and I talked with him about the brief but empowering successes of the magazine and its inability to continue operating because our collective reach exceeded our grasp. We agreed that, although there were more than enough stories that needed to be reported, trying to produce a fifty-page magazine every month was too difficult for our small collective, and the pressure made the project unworkable. Like worker-ownership at Republic Rubber, it was a valiant effort to fight against hegemonic institutions and against the odds, but all too soon it failed.

A few days after my meeting with Jim, my partner Greg and my friend Kathy accompanied me on a memory-focused walk. First, we went halfway across the McGuffey bridge (below, left) so that we could look down and see that Crab Creek, which was severely polluted by chemicals from the rubber plant and other businesses, [looks much healthier today](#) (below, middle). I was surprised at how well-kept the bridge looks because I remembered it as a worn structure, and then I saw the new plaque which showed that [the current bridge was dedicated in July of 2008](#). Albert Street itself could use some revitalization, which may happen as part of the new [Crab Creek Corridor redevelopment project](#). The space where 1019 once stood is an empty lot, though nicely maintained (below, right). There's another empty lot next door, and the nearest building that's still standing is, I think, the location of the café that once was a lunch spot for Aeroquip workers.

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<sup>4</sup>See Pecchia, Dan, "Plant Loses Battle: Republic Hose to end operations," *Youngstown Vindicator*, October 7, 1989



Photos by Kathy Wozniak, used by permission

My companions and I then went further north until we came to the former Aeroquip/Republic Rubber on the other side of Albert Street. There we spent some time exploring the site, mostly staying away from the buildings because it didn't seem wise to walk under the sagging ceilings and across the rotting floors. The scene was bleak, and we could tell that the wreckage of what had once been a productive workplace was now sometimes a shelter where unhoused people spent the night. More than thirty years after it closed, Republic Rubber is in a state of complete ruin, nothing but broken buildings and machines, a destination for urban adventurers and aficionados of industrial ruins (see below).



Photos by Kathy Wozniak, used by permission

Urban explorers often post videos online, so after our trip to Republic Rubber, I watched [Lyd Wetzel's video](#), posted in September of 2024. She went much deeper into the wilderness of those

ruins than my walking companions and I did. As a result, she captured an image of some street art on a broken wall that I didn't see (below). In the artwork, a woman with long pink hair is holding back a blue curtain as if to look through a doorway in a still-intact brick wall. Bits of graffiti surround her, but most notable is what the pink-haired woman is showing us, what the street artist is inviting us to look at. Greenery is growing in this abandoned building. We can see grass and shrubbery and another doorway beyond which there are young trees. This palimpsest image shows three fragments of history: a red brick wall that has existed since some time in the twentieth century; the picture of a woman with long pink hair who was added to the brick wall after the building had gone to ruin and through whose image the brick still faintly shows; and the natural world that was there before Republic Rubber was built and that is determined to return.



Still from video by [Lyd Wetzels on YouTube](#), used by permission

After my trip to Albert Street, I visited downtown Youngstown and witnessed a small part of the demolition of the Realty Building at the corner of E. Federal Street and Wick Avenue. The hundred-year-old building had been damaged when a “[natural gas-fueled explosion](#)“ took place in its basement, and the City of Youngstown said the building had to be made safe or taken down. When the decision was made to demolish it, Diane Beatty took many pictures of the process. In the photo below, you can view urban decline through another unexpected portal. This time it's one of the openings in a three-part bicycle rack/sculpture, and through it you can see the old city vanishing from view. This image implies another palimpsest of place because it shows the demolition of a building which had stood there since 1924, seen in turn through the opening in a [sculpture which was installed](#) in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to encourage both public art and bicycle riding. The artist who created this sculpture/bicycle rack, Tony Armeni, used to have a studio at Ward Bakery.



Photo by Diane Beatty, used by permission

Armeni was teaching 3-D Design and Sculpture at Youngstown State University in 2011 when this sculpture was installed. The [process of making these racks](#), which was undertaken at his Ward Bakery studio, involved metalwork and welding during which the artist used techniques that would be familiar to industrial workers. As Jasper Bernes says, "...wage labor and other types of unfree work provide the social and technical *means* for art work. Artists and writers draw from the methods and means and techniques available to them, many of which come from the workplace, and in doing so respond to the world of work..." (Bernes 2017, 1) [In 2023, Armeni said](#) that he was glad that the university, where he taught for 31 years, didn't renew his contract because it allowed him to do more work in his studio at the Ward Bakery Building, which he had used for 28 years. In 2024, however, he was one of the artists who was evicted when U-Haul Storage of Youngstown took over the building.

It's not really a surprise that Armeni's fate as a working university professor mirrored his fate as a working artist. In *No Collar*, Andrew Ross argues that the artist has become a role model for what is increasingly required of workers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is because the artist accepts the need for flexibility, the idea of sacrificial labor, and is also inclined to value personal freedom over on-the-job security. (Ross 2003, 142-143) Elsewhere, Ross notes that today there is a "generalization of the 'mentality' of artists' work across the entire economy, not just among creatives," and this becomes easier to see as more workers are forced to participate in the gig economy. Furthermore, "[The] traditional profile of the artist as unattached and adaptable to circumstances is surely now coming into its own as the ideal definition of the postindustrial knowledge worker: comfortable in an ever-changing environment..." (Bernes 2017, 215, note 29)

As my visit to Youngstown came to an end last summer, I thought about all the ways that artists, workers, and activists are struggling to come to terms with an ever-changing environment. The artists of the Ward Bakery Building have founded a new group, [Loop Youngstown](#), and are looking for new studio space, showing their flexibility and their willingness to work hard to further their art. The workers who once had good-paying jobs in the steel industry and the auto industry and at Republic Rubber went on to find whatever kinds of work were available. Those who are still in the labor force may now be a part of the gig economy as I have been for a number of years. Though I did have a period during which I worked permanent jobs, you could say I went from being editor of *Grassroots Magazine* to being a freelance editor. I have been a member of the [National Writers Union](#) for over twenty years, which allows me to be a part of the labor movement and have a sense of community with other freelancers.

Every time I visit Youngstown, I feel a little more like the narrator in “Spelunkers,” who takes a good look at changes taking place and says, “I saw that the old city was going away.” Viewing the deindustrialized landscape as a palimpsest of place is one way for workers, artists, and activists to view glimpses of the past in the present and gain insights from the contrasts these provide.

### **Author Bio:**

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# Working-Class Politics and Identity Politics: An Engagement with Michael Zweig

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It is a pleasure to read Michael Zweig's works<sup>1</sup> written as they are, for the working-class majority in the United States. In his earlier 2012 work, Zweig examined the distribution of American occupations from the vantage point of power, to claim that the U.S. working class was 63% of the labor force. His latest 2023 text uses updated data on occupational categories<sup>2</sup> to identify 62% of the labor force as working-class; 36% as middle-class; and 2% as the capitalist-class, on the basis of relative power in the occupations. If the working class remains the solid majority, this inescapable social fact remains hidden from most Americans who mistakenly identify themselves as middle class. The progressive political implications of America's "best-kept secret" have yet to be fully realized. Why this is the case stimulates Zweig to offer an incisive analysis of class relations and a novel interpretation of the middle class. These analyses are based consistently on Zweig's understanding of *relative power*, defined as the degree of authority and autonomy (independence) at America's workplaces. Whether or not Zweig's findings are generalizable across the world economy, progressive movements that foreground working class interests have much to gain by politicizing America's best kept secret. Such a politicization however has to navigate the multiple dangers that arise when class identity comes into conflictual relationships with race, ethnic, gender, religious, and national identities attached to workers. These identities can be tremendously divisive. As Zweig notes, "history has shown us time and again how class, race, and gender movements have clashed countless times to the detriment of all"<sup>3</sup>. What values and strategies may overcome these divisions within the working class? Zweig claims that only a dialectical investigation of the relationships between economy, religion, culture and politics, can help us navigate successfully the depths of class, race, ethnicity, gender and religion.

Among the economic, religious, political and other institutions that mutually intertwine as processes in the U.S. social formation, is it necessary to accord primacy of determination to any one of them? Zweig takes a firm position on this question: "Societies are obviously enormously complex structures that involve far more than the economy. People create cultures, religious beliefs, and political procedures, as well as institutions to organize and perpetuate them. All these deeply influence human experience, far beyond the methods of economic life. But, *whatever the*

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<sup>1</sup> The two landmark texts I engage with here are Zweig (2012) *The Working-Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret*, Second Edition; and Zweig (2023) *Class, Race, and Gender: Challenging the Injuries and Divisions of Capitalism*, PM Press. Key themes in the former text reappear in the latter, with a special focus on the dialectics of class, race, and gender.

<sup>2</sup> Zweig uses U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics for several occupational categories. Compare Table 1 on p.30 with Table 1 on p.95 in his 2012 and 2023 texts.

<sup>3</sup> Zweig (2023), p.189.

*specifics, economies are at the core of all societies*"<sup>4</sup>. The centrality of economic organization in society also means this: "In one way or another, *culture, religion, and politics need to facilitate, or at least not significantly disrupt, the economic arrangements* characteristic of the society"<sup>5</sup>. Where do class relations fit into the organization of the economy? Zweig is equally firm on this question: The "class structure... underpins our economy"<sup>6</sup>. "The heart of class is... about economics"<sup>7</sup>.

These propositions that frame Zweig's analysis, create productive as well as problematic tension when he discusses the intersections of class politics with identity politics. The tension arises because Zweig insists upon the *mutual determination* of class, religion, gender, ethnicity, culture, and politics. This tension deserves close attention. I will return to it in later parts of this essay. If the mutual constitution of class and other identities lies at the nerve center of American society, one way to grapple with these identities is to read Zweig carefully.

Zweig tells us that as an undergraduate student, he was drawn into majoring in economics by the promises offered by Keynesian policy towards unemployment and depression<sup>8</sup>. Much of what Zweig writes is far removed from what I find in any mainstream economics textbook. Most economists do not discuss capitalism when they discuss the economy. If they do write about capitalism, they show poor understanding of its dynamics. As Schumpeter observed, "practically every nonsense that has ever been said about capitalism has been championed by some professed economist"<sup>9</sup>.

Zweig's writings are profoundly different in no small part because his method of analysis is dialectical. His latest work offers an insightful chapter on the dialectical method of inquiry, on contradictions that operate simultaneously, and how one or another of these contradictions may be dominant in driving development at any particular time<sup>10</sup>. Zweig uses this concept of the dominant contradiction to try to resolve the tension between contradictions as they appear within progressive movements.

As I read Zweig, it is impossible not to see that his engagements are really with American *society*<sup>11</sup>, even though Zweig insists that economic activity is the bedrock of all societies. I am fascinated by

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<sup>4</sup> Zweig (2023), pp. 75-76: my italics.

<sup>5</sup> Zweig (2023), p.76: my italics.

<sup>6</sup> Zweig (2023), p.90.

<sup>7</sup> Zweig (2012), p.9.

<sup>8</sup> Zweig (2023), p. 129.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Schumpeter (1942) *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, p.144.

<sup>10</sup> See pp. 56-57 in Zweig (2023), Ch.3, titled 'How Do We Know What We Know?'. Zweig applies his understanding of contradictions to his discussions of the capitalist economy in Ch.4. He uncovers 'unities of opposites' in the relations between class and religion (Ch.7); and class, race and gender (in Ch.9 and Ch.10). These are my favorite chapters. Zweig's Ch.9 and Ch.10 have a lot of affinities with two chapters in Michael Hardt's (2023) *The Subversive Seventies*. Both Hardt and Zweig write from the point of view of progressive social movements against structures of oppression. Hardt draws explicitly upon Althusser's (1962) essay on 'Contradiction and Overdetermination'; Zweig seems to do so implicitly when he refers to dominant contradictions.

<sup>11</sup> Following Karl Polanyi (1944), I maintain that the economy is always embedded in society. Polanyi argues that all historical attempts to create autonomous or "self-regulating markets" (by dis-embedding the economy from society) produced counter-movements to protect society from the effects of self-regulating markets. This dialectic of self-regulating markets and 'self-protecting society' is central to understanding the emergence of the progressive New

the many stories Zweig shares from his personal family experiences and left-leaning progressive activism, his introduction to liberation theology by the Catholic chaplain at SUNY Stony Brook, and his contributions to teaching and research on the livelihood struggles of American workers. I see these writings as lovely elaborations of what C. Wright Mills calls the *sociological imagination*<sup>12</sup>, the imaginative ability to connect and relate the biography of the individual to the larger society within which the individual is located, to the institutions that structure society. Zweig tells us about his experiences growing up in Detroit: his political involvement with the United University Professions, the Students for a Democratic Society, the Congress of Racial Equality; and his immersion in the student, antiwar, and civil rights movements. He helped to build the anti-war coalition, US Labor Against the War in 2003, and is involved in the Poor People's Campaign associated with Rev. William J. Barber, Jr., and Rev. Liz Theoharis. These engagements shape his understanding of how power relations work, and his emphasis on *values* as crucial to the building of progressive movements.

Zweig's investigations largely focus on the United States, even though he is clearly aware that the U.S. is a powerful nation whose "global reach" dominates the world system. If the U.S. nation-state is embedded in a larger Interstate System, isn't it necessary to relate class and identity politics in the U.S. with *world* scale processes of class, race and gender formations? How do mutual determinations of class, race, and gender change when we shift our gaze from the U.S. nation-state to the modern world system? Pursuing this bigger question isn't part of Zweig's project. Addressing the intersectionality of class, race, and gender within the U.S. is certainly central to Zweig's project. That still raises two questions. Is it necessary to accord primacy to the economy over society insofar as the economy is an institution within society and insofar as the interrelations between different institutions mutually constitute each other? Zweig makes capitalism into a master frame of reference<sup>13</sup>. Could doing so become problematic in the project of unifying the struggles of progressive social movements across different identities? In what follows, I will engage primarily with Zweig's latest (2023) text; but I will be informed by Zweig's (2012) text throughout this engagement.

