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Anarchism's Global Proletarian Praxis

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Thank you so much, especially to UCL [Union Communiste Libertaire], Common Cause, AK Press and everyone else who has made it possible for me to come out. I think it's very important for militants who live in different parts of the world to compare ideas and practice. Hopefully that's what we're all about – putting ideas into practice, and being very pragmatic about the way we exercise our politics. I come from a very strange country, and it's nice to see one of my countrymen here. One of my comrades from South Africa has just moved to Montréal, temporarily, but nevertheless. And hopefully you'll make him feel at home as you have made me feel at home.

It's been really fantastic over the last couple of days to have been speaking to people who come from many different walks of life, many of whom are working class but have a very clear understanding of politics, and a very clear class line. And certainly after the collapse of the Berlin Wall 20 year ago, I think we are really starting to see the necessity around the world for class-line politics. Politics which draw a line in the sand and say we will not adopt bourgeois culture or bourgeois values or

a bourgeois way of living, and says in fact we will establish a new way. A new method of politics – which in fact isn't that new, but it's new to a lot of people – in the here and now, in order to construct a physical and real future.

I've been going around and doing a variety of different talks depending on the type of audience. My audience last night was quite mixed, maybe not as experienced as some of you are. Hopefully I'm judging things right, and not talking beyond what you know. But some of what I will talk about hopefully will be beyond what you know, because of all the political philosophies in the world, all of the big practices of the working class, the excluded, the poor, the peasantry, anarchism has been the most misrepresented. I believe this is largely because it has conformed very closely to proletarian practice.

The book [Black Flame: the Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism, which I wrote with Lucien van der Walt] did not start out as a book; the book started out as a pamphlet that somebody else had written, that I read and realised very quickly suffered from the main errors of our understanding of the world, and that is it was very much derived from a North-Atlanticist way of seeing things; to call it Eurocentric would be too kind to it! The standard anarchist histories written by anarchists themselves are notoriously centred on Western Europe and portions of North America.

There is a bogus theory, but very current amongst academics and even militants, of "Spanish exceptionalism," that is, that it was only in Spain that anarchism achieved anything of a mass working-class presence. A Marxist historian like Eric Hobsbawm, who has quite a nice eye for the colour and detail and texture of class struggles – in many respects I actually like him as a writer – is sadly very crude on such matters, simply because it doesn't conform to his politics. And he ascribes what he thinks of as this "Spanish exceptionalism" to some weird deviation in the Spanish character, which if anything is a bit of an unfortunately chauvinistic attitude.

What I want to talk about is a different kind of practice to that of which some of you are accustomed to – I know a lot of you are accustomed to it – a practice which has largely been “disappeared” from the historical record, but is still traceable certainly in the police record, and in the records of all the authorities who have oppressed us over the last 150 years.

I like to joke that the book was a little monster living in my basement that ate scraps that I threw from my table from time to time, and eventually became this huge thing that outgrew the house. So today it is two volumes [Black Flame is the first, and the forthcoming volume is Global Fire]. The reason that it is two volumes is that as the re-writing of this history to try to reorient it towards the massive Latin American in particular and East Asian anarchist movements got underway, it became very apparent that we – my co-author Lucien and I – as anarchists needed to define what the hell anarchism was, because there is a heck of a lot of confusion on this topic.

This confusion is generated in part because many of us as anarchists have accepted bourgeois definitions of who we are. And there is one very specific bourgeois definition – we will leave aside the obvious calumny of anarchism equals chaos, an immature response of the declining artisanal classes as it is usually painted by most, but not all Marxists... We’ll leave aside that, but the primary way in which anarchism is misrepresented is as something that was a brief spark, that was essentially disconnected from daily struggle, that it was born in some philosopher’s head, and died in some foolhardy experiment in Spain in 1939.

The anarchist movement has currency primarily because it was, and remains, a proletarian practice. We do not corner the market on reality; anarchists don’t have the final word on, for instance, the key question which faces all revolutionaries, which is how do you transmit communist ideas – the ideas of a free society – from a militant minority to the mass in a way that the mass makes those ideas their own and in fact moves

beyond the origins of those ideas. To be honest, we all face that idea whether you're a Maoist or a Trotskyist or whatever – we all have to grapple with that issue.

