

AMERICA BEYOND CAPITALISM, by Gar Alperovitz

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Preface

They called it “Black Monday”—the day in 1977 when five thousand workers at the Youngstown Sheet and Tube plant in Ohio were told the mill was going to close. An aggressive group of young steelworkers was dumbfounded. They had put their lives into the mill. Did this really have to happen? Gerald Dickey was the first to have the idea: “There are skills and men here who know how to make steel. Why don’t we set this up as a company that we ourselves own—we could do it jointly with the community.”

That was the start of a major fight. The religious community, led by the Catholic and Episcopal bishops, put together an ecumenical coalition. I was called in to help (some of the church leaders had read my work). With the support of a couple creative government officials, we hired top steel industry experts to develop the kind of plan which is now common in successful steel operations.

Then something interesting happened—and we learned two fundamental things which are at the heart of the following book:

First, the seemingly radical idea of the workers and community owning and running a giant steel mill was hardly radical at all at the grass-roots level. Indeed, the vast majority of the community, the local congressional delegation, both senators, and the conservative governor of Ohio, James Rhodes, supported it. The state prepared loan-guarantee and other legislation to

back the effort. What made sense to ordinary Americans was far different from what many had thought.

The second lesson was equally important: For complicated reasons, Youngstown never got its mill.¹ However, the struggle to find a new way forward that began on Black Monday continued—and in many parts of Ohio (and elsewhere throughout the United States) worker-owned firms inspired by the initial fight are now commonplace. The second lesson is the lesson of commitment to the long haul.

I am a historian and a political-economist. I have been a legislative director in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate, as well as a high-level policy adviser in the Department of State. I was nominated by leading environmental, consumer, labor, and other national organizations to be a member of the Council of Economic Advisers. I have been a Fellow of Kings College, Cambridge University and of the Institute of Politics at Harvard, and of the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington. I worked with steelworkers in Youngstown and with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and Martin Luther King, Jr. at the 1964 Atlantic City Democratic National Convention. I am also a former anti-Vietnam war activist. And I am, lastly and importantly, someone who grew up in a medium size Mid-Western industrial city—Racine, Wisconsin.

I mention these personal facts to underscore several critical aspects of the lessons of Youngstown—and my reasons for writing a book that argues that it is not only necessary but possible to “change the system”:

Though I am now a professor with all the usual academic trappings and degrees, I am not

primarily an academic. What I have to say about political possibilities is informed, for better or worse, by some rather hardheaded real-world experiences—especially concerning difficult longer-term change. Here are four examples:

First, when I worked in the Senate in the early 1960s it was for Gaylord Nelson—the founder of Earth Day. The idea that environmental issues might one day become important in America seemed far-fetched then. Everyone *knew* this was a non-starter. I witnessed close at hand the rise from “nowhere” of what once had been called “conservation” to what became the “environmental movement.” I view current setbacks and political obstacles with a certain historical sense of the possible, and I view long-run change coming “out of nowhere” as always—minimally!—conceivable (whether the powers that be like it or not).

Second, I recall, vividly and personally, the days in 1965 and 1966 when virtually the entire leadership structure of the nation supported the Vietnam War. The president and the Congress (with only a tiny handful of exceptions), most of the press, and most of the corporate and labor leaders all thought the war right (or at least did not oppose it). In 1965 and 1966 even Martin Luther King refused to challenge the Johnson administration directly on the war.² I also recall that, contrary to those who said nothing could be done, slowly and steadily a citizens’ movement built power and momentum until the war was stopped.

Third, way back when—in my early days in Wisconsin—Senator Joseph McCarthy of our state dominated politics, both nationally and locally. “They shot anything that moved politically,” people used to say. Fear dominated every suggestion that progressive ideas might be put forward. Anyone who thought otherwise was obviously foolish. But of course, what came next was the 1960s. Both those who lament and those who cheer the passing of the 1960s era of

activism often read history as if things ended in the 1970s. My reading—from the perspective of Wisconsin in the McCarthy-dominated 1950s—is that those who say nothing can be done because reactionaries control everything simply do not recall or do not know how impossible the world felt *before* the “unexpected” explosions of the 1960s.

