A Magazine of Culture & Politics CURRENTAFFAIRS

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ELIZABETH GILBERT'S QUESTIONABLE WRITING TIPS

By Yasmin Nair



A WHIMSICAL TOUR OF **UZBEKISTAN'S POLICE STATE**

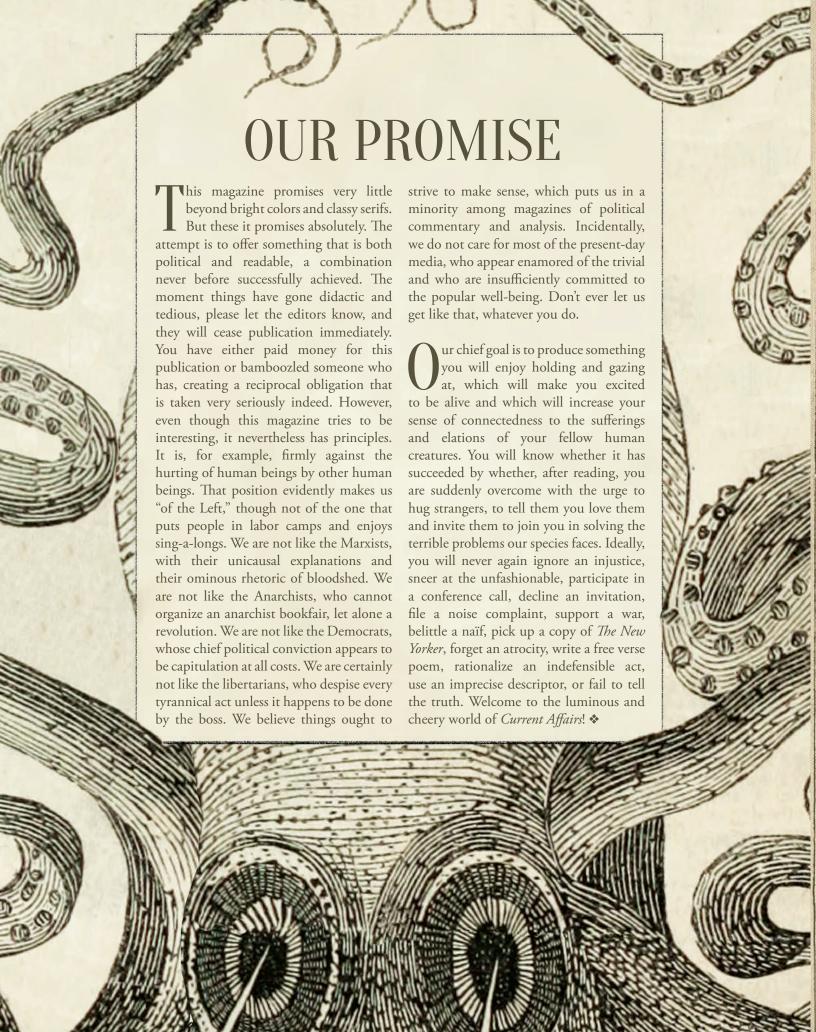
By Belén Fernández

THE MEANINGLESSNESS OF **FEMINIST TWITTER WARFARE**

By Abi Wilkinson

"MULTICULTURALISM **ROTS BRAINS**"

> An Interview with Maryam Namazie





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CORRECTIONS

The infallibility of Current Affairs is widely overstated. This periodical may strive for omniscience, but occasionally fails to ACHIEVE IT. READERS CAN SAFELY PRESUME THAT EVERYTHING NOT CORRECTED WITHIN THIS SPACE IS ACCURATE IN THE UTMOST.

- ♦ In a recent series of Tweets, Current Affairs referred in inexcusably vulgar terms to the staff of The Economist magazine. Many of our closest friends are Economist readers, and we humbly retract our suggestion that the magazine was engaged in one long pornographic act with Milton Friedman's concupiscent ghost. A crude pun on the name of Economist editor-in-chief Zanny Minton Beddoes was also deeply unfortunate. Current Affairs hereby forswears all future temptations to mix the consumption of alcohol with the use of social media.
- ♦ In a recent edition, a number of sarcastic quotation marks were mistakenly omitted. The corrected texts should read:
- ...George Mason University "economist" Tyler Cowen... ...Salon "writer" Amanda Marcotte... ...financial "journalist" and power-fellating ghostwriter Michael Grunwald...
- In our recent feature, "Events for the 'In' Crowd," every single date was listed incorrectly. We apologize to all of those who may have showed up to the Paper Valley Radisson and been disappointed.
- ❖ "Poisson" is not, in fact, the French word for "poison." The linguist responsible for the oversight has been dealt with severely.
- Several photographs purporting to depict ISIS leaders in fact showed the face of New York Times columnist David Brooks. This was not technically accurate.
- ♦ Current Affairs stated it as indisputable fact that "no lawyer seriously believes the law is in any way just." Two lawyers have written to insist that they do in fact believe this. We cannot prove our suspicion that they are shamelessly lying.

THESE ERRORS ARE AMONG CURRENT AFFAIRS'S MANY REGRETS.

LET OTHER MAGAZINES

INOW THER WORTH



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LAUGHING AT SOLDIERS



A Word From



"When I purchased Current Affairs in 1949, it was little more than a Farmer's Almanac. You know, tide forecasts and pig horoscopes and the like. It was a big homemade rhubarb pie of a magazine, but it was fundamentally parochial in its outlook. Now, I am no contemporary break-dance hepcat, but I knew things had to change if we were to survive! You can't make it on mama's roasts in a cutthroat 21st-century economy. That's why we relocated from Dubuque to Springfield. I don't often pat myself on the back (tiny arms), but that is the proudest decision I have ever accidentally made. Our readership is larger today than it ever was before we started publishing. You are the ones to thank for that, so keep sending money. Every penny you send me is guaranteed to go toward bowties & desserts...'



S. Chapin Domino Publisher & Chairman THE CURRENT AFFAIRS ORGANIZATION, LTD.

LETTERS

In which the editors of Current Affairs respond to unwarranted abuse from an oblivious public, as well as to fitting words of praise from readers of taste. As this is CA's first issue, all letters are responses to future issues rather than past ones.

To the editors:

have received the print edition of your magazine since its inception and always enjoyed its warm and forward take on contemporary social doings and the world of letters. However, when the most recent issue arrived in my postbox (I live at home), I was distressed to find what seemed like a monthsold stray raisin mashed between the pages. I would request that you have a word with the little boy who does the mailing, and advise him that snacks are to be consumed on his own time.

With muted displeasure, Pamela Rockford [redacted], IOWA

C.A.: It is to our sincere chagrin that you were disappointed by the gift for long-term subscribers that was included with the last issue. We thank you for your loyalty, and Frankie has been sternly informed that a single raisin is a pitiful gift for a Rockford, particularly one so dedicated to penning letters-to-the-editor as yourself. He has promised that in future, all inter-page raisins will be added only in quantities in excess of a dozen. Ms. Rockford, to us you are worth a million raisins or more. Please remember to renew your subscription.

TO THE EDITORS:

disagree with most of your film reviews, but you were spot-on about The Cantaloupe Women, which is as big a piece of tripe (no pun intended) as has ever blighted the "big screen." I have never been so offended by a musical. Didn't they hear that fruitbased physical comedy died with the Jazz Age? Thank you for being an oasis of light in a forest of cultural doubt.

> Cordially, Nelson Pierpoint Alahambra City

C.A.: We do not know which pun you may have intended, but if it is the one we suspect it was, you may consider us revolted.

TO THE EDITORS:

The word "Nabisco" is a registered trademark of Nabisco, Inc., a subsidiary of Mondelēz International. Nabisco, Inc. and its parent company reserve all rights to the exclusive use of its brand and associated logo, as well as all other feasible portmanteaus of the words "national," "biscuit," and "company." On behalf of the aforestated corporate entities, we hereby demand that Current Affairs and all its related publications immediately cease and desist its appropriation of the Nabisco copyright. Further infringement will result in the pursuit of immediate legal action and the taking of all additional appropriate measures.

> Ingratiatingly yours, Marcus McGinn, Esq. The Law Firm of Paulson, Vitti, and McGinn NEW YORK, NY

TO THE EDITORS:

 M^{y} son recently discovered a copy of your magazine in his playpen (he is eight), and I was disgusted at the contents. Never did I think I would live to see such a lewd caricature of our 41st President. In the future, I would request that all issues be distributed with a warning informing parents that the contents are mostly filth-based.

Eula Iane Thibodaux NINETAILS, OREGON

C.A.: As we have only ever included pornographic caricatures of the 42nd-44th Presidents, we believe your son must have added this scrawling on his own initiative. We would therefore suggest that it is he who is a bad influence on this magazine rather than vice versa.

TO THE EDITORS:

Tine times out of ten I find your magazine enrich-Ving and stimulative. But I take issue with your suggestion that "labour" is an acceptable alternative spelling of a certain word. I myself have never been English, nor do I intend to be.

> Leonard Gryzywsky Brooklyn, NY

C.A.: Lenny, Not all of us were blessed with the luxury of not being English. Consider yourself among the fortunate.

Re: "LOU REED, AMERICA'S KING NEPTUNE"

from issue 12

TO THE EDITORS:

Tgreatly enjoyed your postmortem on Lou Reed, particularly your focus on his nonmusical endeavours such as horticulture and recreational proctology. How curious some of our public figures truly are!

Tamir Sharon HAIFA, ISRAEL

C.A.: We are glad to have feathered your eyeballs with curious prose, though you would reel if you knew the details we withheld from that Lou Reed piece!

TO THE EDITORS:

Oh, so it's not Howlin' Wolf, but it IS Lou Reed? Is that right? Give me a break! I told you THREE ISSUES AGO that it was indefensible not to have written yet about the Wolf, and now Mr. "Satellite of Love" gets the treatment. What a walk on the shit side.

> Huang Murphy SHENZHEN, CHINA

C.A.: We would implore you to kindly forgive any unintentional lupine omissions on our part. As penance, please enjoy "The Wolfman Cometh: The Rumble of a Blues Master" in the present edition. [NOTE: For space reasons, this article has since been cut from the issue.]

HEN OUR LAWYERS WERE REcently asked to render formal opinions on matters pertaining to Current Affairs's eligibility for "charitable organization" status, they dropped a few pieces of unsolicited advice into the resulting memoranda.

"The time, if we may be so bold, is hardly ripe for a venture such as this, given the recent failures of Modern Farmer, Chrysanthemum, and The New Inquiry. We advise you not to continue telling your fundraisers that your operational model is a 'guaranteed moneymaker,' when it is in fact what is known as an 'impending calamity."

DO ALL SIGNS POINT TO **INEXORABLE** DOOM. THEN?

Now, little as we are willing to tolerate insolence from inhouse counsel, whose primary duty is first and foremost to know their place, we felt ourselves bound to consider the proposition prior to discarding it.

But even a fairminded assessment confirms the initial suspicion that the

lawyers, as their kind is so wont to do, were pontificating out of their recta.

Why, one only needs to look at Small Boats Monthly. Here is a magazine that, according to all of the usual predictions, would seem unlikely to survive in an era of comparatively large boats. And yet this unfashionable little periodical

has chugged along in print for volume after volume, the January 2016 issue being as fresh as ever with a bold in-depth report on dragonfly rowing shells.

"Ah, but there's an audience for that," the noxious gadfly. "People like boats." Yes, well, to

this we can only answer: do they not like affairs? Do they not worship all things current?

Thank you, then, to Small Boats Monthly, winner of the 2016 Current Affairs Prize for Persistence in the Face of Reason. Take heed, those who condemn print to certain demise! Current Affairs and Small Boats shall yet spatter egg upon thy face. •

FVFNTS FOR

THE 2015 13TH NATIONAL LIGHT RAIL & STREETCAR CONFERENCE, November 15-17, 2016, at the Hyatt Regency, 1300 Nicollet Mall, Minneapolis, MN. Who should attend: all light rail and streetcar system personnel

PAPER INDUSTRY INTERNATIONAL HALL OF FAME INDUCTION DINNER, May 15, at the Radisson Paper Valley Hotel, 333 W. College Ave. Appleton, WI. 54911.

and it's never too early to start getting ready for...

NATIONAL CHIMNEY SWEEP GUILD Annual Convention, April 24-27, at the Rosen Plaza Hotel, Orlando, FL TO THE EDITORS:

earned a lot of Lou Reed facts from the latest Ledition. All well and good, except when you consider that Saudi Arabia continues its relentless bombing campaign against Yemen. Wonder when your publication intends to cease being the publicity arm of RCA Records and finally become the serious foreign policy review that its cover fonts imply it to be.

> Elon Musk (no relation) Dothan, Alabama

C.A.: A Current Affairs/Rasmussen poll taken last year indicated that 40% of readers would prefer "music & pop industry gossip" over "analysis of Yemeni domestic affairs" (60% of readers had "no opinion"). Ours is a democratic publication, responsive to the will of its public, and if you think its values ought to be imposed by editorial fiat, we would suggest finding a home in a country whose media structure is more in accord with your beliefs, say Musssolini's Italy. Furthermore, we don't actually know anything about Yemen.

Re: "THE PRODUCERS OF SESAME STREET WILL BURN IN EVERLASTING HELL"

from issue 9

To the Editors:

Obviously I couldn't agree more with your perspective on Sesame Street, which has done more lasting damage to the anti-ornithological cause than any other children's program.

> Imelda Mercator LOVING, VIRGINIA

TO THE EDITORS:

The persecution of Snuffleupagi is no fit subject I for jest. Does your frivolity know no bounds?

Natalie Peres (pronounecd "pears")

Wickham-upon-Mirth, United Kingdom

TO THE EDITORS:

Thad been led to believe that this was a periodical dedicated to contemporary philandering, of which I am a casual aficionado. Extremely disappointed with what came in the mail instead. Please cancel my subscription.

> In frustration, Rocky Ulynov Possum Breath, Montana

TO THE EDITORS:

You all call yourselves a "socialist" publication, but upon perusing your latest issue I could not find any in-depth features on the enduring lessons of the Spanish Civil War. If you wish to continue draping yourself in the flag of leftism, I ask that you immediately rectify this irresponsible oversight.

In solidarity and comradely disappointment, . Harold Luxemberg Brattleboro, VT

P.S. Repeated references to the Grundrisse would also be a welcome change.

C.A.: Harry, you have a lot to look forward to! Please see "Francoism & Neoliberalism: What The Difference Between the Young Marx and the Old Can Explain," forthcoming in our May/June issue. We think you'll find it a real thrill ride!

> QUESTIONS? COMMENTS? **QUILTRUMS?** Email us at:

letters@currentaffairs.org or write to: LETTERS DEPARTMENT CURRENT AFFAIRS P.O Box 441394 West Somerville, MA 02144

TAKE A MOMENT TO REMEMBER WHAT A HORRIBLE PERSON

"I don't care to discuss the alleged complaints American Indians have against this country. I believe, with good reason, the most unsympathetic Hollywood portrayal of Indians and what they did to the white man. They had no right to a country merely because they were born here and then acted like savages. The white man did not conquer this country..."

"The Arabs are one of the least developed cultures. They are typically nomads. Their culture is primitive, and they resent Israel because it's the sole beachhead of modern science and civilization on their continent. When you have civilized men fighting savages, you support the civilized men, no matter who they are."

Blimey, what a hateful psycho!

NEVER FORGET.



ISN'T IT SOMEWHAT

STRANGE







THAT EVERYONE ELSE
IS EXPERIENCING
CONSCIOUSNESS
JUST LIKE YOU ARE?

a message from



In which Belén Fernández pays a visit to Uzbekistan, absorbing the country's unusual mixture of historic beauty and authoritarian terror. Key insight: for a country that boils dissidents alive, it sure has a lot of sequins...



"I pondered what everyone in Uzbekistan must have done prior to the invention of the sequin..."

Luckily, a last-minute intervention by a Turkish friend resolved the matter—until I handed over my paperwork at the new Istanbul office and was told I could retrieve the visa in two days. Thus commenced a five-hour period of pathetic and hyperventilated entreaties to the consular staff, who eventually took pity on me and sent me on my way, 160-dollar visa in tow.

HEN I FINALLY ARRIVED TO TASHKENT ON October 20, I cleared customs without issue. My cab driver, although charging me possibly half the average monthly Uzbek salary to transport me to my hotel, kindly did me the favor of exchanging my dollars for me at the black market rate, which at the time was more than twice the official one. He parked on the side of the road, disappeared into an alley, and reappeared with a black plastic bag teeming with 5,000-som notes, each of them the equivalent of less than a dollar on the black market.

My hotel had the appearance of a cheerier version of a Soviet concrete block (until the sun stopped shining), and a sign in the lobby courteously informed guests that we were subject not only to continuous video surveillance, but audio, as well. Reassured, I headed out to explore the wide, tree-lined boulevards of the Uzbek capital and quickly learned a valuable local survival tip: Never assume that pedestrian walk signals and traffic lights are coordinated.

At a busy outdoor market, I bought a giant slab of onion bread from a woman with a wheelbarrow and gleefully set about calculating how many billions more slabs of onion bread my bag of som would buy. I made a note to purchase ceramics and sequined leggings with zippers on them prior to departing the country. I visited numerous parks and squares, among them one dedicated to the Mongol conqueror Tamerlane, whose claims to fame include having been born in the fourteenth century in territory that is now Uzbekistan and having casually engaged in mass decapitations. Tamerlane's prominent spot in the center of Tashkent had previously been occupied by a statue of Karl Marx, who was ousted during the de-Sovietization campaign.

The Tashkent metro system, meanwhile, was an attraction unto itself, with each station boasting its own unique décor. The styles ranged from elegant to discothequey to, for example, the Kosmonavtlar station, the walls of which featured large renderings of cosmonauts in space gear against a backdrop of decreasing shades of blue.

My excursions on the subway brought me into contact with a mainstay of the Uzbek landscape: the police. Generally positioned at both the street entrance to each subway stop and at the turnstiles underground, they looked in bags, waved metal detectors, and never failed to request my passport as well as the slip of paper from the hotel certifying that my presence in the country had been registered with the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The novelty of this process wore off after the first several instances. On a certain occasion the slip was deemed insufficient and one of three police officers present went off to phone the hotel while the other two endeavored to establish, in pidgin English, why a woman of my age had not yet reproduced. On the subway platforms, station guards resembling flight attendants thwarted my attempt to photograph the cosmonauts.

Following two nights in Tashkent I took the train to the ancient Silk Road gem of Samarkand, less than four hours away. In my second-class seat next to an old woman with an oversized bottle of soda and an apple that she diligently polished and gave to me, I learned that A) it was possible to half-communicate with many Uzbeks in Turkish, and B) there are people in this world with tattooed unibrows.

My bed and breakfast in Samarkand was located a stone's throw from the mausoleum of Tamerlane, at which I spent much time staring as though on some pleasant hallucinogen. The rest of the town elicited the same effect. I won't feign any intimacy with the architectural lexicon, but I can tell you there were mosques, domes, glazed tiles, mosaics, and lots of blue and turquoise. My early-morning solo tour of Registan Square—an otherworldly complex of madrassas and courtyards to which I gained off-hours access via a bribe to the policeman on duty—was interrupted only when that same policeman accosted me in a corner and asked me to exchange dollars for him.

A bit outside the city were the remains of the observatory built by the fifteenth-century ruler-astronomer Ulugbek. At the accompanying museum was a photograph of schoolchildren visiting the place, with a quote from Islam Karimov helpfully translated into English: "Our children should be more stronger, better educated, wiser and certainly more happy than we are." Indeed, Karimov's own contributions to the youth happiness quotient in Uzbekistan are second to none; what kid wouldn't love to



participate in slave labor during the annual cotton harvest? (Granted, international pressure has reportedly caused the Uzbek regime to curtail its practice of dispatching of children into the cotton fields. They're still available for work in other fields, but the cotton mobilization now mainly targets doctors, teachers, older students, and other people who clearly have nothing else to do with their time.)

T SAMARKAND'S SIAB BAZAAR, I ACQUIRED THREE different kinds of almonds plus one of the more ingenious inventions of our time: an entirely plastic mini-corkscrew gifted to me by the proprietor of a liquor shop who was apparently moved by my disproportionate reaction to it. I felt guilty at having cost him this little treasure—a godsend for anyone trying to open duty free wine in an airport bathroom—before realizing that every bottle of wine was sold with a mini-corkscrew attached.

Negotiating in Turkish, I obtained a bottle of vodka for four dollars (one of the pricier options) and a bottle of Uzbek wine for a dollar and a half, which the man assured me was not sweet (it was). The wine and corkscrew came with me on my excursion to the local cemetery, where photographic reproductions of the deceased were

emblazoned on tombstones of varying shapes and sizes. Female workers with buckets of water cleaned the graves and chatted, Uzbek visitors strolled about in sparkly two-piece sets, and I pondered what everyone in Uzbekistan must have done prior to the invention of the sequin.

The graveyard turned out to be more expansive than I thought, and three-fourths of a bottle of wine later—politely concealed in a water bottle—I was lost. Fortunately, as there was still one-fourth remaining, there was no cause for alarm.

When I eventually extricated myself, I visited the Shah-i-Zinda necropolis, a strip of exquisite mausoleums abutting the graveyard where the list of rules in English warned that it was a "sin" to beg the saints for forgiveness during the visit, to make a sacrifice, or to leave money on the tombs. The last of these rules, at least, had been wantonly violated, and a man made periodic rounds to collect the accumulated bills.

After Samarkand it was back on the train to Bukhara, the next Silk Road outpost, where I engaged in similar architectural gawking and ended up at the impromptu birthday party of a Tajik Uzbek named Sharif, who called me "Beeline" and couldn't figure out why I was named after a Russian mobile phone company. The encounter began on the rundown patio



of a small restaurant not far from Bukhara's massive fortress, where Sharif and companions invited me to join their table for tea and a snack. The snack evolved into fish and shashlik—skewered meat—and what was meant to be one bottle of birthday vodka quickly multiplied into four, while the number of vodka drinkers remained the same (three). I was assisted in my attempt to initiate an impromptu dance party on the patio by Sharif's taxi driver friend, who blasted tunes like "In The Army Now" from his cab. He used that same cab to cart me back to my hotel when by 5 p.m. I had become largely unresponsive to environmental stimuli.

I arrived at my hotel, the Vella Elegant, to find that it was smack in front of a square organized around a fountain and a horse-mounted statue of Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty who, like Tamerlane, had catapulted into the realm of Uzbek stardom following the Soviet collapse. This was clearly Babur Square, I told myself, and I set about having deep and ironic thoughts re: the Uzbek wedding parties now being happily photographed in front of the fountain.

After I had inspected the square from every angle, I went to the bread market, overdosed on its wares, and explored a street teeming with shops specializing in U.S. Green Card

"The State Department has indeed proven itself most adept at typing up scathing critiques of the Uzbek government... but in person, the U.S. approach is rather more schizophrenic."

Had I wanted to continue my Silk Road tour, I would have proceeded west toward the Kyzylkum desert and the city of Khiva. Instead, I took a seven-hour train ride back to Tashkent and then a seven-hour shared taxi ride further east to the city of Andijan in the Ferghana Valley, near the border with Kyrgyzstan. As I was the only female in the car, I got the front seat; this was unfortunate for the man in the back, whose incessant snacking while on winding mountain passes resulted in our having to make several vomit breaks. Other stops took place at government checkpoints, where my passport and I were hauled out for inspection, and at roadside shacks selling warm bread, balls of tooth-shatteringly hard cheese, and other crucial survival items.

I also became acquainted with Uzbek gas station etiquette, whereby all passengers alight from the vehicle outside the station entrance and are retrieved at the exit. After noting the presence of enormous methane gas cylinders in the trunks of cars, I wondered if the routine was simply meant to minimize collateral damage in the event of an explosion.

Unlike Samarkand and Bukhara, Andijan is known for its more recent history—and one incident in particular. In 2005, Uzbek security forces in Babur Square opened fire on demonstrators, the vast majority of them unarmed, who were protesting general injustice and specifically the arrest of 23 local businessmen on charges of Islamic extremism. The death count, according to the government, was 187. According to others, it was up to a thousand. Since then, the state has changed its mind and made it clear that the Andijan massacre was Something That Didn't Happen.

application photos. At a bookstore I found posters of a semismiling President Karimov and posters teaching children the English words for professions like "driver" and "militarian." I walked more than an hour to the old part of town and was force-fed more bread along the way by someone overjoyed to hear I was American.

Back at my hotel, I conducted a brave investigation into internet censorship: I googled the words "Andijan massacre." To my surprise, I wasn't Tasered by some unseen force and was instead able to open every link I clicked—including one that led to pictures of Babur Square, which, as it turned out, was not the square in front of the Vella Elegant, although it contained the very same horse-mounted statue..

I got in a cab and asked to be taken to the real Babur Square, which was now sans Babur statue. Some wild gesticulations by the cab driver and a phone call to his English-speaking friend confirmed my suspicions: the monument had been moved sometime after 2005.

While in Andijan I learned that U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry was also in Uzbekistan, having descended upon Samarkand for meetings with Karimov and the foreign ministers of the five Central Asian states. A Reuters article described one scene:

"As security men starting ushering reporters out of the room, one American reporter shouted a question to Karimov about the U.S. State Department's own scathing critique of his human rights record. Karimov ignored the query. Kerry began responding but the reporter was pushed out of the room before he finished."

HE STATE DEPARTMENT HAS INDEED PROVEN ITSELF most adept at typing up scathing critiques of the Uzbek government's "endemic" corruption and reliance on torture, arbitrary arrests, and other varieties of freedom-quashing behavior (publicly insulting the president, for example, can get you up to five years behind bars). But in person, the U.S. approach is rather more schizophrenic. A 2005 New York Times dispatch—incidentally published 12 days before the Andijan massacre—offered a blow-by-blow of foreign policy dealings with Uzbekistan since 2001, which I'll take the liberty of summarizing as follows:

1. Seven months before 9/11, State Department issues human rights report on Uzbekistan amounting to "litany of horrors."

2. Immediately after 9/11, U.S. and Uzbekistan jump into War on Terror bed together. U.S. sets up military base on Uzbek territory near border with Afghanistan and proceeds to hurl money at Uzbek government. George Bush fêtes Karimov at White House. State Department continues to report on disastrous human rights situation.

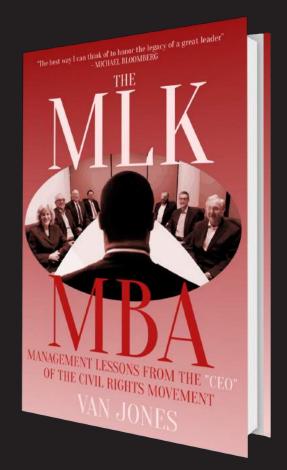
3. Suicide bombings in Tashkent. Uzbek government embarks on anti-Islamic crackdown. State Department announces it's cutting \$18 million in aid due to human rights circumstances; Pentagon announces it's increasing aid by \$21 million.

