

# CounterPunch

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TELLS THE FACTS AND NAMES THE NAMES

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## *Fiscal Policy as Class Politics*

### What Keynes Really Prescribed

By Alan Nasser

Left liberal and radical economists routinely excoriate the economics profession for its failure to anticipate the dot.com and housing bubbles and the debacle of September 2008, and for its post-2008 refusal to consider the no-brainer that “static equilibrium” neoclassical orthodoxy is impotent to explain the origins of the financial meltdown and the current dynamics of the Great Recession. These are among economists’ chief occupational hazards. Far more disturbing is the adherence of *soi disant* Keynesians and the allegedly more heterodox post-Keynesians to a form of fiscal orthodoxy explicitly disavowed by

Keynes. We expect *them* to know better. What most Keynesians put forward as effective policy, namely a far greater fiscal boost to aggregate demand than the Obama administration is prepared to consider, was explicitly rejected by Keynes as “too late” to revive an economy in deep slump.

Aggregate demand management aims to close the “output gap”, the difference between what the economy is actually turning out and what the economy could produce were it employing all available “factors of production” (capital and labor “inputs”). We shall see why Keynes regarded this approach, the same as put forward by today’s left liberals and social

democrats, as ineffective for generating full employment. Stimulating aggregate demand is quite different from what Keynes enjoined, the stimulation of *effective* demand. Government was to transfer purchasing power directly (i.e. not merely through private contractors as intermediaries) to workers via employment in public works programs.

The idea is to close the labor-demand gap, not merely the output-demand gap. To accomplish this, it will not do to try to boost “the economy” in general with the hope that the increased purchasing power eventually trickles down to the unemployed. As we shall see, seven decades of fake Keynesianism has in fact not produced a significant trickle-down effect. Full employment can be attained *only* by government’s direct targeting of demand to those in need of employment. Any alternative policy that relies on the market to intermediate the

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## *The Manufacture of Knowledge*

### What’s Going On at the Israeli National Security Studies Think Tank

By Karim Malik

The Israeli National Security Studies (INSS) think tank regularly features Arab authors and includes them in their media briefings. INSS is part of Tel Aviv University and has started to engage literature in the Arab world, especially after the Arab uprisings. One need only look at their media briefings which regularly show how deeply they take part in surveillance of the Egyptian, and in general Arab, blogosphere as well as Arab social media. The briefings offer cunning summaries rather than direct quotations of Arab writers. The way that they quote them is frightening to say the least and furthers a one-sided narrative. They

usually feature Arab writers who have accommodationalist views that always revolve around the two-state solution. This is always done and presented as the ‘pragmatic’ view that will appease all sides. A closer look at INSS and its background may tell us more rather than scrutinizing these Arab writers in order to find the hidden meaning and often buried truth.

INSS is run by Amos Yadlin who was head of the IDF Air Force, Military Attache to Washington DC and lastly head of the IDF Military Intelligence Directorate. Before becoming head of Military Intelligence he was a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East

Policy. His views on bombing Iran and bombing Bashir Al Assad to stop Syrian massacres are well publicized by the *New York Times* and *The Independent*. Last May Amos Yadlin appeared alongside Robert Blackwill and Dennis Ross in a panel to underscore Israel’s relationship with the USA and worry about how the “Arab Spring had unleashed Islamist forces antithetical to US national interests and hostile to diplomacy”. It is no surprise that his Iran saber rattling extends towards the whole “Arab Spring”. There was of course no mention of Israeli espionage targeting on the USA or its weapons technology leaks to China.

Yadlin appeared next to Blackwill who said the “Arab Spring should be called the Arab Intifada” – no doubt a reference to the shared Israeli background the three of them have. Yadlin played a crucial role in brutally putting down the intifada. He was also one of the fighters who bombed the Iraqi nuclear reactor in Operation Baghdad. Yadlin’s mother was

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transfer of income from government to jobless workers is bound to fail. Keynes's policy recommendations were based on that firm and well grounded conviction.

