

The First Trustworthy Periodical

CURRENT AFFAIRS

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MAY/JUNE 2018



SCHOOL
IS IT A COMPLETE
WASTE OF TIME?

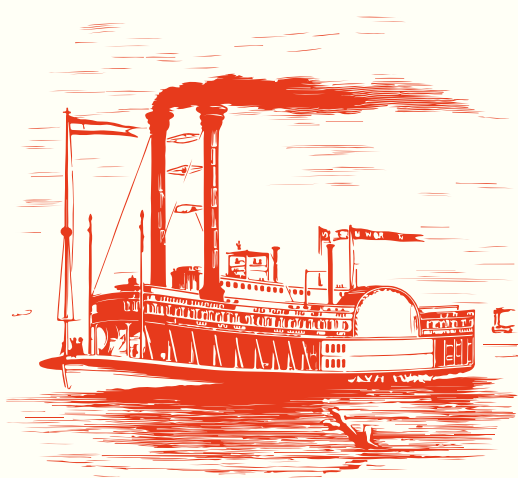
PALESTINE
ITS PEOPLE,
ITS WONDERS

UTOPIAS
HOW TO BUILD ONE
OF YOUR OWN



May These Affairs Be Your Last!

STEAMBOAT ARMSTRONG



There is a story about Louis Armstrong that goes like this. One day around 1920, long before anyone had heard of Armstrong, a man was standing on the banks of the Mississippi, watching the steamboats come into port in New Orleans. On one distant boat, he saw a small dark figure standing on a forward deck. As the boat

came closer, he noticed that the figure was holding a trumpet to his lips. Then, wafting across the river, came a sound unlike anything the man had heard before. Musical notes of such perfection, so rich with joy and sorrow, so beyond anything produced on a trumpet before, that the man could not believe that they were made by a

man. This first sighting of the young Louis Armstrong, still unknown to the world, playing to the river as his steamboat landed, was like watching God descend from the clouds.

It is literally impossible, today, for us to understand what it was like to hear Armstrong then, to understand how extraordinary he must have seemed when he played the "Potato Head Blues" or the "Heebie Jeebies" to a world that had never heard such things. Louis Armstrong changed the world so instantaneously that nobody realized who had done it. One day there was no Louis, then his steamboat arrived, then there he was, and suddenly everything was so different that it seemed as if things could never have been otherwise.

Louis Armstrong was not God, though. He was a poor boy from the back of town, with a gift for translating the entire mosaic of black New Orleans life into notes from his horn. This was impressive, but it should do more than make us admire Satchmo. It should make us realize how little we know about human possibility. Nobody knew that what Louis did could be done. And yet all of a sudden, it happened. What other miracles may yet await us? Who will come in on the next steamboat?

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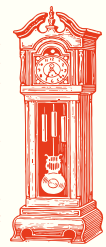
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"It's unfortunate we had to _____ (verb) all those _____ (type of people), but we're confident it will make us _____ (meaningless buzzword) and more _____ (soul-crushing inanity) as we pivot toward the _____ (euphemism for 'hell')."



CLOCKS

It is the position of this magazine that everything really started going awry with the invention of the Clock. Life is not meant to be timed! Life is meant to be spontaneous, free-flowing. Life should undulate. Does the clock undulate? It does not. We rest our case.



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NEOZAPATISMO

Give it a quick wiki.

IT'S NOT A CONSPIRACY THEORY

if it's TRUE.

(Unfortunately, it's probably not true.)



HEY, remember THAT TIME when BARACK OBAMA said that even if single payer saves money, we should oppose it because it would hurt insurance companies, and should prefer to keep millions of people doing totally pointless paper-pushing jobs? and that this represents a "non-ideological" position?

IT'S TRUE!

"I DON'T THINK IN IDEOLOGICAL TERMS. I NEVER HAVE... EVERYBODY WHO SUPPORTS SINGLE-PAYER HEALTHCARE SAYS, 'LOOK AT ALL THIS MONEY WE WOULD BE SAVING FROM INSURANCE AND PAPERWORK.' THAT REPRESENTS 1 MILLION, 2 MILLION, 3 MILLION JOBS OF PEOPLE WHO ARE WORKING AT BLUE CROSS BLUE SHIELD OR KAISER OR OTHER PLACES. WHAT ARE WE DOING WITH THEM? WHERE ARE WE EMPLOYING THEM?"

SOMETHING PLEASANT TO PONDER

"Two parents, to say nothing of one, cannot possibly satisfy all the needs of a family-household. A community is needed as well, for raising children, and also to keep adults reasonably sane and cheerful." ~JANE JACOBS

who's committed more
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TODAY?

- () UNITED STATES
- () ISRAEL



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INDEX and LIST of TERMS

Like the encyclopaedias of old, Current Affairs has an answer for anything. But across our vast archives, it can be difficult to fish out the content of your choice. Here, we offer a full index, with the subject and the issue it appears in.

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"Nancy, where the fuck are my jelly beans?"

—RONALD REAGAN



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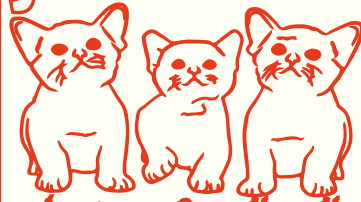
* IN FAVOR OF INDIVIDUAL
FREEDOM AND VOLUNTARY
HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

* OPPOSED TO CENTRALIZED
AUTHORITY AND COERCIVE
INSTITUTIONS

* VERY FUN

A

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CLASS SNUGGLE

TODAY IN AMERICAN HISTORY:

racism.

HENRY KISSINGER

...belongs in jail.



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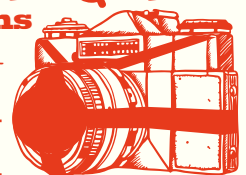


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LETTERS

HI SIR: I read your speech and it was mostly boring. You might be an educated man but in my opinion your speech is void of enlightened intelligence. You could have achieved so much more had you talked about real issues. You mentioned several times that your speech is not about Ben Shapiro but you used his person as a hook for your mediocre speech that followed. I'm not as intellectual as you are I have to admit but I'm not in any way less productive. Sir my mission is to help people to get inner transformation through meditation. Transformation has to happen on the inside of each human being to achieve true freedom. Would you like to know how this happens? Every human being is born with an energy residing in the sacred bone at the base of the spinal column. When this energy gets awakened with our pure desire, it coils (because it's coiled up 31/2 times in a dormant state) and travels up through the spinal column until it reaches the top of the head. Along the way upwards it nourishes seven energy centers which correspond with plexus in our body. The energy which is called kundalini in sanskrit then pierces the fontanelle (fountain of youth) and connects the person with the universal energy. When this takes place, one might feel a cool breeze above the head; there might be heat felt initially as a result of too much thinking and planning or analyzing. Meditation takes places when a person reaches a state of thoughtless awareness; there is no thought dominating the mind but there is silence and a sense of peace felt. One is fully aware in that state of ones surroundings but there is no reaction to anything. The person can enjoy a state of witness or a state of an observer. I hope I've inspired you to find the real solution to what ails human beings.

Sincerely,
Leela Allen

Send comments to:

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ABORTION

and the

LEFT

by BRIANNA RENNIX *and* NATHAN J. ROBINSON

IN ONE RESPECT, IT'S VERY EASY TO UNDERSTAND WHY abortion is one of the most contentious and irresolvable political issues in the world. One side insists that abortion is murder, and that outlawing it is therefore a moral necessity. The other side does not believe it is murder, sees it as a fundamental right, and views any legal restriction as an infringement on women's bodily autonomy. There can be no reconciliation between these two positions. The pro-choice slogan "if you don't like abortion, don't have one" will never persuade the other side: to someone who truly does think it's *the taking of a human life*, this phrase is about as compelling as saying "If you don't like murder, don't commit one." Differing conceptions about the moral status of the fetus, which are matters of instinct and religious belief that cannot be resolved through appeals to reason, make compromise impossible.

At the same time, even though it's obvious why abortion is very divisive morally and politically, from another perspective it's odd that it should be a difficult issue to resolve. After all, no woman *wants* to need to have an abortion, and no woman *enjoys* her abortion. In an ideal world, she wouldn't ever have to have one, but we don't live in an ideal world. Women might view it as anything ranging from an unfortunate inconvenience to an emotionally wrenching and painful decision. But it is obviously never something done for pleasure.

That means that even for advocates of choice, it would still theoretically be desirable to have as few abortions as possible. Hillary Clinton is sometimes criticized by the pro-choice movement for using the formula "safe, legal, and rare," on the grounds that her use

of "rare" implied stigmatizing and discouraging abortion. But there are multiple ways in which legalized abortion could become "rare." It could become rare because, while it is technically legal, practical obstacles and social pressure are put in the way of women actually exercising the choice to abort. Or it could become rare because other social and economic factors have changed, e.g. motherhood is actually supported and subsidized so that it isn't prohibitively expensive and difficult to raise a child, the erosion of male dominance means fewer controlling partners refusing to use condoms, and methods of birth control continue to improve.

Everyone would ideally want a world without abortion in it, then, because even in the pro-choice formulation, it's a remedy for a problem rather than a pastime. The divide between the pro-life and pro-choice positions, is therefore not quite about whether it would be better if there were no abortions, but about whether abortion should be legal or not. Michelle Oberman, in *Her Body, Our Laws*, explains that these two questions are often conflated but are actually quite different. The criminalization of abortion is not the elimination of abortion, and there is good reason to think that making abortion illegal would not substantially reduce its occurrence. Oberman traveled to Chile and El Salvador, both of which have strict laws prohibiting abortion, and discovered that abortion is widespread in both countries, especially thanks to the black-market availability of abortion drugs like mifepristone. The law may symbolically declare the government's position on the moral status of fetuses, but symbols and consequences are not the same.

The laws do have consequences, though. They may not successfully eliminate abortion, but they do make it more difficult and dangerous for women to receive them. Predictably, these harms have fallen almost exclusively on poor women. Wealthy women can simply leave the country and have the procedure performed elsewhere. It is the poor for whom abortion is criminalized, and for whom breaking the law actually poses risks. Oberman reports that in El Salvador, when women are turned in to the authorities by doctors who suspect them of having induced abortions, the reports come almost exclusively from public hospitals. In private hospitals, where patients are wealthier, doctors strictly honor patient confidentiality. As a result, those women with the least money are the ones most likely to be prosecuted. Even worse, because it is often impossible to tell the difference between an ordinary miscarriage and an intentional at-home abortion, Salvadoran women have been imprisoned for the crime of losing a child. This is an act of extraordinary cruelty by the state; a woman suffering one of the worst emotional setbacks of her life may find herself incarcerated and blamed for her misfortune, right at the moment when she needs support the most. As Oberman writes:

It is almost too painful to imagine what it feels like to go into labor suddenly, alone, far from the hospital. To be carried to the hospital, hemorrhaging and in pain, having lost the pregnancy. To arrive there only to be accused of killing your baby, by a state that never had evidence the baby was born alive, let alone that you killed it.

While members of the U.S. pro-life movement often claim that they do not intend to prosecute women, whom they see as “second victims,” Oberman says there is reason to fear that the criminalization of abortion in this country would harshly affect the destitute and desperate. In fact, American women are *already* prosecuted for having abortions, and when women have been charged with illegally attempting to end their pregnancies themselves, they have been treated as monsters rather than victims. Oberman cites the case of Purvi Patel, an Indiana woman prosecuted for feticide after ending her pregnancy using an illegally-obtained abortifacient. Patel was originally sentenced to 20 years in prison before her conviction was overturned. Since *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, over 400 women have been prosecuted for illegal abortions, and nearly 60% of them have been poor women of color.

Laws are only meaningful to the extent they are enforced, and while the pro-life movement has preferred to target doctors over patients, when at-home abortion drugs are used, it is hard to see how laws against abortion can avoid treating the women themselves as criminals. This is the inevitable consequence of viewing abortion as murder: if it truly is murder, then the women who seek abortions are attempting murder, and the choice is either between being “soft on murder” or putting a lot of women in prison. When he suggested that the pro-life position meant women who seek abortions ought to be “hanged,” conservative writer Kevin Williamson was fired from *The Atlantic* magazine. But in one way, Williamson was being re-

markably honest about the implications of the conservative position on abortion. If the pro-life movement believes its rhetoric, then it should be comfortable treating nearly 1 in 4 women as criminals. Yet even in El Salvador, the implications of declaring fetuses to be full human persons are not followed through entirely: prosecutions remain the exception rather than the norm.

Oberman believes that the pro-life movement has an unwarranted confidence that if abortion is made illegal, “the moral stance and the practical consequences will move in one direction.” Yet practically speaking, the result may not be substantially fewer abortions, but the imposition of additional burdens on women and the specter of prosecution. It’s possible that fear will deter some women who would have ended their pregnancies from doing so. But abortion rates are similar in countries in which abortion is legal and those in which it is not. If one were cynical, one might say that advocating criminalization is less about trying to stop abortions than about making a moral statement.



AFTER ALL, IF ONE TRULY CARES ABOUT ending abortions, the first task would be to examine the reasons women seek them. When women who abort are asked why they do not want to have a child, 74 percent say that having a child would interfere with education, work, or their ability to care for dependents, while 73 percent said they cannot afford a baby. Abortion rates are high in the developing world and low in the developed world, where they have been dropping steadily over time. We would expect pro-life conservatives, if they wanted to make it more likely that women would choose life, to strongly support family-friendly policies like paid parental leave, and universal free child care. The easier it is to raise a child, and the more support one receives, the more likely a woman is to decide she can go through with her pregnancy. When one of us (Nathan) worked in an abortion clinic, booking appointments for women, patients would often relate the circumstances of their choice, unprompted. The stories were almost always sad, and frequently related to material factors: abuse, poverty, overwork, a lack of support. One woman said she was firmly pro-life, but since her house had just burned down and she was uninsured, she simply had nowhere she could raise a child and didn’t know how she could possibly manage motherhood at such a difficult time. These are hardships that can be mitigated through compassionate public policies.

In fact, even those who are strong advocates of legalized abortion should be disturbed that so many women seek abortions for economic reasons. Even if one does not view abortion as a killing, and rejects language suggesting abortion is somehow a “tragic” choice, one can deplore the fact that economic circumstances compel so many women to choose abortions who would otherwise wish to be mothers. If one is truly “pro-choice,” then it has to actually *be* a choice, and it’s a fundamental tenet of left politics that choices made under conditions of economic necessity aren’t really meaningful choices at all. The aim should certainly be to reduce to zero the number of abortions that occur *because* women cannot afford to raise children. (And for all the conservative complaints about single mothers living on welfare, to make raising a child financially realistic the government will actually *need* to make sure single mothers don’t need to work full-time.)

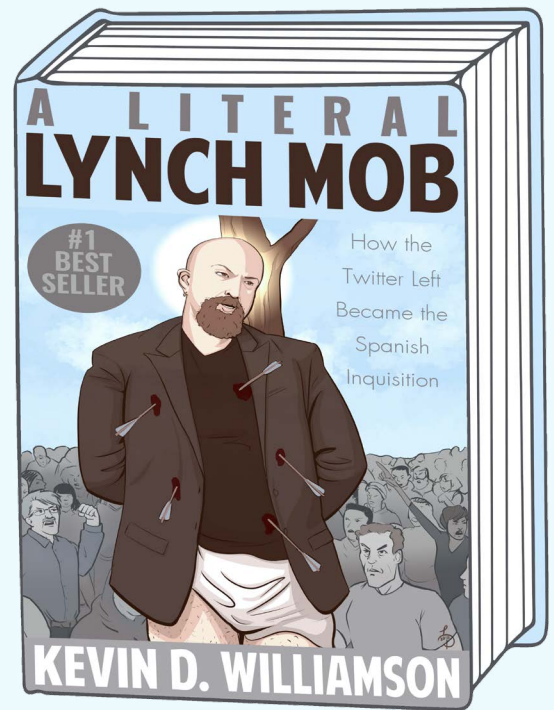
This does mean that any compassionate and feminist left political program *should* result in a reduction in the number of abortions, not because of moral stigma against women, but because left social policies should make raising a child much more feasible and elimi-

NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this article, we frequently refer to “women.” The more precise and correct term for the group we are talking about is “people who are theoretically capable of becoming pregnant,” which also includes many genderqueer and trans individuals. We are using “women” as a shorthand, but we do not intend to exclude non-women.

We also have used the term “disabled people” to describe members of the disability community. We ourselves are not members of the disability community, but our understanding is that some individuals prefer to use the term “disabled person,” and others “person with a disability,” to refer to themselves. We have chosen to use “disabled people,” simply because this is the term used by several activists whom we quoted directly in the article.

THE LEFT DESTROYED FREE SPEECH. BUT ONE MAN WOULD NOT BE QUIET.



When Kevin D. Williamson left a job at a high-profile national magazine for a different job at a different high-profile national magazine, he thought "tolerant" liberals would welcome the opportunity to engage in reasoned discussion of his challenging, provocative opinions.* Yet rather than respond to his arguments, the Left used silencing tactics straight out of the USSR.

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Williamson will be supporting his book on a 50-state tour, where he will discuss his persecution and the wider crisis facing conservative free speech.

IN STORES EVERYWHERE

*specifically, the opinion that women who receive abortions should be hanged.

nate the possibility that anyone will have to parent in poverty. And the left ought to be concerned not just with women who can't access abortion services, but with women who can't access motherhood because the economy narrows their realistic options. Similarly, the parts of the pro-life movement that concern themselves with talking women out of having abortions, but do not offer to *do* anything to make it less difficult to raise children, are offering sanctimony rather than solutions. (Katha Pollitt has argued that reducing poverty may not actually substantially reduce the number of abortions, because while $\frac{3}{4}$ of women cite economic factors, few cite economic factors *alone*. But many of the other factors are also "hardship" related, e.g. not enough time to raise a child. Reduced workweeks, strong communities, and generous family leave policies will reduce the burdens that all mothers, not just poor ones, must bear.)

There is therefore a version of the "pro-life" position that can be respected, one that is actually about life rather than about law. A person could sincerely believe the fetus is a life, but advocate improving the conditions of motherhood rather than using the criminal law to punish the poor and desperate. The problem with the pro-life position is not the particular view that it takes on the moral status of an unborn child, but that it responds through advocating policies that do little to help unborn children while using the blunt instrument of police power to dissuade women through threats rather than help.

IF WE ARE BEING HONEST, THE PHILOSOPHICAL questions about whether the fetus is a "life" are actually difficult. The view that life begins at conception, and that the death of an embryo is morally tantamount to the death of a teenager, is easy to criticize as absurd. (Teenagers are marginally more capable of higher-order thinking than embryos.) But conception has been favored as a point for drawing the line in part because it is straightforward; every other concept, such as the "point of viability," is either impossible to measure, variable, or arbitrary. One reasonable instinct is that personhood does not pop into being all of a sudden, but develops over time between conception and birth. Yet since abortion is an all or nothing proposition that requires us to agree on a fixed point, fluid personhood on a spectrum doesn't help very much.

Additionally, while compromise may feel ideologically impossible between the "abortion is murder" contingent and the "abortion on demand" contingent, it's worth mentioning that the majority of U.S. Americans appear to have views on abortion that fall somewhere in between these two poles. The last time Gallup conducted a poll on abortion, in March 2017, 49% of respondents self-identified as "pro-choice" and 46% as "pro-life." However, when asked to define their views more narrowly, 29% of respondents said that they thought abortion should be legal under "any" circumstances, 13% thought it should be legal under "most" circumstances, 36% thought it should be legal in "only a few" circumstances, and 18% thought it should be "illegal in all circumstances." In 2011, 83% of respondents believed that abortion should be legal where the woman's life was in danger, 82% where her "physical health" was in danger, and 61% where her "mental health" was in danger. 75% thought abortion should be legal in all pregnancies caused by rape or incest.

Though these polls were taken in different years and the numbers thus can't be directly compared, they seem to suggest, broadly, that U.S. Americans don't have entirely consistent positions on abortion. At least some of the people who claim that abortion should be illegal under all circumstances seem to think that there should be an exception for cases of rape and incest. (Pro-life lawmakers frequently build such exceptions into their bills.) This position doesn't actually make sense if you *truly* think abortion is "murder" in the exact same sense that killing a non-fe-

tus person is "murder": under other circumstances, we would never give a before-the-fact sanction for the killing of a defenseless person, even if the killer had suffered deeply and thought their suffering would be reduced if the other person ceased to exist. While the rape/incest exception may reflect some anti-choice advocates' disturbing beliefs about female innocence and moral desert—only women who have had pregnancy *violently forced* upon them are permitted to choose abortion—it may also be indicative of some basic instinct to balance maternal well-being against the fetus's right to exist. On the other end of the spectrum, there's been some polling (by the pro-life Charlotte Lozier Institute) suggesting that 77% of Americans would theoretically favor a ban on sex-selective abortions—a number that, if accurate, likely includes some people who otherwise favor abortions being legal under all or most circumstances.

