

Never Again is Now: Race and Immigration, the Crisis and Crossroads We Face

I begin with a word that rarely gets heard in connection with the United States. Apartheid. One dictionary defines Apartheid as a “former policy of segregation and political and economic discrimination against non-European groups in the Republic of South Africa.” But if the essential point is the segregation and political and economic discrimination of non-European groups, then the U.S. is Apartheid in all but name. We have no particular name for Apartheid in the U.S., so, perhaps by the rules of American exceptionalism, such a thing doesn’t exist -- as certainly most of the U.S. political establishment would insist.

I worked in the fields of California for nearly a decade. I worked on crews and companies from Salinas to Calexico. I lived in labor camps and farmworker neighborhoods with non European groups, mainly Mexicanos, sometimes Filipinos, African Americans, Central Americans, occasionally native Americans, Yemenese and others. All doing the hardest work you can imagine, living in housing that always seemed to be the worse in whatever part of the state we worked. In many of those years workers had no right to overtime pay and were forced to use production tools that were painful and injurious to themselves and advantageous to the overseers. Some of this changed with reforms only after years of intense union struggle.

At times I lived in barracks, in labor camps from the Bracero era. There were rumors that some were left over from the concentration camps built to house the Japanese Americans during the war. If someone were to wander in to one of those barracks – of which there were quite a few in those days - and see me or one of a few other anglos who worked in the fields, they’d have a disconcerting sensation not unlike I had viewing *12 Years a Slave* when that white slave inexplicably appears in the slave quarters.

There were more Anglos around the fields – in the 1960s and 70s -- student volunteers, boycott supporters and activists, drawn to the union movement but their social realities were starkly different from the farmworkers they came to support.

The differences were especially jolting when the INS – la migra – was in the vicinity.

I was in the fields a few times when they came. I saw workers taken away. If they came and you had a certain look, that is, if you looked Mexican, you’d have your documents checked and if not the right ones you’d be dragged out of the fields. I kept my head down when the immigration came waiting for one of them to come up to me and say, “Enseñame tus papeles” and I could stand up and say, I don’t have no stinking papers! But I never got that chance.

One time I challenged several agents when they were taking one of the crew members away, and I, as a union rep on that crew felt an obligation -- and they threw me to the ground, drove me around the fields handcuffed in the back of their patrol car and threatened to leave me a lifeless, bloody mess at the bottom of a ditch. Before they let me go.

One time, in the Imperial Valley a worker came up to me and an anglo friend and asked us to speak to him in English. We then saw the green immigration van approaching and began talking in English so loudly anyone near us would have thought our hearing seriously

impaired. But it was enough apparently, the immigration van passed us by. Mele Sambrano was not picked up that day and we became friends for years to come.

Years later, speaking at book talks and such, about that experience in the fields, I'd ask the audiences if I looked like a farm worker to them. And, of course, the answer was always no. But people rarely stop to think about that, which, if you think about that, is pretty amazing. Another reflection of that phenomenon imbedded in our thinking, but which has no name.

Nevertheless we can track historical roots of America's unnamed apartheid. A recent issue of *The New York Times Magazine*, one you might have seen or heard of, is called "The 1619 project". 1619 is, of course, the year the first African slaves were brought to what would become, the United States.

I quote from its first lines, "It (1619) is not a year that most Americans know as a notable date in our country's history. Those who do are at most a tiny fraction of those who can tell you that 1776 is the year of the nations' birth. What if, however we were to tell you that this fact, which is taught in our schools and unanimously celebrated every Fourth of July, is wrong, and that the country's true birth date, the moment that its defining contradictions first came into the world, was in late August of 1619?"

What about the U.S.'s defining contradictions?

In 1846 U.S. President James Polk decided to rip half of Mexico from Mexico and among the European Americans who followed Manifest Destiny west to newly conquered lands, there was debate about whether those new U.S. territories would be "slave" or "free". But there was never any debate nor doubt about one characteristic of farm labor in those extraordinarily promising lands.

Here let me quote from a Congressional hearing in the early 1900s: A member of the House committee on immigration questions a representative from California:

"Two years ago California came before this committee and stated herself in opposition to the Chinese and Japanese immigrant and in favor of Chinese and Japanese exclusion, stating that they wanted to develop a great big white State in California, a white man's country; and now you come before us and want unlimited Mexican immigration . . . I can not see the consistency."

