

# NORTH OF CENTER

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VOLUME I, ISSUE 11

## What I learned in Pittsburgh

The 2009 G20 summit and protests, part 1



Crowds of protestors gather in downtown Pittsburgh during the recent G20 meetings.

By Michael Dean Benton

Americans... still believe in an America where anything's possible—they just don't think their leaders do.  
—Barack Obama, during the 2008 Democratic Primaries

My decision to embark on the journey to the G20 Summit and Protests in Pittsburgh (September 23 – 26) was a

gesture of political optimism. In the spirit of dissident citizenship I wanted to journey to Pittsburgh to join the voices demanding a change to current American and Global economic policies. I hoped that this would be a process of self-education and collective-engagement. Currently, dissident citizenship, a vital part of democratic societies as an alternative to unchecked ambition, is

viewed as a historical relic of earlier, more troubled times. We admire and celebrate famous dissidents and movements like Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement, Samuel Adams and our revolutionary founders, Harriet Tubman and slavery abolitionists. Our media and histories hold them up as abstract symbols of

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## Forestalling ecocide with *The Age of Stupid*

By Andrew Battista, Leah Bayens, and Jeff Gross

The *Age of Stupid* premiered in over 500 cinemas in the U.S. and over 50 counties across the world on September 21. Simulcast to theaters, the event began with “green carpet” premier events live from New York. Gideon Yago hosted the event, which touted the film's low carbon footprint and included a Moby performance powered by people on stationary bicycles.

After the film, the live coverage included a simulcast discussion with Director Franny Armstrong and Producer Lizzie Gillett. Former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan made an impromptu address about ways that climate change, if left unchecked, will result in social justice issues around the world. Aside from Annan's appearance, the live coverage fell flat, sending most of the approximately 40 people at the Lexington screening for the exits. What follows is a longer musing on the film.

Last month's *Harper's Magazine* confirmed that we're all going to die. According to that publication, one-third of people who own a Toyota Prius also have an SUV in their garage. This ratio shows the deep reluctance of environmentally-minded consumers—let alone skeptical masses and bureaucratic nation-states—to overhaul their lifestyles to a degree that might forestall global ecocide, or the widespread destruction of ecological systems that enable human life on earth.

Humans live in an age, environmentalists claim, in which climate change—not war, famine, nuclear arms proliferation, religious fundamentalism, or corporate crime—is the most profound problem we face. We are close to becoming the first species to eradicate itself knowingly, and the proverbial window of opportunity to retard and then reverse the consequences of our destructive behavior is closing—and could in fact slam shut in the next decade.

Let's be clear. Climate change, or the increase of the mean temperature on the earth's surface and near-surface air, is not a myth perpetuated by Europe's intelligentsia or the United States' left-leaning cognoscenti. It's empirically verifiable. We lose little, aside from luxury items, if we radically recalibrate the way we live and do business on this planet, but we stand to lose everything if we continue to bicker about the science and rhetoric of the global warming “debate.”

Nonetheless, many now realize that climate change is an imbroglio so insurmountable that it is surpassed in difficulty only by the challenge of convincing nations and their leaders to care and subsequently re-imagine economy, culture, society, and life. Environmental activists have predicted ecological ruin for decades. They've disseminated their message of woe from treatises that appeal to scientific rationalism to jeremiads that predict inevitable apocalyptic destruction.

Films are no different. Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) marshaled an impressive array of scientific evidence to convince his audience that we can't keep consuming fossil fuels indefinitely. In that documentary, Gore fashions himself as part public intellectual, part university professor, and part reformed political stiff, and he uses this ethos as the film's unifying device. While Gore stands behind a lectern, laser pointer in hand and imposing graphs behind him, we learn how cyclical temperature increase and atmospheric carbon emissions might imperil our future life.

Gore values the scientific authority as a means of compelling others to understand the gravity of the damage humans have done to the earth. The few apocalyptic images in *An Inconvenient Truth* are relatively benign; satellite images depict what Florida, Manhattan, and San Francisco might look like when the sea level rises after a global melt-off, and a cartoonish sequence of a post-warming Arctic wasteland shows a solitary polar bear frustratingly pawing at the only ice chunk remaining for miles. In this dark seascape, the polar bear succumbs to exhaustion and drowns.

Evidently, neither the science nor the rhetoric of Gore's documentary have been particularly effective in slowing global warming. Perhaps it's because the former Vice President presents such

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## Faust summoned to set Lex ablaze

Krautrockers play Boomslang

By Trevor Tremaine

In the mid 1990s, I was a suburban teenager entering a lifelong obsession with strange, adventurous music. Before MySpace, peer-to-peer filesharing, Mutant Sounds and other blogs of its ilk, and without regular access to many interesting all-ages gigs or the sorts of fantastic record stores that were found in Louisville or Cincinnati (each requiring an hour-plus drive), discovering such sounds was a rather labor-intensive process.

Often, I would just peruse the CDs in (the legendary, long-gone Lexington record store) Cut Corner's scant, rarely-restocked avant-garde section and select a disc based solely on the cover art, the description, or the instrumentation, if the credits were visible (i.e. if personnel were attributed with “tapes and electronics,” I knew I had to check it out—an axiom that still holds true today). For guidance, I sought *The Wire* magazine, a UK journal of experimental music from around the world. One memorable issue listed “100 Records That Set the World on Fire (While No One Was Listening),” and I made it my mission to hear as many of these very, very obscure records as I could find.

Faust was a name that popped up a lot in the 90s, with the resurgent interest in Krautrock precipitated by post-rockers, Yo La Tengo, and others. But, like many other indie geeks, I had never actually laid ears on the band. *The Faust Tapes* was one of *The Wire*'s



Faust.

100 records, and so, having yet to be disappointed, I gripped the horrible ReR CD reissue (with the entire album sequenced as a single track) right away. The fabled pages described it as the work of German avant rock stalwarts stealing away to an abandoned schoolhouse in the countryside for one year, growing their own food and their own dope, and spending every waking hour playing music and recording, all the while leaving a formidable tangle of tape for their producer to whittle into something resembling an album—pure romance for the small-town kid who shirked homework and extracurricular activities to jam a fork under the strings of a guitar plugged directly into his four-track.

The sort of pseudo-anthropological, mythologizing hyperbole of the magazine was, as it occasionally is, totally spot-on, and the minute *Tapes* exploded through my scotch-taped earphones from my DiscMan, I was blown away. Tape loop experiments, zonked Barrettesque psych-pop, field recordings, chants, freaked out rock mantras, free improv, Zappa-style fuckery, and

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*North of Center* is a periodical, a place, and a perspective. Keep reading to find out what that means.

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## Building a basil economy

### The ethics of collecting rock

By Danny Mayer

I recall fondly the first time I ever took rock. A Sunday morning, early and cold, idling in the car on the shoulder of the outer Circle near where it hits Liberty Road by that ridiculous Halloween shop. Like much of New Circle, this stretch features a couple small road cutouts, and I was about to scout and grab rock that had fallen over a period of time into the ditch below. I wanted to harvest some of the fallen stone for a pathway and sundry other small projects for my home two miles away. The process would involve about thirty minutes of my time grabbing the rock on the side of the road and another fifteen minutes in transport home and unloading.

The central question I pondered that day, while waiting to jump out into the cold to try my hand at rock-thievery, is the same one I continue to ask myself five years later when traipsing around places that are supposed “Off Limits” to me, though my fear in having to answer it while collecting rock has subsided substantially over the years: “Well, just what the hell do you think you are doing here?”

Throughout the years, I have offered different answers to that question. Gathering rock on roadside cutouts, construction sites or back alleyways is a distinct activity; it tends to

get noticed by passersby, and I’ve never checked into the legal specifics, so I at least try to mentally prepare for just such a question whenever I’m out.

Collectively, the different answers I’ve imagined to the question “what are you doing here?” form a sort of personal ethics for rock collecting, a justification for why and how I collect rock—in effect, an orientation for being in the world. On the whole, my rock ethic is rooted in ideas of usufructure (the taking of pleasure and profit from unused private land) and anarchist critiques of private property. Together, I have found they offer a solid foundation for trespassing onto under-used land in order to take discarded items not used by the property owners, particularly natural ones like rock. Though thankfully nobody representing authority has ever stopped me to have to answer this question (perhaps an indication that while I may be breaking the law, I’m not doing anything wrong), I’ve imagined two general reasons against taking rock from public or private lands—reasons my rock ethics must both question and take into account.