4. Intelligence officials confirm Uzbekistan's service as a CIA rendition destination. (Moral of the story: torturers come in handy.)

Following Western criticism of the assault in Andijan, Karimov evicted the Americans from their base. But the breakup was hardly definitive. Now, with so many new and improved threats emanating from the region—ISIS! Russia!—Uzbekistan is back in the game. And, hey, things are already looking up on the human rights front: shortly after I left the country in November, one of Uzbekistan's many thousands of political prisoners was released from jail. Imprisoned in 1994 for what was supposed to be a nine-year stint, Murod Juraev saw his term repeatedly extended for offenses such as "peeling carrots incorrectly." Of course, the return of Uzbekistan to the frontlines of the war on terror paves the way for mass arrests under the pretense of fighting ISIS.

On the domestic frontlines, meanwhile, Uzbekistan's first daughter Gulnara remains under house arrest, but I dare say the lyrics of her pop star alter ego Googoosha ring eternal: "You look fine, but what do you hide in your soul?"

"I have a dream that one day my four little children will be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their portfolios..."



"Justice is really just another word for innovation. MLK was disrupting racism, and I'm doing the same for high-speed private transit systems."

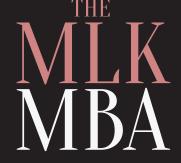
- ELON MUSK

"Nobody knew the meaning of growth better than MLK. He was the 'king' of successful organizational strategies."

- LARRY SUMMERS

"Business is the art of persuasion, and the Civil Rights movement was about persuading America to adopt a new paradigm."

- PETER THIEL







The Rise of the RUTH BADER GINSBURG Gult

How a wizened middle-of-the-road jurist became a T-shirt icon for milennial feminists

by David Kinder

Notorious RBG: The Life and Times of Ruth Bader Ginsburg

by Irin Carmon & Shana Knizhnik, Dey Street Books, 240pp., \$19.99

he past two years have seen an explosion of pop culture affection for 82-year-old Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, much of it under the moniker "Notorious RBG." The name is a riff on "Notorious BIG," one of the most celebrated rappers of all time, and now adorns t-shirts, hoodies, and a popular Tumblr page. A fiery Ginsburg caricature has been played on Saturday Night Live, an opera has been written about her, and Warholian screen prints depict her regal visage complete with crown and jabot. After spending several decades quietly inhabiting the minor limelight afforded to high-ranking American jurists, Ginsburg has

suddenly found herself an icon.

Now Irin Carmon and Shana Knizhnik have written an entire book based on the "Notorious RBG" sobriquet, a curious collection of biography, excerpts from Supreme Court opinions, cartoons, and a recipe for pork loin from the Justice's late husband. The book does not attempt to grapple with why this surge of Ginsburg-mania has come about—it is thoroughly an example of the phenomenon rather than an attempt to analyze it. But as the most fully-realized embodiment of the trend, Notorious RBG is a helpful window into Ruth Bader Ginsburg's journey from Supreme Court Justice to viral meme.

Calling the book a hagiography could hardly offend its authors—most biographies don't conclude their introduction with "We are frankly in awe of what we've learned about her, and we're pretty excited to share it with you." Adoration oozes from the page with every tidbit and factoid the authors giddily present. So we learn that Justice Ginsburg began smoking because she was brave. When she argued before a case before an unusually quiet Supreme Court, the authors infer that she stunned the nine Justices into silence.

This incessant lionizing can border on the embarrassing, even in its most lighthearted and transparent form. The authors tell the (possibly apocryphal) story of Justice Ginsberg rejecting an applicant for a clerkship who had included an error in his application with a personal letter telling him to "note the typo." Carmon and Knizhnik see this as a charming example of Ginsburg's attention to detail. Readers may not find it quite so endearing to see one of the country's most powerful people going out of her way to pointlessly humiliate a young job applicant.

The desire to keep the book reverential forces the authors into some contradictory postures, as *Notorious RBG* alternates between referring to the Justice, admiringly, as a radical with referring to her, also admiringly, as a center-left pragmatist. Ginsburg must be faultless, thus she is both stubborn and diplomatic, both activist and restrained, both moderate and audacious.

But when you get down to it, the fundamental premise of the pop culture adulation for Ginsburg is that she is a headstrong liberal firebrand. Of course, much of the ordinary work of a Supreme Court justice consists of painstakingly adjudicating mundane interpretive questions, such as deciding what standard of review to apply in evaluating administrative determinations of the definition of "U.S. waters." (see *United States Army Corps of Engineers v. Hawkes Co., Inc.*) But such matters leave little

room for gutsy feminist ass-kicking, and elucidating the federal procedure controversies of the day does not earn one's face on

Amy Schumer's tank top.

Making an activist hero out of an administrative functionary like a Supreme Court Justice was therefore always going to require a bit of distortion. Yet a reader of *Notorious RBG* (even after using the book to prepare a delicious pork loin) might be left wondering whether the characterization of Ginsburg as a fearless champion of progressive principles can be defended, even by the relaxed standards necessary for evaluating Justices.

HE TASK OF GLORIFYING GINSBURG IS MADE EASIER IF ONE CONflates her early career as a litigator with her later tenure as a justice. For despite *Notorious RBG*'s portrayal of Ginsburg's life and work as a unified package, there are distinctly different phases, and it's difficult to appreciate Ginsburg's complexity and evolution without separating the 30-something feminist dynamo from the 70-something robed bureaucrat.

In her early years, Ruth Bader Ginsburg was a spectacular law student in the face of rampant sexism and personal challenges. She became a formidable civil rights lawyer, dedicating her career to eradicating laws that discriminated on the basis of gender. Her use

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of male plaintiffs to demonstrate how sex-based classifications harmed men and women alike was shrewd strategy and smart politics. If you were a young, fiery liberal looking for a role model, you could do worse than Ruth Bader Ginsburg, civil rights lawyer.

Yet the recent outpouring of ardor has celebrated not just this period, but her time the court as well, and Justice Ginsburg is a different story. Empirical measurements of ideology confirm the eye test: Ginsburg is a center-left Justice roughly in line with President Obama's two appointees and Stephen Breyer. This gang is less liberal than the recently retired John Paul Stevens (appointed

by Republican President Gerald Ford) and miles to the right of recent justices Thurgood Marshall and William Brennan. Of course, in today's court, which contains four of the most conservative justices of the last century, that still makes them the left flank. But even measured against her decidedly non-radical judicial peers, Ginsburg is a cautious centrist. Thus while she might maintain broadly progressive sympathies, she is equally willing to allow the government to threaten the withdrawl of funding in order to punish universities that ban discriminatory job recruitment by the military (Rumsfeld v. Forum for Academic & Institutional Rights, Inc.) or to rule against paying overtime to Amazon warehouse workers (as in Integrity Staffing Solutions v. Busk).

Ginsburg's liberal supporters—whose raves fill Notorious RBG portray her record differently. Forced to accept that her voting pattern is nothing like that of Thurgood Marshall or legendary radical William O. Douglas (who fashioned a constitutional right to birth control out of thin air, and famously argued that trees had the right to be represented in court), they treat her moderation as cunning. The law, after all, requires five votes to change, not one. What looks on an empiricist's scatterplot like a fainthearted liberal, they argue, is instead a practical coalition builder. Ginsburg is merely

This argument is too clever by half. One does not need to be meek and compromising to advance one's legal views. Justice Scalia, Ginsburg's best friend on the court, has not let his successful coalition building prevent him from being an outspoken, even crude conservative. Scalia has stated that he writes his dissents for the law students, and over the course of his tenure the Court has gradually slid rightward to join him on several important issues. The ability of Supreme Court justices to set agendas through nonbinding rhetoric is one of their most potent.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg undoubtedly understands this, and has given her fair share of blistering dissents. But on the issues where she is silent, her abstention from controversy can be difficult to defend. Where criminal justice is concerned, for example, she has trailed her colleagues in recognizing the stakes, and may have done real harm to large numbers of vulnerable people through her refusal to engage.

ROLONGED SOLITARY CONFINEMENT, THE PRACTICE OF LOCKING one or two people in a small area without meaningful social contact for over twenty-two hours per day for long periods of time, is a widespread practice in American prisons. This starvation of social contact is devastating to the mental and physical health of people in solitary. For decades, psychologists have considered the practice so damaging as to constitute torture.

In 2009, the American cultural elite caught on to the practice's horrors in the typical way: The New Yorker published a thorough, clinical condemnation of solitary confinement by its resident medical explainer Atul Gawande. If the scientific consensus that the practice constituted torture was not enough to end the practice, one might imagine the burst of outrage the article provoked to have finished it off. Even a basic syllogism seems like it should have led the

> courts to eradicate long-term solitary confinement for good: the practice is torture; torturing people violates the Constitution; the practice violates the Constitution.

Not so. Although a handful of lower court cases in recent years have found solitary confinement unconstitutional when applied to certain particularly vulnerable groups such as the seriously mentally ill, the law has lagged behind the science by not mandating the practice's abolition.

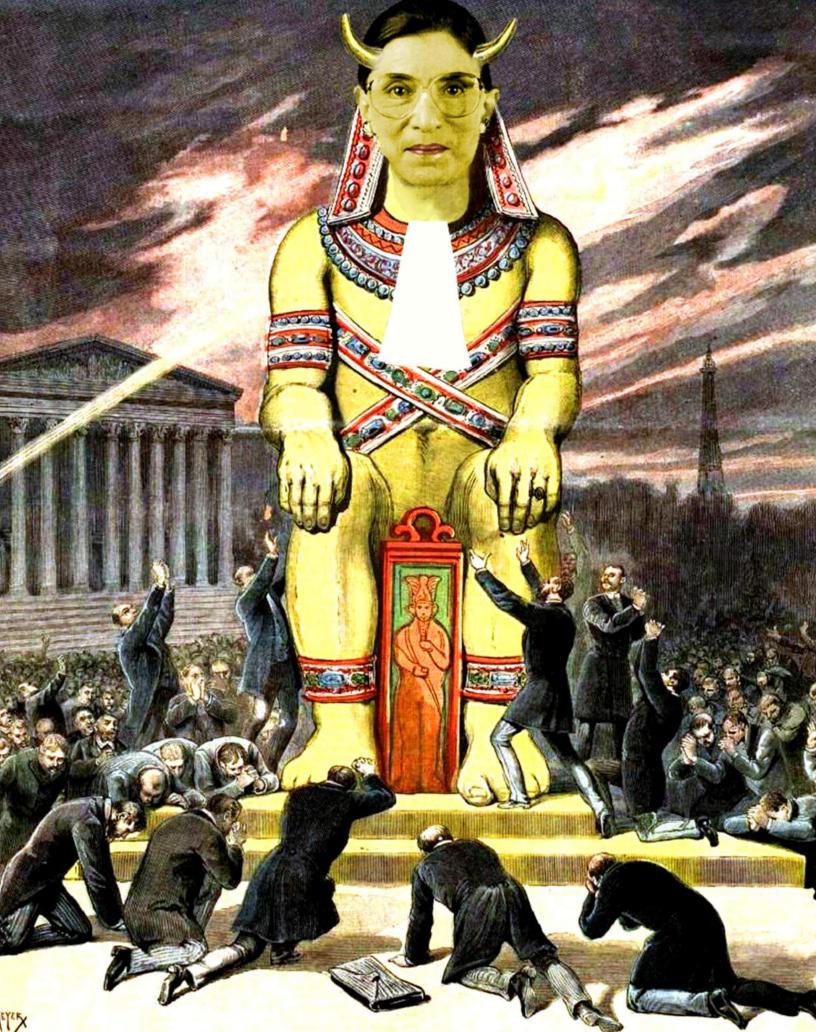
Last term, in the mostly unrelated case of Davis v. Ayala, Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote a lengthy concurrence condemning solitary

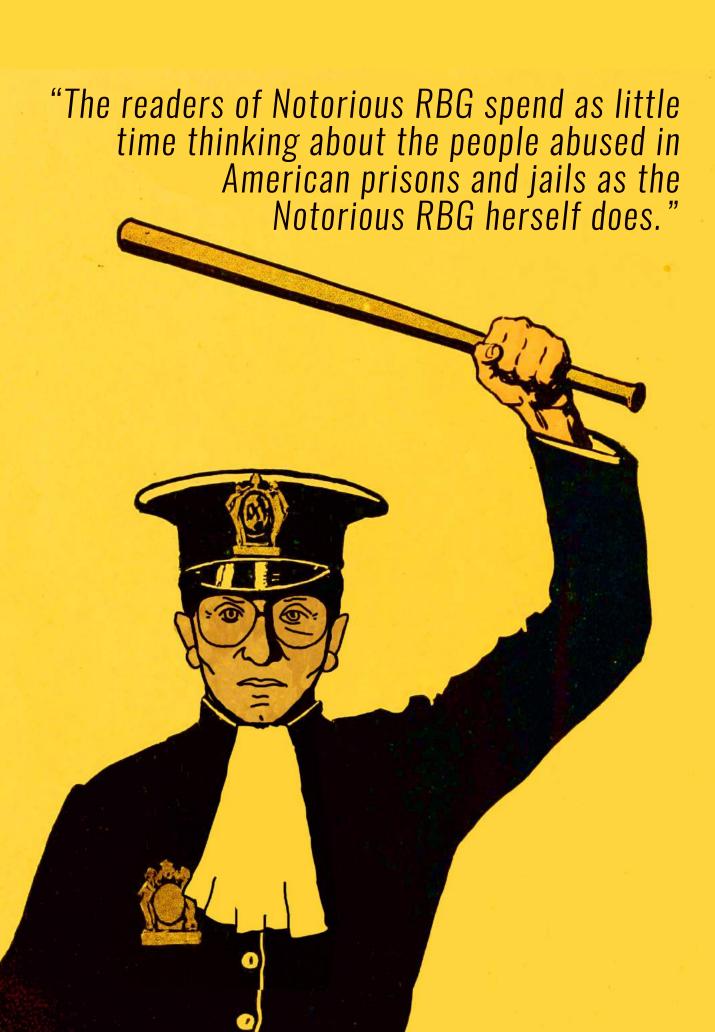
confinement. He described the new and growing awareness that solitary confinement caused massive harm and closed by inviting a challenge to the practice: "In a case that presented the issue, the judiciary may be required, within its proper jurisdiction and authority, to determine whether workable alternative systems for long-term confinement exist, and, if so, whether a correctional system should be required to adopt them." Most notably, Justice Kennedy made no reference to any particularly vulnerable group, instead suggesting that long-term solitary confinement may be unconstitutional for all. Justice Ginsburg did not join the concurrence.

The reaction to Justice Kennedy was significant. The New York Times dedicated an editorial to the concurrence and the Los Angeles Times wrote a story on it. Lower courts have already begun quoting Justice Kennedy's language when discussing cases on solitary confinement. When long-term solitary confinement is abolished, Justice Kennedy's concurrence will appear in the history.

The example, in which Ginsburg sat out an opportunity to condemn the brutal and illegal conditions of America's most marginalized people, is not trivial. Mass incarceration and the reluctance of the federal judiciary to check it are major stories of our time. The number of people we send to prison, the length of time they serve there, and the conditions in which they live are collectively among the country's biggest civil rights disasters. They're also among the few social problems that the Court is actually well-positioned to do something about. Constitutional litigating is generally a feeble means of repairing disastrous public policies, but it should be perfectly designed to prohibit government officials from shooting children in public parks, raping adults in American jails, and torturing people in prison through the use of long-term solitary confinement.

Alas, the Supreme Court has not seen fit to give the Constitution





such a reading, and Justice Ginsburg has been as much a bystander as many of her peers on the Court. Take just the last few terms. In *Heien v. North Carolina*, the court held that the police may justifiably pull over cars if they believe they are violating the law even if the police are misunderstanding the law, so long as the mistake was reasonable. In *Taylor v. Barkes*, the Court held that the family of a suicidal man who was jailed and then killed himself could not sue the jail for failing to implement anti-suicide measures. In *Plumhoff v. Rickard*, the court held that the family of two men could not sue the police after they had shot and killed them for fleeing a police stop. Ginsburg joined the opinion in every case.

In fact, she has gone so far as to join the conservatives on criminal justice, even when all of her fellow liberals have sided with a criminal defendant. In *Samson v. California*, the Court decided the issue of whether police could conduct warrantless searches of parolees merely because they were on parole. Instead of joining the liberal dissenters, Ginsburg signed onto Clarence Thomas's majority

opinion in favor of the police.

In January, the Court issued its opinion in the case of *Kansas v. Carr.* The Kansas Supreme Court had overturned a pair of death sentences, on the grounds that the defendants' Eighth Amendment rights had been violated in the instructions given to the jury. The U.S. Supremes swooped in, informing Kansas that it had made a mistake; nobody's Eighth Amendment rights had been violated, thus the defendants ought to have continued unimpeded along the path toward execution. The Court's decision was 8-1, the lone dissenter being Sonia Sotomayor. Ginsburg put her name on Justice Scalia's majority opinion instead.

T WAS NO RANDOM CHANCE THAT MADE JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR the particular dissenter. Since her appointment in 2009, Sotomayor has emerged as a strong opponent of the more egregiously inhumane aspects of American criminal justice. She has repeatedly taken on all eight of her colleagues; last year she lambasted them for shielding a police officer from legal liability for shooting a man during a high-speed chase. Sotomayor wrote that by "sanctioning a 'shoot first, think later' approach to policing, the Court renders the protections of the Fourth Amendment hollow." The other justices, including Ginsburg, felt the case so unimportant that they dispensed of it with a brief, unsigned opinion.

During her time on the court, Sotomayor has been recognized as making a conscious effort to educate her fellow justices and the American public about issues of race and criminal justice. Writing in *The New Republic*, David Fontana has said that Sotomayor's spirited fight against racism makes her a "national treasure," and that "Sotomayor, uniquely among recent liberal justices, has used her public appearances to effectively communicate her liberal perspective on the constitution to regular members of the public, in addition to legal and academic elites." Importantly, Sotomayor also sees herself as an "outsider," uncomfortable with the pomp and affectation of her eight judicial brethren.

In *Slate*, Mark Joseph Stern contrasted Sotomayor's perceptiveness about police and prisons issues with Ginsburg's indifference: "When it comes to understanding the systemic flaws and violent behavior of America's criminal justice system, there's no one quite like Justice Sonia Sotomayor...Sorry, Notorious R.B.G. groupies, but [Ruth Bader Ginsburg] has a bit of a law-and-order streak." (This despite Sotomayor being an ex-prosecutor, while Ginsburg

worked for the ACLU.)

Carmon and Knizhnik discuss none of this, instead treating as an implicit assumption that Ginsburg's aggressive battle for justice extends from gender equality to fighting racism. Of course, *Notorious RBG* is not obligated to interrogate every facet of her career, and Ginsburg need not be perfect to be worthy of admiration. But the assumption that she is a role model on racial inequality is not on an ancillary question. Racial inequality is a defining feature of American life and a national disgrace. Racial animus is also the bedrock of mass incarceration, which erupted partially on Ginsburg's watch and which she has expressed little interest in attempting to eliminate.

ARMON AND KNIZHNIK MUST SURELY BE AWARE OF THIS. After all, the very opening scene of *Notorious RBG* depicts Ginsburg reading her fiery dissent in *Shelby County v. Holder*, an important voting rights case in which the court implied that Black voters in the South no longer needed Congress's protection from their states' efforts at disenfranchising them. (The intervening years have proved the Court wrong, if there was ever any question.) The Court, *Notorious RBG* notes, was "threatening the progress for which she had fought so hard." As for Ginsburg, "when the work is justice, she has every intention to see it to the end. RBG has always been about doing the work." In the lengthy discussion of her career to follow, one might therefore expect to read about Ginsburg fighting so hard for progress in the eradication of racism; doing the work; seeing it to the end.

Notorious RBG barely mentions race again. The authors seem to believe that because of Ginsburg's many accomplishments fighting for women's rights, we can safely assume that she was a force for good in the fight against racism without considering the evidence.

In fact, one of *Notorious RBG*'s few mentions of race is particularly strange. In the book's discussion of *Bush v. Gore*, the contentious decision that decided the 2000 presidential election, the authors mention that Ginsburg's draft of her dissent had a footnote alluding to the possible suppression of Black voters in Florida. Justice Scalia purportedly responded to this draft by flying into a rage, telling Ginsburg that she was using "Al Sharpton tactics." Ginsburg removed the footnote before it saw the light of day.

This anecdote's inclusion in the book is baffling. *Notorious RBG* unrepentantly fawns over Ginsburg as a civil rights hero. Yet in this story, Ginsburg contemplates calling attention to straightforward, anti-Black racism in the most facile of ways. But when her friend Justice Scalia plucks an argument straight from right-wing talk radio to shame her out of doing so, Ginsburg instantly capitulates.

Some commitment to racial equality.

Ginsburg's legendary chumminess with the late Justice Scalia should be another red flag in itself. Here was a man openly (and brashly) against every value Ginsburg supposedly holds. He suggested that affirmative action may be keeping African Americans from attending the "slower-tracked" schools where they belong. He would have seen *Roe v. Wade* overturned, and the reproductive rights Ginsburg fought for completely stripped. He called the Voting Rights Act a "racial entitlement" and consistently defended the legitimacy of anti-gay prejudice. Not the sort of character one would expect Ginsburg to attend the opera with.

Yet somehow these two opposites managed to get along and maintain mutual respect and good humor, and a legendary extrajudicial friendship. How? On the one hand, it seems a charming parable about the setting aside of differences and the embracing of common ground. But it's also odd that anyone who takes their values seriously could simply "set aside" the fact that, by their own metric, their friend was one of the most powerful enforcers of systematized bigotry and repression in the country. (What can you say? "Oh, that was just his day job"?) Now, perhaps Ginsburg would reject that description of Scalia's position. But if you think the rights of black and gay people are of major moral consequence, and you think Scalia's work profoundly undermined those rights, it's difficult to escape the conclusion that this was not someone you ought to regularly be taking to dinner.

The perverse Scalia/Ginsburg friendship speaks to a disturbing trait shared by both the Court itself and the specific *Notorious RBG* approach to understanding it. This is the tendency to become wrapped up in the genteel, sober, ritualized world of the Court's chambers, and forget the human consequences of the work that is done there. A torture victim would not so easily be able to compartmentalize Scalia's repeated defenses of torture. A gay or trans person might have had a difficult time going out and watching Scalia eat risotto and tell jokes, knowing the world he would build for them if he could. During Scalia and Ginsburg's occasional public appearances together, Scalia usually cracked his line "What's not to like [about her]? ... Except her views on the law." Well hah, hah. Yet

"her views on law" embody her fundamental conception of justice and morality (at least ostensibly). Only in the detached and rarified world of the Court could someone accept such a remark as a gentle joke among colleagues rather than a nasty dismissal of everything one holds dear, including the basic rights of women.

N 2011, SEVERAL PUBLIC FIGURES, INCLUDING HARVARD LAW Professor Randall Kennedy, urged Justice Ginsburg retire while she could be sure that President Obama could pick her successor. Ginsburg was seventy-eight and had survived cancer twice. (Kennedy also called for the retirement of the only slightly-younger Stephen Breyer.) Ginsburg refused to pay any heed to the suggestion, and appears determined to remain on the Court until it pleases her to depart. (With Republicans now firmly committed to judicial obstructionism, it may even be too late fo her to change her mind and assure an Obamanominated successor.) Notorious RBG addresses this controversy in its introduction, and the response is worth considering in full:

Historically, one way women have lost power is by being nudged out the door to make room for someone else. Not long before pop culture discovered RBG, liberal law professors and commentators began telling her the best thing she could do for what she cared about was to quit, so that President Barack Obama could appoint a successor. RBG, ardently devoted to her job, has mostly brushed that dirt off her shoulder. Her refusal to meekly shuffle off the stage has been another public, high-stakes

act of defiance.

It should first be noted that "women" as a whole would are unlikely to lose any power by Ginsburg's retirement; it is widely assumed that any selection Obama would make to replace Ginsburg would be a woman. But other contemporaneous responses to the call to retire made more sophisticated claims that they whiffed of sexism. Emily Bazelon wrote in Slate that since Ginsburg is "a small, slender woman who speaks in low tones and looks like a bird... people tend to assume she is frail when in fact she is anything but." This point is important. Even those of us who find excellent, logical reasons to urge Ginsburg to retire should concede that research on implicit bias makes those excellent, logical reasons inherently suspect. When they happen to coincide with the outcome that traditional gender norms or racial animus would suggest—such as urging a slight woman to step down from her powerful position because she is too frailalarm bells should go off.

Yet the main argument falls to bits upon a gentle prodding. First, the charge of sexism is hard to maintain so long as one equally favors the retirement of the similarly senescent Justice Breyer. (Ageism may be another matter, though it should hardly be unduly discriminatory to point out that the elderly have a noticeable tendency to suddenly expire.) Second, it's very strange indeed to defend against the sexism experienced by Ginsburg without weighing it against the sexism experienced by the 162 million other women who live in the United States and have to live with the Supreme Court's rulings. The authors of Notorious RBG must find important the actual work the Supreme Court does—they wrote a whole book about a Supreme Court justice! Yet they do not even engage with the argument that Justice Ginsburg is actually putting the rights of people at risk by entering her mid-eighties on a Supreme Court with four pathologically conservative justices, all salivating at the prospect of recruiting a fifth and restoring the toxic ideological configuration of the Scalia years. Justice Ginsburg's "public, high-stakes act of defiance" may be gratifying and symbolically powerful, but if the end result is the reversal of *Roe*, can a victory for feminism truly be claimed? (In fact, replacing Ginsburg might actually help women's rights, at least the rights of women prisoners, if someone more Sotomayor-ish were given the post.)

One of the authors' favored metaphors can explain how they so blithely dismissed the merits of allowing President Obama to pick Ginsburg's successor: that of the court as "stage." Ginsburg refused "to meekly shuffle off the stage." It's a word commonly used in descriptions of Supreme Court proceedings. Indeed, Notorious RBG on its opening page notes that "What happens inside the hushed chamber is pure theater." No, it is not. It may be theatrical, but very few of your ordinary community stage productions retain

the power to impose or revoke the death penalty.

A less glib reply to the pro-retirement argument came from ex-New York Times court-watcher Linda Greenhouse. Greenhouse explained Ginsburg's intransigence thusly:

"I think from her perspective she is taking a long view of history, not a case by case one, or a term by term one... I think she feels that it belittles and diminishes the court to have retirements so obviously timed for political reasons."

There, in a nutshell, is the difference between Ginsburg and the people her work affects: she and her followers can afford to take the long view, to see political fights as important without seeing them as an end-all, be-all struggle. From the tables of the Supreme Court cafeteria or the leather chairs of one's chambers, lofty abstractions like "the preservation of judicial dignity" can appear to carry equal weight to questions of actual human consequences. One's fellow justices can be droll and amiable drinking companions, even if they wouldn't bat an eyelid at seeing homosexuals put in prison. And "political reasons" can appear as something tawdry and unbecoming, even though they refer to matters like "keeping children from being put in solitary confinement" and "making sure colleges don't exclude black people." What a luxury it surely is to be able to relax and take "the long view" of these questions, a luxury unshared by the victims of the Court's judgments.