### Full Employment Means Full Employment: Why Aggregate Demand Policy is Misguided

Keynes was clear that he considered literally full employment to be possible through feasible government policy. For Keynes "the real problem fundamental yet essentially simple... [is] to provide employment for *everyone*." The task is not beyond our budgetary means: "*The whole of the labor of the unemployed* is available to increase the national wealth. It is crazy to believe that we shall ruin ourselves financially by trying to find means for using it and that safety lies in continuing to maintain idleness." [my emphases]

This conviction is evident in Keynes's radical conception of the output gap, the notion at the heart of conventional fiscal policy. His measure of the output gap that needed to be closed was identified with the number of unemployed that needed to be hired in order to produce full employment. In fact Keynes made no general use of the term "fiscal policy", but

rather wrote of "public works". Consistent with this usage, Keynes did not formulate the problem of unemployment by estimating the number of widgets that would have to be produced to employ the unemployed. He believed, for good reason as we shall see, that determining a full employment level of output was impossible. Instead, policy must target first and foremost the unemployed by directly providing wages, through public works programs, to those in need of work. It would not do to merely presume that new employment would be the inevitable by-product of stimulating the private demand for goods and services. These latter are produced by workers, whose wages must be the direct object of employment policy. When it comes to determining how much spending (i.e.

### If the idea is to employ the unemployed, the only sure way is to directly offer them jobs. Only government can do this.

how much national income) is required to create and maintain full employment, Keynes argued that the "calculations are in terms of equivalent men... and women, if they are unemployed." He defined "national output" by reference to the work-hours needed to employ all who needed jobs. Keynes's approach to the problem of unemployment is not production-centered; it is entirely labor-centered: "I sympathize, therefore, with the pre-classical doctrine that everything is produced by labor... It is preferable to regard labor, including, of course, the personal services of the entrepreneur and his assistants, as the sole factor of production."

Let's see why Keynes took conventional "pump priming" to be the wrong approach to eliminating – not merely reducing – unemployment.

Pump priming as practiced in the US since the Great Depression construes fiscal policy as spiking total or aggregate demand by enhancing the means of private spending. The latter is of two kinds, consumption demand and investment demand. Government

stimulates both with tax incentives and low interest rates. Reducing taxes provides more expendable income, which will presumably entice employers to add new equipment and/or hire new workers, and encourage workers to purchase privately provided goods and services. Lowering interest rates will lower the cost of borrowing and thus increase both investment and consumption. These policy options reflect the longstanding and overwhelming preference of US elites for private-sector remedies to address what are in fact public ailments. President Obama has repeatedly affirmed his adherence to this non-starter.

Keynes thought the private sector unsuitable to tackle the problem of joblessness, since the private sector itself is the structural source of the inherent tendency toward unemployment. Under capitalism "[T]he evidence indicates that full, or even approximately full, employment is a rare and short-lived occurrence." Employers may be paying wages insufficient to contribute to a full-employment level of spending and/or may have gloomy profit expectations, dampening the incentive to hire and produce. Hence, it is not the responsibility of the private sector to provide all job seekers with work "any more than it is their business to provide for the unemployed by private charity." In the system of private ownership of productive facilities, it is a utopian pipe dream to talk of the "social responsibility" of business. Milton Friedman had it right: "The Social Responsibility of Business Is To Increase Its Profits." (Cover article, *The New York Times Magazine*, September 13, 1970) Either government provides *ongoing* employment opportunities, or we shall have to learn to live with chronic and growing long-term unemployment.

The essential problems with the private sector approach to addressing unemployment are two. The first has to do with the *economic* disconnect between boosting aggregate demand and raising employment. The remedy for this is to establish the connection *politically*, by a government policy of directly employing the jobless. The second problem is that to the extent that aggregate demand management, closing the demand gap, is successful its distributional effects are inequitable. This can be avoided only by turning policymakers' attention to

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closing the employment gap directly by government hiring the unemployed for public purposes. Let us look more closely.