First, one might suggest that my collecting endangers myself or someone else. In asking how I might ensure that the process was as safe as any other daily driving activity in the U.S. (like commuting to work), I have had to ask and answer a number of related questions: can I come at off-hours time, when no workers are around. (If I do go at off-hours time, am I accompanied by a friend?) Is the shoulder on the side of the highway sufficiently wide for me to park for ten minutes? Is the rock safe to access, or is it in a position where it could do bodily harm to me? Is there a possibility that the rock will pose a driving hazard to others in the area. When the answers to these questions are “no,” I normally find another spot.

A second, more theoretical question, is a little less straightforward but I find much more intriguing. One might ask how my taking of rock damages the environment by manner of theft. In a strictly capitalist sense, this is what is we mean, I think, when we talk about the sanctity of private property. Here in the United States, we assume, by dint of deed, that the owner will proceed to make the best use of the land. We assume this because private property, in a capitalist society such as ours, is sacrosanct. The best use of that property *is* whatever the owner does to it, and, conversely, anything that the owner does not condone gets viewed as damaging to that environment in the sense that your very unsanctioned presence detracts from it—so long as environment is synonymous with a deed. Or at least, this seems to me pretty much what property rights enshrine in our laws, the unquestioned assumption that your use of land is less valuable (and correct) than a property owner’s use.

Most of my rock collecting actions, of course, constitute a legal trespassing, particularly so in the case of construction sites. That the sanctity of property stands beyond thought, beyond question, is one of the reasons why I *enjoy* trespassing to collect rock. I want people to see what I do from their homes or cars—trespassing onto places both private and government

affiliated—and to begin to question the primacy of private property. “Oh, look at that young hardworking lad over there! He’s not hurting anything taking all that pretty Kentucky rock that X construction company ripped up during their construction of Y Estates! What a neat and industrious idea putting that rock to good use!”

A bit idealistic? Try collecting rock and the question will become a bit more intimate. It’s something that I ask myself all the time while scouting out rock locations. Specifically, I ask whether I do damage to the property owner for taking discarded rock, stone whose main use to the owner is as a substance to be carted off to somewhere else—that is, as a waste product of that property. Don’t believe me? Take a look at the many unfinished (and finishing) construction sites and the amount of rock sitting discarded, waiting to get hauled off, or watch that favorite cutout of yours over a couple years and wait for the county crew to come and cart it off.

Observing these things, and seeing how useful stone is, has lead me to note simple things about private property—notably that private property owners can both misuse and not use the land that they own, and that while trespassing might be illegal, it doesn’t have to be immoral or wrong to do. It also didn’t have to detract from a property’s value. My taking of stone does no damage to the actual private property—only to the unquestioning idea of its sanctity.

Of course, the same rock ethic restricts as much as it frees. I am, after all, not suggesting that you start ripping the rocks off some bungalow on Desha. The question of damage to the environment is much wider than property rights. Do I want to take stone from somebody’s house? Not hardly, unless I am invited to do so. Doing so would damage that person’s home environment. Similarly, I might ask whether the stone I gather has a cultural value to the environment, as an old rock wall might, or if it held still a use value, if it is still in service to the area, as an overgrown stepping stone might be. In my accounts of environmental damages, these things hold more value to me than a deed paper.

Ultimately, such values necessary to answer the (as yet) unasked questions of “What are you doing, and why are you doing it?” force me to think beyond my environment as property, and to respond to it more as a commons, a place that we all have the responsibility and capacity for using and tending to. You’ll be forced to ask the same sorts of questions, I’d wager, at some point while you gather rock for your projects. Though we may disagree on some particular instances, I trust you’ll arrive at many of the same conclusions that I have.



DANNY MAYER

*Terraced rock helps create level garden space on a steep incline.*

## Rogue bicyclists paste Patterson racks

NoC Staff Report

Observers of the University of Kentucky Parking and Transportation Services’ ongoing attempt to build a registry of the thousands of bicycles parked on the UK campus on any given day were amused to see, pasted on bike racks outside White Hall and Patterson Office Tower, homemade stickers reading “FORFEIT FREEDOM HERE.”

The stickers were arranged in such a fashion as to obscure the top halves of another set of bike-rack stickers, those previously pasted by UK PTS and demanding seat-post-affixed decal permits of all those who deign to park in the racks. The UK PTS web address, however, was left visible by the two-wheeled terrorists, and so the combined sticker read, “FORFEIT FREEDOM HERE: <http://www.uky.edu/Parking/>.”

Few commentators have to this date addressed the connection between

the wholesale surrender of guaranteed freedoms and registering one’s bike, but it appears that a small but determined band of velocipedaling vandals are determined to prevent that surrender from ever occurring.

The registry, initiated this academic term, is free, but was introduced to the university last year as a pay-for-permit program. The plan was met with immediate resistance, and PTS eliminated the offending fees in response. Now it seems they may have not gone far enough.

Typical concerns about the program involve the possibility that fees will be instituted in the future, that stolen-bike rates of recovery will not increase, and that promised improvements to bike infrastructure on campus will not be completed. It is yet unclear which issue drives the cycling psychopaths, but look in this newspaper for periodic updates.

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G2o report (cont.)

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American excellence while erasing the actual struggles and spirit of these fierce and dedicated activists. We all remember Rosa Parks as an individual who spontaneously decided to not to move to the back of the bus during the Civil Rights Movement, but few know that they she was trained in the “Citizenship Schools” at the Highland Folk Center. Annually, we remember the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. as the pacifist civil rights icon who had a dream that we would all live together peacefully, but few know that this dream also involved the demand that the USA put an end to overseas imperial adventures in places like Vietnam and that the government provide reparations for the descendants of former slaves.

The more troublesome dissident groups that problematize the happy-go-lucky, corporate, free-market narrative of American opportunity for everyone, don’t fare so well: they are alternatively silenced from history (IWW/Wobblies), selectively censored (Helen Keller, as the brave young girl who somehow never grew up to be a dedicated radical feminist and worker rights activist), or simply eliminated (Black Panthers and American Indian Movement/AIM). This is the dissident heritage of America; from the celebrated revolutionary-era rebellions against the British Empire; to slave rebellions against Southern plantation owners; to the transnational Suffragette movement, including, notably in the USA, fighting for over a century to get women the right to vote; to Mother Jones leading striking mine workers marching into the hired guns of the owners; to the tragic histories of labor activists like Joe Hill and Eugene Debs who sacrificed everything so that we could have certain workplace guarantees; to Native Americans occupying Alcatraz and Wounded Knee to bring attention to the American government’s violation of treaties, and so on.

The list, known and unknown (so many unrecognized), is endless, and yet these people are the Americans that put the emphasis on freedom in our democracy.

With this in mind, I went to Pittsburgh with my friend Michael Marchman, a veteran of Midwestern union activism and earlier large scale global economic protests, most importantly the 2000 Washington DC protest of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) policies. My experience was in Anti-War protests in Washington DC and union activism in Midwestern universities. Joining us on the second day were three present and former UK students attending their first large scale public protests. This allowed me to witness the events that followed through the older, experienced, perhaps cynical, perspectives of Marchman and myself, and the younger, idealistic, hopeful perspective of our student friends.

Day 1: Media Hysterics

Upon our arrival on the first day, Wednesday, Marchman and I headed downtown to scout out the lockdown situation before the second group arrived on Thursday. We had heard reports that the local Pittsburgh media, in particular radio and TV, had for months been whipping up local hysteria by reporting that crazy hordes of uncontrolled and dangerous protesters would descend on the city. One popular radio DJ was even caught lying about a supposed anarchist plot to fire bomb the river tunnels to stop traffic during the upcoming protest.

Another ridiculous rumor spreading through the mainstream media involved anarchist protesters living in abandoned buildings for months while collecting human feces to throw at police during the protests. Locals actually walked up to us, noticeable with our backpacks and prepared look, asking if we were protesters and

whether we were going to throw shit at people. This might also explain why we noticed fearful glances from people through windows of some businesses and restaurants.

