

David M. Gordon: Radical Political Economist and Activist (1944-1996)

Sam Bowles and Tom Weisskopf

ABSTRACT: David Gordon, a pioneer of radical political economics and an activist of the U.S. left, died of congestive heart failure on March 16, 1996, at the age of fifty-one. At the time of his death he was Professor of Economics at the New School for Social Research and Director of the Center for Economic Policy Analysis in New York. As economists we will remember best his historically and institutionally based contributions to our understanding of poverty and segmented labor markets and to our analysis of long-run capitalist development. As friends and political associates we will remember his indefatigable commitment to reshaping the economic thinking of the democratic left in an era in which many progressives despaired at the unraveling of the left-Keynesian policy paradigm and the rise of right-wing dogma.

THE LIFE OF A RADICAL POLITICAL ECONOMIST

David came from a family of economists of a moderately liberal bent. His father, the late Robert Aaron Gordon, was a distinguished Keynesian macroeconomist and at one time President of the American Economic Association; his mother, the late Margaret S. Gordon, was well-known for her contributions to the economics of employment and social welfare policy; both were long-time professors of economics at the University of California, Berkeley. David's brother, Robert J. Gordon, is a prominent

The authors would like to thank Richard Edwards, Robert Gordon, and Michael Reich for comments on an earlier version of the paper. A collection of David's work is now available: David Gordon, Samuel Bowles, and Thomas Weisskopf, eds., *Economics and Social Justice: Essays on Power, Labor, and Institutional Change*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1998.

macroeconomist at Northwestern University. David is survived by his wife, Diana Gordon, a professor of political science at the City University of New York.

David earned his B.A. in Economics (*magna cum laude*) at Harvard University in 1965. As a first-year student at Harvard he had harbored strong ambitions to become a prominent lawyer and ultimately to be elected to high political office. Many of his Harvard contemporaries and friends did indeed rise rapidly in the U.S. establishment, but David was to become a critic of the ladders of privilege he once imagined he would climb.

Pointedly eschewing the career paths of mainstream economics, David devoted himself to building anti-establishment institutions, supporting economics departments with strength in leftist political economy, and creating programs to spread progressive economic ideas beyond academia. He was an early and active member of URPE; he founded and directed the New York-based Institute for Labor Education and Research, later renamed the Center for Democratic Alternatives; and, shortly before his death, he became the founding Director of the New School's Center for Economic Policy Analysis.

As an undergraduate David wrote for *The Harvard Crimson*; and following his graduation from Harvard in 1965 he helped found *The Southern Courier*, a civil rights newspaper based in Atlanta. Throughout his life he maintained his interest in journalism, contributing an economics column to *The Los Angeles Times* and numerous articles to *The Nation*, as well as making frequent appearances on television and radio commentary programs.

David's political engagement was both the *raison d'être* of his research, and the source of its guiding themes. The public role which most influenced his work was his ongoing association with workers. As he recalled in his last book (1996),

We had just begun [in the mid-1970s] some outreach education work with local union officials and rank and file workers....They complained that their supervisors were always on their case, that bureaucratic harassment was a daily burden. They inveighed against speedup, hostility, petty aggravations, capricious threats and punishments, and—perhaps most bitterly—crude, arrogant and often gratuitous exercises of power....I do not know to this day whether and when I might have paid attention to the bureaucratic burden if I hadn't been sitting in union halls in the mid-1970s chewing on stale jelly doughnuts listening to workers grumbling about their continuing hassles with their employers.

The influence of such conversations permeated David's research agenda throughout his life.

David returned to Harvard for graduate studies in economics during the late 1960s. There he was active in the development of the U.S. school of radical political economics, together with Rick Edwards, Herb Gintis, Arthur MacEwan, Michael Reich, the two of us (authors of this essay), and many other junior faculty and advanced graduate students at Harvard and MIT.

In the summer before beginning his graduate work, David worked on a project evaluating model "Great Society" programs targeting the hard-core unemployed in Oakland, California, near where he had grown up in Berkeley. He was soon persuaded that the primary problem was not securing employment per se, but finding jobs that paid enough and offered enough security to make the jobs worth keeping. Later, as a Harvard graduate student, he worked as a research assistant evaluating similar programs in Boston. This experience further reinforced his conviction that it is not individual characteristics, but the characteristics of available jobs, which matter the most in determining labor market outcomes. In 1971 he was awarded a Ph.D. in Economics, having completed his doctoral thesis on "Class, Productivity, and the Ghetto."

