

Between War and Retail Meltdown

An Interview with Peter Gelderloos

Peter Gelderloos, It's Going Down

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The last two weeks have seen both the impending crash of various retail stores, which threatens to make the lives of millions of workers even more precarious, as well as major military interventions in Syria and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, fights between proto-fascist and “economic nationalist” Steve Bannon and those within the Trump administration more aligned with neo-conservatism came to a head. Wanting to make sense of both of these predicaments, we turned to Peter Gelderloos who offered some analysis on the situation in the US.

IGD: *What do you make of the newest bombings in Afghanistan? Is this a shift from past US policy or just a continuation? What do you think the administration is trying to accomplish? From the outside, it seems like provoke a terrorist attack or gain support in the US through military action.*

Peter Gelderloos: The dropping of the MOAB in Afghanistan is a slight shift in US policy, given that the munition used was unprecedented in its tonnage. Every war is an opportunity to test new weapons, and from Agent Orange to guided missiles to depleted uranium to white phosphorous, both Republican and Democratic administrations have been happy to carry out their lethal experiments on enemy populations. Curiously, in the post-Nuremburg world, you're not a Mengele if you do your killing outside the laboratory.

But previous presidents had been content to let this particular bomb remain a latent threat, in-arsenal. The recent use of the MOAB is certainly a continuation of Trump's desire to impress, to prove to the world that he doesn't have small hands. But unfortunately it doesn't tell us very much about the evolving US policy in Afghanistan. It got mixed reviews from pro-regime Afghan parties, as have most US actions there since the 2001 invasion, so it doesn't represent any kind of diplomatic departure.

The US is slowly losing ground in Afghanistan. Lots of people predicted a quagmire in 2001, and the only reason you don't hear that term more often is that relatively few Americans are dying over there. That's the principal thing they learned from Vietnam: keep down own casualties, preserve morale in the military and apathy in the population; project the myth of “surgical” rather than “carpet” bombing, preserve international credibility.

They can't win a counterinsurgency by breaking out new weapons. Insurgencies that have popular support are only defeated with costly and well-thought-out campaigns. If it were left to Trump, US forces would do something showy like drop a big bomb, and then cut and run when

things got sticky. But if his advisers make it a priority, if the Pentagon gets the resources and the pressure to break the stalemate, then you'll probably see a new strategy being deployed.

In that case, you might see massive ordinance being used to flatten the terrain, destroying the cave systems and leveling the mountains that have canceled out US military superiority. But it's too early to tell if this is a Trump-style, Twitter-cycle-focused one off, or if the US military is about to turn Afghanistan into West Virginia, making the first war-time use of an anti-mountain Agent Orange.

IGD: *In the US, there seems to be a looming retail crash. What does this mean for workers, especially millennials? What would this mean for the economy?*

PG: Retail is the largest sector of the US workforce, and it's already taking a hit. The online sales (think Amazon) that are the major factor provoking the closing of shopping malls and the recession among retail giants rely on warehousing and delivery. The first is already largely roboticized, and the second is one of the prime fields for the development of autonomous and drone technology by the likes of Tesla and Amazon (preparing humanless semi trucks and aerial carriers, respectively). Meanwhile, cashier positions in supermarkets are already being replaced by "automatic" checkout. And a few hip brand stores have started deploying what some of us were predicting when RFID tags came out: a dystopian parody of the free warehouses of the anarchist collectives in the Spanish Civil War, where anyone could just walk in and take whatever they needed. The catch, in the modern version, is that when you walk in with your mobile device, they have your bank information, so when you walk out with the products, they get deducted automatically. A shoplifting-proof environment in which the potential thief is the person without a cyborg phone.

With the roboticization of industry, which is already well under way, it was the service sector that was supposed to save the economy, creating new jobs so you still have consumers to buy all the useless, toxic shit being produced. And the service sector is still growing, but the bigger chunk of it (retail) is on the cusp of a huge decline, at the exact same moment that roboticization is on the cusp of huge steps forward in every sector, as well as a new sector, extraterrestrial exploitation, something that's discussed here: <https://itsgoingdown.org/new-technologies-extraterrestrial-exploitation-future-capitalism/> .

The experts and the people who are making a huge amount of money off this shift are actually really scared. They keep improving AI, but at the same time they're worried about how they might bring about the total collapse of the economy, an unfortunate surge in unemployment, or the obsolescence of the human species (there are different versions, the latter is Elon Musk's take). Tellingly, they keep on designing, and keep on profiting, but they're worried. This behavior belies the idea that technology is useful, that it is dependent on human will. I'll skip the debate over absolute truths for now, but in the present moment, when technology resides at the scale of the organization of human society for the satisfaction, not of biological needs but of economic and ultimately technocratic needs, there is no such thing as freedom unless we're talking about the intent to destroy the whole fucking system. Even elite designers are just tools of the technology, the way the factory worker is an adjunct to the machine (in contrast, possibly, to the artisan, who develops and deploys her own tools, creates rather than produces, and decides the rhythm of her work).

Barring some big surprise, if things keep advancing in this direction, solutions like a universal wage become necessary. Make sure that the unemployable have just enough for a little bread and circus, keep them consumers so they don't become rebels. A growing part of the Silicon

Valley elite already supports the universal wage. It's progressives who are making the proposal, but we need to be clear that it reflects the needs of social control, and nothing else, the same way that welfare was an attempt to institutionalize the poverty and racist exclusion that fueled the struggles of earlier generations. Marx was dead wrong. Socialism was not the result of the evolution of society's productive capacities. Our productive capacities were never so scarce as to rule out universal abundance. Socialism, if it comes, will be a strategic imposition by the State, taking advantage of the evolution of its capacities for social control, as a needed measure to bail capitalism out once again.