Despite the media predictions of chaos and destruction the city was relatively quiet. We walked around downtown; the only hordes we saw were columns of marching riot police and National Guard soldiers in their military vehicles at major intersections leading into the downtown. (Unconfirmed rumors in the media stated that they had just returned from Iraq).



Police protect First National Bank during the G20 meetings.

One of the reasons we arrived early was to have the opportunity to attend a conference style gathering at a Baptist Church. There were speakers from social justice movements and worker rights organizations from around the world. One of the main speakers that day was Joseph Stiglitz, the Nobel Prize winning economist who predicted the global meltdown and was cited by Newsweek as the most referenced economist in the world (“The Most Misunderstood Man in the World”: July 18, 2009). These were the opportunities of learning that we had looked forward to on this trip and we wondered why none of the G20 Summit conferences involved critics of the current global economic system.

While walking through the Hill District, a working class neighborhood, after attending Nobel Prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz’s talk on the global economy, we were once again asked if we were out-of-town

protesters. When we said yes, we were in Pittsburgh for the G20 Summit and Protests, the local men stated that they hoped we would burn the damn downtown-to-the-ground. This was the only time I heard anyone suggest destruction of the downtown environment. Further, down the way in the same neighborhood, we saw homemade cardboard signs stuck in a wrought-iron fence protesting the G-20 Summit.

Evening 1: surveillance at the center

Later that evening, we hopped on a city bus and headed across the city to the Resist G-20 convergence cen-

ter, young men approached the activists outside the convergence center and tried their best to provoke them into a fight, but it was quickly understood and communicated that this was most likely a tactic designed to provide the needed justification to shut down the center and arrest the organizers. It is commonly assumed that anarchists are wild, destructive, mindless nihilists. This gathering, like most of my interactions with anarchist groups, proved the opposite. These young activists were focused, communal-minded and politically-engaged.

Later that night, disillusionment

Late that night, we left the center and headed back to our hotel. (The closest we could find a room was in Cannonsburg, PA, 10 miles from downtown Pittsburgh). I was tired and disillusioned by the unchecked and unregulated federal handout of trillions of dollars to the banking and investment institutions, which ignored the desperation of everyday Americans like the local working class men we met earlier in the Hill District who clearly felt no connection to the downtown fortress housing international visitors.

My disillusionment did not stop there. I was disillusioned by seeing firsthand that the promise of “hope” promoted by the Obama administration in the buildup and aftermath of the 2008 landslide presidential victory rang hollow in the militarization of downtown Pittsburgh. As usual, the downtown’s homeless were cleared out and abandoned in another district, protestors imagining a better future were told to Stay Away. And I was also disillusioned at the way the G20 and its protests were getting covered. It was obvious that the local media, local TV stations, radio personalities and the independent *Pittsburgh City Paper* were trying their best to demonize the protests before they took place (in this, only the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* was a voice of moderation).

And finally, I despaired at the numbers I saw in the city. Why weren’t more protesters in Pittsburgh? The G-20 was taking place in a central place in the USA and the political moment was right for Americans to gather to express their anxieties, questions and, yes, even hope, in a public forum. Where were American citizens? While the progressive-left had moderate numbers, the pundit-threatened influx of conservative right Teabaggers never even materialized.

The G2o: what it is, and why you should care about it

By Michael Marchman

The G20 is an abbreviation for the “Group of Twenty Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors.” It is an informal organization comprising the finance ministers and the heads of the central banks from the world’s most powerful countries. Also at the table are the heads of several international financial organizations, including the European Central Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. Collectively, the G20 countries account for 85% of the world’s economy.

The G20 excludes the world’s poorest countries, and as with the United Nations and the G8 (an even more elite group of the eight wealthiest countries), the wealthiest and most militarily-powerful countries have the most influence over the organization. The US is the most powerful member country, despite its massive debt and the fact that much of the responsibility for the current economic crisis stems from US-based financial institutions.

The G20, which meets annually, has tremendous power to shape global economic practices and fortunes, yet it is a highly undemocratic institution—there is no public agenda, no opportunity for public input, and no public minutes from the proceedings. Our only insight into what happens inside the G20 meetings is a brief press statement that the member countries make at the conclusion of the summit.

The policy prescriptions coming out of the G20 (and other international

financial institutions) generally end up supporting the economic interests of major commercial banks, financiers, and multinational corporations. Within the organization, it is widely understood that the more powerful countries control the process and use their economic, political and military leverage over delegates from smaller economies to corral them into line.

Throughout its existence, the G20 has been an aggressive and unapologetic supporter of free trade policies (often referred to as neoliberal or “trickle-down” economic policies) that require countries to open their markets to cheap imports and to rapidly and often violently restructure their

economies in line with free trade principles, slashing social services, undercutting wages for working people and devastating local ecosystems.

Not surprisingly, these policies, while widely adopted by political elites, are in fact, hugely unpopular around the world, and there is a mountain of evidence that they are largely responsible for the widespread economic instability at the heart of the current economic meltdown—the largest economic downturn since the Great Depression. Despite this, the G20 leaders continue to promote the same policies. The bankers and financiers, who caused this

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Michael Marchman interviewed by Russian television during the Pittsburgh demonstrations.

# Film review: *My One and Only*

A. G. Greebs

I'd like to begin by saying that I don't have anything against *The Catcher in the Rye* per se. However, I consider any movie scene that features a sensitive young man who is obsessed with Salinger automatic permission to stop paying attention. It's the narrative equivalent of calling Obama a communist—a sign of slovenly intellectual habits. So I knew within the first fifteen minutes of *My One and Only* that I was in trouble.

This is a movie that has never, ever, met a cliché it didn't like.

Long before actor George Hamilton became famous for his signature tan, he lived a peripatetic childhood as the son of a society bandleader and his high maintenance wife. When his mother Ann became fed up with his father's serial infidelities, she removed George and his half-brother, Robbie, from their Manhattan prep school and took to the road in the search for a new rich husband.

Years later, after Hamilton had been discovered, he mentioned the ensuing road trip to Merv Griffith, who came to the somewhat startling

conclusion that it would make exactly the sort of movie audiences wanted to see. The result was a series of interminable studio delays (apparently the new generation of studio heads did not share Mr. Griffith's confidence about what would appeal to the viewing public), and finally *My One and Only*, a chronicle of comic missteps, zany adventures, and encounters with ne'er do well rogues.

To imply that *My One and Only* is completely twee would be unfair. Occasionally it's maudlin. It's also really, really, aggressively charming.

The first twenty minutes isn't set in the early fifties, so much as it is done in the style of the fifties. Renee Zellweger, who plays George's mother Ann, does a reasonably good impression of Katherine Hepburn with a southern accent. But after the movie firmly establishes itself as a period-roadtrip-divorce-comedy (the press materials hail *My One and Only* as "genre busting") but "genre inclusive" might be a better way of putting it), everything sort of calms down.

Thereafter, the plot of meanders along with the Cadillac. Eventually

they both end up in the same place, more or less, and like an actual road trip, there are more false starts and diversions than traditional narrative structure. In some ways that's not a problem. After all, who doesn't like road trips or nicely dressed 1950s sets.

But *My One and Only* isn't really self aware enough to pull off the whole free-flowing, character-driven story thing. It is clearly the brainchild of a man who wants to tell Merv Griffith a good story, and who doesn't want anyone thinking poorly of his mother.

As a result, *My One and Only* quickly becomes one of those movies that wants everything both ways. Ann is a terrible mother, but she'd do anything for her sons. She has steely determination, but can't function without a man. She's a Southern Belle, but also from St. Louis.

And all the characters are like that, easily imagined as product of a young boy's perception filtered through an old man's nostalgia. Almost everyone in this movie is too overdrawn to be relatable, too flawed to be inspirational and too clichéd to be genuinely sympathetic. When

the movie succeeds at being funny, it seems almost accidental.

This is a problem, because it makes the movie tonally schizophrenic. Things that seem genuinely degrading (at one point Ann is hurled out of a taxi cab for failing to put out, another time she's arrested for solicitation) are treated as broad comedy, whereas George's constant adolescent belly aching about how he wants to go live with "the good parent" in New York (a staple of all divorce movies), is treated as seriously as cancer.

It's easy to wonder what the point of all of this was. If Hollywood had collectively wanted to convince everyone in America that their lives were less interesting than George Hamilton's, they could have just issued a press release. It's not like most of us would have argued.