### **I: Productive Forces and Production Relations as Unity of Opposites in constituting the Economy**

I begin with Zweig's analysis of the capitalist economy. For Zweig, productive economic activity is the bedrock of all societies, but it is in capitalism that "for the first time in history, production is a process that integrates the entire society"<sup>14</sup>. Zweig follows Marx's dialectical method in identifying the technical and the social aspects of the production process whose internal relations comprise "a unity of opposites that are together central in constituting an economy". Production is *technical* because it involves means and methods – the existing productive forces in the form of

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Deal in the U.S.; and the reactionary forms of fascism and Nazism in Europe. See Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*, Beacon Paperback edition, Boston, 2001. In my understanding, Zweig uncritically prioritizes 'economic dynamics' over all other dynamics in society.

<sup>12</sup> C. Wright Mills (1967) *The Sociological Imagination*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

<sup>13</sup> The subtitle of Zweig's (2023) work is "Challenging the Injuries and Divisions of *Capitalism*". Marx seldom mentions 'capitalism' in his three volumes on *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*.

<sup>14</sup> Zweig (2023), p.85.

available technology, tools and equipment – that workers use to make and distribute commodities. Production is *social* in that it involves people working together in forms of cooperative labor in capitalist workplaces. Since these are distinct but intertwined aspects, a dialectical study of the economy must investigate the effects of their “mutual determination”.

Mutual determination of the two aspects of the production process, however, involves class struggles that arise out of the control of ownership of the means of production by small powerful groups in society, and the simultaneous exclusion of the rest of society from ownership of the means of production. Control over the ownership of means of production enables control over decisions regarding what to produce and how to produce – it is an expression of capitalist power in the workplaces owned and directed by them. Class relations express unequal and exploitative power relations in the workplace that spill over into the rest of society. Exploitative power relations are reproduced by producing consent for existing relations of power, by getting the exploited “to accept their own subordination”. When this internalized acceptance breaks down, “military force and repressive policing come into the open”<sup>15</sup>. In short, through a combination of consent and coercion, the capitalist class reproduces existing power relations in order to appropriate an enormous *surplus* that results from these exploitative relations. This surplus is disguised when we use categories like “profit” to designate the reward for ‘risk-taking’ by capitalist businesses or “rent” for the reward from ownership of land or “wages” as the reward for the productive activities of the working class. Zweig notes that the great bulk of the wealth of capitalist society takes the form of “economic surplus” that the productivity of the working class creates over and above what it requires for its reproduction according to prevailing consumption norms<sup>16</sup>. Who comprises this capitalist class that appropriates the social surplus? What is its relationship with the other classes in the social structure?

## II: The Class Structure of American Society

Zweig identifies three basic classes – the capitalist class, the middle class, and the working class<sup>17</sup> – defined in terms of their relative power, the degree of autonomy and authority exercised at the workplace. Working-Class occupations have least power, while Capitalists have the most concentrated forms of power. The middle class that operates “in the economic spaces between capital and labor”, is composed of three broad groups: managers and supervisors who report to the most senior executives in big businesses; small business owners; and professionals.

Zweig defines the capitalist class as all those who own and direct Big Businesses, typically hiring twenty or more employees<sup>18</sup>. Owners of Big Businesses do not work directly with the workers.

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<sup>15</sup> Zweig (2023), pp.76;78.

<sup>16</sup> Zweig (2023), p.45.

<sup>17</sup> Zweig (2012) focused on these three basic classes, to suggest that “the ruling class” is a subset of the capitalist class. Zweig (2023) claims that the ruling class is “above” these three basic classes, operating at a different level. The ruling class, Zweig (2023: 98-99) notes, comprise people who ‘are typically not capitalists themselves, although many are’.

<sup>18</sup> Zweig notes that there were only 639,000 Big Businesses in the US in 2005, each employing 20 or more employees. The owners and directors of these Big Businesses are the Capitalist Class, around 2% of the US labor force. Zweig also uses the U.S Small Business Administration’s definition, according to which, a Big Business is one that employs 500 or more employees. By this definition, there were only 21,000 Big Businesses in 2005, whose owners

They strategically remove themselves from the production process even though they exercise control over the workforce through at least one layer of middle management. They are a microscopic minority of the workforce.

Zweig makes a welcome distinction between Big Business and Small Business. Only Big Businesses are *capitalist* businesses. Small Business owners are caught “in-the-middle-of” a crossfire: on the one hand they have to struggle to reproduce themselves because Big Businesses monopolize market power; on the other hand, even if they may be sensitive to the concerns of the small number of workers they hire, small business owners are unable to meet the financial and other demands of their workers. They are caught in the middle of a crossfire of powerful interests from above (the capitalists) and from below (the workers), and it is this contradictory location (rather than income or consumption or lifestyle) that makes them middle class. Zweig makes similar arguments with respect to foremen and supervisors; as well as professionals (teachers, doctors, lawyers, and managers) who are situated “in-the-middle-of” conflicting interests from “above” (like the capitalist board of education that undermines the autonomy of teachers and the capitalist healthcare institution and Big Pharmaceutical capital that whittles away the autonomy of doctors) and from “below” (like parents who want their children to receive a quality education from teachers; and patients who want to trust their health to the expertise of doctors).

This insightful conceptualization of the middle class is new, illuminating, and compelling<sup>19</sup>. Income does *not* determine class-belonging; but income has a lot to do with class. When Zweig examines data on urban household income distribution data, he finds that the bottom 60% of households make average annual incomes that do not make them “middle-class” in any meaningful sense. In fact, the bottom 60% of households saw sharp falls in their share of national income between 1968 and 2009. This includes the lowest quintile (the bottom 20% of households in the income distribution) that American society refers to as “the Poor” who may be entitled to receive some form of welfare assistance. It is this group of poor households that the mainstream media misleadingly refers to as “the underclass”. Mainstream media claims that all those who are on welfare are poor black households and immigrants. However, the majority of urban households in this lowest quintile labeled as “the Poor” are Hispanic White and non-Hispanic White households. As Zweig observes, “two-thirds (68.5 percent) of all poor people in the United States in 2009 were white (42.5 percent of the poor were non-Hispanic white) while three-quarters of all

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and directors were 315,000 individual capitalists, the ‘National Economic Elite’. A subset of this elite includes those who sit on the Board of Directors of ‘national scale corporations’, some 245,000 ‘Captains of Industry’. An even smaller network of directors sits on two or more boards of the most powerful financial, industrial, and agribusinesses. Along with ‘top-level political and cultural leaders, this small network of some 52,000 individuals comprises the U.S. ‘ruling class’. “The entire U.S. ruling class could easily be seated in the Yankee Stadium”. Although the ruling class isn’t monolithic, its members have sufficient similarity and coherence of interest to differentiate them from the rest of society, and to offer strategic guidance to U.S. society. See Zweig (2012: pp.16-17); and Zweig (2023: p.99).

<sup>19</sup> Goran Therborn’s critical appraisal of the ‘global middle classes’ is relevant here. Therborn finds that economists and World Bank professionals distort reality when they use arbitrary income measures to optimistically point to an exploding middle class in the world system. Therborn (2020: 79) writes: “In bankers’ eyes, ‘middle class’ and ‘poverty’ are defined solely by the dollar sign”, draining these terms of any sociological meaning. See “Dreams and Nightmares of the World’s Middle Classes”, *New Left Review*, July/August 2020, pp.63-87.

black people were not poor”<sup>20</sup>. If we now look at the second lowest quintile which Zweig refers to as “the core” of the U.S. working class, we find here the stereotypical “angry white guy” whose average annual household income disqualifies him from access to welfare payments. This makes households in this second-lowest quintile resentful of the households in the lowest quintile of the income distribution, even though both these quintiles – the lowest 20% and the second-lowest 20% of households – are solidly part of the working class! Insofar as he is influenced by media portraits of the Poor, the “angry white guy” in the second-lowest quintile picks on households in the lowest quintile as the target for his anger, because he mistakenly assumes that all households in the lowest quintile are either Black households or immigrant households living off welfare checks! Immigrant households often fall into the lowest quintile of the income distribution. Still, the majority of households in this lowest quintile are White households! Only 25% of Black households are in the lowest quintile. Zweig shows us how these stereotypes of the poor promote racism and divide the working class. These stereotypes make white households who are *not* “poor” – insofar as they make an annual income above the Federal Poverty Line, itself an arbitrarily constructed line below which some stingy amount of welfare dollars goes to the households in the lowest quintile – resent the bottom 20% of households mistakenly understood to be only blacks or immigrants.

Poverty itself, Zweig remarks with uncommon wisdom, “is something that happens to the working class” (2012, pp. 89-92). We should see the poor as working people who have run into hard times. Zweig also explains how almost every argument that demonizes immigrants is misplaced. There is no evidence that most immigrants are criminally inclined; there is no consensus that immigrants steal jobs from American citizens; there is no data that supports the false claim that the U.S. fiscal crisis is attributable to welfare payments and the presence of immigrants. If anything, it is U.S. foreign policy in South America that creates distress flows of immigrants into the U.S. If the U.S. would stop interfering in the politics of these societies, there wouldn’t be the immigration problem that the media and right-wing Republicans point out as the most urgent social issue! Zweig mentions the complicity of the U.S. State in empowering corrupt right-wing regimes in Central and South America that promote US corporate plunder, and how these policies “go a long way to explain the flow of large numbers of people from those countries to the US in recent decades”<sup>21</sup>.

This isn’t, however, something that happened just in recent decades. The exploitative character of U.S. relations with Latin America goes back at least to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. US-Latin American relations, labor historians point out, undermined not only the future of the labor movement in Latin America; they also undermined the future of the labor movement in the United States by worsening the racism of the American working class<sup>22</sup>. The American working class buys into simplistic ideas of upward mobility that suggest that anyone who works hard can realize the American Dream of moving up in the class hierarchy and becoming middle class. The poor then become lazy people who deserve their fate. These understandings – recycled in the media – make for bad politics. Zweig reminds us that luck and chance play an important role in upward mobility, as do structural barriers like race, ethnicity, gender, and religion. The structure of the U.S. economy however plays

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<sup>20</sup> Zweig (2012): p.80 in the insightful chapter ‘Why is Class Important?’, pp. 61-75.

<sup>21</sup> Zweig (2023), pp. 177-78.

<sup>22</sup> See Charles Bergquist (1996) *Labor and the Course of American Democracy: US History in Latin American Perspective*.

a central role: if the movement upward in the class hierarchy from working class to middle class was shared by millions of Euro-males during the Cold War decades, the U-turn in the U.S. economy during and after the mid-1970s is increasingly associated with class polarization and downward mobility affecting also the middle class.

Yet the media and political institutions consistently maintain that America is a [middle class](#) society. As Zweig explains, when the working class disappears into the middle class and the capitalist class disappears into “the rich”, we lose sight of the contours of power. We lose sight of the surplus appropriated by the capitalists, and we remain mystified by the economic category that goes by the name of “wages”. Are wages really the just rewards or compensations offered for the productivity of workers? The sustained trend growth in workers’ productivity since the mid-1960s contrasts sharply with the trend stagnation or decline in real wages of workers. How do we make sense of this paradox?

Zweig argues that there is one important way to understand this paradox of the rising real wage-productivity gap. “*Wages do not correspond to or reflect what workers produce. Wages correspond to what it takes to produce workers.* Surplus arises in the difference between these two: the amount by which what workers produce exceeds what the workers need to go on working and raise children to take their place, at the socially accepted standard of living, provided either by wages from an employer or government programs”<sup>23</sup>. Rather than seeing government programs like Medicaid and food stamps as entitlements, it is more accurate to understand them as part of the *social wage*, “a channel for providing compensation to the working class that supplements the private wage paid by the employer”<sup>24</sup>.

What are the implications that follow from the asymmetrical power relations that determine wages, and the surplus created in the production process? In the first place, the low average wages offered to workers as their “just reward” in relation to their productivity disguises their economic exploitation, their struggles against the degradation of work, and their overwhelming experience of estrangement from the workplace. Yet mainstream approaches render exploitation a meaningless concept. “They hide the relationship between labor and capital that creates surplus in capitalist economies, surplus that is the material foundation of profit”<sup>25</sup>. Second, struggles over the social wage are a crucial part of the *class struggle* against capitalist politics of austerity that seek to eliminate welfare and public spending on higher education, housing, and healthcare. Third, capitalist’s control over the surplus created by productive workers leads to an enormous waste of this surplus.

Militarism is one form taken by the waste of surplus. The U.S military absorbed 53% of discretionary Federal spending in 2019 and is the greatest single consumer of fossil fuels in the world economy. Reliance on fossil fuels drives resource wars alongside the destruction of nature. Nature and society are another “unity of opposites”, Zweig argues, because “people are elements

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<sup>23</sup> Zweig (2023), p.83.

<sup>24</sup> Zweig (2023), p.82.

<sup>25</sup> Zweig (2023), p.84.

of nature”<sup>26</sup>. Capitalism disconnects nature from society in its pursuit of short-run profits which often leads to irreversible environmental damage. Capitalists demand an end to all governmental regulation of the environment; they also demand the privatization of government. The privatization of schools, prisons, military operations, and healthcare undermines the livelihood of the working class<sup>27</sup>. Only a powerful working-class movement can access and repurpose all that wasted surplus<sup>28</sup>.