So I think it is worthwhile to take a look to see what anarchism had to say about that. Because based on the historical record, anarchism was quite different to the way it has been represented in the bourgeois press. It is ironic that many anarchists conceive of themselves – outside of certain movements, and within that I include my own, your own, and our comrades in several places in the world, Chile, Argentina, Italy, Ireland and elsewhere, people who are clear about who we are – most anarchists' idea of themselves is in fact derived from a German judge. It was a judge named Paul Eltzbacher who 1900 wrote a book in the period in which anarchism was a global movement that was challenging the order of the day. [He said anarchism was solely anti-state: but its not, its anti-capitalist, class-struggle-based, anti-authoritarian, and it comes from the oppressed classes. But Eltzbacher's view remains influential, and that's a problem, as it distorts our history and our praxis.]

If you take a look at the origins of Interpol, you will see that before Interpol itself was established, there were two conferences, the first one in Rome, and the second one in St-Petersburg in the 1890s, that laid the groundwork for what would become Interpol. And these conferences were specifically aimed at crushing these specific anarchist movements. This was in a period that was remarkably similar to our own. I mean, it was very different in many ways, and very similar. It's very different in that today we live in a world of nano-technology, space tourism, and other nonsense. Our movement today lives in a world which is very different to the gas-lit origins of the movement, and yet we find remarkable similarities. In the period of what you might call the "short twentieth century" – the century between the First World War and the collapse of the Berlin Wall – we find that the state form actually locks its populations down quite significantly, both

for the class. And I think I'll just stop there and leave it open for questions.

tiful gleaming football stadiums when we supposedly cannot build houses for the poor. This massacre occurred just prior to the World Cup in Mexico in 1968. And what the student leaders were asking, many, many decades after the Mexican Revolution, was “Was the anarchist revolutionary leader Ricardo Flores Magón wrong? Did he misunderstand what we were all about? Did he misunderstand the solution?” And 50,000 voices shouted back, “No! He was not wrong. He understood. We understand”. And then the troops opened fire.

Our own small little effort [pictured: the anarchist-founded Phambili Motsoaledi Community Library, Soweto, 2005]. We’re part of a much bigger story, and South Africa is not an easy environment to work within. The working class is lured by all sorts of promises of pie-in-the-sky from all sorts of religious and political elites. And this is what we can do to walk alongside them and help them keep connected, help them keep their eye on the prize. This is developing class consciousness, solidarity, and building popular organisations of counter-power. We build that counter-power, by which I mean structures, directly democratic structures, organisations.

But those organisations become impossible if you don’t have a counter-culture that goes along with them. And what I mean by counter-culture, I don’t mean a particularly weird shade of green in your hair, or a piercing on a part of your body. By counter-culture, I mean a fundamental oppositional working-class culture, which means when you’re walking downtown and you need to purchase something urgently at the chain store and there’s a picket there, you know – it’s in your bone marrow and blood – that you would never cross a picket line. You’ve got that working class culture engraved in your skin. It is a part of you.

That is our biggest challenge. That is where we need to start to rebuild, by changing consciousness in order to create the mental space in which to build counter-hegemonic institutions; by building organisations that are of the class, by the class, and

mentally and physically. The nation-state and nationalism become the dominant ideology throughout much of the world – even in the welfare states – and this dramatic movement of working-class people around the world that you see in the period of the 1880s and 1890s to the 1920s is largely absent. But now, since the fall of the Wall, we’ve seen that start to open up again.

So the origins of the anarchist movement was not in some philosopher’s head, but in the international revolutionary socialist trade unions and workers’ groups of the First International who were banding together on very pragmatic grounds; the grounds of solidarity, to try to stop French workers being undercut by British scabs and vice versa, and it grew out from there. It was a world in which the telegraph had started connecting people across the world at the very same time that barbed wire had just been invented and was being rolled out across the world and being used to cut them off from their own resources.

In this world, there was the consolidation of financial capital, and this massive push into Africa and Asia by the imperialist powers. Imperial wars were being fought (and this sounds familiar) in the Middle-East and Central Asia. The working class, which was all of a sudden very mobile in this environment – part-time sharecroppers coming from repressed and depressed southern Italy going off to Argentina for a season, where they had no vote, coming back to Italy where again they had no vote, this great cycle, this great global movement of workers – responded in several different ways in this period to the pain that they were feeling.