Instead, they have gone to the trouble of making a two-hour long paean to the 50s in which nothing, from the shiny wing of the Coup de Ville to the seedy motels of Los Angeles, is original. George Hamilton's life might have been more interesting than ours, but clearly it wasn't nearly interesting enough.

## Stupid (cont.)

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a staggering problem, with data to validate his claims, and then offers what seem to be paltry solutions, like changing a light bulb and downloading a Melissa Etheridge single. After watching *An Inconvenient Truth*, environmental journalist Michael Pollan remarked that the "immense disproportion between the magnitude of the problem Gore had described and the puniness of what he was asking us to do about it was enough to sink your heart."

Understandably, British filmmaker Franny Armstrong takes a different approach in *The Age of Stupid* (2009), a meditation on human culture and climate change. For a documentary about an ecological problem, scientific evidence is conspicuously absent from the film. There is not much beyond the opening text card's declaration that its forecasts are based on "mainstream science predictions." Instead of Gore's professorial persona, *Age of Stupid's* unifying device is the beleaguered Pete Postlethwaite, who plays a record keeper in the year 2055. Postlethwaite lives in an elevated Arctic vault-edifice,

which contains humankind's entire artistic, musical, literary, and cultural oeuvre. Via a screen-based, scrollable video list, he recounts and narrates touchstone moments in the earth's destruction.

We don't know what the earth will look like in sixty years, but *The Age of Stupid* offers a guess: a tapestry of apocalyptic ruin whose force is intensified by CGIs that meld into recent CNN footage. As the film pans out from the Arctic hideaway, we encounter scenes where nature has subsumed cultural landmarks. The elevated waters of the Thames half submerge the fabled London Eye. Skeletons and carcasses line the barren wasteland that now surrounds the Taj Mahal and its decimated mausoleum. Scrolling back in time further still, Postlethwaite shows us videos of post-Katrina New Orleans, where bloated corpses decompose as they float by rows of rooftops and derelict cars. The message is clear. In 2055, life on earth will have effectively ended.

To be sure, Armstrong's *Age of Stupid* is pitching the fantasy of an environmental apocalypse, another tried and true strategy to launch an

environmental polemic. As a genre, apocalypse promises a violent end to humankind's idiocy. It then points to a definitive moment when humans recognize their own complicity in ecological ruin, brace themselves for the ride, and anticipate a world purified by catastrophe. Amidst the futuristic video library samplings, Armstrong familiarizes us with scenes of social and environmental violence. The Royal Dutch Shell Corporation, among the world's wealthiest oil extractors, pillages Layefa Malini's Nigerian community. The French mountain guide Fernand Pareau, laments the arrival of interstate traffic and the melting of the glaciers in his beloved Mont Blanc region. British engineer Piers Guy battles pious locals who don't want wind turbines to damage the view they enjoy on their pastoral landscape.

All of this oversight, avarice, ignorance, obstinacy, and strife evaporates into a cloud of mid 21<sup>st</sup> century chaos. We don't know how we get from 2009 to 2055. We just know the journey's not good.

The film leads us to blame the well-intentioned folks (like ourselves) who understand why climate change matters but just can't bring themselves to make radical lifestyle. More particularly, the film takes to task American-style accumulation writ large by the "free market" system across the planet. It's small wonder that Nigerian Layefa Malini proclaims, "I want our place to be like America. In a comfortable house, flashy cars, drinking good water, eating good food." Yet as the film makes clear, the very life Malini covets is possible only at her expense. Armstrong rightly connects our consumption directly to environmental injustice. She implies that regardless of whether—but especially because—the climate is changing, we need to address the ecological and social results of our flippant pursuit of increasingly comfortable lives.

As the film points out, the logic of global capitalism is never-ceasing expansion, but we live on a planet with a static carrying capacity. Rethinking the accumulation imperative requires internalizing this fact and radically shifting our values. *The Age of Stupid* makes real the importance of doing so.

The film eyes the coming U.N. summit in Copenhagen as our last chance to change course before the ecological apocalypse foreshadowed in the film. *Age of Stupid's* apocalyptic imagery might be enough to strike fear in us, and the threat that we have only months until Copenhagen to get it right adds to the fear—even as the Obama administration backpedals and suggests that we can, at best, agree on the parameters for an interim plan by the December summit. Yet, perhaps

it is the mountain-forged wisdom of French mountain guide Fernand Pareau that should strike the most concern: "When you're in the mountains you're roped together. The risk is the same for you as it is for me."

Armstrong suggests that it will take a citizen-led, grassroots movement on a large scale to get things right, but *Age of Stupid* gives us little reason to hope. The film features two citizen-led movements, one a group of citizens in Cornwall, England, who stage protests to stop the installation of a wind farm near their properties. It's not that they're against environmentalism, one participant suggests, saying, "Of course we're worried about global warming. That's got to be something that we're all concerned about. I mean we're all doing our bit to conserve and looking at renewable energy, absolutely." But they just cannot support a project that will impact their property values. Another concerned citizen worries about the low-level noise the wind turbines will produce, a concern that is made more *stupid* by the fact that the proposed wind farm is adjacent to the region's largest drag racing track. The brigade of angry citizens successfully pushes the matter to the local board for review. Despite wind turbine engineer Piers Guy's willingness to revise his plans to include fewer turbines and to have them sit lower to the ground, the citizens win. The wind farm project is doomed.

Which lesson, then, are we to take away from *The Age of Stupid*? Perhaps it's that all of us are willing to make changes, at least until those changes impact our lifestyles or, worse yet, our property values too directly. Otherwise, it might be the lesson learned by the aging, mountain-hardened Pareau: we can fight for change, but as long as corporate (or personal) interests are in the way, we won't accomplish much.

*The Age of Stupid* might scare us into action, but it fails to give us a model for successful grassroots organizing. It gives us a deadline to make a difference, but it gives us little hope that we can do so. Unlike the end of *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Age of Stupid* recognizes that we need to do more than change light bulbs and occasionally car pool. Yet, its apocalyptic tenor, its positioning of Copenhagen as our deadline, is a ruse. If we're all tied together in this, then we're in trouble so long as some of us are still tied to property values, profit motives, and luxuries. Perhaps inadvertently, *The Age of Stupid* sends this bleak message.

*For the next month*, The Age of Stupid can be viewed online at [www.theauteurs.com](http://www.theauteurs.com). It is slated to be released on DVD in the U.S. in January 2010.



# Culture

## Music this weekend: Boomslang shows of particular note

Friday, October 9

The Butchers  
*Boomslang Afterparty*  
*The Void Skateshop. All ages.*

While they flirt with good behavior on record, live The Butchers let loose a la the Butthole Surfers, *Bleacher* Nirvana, and the Flaming Lips before their thrash soul got traded in for inflatable anime characters and confetti.

Oozing out of the Void Skateshop “garage” scene, Lexington-born and realer than most fronting as genuine pop these days, The Butchers twang, clang and bang their way through messes of pretty songs. Unintentionally transcendental—in a pharmaceutical way—their music reaches you via timeless hooks and

kite high radiance, all buoyed by plenty of youthful energy.

With a recent EP traveling around town, these underground L.E.X. heroes are out to prove that good songs can exist in the realm of the raw, that songs need not ape the “shitgaze” cop-out of other pretenders. Hail The Butchers. Hail them on into the sun.

—Ma Turner

Saturday, Oct. 10

Papa M  
*Buster’s. 18+*

With the exceptions of The Kinks’ “Have a Cuppa Tea” and The Originals’ “Sunrise,” I don’t think I’ve ever passed a song along to more of my friends than I have with Papa M’s “Krusty.” The fifth track from his 2001 album



*The Butchers.*


*Whatever, Mortal*, “Krusty” truly encapsulates the bittersweet sensibility of Dave Pajo, alternately known as Papa M, Ariel M, M is the Thirteenth Letter, M, or just plain Pajo.