It goes without saying that the general population's knee-jerk reactions to polling questions are not a suitable guide for either moral reasoning or policymaking. But what these numbers do seem to suggest is that people, on average, feel ambiguous about abortion, and have difficulty relating their complicated instincts to a discrete position whether abortions should be "legal" or "illegal." Some of this confusion is because the question of when personhood ought to "begin" is fundamentally a very hard one. Even the Catholic Church—whose unambiguous "life begins at conception" stance has massively influenced abortion policies in Latin America and, until very recently, in Ireland—has not *always* precisely defined all fetuses as full persons. St. Thomas Aquinas thought that a fetus was not endowed with a soul until its "quickening," or the point when the fetus could be felt to move (which is usually between 13-25 weeks after conception, i.e. well past the point when most modern abortions occur). Some medieval penitentials that mention abortion treat a termination after quickening as a homicide, but termination before quickening as some lesser category of sin, carrying a lighter penance. (For most of its history, incidentally, the Church also claimed that all unbaptized babies and fetuses were banished to a weird purgatorial circle called "Limbo," before abruptly deciding a few years ago that this had all been a big misunderstanding and Limbo had never existed.)

MEANWHILE, ON THE PRO-CHOICE SIDE, people have often struggled to carefully articulate a definition of "personhood" that would meaningfully distinguish a fetus from, for example, an infant, or a profoundly disabled adult, whom we recognize as beings entitled to care and protection. And even if one views a fetus as obviously "not a human being," there may still be serious moral questions. Non-human animals aren't human either, but "lesser lives" are still lives. For those who support animal rights, and do not think an entity need possess a fully-developed intellect in order to deserve protection from destruction, fetuses raise complicated questions. Infants, the disabled, and the elderly lack many of the capacities that able-bodied adults have, yet we rightly classify infanticide and involuntary euthanasia as murder. Fetuses are not *much* less developed, and the gap between the fetus and the infant narrows and narrows until the moment the one becomes the other. The left's concern with the weak and powerless should cause us to be very cautious about dismissing moral claims made on behalf of a life form that cannot speak in its own defense. It might not be murder to destroy a fetus, but it isn't murder to kill a puppy either, so we haven't quite solved the problem merely by distinguishing the unborn from the born. In fact, it's only the fact that pregnancy occurs within the physical body of a woman that makes it easy to sweep aside the question of rights for the unborn—if pregnancy caused a growing fetus to

Fresh Hot Takes

ON

Gender

FROM OUR EDITRIXES

BY Lyta Gold AND Brianna Rennix



Recently, *Current Affairs* has received several reader complaints regarding a number of web articles on feminist topics written by our editor-in-chief—who is not, to the best of our available knowledge, a woman. Several letter-writers have urged *Current Affairs* to hire more female writers to cover these important topics. On the one hand, *Current Affairs* would like to point out that over 50% of its editorial staff are women, many of whom are too busy writing articles on things like arbitration clauses, white supremacy, and Star Trek to personally bestir themselves every time a Woman Problem appears in the news.

On the other hand, the scourge of patriarchy is universal, even in the editorial offices of *Current Affairs*. Two of our female editors have written numerous innovative pieces of gender analysis, only to see their work mysteriously “cut for space” at the last minute. We feel that the time has come to speak out about this oppressive culture of censorship. Does the editor-in-chief derive some sick pleasure from silencing his female subordinates? Does he think their bold dissections of traditional gender norms are too radical? Does he resent the Senior Editor’s recent refusal to authorize his use of company money to turn his Manatee Facts Podcast into a feature-length film? Is he appalled at the Amusements Editor’s too-frequent use of, quote, “ghastly swears”?

While the essays themselves have disappeared, we present to you the titles of these fine pieces, so that you may gain a sense of what they were like before they were brutally axed by the patriarchy.



1. Dating Has Been Terrible Since The Dawn Of Time And No Earthly Power Will Ever Change That

2. If Men Have To Learn To Change Diapers, Women Must Learn To Change Fuseboxes

3. (Counterpoint: What Use Does A Woman Who Can Change A Fusebox Even Have For A Man?)

4. Some Women Who Write Op-Eds About Getting Passed Up For Promotions Are Clearly Actually Bad At Their Jobs And/ Or Deeply Annoying To Their Coworkers (You Know The Sort I Mean), So The Real Question Is Not How Do We Get Those Women Promoted But How Do We Prevent Similarly Annoying Men From Getting Promoted, Or Better Yet Remove All Unnecessary Hierarchies From The Workplace

5. Is It Possible That I Resent Men Because If I, A Woman, Drank A Finger Of Scotch In My Office, People Would Just Assume That I Was An Alcoholic, As Opposed To A Really Sophisticated Guy?

6. No One Thinks I’m Mysterious When I Lean On Things: The Tragedy Of Womanhood

7. Sometimes I Think Men And Women Are Basically The Same And Other Times I Think Men Are Worse Than Women And Other Times I Think Women Are Worse Than Men. Murder Statistics Seem To Bear Out Hypothesis #2, But Should I Be Using Broad Demographic Infor-

mation In That Crude Way? Also Why Do Women Always Want To Take Group Selfies Every Fucking Place We Go?

8. (Follow-Up Essay: If I Had A Murder-Penis, Would I Kill Everyone Who Tried To Take A Selfie Near Me?)

9. I’ll Come Out And Say It: Everybody Who Shared That “Cat Person” Story Needs To Share At Least One News Article About Asylum-Seekers Fleeing Domestic Violence Or GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE



10. If A Man Left Me For Another Woman I Would Be Mad But If He Left Me For Another Man I Would Respect That And Probably Be Inappropriately Interested In Their Relationship Going Forward: A Sign Of Internalized Misogyny?

11. The Part Of Masculinity Where Men Have Beards And Wear Flannel (Provided

They Also Know How To Build A Campfire) Is Vital And Must Be Preserved At All Costs

12. Why We Need To Bring Back Victorian Fashion For Men (And Also Honor Duelling)

13. Like Incels Who Believe Society Should Give Them A Girlfriend, I Believe Society Should Force Two Men To Fight To The Death Over Me Whenever I’m Feeling Insecure

14. Male Novelists Should Be Banned (Temporarily At First)

15. Jocks Are Sexier And More Dateable Than Nerds, Sorry That’s True And It’s Always Been True, If You Want A Girlfriend Maybe You Should Cultivate A Personality Outside Of Pop Culture Objects

16. Dear Men, There Actually Is A Flattering Kind Of Catcalling, But If You Don’t Already Know Exactly What I’m Talking About You Definitely Suck At It

17. When Walking Down The Street Behind A Woman, Men Should Always Maintain A Distance of 20 Feet Minimum And Bow Their Shoulders In A Diffident Non-Threatening Way And No, There Are No Exceptions For Family

18. It’s Not Men’s Fault That They Were Improperly Socialized And Don’t Know How To Process Feelings But Oh My God Were They Improperly Socialized And Don’t Know How To Process Feelings

19. Instead Of Having Two Genders, We Should Just Divide Society Between People Who Are

Good At Directions And People Who Are Good At Feelings

20. (Counterpoint: “But What About People Who Are Good At Directions And Feelings?” Irrelevant. No Such People Exist)

21. (Counterpoint: “But What About People Who Are Not Good At Directions Or Feelings?” In The New Society, They Shall Be Treated Gently, But Also Required To Wear A Small Lapel-Pin That Says ‘Help Me, I’m Lost!’ At All Times)



22. Everyone Must Obtain Informed Consent From Their Partners Before Using A Weird Baby Voice With Them

23. How Can I Tell The Difference Between Being In Love With A Man And Being Jealous Of His Cool Leather Jacket?

24. Do Men Actually Exist, Or Are They An Illusion Generated By An Evil A.I.?

25. Heterosexuality Is A Scam.

26. What If There Was Just One Pronoun For Everyone That We All Felt Equally Uncomfortable With?

your source for refreshing and unusual insight into sexual politics

appear within a bell-jar in the mother's living room, the left position on where life begins would not seem as obvious.

For some pro-choice advocates, these abstruse debates about personhood are pointless and distracting. The only relevant factor is the lived experiences of women, who are the ones who must endure the real-world outcomes of any policy decisions on abortion. Pregnancy is an incredibly intimate and invasive experience, which causes disruptive physical and hormonal changes in women's bodies—and that's even before getting to the stresses of labor, infant care, and the thankless lifetime slog of parenthood, an emotionally exhausting job where you can never hand in your notice. (We should mention, at this stage, that neither of the authors of this article have ever been pregnant, much less had a child, so we rely on secondhand intelligence from exhausted family members.) A woman is a fully sentient being. A fetus, to the best of available medical knowledge—leaving aside scientifically-dubious, politically-motivated studies on “fetal pain”—does not seem to have consciousness or to be capable of experiencing pain, at least not until sometime in the third trimester, when almost no abortions are performed. For many people, the debate begins and ends there: *of course* women should be allowed to make their own decisions on abortion, since they are the only ones who actually stand to suffer in any meaningful way.

But the reality is that the debate does *not* end there for many other people, and it seems better to acknowledge this openly than to sweep it under the rug, or to disallow questions and misgivings. People's moral uncertainties about abortion run very deep. In fact, although slightly more Americans identified as pro-choice in 2017 than pro-life, the same poll shows that slightly more Americans (49% to 43%) believed that abortion was “morally wrong” than “morally acceptable.” It might be an easier question if divisions on abortions split conveniently along gender lines, but they don't really. As of 2017, 59% of women polled by Pew thought abortion should be legal under all or “most” circumstances, and 38% thought it should be illegal under all or “most” circumstances. (With men, the split is 55% vs. 42%).

In particular, as we develop greater potential to predict unborn children's physical characteristics, there will also be thorny questions about the connection between choice, prejudice, and the potential for eugenics. Anti-abortion activists are often eager to equate being pro-choice with a covert eugenicist agenda. (And let's be honest, it certainly doesn't help that the founder of Planned Parenthood, Margaret Sanger, spilled a great deal of ink in the early 20th century on the need to sterilize the “feeble-minded” and to discourage the “great masses, who through economic pressure populate the slums and there produce in their helplessness other helpless, diseased and incompetent masses,” from reproducing. Incidentally, she was also anti-immigration, and thought that criminals, sex workers, drug addicts, illiterate people, and “unemployables” should be forcibly segregated into reeducation farms until their “moral conduct” improved. What a beacon of enlightenment!) The obvious counter to this charge is that putting choices about pregnancy in the hands of a decentralized mass of individual women, rather than in the hands of the state or medical professionals, seems like the best way to prevent elites from enforcing their social preferences through reproductive control.

That said, the left is no stranger to the idea that explicit state policies are not the only things that influence human behavior. The economic inequalities generated by a broader policy framework, together with social and cultural expectations, will also influence people's choices. If we think these inequalities are unfair, or that certain cultural and social expectations are inequalitarian and morally wrong, we may not like the aggregate mass of choices they produce. In India and China, for example, selective abortion of female children is believed to have been a widespread practice over recent decades, as evidenced by skewed gen-

der ratios. (There are 34 million more men than women in China, and 37 million more men than women in India.) This preference for sons over daughters reflects deep gender inequalities: at least until recently, a son was simply “worth” more, socially and economically, than a daughter. This is not itself an argument against abortion access, inasmuch as these abortion patterns are a symptom rather than the immediate root cause of sexism in these countries, but it does show that “choice” is a complex phenomenon, and that abortion access is not, by itself, the end-all and be-all of female autonomy. A woman's most intimate reproductive choices, like many of her other choices, may be shaped by factors well outside her choosing.

In the U.S., there is far less widespread acceptance of sex-selective abortion as a routine practice. Some pregnant women do experience an unexpected sense of distress upon learning the sex of their fetus, and there are whole websites and support groups devoted to helping women reconcile themselves to the fact that their real child will look different from their acknowledged or unacknowledged expectations. Usually, these support groups tell women it's okay to feel sad (even if it doesn't seem rational), and gently remind them that gender (or chromosomal sex) is not the defining factor of any person's identity. There is an implicit underlying assumption that women who want to be mothers should be encouraged to work through their feelings of “gender disappointment.” The way we approach the selective abortion of fetuses after screening for physical and mental disabilities, by contrast, is quite different. Many Americans who would balk at the idea of sex-selective abortion are seemingly far less troubled by the idea of abortions based on prenatal diagnoses of disability.

DOWN SYNDROME, IN PARTICULAR, HAS recently become a popular talking-point for anti-choice activists and politicians, with states like Ohio recently attempting to ban abortions after a prenatal diagnosis. Down syndrome is an “easy” condition to turn into a public cause: unlike some other congenital disabilities, which may cause people to lead lives of constant physical pain or terrifying medical uncertainty, individuals with Down syndrome seem about as likely to lead happy lives as most people, provided they have the right kinds of social and emotional support. This debate forces disabled people and disability activists into frustrating territory. As s.e. smith wrote in January 2018: “As a disabled person, talking about laws that restrict abortion is intensely challenging, because often, these conversations can feel like a referendum on whether the lives of disabled people are worth living.” smith points out that “opinions of the disability community on this issue are not uniform, as the disability community is extremely large and diverse. Some are opposed to abortion, period; others have concerns about the potential for genetic eliminationism on the basis of Down syndrome or other disabilities; others may unilaterally support abortion on demand and without apology.”

A frequent point made by pro-choice disabled people, such as Shain Neumeier, is that since disabled people have long been denied control over their over bodily integrity and reproductive functions—to say nothing of the fact that they suffer rape and sexual abuse at rates much higher than the general population—they have more stake than anyone in preserving the right to choose whether to continue a pregnancy. David Perry, the father of a child with Down syndrome, has written eloquently against the Ohio abortion ban and the political weaponization of children with Down syndrome, advocating that women need early access to accurate information about the condition, and better social supports, not potential criminal liability. Clearly, the most important goals—which all people of conscience

can hopefully agree on—are to work to make all areas of life as physically and socially accessible to disabled people as possible, and to rectify the economic inequalities that may make the prospect of raising a disabled child feel unusually overwhelming for people who otherwise do wish to be parents. But how do we approach the immediate reality that fetuses with Down syndrome are indeed aborted at very high rates, perhaps even as high as 90% in some countries? Doesn't that number feel "bad" to us, the same way that female fetuses being aborted en masse feels "bad"? Aren't these numbers a clear manifestation of the reality that our society considers some people more valuable than others?

Having this conversation can be somewhat difficult, because it's become customary on the left to state that a woman doesn't need to apologize for her decision to have an abortion, and that her reason for doing so should never be interrogated. But what about when women *do* proffer their reasons for aborting a fetus with a disability, and they're, well, kind of creepy? Ruth Marcus, in a recent *Washington Post* op-ed baldly titled "I would've aborted a fetus with Down syndrome," announced that if she had received a prenatal positive for Down syndrome for either of her children—who, in real life, are able-bodied and neurotypical—she would have had an abortion "without hesitation." She points out that because Down syndrome individuals may have more limited capacity for long-term financial independence, supporting a child with Down syndrome may be a longer-term commitment than average, and can thus be economically difficult for families. But then she goes further, stating: "I'm going to be blunt here: That [i.e. a child with Down syndrome] was not the child I wanted." Though she *did* want to be a parent, she *didn't* want to be a parent of a child "whose intellectual capacity will be impaired, whose life choices will be limited, whose health may be compromised."

How should we feel about this? On the one hand, as non-parents, the authors of this article are certainly not the best people to be making judgment calls. On the other hand, if the headline of Marcus's piece had been "I would've aborted a biracial fetus" or "I would've aborted a gay fetus," it would have been immediately obvious that there was something very unsettling about her thesis. It's one thing to feel you aren't ready to be a parent at all, or that you aren't emotionally equipped to raise a child with a disability in a world that is hostile to that child's dignity and personhood. These fears feel justifiable: they go to a desire to protect your loved ones from pain, to not take on responsibilities you think you'll fail at. All of that seems rather different, however, from saying that you *yourself* would not value a disabled child, because you share your society's worst prejudices. People on the left ought to be ashamed and outraged that our society values people according to their appearance, their intelligence, or their capacity for gainful employment, rather than according to their basic humanity. It is deeply disturbing to think that some people, implicitly, still believe that disabled people ought not to be born at all, or that they fundamentally cannot be part of a "normal" family.

Chris Kaposy, a bioethicist and father of a child with Down syndrome, suggests that the left needs to keep its commitment to abortion access firm, while also promoting economic policies and social values that would encourage people to embrace being parents of children with Down syndrome. "My wife and I are pro-choice and oppose placing limits... on abortion," he wrote in *The New York Times*. "Nonetheless, I wish more people would include children with Down syndrome in their families." He pushes back against the popular tendency to view parents of children with Down syndrome as "saintly," saying that they are in fact simply normal people who love their children. He suggests that, to the extent that our reproductive choices are influenced by bourgeois assumptions, it's worth thinking

“The problem with the pro-life position is not its view on the moral status of an unborn child, but that it advocates policies that do little to help unborn children while deploying police power against women.”

critically about them: "Why do we have children at all? Most parents would agree that it is not only so that they can replicate a conventional arc of a successful middle-class life: college, marriage, real estate, grandchildren. If those are the reasons to abort fetuses with Down syndrome, they seem disappointing... Prenatal tests enable our capacity to choose, to some degree, the children we will raise. And those who are pro-choice typically embrace this autonomy in reproduction. ... In one sense, [autonomy] simply means being free to choose, without infringement by the government. But, in a richer sense, it means choosing in accordance with one's own values. If you value acceptance, empathy and unconditional love, you, too, should welcome a child with Down syndrome into your life."

Some pro-choice people may disagree with Kaposy's sentiment, because they believe that a woman should never be encouraged to make one choice over another, or made to feel that there are "good" or "bad" reasons for choosing to end a pregnancy. But do we really think that—amongst people who all agree that a legislative ban on abortion is bad—there can *never* be any kind of discussion about

how best to apply one's moral values to one's reproductive decisions? Isn't it, at any rate, a conversation that parents and formerly-pregnant people of the left can have among themselves? It seems unwise for the left to fall silent on such important questions.

A further problem in discussing these questions is the “pro-life” and “pro-choice” positions do not distinguish between morality and law. It is possible to believe that the fetus is a life, or is *something* beyond a mere cluster of cells worth little more than a tumor, and yet be “pro-choice” in the sense of strongly opposing criminalization. But the “pro-life” movement has linked itself to the project of overturning *Roe v. Wade* and making abortion illegal, and the “pro-choice” movement is committed to proving that abortion is not a moral issue (because this risks stigmatizing women as having committed a bad act, and would seem to justify criminalization). As a result, those who oppose abortion morally but do not believe in punishing it criminally, like social justice Catholics, do not really have a comfortable home on the left.

Over the past year, in particular, there has been a lot of debate over whether there should be a Democratic Party “litmus test” on abortion. There is certainly a good argument to be made that party members shouldn't vote to restrict abortion access in the first trimester, impose unduly onerous restrictions on later-term abortions (most of which are cases where the pregnancy has severe complications or the mother's health is imperiled), or support any restrictions that impede abortion access disproportionately for poor women (as do waiting periods, for example, in the present climate of geographically-dispersed abortion clinics). These requirements seem especially reasonable given that legislative bans on abortion, as discussed earlier, do not actually meaningfully reduce abortion rates, making them a largely symbolic gesture whose limited practical effects fall heavily on the most vulnerable people. That said, if the Democratic Party wants to have a litmus test on “choice,” this should encompass more than just abortion access. It should also encompass things like robust paid family leave, on-site workplace daycare, increased benefits and community services for parents, eliminating long-standing racial inequities in maternal healthcare, and funding more creative, flexible assistance programs and open-adoption options for mothers who need more hands on deck. Democrats who are willing to unreservedly support these initiatives and fight for them shouldn't be required to perform public enthusiasm on abortion, if they are morally conflicted about it. It should be enough that they allow abortion access to remain an option for women.

Democrats certainly shouldn't make haphazard policy concessions in a misguided attempt to “accommodate” pro-life constituents. Last summer, an article in *The Week* suggested that it made strategic sense to “soften” the party's position, in the interests of retaining pro-life Democrats and winning over moderate Republicans. The “softening” measures included ceasing to “advocate for late-term abortions” or “use federal dollars to pay for abortion.” But these two compromises are actually extremely poor ideas. Late-term abortions, after all, represent just 1% of abortions, and usually take place under incredibly difficult and upsetting circumstances, such as where the fetus is found to have profound medical complications, or when poor women have experienced economic or trauma-related delays in obtaining an abortion. The women who rely on Medicaid for insurance, meanwhile, tend to be poor, and 54% of them live in states that also do not provide funding for abortions. This “softening,” without more, would represent an abandonment of unusually vulnerable women—and there is no moral argument offered for why these policies, in particular, are the ones that ought to be changed, beyond the

fact that they happen to be unpopular and would thus cost Democrats little politically if they flip-flopped on them. If the Democratic Party only cherry-picks gimmicky compromises with no underlying logic, it will produce disparate impacts for women who are in uniquely difficult positions, without addressing any of the actual concerns of Democrats who are opposed to or ambivalent on abortion.

