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Jonestown in the 21st century

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To commemorate an irredeemable tragedy 25 years on is a difficult thing. Especially those closest to Peoples Temple -- either as participants or opponents, or both -- have struggled to come to terms with the murders and mass suicide at Jonestown. And gradually, people once estranged by what happened have reached out toward one another. But the tremendous loss can never be erased. Most other people live with more distance from the murders and mass suicide at Jonestown, either because they only experienced the events at the time through the lenses of the mass media, because they were too young to understand -- as if understanding had been a possibility, or because they were not yet born. For most people, then, Jonestown is doubly remote. For all the efforts to pin down what happened, how, and why, it always has been an enigma. Now it is a faded enigma, even more hazy in the mists of time passed, pushed away on the sea of memory by the rising tides of more recent events.

Those who would understand the past have two basic choices. We can either try to make sense of the world as it was understood by the people caught up in the events at the time -- and perhaps try to explain how events happened in part as a product of those people's actions. Or, we can try to make sense of events from the perspective of our time, in relation to the larger course of history. Much has been learned by taking the first tack. We know that Jim Jones was a deeply flawed yet somehow visionary man whose movement attracted to Peoples Temple many decent and deeply committed people. And we know that the murders and mass suicide cannot be

adequately explained by either madness in Jim Jones or evil that arose within him. In Gone From the Promised Land I elaborated an alternative thesis; later I subjected it to counterfactual analysis in Apocalypse Observed. Although the internal dynamics in Peoples Temple and Jim Jones are not to be discounted, the murders and mass suicide, I have argued, were the product of an ever escalating struggle between the leadership of Peoples Temple and their opponents, the Concerned Relatives. Questions of detail about what happened remain unresolved, but absent dramatic revelations by participants -- including agencies of the U.S. government -- they are likely to remain unresolved. I, for one, would be surprised if new information radically alters explanations of what happened at Jonestown.

Yet as scholars now acknowledge, it is not only facts that weave the fabric of history. Facts are embedded in stories that make sense of them. Twenty-five years out, we now have a very different perspective on the wider history of the era of Peoples Temple. Moreover, we live in a very different world. Yet it is one that resonates obliquely with the apocalypse at Jonestown. What, then, can be learned by looking at Peoples Temple in its times, as we now see those times? And what can be learned about our times by reflecting on Jonestown?

The entire history of Peoples Temple as a social movement -- from the 1950s to the 1980s -- took place during the period of the Cold War. Communism seemed a serious threat both to the capitalist establishment in the West and to political defenders of American freedom. A new "postindustrial" society -- driven by production of knowledge -- was emerging, and the middling classes were beginning to follow the well-to-do in putting leisure and consumption rather than work and production at the center of their lives. Socioeconomic class remained the central organizing axis of society, and non-whites were concentrated in the lower classes.

Jim Jones was a child of the "old Left" who crossed the divide of World War II and the onset of the Cold War. In the 1950s he established Peoples Temple as a religious organization in Indiana in part by challenging racial segregation, and in its move to California in the 1960s, the Temple participated in the tides of social change of the decade -- the civil-rights movement, the anti-Viet Nam war movement, and the New Left (I may have missed a distinctly feminist

discourse within Peoples Temple, if it was there, but certainly the group seems to have cultivated the talents and abilities of its members, whoever they were). The 1960s were also the era of the counterculture, and although Peoples Temple was not strictly speaking a flower-power kind of organization, if memory serves, it was listed in a directory of communal organizations, and certainly it attracted people conversant in the milieu of the counterculture. And in the 1970s Peoples Temple indeed became an increasingly communal organization. In fact, it was one of the larger ones, akin to The Farm in Tennessee and the later Rajneeshpuram colony in Oregon. In short, as Peoples Temple grew and developed, the group channeled a distinctive confluence of its historical moment -- of Left politics aligned with interracial communalism, wrapped within an organization that was unusual in its capacity to infuse countercultural discourse with a radicalized religiosity.

In the 1970s the American political pendulum began its swing in the opposite direction. Peoples Temple's wrenching and apocalyptic end marked that shift in ways that we can only begin to understand with the passage of time. The radical Left and countercultural emergences of the 1960s did not go unchallenged. Rather, there was a broad based reaction -- on cultural, social, and political fronts. Socially, many counterculturalists found themselves in the position that sociologist Max Weber once described for charismatic movements more generally: the attractions and demands of everyday life began to take precedence over the calls for extraordinary sacrifice to meet extraordinary challenges. Politically, the end of the Viet Nam war undermined the mass basis of the New Left movement, the class- and race-based coalition of the Democratic Party collapsed, and New Left politics morphed into a panoply of distinctive, single-issue "new social movements" -- feminist, gay-rights, environmental, and others. The political Right, stung by Richard Nixon's resignation, began to regroup under the banner of supply-side economics and what eventually came to be called neoconservatism. Culturally, the radicalism of the counterculture softened as its ideas and practices became marketed by corporations and otherwise diffused through mainstream society. On the other side of the cultural divide, the freewheeling '60s met with reaction by conservative Christians and, to a lesser extent,

mainstream family-oriented Americans. This development energized the so-called anticult movement, in which the opponents of Peoples Temple -- the Concerned Relatives -- found not only common cause but specific strategies of opposition. It is here, where the tides of history ran in both directions at once, that the Jonestown murders and mass suicide can be located. To explain the tragedy on the basis of its wider context in any reductive way would be a mistake, yet conversely, the apocalypse at Jonestown stands as something of a marker of an epochal shift.