I'm tempted to say that the consistency here is in the in-consistency. Chinese and Japanese workers, among the first waves of non-whites who would lay the groundwork for the California dream that would not be theirs -- had several defects as far as the white employers and others were concerned; among them was, the difficulty in getting rid of them when they were no longer needed. Mexicans, on the other hand, were far preferable in that respect.

The southern border became, not so much the stolid line of defense of national sovereignty, than the doorway through which passed the cheap labor on which an empire was built. The door was meant to be a revolving one, but it didn't always work the way it was hoped.

Through the years there's been this weird dance of immigration, moving from times when employers couldn't get enough of those "hard working", "uncomplaining" Mexican workers to other times marked by furious nativist-driven campaigns to stop the flow of "criminals",

“disease ridden delinquents”, “drug runners”, communists or terrorists, depending on the era, and, of course, today’s, “invaders” across the southern border. Notable in this are the years 1930, 1954, and 1994 -- a year I’ll talk about a bit later.

The year 1954 is the year of Operation Wetback a brutal campaign of terror and mass deportation that resulted in the suffering and death of many immigrants. While there was some downturn in the economy at that time, it was nothing like the Depression which was the principle reason given for the 1930s mass deportations of Mexicans.

1954 was an ethnic cleansing campaign. But to quote from an article I wrote for Counter Punch, it “failed to accomplish its goal of reversing the growth of non-white communities. Not because it wasn’t well planned or brutally executed, but because it was trying to resolve a contradiction - a conflict - that could not be resolved in the context of the current social order.”

In the intervening years since Operation Wetback the structural dependence of U.S. capitalism on cheap, vulnerable labor *has increased* over time. At the same time, one of the foundations of white supremacist control and identity, white demographic dominance, is more challenged, than ever. There is then, (I said) “a clash of demographics.”

What began as a labor system in the new territories of California and the southwest has now become, increasingly, a key part of the labor system for the whole country. As you know, one can go into nearly any large U.S. city and you’ll find more and more essential jobs from service to construction to meat packing and elder care, dependent on immigrant workers. And the countryside? Today nearly 90% of U.S. farm workers are immigrants. Walk the streets of major cities, go to the high schools and colleges and the demographic future greets you in all its multiplicity.

For the nativist who has bought into the notion that the U.S. is a “white man’s land” and must always remain that -- this is the metastasizing of a nightmare. For those of us who view humanity through a broader lens, it is a twist of historical irony and the harbinger of a potentially better world.

But before we go there . . .

In the 1980s Reagan tried to end this “crazy dance” with an amnesty for what were then three million immigrants deprived of documents. Today, 33 years on, there are 11 to 12 million people in this status. Thirty-three years have passed since there’s been any viable path to the most basic “legal residency” for those millions.

Instead we have a duplicitous game.

Because U.S. capitalism admits to no apartheid labor, nor racial caste system, and yet can’t function – and compete -- without workers deprived of basic rights . . . we have an endless, discussion of “comprehensive immigration reform”, a debate over policy, so convoluted, so hypocritical and so entangled in its own contradictions that a dweller in Alice’s Wonderland would find it beyond the pale . . . With no end in sight.

Beginning in the 1990s we’ve witnessed with Clinton, Bush and Obama, the border wall constructed, laws criminalizing immigrants enacted, a spectacularly cold blooded decision to

drive NAFTA and other refugees into the desert where many were sure to die. . . and detention centers sprouting like diseased deformities on the landscape . .

And today in the Trump era, a fascistic nationalism targets the broader non-white community, and Latino immigrants in particular, not only as *lessers than*, but overtly as *racial enemies*.

When campaigning for office, Trump cited and praised Operation Wetback. He even mimicked Herbert Brownell the Secretary of State in 1954 who, at the height of that Operation, threatened to shoot immigrants to discourage them from coming. Trump, never to be outdone in the verbal thuggery department, said *he would machine gun them*. And we have seen how those words have aroused people to horrible actions in places like Gilroy and El Paso.

When I worked this passed December and March at the Annunciation House shelter El Paso, refugees from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador described to me the wretched conditions and wonton disrespect and brutality they encountered in ICE detention. Immigrants were assaulted, demeaned and berated, their possessions, even medications, taken and dumped. They were placed in cold rooms for days, their food inadequate, their hygiene and medical needs ignored. Refugees into our shelter came in dire need for a place to get a shower, to get decent food, medical attention, and most of all, to be somewhere where they were regarded and treated as human beings.