It would be far better to continue advocating for access to abortion, while also devoting a comparable amount of resources and energy to meaningfully supporting women who wish to be mothers. (Focusing on programs for mothers and children is also a great way to call the bluff of any “pro-life” politician who is opportunistically using abortion as a wedge issue and does not, in fact, give any shits about human life.) That said, there are also certain hills that are not worth dying on. Some pro-choice advocates have opposed initiatives (such as “informed consent” laws) requiring that women seeking abortions be provided with information about alternative options, on the grounds that this is “patronizing” or implicitly “pressures” women out of abortions. This is a reasonable objection when the information being provided is misleading and manipulative: “crisis pregnancy centers,” for example, which are usually funded by anti-abortion groups, are notorious for giving women false information, such as unsubstantiated claims that abortion causes cancer. It's also reasonable to oppose weird, invasive, and emotionally fraught requirements, like forcing women to look at ultrasounds. But in most other contexts of U.S. life, the constant complaint is that doctors, bureaucrats, bankers, and other “expert” functionaries don't provide people with enough relevant information, because they don't take people's concerns seriously and don't care whether they make a genuinely informed choice. The goal should always be to get people more and better information, rather than merely less bad information. (Additionally, if we can improve our public policies on children and families, that will certainly give doctors more actually useful information to impart to people.)

IT SHOULD BE OBVIOUS, FROM THE EXAMPLES OF countries that have heavy restrictions on abortion, that the dominant “pro-life” policy position is not defensible. If abortion is murder, then women who take abortion pills are murderers, something hardly anyone other than Kevin Williamson seems comfortable acknowledging. Even if the pro-life movement admitted, though, that the “life” that begins at conception is not a life with the same moral weight of an infant, *any* attempt to criminalize abortion practices will in practice simply impose a restriction on poor women. If abortion is actually treated as a crime, then there must be prosecutions, those prosecutions will likely be racist, and they may well be like El Salvador's, which have imprisoned women for their miscarriages. Just as with alcohol prohibition, making something illegal doesn't make it go away, but it can certainly make it more expensive, and put a lot of people's lives at risk.

Anyone who wants to see fewer abortions, then, should start by empathizing with women who make the choice, and understanding why they do it. Few of them make it casually. Since economic circumstances have at least something to do with the majority of abortions, the most pro-life thing one can do is to become a socialist. No woman wants to have to have an abortion, but that “have to” is important; it's not the result of whim, but because society has made the alternative impossibly burdensome. There's something perverse about seeing politicians who erode the social safety net, and then want to punish women for the choices they make as a result of that lack of a safety net. Abortion itself is inevitably morally complicated, given the problems of line-drawing, but it is not difficult to see that a world with fewer abortions must be a world where women are supported, not a world in which women are prosecuted. ♦

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TOO EARLY



F R E E D O M A N D T H E I R I S H

by Brianna Rennix

IN COLLEGE, WHEN PEOPLE FOUND OUT THAT I WAS specializing in Irish history, I often got the question: “Are you Irish?” I never really knew how I was supposed to answer this. I clearly have an American accent. My most recent non-American-born ancestors, I suppose, were Irish. They were dour, middle-class Protestants from some weird evangelical sect, who immigrated to the United States just before Ireland got its independence in the 1920s, presumably because they were alarmed at the prospect of Catholic rule. (Of course, a few generations later they forgot the whole thing and intermarried with a bunch of Catholics, so, three cheers for the American Melting Pot, I guess). But I have no family members in Ireland, and no cultural connection to Ireland that I attribute to bloodline rather than mere intellectual interest. I do experience a profound emotional reaction to the combination of bagpipes and goatskin drums, which I sometimes find difficult to explain to people. But this, I think, is because of my unusually sophisticated musical taste, rather than some ethnic legacy.

Nonetheless, there are many people in the United States eager to proclaim themselves “Irish Americans.” Certainly, there are lots of people here with Irish ancestry—but there are surely nearly as many with English ancestry, and yet you don’t hear very much noise from “proud English-Americans.” This eagerness to claim “Irishness,” I suspect, is at least partly related to the vague notion that the Irish were an Oppressed People. This impression, in turn, largely springs from a kind of imaginative conflation of all Irish immigration throughout history with the humanitarian crisis immediately following the Great Famine in 1846. The reality, of course,

is that a great deal of Irish migration was going on both before and after the Famine, and that not all of it was driven by starvation, or by egregious political oppression. Plenty of Irish came to the U.S. seeking fortune, adventure, and better opportunity, like many of the ordinary people demonized today as undeserving “economic migrants.” Some of them, like my Rennix forebears, were unsavory oddballs with no better reason for inflicting themselves on this country than their desire to join some strange religious cult in Pennsylvania.

Surely, the reason that some Irish Americans like to imagine the Irish as oppressed—obsessing over the relatively brief but memorable era of nativist cartoons and “No Irish Need Apply” signs—is because there is cultural capital in oppression. For white people, especially—whether they’re working-class people looking for a deep historical explanation for their economic ills, or well-off whites looking to inject some DANGER into their personal identity—a whiff of racial oppression is a way to feel culturally distinctive. This attachment to a real or imagined heritage may usually be fairly harmless, and often it is quite genuinely felt. Sometimes, however, it manifests in deeply disturbing forms. Over the past few years, there have been a number of “Irish slavery” memes circulating the internet, often on white supremacist websites, but sometimes on Facebook pages of oblivious aunt-and-uncle types. For those of you who haven’t encountered this interesting phenomenon, the meme usually consists of an image of raggedly-dressed Irish laborers (or, sometimes, totally unrelated people, like emaciated survivors of Japanese POW camps), with accompanying text such as: “Irish were kidnapped, shipped in disease-ridden holds, traded

like animals, and then whipped and worked on America's plantations." "Whenever they rebelled or even disobeyed an order, they were punished in the harshest ways." "WHITE IRISH SLAVES WERE TREATED WORSE THAN ANY OTHER RACE IN THE U.S. WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU HEARD AN IRISHMAN BITCHING HOW THE WORLD OWES THEM A LIVING?"

The pedigree of these memes, and a detailed interrogation of all the claims made within in them, has been expertly documented by Liam Hogan, a librarian at Limerick City Library, in a series of six articles published on *Medium*. These articles are fascinating reading, and a brilliant example of meticulously-researched history made freely available to the public. (History departments, take note! This is what the academy ought to be spending its time on!) Though the photographs are misattributed and the accompanying information almost always inaccurate, the memes do have a certain kernel of historical truth. There *was* a period during which some Irish people were transported to the Caribbean against their will, and forced to work as bonded laborers. This historical injustice has long been analogized to "slavery": in 1915, the Irish socialist and revolutionary James Connolly wrote of how "native Irish" during the seventeenth century were "hunted to death, or transported in slave-gangs to Barbadoes."

Under other circumstances, to characterize this forced labor as a form of "slavery" would be uncontroversial. But the "Irish slavery" memes want to go one further. They seek to promote a pseudo-history about an "Irish slavery" that was just as systematic and, in fact, *qualitatively worse than* the chattel slavery imposed on Africans and their descendants. The clear message of these memes, which are frequently deployed against Black Lives Matters activists and other racial justice advocates, is that black people are not entitled to the sympathy of Irish Americans, because Irish Americans have *suffered more* and *whined less*. Never mind that the number of forcibly-bonded Irish laborers in the Caribbean was fairly small, and that most "Irish Americans" aren't descended from them. Pretending that there was a secret, widespread system of Irish slavery is much more glamorous than simply stating boring facts, such as that poor Irish suffered when they first came to America, or that poor people, including poor whites, suffer in America now.

It's depressing to see this invented history being wielded as a weapon in the service of racial and political hatreds. If we want to look at the real history of Irish people in relation to slavery, a quite complicated picture emerges, in which the Irish acquit themselves at times well, and at times badly, depending on which individuals you are talking about, and whom you classify as "Irish."

IF WE'RE GOING TO TALK ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP between Irish identity and the history of slavery, we should probably start with St. Patrick. (And no, this is not simply because of my eccentric insistence on relating every topic back to the Middle Ages! I have *reasons*!) As we all know, St. Patrick is *the* premier mascot of Irish America. In every major city in the United States, people celebrate St. Patrick's Day to honor their

Irish heritage, or, at any rate, to vicariously participate in the Irish people's historically troubled relationship with alcohol. Many Americans probably don't know much about Patrick's actual story, simply thinking of him as a crozier-wielding snake exterminator. Even those who *do* know Patrick's biography have likely heard it *too* many times, until it no longer seems interesting or striking: the way many of us have heard the stories of, say, Frederick Douglass or Harriet Tubman so many times that we no longer appreciate the astonishing narrative arc of their lives. What the real-life St. Patrick had in common with Douglass and Tubman, of course, was that he was an escaped slave. This fact of his history, from what we can tell from his writings, formed a central part of his self-conception and his sense of moral purpose.

Indeed, Patrick—who lived in the fifth century AD—is quite a strange person to have become the chief global symbol of Irishness, because he himself was not Irish at all, and only ever referred to the Irish as a "foreign people." Patrick was born Patricius, and grew up in Great Britain, which was then part of the Roman Empire. (This, to be clear, was many centuries before Ireland was a British colony.) Patrick was likely from a family of at least middle-class means: his father was a decurion, a local government official, and his grandfather was a Christian priest. We know few specifics about Patrick's origins beyond these few facts, as most of the biographies and documentary traditions about him are deeply suspect. (They date several centuries after his life, and largely involve Patrick engaging in *Avengers*-style combat with druids and demons.) In another sense, however, we know Patrick much better than most people from this period, because two texts actually authored by him have survived. One of these, his *Confession*, sketches out some brief details of his life. When Patrick was sixteen, Irish pirates raided his home, killed the household servants, and took Patrick himself captive. He was



brought as a slave to Ireland, a place where he did not speak the language, where the religion of his family, Christianity, had only a tenuous toe-hold. He labored as a slave for six years before finally managing to escape back to Britain, where he was reunited with his family and ordained a priest.

Several years later, however—against the wishes of his parents, and possibly against the orders of his religious superiors—he decided to return to Ireland permanently as a missionary, after dreaming that he heard the residents of the place where he had been enslaved calling out to him for help. In his writings, he described himself a *profuga*—a fugitive or, if you like, a refugee—and as a *servus*, a slave, of the Irish people.

THERE IS SOMETHING RATHER STRIKING about having a cultural figurehead who was once a foreign-born slave. Patrick's identity fits, not *too* terribly, into the Irish-American immigration narrative, and the idea of making a home amongst inhospitable people: but it's a curious complication that the *Irish*, in Patrick's story, were the ones doing the enslaving. Of course, Patrick's enslavement isn't the primary feature of his public image in America. It might be a good thing if it were. If cultural communities insist on having historical patrons, selecting a person persecuted by some past version of your community seems a healthy choice. That way, when if you are a suffering member of the community, you can look to that person's suffering; and if you are prospering, you can look to that person's persecutors, and see if you find any troubling family resemblances.

Given Patrick's background, it seems thematically appropriate that one of the places where St. Patrick's Day is celebrated today is Montserrat, a small island in the Caribbean where 88% of the population are the descendants of African slaves. Many Montserratians bear Irish-sounding surnames, like Lee, Ryan, Meade, Daley, and Sweeney. With lots of drinking and wearing-of-the-green, their St. Patrick's Day bash resembles other such celebrations the world over—but the purpose of the holiday here is slightly different than elsewhere, in that it commemorates not just St. Patrick himself, but also a slave uprising that took place on Montserrat on March 17, 1786.

How did eighteenth-century Caribbean slaves come to choose St. Patrick's Day as the ideal date for a rebellion? We are many centuries after Patrick's time, and Ireland is now under English rule. Many Irish have begun striking out for the New World, some as entrepreneurs, others as indentured servants. Among Montserrat's earliest European inhabitants were Irish Catholics who had been expelled from the English settlements in Virginia and on the Caribbean island of St. Kitts, due to religious tensions. Montserrat, like Ireland, was an island with a tumultuous history of conquest: its previous inhabitants had been driven off by the Caribs, who were in turn displaced by the Europeans. By the 17th century, the title to the island was owned by an English lord, who soon leased his proprietary rights to colonial gover-

nors, whose job it was to extract value from the land.

There was a sharp social division between Montserrat's predominately Irish laboring class and the English and Anglo-Irish planters who governed the island. Still more Irish arrived in Montserrat starting in 1649, when the armies of Oliver Cromwell, then Lord Protector of England, defeated the rebelling Irish Catholic gentry, and the English government began deporting political prisoners to the Caribbean. Other Irish criminals and so-called "sturdy beggars" were transported to the island, too, as a penal measure. Unlike other Irish bonded laborers, who "voluntarily" sold their freedom for a period of years, these deportees were sent to the New World against their will. On arrival, the prisoners' labor was purchased for a specific period of time, usually for 10 to 12 years. Though this term of indenture was long, it was, at the very least, finite. The same could not be said for the African chattel slaves who began to be imported around the same time. They had virtually no hope of earning or waiting out their freedom.

By the 1650s, a hierarchy had coalesced on Montserrat of Anglo-Irish planter elites, predominately Irish Catholic indentured servants, and African slaves. Montserratian historian Howard Fergus speculates that—at least at the very beginning—there may have been some degree of solidarity between the Irish indentured servants and the African slaves. Though a small number of the Irish laborers, after their indenture, came to own one or two slaves, the majority could not afford to do so; when the free Irish had any land at all, it was usually a small plot on desiccated land. Unlike in other British colonies, where housing arrangements were more segregated, poor whites and African slaves in Montserrat lived close together, sometimes even within the same homes. Evidently, the ruling class was anxious about where this proximity might lead, because in 1672 they passed a law forbidding free and bonded whites from conspiring with slaves to run away, and in 1680 banned blacks and whites from federating together in "convivial organizations." Laws forbidding blacks from participating in most forms of economic activity—which benefited poor whites by reducing competition in their small-scale business endeavors—drove the racialized wedge even deeper. Later laws would allow poor whites to shoot on sight any black person attempting to steal their property.

LIFE FOR INDENTURED LABORERS IN THE CARIBBEAN sugar plantations was incredibly difficult. While bonded, a person's labor could be freely bought and sold, meaning that servants had no say in where they were to live or what kind of work they would be forced to do. In Barbados, Irish Catholics who came to the island as family units were reportedly split up and sold to different masters. Punishments for attempted escape were harsh. Howard Fergus records, for example, that several Irish women who tried to leave Montserrat in a canoe were sentenced to 39 lashes on their bare backs, and were then ordered to be sold for an additional four years past the completion of their original period of indenture. Nevertheless, by any objective measure, the African slaves in the Caribbean suffered far worse. Punishments like drawing and quartering, typically reserved for high crimes like

treason, were meted out to slaves for simple theft; lesser punishments included mutilations and repeated brandings with hot irons. Starting in 1696, any slave caught stealing equipment in Montserrat valued at twelve pence or greater was sentenced to death, while a slave stealing any item of lesser value was to be whipped and have both ears cut off. At every point, the law emphasized that slaves were property, not persons—and in some cases, not even property of any particular value. A slave who murdered another slave, for example, was merely fined, whereas slaves who destroyed non-human property were tortured and killed.

OVER THE NEXT CENTURY AND A HALF, THE IRISH population on Montserrat dwindled, as most Irish servants who completed their indenture found little possibility for upward mobility on the island, and chose to leave where they could. Slaves had no such option. In 1768, a number of slaves planned an attack on the seat of colonial government in Montserrat on the feast of St. Patrick, a day when the inhabitants of the island typically gathered. The rebellion was brutally suppressed, with nine ringleaders executed and 30 others banished, probably to other colonies. It was to commemorate this attempted uprising, about which few concrete details are known, that the Montserratian St Patrick's day celebration was instituted in the 1960s. It also soon came to be marketed as a tourist attraction, emphasizing the island's historical Irish connection.

Howard Fergus—himself a black Montserratian—regards with uneasiness this strange conflation of slave rebellion and Irish identity, given that the Irish indentured servants had been a transient class during a discrete point in the island's history, and there was certainly no evidence that any Irish had ever assisted the African slaves in their bid for freedom. “The idea of a black Irish enclave in a distant tropical island or, another Emerald Isle with an Irish diaspora, sounds exotic and has prosperous possibilities for tourism,” wrote Fergus, “but has no strong support from the historical evidence available to us.” The Irish, in fact, left little mark on the demographics of the island: the island's many Irish surnames are an inheritance of slavery, courtesy of Anglo-Irish and smaller Irish Catholic slaveholders.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the “Irish slaves” memes mentioned earlier is that they don't merely try to present bonded labor and criminal transportation as horrific institutions in their own right. There would be little to contest there: the fact that many poor people, political exiles, criminals, and social misfits suffered in the course of their indentures, that many of them had their indentures forced upon them, and that some died before they could secure their freedom, is a human tragedy. But the proponents of the “Irish slave” meme, of course, are not merely seeking to draw attention to a lesser-known historical injustice: they seek to attack historically-marginalized groups by suggesting that since Irish people have recovered from the generational after-effects of their “slavery,” everyone else should have, too.

Of course, the architects of the Irish slavery pseudohistory were certainly aware that the sufferings of the Irish laborers, though real,

simply didn't register very dramatically against the gruesome backdrop of African chattel slavery (especially given the uncomfortable reality that some Irish people became slaveholders themselves). In order to substantiate their vision of the Irish as not just exploited, but *unusually* persecuted, the makers of these memes frequently appropriate stories of atrocities suffered by *African slaves* and attribute them to Irish bond laborers. Liam Hogan has collected memes that reference the dumping of 132 Irish slaves into the sea as a cost-saving measure, and has shown how this false account is directly lifted from the real-life Zong massacre, when 132 African slaves were ejected from a slave-ship in precisely this manner. Stories of Irish slaves being burned and beheaded, too, are borrowed directly from accounts of the sadistic punishments suffered by African slaves in the Caribbean.

In fact, the Irish were a diverse group in the Caribbean. Some were indentured servants. Some, especially the “Anglo-Irish,” were elites. Others were small-scale slave-owners. And Irish slave-owners could be cruel to their slaves. In an account of a trip to Barbados in 1654, a French priest named Antoine Biet wrote of visiting an Irish slave-owner (of unknown religious and social background) who had kept one of his slaves in irons for seven days for stealing a pig. Later, he cut off the slave's ear and forced him to eat it. “He wanted to do the same to the other ear, and the nose as well,” wrote Father Biet, “I interceded on behalf of this poor unfortunate.” Though Biet was no egalitarian, believing that a firm hand was necessary “to keep these kinds of people obedient,” he was nevertheless horrified by what he witnessed. “These poor unhappy people tremble when they speak,” he wrote, “and for my part, I assess the conditions of our galley slaves, who are condemned for their crimes, as being better than that of these poor unfortunates.”

P ERHAPS IT'S TOO MUCH TO EXPECT THAT Irish people in the Caribbean, particularly those Irish who did actually suffer heavily under indenture, would have had the wherewithal to empathize with the sufferings of African slaves. We may feel that we are too distant from the lived reality of their circumstances to assess whether we ourselves would have behaved more morally. But what about middle-class people of Irish descent, living in the United States during the height of antebellum slavery? Given economic and social breathing-space, did their identity as Irish people—many of whom understood themselves to have come to the United States to escape oppression—give them any special sympathy for the plight of slaves?