This was a really globally mobile, but very excluded and flexibilised labour force. They responded, some of them, by turning to religious fundamentalism and fanaticism. Others started to consolidate ideas around revolutionary class struggle. So I think you might agree with me that there are some remarkable similarities between today’s section of flexibilised, precarious,

continually moving, and excluded labour – people who are cut off from any means of real participation in the political process in their own countries, or in the countries into which they are drafted to be the underpaid subject class of labour.

What was remarkable about the early anarchist movement was that despite its militancy, it was deliberately building a lot of educational institutions along the way. It was building popular universities in Cairo, in Cuba, in Peru, in Argentina, and in China. The reason for this is the same as the reason why we had the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa: it was necessary to cut the mental bonds that attached the rape victim to the rapist, the oppressed to the oppressor. And the anarchists shocked bourgeois sensibility by educating not only freed slaves alongside white people, but of all things, educating women alongside men, and girls alongside boys. This kind of stuff just wasn't done back then. I mean, who knows what kind of ideas they might get when you get them out of the kitchen.

On that note, I would like to say that gives us a little hint that the direction in which we need to be organising needs to be determined by our real conditions. In Brazil in 1930, there was an industrial working class of 1-million, but there was a maidservant class of 3-million. Perhaps the anarchists should have been organising among the maids. We need to be connected to where our people are at.

One of the reasons that the anarchist movement spread so dramatically around the world, establishing trade unions, what we call syndicalist unions (in other words, directly democratic and overtly revolutionary rank-and-file unions, anarchist trade unions) in Cuba, Mexico, the USA, Uruguay, Spain, and arguably (although the record is a little slim) in Russia, in the period of the 1870s and early 1880s – the reason this kind of thing spreads into Egypt and Uruguay and Cuba – these places which are under colonial or imperial control (Uruguay was free of the Spaniards, but not free of their own comprador capital) – is because in this period I think, if we are

and she was the premier labour educator of her age. She would go on speaking tours right across Latin America, as far up as Mexico. She preached rationalist education – reason against an education system [dominated by the Catholic Church] that taught mysticism and respect for one's abusers.

Petronilla Infantes [pictured, third from the left in front, with the Sindicato de Culinaria, La Paz, 1935]. Here's a young woman heading up the [anarcho-syndicalist] culinary workers' syndicate in Bolivia in 1935. She becomes the leading labour leader in Bolivia right into the 1950s. If you go into the streets in Bolivia right until today, they will know her name. And we can go on. We can look at Luisa Capetillo in Puerto Rico, who dared to wear pants. And boy did she ever wear them! She led the trade union movement in Puerto Rico. We can look at Maroussia Nikiforova leading the Makhnovist detachments fighting the White armies in the Ukraine during the Ukrainian Revolution, eventually being executed in 1919 in Sevastopol. The list goes on and on.

There was Spain [pictured: CNT-FAI collectivised tram, Barcelona, 1936], which wasn't exactly all that insignificant, but really in context, proportionately, by head of population, the anarchist movement in nearby Portugal was much more powerful than in Spain. It was much more integrated into daily life generally across the country than in Spain, where it was more located in certain regions, such as Catalonia. The Iberian anarchists ran daily newspapers which were as large in circulation as your city newspapers today. Certainly as large as the mainstream newspapers that I as a journalist have worked for. I can only wish that we had radical newspapers of that kind of reach, but maybe we'll build that again.

Mexico in '68, [pictured: mass demonstration shortly before the Tlatelolco Massacre, Mexico City, 1968] again jumping forward in time. You're probably aware that my country is about to host the FIFA Soccer World Cup, and there are massive contradictions in our being able to spend billions building beau-

they were smiling – it was the fourth wealthiest nation by some measures in the world at that stage, but everybody who produced that wealth was excluded. It was very tiny elite that even had the bourgeois vote. If you look at that world, the anarchist movement that develops in those conditions becomes so strong that eventually the two main labour federations in the country by 1919 are two slightly tactically, slightly ideologically different anarchist trade union federations. The debate within the organised labour movement is a tactical and strategic debate between anarchists – in rather significant numbers; mass organisations built across race lines, and certainly across gender lines, at a time of incredible duress.