In the meantime, workers can expect to find their bread and butter in the sectors with a future. For the privileged workers, this means design, programming, cultural production, and applied scientific research. For those of us without degrees, or for the suckers who went for humanities, this means the parts of the service sector that are in expansion: restaurants, tourism, and in general the production of experiences, which, sickeningly, turns out to be driven by people's need to post content on their social media, as *The Atlantic* article you referenced points out.

Restaurants and bars are already a major employer for suckers like us, but it will go a lot further. Extreme sports, self-improvement, personal trainers. Sex work on steroids. Lines will blur, and the affective economy will come to define a much larger part of the service sector. The isolation and misery that the traditional family engineered and that internet and entertainment technologies took down to the ninth layer of hell will be solved by new employment categories that don't yet explicitly exist. We can talk about a suicide economy: the new sex/affective/entertainment/experience worker will help us find the will to live again. Self-care will become a growth sector. In this sense, the abysmal quality of mental health in the US, the worst in the developed world, becomes a resource. Scorched earth capitalism creates scarcity, and then sells us back our own survival.

Going back a moment: it's always disappointing when needed and intelligent critiques gain traction right at the moment when capitalism needs them (I won't say they arise at this moment, as though Capital calls the ideas it needs into being, since they tend to exist long before, albeit obscurely). Unfortunately this seems to be the case with sex work. It's great that the victimistic views of priests, social workers, and essentialist feminists have been challenged, but the possibility of a radical practice within sex work may well depend on the ability of sex workers to stake an innovative position in the struggle against capitalism, because it is in the interest of the new economy for sex work to be relegitimized and diversified. Yesterday's critique, that's it's not much different from other kinds of work, or from marriage, won't be enough tomorrow. Capitalism wants us to work, and the State wants it even moreso, beyond the turbulent demand for employment. When sex work is brought back into the formal economy, will we glorify work or will we make war on the bosses. I know that the most radical critiques have already dedicated themselves to the latter, but the more widespread they become, the more they lose their combative edge.

What are the demands on the affective worker? A similar type of care, a similar affective relationship between worker and customer, is demanded of both the sex worker and the waiter or bartender, that is not demanded of the cashier. Cashiers are one of the last private sector, non-technical workers that are allowed to be surly, or at least unavailable to the customer. In the future, the unhappy, the sultry, will either need advanced degrees (Steve Jobs' being an asshole, for example, was presented as a virtue in the recent movie about him), or they will be unemployable.

The job training of the future might be a society-wide complex that helps people to be happy and fulfilled, so that they can take part in the karmic cycles of satisfaction and accumulation.

IGD: *There seems to be a big tension between Steve Bannon and Schumer, which has also been highlighted by splits between Bannon and those more closely linked to Wall Street. What is driving these splits?*

PG: Wall Street doesn't need neo-reactionaries or anyone else reminiscent of fascists to be writing policy. Neo-reactionaries like Bannon were good for mobilizing a political base, they're good for creating populist rhetoric that assigns scapegoats and mobilizes patriotic thugs, but they're not very sensitive to the needs of capitalism or the State. Perhaps Bannon mistook power for something that could be possessed, and thought he was the one who possessed it. Maybe he'll rebound, maybe he'll correct his course, or maybe the moment has come when he has overreached his authority and alienated himself from the structures that produce political power. I don't think the alienation of Trump's extremist wing is a surprise.

IGD: *Why do you think the US moved to bomb Syria? The US is already bombing and launching drone strikes in a variety of countries. Why was attacking Syria important?*

PG: I have no idea if Assad was actually responsible for the chemical weapons attack. State leaders are certainly capable of actions that hurt their own interests, non-democratic leaders even more so, but Assad was just garnering a level of international support or at least acquiescence that it looked like he might have a future again.

In any case, consensus reality in the Western mediasphere dictates that he's responsible for the chemical weapons attack. Trump is already on the ropes for his questionable relationship with Russia, hence Assad, and the one thing he can't do is to appear weak on foreign policy and anti-terrorism, because that's his last point of support or credibility. He had to do something to punish Assad.

As per their agreement, the US military warned the Russian military prior to the attack. The Russians then warned Assad. The effectiveness of the attack was minimal, and it's perfectly possible that Russian indignation and their threats in the UN were nothing more than playacting. There are certainly ways for Trump to flex his muscle and still maintain the new detente with Russia. In fact, Trump is better off now that relations appear hostile.

It is also possible that US-Russian relations are souring in truth. As I wrote earlier, geopolitical interests do not change with the personalities or the parties of the people in charge. The only way for the US and Russia to establish a feasible, friendly relationship is for the US to relax its historical projections, its state-building rights, in either eastern Europe (especially Ukraine) or the Middle East. I can't think of any other basis that might allow the end of hostilities. As a candidate, Trump favored a strategic withdrawal. Rightwing populists will often campaign on isolationism. It's unlikely, however, that he would be able to convince not only the Pentagon but also all the other people and institutions invested in US strategic planning to relax their pretensions of dominance and let other countries take the lead in certain parts of the world. US power is invested in eastern Europe and the Middle East, and while it would be strategic to acknowledge that their relative power is in decline and a tighter game is in their interests, such a decision would have to be made by powerful people, and powerful people tend to have powerful egos.

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