### **The Disconnect Between Stimulating Private Demand and Reducing Unemployment**

Keynes acknowledges that while the rate of employment and the level of national income or aggregate demand are related, they are not effectively connected. That is to say that employment is in fact a function of aggregate demand, yet the private factors determining aggregate spending are subject to inherent uncertainty, such that there is no guarantee that aggregate demand will in fact rise to the level required to provide employment for those ready, able and willing to work. Hence Keynes's argument that a thoroughly private economy cannot possibly deliver the most important goods – jobs – to all who need them. Neither a Romney nor an Obama administration will heed this warning. In his jobs summit speech (December 3, 2009) Obama affirmed that any politically acceptable remedy for intractable joblessness must be market-based: “[While] government has a critical role in creating the conditions for economic growth, ultimately true economic recovery is only going to come from the private sector.” A recipe for permanent crisis.

Keynes concedes that employment is a function of aggregate demand. But he insists that private demand alone cannot produce full employment. Theory aside, this is a matter of historical fact. Seventy years of pseudo-Keynesian policy has failed to maintain full employment. That boosting aggregate demand does not necessarily produce full employment is due to the former's dependence upon conditions inherently uncertain and immune to government correction. In a capitalist economy aggregate demand depends on three factors: what economists term the marginal propensity to consume, the marginal efficiency of money and the marginal efficiency of investment. In plain terms, these refer, respectively, to the incentive of households to consume (rather than save) out of current income, the rate of interest, and capitalists' expected return on investment, their estimation of the prospects for future profits. Government

policy is powerless to affect the first and third of these, which is why the second (e.g. the Fed's lowering of interest rates) amounts to, in Keynes's words, “pushing on a string”. Nothing illustrates this better than the current impasse. In a severe slump capitalists correctly see low wages, under- and unemployment and declining sales revenues as portending low profits. No rational capitalist invests or hires in the absence of optimism about profit prospects, and government cannot change investors' pessimism. Low tax rates and dirt-cheap money will not move an employer facing penurious would-be customers. This is not to say that under no circumstances can government tax and give interest rate incentives to induce capitalists to invest and perhaps

### **The economy is in need of employment generating public works projects at every stage of the business cycle, not merely in downturns.**

increase profits. Keynes's point is that these inducements cannot guarantee that investors will use those profits to hire labor. The increased surplus may be simply held, or used to acquire other companies or investments in financial assets. Consumption expenditures too are subject to uncertainty. Government cannot determine whether tax cuts will be saved, spent or pledged to creditors. A good number of the unemployed are homeowners with mortgage payments outstanding. Will unemployment transfers be used to feed the family, pay medical bills, service credit card or student debt, or reduce mortgages? No one, including government, can say.

If the idea is to employ the unemployed, the only sure way is to directly offer them jobs. Only government can do this. The failures of the Obama administration illustrate perfectly that lowering taxes or making it easier to borrow are fool's errands in a major downturn.

Hyman Minsky made explicit the radical political-economic implication of these arguments: under capitalist

conditions, the only guarantor of full employment is *to change the way income is earned*. The persistence and severity of capitalist crises forces upon us the notion that workers are owed an income from society as a whole, as represented by government, and not from private profit-seekers.

It is important to note that Keynes's prescriptions were not confined to the circumstances peculiar to the Great Depression. He believed that his arguments about effective unemployment policy in the 1930s were applicable to any severe recession and depression at any time. The combination of private control of investment decisions, a market in labor power and profit-driven investment decisions is sufficient to warrant large-scale public employment as the sole remedy for less-than-full employment. Commenting on the deep depression of the 1890s, Keynes wrote that “probably the only ways of absorbing current savings and so averting the heavy unemployment of 1892-5... lay in borrowing by the government... to finance... work on public utilities.”