While it’s always risky to define an artist by a single song (or a single album for the matter), “Krusty” is a magnificent reflection of Pajo’s efforts as solo artist. The song opens lo fi, melancholy, and acoustic, indicative of his 1999 album under the Papa M moniker, *Live From a Shark Cage*. Then, halfway through, Pajo begins adding drums and an electric solo. The result almost pushed me to tears the first time I heard it. It’s as if the former Slint guitarist is saying to his audience “I know you’ve enjoyed the dream I put you in with Shark Cage, but now it’s time to wake up and experience the world.” (Funny

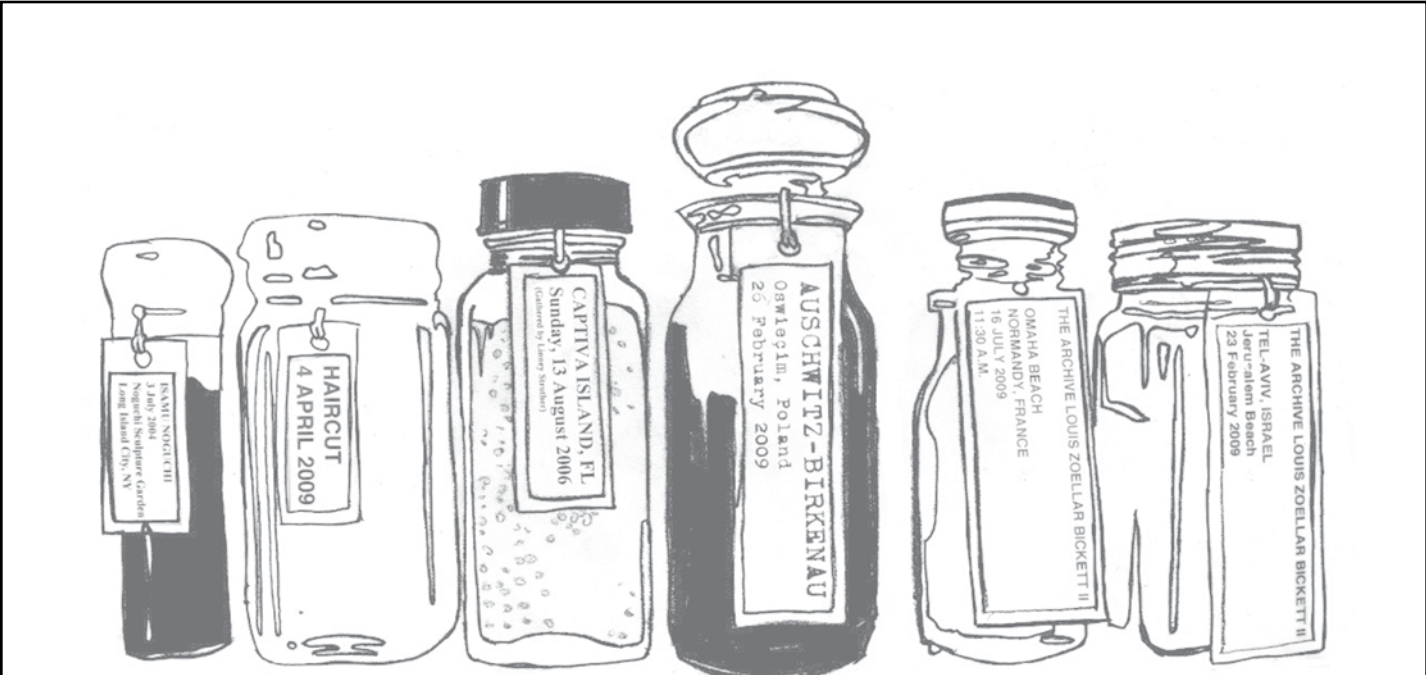
enough the song gets its name from The Simpson’s character Krusty the Clown, who can be heard at the tail end of the track.)

In any case, the breadth of experience in “Krusty” sheds great light on Pajo’s output as a whole. Much like the city and state he hails from (Louisville, KY), Dave Pajo’s only fear might be the label homogenous. While I admit to favoring the artist’s Papa M work, his later work under the Pajo name (Pajo, 1968, and a vinyl-only Misfits cover album *Scream With Me*) is still worth a listen. Good or bad and whatever the moniker may be, every Dave Pajo song truly is a different experience.

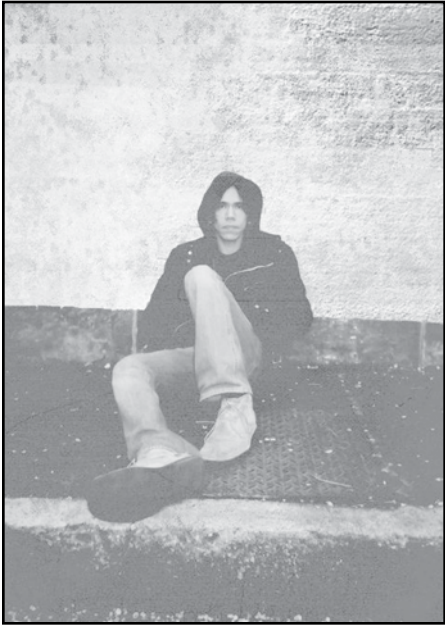
—Tim Riley



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*Pajo.*

## Faust in Lex (cont.)

*continued from page 1*

so much more whizzed by like psychedelic roadside attractions, each more grotesque and bizarre than the last. It had been my understanding that this “Krautrock” stuff (which these boys inadvertently named, tongue-firmly-in-cheek) was a buncha stoned Eurodudes playin’ one chord to that *motorik* beat for a half-an-hour... and, hell, they do that too, with the same aplomb as anything else (check out their collaboration with minimalist composer Tony Conrad, *Outside the Dream Syndicate*, for what is basically the last word on that matter).

What distinguishes Faust from the (venerable) mob—Neu, Can, and, yes, Kraftwerk—is their willingness to get outside themselves and to try damn near anything. It’s as if they saw the finite nature of the operations of rock’s so-called vanguard—those engaged in psychedelic music, progressive rock—and dared to look beyond the terms into true sonic infinity.

Now that journalistic sub-classifying and commercialization has infiltrated even the murkiest depths of underground music, and everyone is so damn willing to accept a convenient and fashionable mark right smack in the middle of their foreheads, Faust should be revered as torchbearers of truly radical music. I mean, they just demolished a stage in New York with power tools last weekend. What more could you want?

*Faust will be playing Friday night at Busters for Boomslang. See <http://boomslangfest.com/> for more information.*

# No reins for Queer Control

By Mathias Detamore

A showcase for Queer Control Records ([www.queercontrol.com](http://www.queercontrol.com)) animated the Al’s bar stage this past Saturday night, October 3rd. The show was a benefit for AIDS Volunteers of Lexington (AVOL) and included an opening set deejayed by Saraya Brewer and Lauren Bolender, and to kick off the show, fire play (out on the back parking lot) by the Amalgamation Fire Nation, which included spinning poi, fire hoop, and eating and breathing fire.

The bands Once A Pawn of Lincoln, NE and Pariah Piranha of Harrisburg, PA rocked the stage with their hard core queer punk sounds. One of the bands originally scheduled, Box Squad was unfortunately unable to make it; so the local queer punk band the Spooky Q’s filled in with equally rocking queercore sounds.

The CEO and co-founder of Queer Control Records, Marlene Melendez hosted the show. Queer Control Records, founded in 2007, is a newly

formed independent record label based out of San Francisco that promotes the music of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer and Questioning (LGBTIQQ) communities around the country. Influenced by the ‘Riot Grrl Movement’ (a feminist punk movement in the 1990s) and the ‘Queercore’ scene (a punk off-shoot of the 1980s) with a general affinity with DIY (do-it-yourself) culture, the record label cultivates an activist sense of social justice while helping sexual and gender minority bands to gain exposure.

To sponsor the event a number of local businesses and fundraisers helped to raise money to bring the bands in, all of whom played for free. Monetary contributors included Third Street Stuff, Pops, Hairrazors, Alfalfa’s, and individuals who gave from \$20 - \$200 privately. As well, a fundraiser back in August (also at Al’s bar) including two local bands—Tense Kids and The Indulgents—and a raffle with contributions from The

Morris Bookshop, Doo-Wop Shop, Charmed Life, Monica Mahanes and CD Central helped to raise \$2000 to bring in the bands. With the leftover monies from the original fundraising and the \$5 cover charge (of which Al’s did not opt to collect their usual 10%) \$420 was raised free and clear for AVOL.