After serving for three years as a research associate at the National Bureau for Economic Research in New York, David joined the graduate faculty of the New School for Social Research in 1973 where, until his death, he taught a variety of courses in labor economics, econometrics, and economic history—including a seminar on the transition from feudalism to capitalism. He also served on hundreds of doctoral dissertation committees, providing invaluable assistance to generations of New School graduate students. Over the two decades following the award of his doctorate David pursued two ongoing collaborations *a trois*: the first, spanning the 1970s, concerned poverty and labor markets; the second, from the early 1980s through the early 1990s, concerned long-run capitalist development and macroeconomic policy.

David's best known contributions to the analysis of labor markets, developed together with Edwards and Reich, challenged the conventional assumption of a single labor market and argued instead for the recognition of deep historically shaped divisions along racial, gender, and class lines. His joint research with Edwards and Reich culminated in the publication of their co-authored and widely cited book, *Segmented Work, Divided Workers: The Historical Transformation of Labor in the United States* (1982).

In 1979, angered by growing inequality and declining real wages in the United States and by the rightward-shifting political economic environment, David accepted an invitation to become

co-chair of a commission on economic problems set up by the "Progressive Alliance"—a political coalition of more than 200 organizations representing labor, citizens, civil rights, and women's organizations. Uncertain about the best economic strategy for the time, he suggested that a new and over-arching analysis was needed to understand the economics of stagflation and the slowdown in productivity growth and to guide proposals for change; and he invited the two of us to join him in this effort.

Thus began more than a decade of collaboration among the three of us on such issues as the dynamics of stagflation, the slowdown of productivity growth, and the determinants of profitability and investment. This work led to a series of joint papers and two co-authored books, *Beyond the Waste Land: A Democratic Alternative to Economic Decline* (1983a) and *After the Waste Land: A Democratic Economics for the Year 2000* (1991).

David's last five years were devoted to the development of what he termed a left structuralist econometric model of the U.S. economy, as well as to continuing analysis of bureaucratic supervision of the labor process and declining real wages of U.S. workers. The latter effort culminated in the publication, the month of his death, of *Fat and Mean: The Corporate Squeeze of Working Americans and the Myth of Managerial "Downsizing"* (1996).

POVERTY AND LABOR MARKETS

David Gordon's contributions to the radical political economic literature on labor markets are inextricably linked with those of Rick Edwards (now at the University of Nebraska) and Michael Reich (now at the University of California, Berkeley). The three of them—hereafter GER—were graduate students together at Harvard University in the late 1960s, and they all received their Ph.D.s in Economics in the early 1970s for their early work on issues of labor market segmentation.

While much research on labor market segmentation is motivated by the liberal condemnation of racial, gender, and other discriminations, GER's interest in the subject stemmed from a more radical set of questions of Marxian inspiration. Among these were the political nature of the employment relationship and the conservative nature of the U.S. working class. The resulting theory of labor market segmentation not surprisingly differed in important respects from the neoclassical theory of discrimination. According to the latter, labor market discrimination effects a redistribution of income from the targets of discrimination to privileged workers at the expense of profits. David and his co-authors, in contrast, highlighted the ways in which discrimination may raise profits and lower the wages of all workers.

David's Ph.D. thesis was carried out under the guidance of Peter Doeringer (then a Harvard Assistant Professor). In his thesis, David sought to document the duality of labor markets in the inner city areas of New York and Detroit. He found a strikingly bimodal distribution in jobs ranked by wages, benefits, security, and working conditions; and, in the kind of detailed empirical analysis that was to become his hallmark, he showed that the distinct nature of the jobs in these markets was well explained by a "dual labor market factor." While still a graduate student, David pulled together some of his own findings as well as related work by others to write an influential book on urban poverty problems, *Theories of Poverty and Underemployment* (1971).

In the early 1970s David linked his work on dual labor markets with Edwards's work on the hierarchical organization of the modern corporation, and Reich's work on the sources of economic differentials by race, to generate a broad conception of what they termed "labor market segmentation." As the three of them put it in their first joint publication, "A Theory of Labor Market Segmentation" (1973),

We define labor market segmentation as the historical process whereby political-economic forces encourage the division of the labor market into separate sub-markets or segments, distinguished by different labor market characteristics and behavioral rules (359).