There was, in fact, a brief period in the 19th century when there existed a transatlantic alliance between abolitionists seeking an end to slavery in the United States, and Irish reformers campaigning for greater political freedom. This alliance was chiefly embodied by the person of Daniel O'Connell, a hugely popular Irish Catholic politician dubbed “The Liberator.” An astonishingly talented orator whose so-called “monster meetings” drew crowds of tens of thousands, O'Connell had won a hard-fought legislative struggle in the 1830s to undo the laws that had barred

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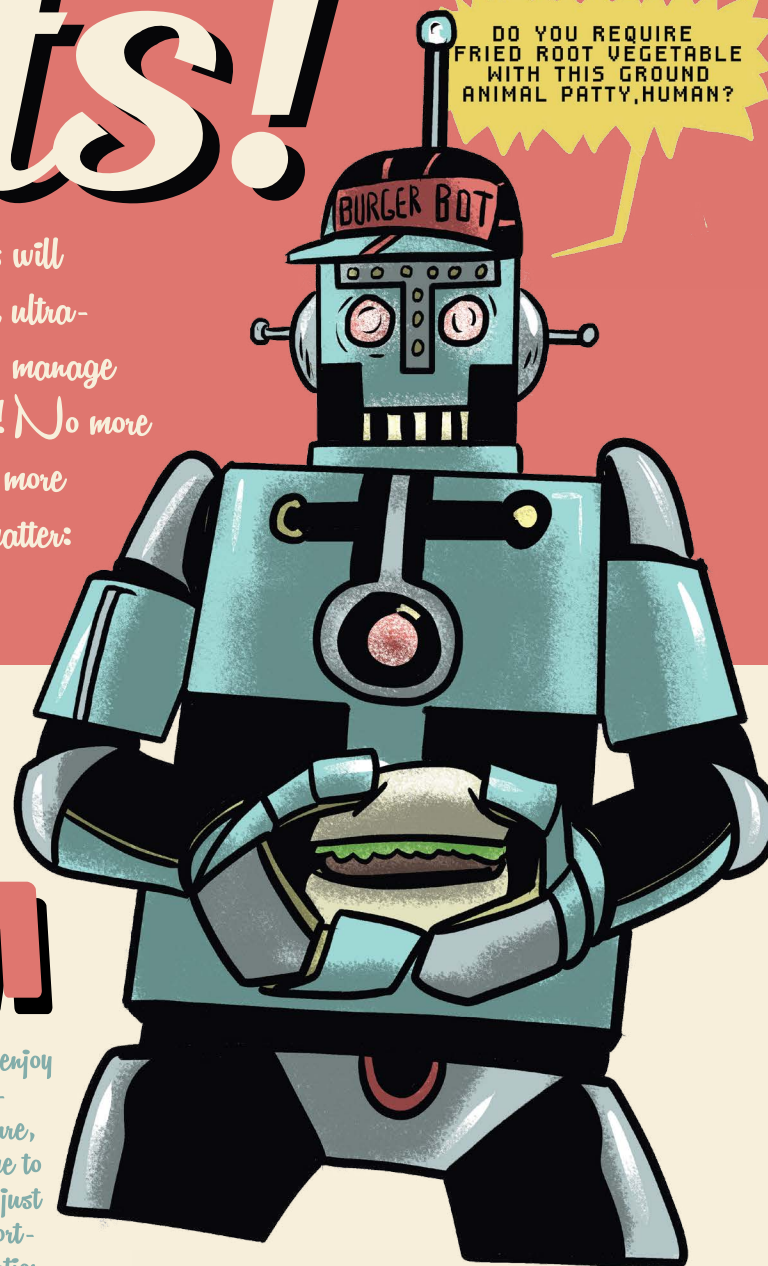
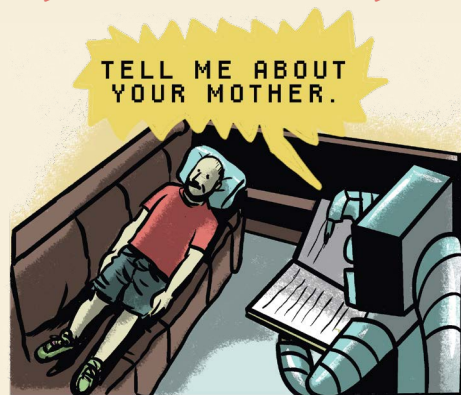
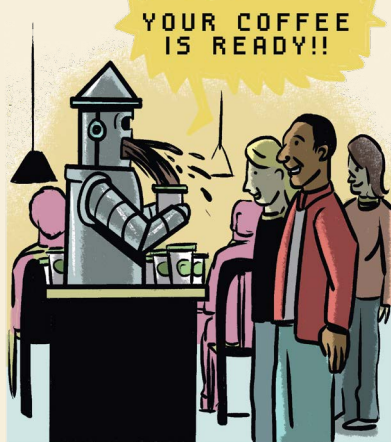
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Catholics from sitting in Parliament. By the 1840s, O'Connell had turned his sights on a new political goal: the repeal of the political union between Britain and Ireland.

DANIEL O'CONNELL, IN ADDITION TO HIS DOMESTIC political concerns, was also a vocal and convicted abolitionist. In this age when we are accustomed to politicians either being single-issue advocates, or otherwise having a lukewarm slate of broad policy positions, O'Connell's ability to genuinely care about more than one thing at the same time feels refreshingly novel. O'Connell was a passionate advocate for abolition, even though it didn't really benefit his campaign for Irish political rights in any clear way, and indeed, if anything, tended to complicate his efforts to seek allies and funding in the United States. O'Connell was fond of saying that he would never set foot on American soil until slavery was abolished. Upon meeting any American in Ireland, O'Connell would ask first if he owned any slaves, and then, if he said that he did, would turn his back and refuse to speak to him. He spoke of his wish that "some black O'Connell" would arise in the United States and urge his countrymen to "Agitate! Agitate! Agitate!" O'Connell's rhetoric against slave-owners was fierce: in one representative speech, he declared that senator Henry Clay "ought to be drowned in the tears of the mothers of negro children." (Can you imagine Bernie Sanders telling Jeff Sessions that he ought to be drowned in the tears of refugee mothers? These are cowardly times.)

Irish abolitionist societies, working in tandem with American abolitionists—including John Remond, a free black abolitionist who travelled through Ireland in 1841 to speak about the evils of slavery—put together an address to Irish emigrants in the United States, signed by Daniel O'Connell and 60,000 other Irish supporters. "We call upon you to UNITE WITH THE ABOLITIONISTS, and never to cease your efforts until perfect liberty be granted to every one of [America's] inhabitants, the black man as well as

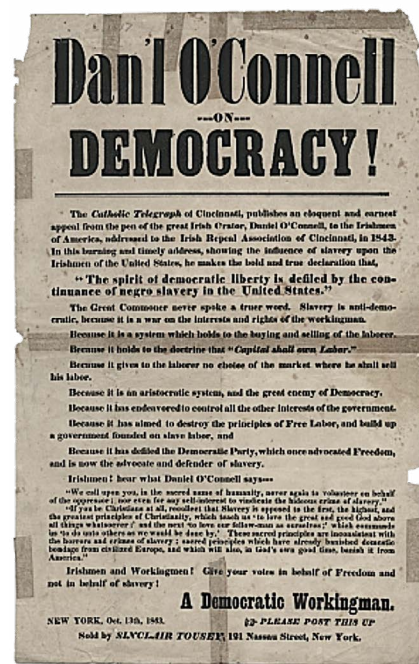
the white man," the address ran. "We are told that you [Irish Americans] possess great power, both moral and political, in America. We entreat you to exercise that power and that influence for the sake of humanity. ... Irishmen and Irishwomen! treat the colored people as your equals, as brethren. By all your memories of Ireland, continue to love liberty—hate slavery—CLING BY THE ABOLITIONISTS—and in Ameri-

ca you will do honor to the name of Ireland."

The address, which was read out at Faneuil Hall in 1842, was supposedly warmly received by its largely working-class Irish audience. But in the weeks after the publication of the Address, it soon became apparent that the broader mass of Irish Americans—especially the leaders of the Irish American political organizations that supported Daniel O'Connell's bid for repeal of the British Union—were not interested in "clinging by the abolitionists." Bishop Hughes, the highest-ranking Irish American in the Catholic hierarchy, openly opined that Daniel O'Connell's signature on the address must be a forgery. The Irish American press decried the Address's attempt to appeal to a specifically Irish conscience, vigorously asserting that the Irish in America were actuated by loyalty to their adopted country over and above any loyalty to their homeland. The *Boston Catholic Diary* announced that Irish Americans would "acknowledge no dictation from a foreign source." Most Repeal organizations in both the North and the South—deploying the popular gradualist argument that the over-hasty abolition of slavery would be the destruction of the American Union, and would thus cause more evils than it solved—rejected O'Connell's appeal to unite the Irish cause with that of abolition.

O'Connell's written response to one Irish American repeal society in Cincinnati castigated Irish Americans for their failure to rally behind abolition. "It was not in Ireland you learned this cruelty," he wrote. "It is, to be sure, afflicting and heart-rending to us to think that so many of the Irish in America should be so degenerate as to be among the worst enemies of the people of color." He called again on the Irish Americans to advocate for freedom, education, and full political rights for black Americans, and to repudiate the "filthy aristocracy of the skin." "Recollect," he wrote, "that it reflects dishonour not only upon you but upon the land of your birth. There is but one way of effacing such disgrace, and that is by becoming the most kindly towards the colored population, and the most energetic in working out in detail, as well as in general principle, the amelioration of the state of the miserable Bondsmen."

In Ireland itself, indeed, there was broad support for the abolition of slavery. When Frederick Douglass made a lecture-tour of Ireland in 1845, he was disturbed by the extremity of the poverty he witnessed in various parts of the country, but simultaneously struck by the apparent lack of racism in all the people he met. "The warm and generous co-operations extended to me by the friends of my despised race," he wrote to a friend, "the prompt and liberal manner with which the press has rendered me its aid—the glorious enthusiasm with which thousands have flocked to hear the cruel wrongs of my downtrodden and long-enslaved fellow-countrymen portrayed... and the entire absence of everything that looked like prejudice against me, on account of the colour of my skin—contrasted so strongly with my long and bitter experience in the United States, that I look with wonder and amazement on the transition." He was thrilled to see Daniel O'Connell speak, and later told an abolitionist gathering how, as a boy, "the poor trampled slave of Carolina" had heard O'Connell's name, and his call for a black leader to agitate among the slaves, "with joy and hope."



Ultimately, nothing much came practically of the attempted alliance between the abolitionists and those seeking political independence in Ireland, as O'Connell's health waned, and as more narrowly nationalist leaders (who declared that Ireland had "no Quixotic mission to hunt out and quarrel for (without being able to redress) distant wrongs, when her own sufferings and thralldom require every exertion and every alliance") increasingly came to the fore of Irish politics. O'Connell's abolitionism—together with his controversial assertion that Ireland would support England over the United States in order to prevent the annexation of Texas—sounded the death-knell for the repeal organizations that had supported his cause in the United States. In Ireland, meanwhile, public attention to the cause of abolition proved transient, especially as the potato blight took hold of the Irish countryside after 1846.

And in truth, Ireland's commitment to abolition had never been pure. Irish agriculture had benefitted economically as a supplier of goods to the British West Indies, both in the time of slavery and under the subsequent racist system of "apprenticeship." O'Connell himself, for all that he railed against slavery, had been reluctant to turn down subscription funds from the repeal organizations of the American South. And yet, there is a deep and undeniable appeal in the idea of a young Frederick Douglass drawing inspiration from O'Connell's call for a black Liberator. It's enough to make us wish that the ideal of oppressed Irish and enslaved Africans coming together under a common banner of freedom could actually have been properly realized.

WE MAY FEEL, WITH SOME JUSTICE, that personifying whole nations is absurd, and that deriving a sense of identity from one's ancestral antecedents is something we ought to be moving away from. That said, people best understand history through narrative, and so telling stories may be the best means of disrupting these stereotyped notions of culture and nationality—or at least beginning to refine them down to something truer and more nuanced. Of course, white supremacists seeding memes are not ingenuously looking to find historical truth; they're just looking to spread propaganda. But for Irish Americans who feel a genuine connection with an Irish heritage, it's possible that accurate presentations of Irish history can be a tool for disrupting unhelpful and simplistic assumptions. To the extent that Irish and Irish-American people suffered in the past, this should help inculcate empathy for all suffering people in the world today; and to the extent that Irish and Irish-American people inflicted suffering, or chose to ignore it, this should inspire self-criticism. It's unfortunate, for example, that the hitherto little-told story of indentured servitude—which could be easily compared to many forms of modern wage slavery the world over, or the plight of people forced into unwilling migration by economic and political forces—is now a form of oppression that must be qualified and diminished, because badly-intentioned political actors have appropriated it as an ex-



cuse to disregard the even worse suffering of chattel slaves.

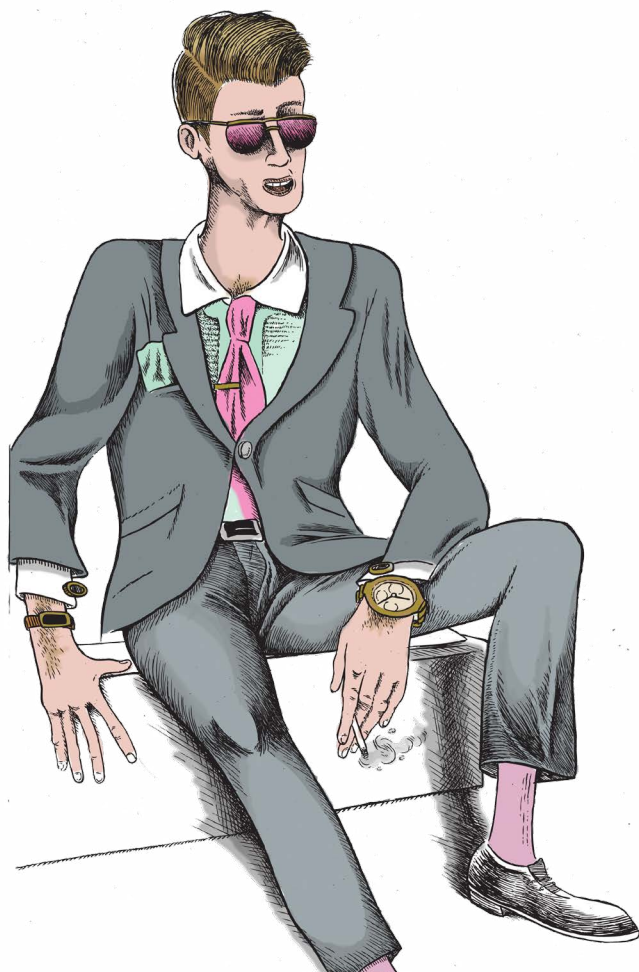
The story of the Irish in the Americas, in turn, illustrates some of the difficulty of trying to get groups of people with a shared experience of suffering—even if of different types and degrees—to see each other as allies. The left has not come up with a good strategy for combatting the divide-and-conquer strategies that elites used against the poor since the dawn of time. How do you get people to unite with those who are in the same or an even worse position than themselves, rather than trying to ally themselves with the oppressors that some part of them secretly desires to emulate? This is where race is especially pernicious, because whiteness allowed ambitious Irish to vanish into the broader mass of privileged people, while oppressed people of color had no such option. That said, it's also true that many poor people in the U.S. today likely *do* have ancestral roots with the poor Irish of the past—whether these were the Scotch-Irish of Appalachia, or the Irish Catholic famine refugees. These Irish Americans are not the descendants of slaves, and their continued poverty has far less to do with systemized racial prejudice than with cruel economic policies that fall most heavily on people who are already poor. Nonetheless, their suffering is real.

How can the left, today, create a narrative that tries to show that poor whites, poor blacks, poor immigrants, have shared experiences of suffering, and common needs that are unaddressed by existing policy? The acute sufferings of some Irish and of all Africans in the Caribbean was one that produced no real solidarity. The same was likely true in the riot-plagued slums of nineteenth-century America, where poor white and black laborers struggled for self-sufficiency and some sense of dignity. But the indifference and jealous self-interest of the middle-class Irish in America, with reference to the question of abolition in the 1840s, shows that success and comfort can produce its own, even more morally hideous brand of complacency and cruelty. Perhaps we can still derive hope from the fact that the words of an Irishman, Daniel O'Connell, gave courage to Frederick Douglass. 🍀

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suburban
redneck*

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*nostalgia
nerd /
startup stan*

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WHAT IS EDUCATION FOR?

by SPARKY ABRAHAM
and NATHAN J. ROBINSON

EDUCATION HAS NO CLEAR PURPOSE. That's not a criticism, it's just an observation that there are numerous conflicting visions of what education is "for." What are we actually trying to do for kids by making them go to school, and why are we trying to do it? If it's an attempt to help kids understand things they'll need to know in their daily lives, much of contemporary education makes little sense: very few of us will use chemistry or algebra or French. But it *would* be very helpful to know how to cook a good breakfast, negotiate a pay raise, or defuse an argument. If education is about making "model citizens," well, we would probably expect civics to be treated in a little less cursory a fashion. Maybe education is about teaching job skills, providing abilities that will prove useful in making a living. Maybe it nourishes souls and expands horizons. Maybe it's just a way to keep as many kids as possible in a room together and therefore out of trouble. Or maybe it doesn't do much of anything at all.

Bryan Caplan, *The Case Against Education: Why the Education System Is a Waste of Time and Money*, Princeton University Press, \$29.95, 416pp.

Libertarian economist, George Mason University professor, Cato Institute adjunct, and *Freakonomics* contributor Bryan Caplan has written *The Case Against Education*, in which he argues forcefully that it's the last one. Education, he says, does very little for kids. Or rather, it *teaches* them very little, which is different. Caplan says that while there is no doubt that the more years of education you receive, the better off you're likely to be in life, this is mostly unrelated to anything you've actually been *taught*. One standard view of the value of an education is that because employers are willing to pay more for more educated workers, people must be getting something important out of school that pays off. Caplan points out that this is not necessarily the case. The fact that more education leads to a higher salary does not mean that school is actually teaching anybody anything. It could just be "sorting" students who have relevant traits, "signaling" to employers which people have the most potential to succeed at their jobs.

Think about this like an obstacle course. If we have a group of people clamber up rocks, shimmy down ropes, and, yes, jump through hoops, the ones who make it to the end might have showed that they're the best candidates for a physically demanding job. But it's just a test, a selection process designed

“Kids need to be able to screw around without pressure to Prepare For The Workforce.”

to expose traits that candidates already possess. It's a “signal.” It hasn't actually taught anybody anything, except how good they are at swinging from ropes. For Caplan, this is what education is mostly about. It's a test of endurance and ability. In contrast to “human capital” theories that emphasize the body of valuable intellectual assets students acquire through schooling, Caplan believes that education is largely a credentialing process. An employer doesn't want people with high school diplomas because of anything they've been taught in high school, but because they want the *sort* of people who get high school diplomas, i.e. those who have habits like showing up on time, following directions, being able to assimilate new facts quickly, etc. Or, more cynically, they want the sort of people with the financial resources and family support to make it through high school.

This does not mean that school teaches nothing, and Caplan concedes that basic literacy and numeracy are obviously important. But it does mean that a colossal amount of time and resources are being wasted. After all, if you could tell which candidates were going to complete the obstacle course after the first stage, would there be any need for ten additional stages? Plenty of jobs that require college *degrees* don't actually require any *skills* learned in college; there's no reason they couldn't be filled by people with high school diplomas, saving the students four years and a pile of money. Caplan asks:

Think about all the classes you ever took. How many failed to teach you any useful skills? The lessons you'll never need to know after graduation start in kindergarten. Elementary schools teach more than reading, writing, and arithmetic. They also require history, social studies, music, art, and physical education. Middle and high schools add higher mathematics, classic literature, and foreign languages—vital for a handful of budding scientists, authors, and translators, irrelevant for everyone else. Most college majors don't even pretend to teach job skills. If you apply your knowledge of Roman history, Shakespeare, real analysis, or philosophy of mind on the job, you have an odd job.

The “uselessness” of education leads Caplan to downright

radical conclusions. While typical criticisms of the existing education system focus on how the system is working, Caplan's objection is to the system itself. He believes that “there's way too much education” and that “typical students burn thousands of hours studying material that neither raises their productivity nor enriches their lives.” He considers himself the ally of every student who has ever sat in class, looking despairingly at the ticking clock, wondering when they're ever going to use any of the stuff they're being taught. *You're not*, Caplan says, and that's the problem.

When Caplan begins talking about the implications of his “signaling” theory, things take a turn for the disturbing. Because he believes education is bad and useless, he supports drastic cuts to public support for it:

Government heavily subsidizes education. In 2011, U.S. federal, state, and local governments spent almost a trillion dollars on it. The simplest way to get less education, then, is to cut the subsidies. This would not eliminate wasteful signaling, but at least government would pour less gasoline on the fire.

He believes there should be far more emphasis on vocational schooling, to the point of putting kids to work. He even has a section entitled “What's Wrong With Child Labor?” in which he says that the employment of children is no worse than school and is far more useful:

When children languish in school, adults rush to rationalize. Making kids sit at desks doing boring busywork may seem cruel, but their pain trains them for the future. Why then is child labor so reviled? Toil may not be fun, but it too trains kids for their future.

At the college level, Caplan believes that students should be discouraged from pursuing “useless” degrees (i.e. the ones that do not increase their employment prospects):

Why should taxpayers fund the option to study fine arts at public expense? Instead, shut down the impractical departments at public colleges, and make impractical majors at private colleges ineligible for government grants and loans. Deprived of impractical options, some students will switch to practical subjects. Won't plenty of others respond to narrower options by cutting their schooling short? Hopefully. If students refuse to stay in school unless they're allowed to waste public money, taxpayers should call their bluff.

He wants to increase the cost of college, so that fewer students will attend, on the theory that if far fewer people went to college, college degrees would no longer be necessary. As he says:

Shift the cost of education from taxpayers to students and their families. Raise tuition for public colleges. Cut subsidies. Turn grants into loans. Charge borrowers market interest rates. Impose at least some tuition for public high school. From a normal perspective, such proposals provoke the horrified reaction, ‘Attendance could fall!’ From a signaling perspective, the right response is, ‘Lower attendance is what we're going for.’

By contrast with those who lament the indebtedness of millennial college graduates, Caplan thinks student debt is a thoroughly *good* thing, because it punishes people for pursuing college degrees:

Student debt has the same upsides. Students who know they'll eventually pay for their education may still make foolish decisions. But at least they have an incentive to weigh their options—and wonder how they'll repay their debts with an anthropology degree. Contrary to populists, student loan programs are one of the least dysfunctional parts of the status quo. Subsidized loans definitely encourage college attendance, but subsidies are too low to encourage it much. Compared to overall taxpayer support for education, loan programs are a rounding error—in part, no doubt, because student debt survives bankruptcy.