And the women who come out of these movements are a force to be reckoned with. In Latin America alone, we can look at people like Juana Belém Gutiérrez de Mendoza in Mexico. She manages to establish a feminist newspaper called *Vespa*. This paper survives and publishes for 36 years, despite the fact that she's continually in and out of jail. She wasn't a pushover.

Kanno Sugako [pictured] in Japan. There were lots of manufactured plots against the Emperor but she really was guilty; she really did plan to take out the Emperor, to prove that he wasn't a living god; to prove that the god in our heads could in fact be killed; to sever that mental link that the oppressed majority had with their oppressors.

Juana Rouco Buela of Argentina, and Virginia Bolten of Uruguay – they set up probably one of the earliest feminist journals in the world in Argentina. They get quite a bit of flack originally from the men. The men say "You're dividing the movement!". But they hold out, and they establish a line of thought that is still transmitted today in the Latin American movement. I'm really glad to see you have Maria Lacerda de Moura on your wall over there. This is one of the ways in which Francophone and Hispanophone movements are superior to English-speaking movements – there is a much deeper appreciation of history and theory. She was Brazilian,

to be honest, up until Lenin in Marxism, in classic Marxism, you don't really find a serious Marxist engagement with the peasantry and the colonial world. By contrast, Bakunin was saying "What happens when 800 million Asiatics wake up from their sleep?"

The anarchist focus, right from the beginning, is saying you don't need to jump through a series of stages, like a poodle in a circus going through flaming hoops to get to the right time to stage your revolt. What you really need is to realise that you're at the stage now where you need to start fighting back. That doesn't mean that revolution is going to happen on Tuesday, starting at 9pm sharp. We all know that revolutions require a massive confluence of historical circumstances.

But it's because of this very early and very radical challenge to gender, race, colonialism, and imperialism that the anarchist movement made some incredible penetrations into parts of the world that Marxism doesn't even reach until much later, in the 1920s in fact. The Profintern [the Red International of Trade Unions] then had to come knocking at the doors of the syndicalist trade unions, saying "Please, may we have a few workers? We don't really have any of our own. We need a couple to pretend that we have an International". Sorry, I'm being rude.

It's probably unknown that there was a syndicalist survival in Southern Rhodesia, what is now Zimbabwe, up into the 1950s. That [pictured in Bulawayo, 1930] is Masotsha Ndhlovu, who in the 1930s was the leader of the Industrial and Commercial Union of Rhodesia. This union had suffered defeat in South Africa in the 1920s, but in what became Zimbabwe, it continued into the 1950s. It had been founded roughly on IWW [Industrial Workers of the World] principles, even if it wasn't a pure syndicalist union, and I'm hoping that many of you know who the IWW are because it is a significant part of Canadian labour history. It's an incredibly powerful model that spread around the world.

The Korean movement [pictured: members of the Korean Anarchist Federation in Manchuria, 1929] is generated primarily by the invasion of Japan in 1910. This generates a whole range of different responses, including syndicalist trade unions in port cities like Wonsan. But eventually a lot of the militants are forced out into exile, and they consolidate just across the border in this broad river valley, ringed by mountains, called the Shinmin Prefecture.

And in Shinmin, during the period of 1929 to 1931, they establish this autonomous zone in which peasants, workers, and revolutionaries essentially run their own lives. This is the rather unknown anarchist Manchurian Revolution, driven by the response to Japanese imperialist aggression. It was destroyed in that place, that particular geographical experience, by the Japanese invasion proper, which happened a couple of years later. The curious thing about the Korean movement is that its finest hours really occurred outside of its own national territory, in defence, originally, of their own national freedom, but eventually in defence of Chinese freedom as well.

But also, the [East Asian] movement is barely disrupted by the Second World War, because these guys had been fighting since 1910. For a lot of Western movements, and you could even look at your conventional trade unions, the rise of the Nazis and of Fascism in Europe was quite a breaking point. But in the Far East you find this continuous arc of struggle which is completely uninterrupted by the War because these guys had been fighting their war since 1910. And this movement continues with significant power right into the 1950s.