No event in history, no matter how dramatic, divides one period completely from another. Though the Soviet Union already was crumbling from within, no one knew in 1978 what would become obvious in 1989. In the 1990s Francis Fukayama could announce "the end of history" in the triumph of democratic polities and capitalist economy in the face of all utopian alternatives. Yet Fukayama's pronouncement depended on a modernist Enlightenment vision that dissociates utopia, built upon the refinement of secular institutions, from religion. Jonestown marks a different "end of history" -- and equally, some beginnings. It came as a *dénouement* for the counterculture and the New Left, as class-based, mass organized democratic politics waned -- at the end of modernity in its high phase, when postindustrial and postmodern society, however much anticipated, still had not become definitively established. After Jonestown, the neoconservative revolution.

Fukayama's pronouncement, we now know, did not end history. This is so in two senses. First, any proclaimed lack of a utopian alternative to the democratic state and globalizing corporate capitalism seems like a distinctly Western view of history, based in a secularizing modernity, and thus oblivious to either the recent tides of religious fundamentalism, or to any utopia -- like the Islamic one of Sayyid Qutb, for example -- that seeks a new fusion of the religious with elements of modernity. At the end of history, a fusion of religious meaning with violence begets a new history.

Second, Fukayama's utopian vision of modernity based in free markets and democratic choice seems distant from modern institutions on the ground. Already in the 1990s a fusion of media concentration, marketing research, and corporate financing of politics was undermining

democracy as practice in the U.S. and other democratic states. And the collapse of communism has hardly encouraged any global flowering of democratic institutions. Instead, especially with the American election of 2000 and terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, ideals of democracy and liberty have been sacrificed to the politics and power of empire and security.

What the new era brings is a question of future history that we are all still writing. Given that the apocalypse at Jonestown occurred 25 years in the past, if we are to make it meaningful, we will make it meaningful in our times. What can we learn from Jonestown now?

Peoples Temple was wrought of earlier times, but it is a harbinger of ours. Before Jonestown, a thesis of secularization held that even seemingly religious conflict -- in Northern Ireland or the Middle East -- was either a remnant of premodern "primordial" attachments or a product of more material processes merely shrouded in religious symbols. After Jonestown, religion could no longer be treated as a "closed book" of prophecy, and although social scientists have been slow to acknowledge the point, we have been increasingly forced to recognize that religion unleashes forces that now hold the prospects of modernity in the balance. For people who know little about Peoples Temple and the genesis of the murders and mass suicides, it would be easy to lay the blame for the carnage at the feet of Jim Jones. Yet as memories of Jonestown fade, such ritual cleansing loses its power. More importantly, it represses a deeper lesson that has become all the more urgent in the wake of 9/11: countercultural religious conflict is a dialectical process in which each side is labelled by the other as "evil." It escalates -- or becomes defused -- on the basis of moves taken on two sides of the apocalyptic divide. To vanquish evil can become a crusade that begets evil.

In the aftermath of Jonestown, many observers pointed to atrocities they alleged Jim Jones to have committed, and to the totalitarian organization that they deemed Peoples Temple to have become. When I began investigating these issues for [Gone From the Promised Land](#), initially I thought that many criticisms of Peoples Temple amounted to cultural rejections of communalism. On this basis, Jonestown became a symbol that could be used to demean the wider communal movement of its day. But as I continued my research, I found something else

going on as well. When I examined the organizational form, the practices of social control, the politics, and the public relations efforts of Peoples Temple, I could not help but be struck by the many ways in which the group borrowed from wider cultural practices. Its most unseemly manipulations and control, I found, were but distorted exaggerations of practices much more widespread in modern society. This finding let me to see the scapegoating of Jim Jones in a different light. Yes, society was being ritually cleansed of things deeply repugnant, but those things were not simply external threats, they were intimately connected but necessarily repressed aspects of modernity. Yet ritual cleansing changes the world only symbolically, not substantively. And so, at the conclusion of Gone From the Promised Land I suggested that people concerned about the evil in Jim Jones should look beyond Peoples Temple, to see if recognizing that evil helped produce moral clarity about the wider world.

Using a moral critique of Peoples Temple's more troubling practices as a basis for wider critique seems all the more urgent now. The sign in the pavilion at Jonestown, quoting George Santayana, read, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Let us recall too that one of the opponents of the Branch Davidians before the conflagration at Mount Carmel worried about "another Jonestown." We will all make our own meanings in these matters, but we do need to take stock of a world where democracy seems increasingly subordinated to an amalgamation of advertising and empire, human and civil rights sacrificed to security, peace and justice to preemptive power. Unfortunately, the tyrannies of Jonestown are still with us.

There is another side to Peoples Temple, often overlooked in the rush to misunderstand its tragic end. A utopian organization, it attracted people of good will from all walks of life, who consolidated a critical understanding of modern society, and put prodigious energies toward building what they hoped would be a better world. The people of Peoples Temple failed to realize that world in this world. But after 25 years, we should acknowledge their dedication and their humanity, and find its sources in our selves. Because Jonestown is a harbinger of a world after modernity, we must each find our calling in the face of a history that has not ended.