GER's conception of labor market segmentation encompasses a variety of barriers to the emergence of a unified labor market. These barriers include (1) the separation of "primary" and "secondary" jobs, as analyzed by David in his doctoral thesis; (2) the separation of "independent primary" and "subordinate primary" jobs within the typical hierarchically structured corporate firm, as analyzed by Edwards in his 1972 thesis (see Edwards 1979); and (3) divisions between groups defined by their race or sex, as analyzed by Reich in his 1973 thesis (see Reich 1980). In the hands of the three of them, the "dual" labor market idea introduced by Doeringer and Piore became a tripartite one (with the division of the primary labor market into independent and subordinate components) further segmented by race and sex. They linked the segmentation of labor markets to employer use of "divide-and-conquer" strategies to ward off the threat of concerted worker challenges.

GER's independent Ph.D. theses provided extensive documentation of differences among various labor market segments in the contemporary United States. In their early joint work (1973 and 1975), GER linked the emergence of labor market segmentation with the transition from a relatively competitive to a

more monopolistic form of capitalism in the United States in the early 20th century. The segmentation was associated with a growing wage gap between the rising monopolistic sector and the remaining competitive sector as well as with the development of hierarchy within the workforces of large corporations.

Later, in their final comprehensive work (1982), GER traced the evolution of U.S. labor markets over time, distinguishing successive historical periods associated with “initial proletarianization” (the 1820s to the 1890s), “the homogenization of labor” (the 1870s to World War II), and “the segmentation of labor” (the 1920s to the 1970s). Here they situated their analysis of the segmentation of labor markets within a “long-swing” interpretation of U.S. economic history. In this interpretation, successive long swings, each consisting of a boom and a crisis phase, are associated with distinct stages of capitalist development, defined in terms of the institutional environment.

GER associated the rise of labor market segmentation with the transition from the long-swing institutions of the 1890s–1930s to those of the next long swing of the 1940s–1980s. More specifically, they argued that segmentation emerged out of the long-wave crisis of the 1920s and 1930s; this was the period of early “exploration” of labor market segmentation. As they see it, the subsequent “consolidation” of segmentation formed an important part of the institutional framework of the post-World-War-II U.S. economy, feeding the boom period of the 1950s and 1960s. Looking ahead, they explicitly recognized the possibility of a renewed restructuring of labor markets in a new period of world capitalism.

In several independent articles (notably 1978 and 1980), David had earlier developed his notion of stages of capital accumulation linked to long economic swings of boom and crisis. Following this approach, GER (1982) embedded their arguments about various aspects of U.S. labor markets into an over-arching historical framework that is itself grounded in a general theory of long-term historical change. This historical perspective was to inform David’s later contributions as well.

Although GER’s account of labor market segmentation is predominantly historical in approach, their analysis does have important theoretical implications. It has served as an important element in the radical political economic critique of orthodox microeconomic theory as applied to labor markets and, in particular, of the conclusion that workers with similar educational levels and skills will (in the long run) be similarly rewarded. The theory of labor market segmentation predicts that, even in the long run, identical workers in different labor market segments will not be similarly rewarded; long-run equilibrium in labor markets will instead be characterized by the rationing of desirable, high-wage jobs, and workers able and willing to take such jobs at the

going wage will be stuck in less desirable jobs for long periods of time.

It is now widely agreed that the "law of one price" is more the exception than the norm in labor markets. The existence and persistence of large wage differentials among apparently similar workers can be explained by relatively new and more sophisticated economic models (e.g., those dealing with monitoring costs, implicit contracts, and long-term employment relations) as well as by more radical theories associated with the idea of employer efforts to "divide and conquer." But the latter theories, as developed and applied to the contemporary U.S. economy by GER and other radical political economists, represented an important step forward in our overall understanding that social norms concerning jobs and wages are related in significant ways to mechanisms of labor control.