So one must adopt a somewhat cynical hypothesis as to why this middle-of-the-road Justice is the object of the cartoons, the hoodies, and this coffee table ode: the readers of Notorious *RBG* spend as little time thinking about the people abused in American prisons and jails as the Notorious RBG herself does. Elsewhere, people in America's worst prisons, their families, and their advocates have to hope that either a Democrat will win the 2016 presidential election or that Justice Ginsburg will make it to 87 in good health. If neither come to pass, thousands of additional people may be assaulted, raped, or killed in American prisons and jails, and it's likely that most of the people wearing "Notorious ŔBG" paraphernalia will never know their names.��



ANNALS OF MEDIA VILLAIN

Department of Harangue

MAY WE VENTURE THAT **one possible solution** could be to not WRITE ARTICLES ABOUT YOUR TWITTER ACCOUNT IN THE FIRST PLACE?

acknowledgment of one's own barbarous acts does not thereby make such acts unbarbarous. In fact, the opposite is the case: if one is aware that one is committing wrongdoing, the obligation to cease it is all the greater. It is a lesson that Annie Lowrey and Abraham Riesman of New York Magazine would do well to contemplate. A recent item in that publication's Intelligencer section, entitled "Good-bye to All That Twitter," featured the pair interviewing one another at prodigious length about their decision to close their Twitter accounts.

ERE IS A SIMPLE TRUTH THAT OUGHT NEVER NEED REITERATING:

Now, as we all know, such an interview is a worthless piece of shallow-minded navel-gazing. Nobody should wish to read a multi-thousand word dialogue announcing and reflecting upon these two writers' reasons for leaving Twitter. Mr. Riesman's four-point set of self-imposed rules for his "exile" (in the course of the elaboration of which he admits that he does, in fact, still regularly check Twitter despite not "using" it) is a likely candidate for the least valuable piece of information in the cosmos. It is difficult to think of a single human being who would benefit from Ms. Lowrey's lengthy analysis of the roots of her enjoyment of Twitter, and her

description of the other apps and messaging services she uses and how she uses them.

It is obvious, then, that this piece of writing is of no social benefit, and that the persons responsible for it ought to be ejected permanently from the profession. At the very least, they should become detested laughingstocks among their peers. Yet the most galling fact of this affair is not that this colossally self-absorbed piece of elite media drivel has been produced, but that its producers are *fully aware* of what a colossal piece of self-absorbed media drivel it truly is. At the opening of their discussion, Annie and Abe unreservedly confess the indefensibility of what they are about to do:

AR: I am fully aware of how insane this discussion must sound to any sane human being. Twitter is such a microscopic part of the human experience, and I suffered no grievous trauma there, so why have I bothered to think about my relationship to it so much? I'm not sure I have the answers, but let's give it a shot.

AL: One hundred percent agreed on the insanity of this discussion. I have rarely spent so much time contemplating my own navel.

Here we find the true horror of the thing: these people are under no illusion about what they are doing. They admit that they are spending their time witlessly examining one another's navels, that they are cluttering up the website of a major magazine with bourgeois masturbatory narcissism, that they are being paid to burble interminable frivolous horse manure. And yet they proceed to do it anyway.

Each writer is aware that to use "exile" in reference to disabling one's Twitter account is a disgusting affront to expelled dissidents, that it is fatuous to compare the absence of Twitter in one's life to the Obama administration's efforts to end the recession. Yet they believe that by acknowledging the glib superficiality of their position, they somehow anticipate and forestall criticism of it.

Not so! Knowledge of atrocities confers greater, not lesser responsibility to end them. And when one says, "God, this is such a selfish, privileged thing to do, right?" one is not obligated to say "Yeah, haha, we kind of suck right now." The correct reply is "Then we must cease it immediately and become good people instead of bad ones."
"Hah, this article I'm writing is so self-absorbed and pointless." "Then you

ought to stop writing it."

You're not going to get away with this, you two. When one confesses to a murder, the police do not say "Well, the important thing is that you *know* it was wrong" and send one on one's way. The self-deprecating asshole is not thereby not an asshole.

And yet, A&A: that does not mean there is no hope for your eventual redemption. Annie! Abraham! You are journalists, are you not? Go and find some things out! Track down some wrongdoing, open some people's eyes. Else what are you for? Why are you doing this? And don't you dare reply "Hah, yeah, I know, I know." Rhetorical self-flagellation cannot exonerate you now. Your only hope for salvation is to leave New York forever and never to write like this again.

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Such Miserable Times as These

HE CURRENT AFFAIRS BOOK of the Good Life has the following to say on the

subject of newspapers:
Reading the newspaper
is an activity best avoided.
Every moment spent reading the news is a moment
not spent doing something
far more productive, like
building a sandcastle, icing
a multi-layered cake, saying

hello to a vicar, sampling an array of unusual cheeses, or masturbating quietly in a dark place. The illusion about reading newspapers is that it makes you smarter. In fact, the opposite is true. The reading of newspapers has a marked tendency to turn one into the sort of creature who finds primary elections interesting and thinks minor D.C. pundits are significant enough to be infuriated at.

Harsh words indeed, but difficult to dismiss coming from such a highly-esteemed source.

And indeed, upon a close read of the morning papers, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the only good reason not to finally shutter and dismantle the entire creaking *New York Times* apparatus is that it would leave *Current Affairs* with some empty page space that might take effort to fill. Begone with it all, we say!

"Now you wait just a gosh-danged horse-feathered country second, Current Affairs! That's our Paper of Record you've just so cavalierly dismissed. Where do you get the everloving nerve to go carelessly micturating upon our nation's core journalistic institutions:"

Well, hypothetical respondent, we concede you may have the gist of something of a point there. It is probably wise to be able to offer evidence to support the things one says. We do not wish anyone to think that *Current Affairs* the sort of publication in which unreasonable things are sometimes said. Our bimonthly report on the various indefensible acts committed by the *New York Times* will therefore be the sausage-grinder through which our indefensible opinions are transformed into incontrovertible fact.

* * S A GENTLE WINTER TURNED INTO A WORRYINGLY balmy February spring, *The Times* was in peak form. Questions of global importance were debated, such as "Could Bloomberg and His Millions Save Us From Ourselves?" (Some say yes! Some say no! Nobody, however, appears to find the question incomprehensible.) Two of the paper's reporters spent what must have been days compiling a vast chart of Donald Trump's Twitter insults (spoiler: he calls many people 'losers'), a use of their time for which they were evidently paid money. The Style section attempted to run a profile of an uncooperative Henry Kissinger, who rebuffed their efforts to inquire into where he gets his suits. ("My what?" Kissinger replied, as if even he could not help but think 'You're a journalist asking a war criminal where he gets his suits?") Marshmallowy divorcé and professional povertyscold David Brooks admitted that "my predictions have been wrong consistently" before going to make... a batch of all-new predictions. Oh, yes, and of course in the Weddings Section some nauseating people got married nauseatingly, with romances blooming across the whole spectrum of society from the Yale Club to the Vanderbilt

But the meat of a newspaper is made of its columnists, and the *Times* gang has been busily churning out some first-rate ordure as our multi-year Primary Season lumbers ever forward. Here is a short list of their finest recent secretions:

- Maureen Dowd, "Here's the Beauty of Trump."
 Thomas L. Friedman, "#You Ain't No
- 2. IHOMAS L. FRIEDMAN, "#You Aint No American, Bro" [hashtag in orig.]
- 3. DAVID BROOKS, "Donald Trump Isn't Real"
- 4. Paul Krugman, "Weakened at Bernie's"

THE ANNALS OF MEDIA VILLAINY

...Oh, no, Paul, no, you can't have. You didn't. Dear God. Look, Current Affairs has always opposed the imposition of capital punishment for heinous punning alone, but exceptions must be made. This time we will be generous and pretend we never saw it, but consider yourself duly warned, PK. (Leave aside the minor indignation one might also show at making a pun based on a 74-year-old presidential candidates having the same name as the titular character of a film about a dancing corpse.)

Speaking of Krugman, the Nobel Prize-winning

Speaking of Krugman, the Nobel Prize-winning economist also used the *Times* website to post a photo of a cat that looks like Donald Trump, and an image of *Sesame Street's* Count to represent Ted Cruz, drawing the *Times* one step closer to its inevitable adoption of entirely GIF-based journalism. (And by the way, what the *hell* does Krugman have against Count von Count?)

Aside from engaging in flagrant acts of dopey wordplay, Krugman spent the rest of his month assisting fellow *Times* writers in their Herculean effort to convince the readership that Hillary Clinton is both human and worth voting for. Krugman spent some considerable hours at his keyboard denouncing suspicions about Hillary's integrity as "carefully fomented right-wing legends," the mere product of a "two-decade-plus smear campaign" by the late Pittsburgh newspaper baron Richard Mellon Scaife. A peculiar angle, this, to say that there's a conspiracy to turn us all conspiratorial, but one is forced into all manner of uncomfortable contortion in attempting to exonerate something so unabashedly sleaze-ridden as the Clinton political empire.

[We might, in passing, mention that lefty reasoning for disdaining Hillary does not overlap much with the right-wing attacks. The Sanders supporters Krugman accuses of being "Fox-ified" certainly don't sound particularly Fox Newsy, their revulsion at Hillary emerging more from matters like: her blithe intimacy with verminous financialtypes ("I represented Wall Street as a senator," plus those hundred-thousand dollar Goldman speaker-fees), her cowardly tardiness on supporting gay marriage ("The fundamental bedrock principle [is] that [marriage] exists between a man and a woman... and its primary, principal role... has been the raising and socializing of children"), her encouragement of public fear and paranoia about young criminal offenders (warning of gangs of roving juvenile "super-predators" with "no conscience, no empathy") her intermittent tepidity on abortion (Planned Parenthood videos 'disturbing'; abortion a 'tragic' choice that should be avoided by encouraging teen girls to embrace 'moral and religious values'), her role in sanctioning an invasion that resulted in the extinction of tens of thousands of fragi preschoolers, her subsequent vigorous defense of that role even after the whole thing turned calamitous ("No, I don't regret giving the president authority..."), her support for kicking people off welfare (so they are "no longer deadbeats"), and her audacious insistence that taking these benefits was to help poor people's self-esteem (they have made the "transition from dependency to dignity"). However, if each of these is a Carefully Fomented Right-Wing Legend, Current Affairs will stand humbly corrected.]

Elsewhere in the paper, other valiant and amusing attempts to assist the tottering Clinton campaign were made. Mealy, globetrotting, sanctimony-dispensing sweatshop-lover NICHOLAS KRISTOF opined on Twitter that: "[o]ne sign of Clinton's greater knowledge of foreign affairs [is that s]he pronounces "Iran" correctly, while Sanders speaks about Eye-ran." It's certainly telling of Mr. Kristof's social class that he draws that kind of inference from that kind of evidence. Does he also think people should pronounce the word "France" with a French accent?

Lesser lights at the paper pitched in, too. Reliable political stenographer AMY CHOZIK reported that Clinton has newly "become a spunkier, warmer candidate" in recent days. (This fresh warm spunk was manifested in several acts of Completely Genuine Relatability, including Tweeting to Hispanic people that she felt like she was an *abuela* to all of them, and a misguided stunt

in which she "turned control over her Snapchat account to Bill Clinton for a day"—one would have imagined a core duty of Clinton staffers consists in keeping Bill as far away as possible from the official campaign Snapchat account.)

The old class bigotries were in full blossom, too. Senior Economics Correspondent Netl Irwin displayed a photo of some Bernie supporters out in the DC snow, only to mock those who "care enough to march on a cold day in Logan Circle, [but] not enough to go to Iowa/NH." One might have thought Mr. Irwin's economic corresponding would have exposed him to the concept of "having a full-time job," but evidently such an expectation underestimates the distance between the Times writership and the class of person who somehow finds herself unable to suddenly take a lengthy Iowa sojourn at her convenience. Finally, the statisticians got in on the act, with Nick Confessore delicately fiddling some numbers in an attempt to smugly prove that Sanders, rather than Clinton, was the true beneficiary of our post-Citizens United Super PAC hell.

Finally, there was the paper's own endorsement of Clinton, which carried the expected spirit of anemia and defensiveness, recycling most of its Clinton endorsement from 2008 with the word "experience" deployed several hundred times in rapid succession. (Quick point on the concept of experience-as-virtue: purely theoretically speaking, what if one's experience is the experience of being a massive blundering screw-up? What if, for the sake of argument, one's experiences were mostly a long string of whoops-a-daisies, say by accidentally decimating a series of countries through catastrophically ill-advised military interventions? Just, well, hypothetically.

It would be inaccurate to say, however, that every single word in the *New York Times* was dedicated to either the bolstering of the Hillary Clinton campaign or the stroking of liberal cultural prejudices. Occasional other material finds its way into the paper. For example, in an item incomprehensibly filed under the heading of "news analysis," vowely film critic **A.O. S**cott wrote a rousing defense of his profession entitled "Everybody's a Critic. And That's How It Should Be." Ao says that, while we may think of critics as as a vermicular, parasitic ooze slowly devouring the last miniscule residuum of our collective cultural inheritance, in reality they are so much more. For to be a critic, says Ao, is to be "a defender of the life of art and a champion of the art of living." Pretty stirring stuff, though one *suspects* this may all just be something Mr. Scott desperately tells himself as he sits down to review *Ride Along 2*. (In fact, he's publishing a book-length expansion of this strained effort to justify his career, entitled *Better Living Through* Criticism. Someone please let Ao know that he doesn't have to do this for a living if he doesn't want to. Sideinquiry: is it common for a film critic's midlife crisis to take the form of a book on the social value of film criticism? Does not seem implausible that this may be a

well-known phase in the lives of reviewers.)
Finally, the Times made two attempts to redeem despised cultural objects:

I. PHIL COLLINS

("Does Anybody Still Loathe Phil Collins" Jan. 29, 2015)

2. TURTLENECKS

("Can Turtlenecks Be Cool Again?" Dec. 30, 2015)

For the benefit of readers, the answers to this little quiz are "yes" and "no," respectively.

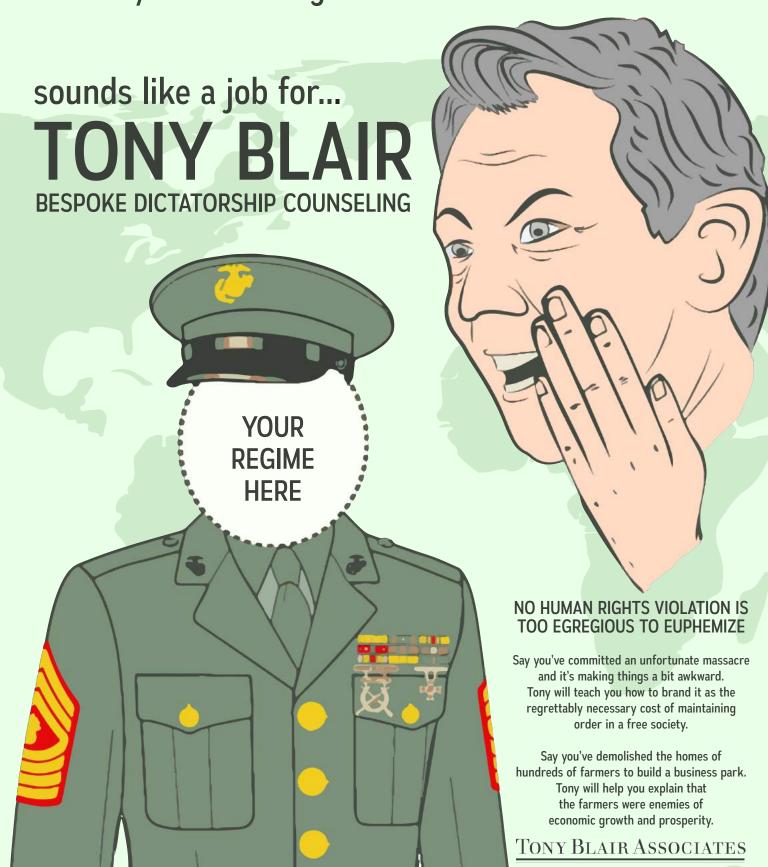
Our Times report would not be complete, however, if we did not note the good along with the bad. There were some redeeming aspects of the paper's work. They did a good David Bowie obituary (we presume), and the brilliant writer VINSON CUNNINGHAM wrote a characteristically brilliant thing.

and the brilliant when Yisson Constitution where a characteristically brilliant thing.

We are capable of being positive, then. We do not, like certain Times film critics, believe the route to the good life is through exercising the curmudgeonly passions. This report has not been drafted for our own idle pleasure, but is offered as a public service. It is the least we can do. •

Alumni Association.

having trouble keeping your populace in line? worried you're seeming too brutal and machiavellian?





CURRENT AFFAIRS

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As our civilization unravels and madness engulfs the land, Current Affairs will be your friend and confidante. Nobody loves you more than we do, and nobody else can hope to bring you the smorgasbord of visual delights that we have planned for you.

IN ISSUE TWO

- ❖ How dismal is our political future? Freddie deBoer issues a prophecy...
- ❖ Mya Guarnieri on why expectant mothers have to be excited... or else.
- * "You Wasted Your Life, Christopher Hitchens," by NATHAN J. ROBINSON
- * ERIC M. FINK's "Quick Fixes for Vexing Social Problems.
- ❖ We lob some unfair invective at The Economist magazine
- * Peeved letters from RUTH BADER GINSBURG fanatics (hopefully)
- "The Day NOAM CHOMSKY Broke My Heart" An insider tells all...
- A Plus: Some harder puzzles, How to Defend Hiroshima, Australia's most idealistic koala, "Is Space Boring?", some complex diagrams of some sort, A Guide to Our Competitors, "Nasty, Brutish, and Interminable: The Joyless Career of Thomas Sowell," "Should Restaurants be Abolished?", Tips for Teens, Our Awful Atheists, NIALL FERGUSON assessed, and our stance on ISIS.

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IMPENDING ISSUES OF CURRENT AFFAIRS MAY CONTAIN NUMEROUS OBJECTIONABLE STATEMENTS

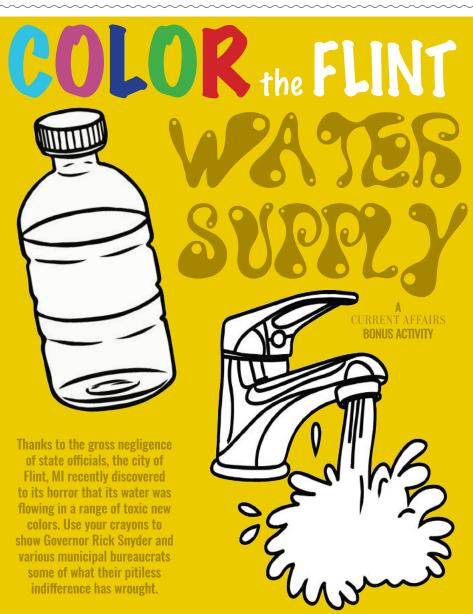
SOME BADLY NEEDFD

OST OF THE ALLEGATIONS MADE AGAINST OST OF THE ALLEGATIONS MADE AGAINST AGAINST AGAINST AGAINST A CULTURE AGAINST utmost. However, among our various detractors and lessers, it has accurately been noted that our publication has an occasional tendency toward excess negativity. Of course, it should be noted that negativity and pessimism are two entirely separate mammoths, so to speak. Believing that everything is, at present, utter unpardonable garbage, does is, at present, utter unpartoniable garbage, does not mean that one believes everything is destined to remain garbage along the whole temporal span stretching from this afternoon to the final denouement of the Universe. We may spit at things now, but we nevertheless hope for a time in which they need not be spat at.

But nobody likes a sourpuss, and so Current Affairs proposes to use this small rectangular segment of page to enumerate some of the things, persons, and sensations to which we rather take a fancy. There are a number of phenomena and entities we like, and here, for the record, they are:

hot jazz on a cold night, butterfly kisses, the excitement of discovering the rusted shell of a '46 Chevy in a secluded dell, not getting emails containing death threats, the feeling that comes with seeing the latest copy of *Current Affairs* waiting on one's porch, the smell of warm hamentashen, the Fort Worth Water Gardens, the truck drivin' songs of the late country artist Red Simpson, the word "efflorescence," a long afternoon spent playing with LEGO*, *The Hearing Trumpet* by Leonora Carrington, the exuberantly chipper tour guides at the Motown Museum in Detroit, the dugong, St. Louis Gooey Butter Cake, Steve Biko, the Bolshoi Ballet, elaborate frontispieces, extremely precise and orderly marching bands, airport newsstands, gingerbread villages, very long tunnels, and people who chase after you after you have dropped a thing saying "Excuse me, is this yours?"

And so, let it never be said that we have never said that there are things that we enjoy. *



5 TOTALLY UNINTELLIGIBLE, BUT TOTALLY REAL SOCIOLOGY CHARTS

The aspiring sociologist will inevitably be forced to perform innumerable shameful acts en route to a full professorship. He/she/ze will have to allege spurious correlations, and will carefully attempt to bury her liberal politics beneath a mountain of abstruse theoretical prose. But perhaps the most humiliating act the young sociologist must perform is dutifully nodding along when charts and tables of dubious coherence are presented as knowledge. The young scholar who hopes for a career must either remain silent or, if she hopes to excel in her field, praise her colleagues' diagrams as an illuminating contribution to the extant body of theory. Yet while she may receive earthly rewards for her self-abnegating toadyism, it is certain that in the next life, her eternal soul shall be damned for the betrayal of her duty to truth, and her ready willingness to pretend that words and thoughts are one and the same thing. Repent, sociologists! Repent!

Each of these charts is taken from an actual assigned reading from an actual Sociology PhD program at an actual accredited university.

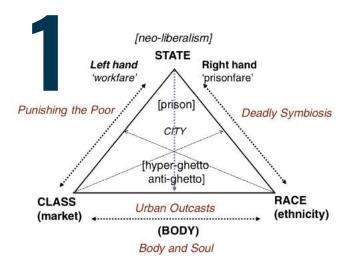


Figure 1. The 'fatal triangle' of the urban precariat.

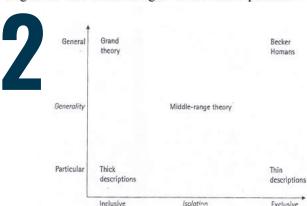


Fig. 2.1 Generality, isolation, and the defining characteristics of middle-

Table	9 1.	SOME DIFFERENCES IN METATHEORETICAL POSITIONS ADOPTED BY SCHOOLS (FACTIONS)
IN SC	OCIC	DLOGY

Psychologism		Sociologism	
Individual (individualism)	(Unit of analysis)	Social network (structuralism)	
Inside (subjectivism)	(Location of observer)	Outside (objectivism)	
Essentialist	(Construction of phenomena)	Analyst	
Ideal	(Prime movers are)	Material	
Voluntarism (free will)	(Dynamic assumed)	Mechanism (impersonal constraint)	
Ideographic (interpretation; humanist)	(Understanding mode)	Nomothetic (explanation; naturalist)	
Consensus	(Basis for association)	Conflict	
The present	(Time frame for study)	All history & prehistory	
Parochial	(Location of inquiry)	Cross-cultural	

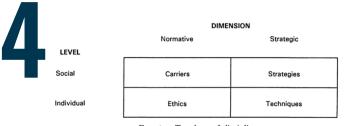
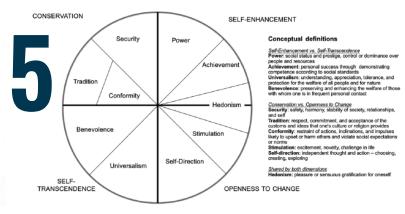


Fig. 1.—Typology of discipline



THE CURRENT AFFAIRS SOCIOLOGY CHALLENGE

Make your own profound sociology chart, table, or diagram, of any size or format. Email entries to contests@currentaffairs.org. The most informative chart will receive an exclusive "I Survived the Current Affairs Sociology Challenge" T-Shirt, and have their chart proudly displayed in the next issue of Current Affairs, as well as becoming a lifelong honorary graduate of Current Affairs University.

Do you find that the power conferred by your wealth precludes a true understanding of the heinous consequences of your actions?

Do you occasionally kill, maim, or exploit people knowing that nothing you do will result in your downfall?

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not everyone may benefit equally from socialism, occasional side effects include gulags, beheadings, and bread lines those particularly fond of capitalism's various bounties (such as the Transformers franchise and the root-beer flavored Oreo) may not find socialism right for them use caution when applying socialism so as not to accidentally become the very embodiment of the thing you are attempting to eliminate.

MASS INCARCERATION & THE LIMITS

Everyone's writing books
about prisons these days.
And they're all searching
for that perfect combination
of words that will end the
miseries of the criminal
justice system once and for
all. Nathan J. Robinson
looks at the selections, and
explains why criminal justice
writing is doomed to be a
literary and political failure.



RITING COMPELLINGIY ABOUT THE prison system is nearly impossible. The challenge is to bridge the gulf between the readable and the necessary; true crime sagas are thrilling to read, mass incarceration statistics are moderately less so. Real trials never feel like John Grisham novels, and prisons themselves are less the gritty gangland battlegrounds of HBO's Oz and more just an endless

bureaucratic tedium. For those who believe American criminal justice is dysfunctional and unjust, this creates a frustrating paradox: many of the stories that most desperately need to be conveyed are those that are the most difficult to tell interestingly and well.

The task of persuasion remains crucial, though. Despite growing recent public awareness and scholarly attention given to the problem of mass incarceration, it has proven difficult to create the sense of urgency required to start bringing down walls and signing release orders. "A dozen books in recent years have addressed this problem without having much of an impact on policy or practice," laments Robert Ferguson in *Inferno: An Anatomy of American Punishment.* "Why has identification of the problem

America's prison system is so vast, so bloated and so cruel, that making it humane is going to require unpopular reforms as well as popular ones.

had so little effect? What is it about punishment that confuses people?" Everyone now knows about it, but mustering the will to stop it is another matter.

Ferguson himself believes the answer lies in an insufficient examination of the nature of punishment and the American punitive psyche. But the problem might be less to do with a lack of a certain kind of writing, and more with some inherent limitations of the subject matter. For, where a writer is concerned, prisons differ in an important respect from ordinary places: they are arenas where all sensation, all color and variety, has been deliberately extinguished. This spareness of stimulus does not easily lend itself to enticing or unique prose.

Literature on mass incarceration therefore easily becomes didactic. Writers about prisons, both inside and out, are faced with creating vividness from the mundane, and find themselves with a limited and clichéd vocabulary. "America's criminal justice system is broken," they say, in a sentence that has been written verbatim tens of thousands of times. Or they will resort to the familiar statistics; the third of black men that will pass through prison gates at some point, the millions entangled with the court system in some way. To stimulate intrigue, writers will call this system Kafkaesque, even though it really isn't. The Kafkaesque is defined by mystery. Who is doing this? What logic governs this thing? In the case of American prisons, we know the who, how, where, when, and why. It's a matter of public record.

