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## Reflections on Politics and Academia: An Interview with Michael Parenti

Noted political scientist Michael Parenti was recently interviewed by another noted political scientist, Carl Boggs. The interview originally appeared in the academic journal *New Political Science*, June 2012. It is presented here in its entirety.

Carl Boggs (CB): Your scholarly work has won extraordinary acclaim, both nationally and internationally, over a period of several decades. All this, despite having been driven out of the political science discipline in the early seventies and, for the most part, having been denied the institutional supports, rewards, and income that most academics – including those on the left – take for granted. Now well into your seventies, you remain as productive as ever. What has been the key to your success?

Michael Parenti (MP): I want to say “clean living” but no one would believe me. Seriously, the only things I knew how to do in life were write and speak, so I continued doing them. What impelled me onward was the urge to seek truth amidst the lies and obfuscation of ruling interests.

My efforts repeatedly drew me into forbidden terrain of a kind that does not lead to tenure. Deprived of a regular university position because of my activism and iconoclastic writings, I dedicated myself to trying to become a public intellectual.

At the same time I still maintained links with academia: some of my books are used in courses; I do guest lectures at various schools and have had a few guest teaching invitations over the decades. And believe it or not, I still on rare occasions cobble together an article for books of collected scholarly essays or for academic journals. Financially it has been difficult at times but I have survived so far.

CB: Speaking for myself and most other progressives and leftists I have known, the radicalizing process we underwent usually came in our adult years. What was the source of your departure from established norms and conventional politics? And when in your life did it happen?

MP: No instant red diaper blooming for me. As a schoolboy I occasionally read about political events in the *New York Daily News* and other such rags. For a brief spell as a teenager in high school, I considered myself a Republican (don't ask). By college I was an activist for the Liberal Party in New York City. At that time the civil rights struggle really gripped me. The injustice of Jim Crow racism was so compellingly clear.

I think I moved leftward because I love justice more than anything else, more than beauty or love or happiness itself. Still there were lapses. The most apolitical period of my adult life was the three years or so at Yale University getting my Ph.D. in political science, or as it might be better called “apolitical science.”

Finally it was the Vietnam War that took me from a pale liberalism to a real radicalism. I began questioning the war, then I questioned the leaders who produced the war, and then the system that produced the leaders. At first I thought the war was an irrational venture, a tragic mistake. Eventually I concluded that the war was quite rational, a tragic success (or at

least partial success) serving global corporate interests. At that point I started moving from a liberal complaint about how bad things are to a radical analysis about why they are the way they are.

CB: You were one of the founders of the Caucus for a New Political Science during the late 1960s. At the height of New-Left radicalism, the Caucus was motivated by the hope that the discipline could be strongly influenced by a building wave of progressive scholarship and activism – and pushed significantly leftward. Viewing the trajectory of the discipline, what is your present reflection on those original Caucus goals?

MP: The Caucus goals are still as worthy as ever, and still not completely fulfilled: venturing into forbidden areas, research that is critical, comprehensible, and relevant to political struggle and history. It was unimaginable back in 1967 that almost a half-century later things in the profession would be pretty much the same. Today we have the same suffocating centrist ideology making false claim to objectivity.

Today mainstream political scientists still debate the same tired questions about methodological rigor and paradigmatic shifts. How come? Well, the centrists and conservatives still control the boards of trustees; they still control the administrations, research funds, think tanks and scholarly journals, along with recruitment, promotion and tenure; in short, all the means to reproduce the conditions of their own hegemony---in the continued pursuit of apolitical science.

Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s I recall case after case of radical scholars and teachers being let go. Generally speaking, politically safe mainstream academics had---and still have---smoother and more prestigious career paths than those who work from a critical perspective, although it's good to know that numbers of radicals have survived the cut.

CB: When we were graduate students a good many years ago debates raged between the “pluralist” school convinced of an exemplary American democracy and “power

structure” advocates influenced by the Marxist tradition and the work of such radicals as C. Wright Mills. In a strange paradox, while oligarchic tendencies within American society have intensified across the decades, mainstream political science has embraced pluralism as a nearly sacred, taken-for-granted ideology while critical perspectives remain essentially marginalized. How do we explain this remarkable contradiction?

MP: The same has happened in economics. In economics departments around the country, Marxism has disappeared---not that it ever had much of a foothold---but so has Keynesianism! Almost all academic economists are now free-marketeters. The ideological right has been seriously active this past half-century, recruiting conservatives for journalism and radio, law school and judgeships, public policy and public office, scholarship and college teaching.