CAPLAN'S ARGUMENT STARTS OUT PERSUASIVELY and quickly turns dystopian. One moment Caplan is talking about the question of what credentials mean to employers, then the next moment he is advocating bringing back child labor, eliminating anthropology departments, totally privatizing primary and secondary education, and saddling college students with even-greater mountains of non-dischargeable debt. Alarming, because Caplan is a strong writer and lays out his points clearly, his book carries readers easily from the academic discussion of “signaling” versus “human capital” theories of education to these dire prescriptions. It can be difficult to spot exactly where things have gone off the rails. Like the story of the boiling frog (if you boil a planet slowly, nobody will notice that all the frogs are dead until it's too late), we can nod along with reasonable-sounding libertarian arguments without noticing just how crazy they've gotten.

It should go without saying (but these things so seldom do) that Caplan's proposal will worsen the existing stratification of education across social classes. Who will be getting the vocational education, sent off as a preteen to the Amazon warehouses or down the bitcoin mines? You can bet it won't be the children of Beverly Hills High School. Likewise, rich parents won't stop sending their kids to get arts degrees or to read Aristotle in the original Greek. But once all the public colleges raise tuition and cut their film departments, it's working class students who will lose their limited opportunities to explore “useless” subjects as undergrads. And while economists might assume that “disincentivizing” students through heavy loan interest will “nudge” them toward more optimal academic choices, in reality many of them will likely keep making the economically foolish choice to follow their dreams. Odds are these students will simply end up in even more impossible debt holes than they are in already. It's unclear whether the “incentives” from more expensive student loans work, but it's certainly clear that poor people, people of color, and women all get disproportionately hurt.

A deeper problem here, as anyone who isn't a libertarian economist will have noticed, is Caplan's narrow definition of the “usefulness” of education. He treats “value in the job market” as education's main measure of worth. The debate over whether education teaches job skills or just offers signals is an interesting one, but it contains a hidden premise: that what

we're supposed to be doing is preparing kids to be good employees. Of course, if that's how you measure the worth of teaching, then the arts aren't worth a damn, because, as Caplan points out, artists starve. (Unless they go to work for advertising firms.) But while liberals and conservatives alike often speak of education as if it's mostly supposed to be a pipeline to a skilled job, there are humanistic approaches (i.e. the ones that see people as more than productivity machines) with somewhat different views of what education ought to be doing.

Ironically, Caplan's view of the education system has a lot in common with that of some leftists and Marxists. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, in their 1976 book *Schooling In Capitalist America*, argued that schools were primarily sorting devices for employers. Capitalists, they said, loved public schools, because they were a taxpayer-subsidized way of training people for jobs: “The reasons why most larger employers supported public education are apparently related to the non-cognitive effects of schooling—in more modern terms, to the hidden curriculum.” That “hidden” curriculum is teaching obedience and diligence, the traits that will turn kids into a compliant cogs in the economic system. Bowles and Gintis say that high GPAs are correlated with “dependability, perseverance, consistency, following orders, punctuality, and deferring gratification” while low GPAs are correlated with “creativity, aggressiveness, and independence.” In fact, here's Noam Chomsky, sounding a lot like Caplan:

[Schools] reward discipline and obedience, and they punish independence of mind... You're not supposed to think, you're supposed to obey, and just proceed through the material in whatever way they require. And in fact, most people who make it through the education system and into the elite universities are able to do it because they've been willing to obey a lot of stupid orders for years and years... The values are, you're going to be a factory worker somewhere—maybe they'll call it a university—but you're going to be following somebody else's orders, and just doing your work in some prescribed way. And what matters is discipline, not figuring things out for yourself, or understanding things that interest you—those are kind of marginal: just make sure you meet the requirements of a factory.

Of course, there can still be a debate over the extent to which schools are “selecting” for these traits or “training” for



them. But more importantly, while the leftists see the fact that schools are actually just serving an economic function as an indictment of the hideous oppressive character of contemporary capitalism, Caplan sees it as a thoroughly good thing. He's just worried it's not being done efficiently enough! Schools would be *even better* at churning out workers if they sent kids to work right away instead of bothering to pretend that they are cultivating young minds and fostering curiosity.

A leftist—or any person whose soul hasn't been totally corroded by capitalism—might be tempted, then, to say that Caplan is missing the whole point of education. Sure, it might not be giving kids what they need on the job. But our lives should be more than our jobs. The point isn't to *train* people, it's to introduce them to the world's knowledge so they can figure out what they want to do.

Caplan has a response to this, however. Education is just as lousy at this as it is at job training. As he says:

You might defend this allegedly “useless” education on humanistic grounds. Teachers habitually claim to enrich students’ lives or broaden their horizons. As a professor, I don’t just sympathize with these arguments; I’ve lived them. The great ideas have enriched me, and I try to pay it forward. To effectively defend education, however, you need to do more than appeal to humanistic ideals. You need to ask: How often do academics successfully broaden student’s horizons? Empirically, the answer is bleak: while great teachers can turn students into Shakespeare fans, Civil War buffs, avant-garde artists, and devoted violinists, such transformations are rare. Despite teachers’ best efforts, most youths find high culture boring—and few change their minds in adulthood.

In fact, he thinks that for all educators' highfalutin rhetoric about “expanding horizons,” students don't actually have much interest in learning about ideas, and it's a waste of time for teachers to try to force them to share teachers' own views of what is worth knowing:

I’m cynical about students. The vast majority are philistines. The best teachers in the universe couldn’t inspire them with sincere and lasting love of ideas and culture. I’m cynical about teachers. The vast majority are uninspiring; they can’t convince even themselves to love ideas and culture, much less their students. I’m cynical about “deciders”—the school officials who control what students study. The vast majority think they’ve done their job as long as students obey.

Anyone who has watched a roomful of young eyes glaze over during an high school English class might be tempted to agree. But it might not be that students are “philistines.” Rather, it might be that subjects are, in general, taught atrociously, that there are few truly inspiring teachers in the classroom who know how to make ideas come alive. The reason “academics rarely broaden students' horizons” might have a lot more to do with the academics than the students. Caplan gives up very quickly, and without much evidence, on the possibility of engaging the majority of young people in history, literature, the sciences, and the arts. But showing that students *aren't* being engaged isn't proof that they *can't* be engaged.

THE TRUTH IS THAT CAPLAN IS PROBABLY right that the experience of school, for most students in the country, is boring and useless. When the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence asked high school students how they were feeling, 75% of them answered with negative emotions like “tired,” “bored,” and “stressed.” But that doesn't mean that they're a bunch of incurious dopes cut out only for manual labor. The insight that “school sucks” is not original to Caplan, and plenty of critics of education have said it over and over. Unlike Caplan, their response has not been to advocate getting rid of school entirely and sending children to work, but thinking very seriously about what education *ought* to be like. Alternative schooling models like Montessori and Waldorf schools try to eliminate the tedious, obedience-training aspects of school, and remove the structural barriers that stand between students and real knowledge. The progressive education movement has a century-long history, and has produced thousands of experiments around the world in new ways of organizing schooling. There is variation in whether students enjoy school, have good relationships with their teachers, and see schools as supportive environments. Figuring out ways to investigate and improve those things is central to serious projects for education reform.

Caplan, however, simply gives up. Even if kids *do* like the “useless” stuff, he says, what good is it? They will only grow up to be disappointed when they find out what the economy actually rewards:

... Teachers expose students to an ossified list of subjects: music, art, poetry, drama, foreign language, history, government, dance, sports. Some kids respond eagerly, especially to music and sports. Yet the greater their excitement, the greater their ultimate disappointment: almost no one grows up to be a violinist, painter, poet, actor, historian, politician, ballet dancer, or professional athlete.

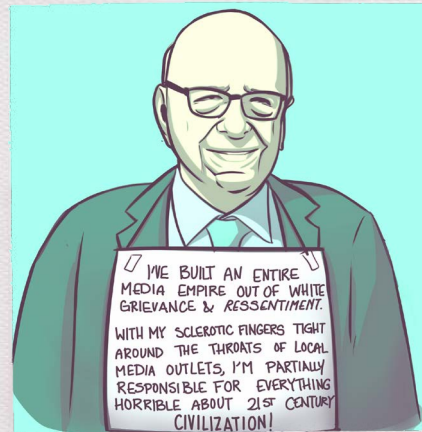
To which we say: exactly. The problem isn't the kids, but that we live in a world in which history and ballet are valued so little compared with, say, devising new credit default swaps or more new ways to target advertising directly at people's hopes, fears, and insecurities. Sure, if you can make money by issuing payday loans but not by writing plays, it makes a certain amount of “sense” to give kids usury lessons and cut the drama department. But this isn't the only alternative, and it puts culture into a death spiral: the less anybody ever hears about beautiful, diverse, and varied things in school, the fewer people will develop any interest in them, which means fewer people will value them. If you think playwrights are poorly-compensated now, wait until the libertarian future in which nobody even knows what a play is. (Also: how many adults are disappointed that their middle school focused too much on music and not enough on job training? How many of them wish they had been child laborers instead of doing fingerpainting? Come on.)

BILLIONAIRE SHAMING

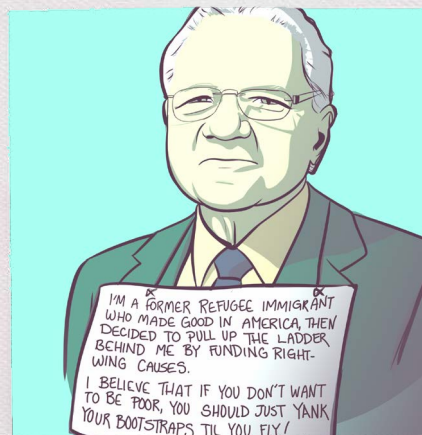
Pets are infamously mischievous and capable of causing all manner of havoc. Hence the existence of “dog shaming” and “cat shaming,” practices designed to hold animals accountable for their misdeeds. You may have seen them: photos of guilty-looking pets with signs around their necks detailing their bad acts (e.g. “I Sneak Into The House of Our Buddhist Neighbors And Eat Their Food Offerings To Buddha”). But when you think about it, it’s a little unfair that these poor creatures are being singled out. After all, the wrongdoing of a lone pug or collie, no matter how exasperating, pales next to the crimes of the bourgeoisie. And yet the wealthy so often get off scot-free, without punitive humiliation of any kind. We propose to rectify this by introducing a new means of ensuring justice: billionaire shaming.



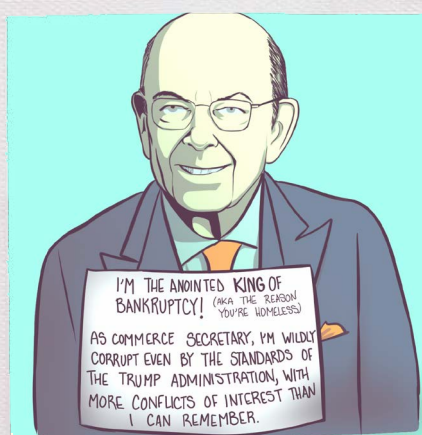
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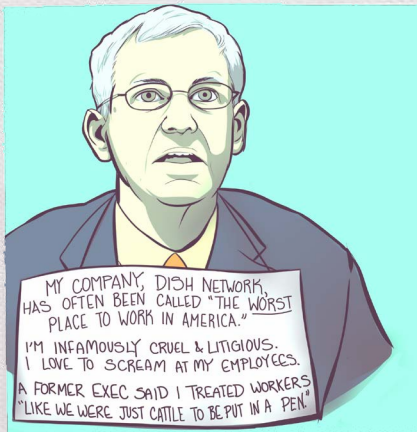
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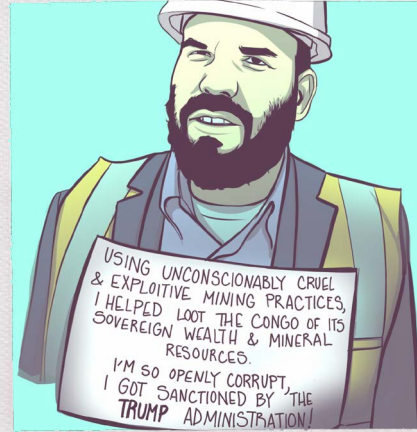
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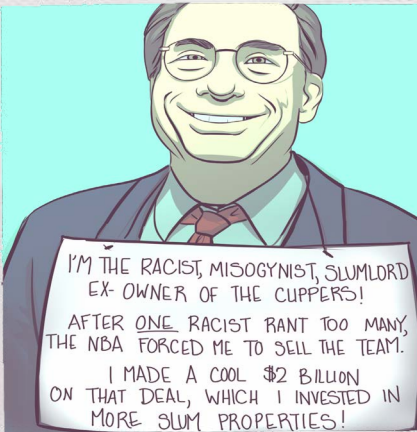
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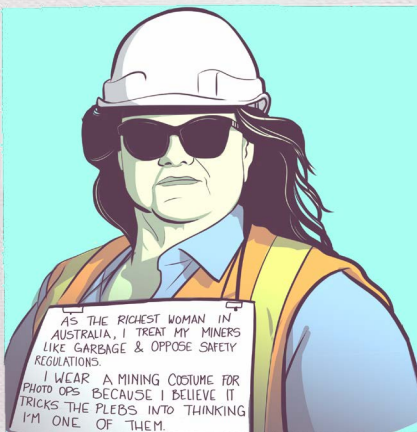
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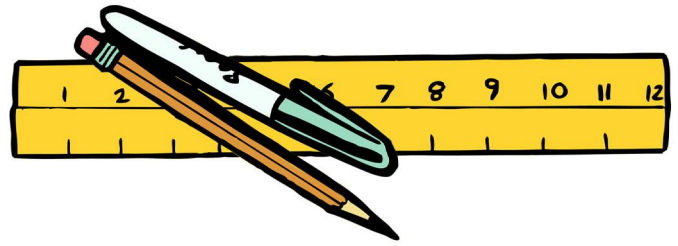


ROBERT & REBEKAH MERCER

WE SHOULD BE WARY OF ARGUMENTS THAT particular kinds of knowledge are useful because they'll be helpful "on the job" or in some instrumental fashion. After all, if it turns out that they *aren't* useful, we may still want to make a case for them. At the same time, Caplan also has a very myopic view of what jobs actually are and what is instrumentally useful in them and in life generally. He admits that he's never actually held a real job outside the academy, and it shows. He suggests that people don't need to know history unless they're going to be history teachers. This is deeply and obviously wrong. Studying history is essential to understanding what is happening around you. If you don't know anything about the context you live in, you become stupefied. You won't get half the jokes on *Seinfeld* or *The Simpsons*, let alone be able to think clearly about issues of public importance. You'll be totally blind to the way that history stamps itself on the present, and the features of contemporary society that exist because of what happened before. You will also be uniquely gullible and will fall victim to political propaganda. If you don't understand the history of the Vietnam War, the Korean War, and the Iraq War, you won't know why "humanitarian" U.S. military intervention should be viewed skeptically. If you don't understand slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow, you won't understand the origins of the black-white wealth gap or the forces that shaped contemporary residential segregation. You will fumble through life blindly and stupidly, without really knowing who you are, where you came from, or what the world is.

Even ordinary jobs can require, or at least benefit from, supposedly "useless" knowledge in unexpected ways. When Sparky worked full-time at a marina, he had to know things about marine biology (whale names, habits, migratory patterns), geology (nature of islands, rock reefs), history (facts about area, use of islands), mechanics (ability to talk about and occasionally fix boats, repair docks, assemble computers), contract and employment law (deal with employees and also contract with other businesses for things like dive trips), and education (prepare sample syllabi to sell school group trips) for what was essentially a low-wage job. Specific knowledge doesn't have to relate to job requirements, though. Any job that requires relating to people benefits from the possession of general knowledge. But of course that doesn't only matter for jobs. Human beings get along better when they have common reference points, and can talk about common facts. If someone doesn't know what World War II was, or what bacteria are, it's not just that the world becomes scary and confusing, it also becomes harder to talk to others. And, more importantly, without common reference points for things outside our own experience, it becomes harder to empathize with others and to understand why their perspectives might be different from our own.

Caplan tries to show the uselessness of education by pointing to statistics on how few facts people remember from their school days; they can't remember whether an electron is larger than an atom, etc. But this may misunderstand what exposure



to the sciences actually does. True, very few people use algebra after they finish "learning" it. They do, however, carry away a sense of what algebra *is*. That may not seem like much, but it could be crucial: there's a big difference between "not knowing much about biology" and "not even knowing what biology is." I may not understand a physicist's equations, but it's a whole new level of ignorance if she introduces herself and I wonder what physics even is.

IF WE ARE TO OFFER A MEANINGFUL AND POWERFUL alternative to instrumental conceptions of learning, we have to be clear about what that might involve. One reason Caplan's arguments can be tempting is that we *haven't* really articulated what schooling ought to be about. This leaves a big prescriptive vacuum where, after making some empirical and commonsense claims, Caplan can slide in unnoticed and present his slashing and burning as the only available solution. And it can result in liberals and progressives trying to defend school on economic, return-on-investment grounds, insisting that sociology degrees are unexpectedly useful in the workplace, or that the average wage worker will someday use their French subjunctives. (Although they probably *will* use their Spanish subjunctives, which is why Spanish should be mandatory.)

So what's the alternative? What is school for? For the first 12 years of kids' conscious lives, we put them in a room and try to fill them with knowledge. What should that be? What about college? To what extent should learning be driven by the preferences of parents or kids themselves? Also, if public schools start trying to make kids learn interesting things, and private schools keep teaching them the things that will make them rich, won't the wealth gap worsen? Does capitalism give us no other option but to pursue the bleak Caplan vision?

We shouldn't hesitate to speculate on radical, even highly unusual possibilities. Though we don't think it should be strictly "vocational," education should obviously be more practical and active. There's no excuse for the fact that students aren't taught basic skills like tying a knot, sewing a button, defusing a bomb, fixing a toilet, baking a loaf of bread, planting a garden, etc. Animal care should be a requirement; establishing relationships with animals is important and every school should have them. Nathan remembers being jealous of a neighboring high school in Florida that used to have cats on campus. What about plant identification? A high school degree should require one to be able to identify at least 80% of the plant life in one's

community. The fact that nobody knows which plants are which is a disgrace.

We can introduce college-level subjects at a much younger age in simplified form. Kids are perfectly capable of learning philosophy. Not the academic kind, perhaps, but as critical thinking (e.g. asking questions like “How do we know to trust our teachers?” “Why are things the way they are?” “Is a bird a process or a thing?”) Try teaching music and art appreciation; don’t just have kids feebly try to learn to play the recorder, introduce them to Miles Davis, or show them how hit songs are made. We should expand the range of material taught in English class. Give kids books they will actually like, don’t make teens read Nathaniel Hawthorne and forget to introduce them to Kurt Vonnegut. Sparky remembers that in his high school, the literature teacher had the class critically examine Dan Brown books, and the students loved it. Something cool should happen every schoolday, whether it’s an explosion in chemistry class or the examination of a historical artifact or the building of a Rube Goldberg contraption or the performing

of a play/dialogue. Bring in less dogma, foster more creativity. Make recess longer. Make things more hands-on. Do more field trips. Reward quality of thinking rather than strict obedience (i.e. it matters more if a student has nothing to say about the reading than if they’re late to class). Don’t do anything *excruciating* to them. (Caplan seems to endorse a lot of this, actually, saying that unstructured play is good, but his whole scheme will ensure that the rich kids get the fun stuff and the poor kids get busboy lessons.)

It may well be true, as Bryan Caplan argues, that as things stand education is a bad deal, societally speaking. We can buy that a lot of the economic benefit comes from signaling, and that spending money on things like Common Core and standardized testing could be making things worse because the gains are illusory. This doesn’t mean, however, that the solution is drastically decreasing resources. That would just be putting all the burdens education is trying to bear (lifelong return-on-investment and publicly-subsidized training for corporate life) onto the backs of students and parents. Plus, why should only rich kids get to spend four years pursuing an arts degree? It shouldn’t just be the students who are willing to toil to pay off crushing debts who get to spend their college years exploring irrelevant subjects that interest them.

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IN FACT, WE NEED TO PUT *MORE* RESOURCES INTO education, but we also need to change our thinking. It’s not because kids are “natural philistines” if they’re bored, but because we don’t prioritize (or spend the money on) the kind of extraordinary learning experiences that would engage even the most intransigent or apathetic child. If foreign language classes aren’t good enough for people to retain languages, then let’s introduce foreign exchange programs. Send them around the world on the public dime.

We’re not cynical about students—we think everyone can be enriched—but to do that we need to turn *away* from the economic benefits of education and actually focus on that enrichment. Let’s do the things Caplan says he wants (more play, a broader canon), but let’s do it for *every* child, not make it dependent on family ability to pay. If rich parents think it’s worthwhile to pay for private schools with 15-person classes and seminar environments, let’s guarantee that to the children of Baltimore and Detroit. If teachers are downtrodden and fatigued and not inspiring, then let’s *fucking pay them*. Teaching *should be a prestige job* and there’s no reason it can’t be.