NE CAN CONTRAST THESE DIFFICULTIES WITH THE successes that the Black Lives Matter movement has had in creating political pressure around the killings of black people by police. The names and lives of victims, like Walter Scott, Sandra Bland, and Eric Garner, make for powerful, wrenching narratives. Prisons themselves are a different matter. There is no single moment of tragedy; the injustice is stretched over years or decades. And it is not an individual story, but the story of multitudes. But harms that take place over long periods of time, and are perpetrated collectively, become abstract. Protests against policing can animate around discrete events, such as a tragic death or a non-indictment. Yet the prison system is not an event, but a constant. It doesn't build toward a sudden, violent climax. Instead, it operates perpetually in the background, a slow, quiet suffocation rather than a single deadly gunshot. Fruitvale Station can show us the devastating final hours in the life of a single individual, Oscar Grant. But how do you tell the story of millions being housed in cages for decades? What could a film about solitary confinement look like, except a blank wall accompanied by a scream?

A number of recent books have attempted to deal with this challenge, and to rouse the kind of passion necessary to activate real public opposition. None of them quite succeeds, since nothing ever can. But by placing them side-by-side, one can see the truth emerging in the gaps. Their varying approaches to crafting mass incarceration narratives, and what those approaches both capture and fail to capture, reveal how the limitations of prose affect our ability to communicate effectively about the prison system.

HE NEWEST OF THESE IS MR. SMITH GOES TO Prison (St. Martin's Press, \$25.99), which benefits from its uniquely novel angle. Jeff Smith was a promising young state senator in Missouri when he lied to the FBI about a campaign finance violation, earning him a year long sentence in a federal penitentiary. As an expolitical science professor, Smith had long been interested in the criminal justice system, and the conviction afforded him with an unexpectedly in-depth experience of it. Ever the enterprising politician, Smith took advantage of his stretch to produce a detailed entry into the neglected genre of involuntary ethnography.

The prison memoir has never been an especially robust or popular genre, and it is not difficult to see why. Each must describe the same sensations: the routinization, the deprivation, the slow process of setting aside what it was like to be human. As a result, they tend to bleed together, the narrator's voice lost the moment her identity was stripped at intake. Claustrophobic and stark as the cell it is written in, the form is inherently hostile to the literary impulse.

Mr. Smith Goes to Prison deftly avoids this pitfall, distinguishing itself by taking advantage of its author's strengths. Smith has a wry voice and absurdist humor that enliven his recounting of the experience, and a social scientific academic background that lets him make important big-picture policy observations. The risk was that Smith would simply write a "fish-out-of-water story," how he went from brokering appropriations bill negotiations to trading packs of cigarettes. And of course, he does tell that story, but Smith also aims to use examples from his observations to inform a wider systemic critique.

Smith is keenly observant of tiny details, from the kitchen's B-grade meat containers stamped "For Institutional Use Only" to the dated pop culture reference points of long-term inmates. He compiles a list of rules for survival (never accept a candy bar left on your pillow; it comes with major hidden strings attached) and translates prison slang ("dipping in the Kool-Aid" means barging into a conversation uninvited). He tells us how to steal peppers from the warehouse (always in the socks, since the pockets bulge too much). He explains the intricacies of racial hierarchy and segregation, and frankly discusses the issues of sexuality in prison, including rape. He carefully demonstrates the mechanisms of prison profiteering, from minor offenses like the mass theft of food supplies by correctional officers to major operations like the dollar-a-minute phone calls and the massive mark-ups on commissary goods.

Smith is especially good at showing the real-world implications of policy questions. His passages on solitary confinement are es-



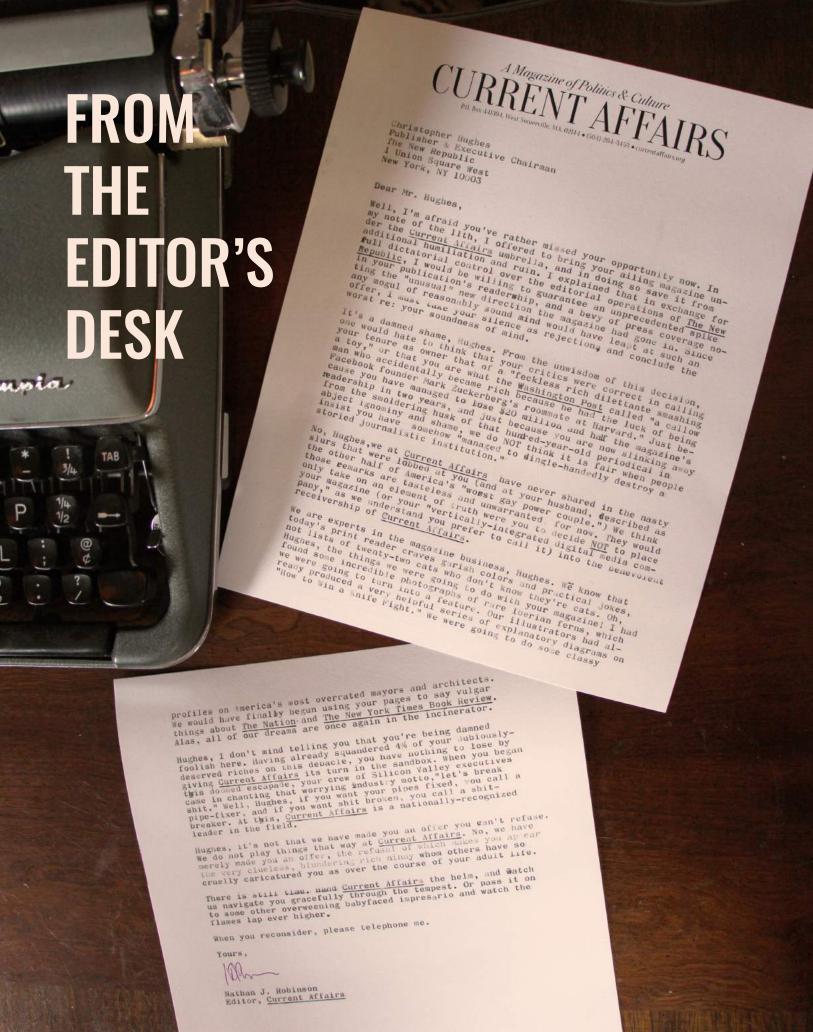
pecially disturbing, discussing the ways in which it gives inmates "depression, rage, claustrophobia, and severe psychosis" with the lack of stimulation and interaction creating a "slow-motion torture." He points out how small things matter, like giving inmates access to weightlifting equipment. Dismissing safety paranoia, Smith says that bodybuilding is one of the most important ways that inmates learn to develop and be proud of their achievements, and that it gives them hope and dignity.

One might think Smith's experience somewhat narrow, because he spent his time in a minimum-security prison. But this turns out to be one of the book's most important points: contrary to what the public believes, the differences between minimum and maximum-security facilities have shrunk in recent years. No more Club Fed, with its tennis courts and spas. Minimum security is maximum security without the barbed wire; the conditions are just as stark and brutal, and the discipline is just as rigid.

Smith is exasperated by just how unnecessary so much of that rigidity is, and documents its harms to the well-being of both inmates and the communities into which they will ultimately be released. Storing inmates far from their families and making phone calls unaffordable breaks down relationships, and that lack of a support network increases their likelihood of re-offending. The cruelty of the correctional officers is often needless and builds mistrust and hostility. And the educational programming offered to inmates borders on the fraudulent, with some "classes" consisting of sitting silently in an empty room until an hour has elapsed. The only real skills training offered is a several-week course on "how to grow tomatoes in water."

What could a film about solitary confinement look like, except a blank wall accompanied by a scream?

All of this, for Smith, creates an unconscionable waste. He points out that inmates are intelligent, creative, and often remarkably entrepreneurial, but that their abilities are being squandered. The miniature economy that runs in a prison trafficks largely in pornography, cigarettes, Mother's Day Cards, and peanut butter (for muscle building). But its operators are



well-familiar with economic and mathematical concepts, even though they use "somewhat different jargon than you might hear at Wharton."

Smith is not the first one to note this; *The Wire's* Stringer Bell used the formal economic knowledge he gained from reading *The Wealth of Nations* in order to master the drug market. But Smith is policy-oriented, and has recommendations for how these skills can be put to good use. Inmates are hungry for knowledge, he says. They have endless time on their hands and want the knowledge and connections that will help them stay in jobs once released. But the prisons consistently fail to provide

not to be outraged by the hell Sullivan has been condemned to. Stevenson's depictions of tormented youths doomed to spend their entire lives suffering from horrors totally disproportionate to their crimes should make it difficult to justify the very idea of trying children as adults. (Stevenson managed to convince the Supreme Court to abolish mandatory life without parole for juveniles in 2012, but the only practical effect is that a hearing must be provided before giving a child life without parole.)

The story at the heart of Stevenson's book, though, is that of Walter McMillan, accused of a murder he couldn't possibly have committed. (Scores of people from his church were selling

'For no issue is the creation of empathy more crucial than in criminal justice. From the beginning, the task is to foster love for the most despised."

even the most meager opportunities; even Smith's own repeated attempts to teach classes to his fellow inmates were instantly vetoed by the prison administration.

Like every memoir ever written by a politician, *Mr. Smith Goes to Prison* is partly self-serving. Smith frequently trumpets his long history of volunteer work and enjoys listing his political achievements. And though Smith does everything to come across a decent guy who made a regrettable error of judgment, it is nevertheless disturbing when he admits he planned to pin the campaign finance misdeed on a young staffer who had committed suicide.

TILL, SMITH'S BOOK IS INVALUABLE, SINCE IT MANAGES to be both vivid and thorough in documenting America's prisons from the inside. It's regrettable that it takes a state senator to tell these truths, though. The "fish out of water" story is good at bringing the facts to life, but its premise also means the described experiences will inevitably be atypical. Smith does his best to remain focused on the lives of those he did time with, but he has a very limited access to their inner worlds. Everyone in prison is putting on an act in order to survive, and Smith admits he rarely manages to break through and find people's true selves. Smith's book is overflowing with useful observations and facts, but it remains an outsider's account.

Bryan Stevenson is intensely aware of this challenge in *Just Mercy* (Spiegel & Grau, \$14.99), recently released in paperback. Stevenson, who has worked as a lawyer on behalf of the poor for decades, is foremostly concerned with conveying the experiences of his clients. The book is framed by Stevenson's own account of his work defending the indigent, and how he came to recognize the depth of the justice system's bias and cruelty, but he is careful to use these in the service of telling the stories of those he works for.

Stevenson has already received well-deserved praise for the emotional force of his writing and his skillful selection of devastating anecdotes. The people he meets are impossible to forget. There is Joe Sullivan, a mentally disabled thirteen-yearold sentenced to life without parole, sent to an adult prison where he suffers unspeakable sexual abuse and ends up in a wheelchair. Yet Sullivan still retains an upbeat spirit, asking Stevenson about cartoon characters and reciting a little poem about how nice life will be when he goes home. It is impossible sandwiches with him in front of his house while it happened.) Yet while McMillan's case seems a slam-dunk for the defense, Stevenson shows how the specter of racism continues to haunt the justice system. McMillan is a black man who had relations with the white woman who was murdered, and in Monroeville, Alabama, this is enough to put him under suspicion in the community. In fact, it is almost enough alone to convict him; the actual testimony against McMillan is laughably unreliable and contradictory. But McMillan is sent to death row nevertheless, where Stevenson fights a lengthy battle to present the evidence that will exonerate McMillan. After six years watching those around him in his cell block being executed one by one, McMillan is finally released, but by this time trauma-induced dementia has set in. When Stevenson goes to visit McMillan in his care facility, he finds that McMillan still believes he is on death row. McMillan's story is a harsh reminder of the stakes, not just because of how patently unfair his conviction was, but because his tragic ending shows that many injustices can never be set right.

Yet Stevenson's choice of McMillan as the main case study also has a shortcoming: McMillan was innocent, and very obviously so. His case is thus a perfect illustration of just how little truth and justice can matter when it comes to defendants who are poor and black. But while cases like McMillans are not infrequent, the main group of people on whom the injustice of mass incarceration is inflicted are guilty rather than innocent.

It's understandable that Stevenson would pick the most sympathetic possible case to anchor his book. It shows just how little American constitutional protections can really matter in practice. Here we have a gentle, harmless man with a rock-solid alibi, and his life is nevertheless ruined because of his status in the racial and economic hierarchy. Nevertheless, the most common story of American prison life is not that of Walter McMillan. It is that of people who did commit crimes, often violent ones, but who nevertheless receive sentences vastly incommensurate with those crimes, and who are given none of the resources they need in order to build a stable life for themselves. Thus a fair criminal justice system will require building sympathy for more than just those who are already sympathetic.

This speaks to one of the central dilemmas in animating public support for prison reform. On the one hand, it is tempting to make the points that will most easily convince people: low-level drug offenses shouldn't carry long prison terms, fourteen-year-

olds who tagged along when an older brother killed someone shouldn't get life without parole, the innocent should go free. All of these statements are true, all of them demand changing current American practice, and all of them can probably be

supported by a good majority of people.

But America's prison system is so vast, so bloated and so cruel, that making it humane is going to require unpopular reforms as well as popular ones. The reform-minded often emphasize drug sentencing, because it seems an issue on which it is easy to build political consensus. Yet even fixing drug policy would barely put a dent in the number of incarcerated. And as Gilad Edelman puts it in *The New Yorker*, "having a fifth of the world's prison population would be better than having a fourth, but not by much." The real problem is sentences for violent crime, but as Edelman says, "acknowledging the need to cut down the number of violent prisoners is a tough sell."

UILDING THE NECESSARY EMPATHY FOR VIOLENT criminals, and showing the way they too are victimized and locked into an inescapable cycle of imprisonment, is part of the project of Alice Goffman's acclaimed ethnography *On the Run* (Chicago, \$25.00). For eight years, Goffman attempted to immerse herself in the world of the guilty, young black men in Philadelphia who spend their lives in and out of various jails and prisons. The result is an extraordinary piece of work, logistically speaking, since Goffman is able to bring details from lives that are typically never seen or cared about by elite policymakers.

Goffman brings readers inside the lives of the men of 6th Street, whose entire lives seem defined by their interactions with police. They are ruled by fear and mistrust, the War on Drugs destroying any prayer they might have had of maintaining an ordinary existence. Goffman aims to help readers understand why Mike, Chuck, and the other 6th Street Boys act as they do. They are criminals, to be sure, but in Goffman's portrayal their lives seem almost inevitable.

Goffman's work has encountered some extraordinarily high praise as well as some fierce criticism. One criticism of the work, made by Dwayne Betts, is that its attempt to humanize backfires. In fact, Goffman simply "encourages outsiders to gawk," reducing these men to the sum of their crimes and their police encounters.

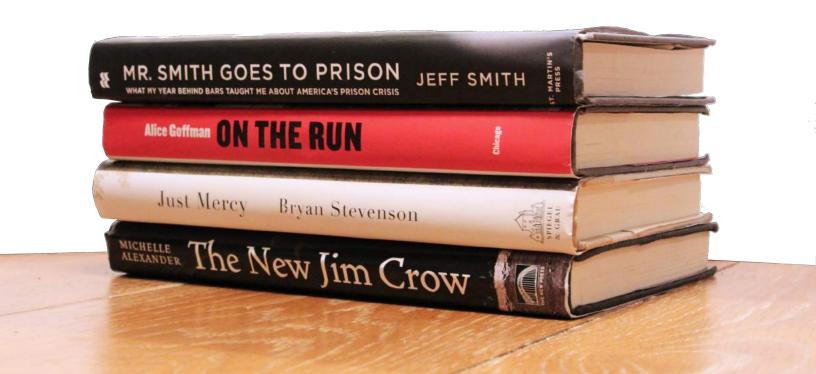
She thus fails to portray the neighborhood in three dimensions, excluding its culture, its warmth, its relationships, and treating it solely as a dysfunctional symptom of the drug war.

Another criticism of the book accuses it of inaccuracies. Multiple reviewers have gone after Goffman for supposedly taking liberties with the facts. The most vociferous has been Northwestern University law professor Steven Lubet, who has repeatedly accused Goffman of dishonesty in *The New Republic*. Lubet says that Goffman's accounts of certain events, like her supposed visit to Chuck's deathbed, do not add up. But he also suspects something fishy in her narrative, especially a passage in which she discusses her readjustment to life outside 6th Street.

The factual challenges to Goffman have not gone particularly far. Gideon Lewis-Kraus of *The New York Times* and Jesse Singal of *New York* magazine checked them out, and her sources seem to confirm her reporting. But Lubet is right to hit upon Goffman's narrative of her return to Princeton as seeming particularly odd. In the "Methodological Note" at the end of her book, Goffman writes of arriving at Princeton after her time on 6th Street:

The first day, I caught myself casing the classrooms in the Sociology Department, making a mental note of the TVs and computers I could steal if I ever needed cash in a hurry. The students and the even wealthier townies spoke strangely; their bodies moved in ways that I didn't recognize. They smelled funny and laughed at jokes I didn't understand. It's one thing to feel uncomfortable in a community that is not your own. It's another to feel that way among people who recognize you as one of them...The Princeton students discussed indie rock bands— white people music, to me— and drank wine and imported beers I'd never heard of. They listened to iPods, and checked Facebook...Moreover I had missed cultural changes, such as no-carb diets and hipsters. Who were these white men in tight pants who spoke about their anxieties and feelings? They seemed so feminine, yet they dated women. More than discomfort and awkwardness, I feared the hordes of white people. They crowded around me and moved in groups.

The passage may seem an unusual one to single out, tucked as it is at the end of the book. But it's notable for its failure to ring true, given the facts known about Goffman's background. As Lubet points out, Goffman was raised in tony surroundings as the child of prominent academics. She attended a prestigious private school, and was at the University of Pennsylvania when she was researching the book. To think that somehow when she



got to Princeton, she was baffled by the existence of the iPod, stretches the limits of the imagination. For a wealthy double Ivyleaguer to be looking for TVs to steal in case she needed extra cash is hard to believe.

Her fear of white people is similarly implausible. Goffman says she was scared especially of white men, even though "on some level, I knew they weren't cops, they probably wouldn't beat me or insult me." On some level? This despite the fact that her adviser was a white man, and that no male sociologist in the history of Princeton has ever been mistakable for a cop.

But Goffman's failure interestingly reinforces the point about the difficulties of discussing mass incarceration. It appears as if Goffman's research was sound, but the narratives she laid atop it were faulty. Goffman attempts to use the "fish out of water" framing in order to make her personal story seem more exciting, but doing so requires her to distort her experiences and background in a way that harms her credibility. And she tries to tell a story about how the drug war has created a Wild West in which black men are forever on the run, but this isn't exactly

try to turn it into a story with a moral, a snappy metaphor or the cry of an innocent man accused. But it's too bleak, pointless, and devastating to be captured in any of these.

REMEMBER WHEN I FIRST REALIZED HOW LITTLE THERE TRUly was to be said about what goes on inside a prison. I made a stupid, naive blunder interviewing a client while working at a public defender's office.

"How are you?" I asked him with eager-intern chirpiness.

"I live in a tent with 80 men and there is no air conditioning. So that's how I am."

"Oh," I replied sheepishly, making a "whoops" face. "I'm sorry." Monotony does not make for good stories, yet politics thrives on stories. 12 Years A Slave must be about about man who escapes slavery instead of the scores who did not, because this is where the story is. As Stanley Kubrick described his fundamental problem with Schindler's List: "The Holocaust is about six million people who get killed. Schindler's List is about 600 who don't."



In that old battle between the readable and the necessary, the readable continually wins out.



true. The reality is, as it always is, more complex than that. While easily-summarized punchlines may sell books ("white Princeton sociologist enters a terrifying urban battleground and loses herself in the process"), when they imply things that aren't true, they damage our ability to understand and address the social problems they are supposedly concerned with. Yet in that old battle between the readable and the necessary, the readable continually wins out.

HE SAME TENDENCY TOWARD NARRATIVE AT THE expense of truth applies equally to the classic text of the anti-mass incarceration movement, *The New Jim* Crow (New Press, \$14.99). By invoking America's own apartheid, Jim Crow, Michelle Alexander wanted to forge a powerful image that would stir public sentiment. She tried to avoid simply presenting dusty statistics, using the segregation comparison to convey the severity and urgency of the injustice. But as critics have pointed out, the Jim Crow metaphor isn't precisely accurate. As law professor James Forman has explained, calling presentday criminal justice Jim Crow fails to explain the system's often equally devastating effects on Hispanics and poor whites. It also obscures the fact that mass incarceration was not imposed simply by whites, but also involved support from blacks fearful of crime. Thus even Michelle Alexander doesn't quite identify the problem precisely.

Smith, Stevenson, Goffman, and Alexander have all written powerful books, each using a different strategy to try to capture what criminal justice in America today is like. Each of them succeeds to a degree, and each ought to be read. Ultimately, though, none of these authors can do what they set out to do, because America's prison system tests the limits of prose. You can

This is not to deny the countless horrifying incidents in the life of the American prison system. But so many of these tend toward the meaningless. I once worked on a class-action lawsuit against a prison in the American South, and I remember reading the statements that had been taken from the inmates. There was one man who was deprived of medical care as he slowly watched his testicle grow steadily larger and turn purple. Each day he would look at the testicle. Each day as the pain worsened, he would beg the guards to take him to the hospital, and each day they would tell him to shut the fuck up. Eventually, when the testicle had grown to the size of a baseball, he was finally brought to the doctor to be castrated. By that time, the cancer had spread. The end.

It is hard to imagine the film version of this scenario being successful. You can't readily adapt it for Netflix. Yet these are the stories that we are trying to tell. Stories without lessons, without resolution or purpose.

Literature is a key ally of social progress for its ability to induce empathy, but literature seems powerless when it comes to mass incarceration. This is unfortunate, because for no issue is the creation of empathy more crucial than in criminal justice. From the beginning, the task is to foster love for the most despised. Not only that, but with prisons being hidden away in countrysides, people must be made to feel something that they cannot see.

One reason the prison epidemic has been hard to excite public emotion against is that while it is easy enough to write about, is difficult to write about powerfully. The story of a prisoner is the story of a starved brain, a human being slowly going mad inside a box. The story of American criminal justice is the story of millions of such people, being placed in suspended animation and put away. What can be said about this? Where's the moral? When it comes to mass incarceration, words simply fail us.

A CONVERSATION with MARYAM NAMAZIE

Maryam Namazie is a secularist and women's rights activist originally from Iran, from which she fled in 1980 after the establishment of the Islamic Republic. She has worked around the globe on behalf of refugees, and has won numerous awards for her humanitarian advocacy. In 1991, she founded the Committee for Humanitarian Assistance to Iranian Refugees and has served as the executive director of the International Federation of Iranian Refugees. She is a spokesperson for the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain and is on the Central Committee of the Worker-Communist Party of Iran.

Namazie was recently the subject of controversy in Britain after a speech she gave at Goldsmiths College was disrupted by members of the college's Islamic Society, who heckled her, disabled her projector, and attempted to prevent her from speaking. The student union of Warwick University also blocked the university's Atheist, Secularist, and Humanist Society from inviting Namazie to speak, with student union officials saying that a "risk assessment" of Namazie had concluded she was "highly inflammatory" and therefore would violate the school's policy on external speakers.

Namazie spoke to Current Affairs from London.

THE IRANIAN DISSIDENT COMMUNIST GETS SCATHING ABOUT ISLAMISM AND THE LEFT...



Current Affairs: Most of those who are vocally critical of Islam and Islamism today seem to come from the far right. You come from the left. What is the substance of your criticism, and how does it differ from that which we hear from the nationalist, anti-immigration camp?

Maryam Namazie: Well, I don't agree that most of the criticism comes from the far right. I think that's a narrative we're often fed, whereas if you look at a large amount of the resistance that takes place against Islamism, whether it's from the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, or the diaspora of immigrants and refugees who have fled those regions, you do find that a lot of those people are on the left. So, I work with lots of women's rights' campaigners, for example, secularists who are very much on the left... I think it's not the far right that's the only vocal opposition. It's been portrayed as such, in the same way as it's been portrayed that Islamists represent Muslims.

There's a big difference between a left or human perspective in this fight against Islamism and a far right perspective. Fundamentally, I think the difference is that the far-right politics is also a politics of hate very similar to Islamist politics. Islamism is also a far right movement. If you look at the far right, they are primarily defending what they consider a "Christian" West, vis-a-vis a "foreign" religion: Islam, and what they consider foreigners. And it's very much based on placing collective blame on Muslims and migrants, seeing them as one and the same with Islamists. My perspective, and the perspective of many of the people who fight with me, is human-centered. Islamism is a fascist movement, we have to be able to oppose it. Islam is a religion, we have to be able to criticize it, whilst defending universal values, secularism, and equality between men and

women. Not placing collective blame, and seeing dissent amongst those deemed 'other' as well. So I think there's a huge difference between the positions.

CA: But perhaps while in Muslim majority countries, these criticisms are going to be secularist and humanist, in the West the dynamic is slightly flipped. You've been very critical of Western liberals for what you see as their siding with right-wing Islamist movements in their attempt to defend multiculturalism and anti-racist values. But isn't that just a product of the fact that in America the foremost critic of Islam right now is Donald Trump, so anyone who wants to be on the left is going to have to side with Islam in order to be against racism?

MN: But again, I don't think that's true. I think that's the image that's portrayed by government and the media. It's a very simplistic narrative, where Islamists represent Muslims, and obviously that's not true... Both sides use the same narrative, that of multiculturalism and cultural relativism, even though they reach separate conclusions. In practice, both sides see the Muslim community as a homogeneous community, and therefore the regressive Left feels that it needs to side with the Islamists if it's going to defend the "Muslim community," whereas the far right blames Muslims for Islamism and therefore attacks all Muslims. They both have a simplistic view of communities and societies. In fact, there are so many people on the front lines, fighting against the religious right. Unfortunately, they seem to be invisible in the mainstream media. So if it weren't for social media, no one would know of me, and still really no one knows of me, even though I've been fighting Islamism for more than twenty-five years. The people I gathered together at a 2014 secularism conference are battling various religious right

"The regressive Left feels that it needs to side with the Islamists if it's going to defend the 'Muslim community,' whereas the far right blames Muslims for Islamism and therefore attacks all Muslims. They both have a simplistic view of communities and societies."

movements, whether it's the Buddhist right in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, whether it's the Hindu Right, whether it's the Jewish Right in Israel and the settlements, or the Christian right and so forth. Very often we don't see the many people who are standing up to the religious right in various contexts.

CA: How do you carve out a stance that criticizes both the homogenizing effects of left-wing multiculturalism as well as the racism of the right? Because obviously sometimes you'll have to defend the rights of people you disagree with, even Islamists, when they're being subjected to bigotry.