The reactionaries understand that people are moved and controlled by words and ideas. Meanwhile the liberals have done little in the way of ideological education except to suppress those to the left of themselves. To this day, liberals and even many “leftist progressives” continue to make war against imaginary hordes of Marxist ideologues while themselves getting regularly whipped by the reactionary right. The Republicans beat the hell out of them and they just keep reaching out, dreaming of bi-partisanship. The liberals and the Democratic Party in general (with some exceptions) resemble the battered spouse in an abusive relationship.

CB: Speaking of oligarchy, the recent Occupy movement has been erected on the premise that corporate and banking elites (the 1%) now rule the country with increasing power and ruthlessness and have scandalously undermined whatever remained of democratic institutions and practices. Looking at this “new populism,” to what extent do you see it as an important political breakthrough – a potentially sustained, radical challenge to the power structure?

MP: The Occupy movement emerged as a massive and spontaneous political force in hundreds of locales, very heartening for the many who thought they were alone and powerless. The movement propagated a clever shorthand for the class war going on in the United States and elsewhere: the 1% vs. the 99%. For decades some of us have been trying to get people to recognize the great (financial) class divide in this society and for that effort we were treated as “extremists” and “Marxist ideologues” by those who wanted no part of class analysis and class conflict (as if they can escape it by declaring it passé).

And now suddenly hundreds of thousands of protestors have recognized the great class divide, vividly and succinctly. Even some news commentators now make gingerly references to the 1%. As we speak, however, the Occupy movement is being systematically suppressed by militarized police forces. When popular sentiment rises up, it is maligned, misrepresented, and treated to police violence.

CB: Many political observers – including some on the left – see parallels between the Occupy movement and the “populism” of the Tea Party movement. What is your assessment?

MP: The Tea Party consists of people who take their otherwise legitimate grievances about taxes and services and misdirect them against irrelevant foes. The tea baggers have internalized much of the reactionary Republican ideological scenario---relentlessly fed to them by Fox News and radio talk show propagandists.

Their “sacred values” include: boundless support for the military, superpatriotism, an untrammelled corporate capitalism, the right to bomb other countries at will, no separation of church and state, patriarchal family, compulsory pregnancy, drastic cuts in government services, and a lustily applied death penalty. They believe that these “precious values” are under attack by the “cultural elites,” the “hate-America” crowd, the snobby liberals, socialists, egg-head intellectuals, trade unionists, atheists, gays, feminists, minorities, immigrants, and other shadowy demons. The Tea Party is a purveyor of reactionary populism and rightist libertarianism.

In sum, the Tea Party bears little resemblance to the Occupy movement other than that they are both protest movements (even then, only one of them gets beaten up by the cops). Maybe someday we will be able to reach the tea baggers and show them how indeed they really are being victimized. But meanwhile we must not reduce essence to form nor succumb to wishful thinking.

CB: You have written quite extensively on questions of American global power and the dynamics of U.S. imperialism going back to World War II and earlier. It has been fashionable, even on the left, to dismiss classical theories of imperialism (such as those, for example, derived from Lenin, Luxemburg, and Hobson or later from Williams and Baran/Sweezy) as outmoded, as dwelling too much on economic factors. How do you view the main sources of U.S. military interventions?

MP: To say that U.S. global intervention is motivated by economic factors does not mean that resource acquisition is the prime or only factor in the empire's aggrandizement. The goal of imperialism remains what it has always been, the striving for dominance over others in order to expropriate their land, labor, natural resources, markets, and capital. The complimentary goal is to uproot and destroy any leader, government, or movement that seeks an alternate route (usually a more communitarian or collectivist one) outside the global imperial system. Such people have to learn that their country does not belong to them; it belongs to the imperium and its transnational corporations.

The U.S. empire sees only two kinds of nations beyond its shores: (1) satellites (also called "client states") that are politically obedient and completely open to foreign expropriation, including our allies who are economically wedded to the western corporate world and who cooperate with Washington on most things; and (2) enemies or potential enemies, countries that pursue independent self-development outside the global free market system, "troublesome" countries like Yugoslavia, Iraq, Cuba, Panama (under Noriega), Haiti (under Aristide), Nicaragua (under the Sandinistas), Libya (under Gaddafi), Venezuela (under Chavez); one could on.