There are many possible visions for what education could and should be. But the one thing it *shouldn’t* be is preparation for wage work. Attempts to destroy education in the name of efficiency are going in exactly the wrong direction. Instead of more efficiency, we need less of it. Students should be finding out about all of the fascinating things in our big, wonderful world, not being fitted and measured for future drudgery. What is education for? It’s for becoming a person, not a worker. ❖

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WOT

the humans of PALESTINE

by NICK SLATER

ON THE LIST OF AMERICA'S IRRATIONAL FEARS, Palestine is near the top. This is no small feat for a "country" with no actual territory and a population about the size of South Carolina. Despite its lack of an air force, navy, or any real army to speak of, Palestine has long been considered an existential threat to Israel, a nuclear-armed power with one of the most powerful militaries in the world and the full backing of the United States. Since there's no military or economic justification for this threat, a more nebulous one had to be invented. Thus, Palestinians are depicted in the media as hot-blooded terrorists, driven by the twin passions of fanatical Islam and a seething hatred for Western culture. So engrained is this belief that the op-ed page of *The New York Times* can "grapple with questions of [Palestinian] rights" by advocating openly for apartheid, forced expulsion, or worse.

This worldview demands an Olympian feat of mental gymnastics. It can only be maintained so long as most Americans have no firsthand contact with Palestine or Palestinian people. Even the smallest act of cultural exchange is enough to make us start questioning the panic-laced myths we've been taught since birth.

Of course, the best way to discover the truth about Palestine is to visit the country yourself, though most Americans don't have the free time or financial resources to do so (this is not a coincidence). This means that those of us who *are* fortunate enough to visit have a responsibility to share what we've seen and heard, without lapsing into pre-fabricated narratives, even "sympathetic" ones. We can't fight untruth by telling untruths from the opposite perspective. What we can do, however, is report what we saw and heard in Palestine. We can try to provide a snapshot of daily life and let people come to their own conclusions.

With this in mind, here's what I learned during a recent trip to the Holy Land...

The Palestinian doorman of the Palm Hostel in Jerusalem is a large and friendly man who insists his name is Mike. My fiancée and I are skeptical, as we'd expected something a bit more Arabic. We ask him what his friends call him.

"Just Mike," he says, and taps an L&M cigarette against the wooden desk. He's sitting in a dark alcove with rough stone floors, nestled halfway up the staircase that leads from the fruit market to the Palm's small arched doorway. A pleasant, musty oldness floats in the air. You could imagine Indiana Jones staying here, if he'd lost tenure and gone broke for some reason. To Westerners like us, it seems too exotic to have a doorman named Mike.

Before we can ask him again, though, Mike pounces with a question of his own. "You're from the States, right?" He speaks English with a thick accent and slow but almost flawless diction, an odd combination that is causing my fiancée some visible confusion, which seems amusing to Mike. I tell him that we're from Minnesota, a small and boring place in the center-north of the USA. His grin gets bigger, which makes me self-conscious, so I also explain that Minnesota has no mountains or sea, and the winters are very cold.

"Yeah, I know," says Mike. "I lived in El Paso for thirty years. Border cop, K9 unit. It was a nice place. Had a couple kids there." Now it's my turn to gawk, and I start to race through all the possible scams he might be trying to pull. Mike seems to guess what I'm thinking. "Really. I even learned some Spanish." He scrunches his brow in mock concentration and clamps a hairy hand over his forehead. "*Hola. ¿Cómo estás? Una cerveza, por favor.*" He opens his eyes and laughs. "Welcome to Jerusalem, guys. Damascus Gate is that way. Enjoy."

I don't know why I'm so surprised he knows a handful of Taco Bellisms, or why this convinces me of his honesty. However, now it's





impossible to walk away. We have too many questions. The first one: why'd he return to Jerusalem? Mike looks down at his cigarette, smoldering into a fine grey tail of ash. He flicks it against a stone and a bright red ember blazes to life.

"This is my home. I had to."

LATER, AS WE SIP SWEET TURKISH COFFEE OUTSIDE a rug shop in the Old City, it occurs to me that Mike was the first Palestinian person I'd ever spoken with face-to-face. His life story seemed unusual, but I have no idea what's "usual" when it comes to Palestinian lives. I'd never thought about them before, to be honest. The world has an infinite number of stories, and the days are not as long as I'd like. It's not like I'd chosen to ignore Palestine. I just hadn't chosen to be interested in it.

Which was odd, because Palestine has been all over the news since I was a kid. There isn't a single specific story I recall, just a murky soup of words and phrases, like "fragile peace talks" and "two-state solution" and "violent demonstrations." They all swirl together, settling under the stock image of a bombed-out warzone as the headlines mumbled something about Hamas or Hezbollah or the Palestinian Authority. I remember reading about rockets and settlements, refugees and suicide bombers, non-binding resolutions and vetoed Security Council decisions. Not a single detail had stuck. I could feign awareness of some important-sounding events—the Balfour Declaration, the Oslo Accords, the Camp David Summit—but I couldn't say what decade they happened, or who was involved, or what was decided.

For years, I'd been under the impression that I knew enough about Palestine to be uninterested in what was happening there. This isn't to say I felt any particular animosity toward the Palestinians. But it's impossible to fight for every cause, no matter how righteous, if only for reasons of

time. Every minute you spend feeding the hungry is a minute you're not visiting the sick. Life is a zero sum game more often than we'd like to believe.

As we headed toward the Via Dolorosa, the road that Jesus walked on the way to his crucifixion, I began to feel uneasy. The Israeli police (indistinguishable from soldiers except for the patches on their uniforms) who stood guard at every corner still smiled at us, and they were still apologetic when they forbade us from walking down streets that were "for Muslims only, unfortunately." Their English was excellent. Many of them were women. They were young and diverse and photogenic, a recruiter's dream team. But all I could see were their bulletproof vests and submachine guns. Above every ancient stone arch bristled a nest of surveillance cameras. Only a few hours ago, I'd been able to block all that from my sight, leaving me free to enjoy the giddy sensation of strolling through the holiest city on earth.

The road ended at the Lion's Gate. Just as we approached it, a battered Toyota came rattling through. It screeched to a halt and a squad of Israeli police surrounded the car. All four doors opened and out stepped a Palestinian family. The driver was a young man in his twenties, with short black hair cut in the style of Ronaldo, the famous Real Madrid footballer. When the police told him to turn around and face the wall, he did so without a word. It was obvious this was a daily ritual. The policeman who frisked him looked as bored as it's possible to look when patting down another man's genitals. Soon it was over, and the family got back in their car. One of the policemen pulled out his phone and started texting.

If I'd made a video of the search (which I didn't) and showed it to you with the volume off, you probably wouldn't find it very interesting. The Israeli police didn't hurt the man, and he barely made eye contact with them. There were no outrageous racial slurs or savage beatings. The only thing you'd see is a group of people in camouflage battle gear standing around a small white sedan, with a middle-aged woman and a couple



PHOTOGRAPHS BY NICK SLATER

of young girls off to the right. Unless you have hawk-like eyesight and an exceptional knowledge of obscure uniform insignias, I doubt you'd be able to tell "which side" any of the participants might be on. All you could say for sure is that the police wanted to search the family's bodies and belongings, and the family looked very unhappy about it, but the police had guns and cameras, and that settled things. It's interesting what conclusions different people might draw from a scene like that.

Later that night, after we get back to the Palm, I tell Mike about what we saw. He asks what we'd thought. "It was fucked up," we say.

Mike sighs. "You should see Bethlehem."

Jerusalem is so close to Bethlehem that you barely have time to wonder why all the billboards that advertise luxury condos use English instead of Arabic as the second language before you arrive at the wall.

THE WALL IS THE MOST HIDEOUS STRUCTURE I'VE ever seen. It's a huge, groaning monument to death. Tall grey rectangles bite into the earth like iron teeth, horribly bare, cold, sterile, a towering monstrosity. The wall makes the air taste like poison.

We're in the car of Mike's cousin Harun, who is Palestinian, but his car has Israeli plates so we aren't searched at the checkpoint. We inch past the concrete barriers and armored trucks. Harun holds his identity pass out the window, a soldier waves us through, and a few seconds later we're in Bethlehem, a short drive from where Jesus Christ was born. It feels like entering prison. I don't say prison in the sense of an ugly and depressing place you'd prefer not to visit. I say prison in the literal sense: a fortified enclosure where human beings are kept against their will by heavily armed guards who will shoot them if they try to leave. This is what modern life is like in Bethlehem, birthplace of our Lord and Savior.

Looking at the wall from the Israeli side breaks your heart because of

its naked ugliness. On the Palestinian side, the unending slabs of concrete have been decorated with slogans, signs, and graffiti, which break your heart for different reasons. One of the hardest parts is reading the *sumud* series. These are short stories written on plain white posters, plastered to the wall about ten feet up. Each story comes from a Palestinian woman or girl, and most are written in English, because the only people who read these stories are tourists.

One in particular catches my eye, by a woman named Antoinette:

All my life was in Jerusalem! I was there daily: I worked there at a school as a volunteer and all my friends live there. I used to belong to the Anglican Church in Jerusalem and was a volunteer there. I arranged the flowers and was active with the other women. I rented a flat but I was not allowed to stay because I do not have a Jerusalem ID card. Now I cannot go to Jerusalem: the wall separates me from my church, from my life. We are imprisoned here in Bethlehem. All my relationships with Jerusalem are dead. I am a dying woman.

The flowers are what gets me, because my mother also arranges flowers at church. Hers is an Eastern Orthodox congregation in Minneapolis, about twenty minutes by car from my childhood home. That's about the same distance between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, although there aren't any military checkpoints or armored cars patrolling the Minnesotan highways. Until today, I would've been unable to imagine what that would even look like. The situation here is so unlike anything I've ever encountered in real life that all I can think is, "it's like a bad war movie." For the Palestinian people who've been living under an increasingly brutal military occupation for the last seventy years, an entire lifetime, I can't begin to guess at the depths of their helpless anger. What did Antoinette think, the first time the soldiers refused to let her pass? What did she say? What would my mother say? There wouldn't be a goddamned thing she could do, or I could do, or my father or my sisters, or anyone else. We'd all just have to live with it, the soldiers groping us, beating us, mocking us.

THE FATE OF GAZA

Current Affairs Legal Editor Oren Nimni talks to **Norman G. Finkelstein**, author of “Gaza: An Inquest Into Its Martyrdom.”

Current Affairs: You’ve commented recently with what’s going on in Gaza about not only the massive starvation and deprivation of the people in Gaza as far as material resources, life, and those sorts of things, but also a starvation of solidarity. There actually hasn’t been that much solidarity in the United States and internationally for what’s going on in Gaza. There really hasn’t been a growth of solidarity for the Palestinians, as the situation escalates and the situation in Gaza just continues to deteriorate beyond belief. Why? Why is the situation for Palestinians different than the situation for black South Africans, or other situations where there has been solidarity out of the U.S. and the international community. What’s different about this?

Norman Finkelstein: Well, I did say in the book that I anticipated, or I expected that if mass non-violent resistance emerged in the occupied territories, it would still be a very difficult uphill battle. First of all, because there are so many humanitarian crises now in the Middle East that the suffering of the people of Palestine in general, and Gaza in particular seems to pale by comparison, or at any rate, doesn’t have that kind of moral salience and urgency that it once before did. So, first of all, there is the drastic diminution of the salience of the Palestine question. Secondly, large parts of our world are now supporting Israel, and are actually urging and exhorting it to crush the people of Gaza. And that includes the Saudis, the gulf in general. It includes the Egyptians. It includes the Palestinian authority in the West Bank. So the Palestinians and their cause, in particular, in Gaza, is more isolated than ever. Thirdly, there is this regrettable aspect of human nature, of which the most acute observer was Gandhi. Gandhi said the only thing that galvanizes a public into action is when they see human suffering. In particular, when they see people get killed for a just cause. And there was simply not a sufficient amount of bloodletting, even in the first weeks of what was called The Great March Of Return. There wasn’t sufficient bloodletting as to excite and arouse the passion and indignation of the broad public. On the other hand, it was perfectly obvious that there was going to be a big massacre on May 14th. And one wishes that people had acted on the inexorable logic of where things were going. There was going to be a massacre.

CA: Israel said so.

NF: Right, Israel said they’re not crossing the border. The people of Gaza were determined. They were going to cross the border. Well, that’s a very combustible situation. But the solidarity movement, like I guess, the broad public, can’t be moved into action unless there is a massive bloodletting.

No wonder Antoinette gave up hope. In her place, would I be any different? We walk in silence for a long time.

We end up in a refugee camp called Aida, where more than six thousand people live in an area roughly the size of a Super Target. Here, the air is literally poison. Israeli soldiers have fired so much tear gas into the tiny area that 100% of residents now suffer from its effects. If they were using the tear gas against, say, ISIS soldiers instead of Palestinian civilians, this would be a war crime, since “asphyxiating, poisonous, or other gases” are banned by the Geneva Protocol. However, such practices are deemed to be acceptable in peacetime, since there’s no chance an unarmed civilian population would be able to retaliate with toxic agents of their own. Without the threat of escalation, chemical warfare is just crowd control.

BEFORE WE CONTINUE, there are three things you should know about Aida. The first is that there’s no clear dividing line between Aida and Bethlehem, so an unwary pedestrian can easily wander into the refugee camp without realizing it. The second thing is that it doesn’t look like a refugee camp, at least if you’re expecting a refugee camp to be full of emergency trailers, flimsy tents, and flaming barrels of trash. The third thing is that the kids who live there have terrible taste in soccer teams.

We meet the first group as soon as we enter the camp. There are five of them, all teenage boys. One of them is wearing a knockoff Yankees hat. They’re staring at us, and at once I’m very aware of my camera bag’s bulkiness and the bloneness of my fiancée’s hair. A loudspeaker crackles with the cry of the *muzzein*, and it’s only then that I realize how deeply we Americans have been conditioned to associate the Arabic language with violence and death. The boys exchange a quick burst of words, raising my blood pressure even higher, and cross the street toward us.

“Hello... what’s your name?” The kid who speaks first is tall and stocky, wearing the same black track jacket and blue jeans favored by 95% of the world’s male adolescents. He’s also sporting the Ronaldo haircut, as are several of his friends. Two of the kids start to pull out cigarettes, so I pull out my cigarettes faster and offer the pack to them. Is this a bad, irresponsible thing to do? Sure, and if you’re worried about the long-term health of these kids’ lungs, you should call the American manufacturers who supply Israel with the chemical weapons that are used

to poison the air they breathe every day.

I tell the kid my name is Nick, and he shakes my hand. “Nice to meet you. I’m Shadi.” He’s carrying a rolled-up book, as are his friends, so I ask if he’s going to school. “Yeah bro, exams. We have three this week.” His friends laugh, and then engage in a quick tussle for the right of explaining that they’re heading to their math exam now, which is a boring and difficult subject, and I agree that it is, although at least you never have to use most of it after you finish school, a sentiment that earns me daps from Shadi and his friends, and we stand there giggling and smoking on the street corner of the refugee camp, though for a few moments we could be anywhere in the world.

My fiancée and I, both teachers by trade, start to pepper the kids with questions. Shadi says that he has one year left at the nearby high school, which is run by the UN refugee agency that was just stripped of half its funding by Trump. After he finishes, he plans to study at Bethlehem University. The other guys nod with approval, and speak of similar hopes. I ask them who their favorite footballer is, and they all say Ronaldo, at which I spit in disbelief, because everyone knows that Ronaldo sucks and Messi is much better, *visca el Barça!* Shadi and his friends break into huge grins, since few elements of brotherhood are more universal than talking shit about sports. Seconds later we’re howling with laughter as Shadi’s buddy makes insulting pantomimes about Messi’s diminutive size. A small part of my brain is loudly and repeatedly insisting that everything about this moment of life is batshit lunacy, that there’s no reason why I should be standing in a Palestinian refugee camp, yards away from buildings my country helped bomb into rubble, with my pretty fiancée and expensive camera, talking in English slang with a group of boys whose lungs are scarred with chemicals made in the USA, the exact kind of reckless young ruffians whose slingshots and stones are such a terrifying threat to the fearsome Israeli military, and the craziest thing of all is that here in the refugee camp, surrounded by derelict cars and rusty barbed wire and six thousand displaced Palestinians, *we are not in danger*, at least not from whom you’d think. Here, in the refugee camp, we can joke around with people who speak our language and know our cultural references and actively seek to help us navigate their neighborhood. None of this is to say that Aida is a safe, comfortable, or morally defensible place to put human beings, but only that the people who live there treated us with such overwhelming kindness and decency that I have never been

more ashamed at what my country does in my name. I tell Shadi and his friends to take the rest of my cigarettes, but they smile and decline.

"We, uh, have to go now," says Shadi, as his friends start to walk up the street. "Do you have Facebook?" We do, because everyone does, and as we exchange information, I wish him good luck on his math exam. "No way, bro, I suck at math," he says. We both laugh, and I pat him on the back.

"Fuck math. But hey, you're gonna do great, Shadi."

"Thanks bro. Fuck math."

I hope he gets every question correct on his exam. I hope he goes to university and wins a scholarship to Oxford. I hope he invents some insanely popular widget and it makes him a billion dollars and he never has to breathe tear gas again.

WE CONTINUE WALKING THROUGH AIDA camp. The buildings are square, ugly, and drab, but the walls are decorated with colorful paintings of fish and butterflies and meadows (along with a somewhat darker array of scenes from the Israeli military occupation). We meet a group of cousins, aged four to ten, all girls, who ask if we can speak English. When we offer them a bag of candy, they take one piece each, and run away yelping when a man limps out the front door of their house. "Thank you," he says, his face a mask of grave civility. Cars, all bearing green-and-white Palestinian plates instead of the blue-and-yellow Israeli ones, slow down so their drivers can shout "Hello!" We meet another group of kids, boys this time, who grab fistfuls of candy and make playful attempts to unfasten my wristwatch. We make a hasty retreat from this group. The streets are scorched in spots where tear gas canisters exploded. Narrow strips of pockmarked pavement lead us down steep hills and into winding alleys, and soon we're lost.

This is how we meet Ahmed. He's a tall man, about forty years old, with a small black mustache and arms as thin as a stork's legs. A yellow sofa leans against the concrete wall of the three-storey apartment building where he lives. Ahmed is sitting there with an elderly couple. He asks if we'd like a cup of tea, and although we've been warned about the old "come inside for a cup of tea" scam, we accept his offer. The elderly couple greets us in Arabic, and I try not to notice the large plastic bag of orange liquid peeking out from beneath the old man's shirt.

While we climb the stairs to Ahmed's apartment, he tells us that the old people are his parents. "They live here," he says, pointing to the door on the first floor, "because they don't walk very good. My mother has problems with her legs, my father is sick from the water." He traces the pipes with his finger, and we see they're coated in a thick reddish crust. "Here is the home of my big son," he says when we reach the second floor. "He has a new baby." We congratulate him on becoming a grandfather. "And I have a new baby, too! Come, I show you!" One more flight of stairs, and we arrive at Ahmed's apartment.

It looks remarkably similar to a hundred other apartments we've visited. Framed photos of various family members hang on the living room walls, which are painted the same not-quite-white as most living room walls. There's a beautiful red rug and a small TV. A woman is sitting on the sofa, nursing a baby as she folds socks. "My wife," says Ahmed.

She speaks a little English too, and says that her name is Nada. She has a pale round face and long black hair. Her eyes are soft, kind, and completely exhausted. Yet if she's annoyed or embarrassed by our presence, she doesn't show it. She just hands the baby to Ahmed and goes to make the tea.

"I'm sorry for my house," says Ahmed, cradling his son like a loaf of bread with legs. "We try to be clean, but..." There's not so much as a slipper out of place, but I know what he means. "We rent this flat. And my son, and my parents. All rent. Before we have a farm, animals, olive trees, but now, we rent." I ask about his job. He smiles and shakes his head. "I

want a job," he says, "I love to work. With my hands, with my mind. I love to work. But here, haven't jobs." For a second he looks like he's going to continue this line of thinking, but he stops himself. "I help my wife, that is my job." Ahmed laughs and passes his baby to my fiancée. "And he, he helps in the home?" She demurs while I protest in mock indignation. I do the dishes every morning before she even wakes up! Still laughing, Ahmed rubs his shins, and again it's easy to forget we're sitting in a refugee camp in Jesus' hometown.

Then the baby wheezes. It's a dry, scratchy wheeze. Ahmed squirms in his seat, looking embarrassed. The baby begins to cough. My fiancée rubs his back as the coughing turns wet and violent. Machine gun explosions blast from his tiny lungs. As an asthmatic, I recognize the sound of serious sickness. The baby writhes in my fiancée's lap, struggling to breathe. He's gasping and it's getting worse fast. At moments like these, personal experience tells me that a nebulizer can be the difference between life and death. I don't insult Ahmed by asking if he has one, because it's clear that he doesn't. All I can do is rub the boy's chest with my finger, a stupid and useless massage. He kicks and stretches as if trying to wiggle away from the unseen demon that's strangling him.

Nada hurries back with the tea. "I'm sorry," she says, picking up the baby. She coos to him in Arabic and rubs his back, both of which are comforting but neither of which can relax the inflamed tissues of her infant's lungs. "My baby..." Unable to find the words in English, she looks to her husband.