The problem, then, was not this or

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that contraction, but capitalism as such. We shall see that Keynes saw the broad socialization of investment as a necessary condition of capitalism's viability. In fact, he saw evidence for the centrality of public investment in the "liquidity trap", the very feature of today's hobbled economy which foils Obama/Bernanke's policy of quantitative easing. In the liquidity trap, as Keynes described it, money has become "a bottomless sink of purchasing power... there is no value of it for it at which demand [for money] is diverted... into a demand for other things." Whoever sets the price of money, in our case the Fed, cannot know whether reducing the cost of borrowing will bolster investors' anticipations of adequate remuneration (nor whether households will consume potential supplements to their purchasing power). Capitalists size up the market and form expectations regarding the adequacy of future returns on the basis of considerations beyond the ken of current government policy. Regarding this very scenario Keynes wrote:

"For my own part I am now somewhat sceptical of the success of a merely monetary policy directed towards influencing the rate of interest. I expect to see the State, which is in a position to calculate the marginal efficiency of capital goods on long views and on the basis of the general social advantage, taking an ever greater responsibility for directly organizing investments." "If two-thirds or three quarters of total investment is carried out or can be influenced by public or semipublic bodies, a long-term program of a stable character should be capable of reducing the potential range of fluctuation..."

Keynes's promotion of the large-scale socialization of investment presumed a rational State bureaucracy determined to advance the fundamental interests of working people. Considering Keynes's macroeconomic brilliance, his political naivete is remarkable.

### The Inequitable Distributional Effects of Conventional Pump Priming

I want to stress two important consequences of Keynes's conception of government employment policy, that the size of the fiscal stimulus is irrelevant to eliminating unemployment, and that the economy is in need of employment-

generating public works projects at every stage of the business cycle, not merely in downturns. The magnitude of tax incentives and interest rate reductions has no bearing on the uncertainties endemic to the private economy which stand in the way of full employment. We've so far examined Keynes's critique of the mainstream's failure to establish an effective connection between raising the overall level of demand and achieving full employment. An additional factor carried no less weight with Keynes, namely his conviction that the distribution of demand is more relevant to addressing unemployment than is the size of the government stimulus. And mainstream policy maldistributes whatever benefits it manages to muster.

## We are seeing both the mass destruction of full-time jobs, many of which will never return, and record levels of long-term unemployment (unemployed for 15 weeks or longer).

Closing the employment gap (i.e. the labor demand gap) requires the direct boosting of effective demand. This sharpens the policy objective. What we need is not a general estimate of the level of overall, aggregate, unspecified demand thought sufficient to generate full employment. For the unemployed are unevenly distributed across the country, and all cities and states are not distressed in the same way. This particular labor market is especially loose, that particular city or region is in especially dire straits. To be sure, desperation is evident across the board, but many of the illnesses are site-specific. Keynes recommended stimulus where it is needed. Jobs are needed for this specific infrastructure project, in this region, requiring workers with these skills and equipment of this kind.

The distribution of the stimulus is left entirely undetermined in policies seeking to raise aggregate national income. In fact, pump priming has had an effect similar to the effects of affirmative action

programs: the principal beneficiaries have been the better educated and better paid. When fiscal and monetary stimuli have induced recovery, the upswing is led by home construction and consumer durables. These spenders do not of course include the long-term unemployed or the very poor. The sole guarantor that those in greatest need will benefit is government in its capacity as direct employer of labor in public works projects. Government outlays are *targeted* (hence the political character of the endeavor) to specific populations in specific regions with specific needs. There is minimal guess work involved. "Anything we can actually do we can afford. Once done it is *there*. Nothing can take it away from us." As the economist Pavlina Tcherneva puts it, "[N]o country is a finished proposition... [Countries]... face new challenges and develop new kinds of needs. The public sector can stand ready through a program of direct job creation to provide jobs for all who wish to work in projects that satisfy those needs." The repair and maintenance of public property of all kinds could and should be an ongoing project with permanently available employment during contractions *and* expansions. Keynes contrasted this approach to unemployment insurance, for which "we have nothing to show... except more men on the dole."