Jack Cofer, the event’s organizer (and Spooky Q’s band member) believed the night to be an unequivocal success. As he noted, “First off, the fact that we can host a ‘queer’ event in Lexington and have the support of our community clearly marks how progressive we are. Kentucky is also now on the map for bands of this genre and caliber to add to touring. We made a valuable connection last night in terms of musicianship, community, and fund-raising.”

He plans on continuing with his passion to bring together queer bands and activism, so look for many more upcoming events that will queer-rock Lexington.



# Fall cycles into Lexington Bike Polo

## Hord and Simpson each score 3 in defensive standoff

Wednesday, September 30, 2009  
Coolavin Park  
NoC *Sports Desk*

Both Kyle Hord and Chris Simpson scored three goals apiece in a defensive showdown at picturesque Coolavin Park on the last day of September bike polo action. The weather was crisp, the bike gear flashy, and the play decidedly defensive. As player Brad Flowers noted of the evening’s matches, “The defense is getting so good now that it’s hard to dribble around and score.”

The third game of the night featured a plethora of beards. On Team One (T1), Chris Simpson (hippy beard), Brian Ronk (Jesus beard), and Jarid (with an “I,”) (red beard) sported a formidable and diverse amount of facial hair. Opposing them, Kyle Hord (scrappy beard), Texas Phenom Rich Lopez (scruffy beard), and Megan Stanton (lacking beard, but didn’t shave all month—or year, for that matter) looked less imposing, but were no less prepared when bystanders in the player’s pit announced the 7:19 joust time with a spirited “3-2-1 Bike Polo.”

Perhaps because her smooth face provided less wind drag than the rest of the bearded players (an aerodynamic observation reportedly first made by Mad Dog Buckingham as faster bikes passed him by), Stanton controlled the joust, though to no scoring advantage. The opening minutes featured back

and forth action and solid mid-court defensive work on both sides. Each team attempted passes at the goal, only to be stoned on their approach by stealthy steals and well-timed tie-ups. The closest thing to a score, for both teams, came at the 7:22 mark when a hard shot by T1’s Ronk careened off the spokes of Texas Phenom Rich Lopez at the T2 goal and catapulted to midcourt. From there, a waiting Hord took the puck and balljointed it in the other direction to within eight feet of the T1 goal before Jarid (with an “I”) stepped in to foil any goal-producing shot.

Finally, at the 7:23 P.M. mark, a Lopez blooper at midcourt allowed Simpson to break the scoreless tie by hitting his first of two consecutive goals. Lopez had tried to leave a drop pass for the circling Stanton, but the Texan inexplicably left the pass instead for a waiting Simpson at the near-side midcourt wall. Simpson grabbed the gift and sped around and dribbled the ball to within 8 feet for an easy tap-in 1-0 T1 lead. He would add to the lead less than 30 seconds later on a back-hand shot and score that trickled in for a 2-0 T1 lead.

The 2-0 lead would not stand, however, thanks to some crafty work by T2’s Kyle Hord, who went on a two minute scoring binge of his own. His first goal, a hard shot over the middle that sailed past the outstretched

mallet of Jarid (with an “I”), brought T2 to within one score at the 7:25 P.M. mark. A little over a minute later, Hord brought his team back to even with an impressive slap shot at halfcourt that sped past a bevy of menacing, bearded, defensemen who were charging in.

Momentum continued to see-saw and gain in intensity as the two teams traded goals. The first, a Jarid (with an “I”) rebound off the back wall that he slapped in with furious force from 3 feet out, pushed T1 out to a 3-2 lead at the 7:28 mark. The ever-steady Hord evened the score, though, at the 7:31 mark with an uncharacteristic burst of speed down the far side of the court for an uncontested shot and score.

With the score now tied and audience excitement ratcheting to a near

violent frenzy, defensive guru and human ball crusher Tiff Morrow, who had just watched from the pit as her dog Elliot relieved himself on Court 2, tempered the audience and players by making a simple observation and asking an even simpler question (before then going to clean up Elliot’s gift to Court 2): “We have free beer at Al’s. What’s the score?”

The question got immediate response. Crowd noise dissipated. Collectively, the players decided to hold a sudden death joust to decide which team could declare themselves Game 3 Winners (of a random September night of Bike Polo). Less than a minute later, Simpson dutifully serviced Morrow’s implied thirsty needs by sending a half-court prayer through the cones for a hardfought 4-3 T1 victory.

## Bike polo players experience “World”

### Return with beards

By Danny Mayer

One thing became noticeable during bike polo action last Wednesday at Coolavin: the soft clean faces have gone the way of summer. And while the bearded action is no doubt the practical end result of falling temperatures and strong seasonal winds, this sports commentator would like to offer another reason: the playful boys and girls of summer have grown up into the hardened, weather-worn men and women of fall.

Things came so easy to the players this summer, as various individuals and teams began racking up deep tournament runs, culminating in the wildly successful Bluegrass State Games Bike Polo Tournament, held right here in Lexington. But with the end of summer, our freshly shaved sports heroes left the friendly confines of the state and traveled to the World Bike Polo Championships, a tournament held on the hard streets of Philadelphia. With teams flying in from as far as Europe and the Pacific Northwest, the competition

was fierce. No Lexington bike polo player or team placed in the tournament; even the Comosexuals from Missouri, who blew through last year’s BG Games Tournament undefeated, failed to place.

As a sports journalist covering the local bike polo beat, I have been hard pressed to get much out of the players who went. Lopez smiles and looks off into the distance, whispering something about stealing the Comosexual flag; Combs mentioning how great an experience it was.

Vague utterances, but reverent ones. The players returned, beaten yes, in some games to a messy pulp, but they survived and learned. They returned home a bit wiser for the experience.

The beards say so: In the month since they’ve returned, the game at Coolavin has picked up. As Flowers noted last week, the defensive intensity has picked up all around. Flowers should know. He did not attend the Worlds for what some say was a chronic case of athlete’s foot, and he wore no beard this Wednesday night.

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*Post-game shenanigans at Al’s*

# Obama’s Olympic error

By Dave Zirin

President Barack Obama is now en route to Copenhagen in an effort to sell Chicago as the site of the 2016 Summer Olympics. In the process, he may be selling Chicago down the river. Obama is joined arm-in-arm with his wife Michelle on one side and Mayor Richard Daley’s Chicago political machine on the other. Michelle Obama says, “My father was disabled, and I think what it would have meant for him to see someone in his shoes compete. Kids need to see that and that needs to be celebrated just as much, if not more.” This seems more like an argument to support the Paralympics (a tremendous event) but that’s beside the point. Michelle Obama should perhaps realize that if the Olympics had come to Chicago when she was a young girl on Chicago’s working class south side, her home may have been torn down to make way for an Olympic facility. No word on how being out of house and home would have helped her disabled father.

Mayor Daley, rocking a 35 percent approval rating, says that the Games would be “a huge boost to our economy, raising it to a new level. The Games will help us recover sooner from the recession that still grips our nation and enable us to better compete in the global economy.”

There is only one problem with this argument: the history of the Olympic Games almost without exception brands it as a lie. As *Sports Illustrated’s* Michael Fish—an Olympic supporter—has written, “You stage a two-week athletic carnival and, if things go well, pray the local municipality isn’t sent into financial ruin.”

In fact, the very idea that Chicago could be an appropriate setting for the Olympics might have been hatched by Jon Stewart for a four-year supply of comedic fodder. To greater or lesser degrees, the Olympics bring gentrification, graft and police violence wherever they nest. Even without the Olympic Games, Chicago has been ground zero in the past decade for the destruction of public housing, political corruption raised to an art form, and police violence. Bringing the Olympics to this town would be like sending a gift basket filled with bottles of Jim Beam to the Betty Ford Clinic: over-consumption followed by disaster.

It’s also difficult for Chicago residents to see how this will help their pocketbooks, given that Daley pledged to the International Olympic Committee that any cost overruns would be covered by taxpayers.

This is why a staggering 84 percent of the city opposes bringing the Games to Chicago if it costs residents a solitary dime. Even if the games were to go off without a hitch - which would happen only if the setting was lovely Shangri-La - not even half the residents would support hosting the Games.