Johannesburg, my hometown [pictured: Industrial Workers of Africa strike, Johannesburg, 1918]. The Industrial Workers of Africa: established in 1917 on IWW lines – very explicitly industrial, revolutionary trade union lines. What happened in South Africa is that the IWW had gone in there and established itself in 1910 in an environment that was kind of similar to Canada at that time in that so-called “white labourism” domi-

They learnt through this guy [Gerdzhikov] that you’ve got to defend your gains, physically, by force, in an organised fashion. He earned his chops fighting against the Ottoman Turks in the 1903 Macedonian Uprising. A huge section of the Bulgarian anarchist movement basically learned how to fight by fighting on behalf of someone else’s freedom in 1903 [this is principled internationalist anti-imperialism, from below!]. About 60 of these Bulgarian anarchists lost their lives in Macedonia – a relatively small skirmish in the bigger picture of things. But in that period they established free communes that replicated the Cantonalist Communes – the cities which the anarchists had run in 1873 in Spain – [plus] Lyon, Paris, those sort of examples, from a few years earlier as well.

The fact that this movement was so diverse, but at the same time coherent, enabled them to fight off two fascist coups d’etat, one in 1923 and one in 1934. Eventually, they had to fight the Red Army itself in 1948, because the Red Army had allied with the indigenous fascists to form the so-called Fatherland Front, to try to impose a disciplined dictatorship – no doubt “of the proletariat”! – on the Bulgarian people. And it’s remarkable that Bulgaria, almost alone of all nations, did not allow a single train to go to the death camps – despite the fact that they were a Nazi ally, on the bourgeois level.

Moving a little bit forward in time, the late Wilstar Choongo [pictured at left with members of the Socialist Caucus, Lusaka, 1998], who I befriended a little while ago, in Zambia. These movements are often, particularly in my part of the world in Africa, ephemeral. They rise up, and then they die. Very difficult circumstances in Africa, and yet when you look at the history of the anarchist movement, the anarchist movement was built by bitterly poor people in extreme conditions of poverty, oppression, and prejudice, and yet they were able to build mass movements.

When you take a look at Argentina, which in 1900 was actually, based on its meat exports – certainly for the bourgeoisie,

The period of the 1940s and 1950s poses a huge set of challenges to the proletariat as a whole, and to the anarchist movement that works within that proletariat. Quite clearly, the history of the Second World War and Fascism is well known, as is the rise of nationalism, which as I said earlier had locked down so many people's minds in so many countries into a very narrow paradigm of what it meant to be free. But when you look at, for example, a year like 1956, you have the Cuban Revolution underway (I mean the real one); the syndicalist dockworkers in Argentina embark on what is still to this day the largest ever general strike; in Chile, the dictator, Paco Ibañez, is forced into a position where he basically hands over the power to the syndicalist and communist unions. He says "Enough already! Just take the country! You've won!" Sadly, in one of the dumbest moves ever, the communists break ranks and that collapses. But what I'm saying is that we have these mass working class movements, these peaks of struggle occurring in Latin America, in a period when, if you read the standard histories, it's all McCarthyism, grim and grey, Stalinism, the Cold War, and nothing is happening – everyone is defeated. But it's not so. I think maybe it's my generation, or maybe the people slightly before me who were defeated, and we've forgotten our own history.

Mikhail Gerdzhikov [pictured], Bulgaria. He becomes one of the leading lights in the Bulgarian Anarchist-Communist Federation, established in 1919. What's interesting about them is that they're very pluralistic. They are a very diverse organisation. They have an industrial base, a very strong syndicalist industrial base. To be fair, they are the third-largest force on the left, after the agrarians and the communists in Bulgaria in the 1920s. But they are strong and coherent – they have their issues, like everybody else – but they have this really interesting and diverse movement. They organise amongst students, intellectual workers. They have their armed detachments.

nated. This was essentially white working class people saying "we're protecting our own asses", against capital and against other workers, without seeing the obvious: that an injury to one is an injury to all, right?

The IWW came in with an entirely different program that was anti-racist. They organised on the trams in Johannesburg, and railways in Pretoria, and in the port city of Durban. At first they failed to break through the colour bar, but they established a generation of militancy that was further radicalized by the anti-war movement during the First World War, and eventually in 1917 established the Industrial Workers of Africa. And in fact they adopted the IWW constitution, lock stock and barrel. They based themselves squarely on the IWW. That's the irony – the Transvaal Native Congress – the movement was so significant in that period that several leading members of the highveld [inland high plateau] branch of what is today the ruling party of the country, what became the African National Congress, were very influenced by syndicalism in this period.