Trump's immigration policy advocates say they do what they do to discourage people from coming. But as the poem *Home* so powerfully expressed, those driven to give up everything they have to go north, have little choice but to endure. And we know, the poverty and violence they are fleeing is a result of U.S. actions in Central America.

But the hypocrisy goes farther because these desperate refugees are the very people the U.S. economy depends on.

One of my jobs at the shelter was to help arriving refugees connect with their "sponsors" be they family members or friends or what have you. Many were heading to places like south Florida where the tomato industry is always in need of desperate laborers or areas that had suffered serious damage in hurricanes and floods. Some refugees said they were assured of jobs where they were headed. Some I suspect were encouraged to come north by labor recruiters who recognize in desperation, opportunity for themselves. There is really nothing new in that.

Recent articles in the U.S. press speak of a big need for immigrant workers, that is, low wage, hard working, people (without those annoying legal rights).

In July I took a trip with a niece to Salinas. We stopped at a strawberry field being harvested and a supervisor explained that the way things were going he could foresee his company forced out of business for lack of workers. Indeed we saw few young workers. A small strawberry grower at a farmers market told me all his workers were in their 60s! A fruit grower told me he was desperate to find young pickers.

I saw newly arrived refugees leaving the shelters wearing GPS ankle bracelets. Weeks later in San Francisco I met one of the refugees from Guatemala I'd met in the shelter in El Paso.

He said he was working every day wearing that ankle device. I felt like a witness to some dystopian nightmare.

In the U.S. today we have a regime in power that seeks to fan the flames of hatred to a white hot intensity. We're in this dangerous intersection where ethnic cleansing meets apartheid.

But how is this playing out among people who oppose this Trumpian racialized nationalism?

In June, 2018, you might recall, hundreds of thousands of people in more than 700 communities across the U.S. took to the streets in revulsion over the separation of children from their mothers and fathers at the border -- a policy so cruel that even some loyal Trump supporters couldn't stomach it.

In June, of this year a group of lawyers and social workers visited the Clint, Texas ICE detention/concentration camp and came out stunned at the horrific conditions there suffered by immigrant children. This came after six children were known to have died in ICE custody. These revelations set off protests that, months later, continue to reverberate.

People began paying closer attention to the stories emerging from the camps that they heretofore had barely realized were there. People began to be tormented by dreams that resembled nightmarish pictures they'd seen in history books. Suddenly the very words "detention centers" seemed like a cover up. The words "concentration camps" heretofore spoken in limited circles, found its way into the vocabulary of tens of thousands.

What has happened in these past few months is the realization that when people are held by overseers encouraged to regard them as "racial enemies" we are on very dangerous ground. History has given us hints we must not ignore.

In July, some of us at the UUSF decided that the moral outrage these events evoked should not be kept within sanctuary walls. Beginning this past July 21, We took our concern to the streets outside the church. We wrote on a flyer we hand out to passing cars, "Have you ever wondered what you would do if faced with a grave humanitarian horror on your doorstep committed by your government in your name? That time is now". We saw that the UU flame needed to also be a spark. We need the fire of indignation to catch hold. This is what we are working on.

We are hardly alone.

The Japanese American and Jewish communities, moved to action by their own lived histories, have done a great deal to raise the alarm. *Never again is now* has become a rallying cry in a new upsurge.

A group of Bay Area cultural activists, responding to a sense of urgency and the need for a protracted effort, proclaimed this past August a Month of Momentum. They called for daily vigils and actions at the ICE regional center in downtown S.F. Dozens of community groupings from comedians to health workers, lawyers to librarians, janitors to journalists, poets, teachers, faith groups and others responded, organizing different actions each day which culminated a week ago Saturday.

Protests of many kinds have flared up across the country. A round of struggle with a different character than last year – both in the tactics people are willing to use and in the determination to persist. There's a sense that this time, we can't go back to passively waiting for whatever comes.

At UUSF our goal is to encourage an outpouring of communities that spans the religious denominations, and beyond. With this in mind we are calling for a mass public gathering of faith communities and others for September 19. We unite with a growing movement to close the camps, end child detention and immigration raids – even ICE itself.