All forms of trickle-down rationale are repudiated in authentic Keynesian policy. On the contrary, as Minsky noted, "...instead of the demand for low-wage workers trickling down from the demand for high-wage workers, such a policy should result in increments of demand for present high-wage workers 'bubbling up' from the demand for low-wage workers." Most self-professed Keynesians have failed to note that Keynes regarded government stimulus to be ongoing and permanent. The considerations elaborated above, showing that the system of private investment and consumption cannot sustain full employment, are not specific to periods of slump. There is every reason to expect joblessness to persist through the expansion. And it has. Paul Krugman's characterization of Keynesianism as "depression economics" is a lie. The Golden Age habit of defining full unemployment as unemployment of no

more than around 3.5-4.0 percent has no basis in Keynes.

Since truly effective policies designed to eliminate unemployment have never been adopted in the US, we should expect that the pattern of joblessness since the end of the Second World war displays a worsening trend of the kind symptomatic of deeply rooted structural contradiction.

Two current trends are a good measure of the depth of industrially mature capitalism's affliction. We are seeing both the mass destruction of full-time jobs, many of which will never return, and record levels of long-term unemployment (unemployed for 15 weeks or longer). Most revealing is that long-term unemployment has been rising since the late 1960s, well before the triumph of neoliberalism. The short-term unemployed have been a shrinking percentage of all unemployed throughout the entire postwar period.

Looking at the business cycle over the last forty years, an ominous trend emerges: in each business-cyclical *expansion*, the long-term unemployment rate remains either at or above the level of the previous expansion. In a word, for the last forty years the short-term unemployed have been a declining, and the long-term unemployed an increasing, percentage of all unemployed. By Keynes's own standards, pretend-Keynesian fiscal policy has been a seventy-year bust.

"Capital Hill", as the Old Man might have called it, is entirely blind to the prospect of permanent and mounting joblessness. The issue is totally absent from mainstream media. At the current historical juncture, liberal, left-liberal and social democratic politics are beside the point. What then is Left? Three guesses. CP

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married to David Cohen who was part of the Palmach, the elite fighting force of the Haganah terrorist force that waged war against the British and Palestinians since 1941 as Western powers sponsored immigration to Israel. One can now begin to make the dubious link of INSS and its peace-process and the promotion of a two-state solution while hiding its bleak past. Needless to say, INSS's website has nothing on the J14 movement. Though INSS may seem like it is a critical voice in Israel advocating for a two-state solution, an examination of its history and its personalities show that it is nothing but a wolf in sheep's clothing. Its public persona helps police the boundaries of what becomes debatable issues; a similar tactic was used in the Oslo negotiations where Israel was presented

## **It is ironic that INSS's paper on a Weapons of Mass Destruction free zone doesn't mention Israel's own nuclear arsenal.**

as giving "concessions" by starting off with extremely high demands which it said were non-negotiable. It is ironic that INSS's paper on a Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) free zone continues to say Israel faces "existential threats" as a justification for its armaments and advocates a total disarmament of the region without mentioning its own nuclear arsenal.

On INSS's board of trustees is Sir Ronald Cohen, an Egyptian-born British businessman. Not only is Sir Ronald a successful mogul like his fellow donors, but he also is a chairperson of the Social Investment Task-force in the UK. This is part of the Commission on Unclaimed Assets. He regularly advocates through policy papers that assets in the UK may be reacquired and used for the general benefit of the public if they are unclaimed. This is arguably but a continuation of the Absentee Land Property Law in Israel in which any piece of land, following 1948, that was left empty for two weeks could be claimed by the State of Israel. This was the mechanism by which the

ethnic cleansing of Palestine started; a history of the Palestinians that continues to be silenced today. This narrative is quietly hidden while in the Arab world the narrative of the "Palestinians who sold their land" is propagated. Is the picture becoming clearer as to why INSS engages 'moderate' Arab voices that are 'pragmatic' to the region. Now one can reinterpret prevalent themes that even some Arabs propagate – which INSS is only too happy to cite – such as the rise of the Iranian threat, the Shia-Sunni split and of course pragmatic views about Gaza that continue to demonize Hamas despite its democratic credentials. This isn't to say that Hamas is the answer to Palestinians' problems; this is only a survey of the views that INSS cites.