The Obamas, former Chicago residents, should be standing with their city. Instead, we have the sight of Barack, Michelle, and Oprah trying to outmuscle Pele and Brazil for a place at the Olympic trough. The question is why. Maybe Obama wants the Olympic fairy dust enjoyed by Ronald Reagan at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles or Bill Clinton at the 1996 games in Atlanta. Or perhaps he is returning favor to the developers and other sundry connected people in the

Windy City who will make out like bandits once the smoke has cleared. But his intentions are clear: he wants the glitz, glamour, and prestige of the games and he wants it for the Daley machine. What the people of Chicago want doesn’t seem to compute.

But we shouldn’t be surprised at this point that Obama is tin-eared to the concerns of Chicago residents. As Paul Krugman wrote Sept. 20 on the banker bonuses, “the administration has suffered more than it seems to realize from the perception that it’s giving taxpayers’ hard-earned money away to Wall Street.” Shoveling taxpayers’ money into the Olympic maw is no better, especially in these tough times. No Games Chicago organizer Alison McKenna said to me, “I oppose the Olympics coming to Chicago because instead of putting money toward what people really need, money will be funneled to real estate developers who will be tearing down Washington Park and other important community resources.



I oppose the Olympics coming to Chicago because the nonprofit child-welfare agency that I work for had to sustain budget cuts and layoffs, while Chicago has spent \$48.2 million on the 2016 Olympic bid, as of July 2009.”

*This article originally appeared in the Nation magazine. North of Center thanks Dave Zirin and the Nation for allowing us to reprint the piece. Zirin is the author of A People’s History of Sports in the United States. Receive his column every week by emailing [dave@edgeofsports.com](mailto:dave@edgeofsports.com). Let him know you learned of him in Lexington’s North of Center.*



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# Opinion

By Herbert Reid

This summer two major polls found strong majority support (71% and 58%) for a Single Payer medical plan often defined as Medicare for everyone under 65. In the Herald-Leader for August 25, Richard F. Dawahare summed up what is needed: A single-payer, publicly funded, privately delivered health care system that cuts out the unnecessary middle man and improves health care delivery for all.

The fragmented private insurance system has brought much more than huge and escalating administrative costs. Across the country, stories abound about insurers interfering with doctors’ decisions and patients agonizing over the dropping of their coverage. Those of us who remember seeing Sally Field as “Norma Rae” may also know the recent story of what has happened to the woman whose mill worker courage led to the movie. Crystal Lee Sutton died of brain cancer after a battle with her insurance company, which had delayed treatment.

Thousands of doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals believe with me that health care is a human right and that access to health care should not be based on ability to pay. They agree with Garrison Keillor, who recently wrote from a hospital bed that it “is not decent that people avoid seeking help for want of insurance. It is not decent that people go broke trying to get well.” As Keillor put it, we need a system that “reflects our common humanity.”

Yet universal health coverage continues to elude the USA, and our best journalists have been clear about the key role of fear-mongering by health industry lobbyists and rightwing media. Apparently, we still have lots of people who haven’t read or viewed anything about healthcare reform from reform advocates like Tennessean Wendell Potter, the former health industry executive who knows how “corporate communications” work in this domain. If you have never heard of him, check out how he explains industry “rescission” practices, which effectively allow insurance companies to cancel your coverage should you become too costly for them to insure. And once you have done so, ask why shouldn’t we pay for health care as we now pay for roads, fire and police protection?

I am not an expert in this field, and I am not foolish enough to try to explain everything in such a field. Heaven help us if only experts can decide what our moral imperatives and economic necessities are. (Think of all the economists who told us Alan Greenspan knew what he was doing!) However, I do know that the single-payer approach advocated in H.R. 676 is basically government health insurance, not government health care.

I have also observed that the mainstream media have failed to give

## Health Care Politics and Obama’s “Bad Moon to the Right”

a clear and substantive view of H.R. 676, which is co-sponsored by veteran Rep. John Conyers and younger House members such as Anthony Weiner, and which has nearly twice as many signatories as there are conservative Blue Dog Democrats. (To read the text of H.R. 676, visit <http://johnconyers.com/hr676text>.)

Despite this weighty support for fundamental reform, as Keillor put it in August, some are so incensed by Obama’s modest reforms that they are ready to “shout until the bats fall off the rafters” about a “Socialist Gummint Takeover.” There is so much outright propaganda whirling about on the Web and on talk radio that it is little wonder some are unwilling to pose serious questions about such policies and the rigid inequalities they have been fostering.

A few months ago as I was driving one evening from downtown Lexington toward my neighborhood, I turned my radio to one of our AM stations. I was startled to hear a male voice screaming loudly about how “sick and tired” he was of Obama. “He wants to change the best health care system in the world,” the man yelled.

No doubt our system has its strong features. But we have a number of documentaries and comparative policy studies that do not bear out the grandiose claim made that night by Mark Levin. What we do know is that the U.S. has the most expensive health care in the world. Compared to other nations, we have higher administrative costs and higher medical prices. And the Census Bureau confirms that at least 46.3 million citizens are without insurance.

I have no doubt that our media millionaires and other affluent Americans can buy good health care. That is not news. What is amazing is to find Americans who have no systematic knowledge of the health care systems in Canada, France, Britain, etc., but think it somehow patriotic to defend this state of affairs. Why is it patriotic to emulate those at the top of the social ladder while kicking those on the rungs beneath? Insurance rates are rising dramatically for municipalities, businesses and families. What is patriotic about defending a system that is dragging us down in these ways? I can assure you that from Jefferson to Thoreau to Wendell Berry the Bill of Rights has not been understood as disallowing political challenges to corporate power or any other form of power posing a threat to democracy.

In addition to our debased media coverage, I also happen to think that the President and Congressional leaders of his party could be doing better. It is too bad, I think, that he did not take Bob Kuttner’s advice offered in

*Obama’s Challenge*, a book of late 2008. Kuttner advised a 2009 focus on the economic crisis followed by attention next year to what even political columnist and commentator David Brooks called “the fundamental perversities” in the health care system. Instead, the Obama administration’s approach has been one of incremental reform that avoids challenging what one health policy expert calls “the insurance-medical-industrial complex.”

Kuttner admits that he did not expect Obama to adopt his economic proposals in the absence of a grassroots movement pressing for democratic transformation of a system that has become more unequal and plutocratic. Kuttner is well aware of the ongoing influence of Larry Summers and the associates of Robert Rubin who rose to prominence in the Clinton administration. Very capable journalists such as Bill Greider have tracked the transformation of much of the Democratic Party since those years as it has come under the spell of Big Money.

Perhaps as a result, instead of a grassroots movement with a coherent and comprehensive program for an alternative economy, we have gotten mobs ranting against “socialized medicine” (and worse) inspired and funded by the insurance industry and often coordinated by people with GOP political experience. Many of us have heard “Bad Moon Rising,” the marvelous song by Creedence Clearwater Revival. One of my main points is that the “bad moon on the Right” is bad because it distorts both the system of power that has arisen and Obama’s approach to the Presidency.

The corporate media—not just Fox News—have magnified the distortion, undercutting rational discourse about power, policy and change. Where health care is concerned, I share with Paul Krugman, columnist and Professor of Economics and International Affairs at Princeton University, the view that “the combination of GOP extremism and corporate power” may leave only skimpy reform, even aggravating aspects of our economic trauma. Unless there is a viable “public option” competing with private insurance, this is all the more probable.

President Obama has admitted that a single-payer plan might be best were it not for the fact that we “can’t start from scratch.” Various members of the punditocracy have offered their own similar versions of this story. What is going on here is backhanded deference to a highly skewed system of power and influence. What is being said is that certain systems of profit are difficult to challenge and to change.

So far, Barack Obama’s presidency has not revealed a leader that differed from either Jimmy Carter or Bill

Clinton. Political Science 101 textbooks usually state that one of several functions of the U.S. President is to serve as “general manager” of the economy. The books usually pretend to be neutral about the field of power in which this takes place. Diverse, competing interest groups ideally moving toward some sort of “balance” is the typical picture.

I think political analysts such as Tom Frank and Chris Hedges are much closer to reality when they describe a corporate state that is overwhelming the more democratic aspects of our liberal-democratic polity. In major areas of concern for us all such as food, energy and health care, public policy making is dominated by a handful of corporations and their political functionaries. Yet, much of the mainstream vocabulary for political talk suggests that something else is happening. If Adam Smith were to come back today and hear all this blather about the “free market” and worthless government, he would be shocked.