LONG-RUN CAPITALIST DEVELOPMENT AND MACROECONOMIC POLICY

The second area of radical political economics to which David Gordon made major contributions encompasses the long-run development of capitalist economies as well as broad issues of macroeconomic policy. His approach to both was fundamentally historical and institutional in nature. In this area he characteristically brought econometric analysis to bear on questions of long-term growth and institutional transformation inspired by the neo-Marxian paradigm.

David began (1980) by noting the lack of any coherent theory of the so-called Kondratieff cycle, which is characterized by long periods of sustained growth spanning many business cycles, followed by periods of stagnation. From his earlier work with Edwards and Reich, he was convinced that as an empirical matter such long waves of growth and stagnation existed; he proposed that they might be explained by the consolidation, flourishing, and decay of successive institutional arrangements which he termed "social structures of accumulation" (SSA's). This idea, which he and the two of us later developed in our joint work, constituted the unifying theme of his research during the last decade and a half of his life. He extended this institutional approach to such policy-relevant issues as the failure of Reaganomics to stimulate investment or to reverse the long-term stagnation of real wages in the United States.

In his 1980 essay he proposed borrowing from and amending Marxian theories of stages of capitalist accumulation. Each stage of accumulation would be identified by a distinct nexus of institutions which could for a period of several decades generate high levels of investment and productivity growth, but

which would eventually lead to growing problems and precipitate a crisis. Included in these institutions were those regulating the labor market, family life, the environment, the organizational structure of firms, competition among firms, financial markets, and international economic relations—whose ample scope distinguished David's approach from classical Marxian interpretations. Institutions were the key to long-term development, while institutional changes were the key to ending stagnation:

Changes in the prevailing social relationships...reconstituting the environmental stability for rapid and sustained accumulation, are necessary for a (long wave) crisis to come to an end (1980: 20).

Thus the Great Depression ended because a new set of institutions was put in place to support rapid accumulation based on a renewed confidence in future profits.

The work that David did with the two of us during the 1980s consisted of a series of econometric and historical studies (1983a, 1983b, 1986, 1988, 1989) of the post-World-War-II boom of the U.S. economy, and its unraveling during the late 1960s and early 1970s. We began with a puzzle: Why did the Great Depression provide a fertile environment for the advance of New Deal social-democratic initiatives while the stagnation of the 1970s fostered attacks on the welfare state and an erosion of the political influence of progressive social movements? In attempting to account for the distinctive nature of the U.S. postwar boom and its unraveling, we developed a distinctly supply-side and profit-driven account of long-term productivity growth, one which contrasts sharply with the conventional Keynesian and Marxian underconsumptionist models. The four key relationships in our model are the following.

First, we adopted and estimated empirically a profit-driven investment function in which the after-tax profit rate, the level of capacity utilization, and the institutional and political environment impacting on business confidence are the major influences on the rate of accumulation (1989, 1994c).

Second, we provided econometric support for our institutional account of the movement of the profit rate, one which is based on the four pillars of the postwar U.S. social structure of accumulation which we term the capital-labor accord, Pax Americana, the capital-citizen accord, and the moderation of inter-capitalist rivalry (1983a, 1986, 1989). The novelty of this work and much of that described below is that it applies conventional econometric tests to hypotheses concerning such political and sociological phenomena as the consolidation and erosion of economic institutions.

Third, we developed a principal-agent model of the labor discipline problem (1983b) as the foundation for econometric testing of what we term a social model of the rate of labor productivity growth. This model differs from conventional approaches to the productivity slowdown by emphasizing changes in the motivational and disciplinary aspects of the workplace as well as changes in such conventional variables as the capital-labor ratio.

Finally, we posited and estimated an endogenous determination of fiscal and monetary policy governed by the need to maintain a profitable balance between the labor discipline environment (requiring sufficient unemployment), on the one hand, and the level of capacity utilization (sometimes requiring demand expansion), on the other (1983a).

In this model institutions and politics influence growth in three ways: by affecting the expected after-tax profit rate, by affecting other determinants of the investment function, and by affecting the rate of productivity growth. Our account of the unraveling of the postwar U.S. boom gives prominence to the institutional and political impact of sustained full employment during the middle and late 1960s, the erosion of the U.S. world hegemony, and the rise of environmental and other citizen movements. Its emphasis on the profit and investment dampening effects of sustained high employment echoes themes initially developed by Michael Kalecki, later applied to the United Kingdom by Andrew Glyn and Robert Sutcliffe (1972) and to the United States by James Crotty and Ray Boddy (1975).