### III: Class Politics in the Union Movement and the Labor Movement

What does it take to create a powerful working class movement? How may the American working class reconstitute itself such that it is not merely a class “in-itself”, but a class “for-itself”? Zweig notes that Unions are important; they are not, however, automatic instruments of worker power. The Union slogan, “An injury to one is an injury to all”, has become a “quaint abstraction”. Working-Class power “rests only in the active and organized rank and file who make the union their own”<sup>29</sup>. Unions must also be independent of political parties. By allying itself with the Democratic Party, American unions became top-down bureaucratic organizations without any powerful or independent working class vision to guide their politics. “It weakens us to believe that unions have brought American workers into the middle class, as union leaders typically say in defense of the importance of unions.” Such an approach ‘misses the proper focus of struggle: the capitalist class and its ruling elites’. “If the target of our political campaigns is ‘the rich’, or even ‘the billionaire class’ without further explanation, we reinforce the false understanding of class as a question of degrees of income and wealth only”. Although current political language has come to accept the term “working class”, it is important to popularize the *capitalist class* (not “the rich”) as the antithesis of the working class<sup>30</sup>.

Zweig links the popular *misperception* that America is a middle-class society to the “ideology and politics of the Cold War”<sup>31</sup>. The ruling class outlawed all “class talk” as unpatriotic, and purged communists and left-wing organizers from U.S. society. One legacy of Cold War anticommunism is that “almost all union leadership have tied themselves to an unyielding defense of capitalism as a system... settling into the role of junior partner to capital inside the Democratic Party”<sup>32</sup>. American Unions offered uncritical allegiance to the war in Vietnam despite a strong anti-war movement inside the U.S. In fact, as Jeff Schuhrke explains, the leadership of the AFL-CIO unions joined with U.S. foreign policy representatives to systematically undermine progressive labor movements abroad<sup>33</sup>. Stripped of all its progressive, left-leaning organizers, Unions became xenophobic, racist, and sexist organizations. The Cold War (1945-1975) nevertheless facilitated

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<sup>26</sup> This is one of Polanyi’s insights. Labor and land are inextricably intertwined relations. The term ‘culture’ itself, I would argue, is primarily an expression of the relationship of people with land.

<sup>27</sup> Zweig (2023), pp. 122-133.

<sup>28</sup> Zweig (2023), p.46.

<sup>29</sup> Zweig (2012), p.135, and p.140.

<sup>30</sup> Zweig (2023), pp.51-52.

<sup>31</sup> See pp. 52-55 in Zweig (2012).

<sup>32</sup> Zweig (2023), p.18.

<sup>33</sup> See Jeff Schuhrke (2024) *Blue Collar Empire: The Untold History of US Labor’s Global Anticommunist Crusade*.

upward mobility for millions of white Euro-males, even as it excluded African Americans as well as women.

Zweig argues that upward mobility is limited by the structure of the U.S. economy. But the structure of the U.S. economy is itself embedded within the structures of the larger capitalist *world system* that the U.S. State played a central part in shaping after 1945. Zweig writes that “the nation and its state have become the overarching identity that has rooted and activated or constrained the individual”<sup>34</sup>. Doesn’t identifying with the nation-state promote forms of patriotism that undermine international working class solidarity? Zweig’s analysis does not engage with the effects of interstate rivalries and interenterprise competition in which the U.S. nation-state continues to play a leading role. The dialectical relations central to Zweig’s method of understanding the material world unfold within the global political economy, and they shape domestic American politics. U.S. militarism and U.S. capitalism are also dialectically related; they are mutually constitutive. U.S. foreign policy promoted military-industrial complexes as well as the U.S.-led world economic boom. That boom came to an end in the late 1960s and early 1970s in large part because competition from European and East Asian business enterprises squeezed the profitability of big U.S. manufacturing businesses. Corporate manufacturing profits continued to be squeezed by declining rates of return from reinvestments in “hot” wars in East Asia. The genocidal war in Vietnam produced a legitimacy crisis of the U.S. ruling class. As the U.S. deindustrialized in the late 1970s and beyond, the U.S. economy became increasingly deregulated and “financialized”, marked by a long and sustained switch from capitalist investments in productive manufacturing-based industries to investments in stocks and bonds in financial markets. This long switch, and the multiple financial crises that punctuated the decades leading up to the 2007-8 financial meltdown, underlies all those unproductive activities that Zweig denounces, like “the increasingly arcane filigrees of financial derivatives, currency speculation, and commercial activity that undermine the ability of the economy to improve living standards while concentrating wealth in the hands of fewer and fewer people”<sup>35</sup>. The long-term effects of this “financial expansion” during the 1980s and beyond<sup>36</sup>, were borne by workers across the world, including those in the U.S. in the forms Zweig refers to – “wage cuts, erosion of pension benefits, and government cuts in social safety net programs” – that ‘reflect the power of capital to reduce the expected standard of living’ of workers, and to increase the share of surplus appropriated by capitalists<sup>37</sup>.

The support of the AFL-CIO for U.S. militarism during the Cold War decades immensely alienated all those struggling for civil rights, women’s rights, and LGBTQ+ rights. U.S. military involvement in the Vietnam War (1964-1976) and union politics allied with that involvement, profoundly divided American workers along the lines of class, race, and gender. U.S. union density dropped to an all-time low at less than 10% of the workforce. Zweig points to a profound “moral failure” in a movement that “focuses only on the injuries of class”, and “ignores injuries of racism

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<sup>34</sup> Zweig (2023), pp. 154-155.

<sup>35</sup> Zweig (2023), p.46.

<sup>36</sup> See the pathbreaking text by Giovanni Arrighi (1994) *The Long Twentieth Century*, for an exposition of the dialectics of ‘material expansions’ and ‘financial expansions’ over the longue duree of historical capitalism.

<sup>37</sup> Zweig (2023), p.81.

and sexism”. A strategic defeat results from this moral failure. “If working class organizations neglect the insults of racism and sexism, women and minorities who insist upon justice for themselves may build identity movements that disregard the working class standing of most women and minorities. Those movements will then be less effective in winning anything for working women or working class minorities, and less useful as allies to workers’ organizations”<sup>38</sup>. Looking at the record of such moral failures within the union movement, Zweig insists: “The *labor* movement must be bigger than the *union* movement and organize beyond it”<sup>39</sup>. A bigger labor movement has to be clear about what *values* should guide it, values that must intersect with values attached to diverse identities of the working class.

#### IV: Intersections of Class Politics and Identity Politics

Zweig argues that *values* bear a “class stamp”. He writes that “our choice of values carries with it the empowerment of one class or another”. Progressive movements must connect values – like mutual aid, respect for the dignity of each person, individual responsibility toward the public good, and a commitment to minimizing the suffering of working-class people – with the policy platform they advance<sup>40</sup>. Progressive organizers must respect those they seek to organize; and remain answerable to them. These values guided the Poor People’s Campaign initiated by Reverend Martin Luther King in 1968; and they inform the call for “moral revival” that animates his followers today. Zweig demonstrates how religion is dialectically related with larger class struggles in society. Some religious traditions like liberation theology are important carriers of *moral* values like “the preferential option for the poor”. These values often conflict with the values of institutionalized religion. It takes strong class consciousness to assert that salvation is *not* a result of individual piety but requires collective participation in movements against ‘sinful’ social structures. It takes class consciousness to see that poverty *happens* to the working class, and not to some marginal “other” demonized by the media as “the underclass”<sup>41</sup>. Practitioners of liberation theology readily recognize this social fact. Those who place an exaggerated emphasis on capitalist individualism ignore the dialectical unity between individual and society. They prefer to see only a collection of separate individuals rather than our social connectedness or the class character of capitalist production. “Only when it comes to class identity have so many people learned to withdraw into the sanctity of individuality.... Class consciousness at the top is accepted.... Class consciousness among workers is a threat to capitalist class rule”<sup>42</sup>.

Do values carry *only* a class stamp? Is it enough in short, to uphold anti-capitalist values? Are there not strong values associated with the anti-racist identity of African Americans that demand our respect? Are there not strong values associated with the anti-patriarchal identity of the feminist movement? Are there not strong values associated with the struggles of the LGBTQ+ movement against oppressive heterosexual norms? Aren’t these values incommensurable? Isn’t it the task of progressive movements to *unite* these *different and incommensurable values* that working people uphold in their diversity of belonging to race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality? Identity-based

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<sup>38</sup> Zweig (2012), pp. 134-135.

<sup>39</sup> Zweig (2012), p.140.

<sup>40</sup> See Zweig (2023), p. 30; p.149.

<sup>41</sup> Zweig (2023), pp.4; 51; 140. See also Zweig (2012), pp.89-92 in the superb chapter, “Looking at the Underclass”.

<sup>42</sup> Zweig (2023), p.155.

movements are struggles against multiple structures of oppression in society, struggles that coexist with struggles against the class-based structure of oppression. There isn't a hierarchy among the different structures of oppression. Capitalism draws upon patriarchy: and Patriarchy accommodates itself to capitalist values. Capitalism draws upon Racism: and Racism benefits from Capitalism. There is a symbiotic relationship between these structures of power rather than a hierarchy. This has the strategic implication that progressive movements should reject *any* hierarchy in the identities that intersect and combine to resist structures of power. If there is a hierarchy of identities it can only promote unproductive tension. Zweig is aware of this when he writes: "This tension between class and 'identity politics' is perhaps the most important and difficult dynamic that progressive politics has to navigate"<sup>43</sup>. Looking back at the powerful intersectional Black Lives Matter uprisings of 2020, Zweig wants to *recreate* with understanding, patience, daring, and strength of purpose, such a powerful *intersectional* movement<sup>44</sup>.

How do we do this? Don't we need "a nuanced understanding of the experiences of different constituencies", in order to navigate progressive politics in such a way that issues of class, race, ethnicity and gender reinforce one another rather than being pitted against each other<sup>45</sup>? In his earlier work, Zweig famously claimed that "working class politics cannot be a substitute for identity politics based on race, gender, or sexual orientation. To be most effective, working class politics needs to complement and incorporate these other movements"<sup>46</sup>. How is this to happen? Does making capitalism into a master concept strategically resolve these tensions?

Progressive politics is complicated, Zweig writes, because class and race are "mutually determined, yet at the same time distinct, with ethnic issues drawn into the dynamics as well". Class and gender are also "mutually determined" yet again distinct<sup>47</sup>. To claim that class, race, ethnicity and gender are mutually determined and yet distinct is to admit that each of these structures of oppression are *relatively autonomous* and *intertwined*. There is no hierarchy of oppression! So why do I see some ambiguity in Zweig's analysis of intersecting oppressions?

Race, for instance, Zweig writes, is an instrument of social control directed at all working people, white and black. Zweig calls for a dialectical understanding of race and class by citing Adolph Reed: "Class – as an expression of location within the political economy – is the framework in which race attains meaning"<sup>48</sup>. Zweig does *not* tell whether he agrees or disagrees with Reed's claim. Nor does he elaborate on the implications of Reed's claim. If class is indeed the framework within which race attains its meaning, then race dynamics do *not* operate independently of class; in fact, they are determined by class dynamics, because it is class dynamics that give meaning to our understanding of how race works.

This is surely problematic. Zweig admits that neither race nor class "exists in the U.S without the other entwined in it". But his implicit endorsement of Reed's claim that "class is the framework in

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<sup>43</sup> Zweig (2023), p.52.

<sup>44</sup> Zweig (2023), p.9.

<sup>45</sup> Zweig (2023), p.189.

<sup>46</sup> Zweig (2012), p.133.

<sup>47</sup> Zweig (2023), p.189.

<sup>48</sup> See Zweig (2023), p.167 for the quote from Reed.

which race attains meaning” is as problematic as is Stuart Hall’s claim that “race is the modality in which class is lived”<sup>49</sup>. Zweig writes: “Race and class are separate and different of course, but they constitute a unity of opposites”<sup>50</sup>. If race and class are separate and different structures of oppression, then each has a *relative autonomy* of its own. The concept of “racial capitalism” coined by Cedric Robinson, emphasizes how “the modes of domination of capitalist society are completely enmeshed with those of white supremacy, and that the two axes of power are not only relatively autonomous and equally significant, but also intertwined and mutually constitutive”<sup>51</sup>. Racial dynamics are both intertwined with capitalist dynamics and remain relatively autonomous in relation to class dynamics. Zweig himself highlights how the mutual determination of race and class has operated in the U.S at least since the beginnings of settler-colonialism<sup>52</sup>. So, neither race nor class constitute a superior structure of oppression. Yet it is difficult not to get the impression that Zweig implicitly privileges class dynamics over race dynamics when he doesn’t criticize Reed’s claim that race *only* finds its meaning within the framework of class.

Consider also Zweig’s brief, all too brief, remarks on the relationship between class and gender<sup>53</sup>. Zweig writes that gender experiences shape class dynamics just as class dynamics shape gender relations. He explains how the piecework undertaken by women in households may be seen as the earliest form of relations between wage-labor and capital. He underlines the unpaid value of household labor of women<sup>54</sup>: this includes multiple forms of affective labor. The struggles of women, Zweig reminds us, were central to the evolution of the U.S labor movement. Zweig also draws attention to what Frances Beal calls “triple jeopardy”, the travails associated with being a woman who is also black and poor<sup>55</sup>. Black and lesbian feminists formulated this theory of triple oppression to emphasize the connection among racial, gender, and class oppression. The concept of “racial patriarchy” is one way to articulate this connection. So is the concept of “patriarchal capitalism” or “racial capitalism” along with the claim that the eradication of one form of oppression requires the concurrent dismantlement of all forms of oppression<sup>56</sup>.

These considerations lead me to another question. How do we make sense of Zweig’s insistence that the *common ultimate source* of suffering from injustices of class, race, and gender ‘stems from its *domination by capitalism*’<sup>57</sup>? If this is indeed the case then capitalism, not patriarchy or race or ethnicity lies at the root of all our ills. I find this puzzling when I read Zweig’s admission that “Racism and male supremacy existed *before capitalism*. They do not require capitalism for their perpetuation”<sup>58</sup>. Yet Zweig frames capitalism as a master narrative even as he admits: “The

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<sup>49</sup> Stuart Hall (1977) ‘Pluralism, Race and Class in Caribbean Society’, cited in Hardt (2023:155).

<sup>50</sup> Zweig (2023), p.167.