MN: It goes back to a point that has been made by [British secularist writer] Kenan Malik, that with the rise of identity politics, solidarity is now either with identities or against identities rather than with ideals, social and political movements, and dissenters. But it's quite clear cut: if I side with humanity, then it's very easy to be anti-Islamism, anti-imperialism, anti-racism, and pro-universal rights. In fact, it makes perfect sense. The left can't be against one kind of fascism, but then defend another kind of fascism, the Islamists. Similarly, the far right only feigns to care about women's rights when Islam is involved. They're quite happy if abortion clinics are being bombed or Planned Parenthood's funding is being cut. In that kind of politics, there's no consistency. But when you have a politics that's centered on the human being, not culture, not religion, not limited self-interest, that's left politics and what the left has traditionally stood for. Unfortunately, with decades of multiculturalism and cultural relativism, the brains of many people on the left have completely rotted; cultural relativism is in the DNA of much of the left now.

CA: Surely there's a defensible version of multiculturalism, though? Because presumably what you mean by that term is legitimizing anything that occurs in another culture simply because it's in another culture, and allowing that to trump universal human rights. But at the same time, there is an important

principle in recognizing differences among peoples and allowing those differences to flourish. So what should people who want to be multicultural aspire to be?

MN: I think multiculturalism as a lived experience is a very positive thing. But that's not what "multiculturalism" is today; it's a social policy. So, in Britain today, multiculturalism as a social policy segregates and divides people into ethnic and religious communities. And what we're seeing is a push toward separate faith schools, separate courts even, as well as separate faith-based social services. So because people are seen as having their own culture, with government willing to outsource its services to regressive faith organizations, who basically manage minority communities on behalf of the state. So we no longer have the universal concept of people being citizens irrespective of their beliefs and backgrounds. And it's not just in Britain, it's a global policy. So it's like what happened after the Iraq war, it's the Iraq-ization of the world, split into different ethnicities and religions and never just human. And it segregates and separates people to the point where it seems like we no longer have a common humanity, and the only thing that matters is religion and culture.

Don't forget, also, that even people within a religion practice it in many different ways. And when you say that this is one "Muslim community," for example, you're basically holding as the marker of that community those with power, those with influence, the most regressive and conservative forces. And given that we live in an age in which Islamism has so much power and influence, it's actually handing over communities to the Islamists. That's a very dangerous thing, so we need to be clear about these distinctions.

CA: Would you say, then, that people just need to maintain a clear distinction between "Islam" and "Islamism"? Or would you say that Islam itself is inherently problematic?

MN: There's a huge difference between Islamism and Islam, in the sense that Islamism is a political movement; it has state power. Obviously that's very different from a belief. Though I think all religions, including Islam, are regressive and inhuman, filled with homophobia and misogyny. I think we have so many wonderful ideas in the 21st century, that we don't need to rely on something passé. But that's my personal opinion, that doesn't mean people don't have a right to their religion and to believe what they want.

Religion is a lived experience, not just a faith. A lot of people are born into the faith, like myself, you don't really have a choice because of the geography where you are born or the parents to whom you are born. You're deemed to be that religion, so religious affiliation has very little choice involved. You've got it stamped on you from birth, often it's even stamped in your passport without your permission. So you grow into this religion without really choosing what you want, and what you don't want. So you find that there are plenty of Muslims who have never read the Koran; they know religion from their parents and schools. That's why not everyone who is Muslim agrees with everything in the Koran, the same way not everyone who is Christian agrees with the Old Testament. People pick and choose, and they

mold religion in a way that's suitable to their lives. That's why making distinction between Islam and Islamism versus ordinary believers is important.

CA: Does that, then, speak to the possibility for a moderate and liberal reformed version of Islam? Or do you believe ultimately that's not possible?

MN: For myself, as an atheist, I really don't care what people want to do with their religion. That's their prerogative, but the more religion is deformed the better. The more it's dragged into the 21st Century, the better. But when it's in a position of political power, then it's a power question rather than a question of personal belief, and it has life and death implications for people. So then it's an issue for all of us. For me, I think if we can push it out of the state, out

Unfortunately, I think because the mainstream left, the visible left, is very much pro-Islamist, you have people who actually want to join the left because they care about social justice ultimately being handed over to the Islamists. I've met ex-Muslims who became Islamists via Stop the War Coalition meetings and such.

CA: Most of the people you're talking about would vigorously dispute that they are in any way pro-Islamist. They would say they are acting against racism, rather than acting in favor of Islamism.

MN: I can't see how they can deny it, when they actively defend the Iranian regime, actively defend the Assad regime, and in doing so betray the working class and the left. They have segregated meetings, they call for women

"Unfortunately, with decades of multiculturalism and cultural relativism, the brains of many people on the left have completely rotted; cultural relativism is in the DNA of much of the left now."

of power, it will actually allow a lot of people to breathe. Not just ex-Muslims like myself, but many practicing Muslims as well, who don't want to live according to the prescriptions of the Iranian regime or the Saudi regime or ISIS, or even the supposedly nicer versions like the Jordanian one. They don't want to abide by Jordanian law or Indonesian law.

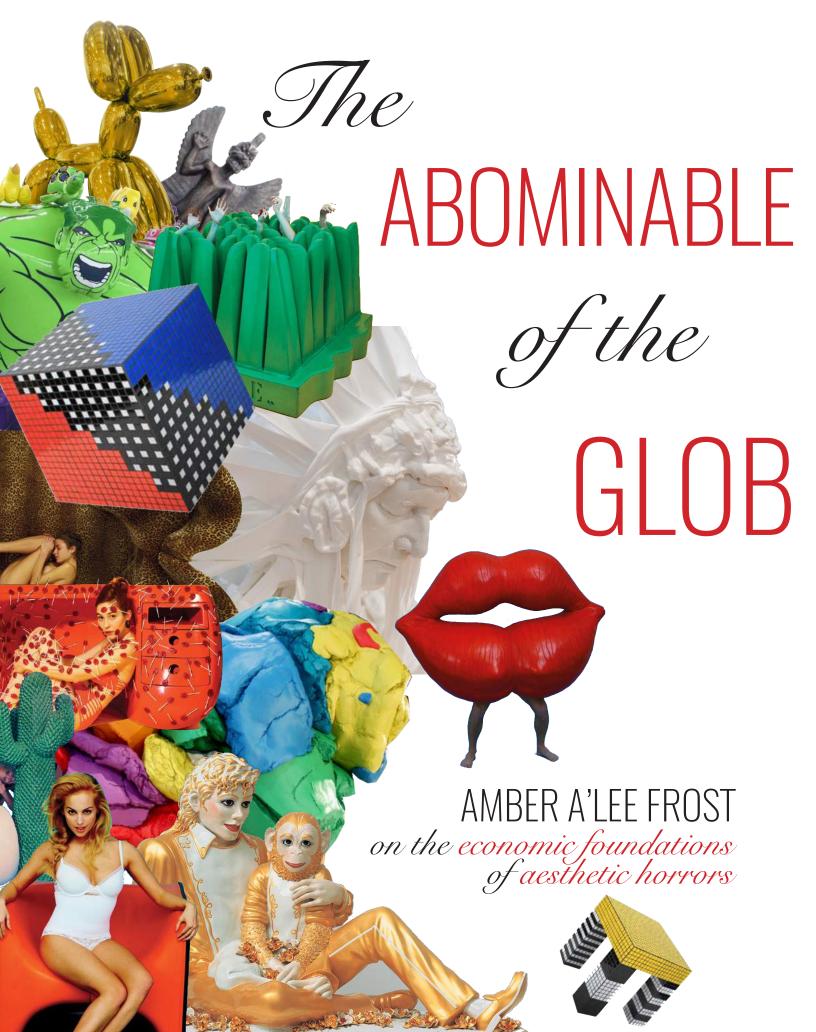
CA: You say Islamism is a political movement. To what extent, then, should we be talking about its political rather than religious causes? A lot of young men who join ISIS, for example, are disaffected and alienated rather than being particularly devout. Is this really a poisonous set of ideas, or is it a product of people's conditions?

MN: Of course you can believe in Islam and not be an Islamist, like my parents for example. So it's not necessarily religion that's the problem. There are a lot of religious people who I work with, who are active on my side against Islamism and for equality. But when it comes to Islamism as a political movement, to say simply that there are young people who are disaffected isn't the whole truth. There are many people who are disaffected who don't turn out to be fascists. The same is true in the West; you've got lots of people for example who are white and working class. Well, some might become fascists, other will become unionists and leftists. I'm someone who is disaffected too but who has gone toward the left. I think this equation, with the oppressed always necessarily becoming fascists, is quite offensive when you think about it, because there are many who aren't.

to veil in support of women in Iraq, they've done this at meetings I've been in. They've kicked out activists, friends of mine, who were at the Stop the War protests with banners against the Iranian regime. They're actively defending a section of Islamists, and so for them to say that's not the case, is dishonest at the very least. As Algerian sociologist Marieme Helie Lucas says: "By supporting fundamentalists, they simply chose one camp in a political struggle, without acknowledging it."

CA: Obviously you find yourself in a somewhat rare position, seeing that you're uncomfortable both with the Left and Right perspectives on this...

MN: I don't think I hold a very rare position. There are so many like me, which is why I feel quite comfortable with my position, I don't feel like I need to back down, I don't feel alone, I don't feel under attack. One of the things I am trying to show is that my position, this left, human-centered perspective, is actually very mainstream, including in Iran, Iraq. In Iraq you see mass demonstrations with placards saying "Neither Shia nor Sunni but Secularism," but you won't find one media outlet reporting on that. Everyone knows bin Laden's name, but how many people know those heroes in the Middle East and North Africa who are leftists and secularists and fighting at great risk to their lives? That's where I see myself coming from, considering my background as an Iranian and the Iranian revolution, which was left-leaning but which was expropriated by the forces of Islamism. �



TASTE

AL RICH





AST MAY, WITH LITTLE TO NO fanfare, the Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet in New York City closed down after 12 years, leaving about 16 dancers and about 10 administrators out of a job. The company's dissolution, quietly announced

on *Observer.com*, was a particularly tragic loss for the dance world, which requires an innovative atmosphere to sustain itself.

Funding for even venerable ballets grows scarcer and scarcer, and more experimental operations like Cedar Lake are even more vulnerable. It's a sort of "last hired, first fired" set of priorities, and as a result, the institution of ballet itself is threatened with stagnation. Swan Lake and The Nutcracker are exemplary classics to be sure, but without daring and contemporary new ballets, the artform itself becomes relegated to antiquity. In America specifically, ballet increasingly smacks of a bygone era, making it less attractive to potential funders.

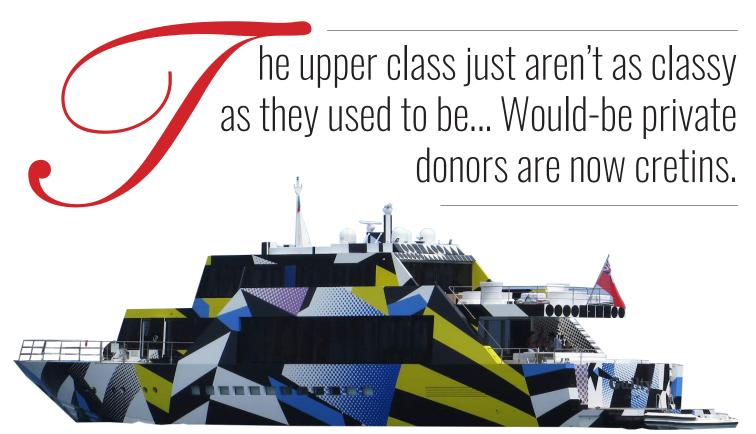
So the bankrolling of ballets has been left to a few super-wealthy benefactors. For Cedar Lake, it was Walmart heiress Nancy Walton Laurie, who invested \$11 million of her estimated \$4.5 billion fortune to found the project. Laurie gave Cedar Lake a custom-built theater and rehearsal space in Chelsea, and stocked it with a full roster of talent. Boasting job security nearly unheard-of in the dance world, Laurie paid the staff and dancers full-time salaries with vacation, health insurance and even dental.

Unfortunately, the company was notoriously mismanaged. Turnover was high; the bestowing of dental coverage didn't compensate for otherwise-dire working conditions. The dancers were actually fined for lateness and performance mistakes, a shockingly repressive practice unheard of even in the legendarily regimented dance world.

Both former dancers and employees would later paint Cedar Lake as the vanity project of an imprudent billionaire, who was, unfortunately, their only real donor. Her whims lent the project both its generosity and its tyranny, and when the whims shifted, the ballet was no more.

N RECENT CONVERSATION, A PROFESSIONAL OPERA singer lamented to me the the state of his profession under recent funding woes. The trajectory for an opera singer, he told me, used to be a fairly established route. A singer would graduate from a conservatory, then spend a couple of years performing for some backwater German town to hone their skills—a sort of apprenticeship that both developed the artist's voice and brought opera—a much more appreciated artform in Europe—to a smaller community.

Such is no longer the case. The austerity measures taken across Europe have dealt arts funding a serious blow, particularly in the less wealthy countries. In 2012, *The New York Times* reported that not only were the smaller opera houses getting the ax, but even once sacrosanct institutions were under fire; the



Dakis Joannou's yacht, "The Guilty," designed by Jeff Koons. "Guilty of being the world's ngliest yacht," presumably, among a number of other possible crimes. By the way, this photo wasn't taken by us. Presumably it's copyrighted. We definitely haven't asked permission. Fortunately, we have that tonable loophode called the Fair Use Exception. 17 U.S. Code § 107 tells us that "the fair use of a copyrighted works... for purposes such as criticism, comment... is not an infringement of copyright." Well, you'd be hard-pressed to say we weren't criticizing the thing. Just to clear up any confinion: it is the optifical Current Affairs position. It's the photo that's optifical current pring. "That owers the yealt art, not the yealt art, not the world. It's the photo that's opyrighted, thus it's the photo you have to be criticizing, not the yealt art, not the wealt art, or the protocopy and the photo, you have to be criticizing, not the yealt." Afrights, fine. We can bandle that. We can easily criticize the photo, too. Happy to take a gratuitous swipe at the photographer, if it means everything will be sorted. So: to the person who photographed this yacht: you have soiled the eyes of the world. What previously only a few unfortunate Grecian seageers were forced to view; you have now foisted upon the entire world. It will take one hell of a lot of photos of covered bridges and babbling streams to make up for having taken this pitture, kid. Perhaps in the future choose subject matter that doesn't bayonet its audience in the eyeballs. There, Xahi sacks, photo sucks. Fair use.

legendary La Scala opera house in Milan was landed with a \$9 million dollar deficit that year. Smaller countries like the Netherlands lost 25% of their arts funding, and Portugal dispensed with its Ministry of Culture entirely.

Some companies attempted to adapt to shoe-string budgets by going "punk"—doing away with famously grand productions in favor of sparser shows, and even a few "experimental" one-man performances.

"It's austerity for opera," proclaimed the exasperated tenor. When I admitted to him that the only opera I can afford these days are sparse, DIY productions at a loft in Bushwick, he was encouraging, saying "that's great—just go." But there's no getting around now the fact that there's something missing from a minimalist Carmen; no matter how "experimental" it might be, it's not a vision fully realized.

"The thing about opera is," he said, "you get a lot of people working together to create this massive spectacle, and then it's over. And all you have to take home with you is the experience." The creation of such coordinated, ephemeral spectacles requires both serious committment and serious material resources.

HE GILDED AGE TRADITION OF WEALTHY benefactors is clearly over. The very wealthy-now often nouveau riche and unbound to the trappings of aristocratic noblesse *oblig*e—no longer consider themselves stewards of the sublime. As classical music scholar John Halle opined in "The Last Symphony" in Jacobin magazine, the upper and ascending classes no longer subject

their children to the rigorous training necessary for classical musical scholarship. As Halle says, "today's elite lacks the patience and culture for classical music." Consequently, the patronage system has become rather passé, and even the odd anachronistic billionaire-funded ballet company might find itself dismissed on a whim. Put bluntly, the upper class just aren't as classy as they used to be.

So too has public funding for high art taken a beating. While Americans might yearn for the sort of well-funded public arts programs they imagine Europeans prioritize, the reality is much bleaker. Despite Europe's zealous emphasis on promoting a rich culture for a united continent, the European Union is constantly hacking away at centuries-old institutions in the name of belt-tightening.

But if the would-be private donors are now cretins, and public funding has been slashed to bits, who finances art today?

FIRST ENCOUNTERED THE NAME DAKIS JOANNOU WHILE working as an arts and culture writer for a fun counterculture blog. Scouring the Internet for something subversive to cover for our "arty dirtbag" readership, I happened across a newly-published coffee table book, 1968: Radical Italian Design, which collected photos of a number of garish pieces of impractical-looking furniture. Since strange furniture always gets the clicks, the book made for a perfect post. It was doubly improved by the fact that the furniture in question was so unequivocally terrible.

Radical Italian Design was a bold avant-garde movement out of the late 1960's that eschewed both form and function on principle, meaning the furniture it inspired is both intentionally garish and practically dysfunctional. The design philosophy is one of overt aesthetic and utilitarian offense—it is ugly, it is useless, and that is all on purpose, with none of the cheek that could even give it a campy appeal. I cannot stress this enough; it's just terrible, ugly fucking furniture.

What interested me most, however, was that I had never heard of Radical Italian Design before. I'm no design expert, but I can at least distinguish a Verner Panton from an Eames, and I like to think I am passably aware of most of the significant stuff. I was also very familiar with the Memphis Group, another Italian design movement of slightly less offensive garish white elephants, once aptly described by The San Francisco Chronicle as "a shotgun wedding between Bauhaus and Fisher-Price." But Memphis Group looks highly practical and understated in comparison to the Radical movement. How, then, I wondered, did this book about an unpleasant but relatively minor—design movement come to be?

It turns out that every single piece of furniture photographed for 1968 belonged to one man: Dakis Joannou, a Greek-Cypriot billionaire, industrialist, hotel magnate, the largest importer of Coca-Cola in Europe and Africa, and one of the most famous art collectors in the world. 1968: Radical Italian Design is actually a project of the Athens-based Deste Foundation, Joannou's arts non-profit, and an organization that conveniently allows him to monetize and promote his own personal art collection.

Deste has produced a rather extensive series of books advertising and legitimizing Joannou's private collections. In 2012, for example, just as Greece began its descent into a dire humanitarian crisis, Joannou hosted a show of selections from his drawing collection at the Deste Foundation's Project Space—a few months later, the show was made into a book. Joannou titled the show and subsequent anthology "Animal Spirits," after the Keynesian economic term describing the "spontaneous urge to action, rather than inaction," meaning the decisions we make that are borne of some primal human instinct, rather than measured or calculated reasoning.

If it seems like an arcane non-sequitur to name an art show for the uber-wealthy after an economic concept, consider it damage control. "Animal Spirits" actually ran as a substitute for an even ritzier art event of Joannou's, in which 300 or so of his friends would travel to the vacation destination island of Hydra—the so-called "gem of the Saronic Gulf"—to party in opulence, and bask in the beauty, sun and art. The reason for the cancellation? The weekend coincided with the Greek elections. Even Joannou, generally insensitive to all matters of decency, admitted that going forward with the show would have been "inappropriate."

Joannou is a big fan of the "Animal Spirits" idea, and the romance of such a mystical concept of rugged individualism guides his hand when it comes building his art collection. As Greece struggled to keep its people fed and housed, Joannou's billions—which remained relatively untouched due to tax loopholes for the shipping industry—never quite trickled down to destitute Greeks, not to mention Greek cultural institutions.

In a glowing profile in *Departures*, a self-described "luxury" and "lifestyle" magazine, Joannou was quick to explain why "support isn't helping anybody. In the beginning, a lot of people thought that's what I was doing, and they would ask for funding for this or that. I said, 'I'm sorry, I'm not into that.' It's about creating a platform."

And who has Joannou given a platform to? As a collector



Some pieces of Italian Radical Furniture. Whimsical, but useless. Oh, these photos are copyrighted, too. But our distaste for them runs even deeper than our distaste for the poor schmoe who photographed the yacht. For these pictures are by Italian surrealist Maurizio Cattelan, a man known mostly for his prank-art involving Hitler sculptures, middle-fingers, and nooses. Cattelan produces an incomprehensible art magazine called Toilet Paper, and his most well-known work depicts the Pope being struck by a meteorite. So of course he was the perfect guy to photograph Dakis Joannou's furniture collection, both of them sharing an affinity for deliberately payee gay to possign to Lass, southours symmune concent, one of your starting at algority for attention that teasteless and decadent neo-Dada. Current Affairs doesn't care much for Cattelan either, since our editorial line is firmly against both lavatorial humour and Hitler. "But what is it about these photos specifically?" our Lanyer rudely interjects. Abbh, frankly they're just too damned **red** for our liking. There, fair use.





of work from around the globe (though rarely, as many of his critics point out, Greek artists) he's actually most famous for giving the world Jeff Koons, from whom he purchased the very first piece of his collection in 1985.

The now-famous sculpture was "One Ball Total Equilibrium Tank," which Joannou purchased for for \$2,700. The sculpture, best described as a basketball suspended in a glass fishtank, was a big break in the early days of Koons's art career, not too long after he had left a career as a Wall Street commodities broker. Since then, of course, Koons has exploded into an infamous art superstar of sorts, even though his critical reception has been decidedly mixed—Nation art critic Arthur Danto described his work as "aesthetic terrorism." Koons's works have increased in both scale and price, with his massive metallic sculpture "Balloon Dog" raking in a cool \$58.4 million. And who could blame Christie's auction house for bidding so high? It's big! It's shiny! It looks like a balloon that has been twisted into the shape of a dog!

Koons was actually so possessive of this innovative idea that when) hief Dakis's project isn't just bohemian wealth run amok... it's explicitly ideological....

one gallery began selling little balloon dog bookends in their gift shop, he sent them a cease and desist letter. Koons makes tchotchkes, but they're art tchotchkes, and whether it's a porcelain sculpture of Michael Jackson and his chimp Bubbles, or a series of inflatable toy Incredible Hulks adorned with bric-à-brac, everything he makes is immediately recognizable, insistently conspicuous, and totally unchallenging.

Now of course Koons and Joannou are dear friends, with Joannou facing scrutiny for charging Koons with curating a show of works pulled from Joannou's collection at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, where Joannou is also a museum trustee. A public museum showing the private collection of one of the host muesuem's own trustees would be enough to raise eyebrows, but Joannou handed the reigns over to Koons, his own prized pony, so to speak. The conflict of interest was glaring and extremely controversial, but the show went on. Wealth confers license to operate as one pleases, no matter how noisily one's peers may register their ethical objections.

If that incident wasn't incestuous enough, Koons also famously designed Joannou's mega-yacht, The Guilty, which is quite possibly the ugliest boat in the world. The 115foot long luxury liner is wrapped in a World War I British Naval camouflage called "Dazzle," which was designed to evade enemy fire with a mish-mash of angular chaos. If you were to take a helicopter overhead, you'd see a massive mural of Iggy Pop on top, an artist whom Koons considers appropriately "Dionysian" for the setting. Ironically, Joannou has had to paper over the notorious "camouflage" of The Guilty, in order to disguise it from paparazzi. (Or perhaps to keep out design-enthusiast marauders?)

In a 2013 interview with Forbes, Joannou described the design concept thusly: "We did what we wanted; style was irrelevant. We designed a boat in an antistyle method. We have no rules, no programs, no plans." The description echoes the ideological influence of Joannou's own Italian Radical Design collection, which is, coincidentally, housed in the "living room" of the mega-yacht. The hideous is not to be spurned but embraced; style was irrelevant.

At first glance, Joannou's collecting habits may seem like the eccentric vagaries of a an insanely wealthy magnate searching for legacy and legitimacy. I won't deny the eccentricity charge, or the role of ego. One of Joannou's beneficiaries, painter George Condo, has immortalized Joannou in surrealist portraiture. Another Deste favorite, sculptor Pawel Althamer, sculpted his dear friend Dakis as a Native American chief in full war bonnet, taking a cast of Joannou's own face for accuracy. (See collage.)

But Chief Dakis's project isn't just bohemian wealth run amok, it's explicitly ideological, the Animal Spirits of a man

> who fancies himself a Howard Roarke visionary, despite his total lack of credentials as a doven.

> ND THIS IS THE STATE OF FINE ARTS \mathcal{U} under contemporary capitalism. Classics and antiquity have lost cultural cache in the age of disruption, and there is no longer an aristocratic imperative to support noble projects of lofty ambition. Today we've neither dutiful Kings, Vaticans, or robber barons to seduce the hoi polloi into complicity with visions of the trans-

plendent. Nor do the experiments in democracy we deem "states" seem to be doing much better, having withdrawn much of the already measly funding available for highbrow cultural endeavors.

Even dictators don't care to seem interested in bribing the proletariat with great works any more. Before being deposed, Moammar Gadhafi shelled out big bucks for private concerts from such virtuosos as Beyoncé and Mariah Carey. Despite intense criticism, Nicki Minaj took home \$2 million last year to play for Angolan dictator José Eduardo dos Santos. And forget about the nouveaux riches investing in art for the people. Crooked pharmaceutical executive Martin Shkreli is despised for jacking up drug prices, but he is only slightly less despised for spending \$2 million on the only existing pressing of a "secret" Wu-Tang Clan album and then threatening to destroy it.

So what we have now, if we're lucky, is the odd production of Swan Lake (because it's still good), a valiant but tragically austere Carmen (because it's the best we can do), and Jeff Koons, because his work flatters Dakis Joannou's vision of a Dionysian rebel.

For the new era of bourgeoisie, the symphony, the ballet, the opera and the museum hold less appeal than a pop star playing your private party, and they certainly can't compete with holding court in an art empire of your own design. The ruling classes ain't what they used to be, and vulgar narcissists like Joannou aren't content with anything short of taking the products of their patronage home with them—and he does, all aboard The Guilty, bobbing atop his fugly floating Versailles. ❖

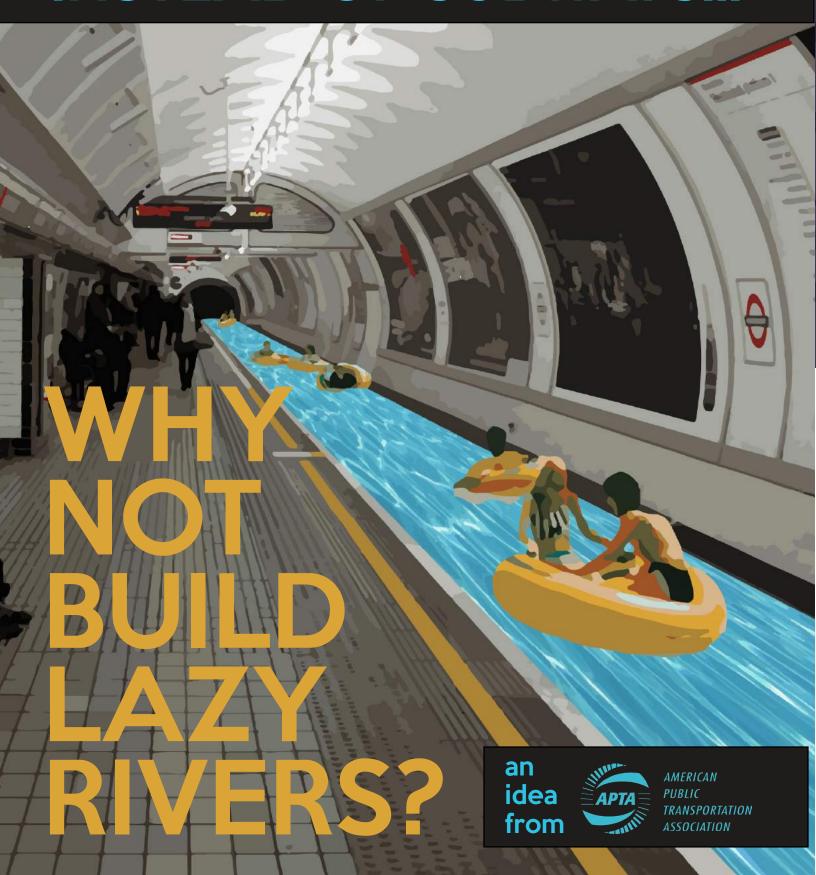
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INSTEAD OF SUBWAYS...