And just to show that we're not all talking about history, [pictured: poster of the Spanish Confederación General del Trabajo, 1999]. Here are the descendents of the historic Spanish CNT who fought the Spanish Revolution (there are several factions, as some of you no doubt know, and this is the largest faction), they are currently representing 2 million workers.

Osugi Sakae, [pictured with Ito Noe and the editors of Rodo Undo, Tokyo, 1921]. The Japanese labour movement, a small movement in a country that certainly in the period between the wars, didn't develop much of an industrial base. Many of the shops and plants were very small. But a very significant, radical, egalitarian trade union movement developed there. It was anarcho-syndicalist, and included (again, shocking the bourgeois sensibility) very strong women leaders, many of whom would be murdered for their opposition to the state. The Japanese trade unions, worked alongside Korean trade unions,

who again were working within the heart of the beast which was the developing Japanese Empire, sliding into militarism.

Shin Ch'aeho, [pictured] a leading Korean anarchist theorist. His Korean Revolution Manifesto of 1923 really united all of the disparate anti-Japanese revolutionary forces, some of them within the Korean Anarchist Federation, some of them within the Korean Anarchist-Communist Federation, some of them within the Revolutionist Federation, basically all of them anarchist, but working alongside nationalists and communists to try to beat back the Japanese. He died in a Japanese jail in fact in '36.

Lala Har Dayal [pictured], the primary Indian revolutionary of his age. You guys probably know about Mohandas Gandhi. Why the hell do you know about Mohandas Gandhi, and not about Lala Har Dayal? The reason is because you're learning your history from the bourgeoisie. You're being fed this shit; you're being fed this pacifism, right? You're being fed all of this lame stuff. What this guy did (and he was also influenced by the IWW), he was a worker, an Indian chap working in San Francisco. He became the secretary of the San Francisco branch of the IWW. He became a convinced anarchist, a hardliner, a Bakuninist. He believed that you needed a specific organisation to maintain clarity, but that organisation has to live, eat, sleep, and breathe within the class – within mass class organisations – and acts as that organisation's historical memory, tactical toolbox, and first line of defence. In other words, they will put their bodies on the line.

This guy's party, the Ghadar ["Mutiny"] Party, established in 1913, established branches in the United States, Canada, British-occupied East Africa, and many other parts of the world where Indian exiles [and migrants] found themselves. Crucially they establish bases within India itself, in Punjab and Hindustan, and launch an armed uprising in 1915. What is interesting is the social base of the Ghadar Party in India is primarily made up of peasants and of returning British army

veterans who know how to fight, but suddenly realised, "What the heck! We fought for this British Empire, but we've been treated like second class citizens in our own country!"

The last traces of this movement that we've managed to discover (and of course, the records are not entirely complete) are in East Africa [in the 1940s] and in Afghanistan in 1938. What is interesting for those of you in the room who might be communists is that those particular regions in which the Ghadar Party was organised in India, were the most trenchant regions of peasant resistance, and the seed-beds of the later radical grassroots communist parties of the 1940s and '50s. So we are kind of cousins after all, right?

Also, crucially, we need to bear in mind that this idea (and not only the idea, but the mass organisational practice of anarchism) did not die on the barricades of Barcelona in 1939 [when the Spanish Revolution fell]. I believe, based on what I've studied (and the book has taken us ten years to write so far), that if there is a "dark ages" of the anarchist movement, which to a degree means if there is a dark ages of working class knowledge and understanding of the class's own fighting history (not that the anarchist movement represents the entire fighting history, that is false; but I think the anarchist movement has been a key repository of those fighting techniques), that dark ages is in fact the late 1970s and early 1980s. This is when a lot of the organisational memory that had been transmitted for decades since the 1860s, by generation after generation of militants – many of whom who died on the barricades, died on the gallows, succumbed to tuberculosis, gone down into the grave early because of the strain of their fight – was lost. There is a reason that a lot of North American movements don't have the faintest clue what happened in their own countries in the 1970s, and don't even know what their own ideological antecedents were as little as three decades ago. Instead we're all looking back to the 1920s and saying "It must have been great back then!"