Fourth, my personal memories also include the way the Civil Rights movement developed “out of nowhere”—or so it then seemed—to challenge the oppression that was the American South. The idea that nothing could be done was also rampant in the pre-1960s South—and there it was enforced not simply by reactionary politicians willing to blacklist anyone who spoke up. It was enforced by deadly terror: blacks—and even some white Americans—were murdered for demanding their basic rights. (As a young Senate aide, I drove through Mississippi with civil rights activist Bob Moses, followed at every turn by armed state troopers; the poor farmers we stayed with kept a shotgun by the door.) Those who tell me the opposition to change, now, is so great that nothing can be done would do well to read just a bit about what it was like before the civil rights movement *was* a movement.³

One final recollection—this one not so close at hand but nonetheless vivid in my life experience as well. Most people forget how marginal conservative thinkers and activists were in the 1950s—both before and after the Goldwater debacle of 1964. The ideas and politics that currently dominate American reality were once regarded as antique and ridiculous by the mainstream press, political leadership, and most of serious academic thought. Committed conservatives worked in very difficult circumstances to develop their ideas and practices and politics for the long haul—and though I disagree with them, they, too, have demonstrated what can be done against seemingly long odds.

If you think I am recalling these various experiences and old war stories to suggest that even the most daunting political obstacles can often be overcome by those who are serious, you are right. I am, however, no utopian. I think it is entirely possible that, like Rome, the U.S. empire will fail and decay. Or that our domestic and international troubles will lead to violence and the suppression of what remains of American liberties. Indeed, as I shall suggest, at best I think things are likely to get worse before they get better. I note, however, that Chile has survived even Pinochet. Those who view things historically understand that the challenge is always to build to and through even the worst difficulties.

The American Revolution itself stands as a reminder of how the then most powerful empire in the world could be challenged. (The signers of the Declaration of Independence, we do well to recall, did so knowing that if they failed, they would be hung for treason.)

This book argues that the only way for the United States to once again honor its great historic values—above all equality, liberty, and meaningful democracy—is to build forward to achieve what amounts to systemic change. I shall explain what I mean in due course, but here let me note that fundamental change—indeed, radical systemic change—is as common as grass in world history. It may be that history has stopped in the United States circa 2004, but I doubt it. The lessons of Youngstown have been reinforced by the experiences I have cited—above all, that what seems radical is often simply common sense at the grassroots level and that a commitment to the long haul is the only way to test what might really be possible.

One other lesson is important: serious ideas count. Moreover, people understand and respect serious ideas. Here I again honor committed, thoughtful conservatives (as distinct from

right-wing ideologues who use ideas to bludgeon the opposition). Though I disagree with the writings of men like Russell Kirk, Henry C. Simons, and Friedrich A. Hayek, I respect their commitment to developing tough-minded theory—and their understanding that this is critical to the development of a truly meaningful politics.

We often ignore this truth, thinking that what counts is “the message” or “how issues are framed” for public consumption. What ultimately counts is a coherent and powerful understanding of what makes sense, and why—and how what makes sense can be achieved in the real world. By “coherent” I mean rigorous intellectually as well as politically.

Some feel that ordinary Americans are uninterested in ideas, or cannot understand them. I disagree. Historically it is not only thoughtful conservatives who have shown that ideas count but, in other eras and other times—whether one agrees or disagrees, Marxists and liberation theologians as well. And Americans at the time of the Revolution. And feminist theorists from Seneca Falls on. The lesson here is that it is time to roll up our sleeves and get serious about the intellectual work that needs to be done if an effort to achieve fundamental change is ever to succeed. We need to ask ourselves the following questions:

If the current political-economic system is no longer able to sustain equality, liberty and meaningful democracy, what specifically do we want? And why, specifically, should anyone expect what we want to be any better than what we now have? And how, specifically, might what we propose deal with the everyday problems now facing most Americans? And finally even if we can say what “system” would be better, why, specifically, do we think it might be attainable in the real world?