Thanks to social media, discourse is less dependent on mainstream media gatekeepers than ever before and marginalized voices have platforms with infinite reach. Women can still participate if they're housebound, isolated or have caring responsibilities that would make attending meetings in person unmanageable. Theoretically, it's easier than ever before for people to act collectively.

It's a shame, then, that the reality of online feminism—and this is coming from someone who might have achieved a lot more with their life if it wasn't for the countless hours wasted trawling gender politics hashtags on Twitter and Tumblr—falls so drastically short of this seemingly wondrous potential.

I started out a wide-eyed, keen believer in the power of social media to radically democratize debate. Several years later, it seems clear to me that it has massively backfired. Pleasing as it is to hear new voices previously snubbed by media and politics, it has become apparent that social media doesn't just enable conversations, it also shapes them.

Let me present a case study from my own experience. Amongst a decent chunk of Twitter-using U.K. feminists, there has been an extremely toxic atmosphere for quite a while now. It began when battle lines were drawn based on what have since become the two primary divisions in online feminism: trans-inclusive vs. trans-exclusive conceptions of gender and decriminalisation of sex work vs. the Nordic model.

There's no logical reason the opinions must be related, but people who believe womanhood is dependent on being assigned female at birth and those who want to criminalize the purchase of sex are commonly grouped as "radical feminists." Individuals holding these views are negatively labeled "TERFs" (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) and "SWERFs" (sex work-exclusionary feminist) by opponents. In turn, these groups are contemptuous

of so-called "liberal feminism." Worthwhile communication between the two camps is almost non-existent. Each accuses the other of perpetuating misogyny rather than fighting it and people involved are more likely to caricature opposing views than engage sincerely. Often, things get deeply personal and nasty. Those who support the decriminalization of sex work for any reason are frequently accused of being "rape apologists" or part of a "pimp lobby," even if they're current sex workers themselves. From the other side, tweets like "Why date a terf when you could date someone who isn't a pile of turds?" are not unrepresentative. Particular academics and journalists are singled out as almost totemic hate figures. Trans women and former sex workers are equally at risk of being labeled TERFs or SWERFs.

Trans inclusion and sex work legislation are both big issues with significant repercussions, so it's not surprising people who disagree about them aren't able to simply put aside their differences. Real life isn't just one big college debating club. On the other hand, the selection of these issues as the defining divisions in feminism is arbitrary. I know, for example, that a libertarian could share my trans-inclusive and pro-decriminalization stance yet support slashing the welfare state in a way the would harm many women. It's not clear why I should consider that person more my feminist ally than someone who thinks criminalizing the purchasing of sex is the solution to harms associated with the sex trade.

In practice, online debate lacks a major strength of an in-person quarrel—it does not end. Instead, the arguments that caused the original rift are reenacted repeatedly in a way that is entirely performative—geared towards reinforcing divisions rather than promoting shared understanding. Neither side shows a genuine interest in either persuading their opponents or listening to their points. If you assume the goal is constructive conversation, it's hard to see why anyone still bothers.

Instead, social media platforms like Twitter exacerbate the worst of our collectivist nature. Endless, circular, unproductive arguments allow people to clearly signal their membership of their chosen feminist "team." The more extreme an individual is in their position and the more hostile they are to opponents, the clearer the signal.

Though the core basis of the division remains, the opposing group identities have expanded to cover a greater range of issues than sex work and definitions of gender. It has a chilling effect on open, sincere discussion when people are wary of being castigated as belonging to the wrong "team" if they express an opinion out of line with in-group consensus. Social media has the potential to democratize debate on a broad scale, but hierarchies have developed within online feminist discourse itself. Certain key individuals are disproportionately responsible for deciding what is considered acceptable opinion within given subgroups.

Even if debates on social media are approached sincerely, there are still factors that make amicable resolution impossible. For one thing, the fact there is a public record of everything you've said can make it harder for people to change position without feeling they're losing face. Also, the lack of non-verbal cues such as body language and tone of voice makes situations more likely to escalate. Character limits on some platforms cause people to be more blunt and less nuanced than they would otherwise, and written communication generally leaves more scope for misunderstanding. Also, even if they didn't start out that way, disagreements quickly turn into a spectator sport and end up with participants playing to the gallery.

Feminist discourse on social media also focuses disproportionately on a relatively narrow range of issues. Sex work legislation not-withstanding, the conversation topics with most traction are concerned with either language, pop culture, or identity. Conspicuously

"The peculiar nature of online debate means that not only are such factional divisions created, but that opposing groups are unable to move on in the way they might after an unproductive face-to-face quarrel."

underrepresented is consideration of issues concerning material reality. It's not that the stuff that is discussed is *always* unimportant, but it's a very limited version of feminism that doesn't position women's living conditions, their ability to care for themselves and their children, their financial independence and their ability to extract themselves from abusive situations as central concerns.

Partly, this is a reflection of wider trends rather than something specific to social media—U.S. culture has a strong influence on all aspects of the English language internet, including conversations about feminism. From a U.K. perspective, there has always been a weird class blindness to political discourse in the U.S., which lacks the labor tradition of European countries. (Admittedly, the sudden rise of Bernie Sanders may challenge these preconceptions.)

Regardless of wider influences, the very fact that discussions are happening online encourages a disconnect from material reality. Identity and language are the topics most relevant to gender as it's experienced actually on the internet, so it's logical—in some ways—that these might be the things that internet feminism focuses on. This would be less of a problem if "internet feminism" was a distinct subsection of the movement, but there are good reasons to believe that online discourse is influencing the priorities of feminism as a whole.

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is nothing
more than empty
posturing if
it's at the expense
of addressing
issues in
less affluent
women's
lives...

One of the most frustrating traits of internet feminism is the popularity of filtering all analysis of gender issues through the lens of celebrity. This can sometimes be moderately illuminating—as a way of bringing discussions of sexual consent to a wider audience, for example—but it massively inhibits understanding if everything is approached this way. When self-purportedly "intersectional" feminist analysis is only ever applied to rich and famous people, it inherently neglects the very important intersection between gender and class, meaning that issues primarily affecting poor women are ignored.

The appeal of celebrity feminism is not without its ideology. Obviously talking about celebrities is so popular in general, so celebrity-centred gender politics has widespread appeal, despite its limitations. There also seems to be a self-consciously anti-elitist element to it in some cases. Talking seriously about celebrity is seen as a rebellion against people who dismiss pop culture—particularly the bits that are stereotypically more interesting to women—as trivial. Though there is some value to this idea, anti-elitism is nothing more than empty posturing if it's at the expense of addressing issues that have a material impact on less affluent women's lives.

I don't want to read too much into snappy but facile social media posts, but it worries me that thousands of people apparently agree with the claim that "a person's take on Kim [Kardashian] tells you where they are on gender." At the very least, the number of shares these kinds of Tweets and Tumblr blogs receive demonstrates that the platforms don't necessarily promote real insight.

Perhaps the defining feature of online feminist discourse the celebration of individual "badass women"—borrows closely from the idol-worship of celebrity culture. Often, the women praised in this way actually are celebrities. Other women designated feminist heroes on social media—and on websites, like *Buzzfeed*, geared towards tapping into online conversations to generate page views—include Kurdish soldiers, anti-FGM campaigners, plus-size models, teenagers who've defied dress codes and women who have said something sassy to men on online dating websites.

There is nothing inherently harmful about praising particular women as role-models. The worry is that a rampantly individualistic form of feminism is replacing serious consideration of women's unified interests as a group. It's telling that most coverage of 18-year-old Malala Yousafzai—one of the most widely celebrated 'badass women' of all—doesn't even mention that she happens to be a serious, committed Marxist, an ideology that totally rejects the idea of individuals as the movers of history. Instead, the media's Malala profiles prefer to focus on her less insurrectionary qualities, such as a couple of complimentary sentences she once spoke about fellow 'badass woman' Emma Watson.

Given that the culture of the internet has always been fast-paced, disconnected from the material world, predisposed towards impact over nuance and conflict over cooperation, it is probably foolish to think social media could be a neutral platform for discussing feminist issues. At the same time, the potential for mass participation is a huge genuine benefit. Feminists who are concerned with materially improving women's lives need to ask ourselves: what can we do to minimize the negatives and maximize the positives of talking about this stuff online?

The answer can't possibly be carrying on as we are now. *



in which prominent figures answer asinine questions with Jamelle Bouie of Slate & Ryan Cooper of The Week

This Month: Our Nihilist Press Corps; or, WHY COVER TRUMP WHEN THE WORLD COULD BE BEAUTIFUL?

Articles Written By Jamelle Bouie About Donald Trump (11/14/15 - 12/1/15)

Due to space constraints, the following list is incomplete and has left off a number of articles by Mr. Bouie that, while they are about Mr. Trump, do not feature Mr. Trump's name in the headline and are thus make for somewhat less impactful list entries.

- "Donald Trump Is A Conservative Media Creation," Nov. 23, 2015. "Donald Trump Is Actually A Mod-

- of Iowa? Donald Trump Insults

"Donald Trump Is A Fascist," Nov.

- erate Republican," Nov.19, 2015.
- "Why The Paris Attacks Will Only Boost Donald Trump," Nov. 16, 2015.
- "How Stupid Are The People Everyone," Nov. 14, 2015.

In this edition of the Current Affairs Interview, we confront two prominent political journalists about their borderline-obsessive coverage of Donald Trump.

Current Affairs: Six out of your last twelve articles appear to be about Donald Trump. Is there truly this much to say?

Jamelle Bouie. Slate: Number one, ves. Number two, I write four to five times a week, so that's not really saying much.

Current Affairs: My goodness, you mean there's mountains more where that came from! Mr. Bouie, Current Affairs pleads with you to devote your considerable writerly energy to other subjects. 50% Trump is no good.

JB: The vast majority of my work has nothing to do with Trump.

CA: A statement one wishes were true but one belied by the record.

JB: So, what percentage of the 60 stories I've written since September do you think are about Trump?

Ryan Cooper, The Week [unprompted]: I'd bet money it's no more than 10% Trump.* But more to the point, he's been leading the GOP field

CA: Sorry, we forgot that political writing today means writing over and over about GOP frontrunners. Many apologies. [You probably have] many stories about how other Republicans are

At this point, Jamelle Bouie evidently became so disgusted that he departed the conversation.

RC: Jamelle and I write about all kinds of stuff. But, yes, Republicans are wrong about virtually everything, and it matters.

CA: Don't think we don't spot the slip in your logic, Cooper! You've used "Republicans are wrong and it matters" to justify "My writing about Republicans being wrong matters."

RC: It matters as much as anything else anyone writes matters, i.e. not very much. Neither you nor I nor anyone else is going to solve climate change with a couple of fucking blog posts.

CA: Then one might as well have a blog about knitting as do your job.

RC: Pretty much! Except I ain't gonna make rent with that.

CA: Odd that political writers only pretend to care about solving the issues. Really they're just feeding the mill to pay the rent.

RC: It might occasionally make some difference. But you've got to be insanely deluded to think writers are a major political actor.

CA: But if this is true, then why write about Donald Trump's day-to-day idiocies instead of something else?

RC: I don't! But the fact that a quasi-fascist is leading the GOP is interesting.

CA: But this was what you initially defended. "Why, Jamelle Bouie, do you write so many Trump articles?" "Because he is important."

RC: He is, I just don't cover his "day-to-day idiocies," [which are] mainly

*It's actually 18%. Having said he would "bet money" that the THE number was under 10%. Mr. Cooper can send his check to: CURRENT AFFAIRS ORGANIZATION P.O. Box 441394. West Somerville, MA 02144

LEGAL NOTICE

that the subjects intended to be interviewed by tirely from the results of such public Twit nt. It has been edited solely fo mar and clarity.

POST-INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

from legendary journalist SALLY JESSY RAPHAEL



hat depressing creatures these journalists are! What a tragedy it must be to live this way, forever conscious of the superficiality and purposelessness of one's writing, yet doomed to continue pouring it forth. How can one inhabit such a position without lapsing into despair?

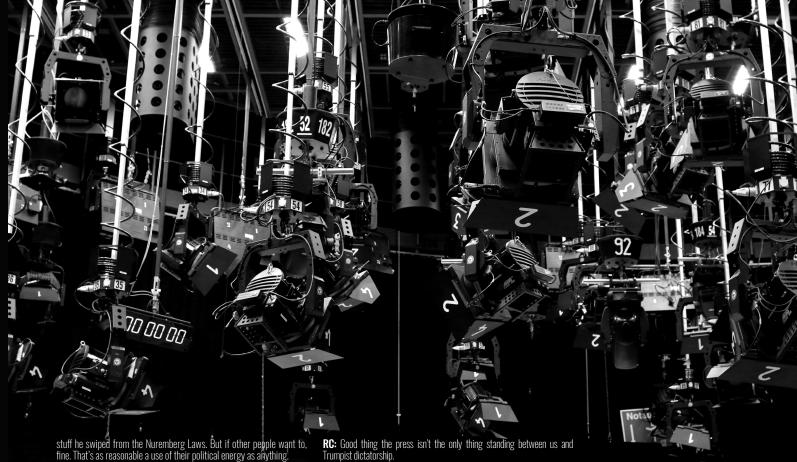
If our conversation with Mr. Cooper is any indication, the answer is that one cannot. It is, in fact, not terriby fun writing five new Trump stories per fortnight. Thus one only has two possible means of protection against the realization of the emptiness of one's work: (1) touchy de-fensive posturing, à la Mr. Bouie (of the school that likes to say "How dare you

impugn my work!") or (2) ritual confession and self-flagellation à la Mr. Cooper (in which the journalist convinces himself that, so long as he does not pretend to do more useful work than he knows he is doing, it is acceptable to remain useless.)

There is something very odd indeed about this kind of attitude toward one's career. The political opinion-writer produces every word as if he is deeply invested in the consequences of an issue. As Mr. Cooper told us, these things matter. Yet he behaves as if these things do not matter very much at all; when confronted with the stakes he shrugs, says "Hey man, I'm just looking to pay my

The dissonance between the writer's two beliefs cannot be resolved. He believes politics have important and urgent consequences for people's lives, yet is content to twiddle his thumbs. And if one says to him "But are not not a mere thumb-twiddler?" he replies

"I mean, what do you want me to do?"
Ah, yes, the old "what are we supposed to do about it?" For aeons, it has served the cause of inaction, allowing the comfortable and slothful to rationalize their indulgences. Of course, it is easily met with an answer: "Think of something! That's your entire job!" But the political journalist is able to wall himself off from those who would place such demands upon his ingenuity.



CA: This is it! You media people are all nihilists! You do not actually think you are capable of anything. You give up the task of persuading people and just resign yourself to condemning Republican foolishness.

RC: I try every day to persuade people, I just don't have illusions about whether they'll be convinced (they won't).

CA: That doesn't sound to me like the attitude of someone who is trying very hard.

RC: Read my stuff and judge for yourself, I don't care. Every political writer in the country has been calling Trump a liar for a week straight and it hasn't done jack shit

CA: EXACTLY! We have learned that "calling him a liar" doesn't work. But this resignation to inconsequentiality seems like suicide. We called the fascists liars, they came anyway. Well, then perhaps writing columns calling them liars wasn't the best way to prevent fascism!

CA: Well, it's not exactly apparent what else is standing in the way! What exactly are you relying on here, if you believe influencing ideas is futile?

RC: Just hope the economy doesn't collapse next year. \(\'\') /

CA: A prayer, then. You literally think fascism is on the march and you're greeting it with a shruggie. If fascism threatens us, our every breathing moment should be dedicated to strategizing its destruction

RC: It has always threatened us. But the solution is proper economic policy and unions, not blog posts about non-Trump subjects.

CA: Do people know how to implement proper economic policy and successfully build unions? If not, why is the job of the writer not to figure out how this is done and then tell people how they can do it?

At this point, Mr. Cooper ceased to reply.

What is striking is how unwilling political writers are to defend their profession. They know full well that in the age of digital media, the Internet is a sprawling, cavernous echo chamber, and that their job is to make the first noise, so that others may reverberate it across time and space. But they have no aspiration toward altering the situation. They do not believe it can be altered, even though they themselves are the ones who remake it anew every day.

What an aggravating abdication of duty! What fatalistic suicidal resignation! What a cowardly self-fulfilling prophecy! Try nothing, then complain that you've failed.

Ah, but what about the question: what ought we do to, then? What would you do, Current Affairs, you arrogant little magazine, sitting about casting aspersions on decent journalists while you remain content to blow spitballs at these hardworking servants of the public good?

Oh, but we've said it already! Ask yourself a different question when you write: not "Why is Republican X wrong about Issue Y?" but rather "How can I convince someone who disagrees with me about Republican X that they are mistaken?" Of course, today's political writers take these questions to mean the same thing. Yet hey do not mean the same thing at all. If I write a column entitled "Donald Trump Is A Liar," and I document the various things this man has said that I believe are lies, and I use evidence and clear argument, I may think I have done my best. I have done nothing of the kind, however. For I have not asked myself a single question about my audience, e.g. "Will those who like Donald Trump and do not think he is a liar read an article entitled 'Donald Trump Is A Liar'? (They will not.)

"But then I am stuck," says the political writer. "They won't read it even though I'm right." No, you are not stuck. You must simply make an effort to build a writerly voice that people who disagree with you will enjoy reading. Telling them in blunt prose why their preferred candidate is a liar and a fascist is not the route to a congenial relationship between writer and audience. Perhaps be a friend to potential hostile readers, instead of an antagonist.

Oh, but writers don't matter anyway, do they? So it hardly makes a difference whether you make an effort or not. But if you believe that, then for God's sake write about flowers or crochet instead. Otherwise, at least make some attempt to be useful and consequential?

TRAGIC

The morning after our interview, we received a message from Mr. Cooper in reply to our suggestion that writers should try to produce work that helps people to do the things that he wishes people would do:

"[Producing writing like that is] worth doing (and I do it) but I think you're misunderstanding the demographic profile of the average newspaper reader. 95% of journalism is infotainment for the upper middle class.'

Well, ladies and gentlemen, there you have it. The entire op/ed mill is a stupefaction racket. The sole difference between The National Enquirer and Politico is the average reader's income bracket. Thus probably safe to ignore all political media.

LEGAL NOTICE

Our post-interview analysis is not conducted by Sally Jessy Raphael, but by a skilled impersonator. Any suggestion that this column is written by the Sally Jessy Raphael is, like so much else in this world, a lie.

AND THE PINTEREST FANTASY LIFE by Yasmin Nair **Big Magic: Creative Living** Beyond Fear, 276 pp. Riverhead Books, \$24.95.

Book, *Big Magic*, is a typical product of the hybrid world of publishing today: it began as a series of TED talks, its cover was premiered on the e-commerce site Etsy, and it now exists as a 288-page text that she has referred to as a "manifesto." *Big Magic* is, on the surface, a cheery self-help manual, an optimistic and sunny nudge towards creativity for those who may hesitate to plunge headlong into making what she calls "whatever creates a revolution in your heart."

Gilbert is expansive in her definition of the "creative," and insists that writing is only one of many such endeavors available to anyone who wants to take up anything from, say, raising goats, or cross-stitch, or perhaps making quilts to sell on, well, Etsy. Still, given her experience, what she returns to most often is the world of writing.

In that sense, *Big Magic* is Gilbert's first book-length foray into writing about writing, a profession she has been a part of for nearly twenty-five years. Gilbert is also an enormously successful writer — according to *The Daily Beast*'s Lauren Streib, she has "easily" made \$10 million in royalties just from her 2007 blockbuster bestseller *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything across Italy, India, and Indonesia.*

We can assume that it is the phenomenal success of that book which made Gilbert so successful on the TED circuit and why so many are so eager for her advice.

In a time when the "creative" fields are diminished in value but also seen as potentially profitable and simultaneously good for you, it is inevitable that millions would tune in to see what a best-selling author might have to offer them in terms of advice on how to emulate her example.

The line she walks in this new book is a fuzzy one: Gilbert wants to seem assured in conveying she has insider knowledge about her field, but she doesn't want to acknowledge that being a writer is actually a profession. To do so would demystify her entire career and, really, mean that hers would be no different than the many books lining bookstores everywhere, promising everyone the best-kept secrets to publishing or the "creative life." So, instead, she presents, in *Big Magic*, not a description of how to become a writer but how to be a writer. This is entirely in keeping with the message of Eat, Pray, Love, which similarly swept aside any material considerations—how, exactly, are women to embark upon epic journeys across the globe without independent and very large means?—in favor of a can-do quasispiritual set of injunctions about uncovering one's true self. Because Big Magic is in so many ways an addendum to the earlier text, it becomes a case study of how a hyper-successful writer conceives of herself and her profession. In the end, Big Magic is not about actually helping people become better at creating work. Rather, it's about furthering the informal literary empire spawned by Eat, Pray, Love.

That's not to say that *Big Magic* is entirely without merit. Gilbert offers many useful checks against the unnecessarily dramatic stereotypes people are apt to immerse themselves in when they look for the creative life, such as the one that dictates that genius can only emerge from tormented lives. She calls for discipline in turning out work even when it seems impossible to keep at it. All of that is necessary advice—in a world where writing and/or creative work is as fetishized as it is ill-paid, it's useful for those looking to create over the course of a lifetime to know that some myths are best abandoned.

Despite such helpful admonitions, most of *Big Magic* reads like carnival puffery from a fortune-teller. Gilbert combines Oprah-esque pithiness with strange, bizarre suppositions that render her the Deepak Chopra of Creative Work.

Take, for instance, her idea about creativity or magic, the theme of the book:

And when I refer to magic here, I mean it literally. Like, in the Hogwarts sense. I am referring to the supernatural, the mystical, the



ether and into the realm of the actual.

In other words, ideas are entities looking for the perfect home in the bodies and minds of creators. To support her theory, she gives an example of a novel she once planned to write, about Brazil and rainforest development. Due to various circumstances, she eventually stopped researching and developing it. In the meantime, she became friends with Ann Patchett, a fellow writer whom she first met at a conference. The two women bonded instantly, with Patchett landing a loving

kiss on Gilbert after their panel.

They became epistolary friends as well, exchanging handwritten letters where they discussed their lives and work. Somewhere along the way, it transpired that Patchett, too, was considering a novel about Brazil with similar themes. But it was only when they met for breakfast one day that Gilbert discovered Patchett's work bore striking similarities to her own, down to their both including a protagonist who was a spinster from Minnesota.

From this coincidence, Gilbert decides that her theory is right: she had stopped working on the idea and it, presumably in a huff, floated off to take residence within Patchett's mind instead.

Somehow, it never seems to occur to Gilbert that perhaps such

body, seeking the ones that will put them forth into the world.

Or, perhaps, Gilbert simply ignores the truth, that intellectual work is rarely exclusively original, and is acted upon by factors too varied to see in the immediate moment. After all, that kind of theory would severely undercut the theme of the book which she announces quite smugly: "And that, my friends, is Big Magic."

UCH REDUCTIVE AND, REALLY, BIZARRE ASSERtions about the creative process seem out of place in a book that lays claim to helping readers get away from other myths, like the one about tormented genius. But they are in keeping with

the mystical premises of Eat, Pray, Love.

That book redefined self-help literature for women. It has, and I think rightly, been criticised as "priv-lit," dwelling too much on lifestyles only attainable by those who can afford to take a year off and travel in relative comfort, as Gilbert did. Jessa Crispin locates Gilbert's memoir in a long tradition of inwardlooking female, white memoirists who travel through foreign lands without ever considering the cultures they march through with depth or curiosity. Despite many such criticisms, the book has made Gilbert that rare thing, a multimillionaire author who will never again have to worry about financing her work.

Gilbert will always be defined as the author of *Eat, Pray, Love.* Even the republished version of her 2002 biography of Eustace Conway, *The Last American Man*, has her authorship of that memoir clearly noted on the front cover. For some

6 6 Gilbert sidesteps the institutional

and structural questions currently haunting

the landscape of the creative fields in favor

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as a lubricant for the soul.

authors—Harper Lee comes mind—the enormous success of a first book can become an albatross, an achievement that clouds and freezes one's sense of movement as a writer. But Gilbert, to her credit, has continued to write. After Eat, Pray, Love came a sequel of sorts, Committed, about the reasons why she decided to marry the man she wrote about falling in love with in the best seller. Sales were respectable, but it saw nothing like the success of Eat, Pray, Love (arguably, what could?) In 2013, Gilbert returned to fiction, and published a tome of a novel, The Signature of All

Things, which received positive reviews.

The Signature of All Things was written with the luxury of time and place. Gilbert bought the largest and oldest house built on the tallest hill in artsy Frenchtown, New Jersey.

She had the enormous attic fitted out with bookshelves and secret cabinets designed by the well-known carpenter Michael Flood. Her custom-made desk was built out of a 15-foot long slab of acacia.

But the book also meant a return to intensive research, three years spent studying arcane histories of herbs and biology. Elsewhere and in *Big Magic*, she talks about the process of the work that went into it, filling up boxes with note cards, producing a 70-page synopsis before she even began writing the book.

None of this comes to Gilbert as a set of recent habits: she has always been a writer. As she describes it in *Big Magic*, she grew up on her parents' Connecticut Christmas tree farm (her father was a Chemical Engineer who grew the trees on the side, and her mother a nurse of Swedish descent) and she and her sister had no television growing up but were encouraged to read and write and to create their own worlds. According to Gilbert, she took vows early on, actual vows, to do everything she could to become and stay a writer all her life. She moved to New York to attend New York University and received a Bachelor's in Political Science.

