



Going Underground

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McCormick Place is the largest convention center in North America—2.6 million square feet of exhibition space in total. The whole complex consists of four interconnected main buildings, each gargantuan in its own right, with the back-end hugging right up against Lake Michigan. Straddling Lakeshore Drive, it serves as a glitzy, informal border between downtown and the South Side.

It's a weirdly eloquent relic of the age of robber-baron capitalism. In one sense, the McCormick fortune sprang out of the earth itself. It's a great American story of the insatiable quest to extract maximum marginal profit from the nation's farmland via machinery manufactured under the vaguely ominous, world-conquering brand name of International Harvester. McCormick wealth also famously bankrolled the reactionary heyday of the *Chicago Tribune*. Robert Rutherford "Colonel" McCormick published many a broadside railing against liberalism, organized labor, and any other social demon that obstructed the fullest expression of capital's glorious will-to-power.

Now with Harvester sold, and the *Tribune*, like just about every other metropolitan paper, slouching toward glorified pennysaver status, this cavernous business meeting space is a shrine in the church of latter-day moguls, a testament to the days when McCormicks ruled the earth. If anything, it resembles a hulking Kubrickian space station: both otherworldly and crushingly mundane—a brutal, immaculate, and awe-inspiringly sad corporate fortress. Quite a fitting site, all in all, for an amassed effort to jumpstart a confident, socialist left in Trumpian America.

But just thinking all this makes me feel silly. It's the same feeling you get reading Dostoevsky's own horrified impressions of that other great monument to untrammelled capitalist enterprise, the Crystal Palace, erected for the 1851 Great Exhibition in London. You get the sense at first that he was probably being a *tad* dramatic. After a few days in McCormick Place, though, you start to circle back; maybe he was telling the truth.

I'm thinking about Dostoevsky a lot here at the [2017 People's Summit](#) (June 9-11). Of course, the passage from *Notes from Underground* is only tangentially inspired by the real Crystal Palace, once located in London's Hyde Park. The primary referents are a man named Chernyshevsky and a thing called socialism. (Which is all the more striking, given that the main attraction this

weekend in McCormick Place is a speech by the most popular American socialist since Eugene V. Debs.)

Dostoevsky's narrator, the underground man, might well be imagined as a scruffy, jittery, irascible loser, a retired civil servant pacing back and forth in the basement of a tavern, or a seedy garret, where he mutters Diogenesian diatribes to an imagined audience of his peers, often running over to peek through the cracks in the boards at the tavern folk and observe. He's in pain. For him, the idea of the "crystal edifice" is irrevocably linked to the dream of utopian socialism, to the young radicals swooping in with their European irreverence and their unmitigated faith in science, reason, and enlightenment. They—the young radicals—believe that humanity can be perfected, that the inequalities and irrationalities at the root of all our problems can be ironed out with systemic thinking free of cultural superstition. They confidently expect that a sane balance between the better angels of our nature and their far more squalid weaknesses for power worship can be instituted once and for all. Then, at long last, all humanity can be free to live in scientific harmony, each for the good of all, in the crystal palace where, in Chernyshevsky's words, "Everyone has ample room and enough work. Life is spacious and abundant."

Beneath such sanguine social prophesying, the underground man smells bullshit. *Look, gentlemen*, he says to the cockroaches and bags of flour, *it's not like this crystal edifice doesn't sound lovely*. It does—*really* lovely, in fact. But you are forgetting, dear sirs, that irrationality is not some epiphenomenon that can be washed out or redirected into a smooth matrix of social order. A mouse squeaks in the corner. *Please, sir!* Let me finish. You object that clear, rational calculation and scientific socialism can at last bring the human to realize its communal, *perfectible* nature. But the very nature of the human, the thing that defines him above all else, is his impulse toward the irrational: "Man, whoever he might be, has always and everywhere liked to act as he wants, and not at all as reason and profit dictate; and one can want even against one's own profit, and one sometimes even *positively must* . . . all this," the underground man continues, "is that most profitable profit, the omitted one, which does not fit into any classification, and because of which all systems and theories are constantly blown to the devil."