Ahmed rubs his cheek. "When she is pregnant, one night the soldiers come. They say the children throw stones. They always throw stones. So the soldiers shoot gas in all the houses. In the windows, over there." His voice gets quieter. "And she is very sick. When the baby is born, he is sick too." I ask him if it's possible to find medicine. "Sometimes yes," says Ahmed, "but very, *very* expensive." For the first time, there's a note of frustration in his voice. "Everything is expensive here. You see this," and he picks up a pack of diapers, "it cost me thirty shekels. Ten dollars, almost. And the baby needs so many things. It is impossible to buy. I haven't money for meat, how can I buy medicine?" He points to a plastic bag with four small pitas. "This is our food. One bread for my two sons, and two breads for my wife. She must make milk for our baby." When I ask him what he eats, he holds up his cup of tea.

Somehow Nada has soothed the baby out of danger. His breathing is almost normal again, just a quiet raspy crackle. She's still staring at him, her big brown eyes wide with worry. I don't know how many times she's done this before. I don't know how many times are left before her luck runs out. Somehow she's keeping her baby alive with nothing but the sheer force of her love. I ask to use the toilet so I don't have to cry in front of her.

When I come back, we finish our tea and say our farewells. I press a small wad of bills into Ahmed's hands. He glances at them for just a second before passing them to Nada. Then he hugs my fiancée and I, and I can feel him squeezing so hard with his wiry little arms. I dig my hands into my pockets, and discover several packs of orange fruit chews. Nada chirps with delight when I hand them to her. She immediately dashes out the door with two of the packs, shouting to Ahmed's parents in the street. A moment later she returns, just as we're leaving the flat. I can see her through the closing door, tearing open the last pack and unwrapping a little cube of bright orange paper. She puts the candy in her mouth and chews with slow, weary happiness. "Thank you," says Ahmed as we wave goodbye, "I cannot forget this."

Neither can I. As we walk back to the car, I'm wondering what it's like to watch your elderly parents die of organ failure before your eyes, pissing into a plastic bag while they sit on a sofa in the street. What's it like to starve yourself so that the love of your life can have a few more mouthfuls of food each day? What kind of stupid, brutal hellworld is this? When Harun asks us if we still want to go to Jericho, I nod, but how am I sup-

posed to get excited about some ancient cave when I can still feel the grip of a six-month old baby who might be choking to death as we speak?

Life goes on, for some reason. The road from Bethlehem to Jericho takes us past remote Israeli settlements, fortified outposts with armored cars, and finally the Dead Sea. Up ahead is the Mount of Temptation, where Jesus was tempted by the devil. Today it's home to a Greek Orthodox monastery. It's here, in this historically significant if deeply underwhelming place of pilgrimage, that we meet a Palestinian man named Yousef.

Yousef asks if we'd like him to take a picture of us. We say yes. He asks if we like Palestine. We say yes once more, and show him the bracelets we're wearing, which are red, white, and green. His face brightens. He asks if we'd like to come visit him in Ramallah. He says that he'd like to show us a part of Palestine "that you don't get with a professional guide," and we accept without thinking twice.

Ramallah is synonymous with chaos and murder, at least in the American mind. It belongs to a class of cities like Baghdad, Kabul, or Tehran—places believed to be populated by swarthy bearded lunatics, slave women in veils, and wild-eyed orphans with a suicidal hatred of baseball, Ford trucks, and Diet Coke. You've probably never thought much about any of these cities, or Ramallah in particular, except in the context of war and mayhem. These days, the only time you'll see their names on TV is when there's an attack with an unusually high death toll during an otherwise slow news day. Americans have been fed a nonstop diet of war zone imagery from places like Ramallah, and as a result we're unable to imagine them as anything other than war zones. It's impossible for most of us to picture Ramallah, for example, as a place that's decorated with Christmas lights. Would you believe it also has free wifi in the streets and a Popeyes Chicken?

We meet Yousef at the statue of Nelson Mandela. It's about a forty-minute walk from the city center, standing in the middle of an empty roundabout. We walk in slow circles around the 20-foot tall bronze sculpture. Mandela is smiling with his fist raised to the sky. Back in Bethlehem I'd seen that same image spray-painted onto the prison wall, with his famous words written beneath: *We know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians*. Yousef says he thought it was the perfect place to start our day. "I know it's a little far to meet, but I wanted to show this to you. Because, you know, Mandela is a hero for us. He told the world about Palestine. This is what I want to do, too."

Yousef says our first stop is Birzeit University, where he used to work as a graduate assistant. Located just outside Ramallah, Birzeit is one of 14 universities in occupied Palestine. It's also a frequent target of Israeli military raids, so Yousef apologizes in advance for any security hassles. "I did make a coordination with my colleagues there, so I think everything is OK, *inshallah*," he says. "You'll like it, I hope so."

The campus sits on a hilltop overlooking the rocky Palestinian countryside (the university's website offers a virtual reality tour, if you're curious). Students swarm around the main entrance, buying coffee and pastries from little kiosks. At least half of them are women. Many of them wear colorful headscarves and skintight jeans. Others have beautifully styled hair and long, loose dresses. Some women wear golden crucifixes around their necks, some wear traditional Islamic garments. The male students dress better than their American counterparts, though hoodie-and-sweatpants is not a hard bar to clear. On a nearby bench, a couple takes selfies, laughing in mock outrage at the silly faces they're both making. My fiancée squeezes my hand and says, "Remember when that was us?" Then a bell rings and we're swept up in a wave of humanity. A security guard keeps watch as we file through the gate, greeting many by name.

Yousef takes us to meet his friend Mohammad, his old buddy from their days as teaching assistants in the English department. We find Mo-

hammad in the kind of tiny, windowless office with white brick walls familiar to anyone who's ever worked in academia. He's bleary-eyed and surrounded by stacks of papers, but he invites us to sit down—and, of course, to have a cup of tea. He asks if the security gave us any trouble. "Sometimes the Israelis send undercover commandoes to steal records or arrest student leaders of different organizations, so we must be careful with visitors. I hope you understand." He says that many of the university's professors are also "visited" by Israeli commandoes, in retaliation for political views such as supporting the academic boycott of Israel. At the moment, though, he's less interested in talking about armor-clad shock troops kicking in his door than he is about his upcoming English exam. "You know the IELTS, right," he says, naming the standardized test that's used in the screening process for UK visas, "I want to take it next summer. The listening part, though, it's hard." He asks if I'd mind Skyping once in a while so he can practice following a conversation without being face-to-face, and I tell him yes, of course. Then his phone rings and we whisper our goodbyes, leaving Mohammad to shuffle papers around on a desk that has been flipped over by Israeli special forces more than once.

WE STOP AT THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' office, which I'm surprised to learn exists. We're introduced to a woman named Rasha, who's eating the kind of turkey-and-white bread sandwich found in vending machines around the world. "Sorry, it's lunchtime," she says, placing the half-eaten sandwich on a pile of notebooks while she searches for a brochure to give us. "Here you go. I'm not crazy about the color scheme, I keep telling them we need to go brighter. But I'm not the designer." As we look through the brochures, Rasha explains that international students usually come for courses that run for three months, because that's the maximum length of time Israel allows foreigners to stay in the occupied Palestinian territories. "I do try to make it really clear to prospective students that there's a chance the Israelis might not let you in at all," Rasha says, "It depends on your luck. Sometimes the passport control guy is having a bad day, and he doesn't like the answer you give him, and you're denied entry on the spot. I know other people who come every summer, and they never have problems. It does help if you don't look Muslim." Despite the risk, she says that every year foreign students keep signing up for Arabic language and Palestinian political science courses at Birzeit. "We have students from Europe, Canada, the U.S., along with many countries in the Islamic world," says Rasha. When I ask her what's the best way to prepare for a course of my own, she says, "Read Edward Said, and don't try to study the alphabet on your own. Either you'll get confused and frustrated, or you'll learn just enough to be bored with the first three weeks of class." We thank her for the tips, and leave her in peace with her sandwich.

As we walk through the campus gardens, we see how Palestinian students pass the time when they're not busy studying for calculus finals or making human chains to prevent armored bulldozers from demolishing their homes. Four girls, three with headscarves and one without, are singing "Happy Birthday" in a mix of Arabic and English, serenading their bareheaded friend who's holding a small chocolate cake and puffing in vain at what is obviously a trick candle. A couple of serious young men in leather jackets are practicing photography with DSLR cameras. We hear conversations in French, German, Spanish and English, and at least two of them are about finding the nearest bathroom.

Yousef leads us to a parked minibus, and as we climb inside he apologizes for the tameness of our tour thus far. "I know it's not so exciting, not like the demonstrations," he says, "but I wanted to show you we're not crazy. We like to study. We like to make things. I don't know what you think about Palestinian people before, but I hope you see we aren't mad people, we aren't terrorists. We can build a country if we have a chance.



Just wait, you'll see." He grins and nods his head, beaming with gentle anticipation. "We're going to Rawabi."

Rawabi, says Yousef, is Palestine's "city made from nothing." The first thing we see is a sand-colored minaret rising above a gleaming forest of towers. Built on the side of a cliff with commanding views of the valley below, Rawabi is so modern and polished it makes my eyes ache. "A Palestinian businessman made this. It was his dream," Yousef says, "I think he wanted to show the world that Palestine isn't empty." The city looks like a Silicon Valley utopia, with cute shady boulevards and boutique eyeglass stores next to Mango outlets and artisanal coffee shops. There's even an enormous Roman-style amphitheater and an extreme sports park. On the whole, Rawabi has as much in common with a typical Palestinian town as Las Vegas does with a typical American one. Many of the buildings aren't quite finished, and there's a noticeable lack of inhabitants. It's fair to question the logic of building such an expensive new development while so much of Palestine's infrastructure lies in ruins. If such a project were proposed in the U.S., I would be against it.

But we're not in the U.S., and the symbolic importance of Rawabi to Palestinians shouldn't be ignored. Yousef himself says, "Only rich people can live here. And it feels so empty. Even if I have a big salary, I don't want to live here. But you know, I'm happy to see a nice, clean, peaceful place in Palestine. It's a good thing to show the world." Whatever shortcomings Rawabi may have as a paragon of egalitarian praxis, it makes up for these with its brick-and-mortar rebuttal to the lazy stereotypes of Palestinians (and Arabs in general) as people who "bomb crap and live in open sewage," to quote famous dipshit and ethnic cleansing enthusiast Ben Shapiro. Rawabi offers a view of Palestine's future where kids don't pack gas masks for school and nobody gets frisked by paranoid soldiers on their way to work. That's enough reason for Yousef to be proud, and his optimism is hard to resist. "I'm glad you could see this place," he says. "We should go back now, but I have one more surprise for you."

Back in Ramallah, we say our goodbyes in front of an enormous illuminated sign that reads *We Ramallah*. It reminds me of the famous selfie magnet outside Amsterdam's airport. A man pulls up on a motorbike, and when he removes his helmet, he looks so much like Yousef that my fiancée blurts out, "Holy shit." It's Yousef's twin brother, and he's ridden more than half an hour to greet us. He has the same gentle and curious eyes, the same brilliant smile. "Sorry, I don't practice English for a long time," he says, "but my brother, he speaks very well. He's a smart guide. I hope he showed you the good things in Palestine." My fiancée and I are quick to say yes, of course. Raindrops start to fall. Yousef and his brother jump on the motorbike and wave goodbye. "Come back in the summer, the weather will be much better," says Yousef, shouting over the engine's roar, and they zoom away into the night.

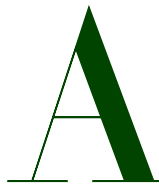
My fiancée starts walking back toward the center of town, enjoying the peaceful rainy darkness. An enormous Christmas tree stands in a plaza. Children run around it, laughing and chasing each other, while street vendors sell roasted corn and grilled chicken. It's not exactly like a scene from an American city, but it doesn't feel that different, either.

SUDDENLY A CAR PULLS UP. TWO YOUNG MEN ARE sitting in the front seats, and they're staring at us. My pulse quickens. I can't help it. Years of conditioning are hard to break. Then the passenger rolls down his window and says, "Hey, are you the Couchsurfing guys?" His face is dark and handsome, with a short beard groomed to perfection. "Come on, get in, you're going to be super wet!"

His name is Ameer, and his friend's name is Fadi. They're graphic designers who work at the same company. Both of them talk like SoCal surf dudes. We're heading back to Ameer's place now, which he shares with his brother and another friend. The car weaves through the narrow streets of

Ramallah. As we drive, Ameer and Fadi ask us what we like to do for fun.

"Do you party?" Ameer has a smile best described as impish. "We don't have many discos or bars here, but I know some places." He punches Fadi on the shoulder, and they make an impromptu list of drinking establishments in Ramallah. Every other word is "fuck." Their casual profanity and enthusiasm for alcohol is something we haven't encountered yet in Palestine, and to be honest, there's something exciting about it. I pull out the bottle of Jameson I'd hidden in my backpack (to avoid insulting what I'd assumed would be our conservative Muslim hosts) and ask Ameer if he's ever tried Irish whiskey. "No bro, but I'll fucking try anything," he says, and I can tell we're going to get along well.



AMEER'S APARTMENT BUILDING STANDS ON THE side of a steep cliff, which seems to be a common trend in Palestine. The elevator is out of order so we take the stairs. We pass the empty husk of a unit with no doors or walls. Stacks of rebar lie in the dust and a few empty potato chip bags flutter when a gust of wind blows through the holes where windows should be. Construction is not a linear process in Palestine, and Ameer isn't sure when the building will be complete. "If the company still has money, they'll finish," he says. "If they don't, they won't."

When he opens the door to his own apartment, though, it's a different story. Ameer's place is huge and spacious, with a big screen TV and a huge gorgeous rug and couches so comfortable they could be in an ad for American man caves. Two men are already sitting there, both young and bearded, both smiling at the foreigners who've just invaded their living room. "This is my brother Abdullah," says Ameer, "and this is our other brother Momen."

"Not a real brother," says Momen, "more like, a friend-brother." He's in his early thirties but he has the calm, thoughtful eyes of a grandfather. I have a strong and inexplicable feeling that he can be trusted with money. Maybe I'm onto something – it turns out that Momen works in a bank, and he *is* somewhat of a financial genius. Ameer tells us that he bought Bitcoin years ago, "like ten of them," and now he's crypto-rich. "It was only three," says Momen, with a rueful sigh, "and I should have sold them already." When I ask him if he has any tips, he says, "Buy XRP, from the company Ripple. Take maybe \$500, and forget about it. If you lose, it's OK. But if it goes up..." He leans back on the couch, crossing his arms, conveying such wisdom and authority that I forget to think it's weird I'm getting investment advice from a guy on a couch in Palestine.

Abdullah, on the other hand, prefers to talk about travel. Tall and muscular, with a strong jaw and deep brown eyes, he could easily pass for the All-American halfback of your high school football team. He says he's always been curious about the outside world. "When I was studying abroad in Malaysia, my parents used to send me money for my studies. The price isn't so expensive like in the U.S., but it was a lot of money for me." When he says this, I try to hide my surprise that a Palestinian student even *could* study abroad. "I was really lucky, you know. We don't have any islands in the West Bank, and it's so difficult to go out. Most people never see the ocean. So anyway, one day me and my friends decide we're not gonna use the money for school. We wanted to see what it's like to live on the beach. We rented a little flat in Langkawi, stayed there three months. We felt so free, so, just, you know, *happy*. I loved it, man. I'm in love with islands." We start trading spots on our bucket lists: Fiji, Palau, the Maldives. In fifteen minutes, he shows me so much of his soul that I feel like we've been best friends for years.

We're interrupted by Fadi, who's noticed the tattoos peeking out from my sleeves. He laughs when I ask if he has any of his own. "No, bro, I wish. In Islam it's *haram*, you know... but, who knows, maybe someday I will. I like a lot of things that are *haram*," says Fadi, "not, like, super-*haram*, but

Since May 14th, there have been more demonstrations, and there has been more solidarity on the broad public level, and also on the level of the solidarity movement. There are the additional factors. I would not call them major factors, but I would call them factors. Nonetheless, the solidarity movement has been effectively hijacked by the BDS campaign. And the BDS campaign was wholly irrelevant to the events that exploded in Gaza. And so people who were kind of fixated on BDS and BDS campaigns, which is the whole of the solidarity movement has been hijacked by BDS, they didn't know how to react. So you had this preposterous result that as the Great March of Return began, the BDS issues a statement that the most effective tactic now is an arms embargo on Israel. Because an arms embargo conforms to their program of sanctions against Israel. But it had nothing whatever to do with the reality that Gazans were facing. You needed mass demonstrations, you needed sit-ins, you needed vigils. You need mobilizing the public in order to put sufficient pressure on Israel so that it wouldn't commit a massacre on May 14th. Instead, they're telling people to coordinate an arms embargo. It was so completely irrelevant. And the other factor was I mentioned that the moral salience of the Palestine struggle has been drastically reduced. I mentioned that it's humanitarian dimension has also been overshadowed by what's going on elsewhere in the Arab world. I mentioned the abandonment or betrayal of the leading Arab states of people of Gaza. I mentioned the inactivity of the solidarity movement. And then there's one other very big factor. The complete passivity of the West Bank, to the point of what you might call treachery and betrayal. On May 14th, there were 1,000 people demonstrating in the West Bank. That was the day of the moving of the embassy.

CA: As Gaza has slipped further and further into just more deplorable conditions, and the crimes against Gaza continue to mount, the West Bank has been relatively quiet. What is the end goal for the Palestinian Authority and the West Bank? There seems to be a separation in solidarity and in action between what is going on in the West Bank, and Israeli focus in the West Bank. The Israeli focus seems to be largely on Gaza. And I guess my question is so what's the end goal of Israel?

NF: Israel has achieved its goal in the West Bank. It's succeeded. The Oslo Process, which was designed to create a collaborator class that would pacify the population. It succeeded. There is a privileged caste now in the West Bank. There is now a very efficient security apparatus trained mostly by the Jordanians and the CIA. There is a dearth of civil society organizations because Israel, the EU, and the US adopted the strategy of anyone and everyone in the West Bank who showed leadership ability, who showed intellectual acumen, they would just fish them out, give them a computer terminal in Ramallah, give them a cubicle, pay them by West Bank standards a very high salary, and effectively said, "you can do whatever you want on the web, just chill."

Ramallah now probably has one of the highest living standards in the world. There are scores of NGOs. And live a relatively good life there. And so the whole potential leadership class of the civil society organizations now occupy cubicles in Ramallah, and cafes at night. And so in time the First Intifada, and I lived there then, everybody, there was no exception. Well I knew one guy, an exception. With one exception, everybody belonged to a political party. Political party was part of your C.V.

Actually, it was the top item, the first item on your C.V. And then everybody belonged to this union, or that mass organization. There was a rich array of civil society organizations which disappeared immediately as the first Intifada broke up, and there was a kind of leadership vacuum, because the former leadership at that point was in Tunis. There were all these other organizations which moved right into action. This whole array of civil society organizations. Now there's nothing.

CA: It does seem like Israel has largely attained its goal for what they want in the West Bank, and is moving to attain its goal in what they want in Gaza, perhaps.

NF: It wants to attain that goal in Gaza. That's why the key demand has been to replace Hamas with the Palestinian Authority as the ruling group in Gaza. They will have more difficulty because of the level of poverty in Gaza is such that it will be hard to pacify their population. But they've succeeded in the West Bank, which is another reason why, as I insisted all along, that BDS is a facade. They claim to represent Palestinian civil society, and they have appended to what they call the 2005 Call. They have appended to it the endorsements of some 200 civil society organizations. And I kept saying yes, it's an impressive list, until you come to realize that each signatory on that list represents two people. So they're a shell organization. And the proof of the pudding is in the eating. So what happened? We have an outbreak of mass nonviolent civil resistance in Gaza, and the thing that Israel fears most in the short term is that it spreads to the West Bank. Because that would be a re-enactment of the first Intifada, which means massive amounts of Israeli troops and reserves would have to be brought in, which for Israel is a problem. Well, there are no demonstrations.

CA: No, the West Bank has been largely silent. In the United States we talk a lot about what the role of the United States to put pressure on Israel with regards to Gaza and with regards to the West Bank is. But what do you see as the future for the left in Israel and for civil society organizations like Adalah, for example, or for political players in the Knesset like the Joint List, do you think that the left in Israel has any position to push back?

NF: There's no more point in investing hope or energy in converting Israeli society than there was in investing hope and energy in converting the southern white power structure during the Civil Rights Movement. The South wasn't going to be converted [except through external pressure.] And at some point, for various political reasons, Lyndon Johnson felt compelled to support the

Civil Rights movement, and bring to bear all sorts of external pressures, which of course were stimulated by the resistance of African Americans in the South. But on their own, they couldn't do it. They know that they couldn't break the back of the South, because left to its own devices, the South would have brought to bear overpowering brutality and violence against the nonviolent resisters. The South was trying to make an appeal to the whole of the United States—I mean, the African Americans themselves, the Civil Rights Movement, and appeal to the whole of the United States, and to some extent, to the world, to say that this system is immoral, this system is unjust, this system is in breach of our constitutional rights, so the system has to be broken.

It's the same thing with the Palestinians. Don't waste your time on Israel or Israelis. They are like those vicious racists, those mean people in the American South. What you have to try to do is bring to bear international public opinion on Israel. And Israel is very sensitive to that international public opinion and invests quite a significant amount of resources to try to—

CA: It has a big P.R. campaign, and you know under the Obama presidency obviously, any time he wanted an Israeli operation to stop, he would just let them know, and that would be fine, and he could stop it whenever he wanted, but that would be only invested when it was politically advantageous to him.