Put most simply, we argued that the boom ended because the institutional structures could no longer restrain rival claimants' (both domestic and international) encroachment on the profits of U.S. corporations. Rejecting the conventional leftist diagnosis—deficient aggregate demand—and endorsing a supply-side profit-squeeze theory, we concluded that an enlarged government sector or a redistribution to those with higher spending propensities would be insufficient to restimulate growth. What was needed, we proposed, was a new institutional arrangement in which the legitimate claims of all parties could be reconciled in a way consistent with high levels of investment and work effort. Meeting this challenge was a tall order, and we suggested that failure to meet it would produce the policy vacuum eventually exploited by the conservative economic agenda.

Our social structure of accumulation approach is similar in a number of respects to that of the European "Regulation School" pioneered by Michel Aglietta, Robert Boyer, Alain Lipietz, and others. Both schools seek a more nuanced understanding of the varieties of institutional arrangements characterizing distinct capitalisms both among countries and over time. Two differences between the regulation and the SSA approach are important,

however. First, the SSA model determines the level of aggregate demand (and hence the level of capacity utilization) through an endogenous fiscal and monetary response to varying degrees of labor market tightness. By contrast, the regulationists have aggregate demand determined by the distribution of income, in the fashion of Nicholas Kaldor. Second, the primary focus of the SSA approach is long-term productivity growth, and this is determined through a model of social as well as economic influences on labor discipline, motivation, and effort; whereas the regulationist approach favors a Verdoorn relationship of productivity growth to output growth.

An important characteristic of our joint work in this area is its historical specificity: all of the econometric analysis is based on historical time series of the United States, with some comparative analysis between distinct epochs of U.S. economic history. In one of David's last essays (1994a) he identified a number of distinct models of successful accumulation. This approach contrasts sharply with the tendency of the new growth theory in mainstream economics to identify (often through national cross-section econometric analysis) regularities extending across countries and across time.

David was fascinated by the empirical implications of different paradigms in economics, and in many works he presented econometric analysis based on the distinct specifications suggested by various approaches. These were often in the form of an out-of-sample forecasting tournament, or a test of the relative ability of different approaches to account for such puzzles as the productivity slowdown of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The macroeconomic research David undertook during the late 1980s and early 1990s is an extended example of this method. His project involved four distinct econometric models of the U.S. economy based on the functional specifications for key variables (such as investment, wages, and labor productivity) implied by the neoclassical, the classical Marxian, the post-Keynesian, and what he termed the "left-structuralist" perspective—the latter representing a formalization of the SSA approach. It was characteristic of his method that he rejected the usual approach to econometric modeling—which would have developed a single model as the basis for its analysis and forecasting—and instead treated the reader to an analysis of what difference the differing paradigms made in the ways that problems were framed. It should be added that his left-structuralist model typically scored best on the explanatory tests and won the forecasting tournaments.

CONCLUSION: DAVID'S LEGACY

David wrote that “progressive political commitments and concerns have persistently and insistently shaped the questions I’ve asked and the problems I’ve explored through economic analysis” (1998, 1). This orientation led him to address much of his research to economic issues of importance to the average person. It led him also to disseminate his research findings in a highly readable style to a wide popular audience, keeping alive the waning tradition of the economist as public intellectual.

David shared the general radical critique of conventional economic wisdom as most often aligned with the preservation of an unjust economic status quo. He noted with dismay (1994b) that even where current research results warn against applying simplistic laissez-faire remedies—as with the new growth theory and the new theory of international trade—the policy utterances of economists betray little of the new views, often hewing to what he termed free market dogma. Yet David did not believe the view that the interests of ordinary people are always inherently opposed to those of the better-off. What he sought to show (in a nice variation on the old quip that “what is good for General Motors is good for the United States”) is that often what is good for the common people is in fact also best for just about everybody, so that more democratic and egalitarian approaches to economic policy are really in the interest of the great majority.

David’s research-based writings for the general public are vast; but the most comprehensive and surely the best example of his accomplishments in this area is his last book, *Fat and Mean* (1996). He regarded this book as his legacy, working intensely on it over the year 1995 as his heart weakened, and delivering it to his publisher on the day of a medical setback that led to his final hospitalization.