Most of us are open to the possibility that such actions could transform into a movement to remove the regime itself, inspired by the examples of people from So. Korea to Sudan to Puerto Rico.

There are other signs of a new potential. St. Mark's, the church across from our UU in San Francisco, and a partner in this effort, belongs to the Evangelical Lutheran Churches of America. In mid August at a national gathering in Milwaukee, representatives of the ELCA's 9000 churches passed, with a large majority, a resolution calling on their member churches to become Sanctuary churches. 700 gatherers then marched to the ICE Milwaukee headquarters for a protest vigil.

These steps taken by the Lutherans were sharply criticized on Fox News.

On the way here a few days ago news came out of a new initiative from leaders of the Catholic church on the east coast -- a new round of protests of ICE treatment of immigrants. 400 nuns, priests, lay people and activists carried out a civil disobedience action at the Federal building in Newark, New Jersey. Significantly, one of those protesters was a Catholic Cardinal, Joseph Tobin. To quote one of their spokespersons, "We're hoping that we begin to create a wave across the country . . . of what we would call prophetic opposition . . . to change the course of where we are going as a country in terms of our treatment of migrants and refugees," Joseph Fleming, director of Catholic organizing for Faith in Action, told NJ.com.

These all amount, of course, to bare beginnings, but they do point in a certain direction.

We are encouraged in our actions by a statement from the UUA that "this is a time for bold resistance". We would like to see the UU, on a regional, statewide or national level, commit to public action in a sustained way.

We are responding to the danger of white supremacy, weaponized by fascists, to advance a larger agenda – to reinforce U.S. domination – under the slogan *Make America Great Again*.

The rise of strident white supremacy in an era of looming climate catastrophe further compels a sense of urgency and a new mood of determination. Things are very much in motion.

As I move to end, I want to return briefly to the year 1994 which I think has some relevance for us today.

1994 was the year of NAFTA, the beginning of the border wall, and of laws criminalizing immigrants. In California, then Governor Pete Wilson promoted Proposition 187, a major attack on immigrants, as his signature issue. This proposition was part of a massive campaign to convince the public that immigrants represented a dire threat to the economic well being of the state.

To deal with the logistical problem of rounding up large numbers of immigrants, and to further isolate and terrorize immigrants, 187 proposed to turn teachers and medical workers into unofficial agents of the immigration service. Under its provisions teachers, doctors, nurses and paramedics would have been obliged to turn in lists of names of students and patients they suspected of being undocumented.

Proposition 187 passed by a large margin in California, but it was a *spectacular failure*. In the lead up to the election thousands of teachers, doctors, nurses and para medics, signed cards pledging to go to prison rather than abide by the law. Proposition 187 woke up a generation of youth, especially in the Latino community, leading to mass school walkouts and the largest demonstrations in California history. After passing in the election in 1994 the California Supreme court ruled Proposition 187, unconstitutional. More than unconstitutional, it was *unenforceable*.

Proposition 187 was meant to ratchet up divisions and hatreds, but became a turning point in a different direction. The sentiments it awoke, and the *populations it aroused* contributed to California's becoming a Sanctuary state, a state that, by and large, rejects fascist racial enmity and narrow definitions of what it means to be human.

To conclude let me say, so much is on the line right now. We are at a crisis and a crossroads.

We need a new dynamic that takes us in the opposite direction from apartheid and all it implies. There are forces arising and in motion with the potential to challenge this apartheid set up. But I think it naïve to believe that such a transformation could take place within the system that gave birth to it. We need to understand where we are, yes, and think outside the lines of what is, in order to embrace, and struggle for, that which could be.

Closing Remarks:

I'd like to close our session today by quoting from one of the more subversive voices of recent decades. I'm talking of course about -- Carl Sagan.

When the Voyager spacecraft, launched in the early 1970s was about to reach the edge of the solar system, 3.7 billion miles from Earth, Sagan asked that its cameras be repositioned to take a picture of our planet. The result was a photo of a tiny dot in a shaft of light. At a public lecture at Cornell University Sagan spoke of the significance this image had for him. Here are some of those words:

"Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived

out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there-on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner -- how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot

There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. (He goes on to say) To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known."

— Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space*

A world without apartheid, without hostile racial divisions, without the advancement of some at the expense of others, is a much better, more just, way to handle our affairs, and it also just may be, the only way to secure our survival on this Pale Blue Dot.