This is the point at which Gilbert's account of her writing life (told not chronologically but in terms of themes woven through the book) in *Big Magic* varies significantly from the reality that she has alluded to in prior work. It's not so much that she lies,

exactly, but that she engages in strategic acts of omission. In *Eat, Pray, Love*, she admits to being a highly successful freelance writer. In 1993, she became the first unpublished short story writer to appear in *Esquire* since Norman Mailer. A 2013 *New*

York Times profile notes that her editors still remember with "reverence" the skill apparent in her work, and she was widely published in the top magazines like GQ. Her GQ story about the Coyote Ugly Saloon became the basis for the hit film about the bar. She made enough money that she lost a considerable fortune in her divorce. All three of her first books either won awards or accolades from sources like The New York Times.

There has never been an idyllic time for writers, but in the 90s, during the time that Gilbert flourished, writers who made it to the upper echelons of the top magazines could make a decent or even

excellent living from writing. The proliferation of internet publishing and related factors have since changed and exploded all that

N LIGHT OF ALL THIS, GILBERT COULD have written a very different and more realistic book. She could have retained the advice about discipline and plugging away, dispensed with the hoo-ha about ideas as beings and provided a more realistic view of what it takes to become a successful writer/creative producer like her.

But that would undercut all of *Big Magic*'s otherworldly mystification about the nature of creative production. So, instead, she completely downplays *Eat*, *Pray*, *Love*'s success and insists it took her completely by surprise. This is how she describes what happened:

I once wrote a book that accidentally became a giant best seller, and for a few years there, it was like I was living in a hall of fun house mirrors.

And:

It was never my intention to write a giant best seller, believe me. I wouldn't know how to write a giant best seller if I tried.

On the one hand, even the most savvy publishing houses will admit that, bar a few stratospheric authors like Tom Clancy, there is never any predicting a best seller. Still, Gilbert received a \$200,000 advance to go forth, travel, and write the book. Her publisher, at least, seemed fairly confident in the book's sales potential. (While Gilbert has spoken openly about her advance elsewhere, she doesn't mention it in *Big Magic*.)

She also goes on to write, "It never occurred to me that my own thoughts and feelings might intersect so intensely with the thoughts and feelings of so many other people." This is simply

a lie: unless she had the cachet to get away with not writing one, publishing houses generally demand book proposals before committing to publication. Pitching a book and receiving such a large advance is *entirely* about revealing exactly why the "thoughts and feelings" of the author might coincide with her readers. Even if she didn't have to produce one, Viking would have at the very least asked for some sense from her as to why the book mattered enough at that particular time for them to publish it. In which case, Gilbert would have had to provide at least a perfunctory sense of her target audience and why they would want to buy her book.

In other words, *Eat, Pray, Love* was not some mere accident but a well-planned intervention into the zeitgeist of publications by and about women.

There's nothing wrong with that, but the success of *Big Magic*—the potion that Gilbert is trying to market as "magic"—would never come about if she blithely and carelessly went off on a mysteriously funded jaunt across the world. Rather than convince the reader

to anthropomorphize every aspect of the process, it would have been more honest of Gilbert to point to the structural, procedural elements of it—that you don't just get a book contract like the one she received for *Eat*, *Pray*, *Love* without an agent and a few lawyers, for instance, or that book proposals are necessary and hard work.

Instead, *Big Magic* resolutely erases any evidence of such. It turns work like writing into, well, a "creative process," and thus renders it not a profession but into something between an act of deep meditation and lots of wishful thinking. In fact, she relentlessly mocks those who complain about the conditions of writing as a profession:

From the volume of complaints that emerges from the professional creative class, you would think these people had been sentenced to their vocations by an evil dictator, rather than having chosen their work with a free will and an open heart.

In other words, Gilbert, who has spent half her life as a professional writer, now believes that hers is simply a vocation. Yet, when she actually describes the trajectory of her career—

and it has been a long and illustrious one—she treats it not as a mystical calling but as work. At one point, for instance, she relates how her editor at *GQ*, where she was then a staff writer,

pulled a story she had worked on for five months, a travel story about Serbia on which the publication had spent a lot of money. The editor's rationale was that he realized she was not the person for the job and there was no point in her pursuing it any further; he told her to simply move on to the next assignment. Gilbert's point in relating the anecdote is that writers must always be prepared to end projects that aren't working. But we might glean a different story here: that no one hires a casual, vocational writer to work on a travel story about Serbia for five months. The freedom to flit, to cut one's losses and move on, is possible only when one has the backing of a serious institution and serious money, plus an editor who can sign off on half-a-year's salary and travel expenses for a project that never sees completion.

In fact, this is one of the dominant threads in conversations about the breakup of media outlets: that fewer places are able and willing to develop the kinds of writers who can do sustained long-form writing, and that this has been a negative for media in general. Gilbert displays no awareness of or interest in these

changes, even as they fundamentally diminish the possibility of following her advice and becoming the kind of liberated, magical creative spirit she insists all writers should be.



HIS IS YET ANOTHER WAY IN WHICH GILBERT sidesteps the institutional and structural questions currently haunting the landscape of the creative fields—similar problems are rife in, say, dance or art—in favor of aphorisms designed to make the reader feel that she has been

apnorisms designed to make the reader reel that she has been immersed in a spa offering creative well water as a lubricant for the soul. Yet, everywhere, in the arts, people are revolting against what they forthrightly call the exploitation of artists. In January 2016, the bestselling British writer Philip Pullman resigned as patron of the Oxford Literary Festival, citing the event's refusal to pay featured writers as his reason. In New York, the Freelancers Union is gaining steady momentum as it collectivizes writers, arguing not just for fair but timely compensation.

The current writing economy is generally inhospitable for

those who want to write for a living, even though there are some changes afoot, like the kind described above. Gilbert occupies a rare stratosphere of the creative world, but it took her years of hard work to get there, and in a time when writers were paid decently. In a non-Gilbertian world, the average writer is a freelancer (given how many magazines have cut their budgets)

All this sort of 'embracing other, less

material ways of well-being' ignores that

you can't make music without instruments

or write poetry without ink and paper,

and instruments and paper can't be made

without raw materials that need to be

chopped down or mined.

who has to hang on to editors like a bulldog on a mailman's leg just to get tiny checks mailed to her. The utter instability of writing as a profession has meant that a long and steady career like hers is unlikely, no matter how much determination one brings to the effort.

Gilbert is clearly an intelligent and well-read woman, and has to be aware of these shifts. But she doesn't really have to care about reality. *Big Magic* will undoubtedly make her big money, and while it's not likely to

become a high-grossing film (the concept of ideas as amorphous supernatural beings does not quite make for the same cinematic experience as Mumbai sunsets and Italian dessert tables), it will probably be incorporated into book clubs and become a teaching tool for a particular subset of women.

Gilbert makes a point of saying that the money is not the point, but offers little to explain how someone with, say, multiple jobs and unstable shifts might carve out the time and the energy to continue with creative work. As with *Eat, Pray, Love*, Gilbert isn't interested in the reality of lives different from hers. Rather, she sells the idea that everyone can access her kind of success by magic.

well-appointed house, telling the *New York Times* that she always had to move from a place once she had started and finished a project there. And so, the bookcases, the furnishings, even the imported statuary in the gardens, all of it was for sale for \$999,999. It's lovely, truly, that Gilbert has the financial resources to do so, but she appears to have lost a sense of the reality for many writers, who generally stay put in the same place and are barely able to make rent.

Without getting into any crude analysis of class politics, surely we can ask the simple question: if any place and a routine and discipline are all that's required for a writer, why does Elizabeth Gilbert require such majestic spaces to write in?

Or we could ask an even simpler question of Gilbert, who scoffs at the very idea that the creative world should ever

offer a living or stability: why shouldn't someone who works tirelessly on a piece for, say, five months, expect to get paid really well for it?

Or even to be able to earn enough for rent? Gilbert can afford to believe in theories of creativity as magic, and wax on about the arrogance of creative workers who expect to make

a living off their work—now that she has accumulated a small fortune of her own.

Ultimately, *Big Magic* isn't really aimed at the "creative class," but at a very particular kind of woman, a female consumer who wants to spend her money on a promise of a different life. In her acknowledgments, Gilbert thanks several people, but also thanks Etsy. It's fitting; Etsy, like Gilbert, is a purveyor of goods with a quirky, homemade but polished aesthetic, professional goods given a carefully-honed sheen of amateurism.

Etsy's visual cousin is Pinterest, a website that would

have been inconceivable at the dawn of the internet: a visual repository of images of, well, things. Need to know what a painted wooden blue table could look like, in fifty different shades and sizes? There will be a hundred images for you. Pinterest is ostensibly for the hobbyist — the idea is that you find, say, an image of a painted blue table and proceed to buff and transform that five-dollar table you found and carted home from the garage sale last summer.

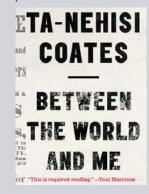
But the truth is that what Pinterest offers most is a fantasy of what your imagined world might look like. If you're like most people, your table will not be transformed. You might daydream about spending days lovingly sanding it and turning it a blue pastel, but the realities of life and work will intervene. Your table will collect dings and scratches over the years and become at best a larger holder of keys and the detritus of your life. Finally, one day, when you get ready to move, you'll look at it and decide it's too much trouble to take an unremarkable brown table with you. It will be stacked neatly against your dumpster, to be found by a delighted neighbor walking by, who will take it home with the exact same enthusiasm you once demonstrated, and will resolve to buff it and paint it blue, and the cycle will continue.

Big Magic is like a DIY Pinterest project, but about life itself. It is ultimately designed not for people who would like to think of writing as a profession, but for those who can afford to dabble in it. What Big Magic promises is akin to something you might find for sale on Etsy, to be recorded on Pinterest: a tiny mason jar that is also a snowglobe, a wishful, frozen fantasy of what the writing world might look like.



EVIEWS IN BRIEF TH IN LITERATURE: RACISM, DRONES, & O'REILLY KILLS ANOTHER PRESIDENT

OH, TA-NEHISI! WHAT POSSESSED YOU TO attempt so blatantly to Baldwin yourself? What spell of madness this could this have been? Mr. Coates knew the comparison he was inviting; in fact, he courted it in a most unseemly fashion. The book is slathered in blurbs comparing Coates to James Baldwin, with Toni Morrison telling Coates he "fills the void" left when Baldwin died. And you don't do a book in the form of a letter to your son about race relations without knowing you'll be expected to live up to The Fire Next Time.



Given that this was all of his own volition, he can't really complain when we note unkindly (though relatively indisputably) that Mr. Coates is not James Baldwin. For one thing, Coates cannot ever get to the point. An opening anecdote, about a time he once appeared as a cable news pundit, drags on for page after page. And he's got that irritating fashionable tendency of referring to black "bodies" instead of black people. A crassly materialist view of the human experience, if you ask us.

BETWEEN THE **WORLD AND ME**

Ta-Nehisi Coates Random House, \$18.50

Anyway, he wants to be "prophetic" and "urgent," but he's all history and no prescription. And while he insists he's writing to his son, he's really writing to white people in order to try to get them to fully appreciate America's sins at last. Black people already know everything in this book. If you're white, and oblivious to your country's history, this book will help depress you. If you are not, and you'd like some useful insights on fighting racism instead of a hopeless dirge, Ta-Nehisi's sententious meander is not for you. ❖

The conclusions in M_Y TURN will not surprise longtime cynics: Doug Henwood argues that Clinton is a crafty and unprincipled operative whose values shift in accordance with the political breeze. But it's good to have the case so carefully made; Henwood has no time for the cheap, sexist attacks on Clinton favored by the right. He discards untrustworthy sources and presents the facts most likely to disturb her liberal supporters. So readers are taken carefully through Hillary's history, from her early Arkansas law-firm work defending corporations (against caps on electricity bill rates for poor people, as well as claims by disabled workers) to the Clinton Foundation's disastrous, corrupt intervention in Haiti. Some of the quotes Henwood unearths are ludicrous; Hillary defended her corporate legal work by saying "For goodness' sake, you can't be a lawyer if you don't represent banks." (That will come as news to every legal aid and public defense lawyer in the country.)

MY TURN: HILLARY CLINTON TARGETS THE PRESIDENCY

Doug Henwood OR Books, \$15.00

The picture that emerges here is not a good one for Clinton; her substantive political achievements are few and overstated, other than having built a vast fundraising apparatus of great philanthropic pretension but dubious social value. She has used the offices of the state toward shady personal ends, such as by securing favors for billionaires like investor Stephen Schwarzman (the one who compared tax rises for hedge funders to Nazism.) And she has deceitfully helped to

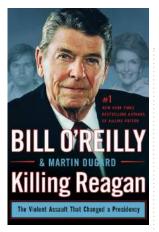
engineer multiple deadly intrigues abroad, from Iraq to the coup in Honduras.

Henwood respects the feminist argument for Clinton. As he says, "it would be a good thing to have a woman president after the 43 bepenised ghouls and functionaries who've occupied the office." And he is not necessarily against the "lesser evil" view, either. But he claims Democrats should assess Hillary's record with their eyes open. As he puts it:
"If people want to tell me that Hillary

would be a less horrid option than whatever profound ghastliness the Republicans throw up, I'll listen to them respectfully. If they try to tell me there's something inspiring or transformative about her, I'll have to wonder what planet they're on."

Some parts of My Turn feel cursory or digressive, and one wishes the demands of campaign season topicality hadn't rushed the book into print. But Henwood's wry, literary writing style makes this a satisfying and persuasive piece of obliterative prose. ❖





KILLING REAGAN

Bill O'Reilly Simon & Schuster, \$26.95

ABLE NEWS JOWL-FLAPPER BILL O'Reilly has developed somewhat of an unusual literary subfranchise in recent years: books about killing historical figures. We've now had Killing Lincoln, Killing Kennedy, and Killing Jesus. Now we've got Killing Reagan, mildly odd only because Reagan wasn't killed. (But unless he'd gone for Killing McKinley, O'Reilly was about to be S.O.L. The franchise must go on!)

They've all got an odd fetishism about them, which one might expect from the title. They even adopt an assassin's-eye view in order to get the blood racing: "The assassin feels an unlikely burst of excitement at the prospect of seeing Reagan in person... He knows the .22-caliber Rohm must be fired at close range for peak accuracy, and the spot where he now stands is well within the pistol's optimal range of 90 feet." If you aren't titillated by bloodied presidents, you might find the whole enterprise a bit repellant.

The good news is that O'Reilly has annoyed his conservative readers by staying true to his Serious Historian aspirations and treating Reagan as the senile old buffoon that he was. O'Reilly describes Reagan as "not a great intellect", "passive," "disengaged," "in permanent decline," "visibly frail," "naps frequently," "delegates much power to Nancy," "spends hours during the day watching television reruns." Good stuff.

So it's not actually the worst present to give the Reagan-haters in your life. They'll enjoy both the copious evidence of Reagan's ineptitude and the exuberant reenactment of his shooting. ❖



DRONE 360 MAGAZINE

\$8.95

So this is how it's going to be, is it? The robot death spiders are already so normalized that we now have specialized hobbyist magazines for them, and we are supposed, apparently, to simply accept this.

Drone 360 magazine is dedicated to the proposition that drones are cool. Learn how high they fly, what maneuvers they can do, and how they might change your life! See who builds the drones, and what new advances await us!

Naturally, as hard as Drone 360 might try, it can't really ignore the fact that drones are a monstrous harbinger of civilizational suicide. harbinger of civilizational suicide. So they give us some soft little "pro/con" discussions. "Police drones: a good thing?" That's a bit like asking "Totalitarian nightmare-states: yay or nay?" or saying that the all-seeing Eye of Sauron "has its critics."

In fact, Drone 360's view is that any debate is useless to begin with. Drones are here and that's that. They already "film our favorite movies, keep watch over our neighborhoods, and wage our distant wars." Resistance, the magazine lets us know, is futile.

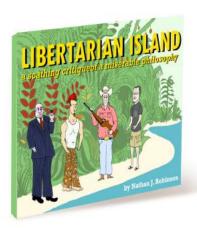
In that respect, Drone 360 might actually be right. New technologies, however destructive, never seem to go away once introduced. Nevertheless, there's no automatic requirement that we make fan magazines about them...

But it's curious: do the people who put together Drone 360 magazine believe the future is going to go well? How long do they think drones are going to remain fun? Have they tried showing their magazine to any Pakistani or Yemeni children recently?

Good lord, we're all doomed. ❖

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AUSTIN | FT. WORTH | NEW HAVEN



LIBERTARIAN ISLAND

by Nathan J. Robinson

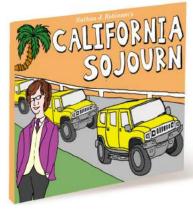
When the stragglers land upon an island, they must organize the economy anew. But there is a deadly tension. Will the Libertarian accept the Lockean Proviso? In a careful elaboration of the philosophical foundations of property rights, the grave consequences of excessively Libertarian thinking are humorously exposed.



DON'T LET THE PIGEON QUESTION THE RULES!

by Nathan J. Robinson

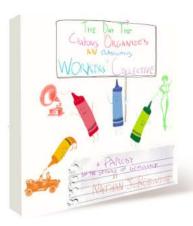
A devastating evisceration of Mo Willems's Stalinist Pigeon book series. When the bus driver asks you to enforce an unjust order, you must reflect carefully on the nature of ethics. Do you forbid the pigeon to drive the bus, even though it is tiny and powerless? Or do you favor substantive justice over empty proceduralism? Don't Let the Pigeon Question the Rules is a charming introduction to natural law principles, and a careful rebuttal of authoritarian reasoning.



CALIFORNIA SOJOURN

by Nathan J. Robinson

California Sojourn is a guide to the people and culture of Los Angeles, and an illustrated diary of the amusements and misunderstandings that befell the author during two weeks he spent there. Through a series of colourful snapshots, it reveals with startling candor the unusual nature of the Californian experience. Featuring crude depictions of certain landmarks, celebrities, and fauna, California Sojourn will alternately delight and worry prospective westward travelers.



THE DAY THE CRAYONS ORGANIZED AN AUTONOMOUS WORKERS' COLLECTIVE

by Nathan J. Robinson

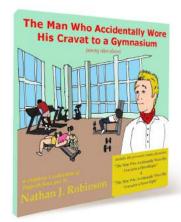
An unsparing parody of the antilabor children's book The Day the Crayons Quit, which begins from the premise that the interests of workers and capitalists can somehow be harmonized. TDTCOAWC rejects this reactionary message, and instead weaves a tale of solidarity and courage. Containing effective programmatic strategies for a new kind of radical labour organizing, TDTCOAWC is an adorable narrative about children's self-worth, as well as a merciless denunciation of capitalist tyrants.



THE MAYOR OF NEW ORLEANS GETS HER WAY

by Nathan J. Robinson

When everyone in America is put in charge of a city, you are assigned to be the Mayor of New Orleans! In this gripping second-person urban planning narrative, you must decide how best to tame your populace and keep your administration humming.



THE MAN WHO ACCIDENTALLY WORE HIS CRAVAT TO A GYMNASIUM

by Nathan J. Robinson

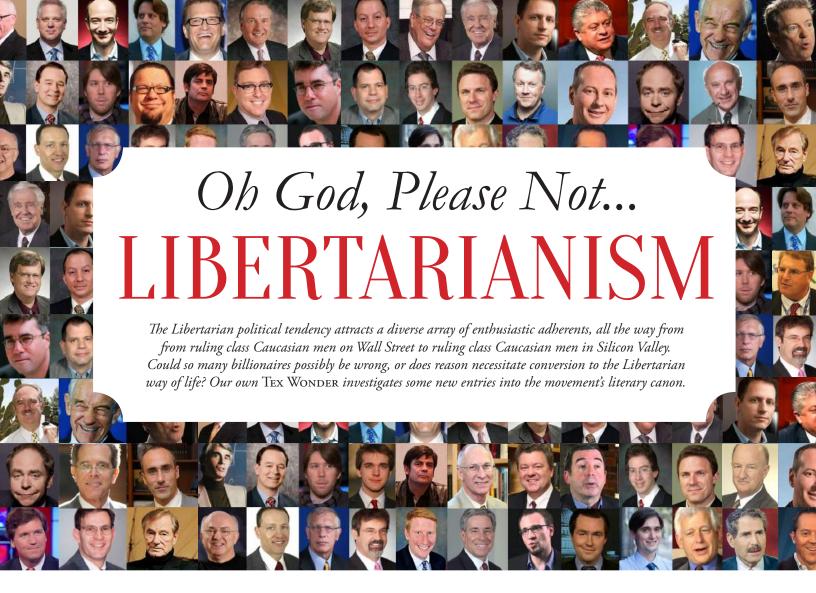
The Man Who Accidentally Wore His Cravat to a Gymnasium concerns an egregious error in sartorial judgment. Lively and colourful, The Man Who Accidentally is an endearing parable on the vitality of nonconformity and the enduring madness of crowds.

AVAILABLE AT AMAZON.COM AND WHEREVER QUALITY LITERATURE IS SOLD



"...AND LITTLE JOEY STALIN ENDED UP SITTING BY HIMSELF BECAUSE THE OTHER CHILDREN WOULD NOT LET HIM PURGE THEM."







The Libertarian Mind: A Manifesto For Freedom by David Boaz, Simon & Schuster, 409pp., \$27.95

The Conservatarian Manifesto: Libertarians, Conservatives, and the Fight for the Right's Future

by Charles C.W. Cooke, Crown, 246pp., \$25.00

ANIFESTOS ARE NOT meant to be sophisticated things. They are declarations, not dissertations. To write a manifesto is to issue a piercing scream, a denunciation of all the world's wrongs and a rousing call to arms. The manifesto is no place for nuance or pragmatism, for thinking things through and resolving differences. The manifesto is the medium of one who has already worked everything out and is compelled to shout it to the world.

Oddly enough, the manifesto appears to have switched sides over the last century. Once they were the provenance the revolutionary left, from the Communists to the Surrealists. But since the 1970s, it has principally been libertarians cranking them out. Murray Rothbard and Ron Paul have both issued their respective manifestos. Conservative pundit Mark Levin's *Liberty and Tyranny: A*

Conservative Manifesto became a #1 bestseller in 2009. Now, the bookbuying public finds itself treated to two new manifestoes of the libertarian right: David Boaz's The Libertarian Mind: A Manifesto for Freedom and Charles Cooke's The Conservatarian Manifesto.

This libertarian penchant for manifestos is not especially surprising; its philosophy is one of proud simplicity and certitude. Just as Marxists are convinced that class relations explain everything, libertarians see the war between freedom and tyranny as the root cause of all misfortune. (Classifying libertarianism as "simple" or reductionist is not a slight; libertarians themselves insist that a virtue of their principles lies in their elegant intuitiveness.) Indeed, in his very first sentence, David Boaz announces that "libertarianism is the philosophy of free-



dom," immediately lumping all other human beliefs together as philosophies of unfreedom. Then we hear about some of the great threats to our freedom today, foremost of which is... Michael Bloomberg's ban on big sodas. (The stakes, as you can see, are high.)

From there, Boaz proceeds down a well-trodden path. Expositions of libertarianism often follow a standard catechism, one that attempts to posit an inescapable deductive proof that libertarianism is correct and irrefutable. Nobody can deny the niftiness of this little Socratic exercise. But just as in Socrates's own dialectics, if one does not carefully examine each libertarian premise before accepting it, one soon accidentally signs on to some spectacularly objectionable conclusions.

In Boaz's recitation, the libertarian chain of logic proceeds roughly as follows: Human beings own themselves, because for someone else to own them would be slavery. To own oneself idea that nobody should interfere with the affairs of another sounds obvious, until we attempt to negotiate our messy realities with it. Should I take the gun from my depressed neighbor's hand so he cannot kill himself?

So, too, with the related principle that people are legally entitled to do anything that doesn't exercise force against others. Could nobody legitimately stop a wealthy man from purchasing and deliberately destroying a life-saving vaccine? Simple principles are only satisfactory to those oblivious to complicated realities.

This becomes starkly evident when Boaz arrives at his proposals. The libertarian is committed, through his deductions, to believing that government intervention is never morally justified. From there, he has to strain himself to prove that government intervention is never *effective* either. Boaz makes a lively attempt at this, going through the market-based solutions to a series of issues.

Seneath this theory of freedom is a practice of misery...

means to own the products of one's work, for the right to self-ownership is meaningless without the right to the fruits of one's efforts. So property rights are an essential human entitlement. Since human beings own themselves and their property, it is illegitimate for anyone else to aggress upon these things. Thus, the fundamental principle of justice is that people and their property must be left alone to do as they please, so long as they do not interfere with the person and property of others.

There isn't much more to it than that, nor need there be. From one or two axioms, we can arrive at a full defense of capitalism and the minimal state. It's only when we give this concept of labor's "fruits" a bit of a cross-examination, or wonder what a world built on this mathematically perfect credo would actually feel like to live in, that it begins to wobble somewhat.

The jump from the right to self-ownership to the right of property ownership always occurs hastily, as if the libertarian knows full well he's fudging one of the most dubious steps of his proof. Boaz makes the unfortunate decision to choose John Locke's theory of "labor mixing" as his preferred means of papering over the leap. This is the theory, dating from 1689, that when a person "mixes" her labor with a thing (say by turning a tree into a chair), she develops a property right in it. Why this should be so, nobody knows. What "mixing" even is, nobody knows either. Boaz doesn't attempt to define it; its function is simply to jury-rig a rickety theoretical bridge that will suffice until the next deduction is made. So long as the reader blinks, she will fail to notice that the entire natural rights justification for property is built upon flashy prestidigitation.

The rest of the philosophy requires similar hand-waving. The

They're all a disaster. On the environment, he suggests crises should be handled "at the local or state level." There's no plan for how a global environmental crisis requiring a multi-national solution could ever be addressed. On education, he wants full privatization, meaning that not only should schools be privately-run, but they should no longer be free and guaranteed. Vouchers or subsidies, he makes clear, are merely a compromise for those horrified by the prospect of a world in which many children cannot go to school because their families cannot pay.

Naturally, he wants Social Security privatized, though true libertarianism wouldn't have compulsory retirement savings at all. Boaz doesn't address the question of what would happen if a retiree's private investment account goes bust. Do we leave these unfortunate elderly in poverty? The libertarians never say. The same unanswered questions face the free market health care plan. If some people make the foolish decision not to get insurance, then get sick, do we leave them to their fate? Surely the penalty for financial mismanagement shouldn't be death.

The only possible libertarian answer is hinted at in Boaz's section on poverty. To his credit, Boaz does recognize poverty in America as an issue, though like a curmudgeonly octogenarian he continually informs us that things are better than they were during the Depression. (Those surviving on \$2 a day will draw small comfort from Boaz's reminder that unlike them, the French monarchs of Versailles lacked indoor plumbing.) But his solution is simply to insist that the churches and the Elk's Lodge will take care of it. Of course, the churches and the Elk's Lodge have been around for quite a while, and so far haven't shown much of an ability to assist America's 16 million impoverished





children. But that's where the second part of Boaz's solution comes in: the elimination of welfare and occupational licensing.