<sup>51</sup> Hardt (2023), p.153, refers to Cedric Robinson’s (1983) *Black Marxism*.

<sup>52</sup> Zweig (2023), p.168.

<sup>53</sup> Zweig (2023), pp. 179-186.

<sup>54</sup> The total value of unpaid household labor in the US amounted to \$1.5 trillion in 2018; for the world economy it amounted to nearly \$11 trillion in 2021 (Zweig 2023: 180).

<sup>55</sup> Zweig (2023), p.184.

<sup>56</sup> I am indebted to two chapters written by Michael Hardt for some sharp insights: chapter 11, “Feminist Articulations: A Theory of Intersectionality *Avant la Lettre*”; and chapter 12, “Strategic Racial Multiplicities”, in Hardt (2023), *The Subversive Seventies*, Oxford.

<sup>57</sup> Zweig (2023), p.189: my italics.

<sup>58</sup> Zweig (2023), p.197: my italics.

interplay of class, race, and gender does *not* create or involve a hierarchy of interests. We cannot rightly say that one is central, and the others subordinate or peripheral”<sup>59</sup>. These admissions must be read alongside another: “At any one time or place, one or another of these oppressions and resistances will be most central to the long-term growth of movement power. We all have to analyze *the situation* and negotiate relations among the various parts of the movement and the timing and sequence of the movement’s focus to maintain coherence”<sup>60</sup>. I would prefer to replace what Zweig calls “the situation” with the concept of “the conjuncture”. The conjuncture is the present moment in which all the structural contradictions appear in concentrated form.

I would like to recast Zweig’s claims in a sharper manner. In the first place, there is no hierarchy between Capitalism, Racism, and Patriarchy as intertwined *structures* of oppression. These are articulated structures of power, each of which adapts to the other to reproduce oppressive relations in the entirety of society. In the second place, the best strategy for intersectional progressive movements is to prioritize forms of resistance in relation to the form of structural oppression that dominates the *conjuncture*. The anti-capitalist movement, the anti-racist movement, the anti-patriarchal movement are relatively autonomous movements. Despite their relative autonomy, these movements can intersect strategically to articulate an adequate form of resistance against the particular (dominating) form taken by structural oppression during a specific conjuncture. In the current conjuncture dominated by murderous ethnic cleansing of Palestinians and relentless attacks on immigrants, progressive movements must surely make anti-racist politics the primary focus of their collective energies.

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<sup>59</sup> Zweig (2023), p.197: my italics.

<sup>60</sup> Zweig (2023), p.198: my italics.

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# Into the sun

**Ian C Smith**

A couple arrived early, kicked sand, posturing through courtship's universal game. The boy, thirteen, spied, shade his screen, tasting the scald of his breath. He had again fled the savagery of his war-damaged immigrant family, sleeping, lightly clad, shivering through the night in the storage space under a beach hut after hitchhiking there. Behind the hut sandy trails meandered through straggly tea trees where flies attended dead condoms. Beyond that slouched a town with employment problems, businesses mainly catering for summer visitors. Emerging into wan light, impatient, the boy welcomed morning's fresh slant on affairs. The woman facing his way undid her top like a conjuror's revelation, her breasts bouncing for the occasion. The man, that lucky sod, kissed the curve of her, the boy, statuesque under the hut's eaves, fearing being seen, her laughter and spent waves the only sounds so early. This would resemble a camera shot much later in memory's treasury.

That afternoon young men shouted to be noticed by a red bikini languid under a blue umbrella. A dog barked lunging at a beach ball bobbing on a silver-topped wavelet rushing into the hot embrace of yellow sand. Far out, painted on the convergence of blues, a white yacht navigated towards the estuary's expanse promising adventure in the wider world. The sun posed, golden on the sky's stage while the boy tried to imagine being loved. By anybody. He invented dialogue with himself cool and heroic like a starring actor, or a sports champion, or something equally far-fetched, a writer. All this to swelling orchestral music. A psychologist, his partner years later, said he was like the sorry Vietnam vets she counselled. He disagreed with her view that he carted anger around like a deadweight burden. The young men's shouts became airwave ghosts, froth gummed the tideline, the yacht became a dot, then disappeared, and the retiring sun flung out pink streaks as it sank. Waves the boy shunned all day, indefatigably designed, ignored this finality.

Without food or much money, possibly influenced by cinematic make-believe, the hungry boy decided to stalk gathered gulls, hurling a fusillade of weighty rocks their way then cooking and eating an unlucky one. He kept matches with his tobacco. Those gulls avoided his half-arsed potshots to skim the estuary's mud cracks like today's skateboarders, feathers ruffling in the sandsplit wind. These, and the shore littered with the emptiness of departure, are among what the sunburnt boy, grizzled now, recalls of that location known for its high crime rate. And, of course, shining in memory, his silent surveillance. And how he considered vanishing like a magic trick, but forever, so his people should be sorry, the flux of that possibility. Sunlight slanting through his French windows, he relives witnessed moments from one hazy day imagining a kind of happiness, the elusive ache of things.

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# Three Poems: “The Ballad of My First Communion”, “The Our Father Working-Class Riding Mower Blues”, “Duck, You Dumbass”

William J. Doan, Penn State

## The Ballad of My First Communion

Jimmy is a public-schoolkid who comes to St. Mary’s for First Communion classes.

A parish of immigrant, working-class poor,  
St. Mary’s insiders don’t usually associate with public schoolers  
for fear of exposure to the worldly chaos of secular ideas.  
Or maybe we just think we’re better than them.

But I really like Jimmy.

He has just a little fuzz on top of his head and is kind of pale.  
My like-blinded comrades of the Altar Boy Society for Catholic  
Fundamentalist Fools harass me for befriending this public-school kid  
who looks like a ghost.

I pray for Jimmy.

Every day at mass I light a candle at the back of church. I have no money to  
leave in exchange for this invocation.  
Sometimes I leave my milk money  
but I never tell anyone what I did with my dime for fear of jinxing the  
candles I light for Jimmy.

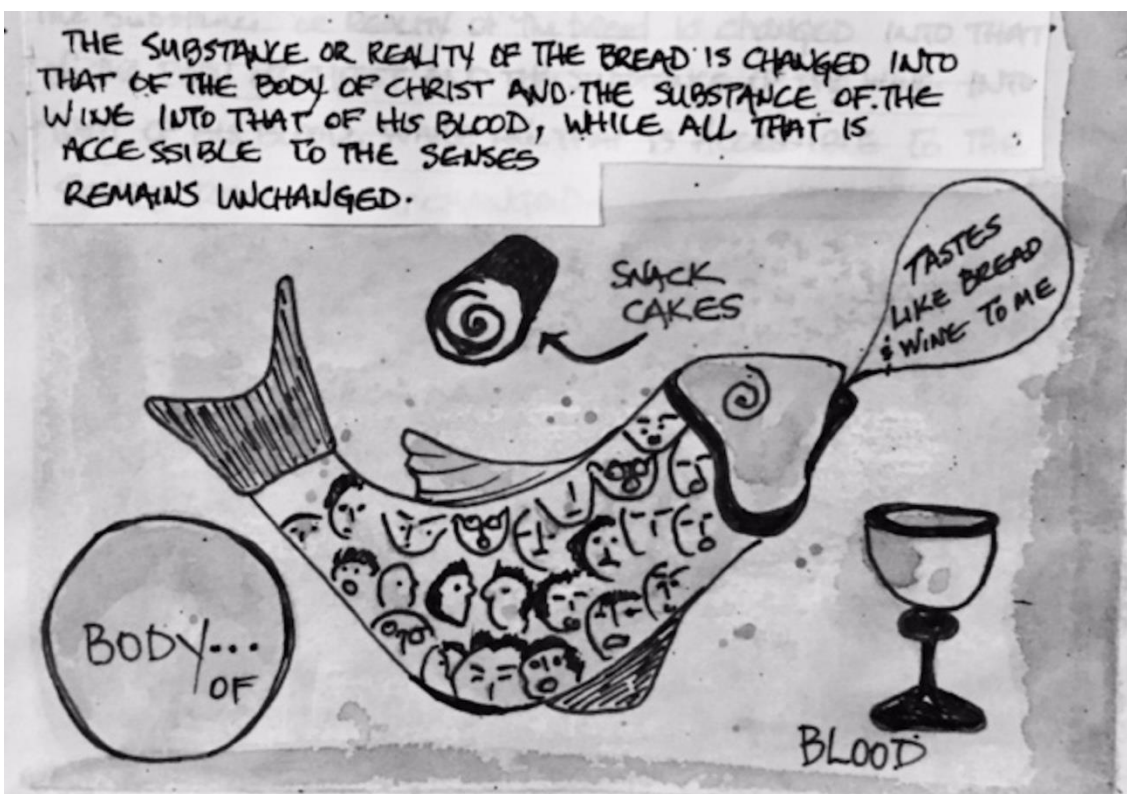
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The candle’s smoke carries petitions straight to heaven, so I watch.  
The smoke rises and disappears into what I am sure is God’s listening ear.  
That’s what Sister Mary Mark says.  
We call Sr. Mary Mark Zorro because of the marks she leaves  
on our bodies.

At First Communion, Jimmy and I make sure we are next to each other so we can compare our “body of Christ” experiences as soon as they happen.

We try convincing ourselves it’s just bread, but our imaginations flood with cannibalistic flashes of that metallic taste when you suck your own blood from a cut.

We wait for the day that wafer will suddenly transform into something like a juicy piece of steak.





Jimmy says he can't pray.  
Sometimes he even refuses, which  
really pisses Zorro off.  
He tries to, to make his mom happy.  
Every time he tries, he starts laughing or cussing.  
And he can really cuss.

Jimmy often overhears his parents talking.  
His mom prays First Communion will bring a healing.  
His dad cautions her not to get her hopes up.  
Caught between death and divine intervention,  
Jimmy's parents whisper nightly behind their bedroom door.  
So, I pray and we both cuss.

Every week, the priest visits, telling us the same thing.  
"You will partake of the body and blood of Christ.  
Eating and drinking the flesh and blood of our Lord and Savior."  
Flesh and blood. Eat flesh and drink blood.  
A mantra linking us to a chain of carnivorous creatures  
brainwashed by the brand of their worship.

On First Communion Day we are in the front row.  
Boys on the right, girls on the left.  
Boys dressed in navy blue suits, white shirts, and navy ties.  
My jacket has the St. Mary's school crest on it.  
I don't want to wear it because Jimmy doesn't have the crest,  
but mom tells me I have to.  
Communion time finally arrives. Jimmy and I glance at each other.  
I step into the aisle, Jimmy right behind me.  
Kathy is first in the girl's row.  
She looks so beautiful in her white dress and veil.  
Kathy gave me my first kiss under a stairwell at St. Mary's.





We arrive at the Communion rail. Kneel side by side.  
Perfectly synchronized, like midgets getting married.  
We watch as each kid in class receives First Holy Communion  
trying desperately to see signs of transformation.  
“My mouth is so dry,” Jimmy whispers to me.  
Father John says, “Body of Christ.” Kathy whispers, “Amen.”  
I’m next. Father John looks me in the eye and says,  
“Bill, the Body of Christ.”  
“Amen Father.”

I stick my tongue out as far as I can without gagging.  
Father John smiles and places the host on my tongue.  
I quickly cross myself and head back for the pew.  
Jimmy tucks in behind me.  
I kneel, working up enough spit to  
deal with the host clinging to the roof of my mouth.  
When will I taste flesh and blood?  
When will it swell and ooze?

Jimmy begins fidgeting.  
His right hand is in his mouth and he’s trying to hide it with his left.  
Suddenly, he flicks something out on the floor.  
Oh my God, oh my God, OH MY GOD. It’s the host. It’s Jesus. Jimmy, you  
just flicked Jesus on the floor. Are you crazy?  
Jimmy, you gotta pick it up and put it back in your mouth.  
Jimmy refuses.

Jimmy, it’s the host. It’s, it’s Jesus! You flicked Jesus on the floor.  
You’re going straight to hell.  
You gotta pick that up and swallow it before it’s too late.  
You gotta pick Jesus back up off the floor and swallow him.  
Jimmy begs me to shut up.

All I can see is that small wad of host sitting on the floor beneath the kneeler and  
Jimmy burning in hell.  
Please Jimmy. Please pick Jesus up.  
You at least gotta take him home and not just leave him on the floor.  
It’s Jesus man. This is really bad.