Instead of educating themselves about the economic imperatives of empire, most present-day writers, such as Chalmers Johnson, claim imperialism is all about aggrandizement, power for power's sake, military bases, and messianic hegemony---as if these things were mutually exclusive of economic imperialism. One central goal of these writers is to avoid any informed discussion of the underlying imperatives of class power in service to class interests. Relatively little is offered on how power (in the hands of the few) is used to accumulate wealth, and how wealth is used to secure power. In one of my books I call them the "ABC theorists," (Anything But Class).

CB: Many contemporary critics of U.S. foreign policy – the work of Chris Hedges and Andrew Bacevich comes quickly to mind – have written that U.S. global power is now in serious decline, that the capacity of Washington to intervene around the globe has been compromised by growing economic weaknesses and a too-ambitious international reach. We have the specter of an increasingly debilitated imperial giant no longer able to pursue its superpower ambitions. What is your response to these critics?

MP: I would like to think they are correct but there really isn't all that much evidence that the U.S. empire is tottering. The empire has more numerous and more elaborate bases around the globe than ever before. It has more deliverable destructive power and more reserves of "soft imperialism" than ever before. It has penetrated more markets and resource areas than ever before. It has successfully destroyed leaders and organized movements in scores of countries that have tried to chart a more egalitarian and independent course. The empire has extended its reach around the globe, going from one success to another---along with one or two stalemates as in Afghanistan. Even when the empire suffers defeats, it still might then continue to wax more powerful.

Consider the U.S. defeat in Vietnam. Since then the U.S. empire has only grown in power. And every year it is granted a still more gargantuan military budget, now courtesy of President Obama who stands at attention saluting the Pentagon, always ready to serve.

Of course, it's also true that the empire feeds off the republic. All its expenses are paid by the republic. It feasts from the public trough at great cost to the civilian sector. It's the republic that is in drastic decline not the empire. But like any parasite, if the empire is too successful and unrestrained in its parasitic feed, it will eventually kill its host and itself. Right now it enjoys a military Keynesianism, a public spending that bolsters (in a warped way) the republic's economy and Corporate America's profits.

CB: In your book *To Kill a Nation*, your focus on a multitude of crimes carried out by U.S. and NATO forces during nearly three months aerial bombardments – preceded by roughly a decade of economic, political, and military efforts to destroy Yugoslavia as a unified nation -- brought widespread outrage from leftists as well as liberals who uncritically accepted the Western demonization of Serbs as the party singularly guilty of atrocities during the long and bloody civil war. My own generally positive review of your book elicited similar harsh responses. How, in your opinion, could American progressives normally critical of U.S. interventions abroad suddenly become so myopic in the case of Yugoslavia?

MP: Most U.S. leftists want to open toward those to the right of them and eschew those to their left. Their prime passion seems to be making war against communism or what they call “Stalinism,” a largely undefined and rather dated demon. I’m talking about people on the intellectual and sectarian left, not the Tea Party reactionaries. Many of the liberal-left saw Milosevic as the last Stalinist in Europe who had to be done in. So they readily swallowed the mass media’s fabricated stories about genocidal atrocities allegedly committed by the Serbs. They stood shoulder to shoulder with NATO, the CIA, the Pentagon, the White House and mainstream media, the same usual suspects whom they say we should never trust. They believed every demonizing story fed to them about the Serbs.

To give just one example: they believed that 100,000 people in Kosovo were slaughtered by the Serbs and that the Trepca mines were filled with corpses. No such mass graves were found and in the Trepca shafts not even a shoe or belt buckle was found.

Actually the Serbs were the ones who had the largest multi-ethnic populations in their republic, including Croats, Albanians, and Slovenians; the Serbs were not indulging in ethnic cleansing and certainly not genocide. The Kosovars fleeing south during the war openly exclaimed that they were running from the NATO bombings not from a Serbian Juggernaut. I have all the sources and citations in *To Kill a Nation*, almost all of them western sources including ones from the United Nations and even NATO.

But it is a familiar scenario: U.S. leaders demonize the targeted leader, in this case the democratically elected Milosevic, and this gives them license to bomb his people---with depleted uranium no less. In my book *The Face of Imperialism* I call it “Privatization by Bombing.” I was in Serbia a few weeks after the 78 days of bombing and noted that only government-owned and worker-owned factories, utilities, hotels and the like were bombed. The privately owned Hilton Hotel and other private companies had not a scratch.

What is unusual is that so many lefties got suckered into this “humanitarian war” scenario. As I say, I think some of them are fighting the ghost of Stalin, possessed as they are by their knee-jerk anti-communism. The Serbs were targeted by the U.S. imperialists because they were the biggest ethnic group, the one most against secession, and with a working class that was more socialist than in any other of the Yugoslav republics.