Next on the list is David Alliance, a British tycoon of Jewish origin. He is among the *Times*' rich list ranking 267th with a reported fortune of £408 million. Alliance is a party member of the Liberal Democrats in the UK. The interesting thing is his Jewish roots is not European but rather Iranian. He is the main architect and donor of Tel Aviv University's Iranian Studies Center named after him. That is why Yadin's views on striking Iran are so important—they are connected to the newly established center in Tel Aviv University.

For such a board that certainly has a track record that is less than impeccable one need not be surprised where David Avital's name comes up: board member of "Seeds for Peace". Not only is Avital connected to major investment firms such as the MTP investment group, which he founded, but on the policy level he is also tied to J Street; the progressive arm of AIPAC. J Street is famed for hosting Arabs and funding them to search for "amicable solutions in the region". Instead clearly it is not only AIPAC's vanguard but INSS's vanguard as well; it helps keep their bleak history hidden.

The need to locate these Israeli-sympathizers is so that we must not let history claim that these are representative of all desires to have an Israeli state back in the 1940s. If anything, people like David Alliance and Ronald Cohen often look back at their roots in Arab countries (for Alliance that is Iran) and with some nostalgia they 'hope' for a two-state solution. This is certainly one narrative that is pro-Israel and does not

mention its bleak past. For the contrary narrative one need only look at Edwin Montagu, Secretary of State in India for Her Majesty's Government (HMG), who at the time adamantly rejected the Balfour declaration. CP

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## The Undocumented Population and Universalism

By Nicholas Parker

Three years ago, South Carolina congressmen, Joseph Wilson, at a congressional address by Barack Obama during the lead-up to the passage of the so-called Affordable Health Care Act, stood and shouted "you lie" when Obama said there would be no coverage for the undocumented.

But the most essential aspect of the controversy was never addressed. Supporters of Wilson claimed he was right, Obama lied. Others claimed Obama was correct to say that impending legislation would not enable the undocumented population to purchase or obtain health insurance. But no one said that it would have been a *good thing* if Wilson's charge had been correct. And it certainly would have been a good thing. It would have meant that the impending bill would have enabled the undocumented to obtain health insurance.

Obama had spoken about the undocumented prior to his congressional address. Participating on a talk show of a conservative radio host Obama stated categorically that the undocumented populace would not receive coverage and moreover that such a proposal had never been discussed in his administration and that it had never been on the table as a possibility nor would it be. Categorical. But it was a categorical failing.

Of course the question was undoubtedly discussed precisely in terms of making sure that the Democratic Party and the Obama administration would at every opportunity explicitly state that they were categorically *against* coverage for the undocumented. This naturally evades another essential:

questions pertaining to coverage for the undocumented touch upon all the central questions related to universal health care, to the physical-medical health of the entire population, etc.

But such substantial questions related to universalism and to a just – and *healthy!* – social order are banished from the Democratic Party's purview. The Democratic Party's governing ratio and calculus – their *sole* governing ratio and calculus – is one which seeks always to provide cover against charges made against it by the Republican Party. The Republicans are not the only "Party of the No".