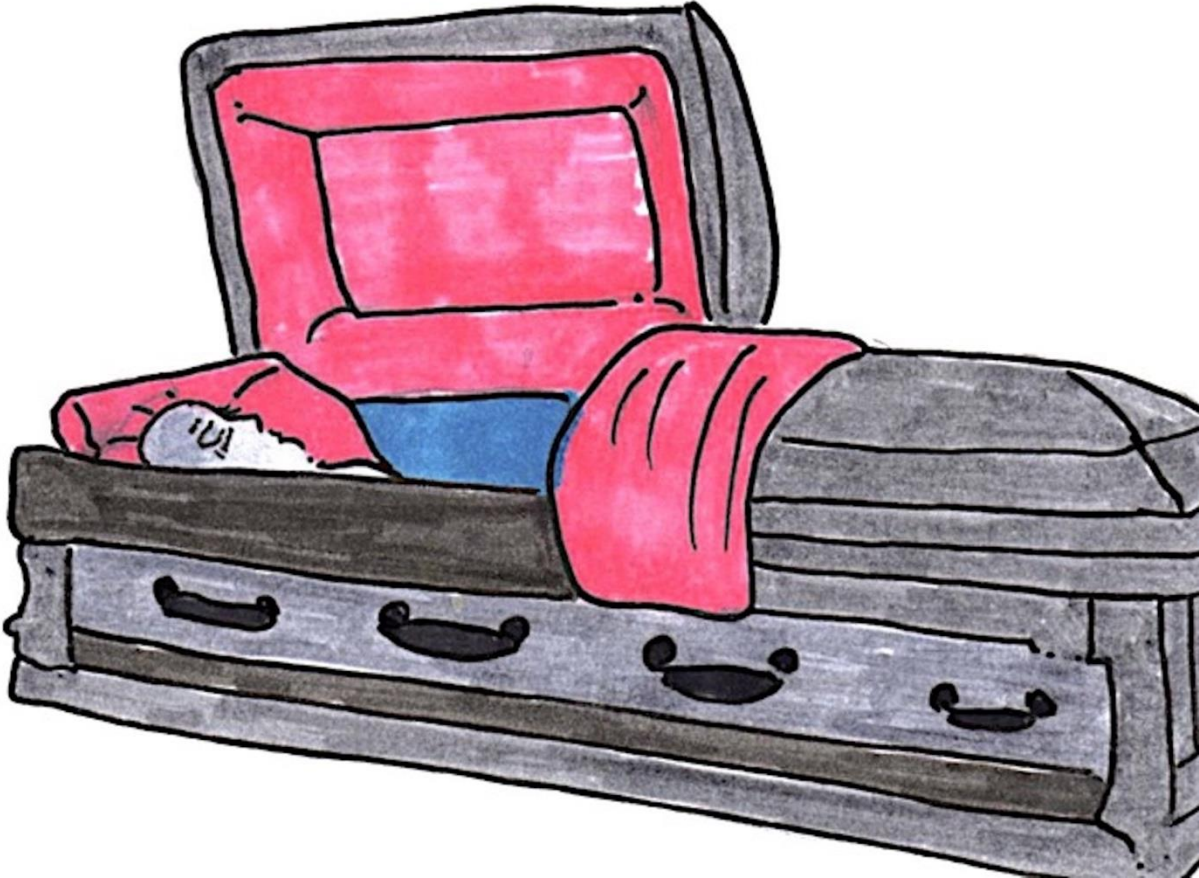


The procession out of church is a blur.  
I am unable to enjoy the parish pride washing over  
those of us who just consumed the flesh and blood of Jesus.  
Newly minted Catholic Cannibals.  
Oh my God, Jimmy. What did you do?  
I can't breathe.

As soon as we are out in the vestibule  
I duck back inside to our pew.  
There it is. The body of Christ on the floor under the kneeler. I gently  
pick it up and put it in my pocket.  
I have no idea why, or what I will do with it.  
For Jimmy's sake, I just knew I had to go back for that abandoned  
scrap of Jesus.

I put Jimmy's rejected Jesus in a small plastic box inside my National Geographic kit,  
replacing a piece of fool's gold.  
Six months later Jimmy died.  
Not because he spit Jesus on the floor.  
He died from leukemia.  
I tell my mom I want to go to the funeral home.  
I want to see Jimmy.  
I promised him I would say goodbye.

On the morning of Jimmy's funeral,  
I wear my St. Mary's blazer with the gold patch, my white shirt, navy blue pants,  
tie and shiny black shoes just as I had for First Communion.  
There's Jimmy. There's no fuzz on his head now.  
He's totally bald. He looks like a little old man, but I know it's Jimmy.  
I can tell by his hands. They look the same, just paler.  
I slip the plastic box out of my pocket.  
I remove the dried, shriveled piece of host.  
I hold it tightly in front of me so Jimmy can see it too.  
With my left hand on his shoulder, I whisper, "Body of Christ."  
"Amen," I whisper on Jimmy's behalf.



## The Our Father Working-Class Riding Mower Blues

In the absence of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Stupid little bastard who believes in heaven  
hallowed be thy lawn mower.  
Thy blades they come, thy will be done,  
with stray sticks and stones on the ground.  
Give me this day my daily lesson  
As I forgive those sticks and stones that trespass against me.  
And lead me not to another beating  
and deliver me from waiting.

Thirteen to seventeen I live to the sound of a riding mower.  
Reverberating in my ears. My head. My chest. My ribcage.  
Rattling down my spine as my knees knock toward each other.  
VVVVVvvvvvvrrrrroooooommmmmmm  
Ping-thwack, Ping-thwack as the blades  
contact a stick or stone.

Ever present.  
The soundtrack of my life.  
Louder then receding,  
circling inside my head.  
Which is why I can't hear you,  
Our Father. If indeed you're even there.

I try to find the words.  
I speak in tongues  
above the sacred drone of his mower.  
Ahdshamalblblen. Budddiskattimeoosmen.  
Ping Thwack, Ping Thwack,  
go his precious blades.

It's mowing day. I sit on the porch and wait for the hits.  
He keeps a pocket-sized notebook taped to the mower's console,  
Marking down the hits, tracking the ping-thwacking.  
Sticks and stones may break my bones but being called  
a stupid little bastard will never hurt me.

I spend the entire morning on my hands and knees,

crawling around looking for sticks and stones.  
Sticks and stones may break my bones but being called  
a stupid little bastard will never hurt me.  
Pick them up until my heart is filled with  
sticks and stones. And my mother,  
on her hands and knees picking lint and fuzz  
from the carpet. Sticks and Stones, Lint and Fuzz.  
He comes home from work covered in sawdust.  
Mom vacuums his head before he showers.  
Vacuuming Dick's head. Vacuuming the Dickhead.  
Vacuumed, showered, free of dust,  
he heads for the barn and mounts his mower.

The blade makes contact. Ping. Thwack.  
He shifts into neutral, idles in place.  
His pencil records the ding.  
The engine revs. vvvvrrrrrooommmm, vvvvrrrooommmm.  
Slips back into gear.  
Ping, Thwack, Ping, Thwack, Ping, Thwack.  
More waiting, always waiting. Tick, Tock, Ping, Thwack.  
He tallies the hits from his notebook. Dismounts,  
walks back to the house.

We make eye contact. His are the darkest, meanest, eyes I've ever seen.  
Eyes reflecting back a life battered by whiskey and beer.  
This alerts me to what's coming like a dog that feels the kick before  
the kick lands. First pain. Soul Pain.

I bend over and grab my ankles as instructed. I hear  
his belt release from its loops. I pray.  
In the absence of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Thwack, thwack, thwack.

## Duck, You Dumbass

Shell-shocked, cold-cocked,  
smacked upside my head.  
Early and often.  
Are men who shoot horses the same men  
who hit women and children?  
My memory fails me.

I build monuments in my yard,  
altars of acceptance to the whoosh  
of welts rising and falling.  
Shards of my fractured spirit.

I crawl beneath them for containment.  
The sting of step-dad's hairy knuckled fist  
and my brother, screaming,  
Duck, you dumbass!

### Author Bio:

**William Doan**, Ph.D. is a past president of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education and a Fellow in the College of Fellows of The American Theatre. In addition to articles in scholarly journals, Doan has co-authored three books and several plays. He has created solo performance projects at a variety of venues across the U.S., and abroad. His current work includes a large, multi-media project titled *The Anxiety Project*. Work from this project includes multiple short graphic narratives published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine/Graphic Medicine*, *Cleaver Magazine*, *Intima: The Journal of Narrative Medicine*, and *The AutoEthnographer*, as well as several award winning animated short films. He is an emeritus professor in the College of Arts and Architecture at The Pennsylvania State University where he served as the Penn State Laureate for 2019-2020.

# Wisconsin Milk Strike

**Lita Kurth**

I remember 1933, the winter of frozen potatoes. We brought them up from the cellar, boiled them in a big blue canning kettle to feed fourteen mouths, choked them down day after day without butter or even lard. Looking over the snowy fields, we farmers searched for the gods of corncrib and cowbarn, the superheroes of skinny cattle and hungry hens. We forked down the last hay from the haymow, fed it to the cows, and prayed. Where were the Omnipotent Ones, who'd arrive on wings and make a dozen eggs worth more than a cent?

We carried the silver milk pail from cowbarn to the milkhouse. We strained the milk through cheesecloth and into the big milk cans. For what? The price kept going down. Morning and evening, we begged for answers. Neighbors talked by the light of kerosene lanterns.

Relieved to escape the worries of near-empty silos and too-small haystacks, we drove our sputtering Model A's and Chevrolet pick-ups to town while the roads were still good. After the poor harvest and the morning milking, we walked the broken sidewalks, looking for work, but who'd pay more than a dollar a day? We chugged home again. Gas money spent for nothing.

Some of us stopped waiting. We sat on stools in the barn and made a plan. We formed a co-op. But the cheese factories, the sausage factories, the bigshots in town--would they buy from a co-op? No.

\* \* \*

We formed another plan. In the February dark, I ate my breakfast of lard bread and Karo syrup. The kids would have lard bread too. The bony cows would keep on bawling for hay we didn't have. My wife poured reboiled coffee into a thermos and said nothing except, "Good luck," when I got the shotgun off the wall.

I hitched old Pat to the sledge. The roads were too icy for cars now. With the help of my oldest, I pried, shoved, and wrestled boulders onto the sledge. Pat gave a strong pull and set the sledge in motion. We plodded down the black-ice road to the main junction of the township: County O and Maple Way.

The sky was turning grey when I caught sight of Singler, Pokala, and Glutchek waiting at the crossroads, their wagons turned sideways. The horses greeted each other. We let them stand together for warmth.

We unloaded the boulders to block the road. The snow was so cold and dry it squeaked.

Then we huddled behind a wagon, away from the biting wind. Everybody in three townships knew about the milk strike. They'd all gotten a letter or been told in person. I prayed we wouldn't hear the sound of a truck with better tires than ours or horse and sledge trying to sneak milk into town, driven by a man willing to sell at starvation prices. Or worse, the sheriff, come to take the side of the bigshots.

Double wool socks didn't protect my toe under the hole in my boot. My feet stung. I stamped and swung my arms to keep warm.

Long before we saw it, we heard the groan of a motor in the frigid silence.

"Ready?" Pokala said in a low voice. I cocked my shotgun. A raven cawed from a snowy pine tree. We all stood up behind our barricade. A pickup chugged into view pulling a wagon full of milk cans.

"That's Schmidt," I said. God damn, why couldn't he stay home?  
"Turn around," Singler muttered to himself.

Schmidt kept on coming.

We walked forward in a row. I held my shotgun.

Schmidt cranked down the window and growled through his full beard, "Move those God damn rocks and wagons."

"Don't do it, Schmidt," Pokala said. "We can win. Just wait."  
"Go to hell. I'll get the district attorney after you." Schmidt rolled up the window and gunned his engine.

I looked at Glutchek. "He's going to go around."

"No, you don't, Schmidt!" Glutchek shouted. He, Pokala, and Singler ran to Schmidt's wagon. I followed with the gun. Schmidt was backing up. Maybe he'd try another crossroads. Pokala ran up and pushed one milk can off the wagon. It rolled and sank in the snowy ditch.

Schmidt stopped the car. Before he could reach for anything, I pointed my shotgun. "Hold it, Schmidt!"

My three comrades pushed off the rest of the cans, banged the side of the lids to loosen them, then tipped them into the snow. Beautiful cream-topped milk spilled out and formed a fan of white that quickly turned to ice. I couldn't help feeling sorry. At home, they could have drunk that or fed it to the calves. Schmidt sat in his car cursing.

I handed my shotgun to Pokala and hauled the empty cans back onto Schmidt's wagon. They banged like bells. He rolled down his window and spat onto the snow, his face as hard as the rock-hard ice.

When he was gone down the road, Singler said grimly, "That's the first one turned back."

"How about a nip?" Glutchek was always the first one to polka at any wedding, the last to leave. He passed around a flask of moonshine. We poured it into our mouths without letting the metal touch our lips and stick there. I felt cold, fired up, determined. Something had to be done. We couldn't let our kids go without shoes.

We stayed until noon when the next set of farmers took over. Shift after unpaid shift, we held the line all through the freezing days. Sometimes we sang. Sometimes we talked. Which god, which hero should we pray to? Conan's in it for himself, the Shadow's in league with the police, and the Lone Ranger fights for the killing law. They're all in town. Their clothes are clean. It's never against the law to starve someone. It's only illegal to turn the rules around, to insist on living.

The sheriff sent out vigilantes, town folks and cops for hire who threw rocks and horseshoes at us, broke Singler's jaw and sent Glutchek to the hospital—another bill he couldn't pay. They smashed the wagons, moved the boulders, and a guarded convoy moved past us bringing the milk to town to be sold for pennies. The cheese factory cut the price lower, less than it cost to feed a cow.

A bomb went off at that factory. And I didn't say a word. Turns out, it's just us, our shotguns, hoarse voices, numb fingers.

### **Author Bio:**

**Longtime WCSA member Lita Kurth (B.A. M.A.+ M.A., MFA)** is the author of *One Creative Writing Prompt a Day...* (Callisto Press) and has a book on writing flash memoir (title TBA) coming out from Thinking Ink Press. She has received multiple Pushcart and Best of the Net nominations for fiction and creative nonfiction. She teaches at De Anza College and has taught ages 8 to 80, jail residents to professionals.

She is the co-founder of San Jose's literary reading series Flash Fiction Forum; winner of the Diana Woods Memorial Award from *Lunchticket* and recipient of several creative writing fellowships. Sample publications: *Cherry Tree*, *The Millions*, *Atticus Review*, *Lunchticket*, *Brain, Child*, *Main Street Rag*, *Wordrunner*, *Oyedrum*, *Chicago Literati*, *Rappahannock Review*, *NewVerseNews*.  
<https://litakurth.substack.com/>

# To the Woman Ordering Salad

**Debbie Chase**

You were so adamant about your salad dressing—insisting that what the server had set in front of you was high fat. You pushed the salad away like it was poison, telling the young woman standing before you that you needed a new dish with only vinaigrette. I was maybe four feet away, but you didn't see me or look up toward the open kitchen where I had prepared your meal. You leaned into your friend across the slim bar table as if in conspirator's whisper, whipped your long straight dyed-black hair behind your shoulders and asked, "How hard is it to get a salad right?" Your yoga clothes hung loosely on your arms and legs, and you jerked your head up to catch the server before she got away. "No bread or croutons. Don't forget."