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The thing is, I agree with the underground man. And I don't think that's a contradiction, given the setting here. There will never be a human civilization that can rid itself entirely of "the omitted one." The omitted ones themselves are, you might say, the very fire and movement of history. They're the termites eating away at the inert, cold cathedrals of progress—"all systems and theories"—that assert themselves as the culmination ("the end") of history, the acme of the rational, the pinnacle of the possible.

In today's America, the steeples of The End reach up to the clouds and spill over to the shores, spelling out in all their sharp corners and sky-sized windows the zenith of capitalist reason. Why, just north of McCormick Place, you can see the Hancock, Sears, and Trump towers. It shouldn't be forgotten that, in this America, mainstream pundits and politicians are the new

Chernyshevskies. Socialism is a nice idea, they say, but it's *just not rational*. There's no alternative here.

The underground has something to say about that.

Info Skirmishes

I'll just warn you now, if the Dostoevsky epigram didn't tip you off: this won't be a particularly good piece of reportage. I don't know what you'd call it. The sections jump back and forth in time, there's not much of a coherent narrative of events, and, well . . . you'll see.

First example: I launched my quixotic reporting mission at the People's Summit with an exercise in glorified snipe hunting. A rumor had rippled through the assembled crowd that there was a mole in our midst: a reporter for Alex Jones the Hutt's right-wing conspiracy site, Infowars, masquerading as a true Bernie believer. What better nod could there be to the underground than an unhinged Infowarrior sweatily trying to blend into a crowd of democratic socialists?

Regardless of whether or not the rumor I was investigating was true (truth-values never being a real concern in matters involving Infowars), it did give me the extremely good fortune of being able to look at the events over the three-day Summit without many pressing expectations. In my hunt for the mole, I more or less stumbled upon everything else by accident. In the process, I got to overhear what I think can credibly be called a movement, in all the handling of its own painful divisions, shared passions, and frenetic locomotion.

I marveled at the fact that, in such a seemingly short amount of time, socialism had become a mainstream rallying cry in America once again.

I got to take part in, and listen in on, conversations among many people, from all kinds of backgrounds, for whom something in America had fundamentally changed. I spoke to numerous attendees and panelists who, regardless of the truly grim state of American politics, were more excited and hopeful than any I've come across since the 2016 election. I saw a 25 year-old man walking around in a head-to-toe onesie with Bernie Sanders' face on it. After Day One, I started keeping a tally of the gray ponytails I spotted. I witnessed so many touching moments when Boomers, Gen-Xers, and college-aged Millennials confessed their respective generational longings and cultural hubris to one another with bewildering honesty. I ate something called a "banh mi taco." I talked to a group of education activists, all women, who genuinely seemed like they could kick the shit out of any biker gang. I talked to more people than I could count who had run for some kind of political office or were planning to run, a significant number of whom were under forty. I saw an NFL star defensive end carrying what looked like thirty books from a radical press. I talked to students, activists, writers, union reps, politicians, an incredibly sweet group of progressive stay-at-home moms, and one lawyer; along with many others, I marveled at the fact that, in such a seemingly short amount of time, *socialism* had become a mainstream rallying cry in America once again.

Speaking Frankly

Let's fast-forward, though, to the very end. It's the Day Three of the People's Summit and I've got a bus that leaves from Union Station in two hours. I'm following around Thomas Frank, world-renowned journalist, historian, and founder of a little magazine called *The Baffler*, buzzing three to five feet away from him like a gnat as he bounces with impressive pep from the exhibit hall main stage to the book exhibit to sign some copies of *Listen, Liberal*. He then makes a B-line over to *The Intercept* table to hug and catch up with Naomi Klein, world-renowned journalist and environmental activist. Passersby are geeking out (and I'm trying, with varying degrees of success, to play it cool).

There are a lot of loose ends bizarrely converging in this one moment. I've spent the last two and a half days covering the Summit for my first big on-site reporting assignment and learning, in the process, that I'm not very good at it. I'm almost pathologically bad at chronicling the big-picture events that reporters are supposed to record and I keep getting obsessed with minor, weird details. Still, it certainly isn't lost on me that my weekend safari is the gangly, skittering offspring of a project that Frank himself started back in '88. Indeed, the very tenor and scope of the Summit going on around us—really impressive considering this is only its second year of existence—echoes a lot of questions, concerns, and hopes that are very, very familiar to anyone who's been reading Frank's stuff for the past two decades.