The Democrats are too! Through the years the Republicans say (and restricted media reporters and commentators repeat this as if it were a fact) that the Democrats are weak on defense, that they tax and spend, that they are anti-

### **No commentator, no pundit, no politician asked the most obvious of questions: why should health care be denied to the undocumented?**

business, anti-American, pro-socialist, pro-"illegal immigrant," etc. And the Democrats rush to say, "no we aren't, no we don't!". And in every instance the Democrats scurry to prove that their denial is sincere and factually founded. And in actuality the denials are factually founded. The Democrats are to the right of every characterization enunciated by the Right and by the Republicans. Indeed, the Democrats don't even wait for the Republican charge, they anticipate it and make sure they act so that they cannot be charged as such.

And so the "mainstream" "public" "discourse" remains within the extremely narrow channel established by the Republican condemnation of the Democrats (arguments between the right and the center-right) and no public discourse within the restricted media appears by virtue of which the "public mind" in its entirety might learn, expand, and mature, indeed in which the "public mind" might reflect the much larger *general intelligence* of our species in its

present moment, which intelligence is constituted by a much larger framework than that contained in the narrow band of opinion (one could scarcely call it thought) between the Right and the center-Right.

Obama was also categorical during his congressional address when, appealing to those who already have health coverage, he sought to explain that there is something at stake for them too in expanding health insurance to the uninsured (but not to the undocumented). He said that health care costs could not be contained so long as a significant portion of the population lacked health insurance and therefore had to receive primary care in emergency rooms.

This is true.

However, this leaves something *unsaid*. No commentator, no pundit, no politician asked the most obvious of questions: why should coverage be denied to the undocumented? But all there is in the media "public sphere" is an immediate and universal conformity to an unanalyzed notion. No coverage for the undocumented. Yet, if costs are driven up by people who receive primary care in emergency rooms, then this also includes the undocumented.

Obama's own argument about costs *inescapably* is an argument *for* providing health insurance for the undocumented population. The immigration/migration question and the health care question (and all other social questions) cannot be separated. A migration has taken place and cannot be reversed.

But that is what we humans do. And other species as well. We migrate, as we have from the very beginning. The Western Hemisphere from 15,000 years ago to today is but one proof. Australia from 50,000 years ago to today is another. ETC. ETC.

During his discussion on the aforementioned radio program Obama was asked about the fact that the undocumented can receive health care in emergency rooms (the question was meant to challenge Obama's claim that the undocumented would not receive health insurance in the proposed health care legislation). He replied that it is proper for the undocumented to have access to emergency care, because "we wouldn't want their children who play with our children to do so if they are sick

and ailing....”

Leaving aside his unfortunate and revealing use of pronouns and the discriminatory and exclusionary disjunction, “our children” and “their children”, the fact is that his argument is only half-supported by his statement that the undocumented must be provided access to emergency care.

They need access to health insurance and health care *too* – which is to say, emphatically, *just as everyone else!* Because the population is One and because the population of “children playing” is One.

Whoever is here is *here*. And this *here* should not be divided up into those who need not worry about their health and those who do need to worry and must suffer the *secondarity* and worse of emergency rooms and emergency care.

Immediately assuming that the undocumented should not receive health insurance, immediately assuming that such a question should never be raised, immediately proposing legislation that bars the undocumented access to health insurance, these are assumptions, these are actions that are worse than lying, worse than shouting during a congressional address, etc. But these were and are the assumptions and the acts willfully committed by the gamut of the political, media, network, editorial, and journalistic powers and classes.

It is a meager, an exceedingly basic and, thereby, banal truth, but a truth nonetheless — and in this instance a *foundational* truth: universalism will be universal or it will not be all. CP

**Nicholas Parker** is a social, political, and cultural theorist.

## Suicides in Solitary

### By Terry A. Kupers

On July 20, Bureau of Prisons (BOP) director Charles Samuels sent a memorandum to all federal prisoners, exhorting them not to lose hope or give in to suicidal inclinations. Samuels explained to prisoners: “If you are unable to think of solutions other than suicide, it is not because solutions do not exist; it is because you are unable to see them.” As a psychiatrist who has worked for decades with prisoners in solitary confinement, it

was painful to read this.