You leaned back on the padded, wooden booth, crossed your legs, and smiled as your friend dug into her hummus and vegetables, sliding the pita off her plate onto a napkin. I heard you both chatting about your kids, about the activities they had after school: soccer, dance, debate club. Would you have time for a manicure before the afterschool madness began? Your friend cackled as I heard you describe your husband's latest attempt at fixing the persistently running toilet.

I watched you sip your lemon water through the straw, mesmerized by the light that bounced off your shiny hair, and thought about how that could have been—had been me. I had come to this wine bar countless times with my mom or work-friends, ordered a chopped salad and iced tea—glass of white wine on rougher days—and laughed buoyantly with my lunch partner.

But then something in me started to fizzle. I wanted less and more at the same time. I wanted a change—something to take me out of my head. I started looking for a relief valve for the pressure cooker life I'd created for myself.

I had churned forward for so long – starting a consulting business when my first child was born so that I wouldn't have to go into an office and leave him in childcare, having a second child, taking care of a home, cooking nightly family dinners, being a supportive partner to my husband, taking care of my parents when they got sick. All the typical duties of a working mother. Then when my youngest started middle school, I went back to inhouse jobs with travel demands and needy staff to manage. I never really slowed down. I never really knew how to just take a breath. I'd started sitting at the bar writing PowerPoints on my laptop, drinking a little too early in the day. The afternoon salad lunch no longer filled me up.

So when one of the bartenders said they needed line cooks, I thought, what the hell, I can cook. Maybe I could give that a try. I told the bartender I was interested, and he just laughed. "It's hard work back there with all those dudes. Your pretty-little-self will get dirty, sweaty, burned and cut up. You could never handle the pressure." Well, that was all he needed to say. I love a challenge. So I pushed him on it until he finally relented, smirking as he handed me the general manager's email scribbled on the back of a receipt.

I looked at you with your salad, eavesdropping on your laughter and wondered if I ever appeared that confident to someone watching me from the kitchen. I wondered if you felt the same kind of discontent I once did. If you ever felt overwhelmed and underwhelmed simultaneously by your life and the choices you made. If you fielded work calls while in the carpool line to pick up your kids from school. Whether you mentally scoured the contents of the refrigerator during afternoon meetings to see what might be available for you to cook for dinner. If you panicked over the ennui.

I was so excited for my first shift as a line cook, more excited than I'd been about anything in years, and also a little nervous. I packed a ratty t-shirt, old jeans and sneakers into a duffle bag to change into that evening before I left my office job. I tied my mass of curly hair back as I walked into the galley kitchen and surveyed my new coworkers. Gritty men who had been cooking for as long as I'd been managing nonprofit staff. I wondered how they'd feel about a woman working back here, especially one who used to sit at the bar. But they were gracious and patient as they walked me around the cramped airless space, opening the coolers to show me the line of prepped ingredients in bins, the ovens, the flat top, crepe grille, knives hung above the cutting board, meat slicer. And then the tickets started streaming off the tiny machine balanced above the tray of dressings. I watched as my new coworkers kicked into gear, somehow moving quickly between stations to create pizzas, salads, and steaks without talking, throwing them on the line, hitting the bell for the server to pick up food, and then turning back to make the next order. They had me watch so I learned the ingredients that went with each dish, the order to grab them from the bins to maximize efficiency and the way to cook and then plate the food.

We didn't talk. I just watched and learned. And I tell you, it was an incredible exhilarating relief from all the jabbering and analyzing I did all day at my management job. After about two hours, they let me make a hummus plate, correcting me with hand gestures when I put too much feta on top or forgot the olives. But by the fifth or sixth order, I had it down, and they had me move on to pizzas, squatting to get the crust from the bottom cooler, spreading the thin layer of sauce, glancing up at the ticket to see what toppings had been ordered. When I grabbed the giant wooden spatula, scooted it under the pie and slid it into the convection oven, I felt like a pro. I couldn't stop smiling. At the end of my shift, I clocked out and the manager poured me a whiskey. Sweaty and sticky, I slid into a stool at the edge of the bar, looking at the food scraps crusted on my shoes, and felt my spirits soar with my new accomplishment.

My twice weekly shifts quickly became the highlight of my week. Every shift brought something new and unexpected, a fresh skill to master. At first I was afraid of the meat slicer, imagining the menacing metal circular blade taking one of my fingers. But after a few tries, I could slice paper-thin prosciutto to wrap around grilled asparagus with ease, precision, and confidence. So much satisfaction in the mastery of small tasks with such tangible results. A grilled steak perfectly charred, evenly sliced meats and cheeses fanned out on a charcutier board, a crispy edged crepe. I would rush out of my office at 4:30, speed across town, bounce into the bar at 4:55 (always five minutes early) and clock in at the register. This side gig was thrilling.

But then one day, my day-job boss laid me off. It happened at the beginning of our weekly meeting. I willed myself not to cry as I went back to my office, collected my personal items, and sprinted to the door. I sped past my staff and coworkers, imagining they were all smirking at me and my bad fortune, and forced my body to make the walking motions to get me to my car. Everything I

had ever thought about myself came crashing down on me. Every demon. Every judgment. Every mistake. Every choice. It all swirled around me as I drove home. Should I have seen this coming? Was I a bad worker? Was I producing? Was I too aggressive? Was I not assertive enough? Will I ever work again? Was this the end of my career? Was I ever any good at anything?

These thoughts spiraled until I found myself at home in the entrance hall (that's as far as I got) lying on the floor, face down, hugging my knees. I had just turned 54, and now I was laid off. I was not a leader. Not an influencer. No longer an agent of change. I stayed there, fetal positioned, until 4pm when it was time to go into the restaurant for my shift. That's the only thing that got me up—the pull to cook.

I spent the next months in a daze, moving through the humid haze of a St. Louis summer without identity, without purpose. Even with the years as a consultant when the kids were little, my career had been so linear, every move a forward upward movement, but this layoff had sent me hurling down to the bottom. It caused me to question whether what I did mattered. I worked in nonprofits because I thought helping people had value. And, more personally, I thought my strategic mind improved the work and effectiveness of nonprofits. I defined myself as a good person because I was giving back to other people through my work. Now the leaders of this work were telling me I wasn't needed.

On top of that, the restaurant was now my only job. Cooking in a restaurant nourished me because it was my extra gig, my energy, my escape. Like taking a lover for its momentary escape from a spouse, being a line cook was thrilling in its difference from the long-term reality of a career job. But does anyone ever really expect to get stuck with the lover as their partner? Was restaurant work inspiring enough for me to focus on every day? Could I believe in myself as a good person if this were my main job? If I was defining myself as a line cook, I had to think about what that meant, what I really thought about this kind of work and whether it provided value.

Before I worked as a line cook, I never thought about what the people making the food endured—the risk of the meat slicer, the heat of the kitchen. And when I saw you casually sending your food back to be redone, I realized I had been you—expecting someone else to fix my food (or my car or a leaking toilet) without giving any real attention to who those people were or what they might be going through. I earned \$14 an hour as a line cook. Your salad cost \$16.95. My coworkers couldn't afford to buy the meals they prepared. I never thought about any of that until I started restaurant work. So much churned through my head when I saw you. The need I'd had to try something else but also how little I'd known about the work back here, when I only sat out there.

Summer at a wine bar is madness. Customers stream in before concerts and after ballgames. I lost myself in the onslaught of cheese boards and pizzas and sweat. In the middle of a 9pm rush, when I hadn't looked up from the cutting board in three hours, when I hadn't even had time to go to the bathroom, I found myself smiling, even laughing. The physicality of it got me out of my head. The immediacy made it impossible, for a while, to worry about anything else.

But then I saw you sitting so nonchallantly and pristinely in front of your low-fat, low-carb salad and I got a flash of what I used to be. How I used to define myself. And I wondered if I'd always been irrelevant enough to fire, invisible enough to make food for other people without

acknowledgement. Or was possible that what I did for work did not define me? Was there a chance that my value was not dependent on being seen or appreciated by other people? If I was someone who found value in doing good, could there be good in work that went unseen?

When I finished preparing the new salad—crouton free with just a splash of red wine vinegar—I took it out to you. I walked the four steps from the kitchen to your table and set it gently at your place. You didn't look up. Just put on your glasses to inspect for accuracy, turned it around to ensure no undesirable ingredients, reached for your fork, and gave an almost imperceptible nod.

**Author Bio:**

**Debbie Chase** is a writer, nonprofit strategy consultant, restaurant cook and mother. She writes about work and its intersection to class, race and motherhood. Her work has appeared in *Cincinnati Review*, *Jacobin Magazine*, *Under the Gum Tree*, *Motherly* and *Chicken Soup for the Soul*.

# Davis, L. (2024) *Poor Things: How Those with Money Depict Those Without It*. Duke University Press.

## Review by Matt Brim

Lennard Davis's *Poor Things: How Those with Money Depict Those without It* (Duke UP, 2024) traces a broad pattern of "poornography," or distorted and often salacious representations of poverty and poor people in the nineteenth and early-twentieth-century novel and, briefly, photography in the U.K. and the U.S. Davis uses the term "representational inequality" to identify the key imaginative problem causing these distortions: novels about people living in poverty are written by authors who do not come from poverty and who rely on a fairly small and negative set of received tropes to depict a class of people whom they fail to understand and portray with accountability. Chief among these are "biocultural myths of the poor body" and the composite figure of "female sex workers," each of which gets their own chapter. How, then, to address representational inequality?

The answer provides the most powerful and contentious claim of the book, which is that "writers who come from poverty, those I am calling *endo-writers*, are essentially the only ones who have the platform and credentials to write about the poor" (p. 17). And later: "it is the poor who must speak their truth whether or not that truth is acceptable to the middle-class reader" (p. 169). Middle-class novelists, or "exo-writers," having proven themselves for centuries unable to write about the poor from the inside-out perspective that would allow them to see something other than stereotype and to feel something other than disgust, pity, guilt, or moral superiority. Elizabeth Gaskell in *Mary Barton* (1848) may desire to represent the abuses heaped on the poor, but she is unable to break that habit. Charles Dickens, Émile Zola, Stephen Crane, and Frank Norton speak poverty through the voice of omniscient narrators who sound authentic to middle-class audiences. Others, including Nellie Bly, Jack London, and George Orwell, "do[n] a costume of poverty" (85) to write pornography. Freidrich Engels, who lived with working-class Mary Burns and her sister Lizzie yet kept quarters in a better part of Manchester, is notable on the list of "passing" exo-writers. In a key move, rather than focus solely on the inaccuracy of these portrayals, Davis routes the usual discussion about authenticity through his preferred metric of accountability, or "actively...being responsible to the group being depicted" (p. 49).

When Davis brings the weight of the long history of unaccountability to bear in arguing that exo-writers should stop writing about poor people, he is most concerned with the consequences representation has on poor people. In an extended comparison to the voting public that chooses its representatives, Davis envisions the poor and working-class reading public as disenfranchised, allowed no voice in the matter of how they are portrayed in literature and art because they do not control the means of artistic production. But if endo-writers (preferred to the imprecise and loaded

term “the poor”) usually do not have access to the means of production to write and publish their own novels, and if exo-writers fail to write poverty with complexity and should therefore stop, who will do the work of representational equality for people in poverty? Davis’s response is that “transclass” writers, those who were raised poor but are no longer poor, and to some extent those writers who became poor after having not been, have a special perspective as go-betweens or cross-class interpreters. Transclass writers, “waxing and waning” in relation to poverty, can and must stand in until such a time as people who were raised and are currently poor control their own narratives.

The importance of *the Poor Things* has to do with the urgency and starkness of its intervention. Unlike other studies that, with some degree of hopefulness or perhaps equivocation, take up the question of whether someone in a more privileged identity group can represent someone in a more marginalized identity group, *Poor Things* has little to no faith in the viability of class crossover in writing about poor people, certainly not from a stable middle-class (or higher) position. The experience of poverty alone gives one access to the specific ideas, such as underclass pride, and sensations, such as hunger, that constitute reality for the poor. The chief qualification or exception here comes as Davis theorizes a transclass perspective, but even there he is as likely to draw the reader’s attention to the inequalities sustained by transclass novels as the equalities produced by them. By revealing the limitations of the transclass exception even as he puts some stock in it, Davis is all the more able to set the stakes of his argument: that novels have the power to do meaningful cultural work, and representational equality—literature written by people in poverty—can act as a cultural brake on the social dynamics by which the moneyed and the impoverished are, right now, pulled so violently apart.

One real strength of the book is that Davis comes at this project as someone raised poor. He explicitly situates his initial interest in the topic by saying he wanted to better understand his father, who was raised poor in London’s East End. The memoir-esque thread of the book (e.g., the details about getting an Ivy league education as a poor person and then making his way through academia without the cultural savvy that surely would have made the journey smoother) provides a compelling throughline at the same time as it gives Davis something of an intellectual high ground from which to make his case. Another key here is that using the personal narrative, so important to working-class academic writing, allows Davis to convincingly argue that a purely structural class critique is insufficient because such critique typically overlooks the realities of the lived experience of poverty. Counterintuitively, liberal minded middle-class academics can engage in structural critique as a way of shielding themselves from their own implicated-ness not simply within a system of class oppression but within a process of psychological detachment from people actually living in poverty.

*Poor Things* is compelling, yet some readers will argue with it—and the nature of that argument is likely revealing. They will not question with the evidence of the misrepresentation of the poor by middle class / exo- writers. Rather they may find it difficult to stop thinking of exceptions to the “no-exo” rule that Davis is proposing. His final argument puts this work of exception-making into perspective: “Where a kind of clarity has emerged around how to combat racism, homophobia,

transphobia, sexism, disability, and the like, much more work needs to be done to create the same clarifying vision around the lived experience of poverty and its representation” (p. 230).