"What would happen to potential welfare recipients if welfare weren't available?" Boaz asks. "Many of them would get jobs." Actually, we know precisely what such people do when welfare isn't available. We know this because for all practical purposes, welfare has been eliminated from this country in the last 20 years. In fact, one of the most bizarre aspects of policy discussions on poverty is that conservatives remain convinced there is a thing called "welfare," in which the federal government writes checks to people for being poor. Yet for all the noise expended on it, there's no such program.

Boaz, like many fiscal conservatives who discuss public benefits, is unaware of the actual landscape of American social programs. The closest thing to any kind of "welfare" system is the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, which offers measly sums, is exclusively for families, has a 60-month lifetime benefits cap, and requires recipients to get a job. Since Boaz speaks of "welfare" in the abstract, it's impossible to know for certain whether it's TANF that he intends to eliminate, but that certainly seems the case.

In practice, what *does* happen when we eliminate welfare? Well, we can look at Mississippi, where poor families receive almost nothing in government subsidies, as recently documented by Kathryn Edin and Luke Schaefer in \$2 a Day. Do these people get jobs? No, for the simple reason that there are no jobs available. Instead, they sell their plasma and become malnourished. Have the churches and Elks stepped in, as Boaz

predicted they would? Nope, they sure haven't.

Boaz has some other solutions, but they're disgusting. They mostly amount to simply stating that poor kids should act more responsibly, that they should all finish high school and that the girls shouldn't get pregnant too young. Not that he has a policy suggestion to go along with this; it's just useless moralizing about the diminishing moral fibre of impoverished teens. Recognize that regardless of the truth or falsity of this theory, it gets one nowhere. Even if you believed that somehow behaving in an upstanding manner would bring more jobs to decimated neighborhoods, it's completely unclear how to actually create a sudden nationwide wave of moral responsibility. But the point is not to solve the problem, the point is to make poverty the fault of poor people so that we are absolved of the responsibility of dealing with it.

Boaz concludes his poverty section with what is possibly the dumbest question ever asked, though he believes it to be one of the cleverest:

'If you're not convinced that private charity can replace government welfare, ask yourself this: [if you had a hundred thousand dollars to help the poor,] would you give it to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services...or a private charity? Most people would not hesitate to choose a private charity." Right, Dave, but the entire point of the skepticism is not a belief that government is better at providing charitable services, but that not enough rich people give to charities to solve the problem, whereas governments can levy taxes. If the rich weren't such unfeeling swine, we wouldn't have a problem.

The rest of the book is full of similar mischaracterizations and logical pretzels. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is not just wrong but "impossible," Boaz declares, because to declare education a human right mean that someone has to provide it, and since that's not always possible, education cannot be a right. This weird little trick of language only works if you define a right to be a thing that can be provided at all times, instead of a moral obligation toward which all societies must aspire.

Then there are the senseless distortions of the left's principles. Socialists "want to eliminate property rights." No they don't, they want workers to own their factories, farm laborers to own the farms, etc. Communism is the system in which "everyone owns everyone." Actually, everyone owns the means of production, a somewhat different principle, but if you accept the libertarian idea that one's property is coextensive with one's body, then shifting legal control of a workplace from the owners to the society is no different to slashing up the owners with a straight razor. That little logical slippage is also what makes the libertarians wail so loudly about taxes. If financial assets are as essential as bodily integrity, then a tax is logically indistinguishable from a kick in the face.

All of this is disheartening, especially the poverty section, because it makes one realize the extent to which hardcore libertarianism is both profoundly persuasive and worryingly oblivious. Its writing is clear, its slogans are appealing, and its principles appear indisputable. Yet beneath this theory of freedom is a practice of misery. To figure out precisely how the one leads to the other requires careful scrutiny and skepticism. Unfortunately, since beguiling yet unexamined rhetoric so often carries the day in politics, *The Libertarian Mind* will doubtlessly win converts. The consequences for the poor, whose few remaining benefits Boaz would gleefully strip, are likely to be devastating.

There is a wearying familiarity to *The Libertarian Mind*; Hayek wrote all of this in The Constitution of Liberty, then Rothbard wrote it again in *The Ethics of Liberty*, then David Friedman in The Machinery of Freedom. Read one sentence of one libertarian book and you've read every sentence of every libertarian book. Boaz insists that libertarians come in dozens of unique varieties, but the libertarian mind ends up sounding pretty hivey:

"There are many kinds of libertarians, of course. Some are people who might describe themselves as 'fiscally conservative and socially liberal'... [some] want the government to remain within the limits of the Constitution...Some are admirers of Dr. Ron Paul and his son, Senator Rand Paul...Some have noticed that war,... welfare, taxes,

and government spending have deleterious effects."

So there you have it: libertarianism ranges from people who support small governments and free market capitalism to... people who support small governments and free market capitalism. A mighty large tent those fellas have, one that can contain figures all the way from Ron Paul to his son Rand.

T'S THAT LIBERTARIAN NARROWNESS THAT LEADS CHARLES Cooke, in The Conservatarian Manifesto, to reject the label for himself. Cooke positions himself as a pragmatist, and appears genuinely interested in negotiating between differing political inclinations and forging something new rather than rehashing Rothbard or Rand.

The something new is "conservatarianism," an awkward neologism that Cooke insists "is not a linguistic trick" deployed to sell books. (It is.) The conservatarians like Cooke are those alarmed by both the Republicans' tendency to expand government



PROFUNDITIES AMIDST THE REDWOODS

OOK, IT'S TOO EASY TO BE UNKIND to **JONATHAN FRANZEN**. We're not going to do it. He's had enough. People are always ragging on the poor schmuck. Not us; *Current Affairs* has never read one of his novels and doen't intend to; they just don't seem very funny.

Now, admittedly, at times it can be hard to restrain oneself from joining in the derision, and one must bite one's lip upon coming across such tempting fodder as this item from the Financial Times

Times:

"I don't like to hire people to do work that I can do," [Franzen] says. So that means he does his own dusting in the New York apartment be shares with his girlfriend? Franzen looks slightly shifty. "We do have a cleaner, although even that I feel some justification because we pay her way more than is standard and she's a nice Filipino woman who we treat very well and we're giving her work."

But no! No, Current Affairs, you musn't. Remember that Oprah and the Audobon Society and the international feminist movement have already heaped their brutal ire upon the man. Just walk away, Current Affairs, you're better than this.

Very well. The tongue shall be held. But we would betray our obligations as journalistic truth-tellers were we not to briefly note a recent profile piece from the Paper of Record. We will justify ourselves by pointing out that it is the piece's author, RACHEL KUSHNER, rather than Jonathan Franzen, who comes across the worse.

Ms. Kushner's New York Times article, "Jonathan Franzen's Crackling Genius," does not exactly conceal its author's adoration of the subject. Not that there's something inherently wrong in that; many of history's greatest monsters had people in their lives who loved them dearly. It's okay by us. No, Kushner's greater crime lies in her extraodrinary infatuation with the use of italic type. Witness:

- "He went on to investigate not the psychology of bad seeds as types, but the psychology of his cousin, who was not a type, but an individual."
- "The next week, after that visit, came this curious assignment, to write about Jon, who is not a close friend, but a friend, which is what makes it curious."
- "I thought it would be right to arrive as his guest in Santa Cruz ready to present my reactions to the book, which is filled with great comedy. (For the record, I would consider Jon principally a comic writer.)"

And just what, you may ask, is so unforgivably abominable about that? Oh, nothing too much, we suppose, except that Ms. Kushner treats her every last thought as in need of additional emphasis. That doesn't annoy you? Not even just a little bit?

But we are losing the thread somewhat. Here is what happens in Ms. Kushner's profile of her dear friend "Jon" (not a close friend, you must understand, for that is what makes the whole thing so curious): K&J discuss going to look for some rare island scrub jays (emphasis hers, naturally.) But soon enough their conversation becomes so sparkling and engrossing that the birds are laid to the wayside and we receive an extensive recounting of the topics on which these two curiously semi-acquainted writers passed an afternoon riffing.

And it is here, as Jonathan Franzen and Rachel Kushner sit chattering on a park bench admid the redwoods, that we finally gain an appreciation for how deathly insipid the conversation of our nation's most most prominent writers can truly be. Let us excerpt:

We moved on to a discussion of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, and Jon spoke of their relation as a competition. "You had two talents of that order working at the same time," be said, "and in the same way that siblings specialize, they each became more intensely the thing they'd been to begin with — as a way of competing, and a way of saying, I'm not that other sibling, I'm me.'" And I said, "but in order to occupy what they nonetheless misperceive

SEE "TOLSTOY," PAGE 68→

spending and the libertarians' reflexive antiauthoritarian extremism. They are those who "feel like a conservative around libertarians, and a libertarian around conservatives."

Cooke's "conservatarianism" is a fascinating illustration of the way ostensible moderation can mask extremism. He ends up mixing the most noxious elements of both conservatives and libertarians. Conservatarianism is for those who both want to destroy all social programs (like libertarians) but also enjoy the preservation of authority and hierarchy (like conservatives). If you find conservatism too concerned with morals, and libertarians too concerned with freedom, then how about a philosophy that cares about neither morality nor freedom?

On immigration, Cooke disagrees with libertarians. He rejects the idea that people should have a right to move about the world as they please. "America is a country, not a charity," he says. Of course, Cooke himself is an immigrant, who benefitted from an immigration system that holds preferences for British citizens like him over people from poorer countries. He recognizes that this is probably grossly unfair, but says only "[S]o what?" Well, so, some people think rewarding people who already have a lot is probably less morally defensible than giving opportunities to people who have less.

The "so what" attitude toward people in trying circumstances is the most disturbing aspect of Cooke's new politics. Boaz, however

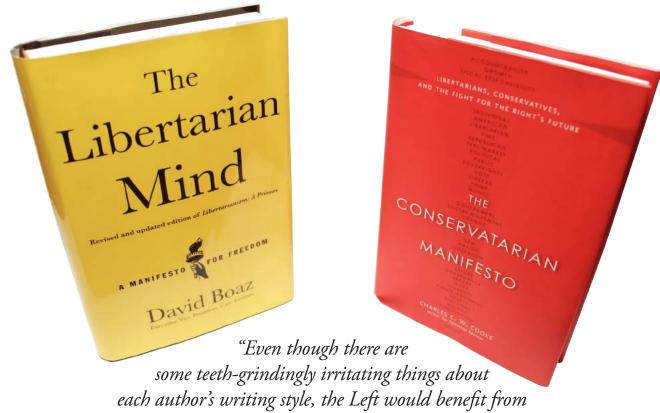
you find conservatism
too concerned with morals,
and libertarians too concerned
with freedom, then how about a
philosophy that cares about
neither morality nor freedom?

Oh, alright, that's a gross caricature, but Cooke has earned himself the poke in the eye. It also does get at unpleasant aspects of the compromise politics Cooke supports. To the extent that it holds together as an intelligible proposal for the Right, it appears to be both more concerned than Republicans with cutting the size of government, and less concerned than Libertarians with limiting America's violent incursions into other countries.

Cooke believes that libertarians are too skeptical of American military interventions around the globe. "Not every intervention is Iraq," says in defense of American global dominance. That's certainly true; some interventions are Vietnam, Libya, Chile, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Iran, and Sudan. Cooke argues vigorously that America must occasionally step up to ensure the peace and stability of other countries. But it's telling that he does not name a single instance in which this has successfully occurred. Not that one ought to expect him to, since America's track record as a global peacekeeper is widely recognized as abysmal.

demented his solutions, is interested in addressing the situation of the sick, the poor, the elderly, and the oppressed. The existence of such people does not even register with Cooke. Poverty is barely mentioned at all. Of the four references in the index, two are to offhanded remarks that the War on Poverty was a waste of money, one is to a statement that uninsured poor people are a regrettable consequence of economic growth, and one is to a statement dismissing arguments that poor women should have abortion access. One wonders how Cooke can formulate a political program without even noticing that America contains nearly 50 million poor people.

But that is because Cooke has other issues on his mind, like guns and abortion. He very much likes guns, and very much does not like abortion. (For an ostensibly "new" right-wing politics, this seems an awful lot like the old stuff.) Not only does he believe in the vigorously defending the *right* to have guns, but he wants America to actually "normalize guns and gun



appropriating the precision, accessibility, and organization of conservative writing."

ownership." (Emphasis added.) Heaven knows what the purpose of this would be; Cooke doesn't say.

On abortion, though, Cooke makes an important point. The abortion debate is about one issue alone, which is the definition of "taking a life." What abortion rights proponents consistently fail to realize is that their arguments can never be persuasive to the pro-life side, who view abortion as the murder of a human being. Everything hinges on that one question. If abortion is murder, then nothing can justify it, period. When Planned Parenthood says that "only 3%" of their services are abortion-related, it's irrelevant. If abortion is murder, then the percentage is irrelevant. A nonprofit claiming that only 3% of its work consisted of mass slaughter would have a difficult day in court.

Thus, the pro-choice side needs to give up all the arguments of the variety "if you don't like abortion, don't have one," since "if you don't like murder, don't kill someone" would never fly. Their argument needs to be, first and foremost, that it isn't murder, that "a life" is a fluid and imprecise term about which there can be no scientific resolution, only differing instincts. On this, the pro-choice side is actually on very strong grounds. Every position on this is going to ultimately be arbitrary; "when does a life begin?" is a question with no more of a definitive answer than "when does one stop being simply unshaven and start having a beard?" Cooke is nevertheless exactly correct to point out that this is the central question in the abortion debate, and that everything else is evasion.

HE BOOK IS LESS NOVEL AND CONTRARIAN THAN ONE might hope, though. By the end of it, you may be hard-pressed to remember the distinction between conservatives, libertarians, and conservatarians. That's because this is largely some rancid old wine in an unsightly new bottle. Cooke does encourage conservatives to give up the gay marriage fight, but he is uninterested in it as a basic right and is more concerned with the "very real threats"

that the partisans of gay marriage are posing to individual liberty" by legally mandating businesses serve gay and straight customers equally.

And yet the manifestos of Cooke and Boaz are still worth reading. Why? Because they are clear and systematic expositions of the authors' respective philosophies, and because there is tremendous benefit in engaging with wrongheaded arguments that are stated well. The Left would benefit from appropriating the precision, accessibility, and organization of conservative writing.

It's true that there are some teeth-grindingly irritating things about each author's writing style. Boaz has fully mastered Patronizing Libertarian Voice, with which (male) libertarians use highly irrational arguments to dismiss every other politics as the beliefs of a child, while loudly insisting on their faultless rationality. Cooke drizzles his Oxford education all over the page (we get plenty of highfalutin italicizations like *pace* and *Weltanschauung*, plus, oh dear, "to wit"), but then reverently quotes from lumbering galoots like Andrew Breitbart and Kevin Williamson¹ as if they were Oscar Wilde.

But the titles do not lie. These are manifestos. They lay their cases before the public, and if you are of the type swayed by chintzy syllogisms and references to the Founding Fathers, you will doubtless end up converted. In its classic form, the art of the manifesto entails layering spirited rhetorical packaging atop extremist politics and patent untruth, and by this standard David Boaz and Charles Cooke are two sublime artists of the manifesto. ��

I Lest it be alleged that Kevin Williamson does not merit the cruel appellation "galoot," I cite the following evidentiary point: Mr. Williamson is supposedly a "theater critic" for *The New Criterion*. And yet Kevin Williamson is such a droolingly inarticulate violent numbskull that he is unable to sit through a whole theatrical performance without picking up a neighboring audience member's phone and throwing it across the room. See "Kevin Williamson, National Review Reporter, Throws Woman's Phone 'Across The Room' During Play," *The Huffington Post*, May 16, 2013. **Kevin Williamson** is a galoot.

SOME THEORIES ABOUT TOLSTOY TO MAKE YOU SOUND SMART

CONTINUED FROM "REDWOODS," PAGE 66

as the one spot." To be fair, I know little of Tolstoy's biography, only that he was a pacifist and revolutionary, had a late-life religious conversion and died in a train station. I mentioned these things and Jon said that what happened to Tolstoy—bis conversion, his strange behavior later in life—could have been merely "TLAs." I asked what that was or those were, and he said, "Transient ischemic attacks, you know, mini-strokes. The brain isn't getting enough oxygen and you get weird." And I said, "Reduce it all to the brain! What a positivist response!" And Jon replied, "Well, he was very old."

A tip from Current Affairs to the aspiring novelists and Times writers among our readership: there is no person or agency absolutely requiring you to attempt profound conversation on the lives of famous authors. It is indeed very fashionable to do so, but if you do not actually know anything about these authors, the whole enterprise takes on a certain, shall we say, air of smug affectation? It is also the case that if you are in the woods with a very self-confident friend of yours, who has a pet theory that all of Tolstoy's religious and political ideas can be attributed to brain farts, you are not required to say "Ooh, how very positvist you are, Jon." There is, in fact, nothing to stop you from saying: "Jon, kindly stop spewing guano from your mouth. The Kingdom of God is Within You is not the mere result of a goddam ministroke, and merely by floating this asinine theory you have surrendered your right to further opinions on matters of literature. Instead of

issuing additional facile speculations about the inner psychological workings of great authors, let us discuss how pretty we find the nearby conifers, or some other topic at which you might not make such a nitwit of yourself."

Oh but poor Kushner, to her everything Jon says will always be wondrous and wise. His vapid non-opinion on Edward Snowden ("I can see both sides") is evidence of his sober, deliberative temperament. Jon's explanation for why Mephisto tempts Faust ("Because that is his nature") displays a penetrating grasp of psychological truth. His every simple-minded observation is a precious bijou, to be carefully safeguarded and transcribed for the benefit of *Times Sunday Magazine* readers. Poor Kushner, to live with this level of delusion, to see such genius in such banality! (It rapidly becomes clear that Franzen lifts his every opinion from the editorial pages of the newspaper. One would like to think it was the *Times*, but *frankly* there is more of a *USA Today* flavor to these insights.)

Fittingly, Kushner's closing anecdote displays the greatest distance yet between the level of Franzen's exhibited intelligence and the impression received by Kushner. She relays how Franzen describes the death of his cousin:

He told me that his cousin had been recently murdered. "My Aunt Margo used to call him a bad seed," he said. "He was an alcoholic, and he was murdered by his best friend after they had spent a day and a half drinking together... He and his friend were in a bar, and then they finally ran out of money, so they went home and continued drinking there, and apparently the friend got it in his head," Jon said, "that my cousin was interested in the friend's daughter, and that led to violence." The details, Jon said, were horrifying. When his cousin was still conscious he was asked whether he wanted to be taken to the hospital, and the cousin said, "No, he's my best friend. I don't want to get him in trouble."

And here is Kushner's analaysis of this little tale:

The way Jon described his consin's death, I thought, was a perfect illustration of why there is no such thing as a fixed and unshaded nature. It was also a demonstration of Jon's and tragedy, and in this case honor the real person who was the tragedy's subject, and victim. Honor, but not sugarcoat. Whether or not he had intended to treat this cousin with love, to allow him such complexity, it was in Jon's own unique nature to do so.

Oh, please. Singular talent to form story? There are more elegantly-crafted yarns in a stack of police reports. Our friend Jon has literally just relayed the facts of a barfight in the same fashion as every single other human being who heard or read about the incident from the barstool to the local crime blotter. But no. We may only see a man saying "My cousin got in a barfight. He's dead now." Yet within these simple remarks there is prodigious authorial virtuosity. Truly, "my cousin once died" is the sort of magisterial storytelling that could only ever have come from a powerbouse like our Jon. •

HERITAGE not FATE

Are you sure wearing that is a good idea? What would you say to people who think wearing that flag is "offensive" or "racist"?

I'm not a racist, that's not what this flag means to me. For me it's about who I am and where I'm from. It's nothing to do with race or anything like that.

But doesn't the flag have a history of being used by those with racist causes?

Well, I can't speak for them, I only know why I wear it myself, which is to show that I'm proud of my heritage.



I mean, when you say "heritage," it's the flag of Adolph Hitler, who said this:

"The noblest and most sacred [task] for mankind is that each racial species must preserve the purity of the blood which God has given it... There is one error which cannot be remedied once men have made it, namely the failure to recognize the importance of conserving the blood and the race free from intermixture and thereby the racial aspect and character which are God's gift and God's handiwork."

Plus there's the massive racist violence, the millions of dead. Is that the heritage you ean?

No, obviously not. I don't endorse any of that. It's not about that for me. It just means rebellion, it's that German spirit, it's about celebrating our people.

But what about the fact that it doesn't even symbolize your people? It was an ancient symbol used by Hindus and was revived in the 1930's as part of a fascist movement by white supremacist Nazis.

You're not listening. Today it means something different.

But when you see photos like this...

...do you ever think that maybe you might not want to be wearing the same flag as these people?



I'm nothing like those people, the comparison is ridiculous. It doesn't matter how they used it. That's not how I mean it. If some are offended, it's not my problem. There will always be some ignorant people who don't understand what the floor really stands for

Absurd Beyond Belief

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But doesn't the flag have a history of being used by those with racist causes?

Well, I can't speak for them, I only know why I wear it myself, which is to show that I'm proud of my heritage.

I mean, when you say "heritage," it's the flag of Jefferson Davis, who said this:

"My own convictions as to negro slavery are strong. It has its evils and abuses...We recognize the negro as God and God's Book and God's Laws, in nature, tell us to recognize him – our inferior, fitted expressly for servitude...You cannot transform the negro into anything one-tenth as useful or as good as what slavery enables them to be "

Plus there's the massive racist violence, the millions of slaves. Is that the heritage you mean?

No, obviously not. I don't endorse any of that. It's not about that for me. It just means rebellion, it's that Southern spirit, it's about celebrating our people.

But what about the fact that it doesn't even symbolize your people? It was hardly ever used until it was revived in the 1950's as part of a segregationist movement by white supremacists and Klansmen.

You're not listening. Today it means something different

But when you see photos like this...

...do you ever think that maybe you might not want to be wearing the same flag as these people?



I'm nothing like those people, the comparison is ridiculous.It doesn't matter how they used it. That's not how I mean it. If some are offended, it's not my problem. There will always be some ignorant people who don't understand what the flag really stands for.

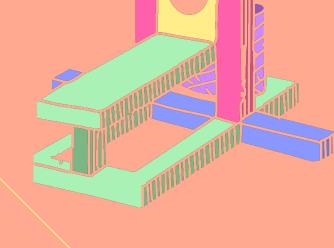
APPARENTLY SOMEHOW DEBATABLE

LIKE THE REIGN OF TERROR BUT FOR PROSE



How about reading that same old turgid Marxism with beautiful graphic design?





JACOBIN

AFSTHETICIZING MASS SLALIGHTER SINCE 2010

The PUZZLE PUZZLE

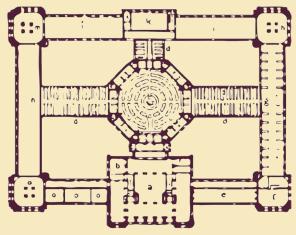
1, THE GOAT PUZZLE



2. THE TAX PUZZLE

Some people say they pay too much in tax. Some people think those people do not pay enough in tax. There are 73,954 pages in the United States Tax Code. Some people claim that all of these pages are necessary. Others claim that they are not. What is the optimal national tax structure? Give some reasons for your choice.

3. The Gathedral Puzzle



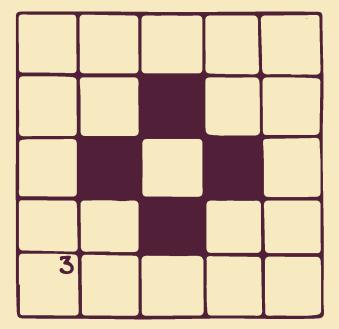
The Bishop has stepped away from his cloister. Can you redesign the Cathedral so that when he returns, he will have lost his faith?



4. THE EYE PUZZLE

This eye seems very interested in something. But what is she looking at?

5. THE SOUARES PUZZLE



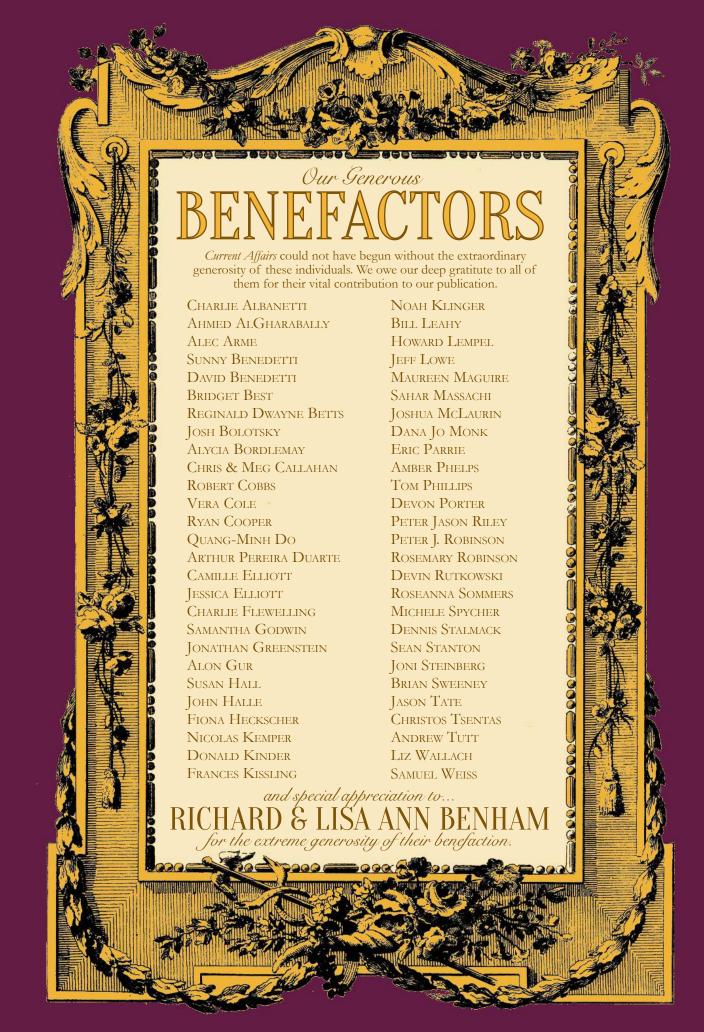
Can you rearrange the squares to form the first three letters in *Current Affairs*?

6. THE BENTLEY PUZZLE



Whose car is this?

ANGNATAR 1. What do you mean by forgetting? 2. Tax the rich until they bleed. Solve povertry by handing out the expropriated wealth ("use the Earned Income Tax Credit" is also an acceptable answer.) 3. No. 4. She is looking at YOU. 5. No. 6. It's your car, silly.



CURRENT AFFAIRS

A Magazine of Politics & Culture

THE RISE OF THE RUTH BADER GINSBURG CULT By David Kinder

SOME ABSURDLY MEANINGLESS SOCIOLOGY DIAGRAMS

An Exhibition & Contest

PLEASE, ANYTHING BUT LIBERTARIANISM

By Tex Wonder



Nazi Cowboys, Elaborate Puzzles, Irate Letters to the Editor, A Special Coloring Activity, Bill O'Reilly's New Book, and Our Sincere Offer