Fat and Mean documents the long-term decline in the pay and living standards of American workers and the increasingly top-heavy bureaucratic structure of American corporations.¹ This book illustrates several key elements in David’s work: his careful criticism and rejection of conventional economic wisdom; his meticulous marshaling of quantitative data and econometric research to support his arguments; his effort to go beyond criticism and analysis to develop specific and politically feasible policy proposals; his engagement with the public not by offering

¹ The U.S. Consumer Price Index (CPI) has recently come under criticism for over-stating inflation, and it is possible that future revision of the CPI will diminish the wage declines identified in the data used by David in *Fat and Mean*. But even if the ultimate verdict is real wage stagnation rather than decline, the fact that this stagnation has persisted for a quarter of a century is surely reason enough for concern.

policy advice to those in power but by putting forth economic programs as tools for popular mobilization; his plain English and fluid prose.

In *Fat and Mean* David confronts conventional wisdom about the U.S. economy and proceeds to challenge, with an impressive array of quantitative evidence, a series of common impressions held by most economists as well as by the general public. For example, he argues that U.S. corporations have not significantly downsized their managerial and supervisory personnel; they have gone mean rather than lean, for in relation to their work forces they employ more managers and supervisors than ever before. He suggests that workers make the most rapid wage gains not in countries where unemployment is low, but where the bureaucratic burden is small and where relatively cooperative management-labor relations prevail. He attributes both the squeeze on U.S. workers' real wages since the mid-1970s not so much to increasing international economic integration and increasingly complex technology, as to corporate executives' choice of a "low-road" rather than a "high-road" strategy. This choice he links to the bloating of corporate supervisory bureaucracy, as the low road involves the use of discipline and negative sanctions rather than autonomy and positive incentives to motivate work.

David assembled a great deal of quantitative evidence and drew on much of his earlier econometric research to support these unconventional and controversial theses of his book. Among his more creative efforts along these lines are: his development (via factor analysis) of a "cooperation index" to measure cross-country variation in the degree of cooperative vs. conflictual labor-management relations; his graphical cross-country juxtaposition of a bureaucratic burden measure with measures of such variables as the cooperation index and the rate of incarceration; and his time-series and cross-country regression explanations of the extent of supervision by variables measuring different aspects of business strategy—including worker motivation and employer control.

Fat and Mean concludes with a chapter devoted to policy recommendations designed to help move U.S. corporations from a low-road to a high-road business strategy. Among other things he calls for legislation that would raise the minimum wage floor, enhance workers' ability to achieve effective voice at the workplace, reduce the appeal to employers of short-term contingent employment, and establish a public investment bank to reward firms embracing more democratic and cooperative approaches to labor management.

David recognized that some of these policy recommendations were far from the center of contemporary economic discourse in the United States, and that they would be likely to evoke

strenuous resistance from business elites. He was hopeful, nonetheless, that his proposals would ultimately become more politically compelling with the growth of popular dissatisfaction over the consequences of current U.S. business practices. And he ended his book with the following characteristic appeal:

...We need to change the environment in which [U.S. corporations] operate and to push them and pull them, no matter how deeply they dig in their heels, in order to overcome the wage squeeze and corporate bloat. It will take time and it will take power...

Asked in 1992 to reflect on his professional career, David responded with a fitting summary of his life's work:

My general concerns as a political economist have concentrated both on helping to forge a coherent left analytical framework within economics and on contributing to the formation of a progressive...political movement in the United States....I feel pleased with the choices I have made and the work that my collaborators and I have produced; frustrated by the condescending complacency of mainstream economists; angered by the greed and irrationality which dominate the U.S. political economy; and still hopeful for the prospects of a significant progressive mobilization towards a more just and humane society as we turn towards the 21st century.

David Gordon, in his life and in his work, exemplified the finest tradition of the radical political economist: he tackled major social and economic issues, contributed to our understanding of them, and found ways to bring his ideas not just to professional colleagues but to the people who had the greatest stake in them. His unswerving commitment to social justice inspired a generation of progressive students and scholars to address their work in economics to the task of building a better society.

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Sam Bowles
Department of Economics
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, MA 01003
bowles@econs.umass.edu

Tom Weisskopf
Department of Economics
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, MI 48109
tomw@umich.edu