**Reviewer Bio:**

**Matt Brim** is Professor of Queer Studies at the College of Staten Island and the CUNY Graduate Center, where he is Executive Director of CLAGS: The Center for LGBTQ Studies. He is author of the award-winning *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University* and *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination*. Brim is currently writing a material history of queer studies that envisions ways of redistributing resources around the queer academy.

# **Perlin, R. (2024) *Language City: The Fight to Preserve Endangered Mother Tongues in New York*. Atlantic Monthly Press.**

**Review by Joshua B. Freeman**

Three decades ago, when I was writing *Working-Class New York*, I was acutely aware of my linguistic deficiencies and the obstacle they presented. My rudimentary French and German were of little use in understanding a working class with a huge Spanish-speaking component and growing numbers of Chinese, Haitian Creole, and other non-English language speakers. I envied Lizabeth Cohen, who in *Making a New Deal* was able to take advantage of foreign-language Chicago newspapers that had been translated by the WPA. I even applied for an NEH grant to study Spanish, and got laughed off the court. So, I muddled through, recognizing the thinness of my portrait of immigrant workers.

Writing that book today, things would be different, and not so different. A huge number of Spanish-language publications and documents are now digitalized and can be instantly translated on-line. The word processing program with which I am writing this review will translate over 40 languages; specialized programs can translate many more. But there are far more languages spoken in New York today than 30 years ago, at least 700. According to Ross Perlin, author of *Language City*, Gotham is now “the most linguistically diverse city in the history of the world” (p. 5). Translation software won’t help with many of these languages, which not only lack an on-line presence but have no dictionaries of any kind, no grammatical guides, limited if any documentation, and, in some cases, no written language. Social scientists and historians seeking to understand the people who speak these languages still face big challenges.

Perlin is a linguist, interested, above all, in how small, threatened languages can be preserved. The core of his book consists of portraits of six New Yorkers who are trying to maintain their native tongues or the languages of their forebearers that they belatedly learned: Seke, spoken in just five villages in northern Nepal; Wakhi, native to a “remote high-mountain region where Tajikistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China converge” (171); Yiddish, which is actually thriving among Hasidic Jews, but has all but died out among secular Jews and as a literary language; N’ko, an alphabet created in 1949 for West African languages that lacked writing; Nahautl, an ancient language still spoken by 1.6 million people in central Mexico; and Lenape, the original language in what is now New York, which, according to Perlin, has just one native speaker left. Surrounding these engaging profiles is a wealth of information about linguistic communities in New York, most

in outer borough neighborhoods little known outside of the city (or, for that matter, to residents of better-off parts of the city).

Perlin does not define his subject as the working class, but for the most part that's what it is. The people he writes about are nurses, care-givers, street vendors, construction workers, landscapers, Uber drivers, restaurant workers, and grocery clerks. Speaking languages from home villages and regions, most also know a larger language, like Spanish or Russian or Hindi, as well as English (and in many cases a couple more languages beyond that). They are, Perlin claims, the norm, not the oddity; "the archetypal New Yorker is . . . a working-class, multilingual immigrant (p. 21)." Perlin mentions in passing some efforts by speakers of endangered languages to organize on the job, like Los Deliveristas Unidos, which represents app-based delivery workers, but he gives more attention to the social organizations, religious institutions, and educational efforts in their communities, especially groups devoted to teaching, documenting, and preserving languages, overwhelmingly a grass-roots movement.

*Language City* is full of "who knows." Who knew that the area around Park Hill in Staten Island is home to more Liberians than anyplace outside of Liberia, and that they speak seventeen separate languages? Who knew that a third of "French" residents in post-World War II New York were Bretons who spoke their own Celtic language and dominated jobs in "French" restaurants? Who knew that there is a Kichwa-language radio station in the Bronx? Who knew that the borough also has a mosque where a version of Romani spoken by Macedonian Roma remains alive?

Recent years have seen an outpouring of excellent scholarship on particular ethnic communities in New York: Koreans, Dominicans, Chinese, Haitians, and others. But no book gives as rich a sense of the sheer complexity and diversity of working-class New York as *Language City*. Reading it is a humbling experience to those who think they know the city well.

Some of the implications of Perlin's extraordinary work for working-class studies are clear. Connections between the local and the global are all over *Language City*. As Perlin shows, the extraordinary linguistic diversity of New York stems from the disruptive power of capitalism, as it penetrates the last remote and isolated regions of the world: communities high up towering mountain ranges, or tucked into isolated valleys, or for some other reason previously unconnected to major trade and transport routes. With roads, cell phones, DVDs, and cheap air transportation, New York City is now not so far from just about anywhere. The hyperlocal and the transnational are one and the same, as in the case of the significant percentage of the 700 global Seke speakers who live in one building in Brooklyn and remain in constant touch with their co-linguists in Nepal. The working class in New York, and at this point in most U.S. cities, cannot be studied on its own, isolated from the distant places that shape its language, values, thinking, and priorities on an ongoing basis.

Perlin offers only glimpses of how extreme linguistic diversity may impact working-class cohesion. On the one hand, shared language can create a certain insularity, an inward-looking orientation, in communities, especially if there is a sense of being part of a beleaguered group. On the other hand, many small linguistic groups adopt or develop a lingua franca that enables them to speak with groups from nearby parts of the world, living or working in proximity in New York. To Perlin's mixed feelings, the children of immigrants tend to quickly feel more at home in those languages or in English than in the languages of their parents. Perlin argues that the very diversity of languages in immigrant New York, and the lack of any one dominant language, contributes to the generally harmonious relations that can be found there, even among groups that elsewhere are in conflict. "Linguistic and cultural differences stabilize, even harmonize, the neighborhood. It can be a home for so many groups in part because it is a homeland for none of them, no one's turf (p. 16)."

Perlin episodically plunges deep into linguistic ideas and the widely varying structures of language. Not every reader will want to go there with him. But for anyone interested in the working class, this is a pleasurable, provocative, eye-opening read.

**Reviewer Bio:**

**Joshua Freeman** is Professor Emeritus of History at Queens College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York. Besides *Working-Class New York* and other books, he is the author of *Behemoth: A History of the Factory and the Making of the Modern World*. He has a forthcoming book from U. of Chicago Press titled *Garden Apartments: The History of a Low-Rent Utopia*.

# **Bruno, R. (2024) *What Work Is*. University of Illinois Press.**

## **Review by Stephanie Ross**

A moving and thought-provoking book, *What Work Is* explores an age-old question central to our collective future. Robert Bruno centres the voices and experiences of “worker-students” who have taken his labor education courses over the past 25 years. Bruno takes as his material the responses to the six-word essay assignment he’s used to generate class discussion, in which students complete the sentence “Work is \_\_\_\_.” Bruno argues that “in order to develop policies and practices about work for the future, we should ask the workers right now what work is so that they can be the architects of their own destiny.” This approach runs contrary to how work is generally understood and discussed by the dominant economic and political forces in society.

A professor of labor and employment relations at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and director of their Labor Education Program, Bruno has long been interested in working-class experience and identity. His own working-class upbringing in Youngstown, Ohio led to his work *Steelworker Alley: How Class Works in Youngstown* (1999), based on extensive interviews with retired steelworkers and their wives and which he cites as one inspiration for *What Work Is*. Other inspirations include National Public Radio’s “Race Card Project,” which similarly asked listeners for short meditations on what race means, and the poetry of former US poet laureate Phillip Levine, whose poem about working in Detroit’s auto factories inspired the title. Bruno deftly weaves his students’ words together with insights from Marx, Smith, Polanyi, Goffman, Russell and many contemporary labor scholars. These influences converge in a compelling and poignant read that alternates between philosophy, social science, and memoir.

The book is organized thematically according to the answers that came up most frequently and generated the most class discussion: time, space, impact, purpose and subject. Bruno weaves together these answers with reflections on work from scholarship, art and poetry, and his own experiences and research.

In “The Time of Work,” Bruno depicts students’ sense that work is ever-present, consuming their lifetimes and stealing time from other more valuable things (like family or leisure). Work is a claim on their time they have little power to refuse. However, work also gives meaning to workers’ past, present and future – it is the basis of a legacy, the structure of one’s days, and the way people strive for a better future for their loved ones.

“Work and Space” depicts the way that work both occupies every space on the planet but is also carried out in particular sites with their unique forms, purposes, and impacts on people and their environment. Who gets to decide what those forms and purposes are is a key question and makes workplaces into sites of “contention and struggle.” The fact of alienation strips workers of ultimate control over their places of work, which can be places of danger and degradation. Yet this reality also generates contradictory experiences of the worksite because it is where workers connect with

others, develop and use their skills, and do useful, pleasurable or meaningful things of which they are proud. Some workers even come to see the workplace as an embodiment of themselves, especially if they've worked to create or maintain that space.

“Work’s Impact” explores how work transforms us and the world, how “our labors come with a cost, a price to be paid, a return on investment, a reward, a sacrifice, a gift.” Even when workers emphasize the meaning they derive from work that serves others, makes a difference, or allows them to use their skills and discretion, there is also a price exacted in their bodies and minds, a price they pay long after the working day or even their working lifetime is over.

In “The Purpose of Work,” we see how work is about earning money, doing what needs to be done to survive and to provide for others, but also fulfills the desire to do something important, even when that something wasn’t necessarily chosen. Finally, “The Subject of Work” examines who workers work for and reveals a fascinating outcome – while workers were well aware that they work for employers who take an inordinate benefit from their labors, this was not who they were “working for.” Instead, as Bruno writes about his parents, “They worked for me. They worked for my brothers. They worked for each other. They worked for their friends and neighbors. They worked for the community. They worked for themselves.”

Throughout the book, Bruno shows how working people have a very clear sense of the contradictory experience of working under capitalist conditions of alienation, unequal choices, and employer power. Work both traps workers like “a worm on a hook” and fills them with pride, accomplishment and a sense of usefulness. In several places, Bruno emphasizes that students understood it was not work itself that was “evil” but rather “the rules of the political-economic system that coerced workers into jobs they needed to survive.” Bruno’s students collectively articulate a moral economy of labor that stands in stark contrast to the dehumanizing vision of capitalist employers and the politicians who abet them. By pointing to and clearly articulating the conditions that rob workers of their power and dignity, we are better able to envision the conditions that would better deliver on work’s transformative and empowering potentials.

Bruno is clear that workers’ situations and the capacity to change them is about power – the power of employers to dictate the purposes to which workers’ labor is put but also the collective power of workers themselves to remake the workplace and the economy. If there is a gap in this book, it is the thin exploration of what collective agency could make such a transformation of work possible, particularly given the challenges faced by unions, workers’ political parties, and progressive social movements in an era where authoritarian and anti-worker politics are ascendant. However, through the voices of his students, Bruno helps us renew our commitment to the urgent search for an effective politics to transform work.

*What Work Is* should be read widely by policy makers and labor studies educators. This book inspired me as a labor studies professor about how to engage students to talk about their experiences of work. The stories here also resonated with me as someone from a working-class family like Bruno. Perhaps the most important audience for this book is workers themselves, then, whose insight, grit, dignity and desire for a better world shine through Bruno’s careful prose and humanizing approach.

**Reviewer Bio:**

**Stephanie Ross** is Associate Professor of Labour Studies at McMaster University in Ontario and co-author, with Larry Savage, of *Shifting Gears: Canadian Autoworkers and the Changing Landscape of Labour Politics* and *Building a Better World: An Introduction to the Labour Movement in Canada*.

# **Goldman, D. (2024) *Disconnected: Call Center Workers Fight for Good Jobs in the Digital Age*. U. of Illinois Press.**

## **Review by Andrew Stevens**

Over the last two decades, countless articles, reports, and monographs have been published about call center work. These studies have covered everything from critical labour process theory to the political economic structures defining what became a global, \$314 billion industry. So, what can be gained from another book on the subject? Well, if you read Debbie Goldman's text in the context of Trump and the dreadful state of what passes for America's economic policies these days, it turns out a lot. Here's why: foreign powers aren't responsible for the hardships facing American workers in 2025 -- it's the companies they work for. *Disconnected* charts that story through the experiences of Communication Workers of America (CWA) members employed by US telecommunications giants in a period spanning five decades.

Goldman, who served as the director of research for the CWA, opens with a very fitting vignette showcasing the voice of Victoria Kintzer, a customer service employee at Bell in the 1980s. As Goldman writes, "Kintzer had relative autonomy to use her skills, knowledge, and emotional intelligence to assist her customers. She took satisfaction in helping them, solving problems, and making sure the job was done right from start to finish" (p. 1). This was the life of a Bell customer service representative before market forces and digitization robbed from workers a great deal of their control over work.

Any exploration of call center work necessarily involves a critical treatment of the labour process. There's a reason why Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism* has routinely been used as a benchmark for understanding the nature of call center work through a Marxist lens. The struggles of telecommunication workers, and that of their unions, commences at the site of production. *Disconnected* serves as a reminder that unions aren't just about bargaining for higher wages every couple of years.

Thanks to the National Labor Relation Act's ban on company-dominated associations, newly formed independent unions joined to form the National Federation of Telephone Workers (NFTW) in 1938, before becoming the CWA a decade later. What's important about Goldman's approach is her avoidance of characterizing the pre-divestiture era as a "golden age" of work in the telecommunications industry. The pressures of speed-ups, surveillance (managerial and

technological), union avoidance, and various forms of discrimination have always been present in the industry, even during the height of New Deal-era regulations. During this period important victories were achieved by the CWA in curbing supervisory monitoring, boosting wages, and in resisting high pressure sales quotas. But the union's capacity to advance these gains shifted over time as the political economic terrain enabled the continual erosion of working conditions.

After World War II a national system of regulatory oversight created what Goldman describes as the "grand bargain" between AT&T and government agencies, prompting a precipitous rise in household telephone service, which grew from some 62 percent in 1950 to 90 percent coverage by the late 1970s. Part of this compromise meant cross-subsidizing residential customers through above-cost pricing for business and long-distance services. Access to quality telecommunications was both affordable and near-universal – and delivered mostly by unionized workers.