Recently, David Letterman opened his show by asking the audience, “Are you despondent and confused by this health care debate?” The reaction was loudly affirmative. The next morning when I got on the Web, I found in my mailbox an article by David Sirota, one of our best journalists, comparing the health policy/legislative mess in Washington, D.C. to the movie “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest.”

Sirota’s depiction of the “insurance industry’s Nurse Ratched” lurking in the background of his asylum scene is memorable, at least for a single-payer advocate such as myself. His chief target is what he calls “selective deficit disorder,” an affliction not to be found in the days of massive tax cuts for the wealthy, a budget-busting war in Iraq, and recent Wall Street bailouts. I agree with Sirota that there “is something very wrong with those who decry deficit spending on health care for millions of people, but ignore far bigger deficit expenditures on giveaways to a tiny handful of fat cats.”

Too many Americans think the answer is saving themselves *from* politics. Some are talking about “taking back America.” It makes much more sense to talk about taking back politics. We can democratize politics. After all, that is one of the most hopeful chapters in the American story, a book that remains unfinished.

We can take back politics as the process in which we help define the terms of our collective existence. But to do so we will have to take politics out from under the spell of Big Money and unaccountable power. When that is done we may be able to act on the “grand vision” Bill Greider points to in his new book, “the right of all citizens to larger lives.”

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## G20: why you should care (cont.)

*continued from page 3*

crisis and have already received nearly a trillion dollars in US tax-payer bailout money as payment for their efforts, must be laughing themselves silly.

The collapse started when a massive bubble in the housing market burst (predictably), causing tens of thousands of home-owners with so-called “sub prime” loans to default on the terms of their loans. This massive spike in mortgage defaults caused the value of mortgages trading on the open market to plummet. It also caused banks, holding insufficient cash, huge liabilities and trillions of dollars in bad mortgages, to stop lending.

This sparked a crisis in the consumer credit markets. Since the economies of most developed countries have been driven by consumers buying goods on credit, not with cash, the credit crisis triggered a collapse in the demand for consumer products. That crash in demand for consumer products triggered a related collapse in the manufacturing sector. And the collapse

in manufacturing created an unprecedented surge in unemployment.

And here we are today... 9.8% official unemployment (always a vast underestimate of actual un- and under-employment) and a home foreclosure being filed every 7 seconds. In 2008, in the United States alone, more than 2.6 million people lost their jobs and more than 3 million families lost their homes to foreclosure.

As the system unraveled in the fall of 2008 and spring of 2009, the capitalist classes scrambled to revive the economy and restore order to the financial markets. National governments offered huge loans to failing banks, bought toxic assets to pull them off the books of private banks, helped to broker huge buyouts and acquisitions and even took control of some major banks.

But still the crisis proved too big and too global to be addressed by any single national government. So, in April of 2009, the G20 convened a special summit in London to discuss what to do. Following the summit, which

occurred behind closed doors amid huge street demonstrations in which one person was killed by police violence, leaders emerged to announce a \$1.1 trillion package to attempt to bail out the global economy. The global bailout package included up to \$750 billion for the International Monetary Fund (IMF), a trade finance package worth \$250 billion, and at least \$100 billion in additional lending by the Multilateral Development Banks.

In Pittsburgh last month, the G20 leaders congratulated themselves for having saved capitalism from itself and agreed on a “Framework for Strong, Sustainable and Balanced Growth” that seems mostly aimed at maintaining the pre-crisis system with a few new regulations added for the banking and financial sectors. Nowhere in “The Leaders’ Statement” are any serious questions raised about the free trade model itself. In addition, the agreement is non-binding with no penalties for countries that do not follow through on even the weak plans to which they have agreed.

And so it seems nothing is going to change. The exact course of events that led to the current financial crisis is something that will likely be debated for decades. But at the root of the problem is a global financial and economic system that is based on power, exploitation, speculation, and mass consumption.

And for those who thought an Obama presidency would usher in a new era of sanity, self-reflection, and compassion in the US—guess again. Both Republican and Democrats have swallowed the blue pill of free trade and appear content in their blissful ignorance of its devastating effects. Many of the cheerleaders and architects of the system, such as Lawrence Summers and Timothy Geithner, hold top positions on Obama’s economic team and, therefore, in the G20. So, it seems the foxes continue to guard the henhouse.

*Portions of this article are adopted from The Boot Stamping On Yer Face: An Introduction to the G-20, IMF, and Economic Crisis available at resistg20.org [no copyright].*



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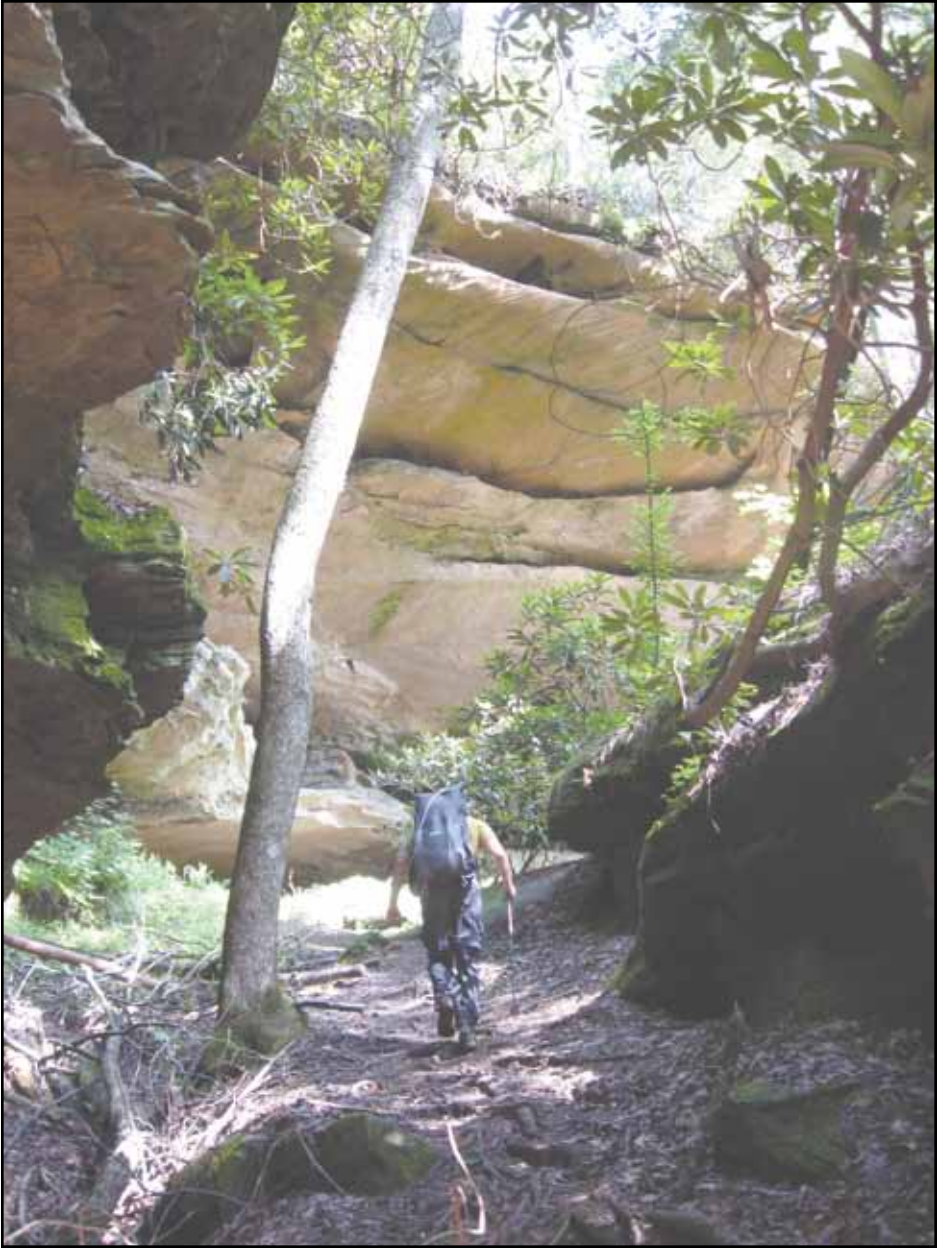
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