CB: The process of globalization is usually presented in mainstream (and standard political-science) discourse as something of a natural phenomenon – an inevitable tendency of the world economy toward heightened integration, transnational communication, prosperity, and (in some readings) democracy. You have written, in contrast, that globalization is no inexorable process but rather a conscious, planned design by multinational corporate interests to expand the realm of capitalist markets and profits, making it anything but a development favoring economic prosperity and political democracy. Can you elaborate on this argument?

MP: In *The Face of Imperialism* I have a chapter dealing with globalization; I take a couple of pages to criticize those Marxists who seemed unable to grasp what globalization is. As with the conservatives, many Marxists (but not all) missed the whole nature of the struggle. They saw globalization only as a process of expanding investment—which Marx and Engels described long ago, so why the fuss.

But those of us who actually knew something about the free trade agenda---including farmers, workers, students, and intellectuals all over the world---understood that under globalization's free trade agreements public services can be ruled out of existence because they cause "lost market opportunities."

Laws that try to protect the environment or labor and health standards already have been overturned in many countries for "creating barriers to free trade." Globalization monopolizes production by removing protections for small producers and farmers who are then undersold and driven out by heavily subsidized corporations.

What is also overthrown is democracy itself, the right to have laws that are protective of the social wage, human services, and local economies. Globalization elevates investment rights above all other rights. Globalization also attempts to monopolize nature itself, allowing corporations to lay exclusive claim to basic resources of life, including farm seeds, rice, corn, and even rainwater. It is not free trade; it is monopoly investment. The results are disastrous for Third World nations and not good for any of us except the 1%.

CB: The severe economic crisis we have experienced in the U.S. – and the world – during the past few years is often understood as either a temporary downturn or a cyclical adjustment within an otherwise healthy, dynamic growth-oriented "market" system. After all, previous crises have typically been followed by sustained phases of development. Is there something qualitatively novel, more deeply structural and long-term, about the present crisis?

MP: Recessions are difficult and painful for us but not such a bad thing for Corporate America. Recession allows giant firms to more easily swallow up smaller ones (or other giants) thereby increasing oligopolistic concentration and diminishing competition. Profits keep flowing in while corporate tax rates remain lighter than ever (as even the *Wall St. Journal* recently reported). Recession also tames or totally defeats labor unions. And the general public learns humility too.

The 1% does not want a public that is well educated and well informed, free of debt, able to organize and make demands, directed by a strong sense of entitlement and high expectations, advocating not-for-profit social programs and services. Recessions often teach the working public to stay in its lowly place and work harder and harder for less and less. Crisis, panic, recession, and poverty are the common conditions of free-market capitalism not the rare exception.

Take a look around the world at (to name just a few) capitalist Nigeria, capitalist Indonesia, capitalist Hungary, capitalist Bosnia, capitalist Haiti, capitalist Honduras, and soon-to-be capitalist Libya.

But capitalism is also a self-devouring beast. One function of the capitalist state seldom mentioned, even by Marxists, is to protect capitalism from the capitalists. If the 1% become too successful in their frenzied pursuit of profits and their furious determination to roll back all regulations and restraints, they may well destroy their own system. The plutocrats will plunder everything and everyone in sight, including other capitalists. Toss the global ecological crisis into this witch's brew and we may well be headed toward monumental disaster.

In the middle of it all we have a president (Obama) who keeps jacking up the military budget and is now spending billions to build the first new (and utterly dangerous) nuclear plant in decades, announcing proudly "I believe in nuclear power."

CB: You have written, in your book *Contrary Notions*, that "the important legitimating symbols of our culture are mediated through a social structure that is largely controlled by centralized, moneyed organizations. This is especially true of our information universe whose mass market is pretty much monopolized by corporate-owned media." This offers a rather monolithic view of media culture in the U.S. Do you see any signs, or sources, of fissures in this system – of a break from the hegemonic order?

MP: The corporate owned mass media are not as perfectly reactionary as media owners might want. All sorts of information can be found buried in the back pages of the *New York Times*, *Wall St. Journal*, and other mainstream publications---or even stuck right in the headlines. Some of it can be quite revelatory, if you know how to connect the dots.