Of course, even in what might be considered the peak of the New Deal era, most American workers were excluded from the relative privileges the regime had to offer. This marginalization cut across gender and racial lines. Where African Americans and women made meaningful headway into large corporations, they still suffered from discrimination and exclusion. Almost 10 percent of Equal Employment Opportunity Commission complaints were filed against Bell companies in just six years following the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (p. 25). Telecoms also maintained a sexualized division of labour within the ranks of service representative positions, an industry practice that had been in place since its founding in the 1880s. Women were also on the front lines of Taylorism, as the female-dominated operators were the first to experience the effects of digital technologies on working conditions, decades before these systems migrated to the customer service offices (36).

A changing political economic landscape defined by ideological tendencies that favoured increased competition resulted in the deregulation of America's major industries throughout the 1980s. By 1984 the breakup of AT&T under the guise of trust-busting meant the spin-off of one of the world's largest corporations into a constellation of Regional Bell Operating Companies (RBOCs). AT&T's market share of roughly 80% quickly collapsed, and the loosening of regulations opened the door to competition, putting downward pressure on labour costs. Union busting was both incidental and purposeful as new, non-union companies like Sprint and MCI came to dominate the telecom landscape.

Where strong union density rates had once helped to secure good wages for workers, subcontracting and hyper-competitive carriers undermined the collective bargaining strength of unions throughout the industry. With these structural changes came a degradation of employment conditions. Citing labour economists, *Disconnected* refers to this as a process of workplace "fissuring", whereby outsourced services reduce "not only costs but also responsibilities connected to the employment relationship" (p. 117). It's worth considering, given the current rhetoric

advanced by President Trump, that the race to the bottom took place *within* the United States through contracting out and the flight of capital to lower cost (and largely non-union) regions of America.

In the decades following the divestiture of AT&T, the CWA was on the defensive as union density rates dropped and concessionary bargaining exploded. Companies, Goldman acknowledges, “used the shift in market conditions to destabilize traditional labour-management relations” (p. 56). Sales objectives instilled fears of discipline in workers, should they fail to satisfy unobtainable goals. In some instances, employees were pressured to use the illegal practice of “slamming” to put items on customer accounts without permission (72). For these reasons the CWA made surveillance, workplace controls, and oppressive sales targets a focus of their organizing campaigns throughout the 1990s.

Despite the worsening conditions of employment, unions struggled to certify new workplaces, but hopes of a Democratic presidency reforming America’s decentralized labour relations regime were quickly dashed. Instead, the Clinton administration focused on “labour-management partnerships” to enhance worker voice on the job. Little was gained by these voluntaristic efforts, which lacked any of the institutional or legal requirements that might replicate European co-determination models. Fortunately, Goldman argues, neither the workers nor their unions were “co-opted” by management in these joint relations schemes. But the alternatives didn’t bear fruit, either. What victories the CWA did experience were hard-fought, and were still not enough to halt the hemorrhaging of jobs and subcontracting. Today, industry union density is just around 10 percent, a far cry from its peak of around 60% in the 1970s.

*Disconnected* is a noteworthy contribution to established literature on call centers. With a sizeable number of working-class Americans casting ballots for Trump, this book is a good read for union leaders and organizers who must demonstrate to workers that their inability to buy a house or afford health care isn’t the fault of foreign call center employees, but the union-busting and cost-cutting agendas of their own bosses. Making America great again means advancing a regulatory and labour relations regime that puts workers, not corporate profits, first. Goldman illustrates this point beautifully.

### **Reviewer Bio:**

**Andrew Stevens** is an Associate Professor and Unifor Research Scholar in Labour Relations at the University of Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada. His research focuses on the sociology of work, labour studies, political economy, and industrial relations. Andrew served as a Regina city councillor until 2024, where he championed policies aimed at reducing homelessness, anti-poverty initiatives, labour rights, and ensuring that civic services and spaces meet the needs of residents not corporations.

# Zhang, L., ed. (2024) *Asian Workers Stories*. Hardball Press.

## Review by Magnus Nilsson

The anthology *Asian Workers Stories* contains fifteen prose texts by working-class writers from Asian countries such as Bangladesh, India, the Philippines, Indonesia, China, and Malaysia, several of whom are or have been migrant workers. Ten of these texts are fiction, whereas five are non-fiction testimonies. Most of them describe the plights of workers in different Asian countries today.

The anthology's editor, Chinese literary scholar Luka Lei Zhang, states that her ambition is to make visible Asian working-class literature – as well as the experiences it describes – to a wider audience. But she also promotes a specific interpretation of this literature. Being worried about “the prevailing trend of viewing migrant worker or working-class writers solely through the lens of ‘cultural’ identity,” she emphasizes that the texts collected in *Asian Workers Stories* illuminate workers’ “economic role and the exploitation they endure” in contemporary capitalism. Furthermore, she also wants to “foster connections and solidarity among working-class writers in Asia”

The collected texts are quite diverse. Some are written by quite experienced writers, others by amateurs. Some explicitly describe and criticize workers’ working and living conditions, while others are more personal or poetic.

On one end of the stylistic and thematic spectrum one finds passages like the following, from Zakir Hossain Khokan’s short story “Rain”, which describes a lorry full of migrant workers crashing on a highway in Singapore:

Rames barely had time to crane his neck in the direction of the sound, when he was thrown completely out of the lorry, followed by the other passengers all hitting the road, as the lorry itself became a mangled mess of metal. Rames looked and saw spots of red develop on the bodies of his fellow migrant workers, a revolting shade of red which the rain could not wash from his mind.

On the other end there are lyrical elements, as the following poem which is included in Tari Sasha’s short story “Like a Wounded Senkon” (the name Senkon is an allusion to a poem by Indonesian poet Peri Sandi Huzchi about a farmer by that name who was shot dead by the police in 1965 after having been accused of being a communist):

I am the wounded Sengkon  
Try to recall every wound  
In the chest

On the back  
On the feet  
In the coughs  
pestered with tuberculosis

Together, the texts give a multi-faceted picture both of class relations and class conflicts in Asia today and of Asian working-class literature. Thereby the anthology makes a most welcome contribution to an important trend in the study of working-class literature.

For a long time, this scholarship was often characterized by a rather narrow national (or even nationalistic) perspective. Scholars in the USA, the UK, Germany etc. focused mainly on working-class literature from their respective countries. Often, they also essentialized it and argued that their analyses had universal reach.

In recent years, however, this approach has been challenged. For example, in *No Country* (2014), Sonali Perera argued that working-class literature should be viewed as a global phenomenon. Thereafter, several volumes comprising scholarship on working-class literature from different national contexts have been published (and more are on the way). They have demonstrated that the differences between working-class literatures from different countries can be quite substantial, and that working-class literature must thus be conceptualized as a highly heterogeneous phenomenon.

*Asian Workers Stories* contributes to this development. By expanding the archive of working-class literature available to scholars, it challenges established understandings of this literature and thereby functions as a catalyst for thinking about it in new ways.

Zhang envisions the anthology as the beginning of a larger project, hoping that more texts can be translated, collected, and published in the future. That would be most welcome.

### **Reviewer Bio:**

**Magnus Nilsson** is a professor of comparative literature at Malmö University (Sweden). Working-class literature across media and languages is his main research interest. His English-language publications include the monographs *Literature and Class: Aesthetical-Political Strategies in Modern Swedish Working-Class Literature* (2014), and *Writing Class: Precarious Blue-Collar Labour in Contemporary Swedish Literature* (forthcoming 2025). He is the editor (with John Lennon) of *Working-Class Literature(s): International and Historical Perspectives* (2 Vol. 2017 and 2020) and (with Mike Sanders and Wiktor Marzec) *Transnational Working-Class Literatures* (forthcoming 2025).

## **Bourgeois, L., ed. (2024) *Unit 29: Writing from Parchman Farm*. Vox Press.**

**Review by Nathaniel Heggins Bryant**

*Unit 29: Writing from Parchman Farm* is a sobering and raw anthology of original art, short nonfiction and documentary narratives, and poetry from people (mostly men) incarcerated in Unit 29, a notoriously violent and repressive section of the prison. This unit, also referred to as “the zone,” was the site of 16 different murders and suicides and many more stabbings and beatings over a three-week period spanning late 2019 to early 2020. Parchman also saw deadly outbreaks of COVID in 2020 and 2021, further contributing to the fear, anxiety, and unrest on the unit. At the invitation of Parchman officials, Louis Bourgeois, editor of *Unit 29* and executive director of the Oxford, Mississippi-based Vox Press, worked with more than 30 individuals in an effort to use creative writing to help them make better sense of their lives on the zone as well as to quell some of the violence. While it is ultimately unclear whether or not the violence was mitigated by this writing experience, the result, this book, is a powerful and damning collective critique of one of the United State’s most famous—or infamous—penal institutions. *Unit 29* is the third in Vox Press’s Prison Writes Initiative, and all three were anthologies produced by incarcerated individuals in Mississippi State Penitentiary, better known throughout the South as Parchman Farm.

Like other infamous southern prison farms—including Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola and many of the numerous ones across Texas that were built before the 1980s—Parchman Farm was built on land formerly a part of a 19<sup>th</sup> century plantation. The echoes of chattel enslavement, as well as Jim Crow-era convict leasing, inform the sensibilities of some writers in *Unit 29*, particularly in the way they depict abysmal living conditions and prison labor. Both Black and white convicts refer to the heritage of slavery and their own sense of being a slave to the state. One writer, Whitzey Walker, includes a piece entitled “Slave Speaking;” he conceives of his piece as a “newsletter from a man of miscarriage of justice, of profit, of legal slavery” and later describes that “mass incarceration isn’t just about making money off of a black person’s body” (p. 35), though of course it does include that motive. In the short poem “Save Me,” Nathan Sumrall refers to his existence more succinctly: “Owned by the state like a slave with no escape” (p. 101).

Perhaps more surprising is the idea that white convicts in the collection routinely cite their minority status in the zone as a source of potential violence against them, in a kind of institutionalized reverse racism. Most vehement in this regard is Christopher Smith, who observes, “We, as non-gang members and mostly white, are put through hell every day by pigs [guards] and gang members,” ending his essay with the claim, “You don’t have the right as a white person to have shit” in the unit (p. 54). Then again, given the racial politics of rural Mississippi and its apartheid-like minority white rule across its history, the notion that white convicts find themselves as victims in a space overwhelmingly dominated by poor, Black people—all there by design—doesn’t seem that far-fetched, either.

Beyond the ever-present subject of race and racism, other subjects occur with enough regularity across *Unit 29* that readers can achieve a comprehensive sense of life in the zone:

- drug use (particularly crystal meth and “spice,” a synthetic cannabinoid created to mimic THC, the psychoactive compound in marijuana);
- the tension between those affiliated with “organizations,” gangs inside and outside the prison, and those who do their time on their own;
- conflicts between prisoners often devolving into flinging feces at one another;
- sexualized violence (both between inmates but also between inmates and guards—usually young, Black women who risk their employment by engaging in these acts);
- poor diets consisting mostly of cheap, empty carbohydrates usually supplemented by over-priced canteen purchases;
- boredom, particularly when locked down due to emergencies or violence;
- criticisms of the infrastructure of the unit in particular and the prison more generally (especially notable since Parchman is Mississippi’s oldest prison), including the lack of both heating in the winter and air-conditioning in the summer;
- indifference to outwardly, unabashedly violent guards and administrators;
- depression, poor mental health, instances of self-harm, and suicidal ideation; and
- different forms of prison protest, from the wrecking of prison cells and the starting of fires or creation of floods (usually by stopping up toilets) to Christopher Smith’s days-long hunger strikes.

Of particular interest to readers of this journal are the pieces depicting the various forms of institutionally sanctioned labor (ranging from cleaning and other forms of repair to working in the kitchen). Some of these narratives take the form of an-average-day-in-the-life-of a unit convict, such as Anthony Cathey’s short piece “Kitchen Punch Line Jells” (detailing mess hall work beginning at 2:00AM every day) or Leon Johnson’s “Prison Creates Lines,” a poetic litany of the many queues that a regimented prison-life demands of inmates. Some of the longest pieces in the anthology read like long excerpts from a personal diary: Rufus McFadden’s “My Lockdown Chronicles;” Elijah Stamps’s “Thoughts Everyday;” and Ronald Thompson’s “Days” are a few like this.

Some of the pieces are rough, unvarnished, appearing with very little heavy-handed editorial interventions—a deliberate choice, it appears, to avoid prettifying the stories these writers needed to tell. Likewise, there is no framing foreword or editorial introduction to the collection as a whole, outside a brief note on the copyright page indicating that the pieces were drawn primarily from the writing workshops held by Bourgeois from November 2021 to June 2024. As such, the pieces are meant to speak for themselves. The light editorial touch imparts a sense of hardboiled realism from time to time, but more important than that, the book, as a whole, captures a real sense of urgency around the immediate conditions that Unit 29 prisoners were facing while they sat down to write these narratives. Despite the way some pieces date as far back as late 2021 and serve as slices of time from the recent past, it is clear that the imprisoned writers in this anthology still face these conditions, thus making this collection all the more important as both a testimony and a demand for action from the state.

**Reviewer Bio:**

**Nathaniel Heggins Bryant** is Associate Professor of English at California State University, Chico, where he also serves as the chapter president of California Faculty Association, the labor union representing faculty, counselors, librarians, and coaches in the CSU system. He is the author of several articles dealing with the intersection of labor studies, prison studies, and prison writing on individuals like the Soledad Brother George Jackson and Caryl Chessman. He has served as the Working-Class Studies Association secretary and is currently working on two book-length research projects: the first on a critical reassessment of Robert F. Stroud, better known as the Birdman of Alcatraz, and the second on prisoner unionization efforts in the 1960s and 1970s.