Samuels’ memo made particular reference to prisoners who are in long-term solitary confinement. And the letter was sent out just a month after a group of prisoners in solitary at the federal supermax prison in Florence, Colorado, filed a class-action lawsuit accusing the BOP of inadequate mental health care. According to the prisoners’ lawyers, “inmates often mutilate themselves with razors, shards of glass, sharpened chicken bones, writing utensils and other objects. Many engage in prolonged fits of screaming and ranting. Others converse aloud with the voices they hear in their heads.... Suicide attempts are common. Many have been successful.”

In light of this lawsuit – and a second, brought by the family of a prisoner in solitary who succeeded in killing himself – Mr. Samuels’ memo seems a callous attempt to blame the victim.

**Long-term isolation and stark idleness affect not only rising prison suicide rates; they also wreak havoc on prisoners’ mental stability and recidivism rates.**

But it does reflect one accurate reality: Solitary confinement leads many to take their own lives. On average, 50 percent of completed suicides by prisoners in the US occur among the approximately 5 percent consigned to isolated confinement at any time. Causality is a complicated matter, but clearly it is fair to conclude that solitary confinement pushes many to resort to suicide.

As a psychiatric expert for US courts over three decades, I have inspected many supermax prisons and solitary confinement units, and interviewed and evaluated many prisoners therein. I have repeatedly reviewed cases where a solitary prisoner is recognized as suicidal, removed from an isolation cell and placed in a “strip cell” for “observation”. Prisoners who are still suicidal often will tell prison staff they are no longer feeling suicidal simply so that they can escape the humiliation, disorientation and heightened vulnerability of being

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naked in a bare cell. The prisoner is then transferred back to his solitary cell, where, in fact, the majority of suicides occur.

A few years ago I evaluated a young man in a western state prison who, at 15, was tried as an adult and sent to prison. An older man grabbed his testicles, and having been warned he had to show how tough he was if he wanted to avoid being someone's sex slave, he hit him.

He was sent to a supermax unit for "fighting". There he became acutely depressed and made repeated suicide attempts, twice trying to bite through the veins of his arm. Each time he tried to take his own life, he was put in an observation cell for a few days and then sent back to isolation.

Eventually he made such a serious suicide attempt he nearly died, needing blood transfusions in an intensive care unit to survive. He told me that every time he is placed in solitary he "goes crazy" and cannot control his self-destructive impulses. And so the repetitive cycle continues for such men, women and children being held in our country's solitary units.

As an expert I have also seen firsthand the dearth of correctional mental health services, which do not nearly suffice to treat the psychotic episodes, suicidal despair and other serious mental illnesses that proliferate in solitary confinement. At a recent US Congressional hearing,

### **How can we urge inmates not to commit suicide without alleviating the conditions driving them toward it?**

Samuels himself admitted that there are only two mental health professionals on staff at a federal supermax containing 490 prisoners.

Long-term isolation and stark idleness affect not only rising prison suicide rates; they also wreak havoc on prisoners' mental stability and recidivism rates.

Even so, the federal BOP as well as the state departments of correction have for decades relentlessly expanded both

the number of prisoners in long-term solitary confinement and the length of time they languish there.

In this context, it is entirely cynical for federal prison authorities to encourage prisoners not to resort to suicide, without making any attempt to alleviate the conditions driving them towards it. It is as if Mr. Samuels believes they have control of the self-destructive urges the terrifying prison environment brings on. They do not.

We as a society are faced with a critical moral question. Do we believe it is just to place prisoners in conditions that are known to cause suicide, and then glibly offer them the advice they should avoid suicide? Or do we want an actual remedy to the problem, which requires ending the practice of long-term solitary confinement?

**Terry A. Kupers, M.D., M.S.P.**, is a psychiatrist, Institute Professor at The Wright Institute, and author of *Prison Madness: The Mental Health Crisis Behind Bars and What We Must Do About It*.