When it became clear to me that Donald Trump's electoral rise wasn't going to be washed out in the primaries like everyone hoped it would, I went back to a passage from *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, which Frank wrote back in 2004, in time for the enormously demoralizing re-election of George W. Bush at the behest of Karl Rove, a few billion in corporate political cash, and (so the story goes) a diehard band of heartland culture warriors mustered to the polls to smite down the apocalyptic threat of legal gay marriage:

For decades Americans have experienced a populist uprising that only benefits the people it is supposed to be targeting . . . The angry workers, mighty in their numbers, are marching irresistibly against the arrogant. They are shaking their fists at the sons of privilege . . . They are massing at the gates of Mission Hills, hoisting the black flag, and while the millionaires tremble in their mansions, they are bellowing out their terrifying demands. "We are here," they scream, "to cut your taxes."

There's also this eerily prescient passage, from a 2014 Frank essay in *Harper's*:

Today we are living in a kind of golden age of paranoia, made possible by the Internet's complete eclipsing of standard cause and effect . . . The notion that the righteous have been dispossessed is by now so utterly ingrained that conservatives have stopped mincing words about the remedy: they must "take our country back" from the elites and socialists who have stolen it away.

And this one from *Listen Liberal*, which was written in the waning days of the Obama presidency, but pretty much served as a play-by-play of the great presidential plebiscite in the year of our Lord, 2016, the same year the book was published:

The Democrats posture as the “party of the people” even as they dedicate themselves ever more resolutely to serving and glorifying the professional class. Worse: they combine self-righteousness and class privilege in a way that Americans find stomach-turning. And every two years, they simply assume that being non-Republican is sufficient to rally the voters of the nation to their standard. This cannot go on.

I’m not trying to play favorites here, but I’m also not going to pretend that Frank hasn’t been right about a lot of stuff over the years—and by no means is he alone in that respect. I was even more sure about that after attending panels and talking to Summiters all weekend. That’s mainly why I wanted to talk to him now.

But if I’m a novice reporter, I’m an even more useless interviewer. This whole time I’ve mainly been joking around with Frank about populist leaders’ hairdos, the University of Chicago (we’re both alums), and close family members of ours who voted for Trump. The crush of Summit activity is speeding up time, though, and suddenly the “interview” is over. He’s got a plane to catch and I have to get to the bus station. I look down at my notebook to see what “usable” material I’ve bothered to scribble down: “*Listen, Liberal*,” “Naomi Klein,” “UChicago,” “Trump,” “populist hair.” Well, shit.

Our last exchange, before parting ways, goes like this:

Me: “So, like we said, this must be kind of weird for you—right?—given that a lot of the problems we’re focusing on here at the Summit, and a lot of the views being expressed, sync up with stuff you’ve been chronicling for years . . .”

TF: Yeah, it’s crazy.

Me: But good?

TF: Oh, definitely!

Me: After this weekend, though, is there anything you’d want to add to what you’ve already written down?

TF: Oh, I’m done. I’ve said what I can.

Me: Oh, yeah? And you’re O.K. with that? Like . . . looking around, does it feel like the message is in good hands?

TF: Well, what more can I do?

His tone wasn’t at all wistful or cryptic—this was just a matter of fact. He looked ready to run a marathon. “I’m a journalist, not a politician.”

Contra the Destructionists

We’re back at Day One of the Summit. I’ve just come from a large meeting for members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) where people were especially amped up—we’re just a few hours into this thing and the coffee is kicking in. During one of the breakout sessions, a young DSA organizer from Sacramento named Phillip Kim led our table in a discussion about

the Affordable Care Act and the push for single-payer healthcare. Then members of our group—a good mix of twenty-to-fifty-somethings—practiced some role-play in the hopes of preparing talking points for when people are knocking on doors in the coming weeks. (One of the refrains heard throughout the weekend is “Knock on every damn door”). The role-play doesn’t go all that well; people get stuck responding to basic objections. Others jump in and try to help out. It’s difficult talking to people outside your echo chamber (or pretending to), when you can’t fall back on the unspoken consensus to bail you out. But it’s a really good sign to see people making an effort.