As I said, I am no utopian. Why in the world should anybody want to support a

movement for serious change that does not attempt to give straight and tough answers to such obvious questions? My book, I hope, will help stimulate more tough-minded discussion of such matters.

Although this book is not explicitly about the war in Iraq (or the war on terrorism), I also hope it will help us reach to some of the underlying structural relationships—and matters of democratic decision making—that have allowed the over-militarization of U.S. foreign policy. I have previously written a great deal on foreign policy and military issues.⁴ This work attempts to go deeper—to the structural foundations of the system that permit the kinds of policies that so endanger the modern world.

Quite apart from any particular book, I believe there is a real hunger for new thinking among many Americans. Indeed, it would not surprise me—given the growing pain and frustration—if in the coming decades, we were to experience something like the Federalist debates of the founding era—a time of great and historic public rethinking of fundamentals. It may well be that the intellectual (as well as political) debates which antiglobalization activists have helped initiate are the opening guns in such a national dialogue.

The first sections of this work offer an introduction to critical ideas about what it takes to sustain equality, liberty and democracy—the kind of ideas which in recent years modern political and economic theorists have been developing and refining in their books and articles. (Part I of the book is also an invitation to continue the effort, to go further.) And it is an invitation to plain speech. The great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy is reputed to have warned fellow intellectuals that “if you can’t explain it to an ordinary peasant, that is your problem, not theirs.”

I might add that this better be the case if we are talking about ideas for a democracy! The

Americans I grew up with in Racine, Wisconsin are damn tough-minded. They can more than handle ideas about how really to achieve equality, liberty and democracy—if they are presented in ordinary English. They are no different in this respect than millions of others, historically in this nation and around the world, who have decided to get serious about things that count.

The question is not the capacity of citizens to understand. It is not even whether writers and thinkers take the time to explain themselves. What opens people to making the effort is that they are forced to abandon the pose that politics doesn't matter, and that ideas are irrelevant. Two final personal experiences are instructive in this regard—both from the time of the Vietnam War.

The first involved a meeting in Massachusetts and a government official who had been sent out to calm the opposition. This had once been an easy task; the rationale for the Vietnam War went largely unchallenged for many years. What stands out in memory, however, was a housewife at this meeting, challenging the official—and backing him down, step by step—on each point of fact, of law, and of history involved. She had simply decided it was time to get to work and master for herself the politics and the underlying intellectual rationale.

The second is my first experience knocking on doors with a young activist at the time. At the first stop, the person who answered the door hesitated and then said, “I'm against the war, but no one else is on this block.” At the second, third and many more stops, almost the same words were spoken in almost the same way. The reality, of course, was that far more people agreed—and ultimately triumphed—than anyone imagined at the outset or in their own isolation (including our own).

My heroes are the people who fought for civil rights in Mississippi in the 1930s and

1940s—when the struggle that laid the groundwork for what came later was undertaken by individuals whose names few now remember. That was when the real work was done.

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Preface

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1. For the story of Youngstown, see Staughton Lynd, *The Fight Against Shutdowns: Youngstown's Steel Mill Closings* (San Pedro: Singlejack Books, 1982); Gar Alperovitz and Jeff Faux, *Rebuilding America: A Blueprint for the New Economy* (New York: Pantheon, 1984).
 2. David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), pp. 469-545.
 3. See John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).
 4. See, for instance, Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965); Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985); Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (Boulder, Colorado: Pluto Press, 1994); Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision To Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995); Gar Alperovitz, *Cold War Essays* (New York: Doubleday, 1970); Gar Alperovitz and Kai Bird, "The Fading of the Cold War—and the Demystification of Twentieth Century Issues," in *The End of the Cold War: Its Meaning and Implications*, ed. Michael J. Hogan, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).