Troublesome events peek through the haze: recession, poverty, enormous public debt, horrific military interventions, corrupt lawmakers, thieving financiers, renditions and torture, unprecedented natural disasters---but these are not things we lefties inventively pull out of our radical hats. They really exist. Reality is radical. Often the media have to report something about these unpleasant realities, and when they do, this convinces the moneyed reactionaries that there exists a "biased liberal media" that tries to make capitalist society look bad.

As for "fissures" in the communication universe, well, there do exist a few hundred non-profit community and campus radio stations that occasionally allow a dissident voice on the air. I do about 35 radio interviews a year on small stations all around the country that broadcast to very small listening audiences. There also are a few under-financed tiny circulation magazines that offer some leftist perspectives. And then there is the Internet which has the defects of its own virtues, with websites and blogs that extend across the entire political spectrum, and hundreds of self-appointed columnists and commentators of all political hues.

Still the moneyed class and its acolytes control almost the entire communication universe. Getting heard by larger publics is an uphill battle if you have no access to major media. I speak from direct experience. I usually get over 100,000 hits a month on my website, while Glenn Beck gets millions of hits and has many millions of viewers and listeners (and makes millions of dollars). Can he really be that much more intelligent and informed than the rest of us? Or is he just more ideologically correct and therefore better marketed by superrich interests? So the Internet has provided an outlet but---given the way moneyed resources are distributed---it is difficult to create a level playing field.

CB: In your book *God and His Demons* you write: "God's wonders never work more mysteriously – and deleteriously – than

in the propagation of religion itself. Religion is widely credited with being the great progenitor of moral virtues, but looking at the actualities of history we cannot help noticing how frequently religions have served as instruments for promoting intolerance, autocracy, and atrocity.” To what extent has this kind of religious dogmatism influenced the contemporary rightward shift in American politics, in which Christian fundamentalists (among others) seem fully possessed of a combination of righteous moralism, nationalist xenophobia, and political authoritarianism?

MP: As I note in *God and His Demons*, many fundamentalist groups are completely hostile toward “godless” secular democracy; they are uncompromising totalitarian theocrats and openly say as much. They are dedicated to infiltrating the various institutions of this country. About 25 years ago I was invited to speak at the U.S. Air Force Academy. The Academy’s political science department was using my textbook, *Democracy for the Few*. No kidding. I had an interesting time and made some nice friends.

But today I would not be allowed through the gate. The Academy has been taken over by Protestant fundamentalists as has other military centers and bases throughout the armed forces. More generally, the fundamentalist worshippers have played an active role injecting theocratic values into political discourse, especially with such receptive reactionary presidents as Reagan and George W.

The clearest case of theocratic intrusion into secular politics was Pope John Paul II’s destruction of liberation theology throughout Latin America, a CIA sponsored suppression that needs more revelation than the few pages I gave it in my book. And of course there is a circular effect. The secular reactionaries fund the fundamentalists in whatever ways they can and even appoint some of them to public office. So church impacts upon state and state bolsters the church, all in a mutually reactionary direction, a marriage made in heaven---or more likely somewhere else.

CB: Returning to the Occupy movement and its many offshoots, can we find cause for optimism here at a time when our experience with other contemporary social movements has been somewhat less than positive. Popular insurgencies rooted in global justice, antiwar politics (Iraq), and immigration rights, for example, have generally stalled and failed to achieve much political articulation or durability. Might one identify something entirely different about this new insurgency – different enough to justify renewed optimism for the future?

MP: That’s a crystal ball question. Who can say? I would qualify what I said earlier about the imperium. It is horribly powerful but neither invincible nor omnipotent. There have been victories and changes. In my lifetime I have seen Jim Crow driven off its pedestal. I have seen a peace movement that eventually almost paralyzed the U.S. war effort in Indochina and raised a ferment on the domestic front that shook up our institutions and our very lives. There have been dramatic gains by feminists and gays, and now a sudden explosion of class fightback by the Occupy movement. Uprisings are unpredictable things. Nobody expected the overthrow of Mubarak in Egypt, not even the Egyptologists and Middle East specialists. If they did, they certainly kept it to themselves. Everything may seem hopeless and then suddenly the people find something in themselves and each other and the democracy is out on the streets.

I guess the best approach is the one offered by Antonio Gramsci who said we must have “a pessimism of the mind and an optimism of the will.” That is, we must be able to look at how grim things can get and have no sunshine illusions about what we face, but we must also keep fighting as if it made a difference and had an impact---because sometimes it does.

Let me end by thanking Carl Boggs for his efforts in putting this interview together. It's a privilege to be interviewed by someone of his caliber.

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