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At this moment, I’m skulking around the edges of one of the medium-to-big rooms where a packed seminar on “The Rigged Economy” is under way. At least half the crowd is under thirty-five and there’s an even fifty-fifty split of men and women. But it is overwhelmingly white. Counting myself, I guesstimate that about 8-10 percent of the audience consists of people of color. It’s really fascinating to observe over the weekend how the attendees amass and disperse, like one of those massive swarms of tiny birds, like krill, whipping this way and that. Different panel topics draw drastically fluctuating densities of white dudes, women over forty, people of color in their twenties, people in fancier clothing, etc.

The seminar is being led by one person, Chris Nielsen, who, it turns out, is both a really nice guy and a full-time faculty member for the National Nurses United union. I had no idea that such a career education post existed, but I’m glad to know it does. Right now, Nielsen is going through some PowerPoint slides and telling the grand story of American neoliberalism. All the old favorites are there: Friedrich von Hayek, John Maynard Keynes, the New Deal, Milton Friedman, Dick Nixon, The Heritage Foundation, the CATO Institute, Ronald Reagan, “Morning in America,” deregulation, market fundamentalism, etc. At one point, Nielsen pauses to solicit definitions of what neoliberalism is and does from members of the crowd. “Corporate socialism,” one middle-aged man says into the microphone. “Establishment Democrats resisting change,” another pipes in, which gets a chuckle from the crowd. One person shouts out “Union busting!” at the same time someone else shouts “Privatizing everything!”

On the projector screen, meanwhile, are two lines from the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu: “What is neoliberalism? A programme for destroying collective structures which may impede the pure market logic.” One of the things that’s starting to come through in Nielsen’s seminar is that neoliberalism—a term that, today, serves as a kind of catch-all name for many of the collected evils the left forces of reform are fighting against—didn’t spring fully formed out of the malignant crania of certain economists, business moguls, or conservative politicians. Looking back, the clear constellation lines of the “programme” obscure neoliberalism’s quiet and uneven emergence out of a loose cluster of stars. Neoliberalism’s messy history suggests Bourdieu’s definition works better as a punctuation mark on the gradual, ad hoc stirring of far simpler organizational impulses.

It's much easier to grasp as a question of what neoliberalism *does* as opposed to what it *is*. It's not so much about the "programme" as the "destroying." The "programme" came along eventually, but neoliberalism germinated out of some of the deepest and most self-serving feelings of hatred and resentment toward the forces of collective living.

One woman who speaks up puts a fine and somber point on all of this. Her name is Barbara McVeigh, an independent writer, filmmaker, and radio host who grew up in Fremont, CA. She tells the crowd that Ronald Reagan nearly destroyed her family. When I speak with Barbara after the session, she explains that her father was one of the over 12,000 members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) who went on strike in 1981. Reagan famously issued an ultimatum to the PATCO strikers, who were informed that it was illegal for government unions to strike and given forty-eight hours to return to work. When the strikers refused to comply, they were fired and barred, under Reagan's orders, from ever being hired again by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). PATCO was formally de-certified by the Federal Labor Relations Authority later that year.

Reagan's actions were a watershed moment in American history, effectively snapping the spine of the mid-century labor movement, prompting a rapid decline in national union numbers and a surge in union-busting conservatism. McVeigh confesses that she hated her father "for over thirty years for striking in 1981, which put my family into years of emotional and financial struggles, and [resulted in] many lost childhood dreams for me, including funds for college education." This, it strikes me, is one of the definitions of neoliberalism that should be included in books next to those offered by people like Pierre Bourdieu, David Harvey, and Wendy Brown: The hatred and destruction of collective forms of living, from communes to co-ops, from unions to the welfare state, that worms its way deep into the tender innards of social consciousness, festering for generations.

After thirty years, though, McVeigh relates that she's found in the People's Summit, the revived American left, and her own artistic work, a way to rediscover and forgive something that looked a lot different to her at age thirteen. She tells me she's really "pleased to see that the pain that Ronald Reagan caused my own family, starting in 1981, may have purpose and value to share today," and that she wants to honor "those who took a stand for honesty, and showed us the guts it takes to stand your ground for honesty and justice, even at the risk of losing everything."

It's evening now on Day One of the Summit. An excitable crowd's assembling for a slate of psyche-up speeches and honest entreaties by progressive figures like Chokwe Lumumba, the surprise radical mayor of Jackson, MS, Linda Sarsour of the Arab American Association, and RoseAnne DeMoro from National Nurses United. During every smoke and coffee break so far, if I haven't been talking to other attendees, I've been trawling through the mainstream media coverage of the Summit on my phone, all of which seems to be focusing exclusively on the cast of speakers, especially the headliners. And this seems a clear signal to me that, for the most part, I don't have to write much about them. Instead, I'm still chewing on the testimonies of people like McVeigh, and the Chicago Teachers Union member who asked to remain anonymous, and the college student from Wisconsin who told me he's now seriously considering running for

local office. Even if we didn't talk for very long, and even if I didn't ask very good questions, the experience of "connecting" with these people feels like the most important thing to keep in mind as the ever-fractious forces of the American left dig in for more marathon sessions of introspection, strategic analysis, and—yes—infighting.

Solidarity often appears in far less spectacular forms than most writing on the subject would lead you to believe. On paper, solidarity coaxes out of strong-willed people an intellectual commitment to first principles. Out here, it's low-grade, unsexy, thankless care for other people. Everyone here would be so much easier to hate or overlook when your connection to them is mediated through a million screens and words and distanced judgments. If you want anything to change, though, you have to start here, with the bros and the slobs, with the dedicated activists, with the people who just want to hear themselves talk, with the quiet ones, the fiery ones, the annoying ones, and everyone in between. Solidarity is the only thing that will get this, or any, movement off the ground.

After Day One, I can report that people are encountering each other and some sparks of solidarity have caught my attention. Sometimes the interactions go nowhere. Other times the electricity surges and your hair stands up. As both an observer and a participant in this movement, I feel like the unfinished business that the Summit participants are working through, if only erratically, is more urgent than ever, and the stakes are too high to settle for tepid results. But the spark of solidarity is there. Is there really anything else to report? Sure, *I have* serious doubts about what this movement can accomplish in the current climate. *I worry* about the state things will be in when the older generations are finally done trashing the place and we're left to clean it up (fucking Boomers, man). *I'm also preoccupied* by the stubborn salience of the blistering wound preventing any clear consensus on the need and means for integrating class politics and other modes of so-called identity politics into a coherent ideology that can win—a wound that, in the house of left activism, doesn't look like it's going to be sutured any time soon. *I wish* more sessions integrated pragmatic strategies for unionizing or building coalitions among, say, students, postal workers, and Black Lives Matter (we'll see what happens in the panels tomorrow).

I've been grinding my teeth all day because it's very clear that, apart from strong exhortations by certain individual speakers about forming a third party, the overarching theme of the Summit is strengthening efforts to "push the Democratic Party to the left." This, *I fear*, will continue to lead to more cooptation and disappointment. *I'm also deeply uncomfortable* with the dissonance of standing at the reception among thousands of others who, like me, unhesitatingly identify as "socialist" while we pick at pretty nice-ish "fusion" finger foods prepared by catering and cleaning staff workers who might as well be invisible. I could easily make these "insights"—or whatever you want to call them—the focus of the whole story.

I'm trying to practice instead of preach, though. People here are really excited to talk, I've noticed. Their excitement is charming and infectious. But many of the same people seem far less capable of listening. There should be a workshop on listening.

It would take a massive ego to stand in this big of a building, amid this many people, in this desperate a juncture in our country's history, and still feel like it's somehow about me. This is the real challenge for anyone writing today, especially from the left. There's something going on here. It's got some miraculous parts, and some really ugly ones. But you can't hear it if you're talking. Tom Frank's harried insistence on a clear-cut division of labor between political agitation and journalistic critique is still rattling in my brain. The problem is that I and most other lefty writers I know are reckoning with a writing and a political regime that makes just about every writer a politician. It's easier to be a politician. You don't have to listen as much. It's much harder, I think, to be a journalist.

I'm saying nothing here on the soul or animating mission of a socialist movement as it "should be." I'm just trying to tell you what I heard.