NF: He wanted to pretend to be a progressive. Which is one of the reasons he hated Bernie Sanders so much, because he wanted the mantle of being the prophet of progressive ideas and along came Bernie, this 70 something Jew from Brooklyn, New York, and he was winning the hearts and galvanizing the spirits of young people, which is what Obama wanted.

CA: So Bernie is interesting because he is the only major politician really to comment on the brutality of the Israeli regime on the people of Gaza, at this point, but also, when he does so, he also front loads the "well there was some 'violence' from Hamas," which doesn't justify the massive violence by Israel. Bernie is a fairly major politician. Is the fact that he's even talking about it an important shift?

NF: Well, first of all, by impulse and instinct, Bernie is a fairly decent guy. He is also an addition, a politician. And he's a politician who now has very serious presidential ambitions, and quite possibly will be the next president of the United States. It's a serious possibility. It's not a certainty, of course, but there is a good possibility that he might be. If you look at the Democratic Party now, the Democratic Party and the question of Israel is significantly shifting. It's now about 25% support Israel, about 25% support the Palestinians, and 50% take no position. However, among the Bernie wing of the Democratic Party, it's lopsidedly pro-Palestinian. It's about 29% pro-Palestinian, 16% pro-Israel. So when you factor in all of those percentages, not just by virtue of instinct and impulse, but also by virtue of his base, he has to speak out on what Israel is acquitting itself of in Gaza. His initial statements, in my opinion, were not bad.

CA: They were better than I expected, to be honest.

NF: But there was an element of disingenuousness when he talked about the Hamas violence. I attacked him very aggressively for that. And then it was noticeable that his next statement, on May 15th or 16th, I can't remember, he dropped the phrase about the Hamas vi-



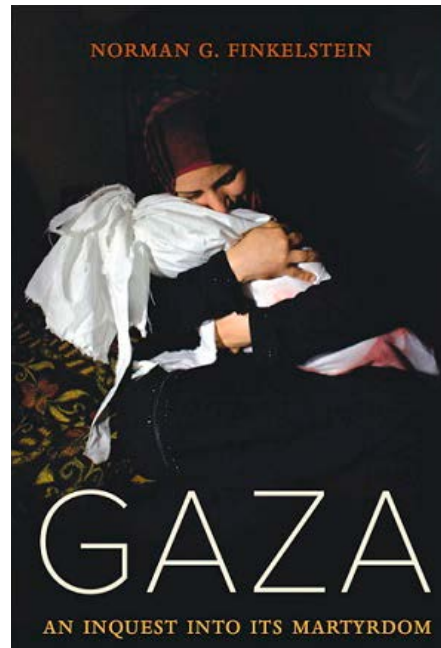
olence. There was also the statement signed by him and Dianne Feinstein. There was also a statement signed by six or seven members of Congress, which wasn't bad. The important point is that the shifts in public opinion generally are finding expression inside one of the major political parties, and that's in the Democratic Party. So that is a critical change, and one which bodes well for the future, that it will no longer be blind bipartisan support for Israel, the Republican Party will be the party of blind support, and the Democratic Party will be one of different shades of criticism. Schumer, I think, he will represent a stratum of the Democratic Party which is heavily enthralled to the Israel Lobby. But there will now be gradations of criticism with the Bernie base of the party, the most critical of Israel.

CA: *Shifting to the ways that we might put external pressure on Israel. In the book, in the appendix, you talk about the international legal case against the blockade and the occupation. I wanted to hear from you about the strength of that case, and also about the extent to which we want to rest our push against the Israeli occupation on international law or international legal norms, or whether those are just a good strategy right now. But maybe we shouldn't put all of our eggs in the basket of whether what Israel is doing is a legal crime, as opposed to whether it's a moral crime.*

NF: I never put any eggs in the legal basket, per say. Legal victories of the Palestinians—they are weapons in the struggle for public opinion, because they lend legitimacy, moral and legal legitimacy and authority to the struggle. So you can say the legal opinion is 'the occupation is illegal.' The legal opinion is 'amnesty international, human rights law, they say the blockade constitutes a form of collective punishment, which is a flagrant violation of international law. And you can invoke those legal victories in the course of the mass struggle. But in the absence of a mass struggle, I never thought you could win. You know, lawyers, they become so obsessed with winning the legal battles, when many of the legal battles have already been won. The Palestinians won the legal battle over the legitimacy, the legality of the wall that Israel was building in the West Bank. They won that in July, 2004. What came of it? Nothing. The Palestinians have won. They've won the Goldstone Report—a very powerful weapon. They did nothing with it. They had the resolution in 2016 in the security council on the illegality of the settlements, the one that Obama abstained from. They have in their dossier lots of legal victories. They've done nothing with them. Even if by some miracle, Fatou Bensouda, the chief prosecutor of the international criminal court, did prosecute Israel, which she won't, and even if by some larger miracle, she found them guilty, which she won't, but if she did, it's another paper victory. It's very important, paper victories, but only if they are part and parcel of a mass struggle, which is trying to win public opinion. And you can present to public opinion these legal victories in order to command legal and moral authority. Which is to say, to do exactly what the Zionists did. Zionists, they latched onto the Balfour Declaration, then the partition resolution. Every time they had a legal, moral victory, they then exploited it to the hilt in order to win over public opinion to their cause. These were certificates of legitimacy that the Zionist movement was able to acquire, and then to exploit. And they were very successful at it.

CA: *And conservative movements are often better at utilizing law, or legal victories in order to make moral claims. But it's true that the Civil Rights Movement in the South had this pairing of legal victories with building of a mass movement to actually enact those.*

NF: With the Civil Rights Movement, its moral legitimacy and legal legitimacy were squarely in the law. The Fourteenth Amendment guaranteeing equal rights under the law, and then *Brown vs. Board of Education*, declaring separate but equal to be—they said separate cannot be equal and therefore the system cannot be legally validated. It's important to remember *Brown vs. Board of Educa-*



tion was in 1954. By the time of the first Civil Rights Bill in 1964, ten years later, only 1% of African Americans were attending integrated schools. *Brown* was a paper victory. It only became a real victory on the ground, a material victory, because of the Civil Rights Movement.

CA: *Right, and to the extent that it did, because in Boston, schools are largely still segregated by income and neighborhood.*

NF: It's still a long way from being "not separate."

CA: *You're right that there is that pairing between using the law as the moral foundation, but needing the mass movement to build and push. In the book you document out an expansive history of the subjugation of Gaza at the hands of Israel from Operation Cast Lead, Operation Protective Edge. What is your goal with this book, and what do you see as the future for Gaza?*

NF: The goal of the book is very simple. The goal of the book is to preserve the truth. I believe in that, and I say in the book, it's the least that's owed the dead and the martyrs. The truth of what they endured, what they suffered at the hands of Israel should not be effaced, it should not be forgotten. I wanted to chronicle that record of martyrdom that the people of Gaza have had to endure at the hands of the State, which at this point, I can't resist, much as I wish I could, I can't resist the conclusion that it's become positively satanic, and pos-

itively maniacal in its determination to crush the people of Gaza, to engage them in what even their own senior military and security officials acknowledge is an unlivable situation. I want that to be documented. I want that record to be preserved. I had little if no hope that they would finally figure out, the people of Gaza, as I say in the book over, and over again, the only option they have is mass non-violent resistance. And I said it once, I said it twice, I said it three times, you have the right to armed resistance, but as a matter of political prudence, it won't work. I said, the strategy of what's called international diplomacy, the so-called peace process, well we don't have to convince anyone any longer—that's a dead end. And that left only one strategy unless you're a complete imbecile and you believe that BDS is going to liberate Palestine. And that was mass non-violent resistance.

CA: *With your view of the history, it seems like there's a couple of ways forward, right? One is Israel is successful at provoking people in Gaza into using methods that the international community would find too violent to support, and then Israel gets its green light to wipe out more of Gaza. Or, Gaza is successful at resisting those and continues in non-violent mass movement building, and then perhaps something happens, or Israel is just successful at starving them into the sea.*

NF: Well, and that's a logical move by Israel. It's going to be threatened. If Hamas doesn't stop the non-violent protest, they're going to assassinate the leadership of Hamas, hoping that a new level of leadership will be sufficiently lunatic that they will start up the rocket attacks again.

CA: *They have a record of assassinations, of course.*

NF: They assassinate all these moderates. Just like in 2012 at Pillar of Defense, it began with their assassination of Ahmed Jabari, who was actually working with Israel to maintain the cease-fire along the Gaza border. So I think the next likely move is going to be to assassinate the leadership. Because they threatened to. They threatened that on May 14th, when the head of Hamas went by helicopter to Egypt, and there he was told by Egyptian security that he was conveying the threat from the Israeli government that if you don't stop the demonstrations, we're going to assassinate your leadership. So I think the leadership of Gaza knows that this strategy is working. However, they won't be baited or goaded into resuming the so-called rocket attacks. But there is a good chance they're going to be killed.

CA: *Do you think the move of the embassy and Trump's support of Netanyahu is going to push Israel to take further, more extreme violent action more quickly than they normally would, or that really, Israel's interaction with Gaza is really not that much influenced by what Trump is doing?*

NF: I would tend towards the latter. It is true, as Professor Chomsky points out correctly, that tiny differences make a very difference when it's a system or an organization commanding huge amounts of power. The differences between the Democrats and the Republicans might be a flea's hop on many issues, but a flea's hop, when you have that much power, does mean a significant different in terms of numbers of people killed. And the fact that there were mild remonstrations by Obama and Secretary of State Kerry against Israel did put some brakes on Israel.

Not much, but something. Now there is nothing. ❖

a little *haram* is OK.” He points to the bottle of Gordon’s gin sitting on the coffee table. “Maybe in America people think all the Muslims are so serious, they never party or have fun, just go to mosque. But we like to party, we like to live. We’re like any people. We want to have a good time with our friends. We’re not some crazy terrorists who only care about religion. I mean, listen bro: I’m Muslim. I pray, I go to mosque. I believe in Allah. But also, I like some things that are *haram*.” He pours a gin & tonic for me, and another for himself. “In Ramallah, there are a lot of people like us. This is a liberal city, progressive, you know? That’s why we come here. It’s different in the small villages, like where my family lives—there’s no alcohol there. The people there don’t like it. It’s fine, no problem. We can believe different things and still live together. I don’t hate them. Even the Israelis, I don’t hate them. Well, maybe the soldiers, but not the people. Why should I hate the people? I don’t know them.”

Ameer, who’s busy rolling a hash joint, seems to agree. “If you hate somebody, it means you want to control them. Me, I don’t want to control anybody,” he says, blowing a cloud of smoke into the air. He leans forward and locks eyes with me. “I want to be free. Totally fucking free. I don’t care about borders, nationality, any of that shit. My mind is open. I love everything that’s different. That’s why I love to meet people from outside Palestine. The normal daily life is always routine, and I fucking hate routine!” In his excitement, he slaps the coffee table and leaps to his feet. “Come on, let’s go! Let’s show you the fucking Holy Land!”

What follows is the strangest and most magical night of my life. It begins with all six of us piling into Fadi’s tiny car, giggling with our faces pressed against the windows. The radio is playing a song by Bon Iver, and my fiancée squeals with delight. Abdullah tells us that we’re heading to his favorite spot in Ramallah. “It’s a Mexican place called Fuego,” he says, “and the nachos are amazing.” We order round after round of margaritas and huge frosty mugs of beer with salted rims. When I try to pay for the

drinks, the waiter smiles and refuses to take my credit card. “You’re our guests tonight,” says Fadi. “We’d be assholes if we let you pay.”

When we return to the apartment, Ameer invites some friends to come over. One of them is a beatboxer named Laith, a local celebrity with over 90,000 Facebook followers. He attributes his success to Dale Carnegie, the Law of Attraction, and his Muslim faith. Another friend, named Samhouri, is an artist who’s painted every inch of his house with enormous, colorful murals. He doesn’t speak English, but Momen is happy to translate when I ask why he did it. “Samhouri and his wife, they can never leave this city. They have no residence permits, no identification. If they try to pass the checkpoints, the Israelis will catch them. Then it’s possible Samhouri will never see his wife again. So they are trapped here. But at least they’re together. This is why he paints their house. He wants to make the life beautiful for her, as much as he can.” Later, an enormous bald man named Mo arrives. He says he used to be a hacker, living on the run from Israeli intelligence agents for years. Eventually he was captured and tortured, but even the long years of imprisonment didn’t break his determination to fight for Palestinian freedom. “Some-day, I want to write a book about the people I met while I was locked up,” he says. “They had such interesting stories.”

The hours slip away, and roosters begin to crow outside. We’re all red-eyed and exhausted, but nobody wants to go to sleep. We know that something precious and ephemeral is alive in this room. In Arabic and English, we take turns trying to describe it. Friendship, brotherhood, solidarity... they’re close, but there’s something more, something that evades our best attempts to pin it down. We just feel *close*. We feel together. I look around the room at Fadi and Momen and Abdullah and Ameer, and I realize that I love them. They’re Palestinians, and they’re my brothers, and I love them.

I’ve never learned anything more surprising or wonderful. ❖



THE CITY OF DREAMS



by Nathan J. Robinson

*Basin Street is a street
Where the folks, they all meet
In New Orleans, the land of dreams
You'll never know how nice it seems
Or just how much it really means*

—LOUIS ARMSTRONG, “BASIN STREET BLUES” (1928)

*If others can see it as I have seen it,
then it may be called a vision rather than a dream.*

—WILLIAM MORRIS, “NEWS FROM NOWHERE” (1890)

THERE ARE STILL PERFECT MOMENTS. NOT TOO many of them, but they happen. In my last one, I was sitting on a balcony in the quiet part of the French Quarter, eating a pistachio muffin and sipping an iced coffee. I was with an old friend, and we were talking excitedly about things we had read. There was a breeze, and we could see boats going by on the Mississippi River. In the distance, we heard the sound of a trumpeter playing on a streetcorner. I was wearing a comfortable shirt, it was spring, and there were flowers around. Music, food, sunshine, friendship, plants, old architecture, proximity to a body of water, and intelligent but unpretentious conversation: to me, these are all the elements needed for total peace and satisfaction.

I'm sure you have your own list of ingredients for a personal paradise. (Some people like snow, they tell me.) They rarely come together all at once, and when they do, it's usually only for a moment. But what a moment! Kurt Vonnegut has a lovely quote that describes these sorts of times: “I urge you to please notice when you are happy, and exclaim or murmur or think at some point, ‘If this isn't nice, I don't know what is.’” Unfortunately, that isn't what I usually murmur. Because underneath the feeling of bliss there is always a certain amount of frustration and anxiety. And what I end up murmuring is: “Since this is so nice, what is humanity doing with itself?”

The perfect moments do not end up being entirely perfect, then. They end up being exasperating, because I can't help but be angry that such nice experiences are possible, yet aren't ubiquitous. On a planet capable of being so extraordinarily beautiful and pleasant, why are so many things so absolutely rotten for so many people? The ingredients of the good life are not complicated. It's a trumpet, a muffin, a river, and a nice day, basically. And yet we have a world filled with border walls, solitary confinement, drone strikes, gang violence, car accidents, student debt, preventable diseases, Walmarts, and Donald Trump. There's so much loneliness, so

much misfortune. So many children who never see a friendly face, so many old people who wait each day for a visit. In the U.S. alone, 40,000 people get desperate enough to take their lives every year. No, that's wrong: 40,000 people *succeed* in taking their lives; for every suicide there are 25 suicide attempts, and God knows how many other people who hover on the brink. How could things go so horribly wrong when they seem so easy to make right?

It's very difficult to be comfortable in one's personal "perfect moments," when one realizes just how many people don't even get many *bearable* moments, let alone perfect ones. And in some respects, one person's pleasures are built on other people's discomforts. The street musician playing the trumpet is underpaid and struggles to pay for the basics (I've talked to him about it), because tourists treat him as part of the scenery. I buy my muffins at the coffee shop around the corner, where the workers probably don't make too much more than the Louisiana minimum wage of \$7.25/hr when it takes about \$20/hr to afford a decent apartment here. Some of the world's most delicious food is made in this small city, but it's made by people who toil and sweat and suffer and get very little thanks for it. (This is not to mention all the animals that die so that we can feast on them.) It seems almost grotesque to talk of perfect moments, because to perceive them that way requires insulating ourselves and ignoring everything around us. The French Quarter, for instance, is visited by hundreds of thousands of people each year, who come to stroll under the oaks of Esplanade Avenue and look at the fabulous Spanish colonial architecture. When you're rumbling along in the St. Charles streetcar, looking at the antebellum mansions and smelling the magnolias, you can genuinely think you're in a kind of Eden. But this is also a city where 1/3 of people are in poverty, where 150 people are murdered every year, and where the incarceration rate is the highest of any state in the country (which is, in turn, higher than any country in the world). What looks like a city of charm and luxury is actually a city of drastic racial and economic inequality, built by slaves and sustained by injustice.

It's certainly enough to put you off your muffin. But I don't think becoming aware of reality means that we have to lessen our enjoyment of the world's wonders. That way lies an unhelpful negativity: "Isn't this garden beautiful?" "I guess it is if you don't think about how all the time spent making it could have been spent trying to end mass incarceration." Instead, I think it's possible to pair feelings of joy/appreciation with corresponding feelings of realism/responsibility, and we can view perfect moments not as an ignorant indulgence, but as a vision of the kind of experience that we ought to make accessible to everybody. They're little glimpses of what we should be fighting for, and it's actually important to have reminders of what the good life might consist of, and to have reassurances that it's not actually fantastical to think we can achieve heaven on earth. We already *have* heaven on earth, it's that we only have it fleetingly, and it's not available to everybody.

It's important to use present-day experiences as source material for dreams of social transformation, because nowadays, it can be difficult to imagine a future that is substantially different from the present, except in ways that are horrific. It's not that nobody can imagine things changing. It's that the two possibilities seem to be

either "like this, only more so" and "civilizational annihilation." Granted, you still hear one or two moonbeams insisting that "a better world is possible." But even that is a phrase rather than a vision, a chant meant to reassure us that we haven't given in yet. The most creative imaginings of possible futures are bleak. Several times, this magazine has published articles on the regrettable trend toward dystopian film and fiction, which even the *Star Trek* franchise has succumbed to. The observation "It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" is tragically accurate.

THE FUTURE WASN'T ALWAYS LIKE THIS. ONCE, long ago, people devised extraordinary utopias. From the original one—Thomas More's 16th century satire—to the Victorian-era visions of H.G. Wells and William Morris, to the feminist science fiction novels that dared to dream of a world without men, in times past there were countless available tomorrows, only some of them depressing. George Scialabba, in his lecture "Slouching Towards Utopia," notes the strange contrast between the popular literature of the 19th century and that of our own time. The bestselling books of the 1800s were exhortations to moral progress, like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*, and Edward Bellamy's utopian *Looking Backward*. (By contrast, over the last century, Scialabba says, it was probably *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *The Kinsey Report*.) The success of Bellamy's novel is particularly noteworthy. As a novel, there's not much to it: a Bostonian falls asleep and awakens in the year 2000, where he is shown around a future socialist society. But Bellamy goes into detail about the operations of future-Boston, presenting a world in which labor is minimal, goods are distributed equally among all, crime is treated as a medical issue, and everyone retires at age 45.

Bellamy's future so captivated his contemporaries that hundreds of "Bellamy Clubs" sprung up around the country, dedicating themselves to actualizing his vision. Unlike Karl Marx, who refrained from actually offering clear ideas of what a future society would look like and how it would work, Bellamy had dared to make the fantastical seem somewhat feasible. He made it possible to actually conceive of socialism existing, so that the word was no longer an economic abstraction. Scialabba quotes some of the passages from Bellamy that so inspired the public:

"Do you mean that all share equally in the national wealth?" Julian asked incredulously.

"Certainly," replied the doctor. "And in return, we require precisely the same measure of service from all: namely, the best service it is in his power to give."

"And supposing all do their best they can," said Julian, "[and] the amount of the product resulting is twice as much from one man as from another?"

"That has nothing to do with the question of desert," the doctor answered. "All who do their best, do the same. A man's endowments, however godlike, merely fix the measure of his duty. [And although we reward excellence and diligence with public praise and increased responsibility,] you must not imagine that we consider such things a motive likely to appeal to noble natures. Such persons find their motives within, not without, and measure their duty by their own





CAN YOU FIND THESE PHENOMENA?

The editors of Current Affairs have built you a city. We hope you like it! When you're done, try building your own.

1. Cottages, available to all through housing lotto.
2. Enchanted forest filled with creatures.
3. Secret rooftop chess club, but with friendly players and also plenty of people who are just as bad at it as you.
4. Roof gardens.
5. Personal miniature zeppelins that operate similarly to Zipcars but do not cost money.
6. Lazy river public transit system.
7. Universities that have been abolished since knowledge is a fundamental part of everyone's life and is not housed in particular isolated places.
8. Planetarium. Yes, there is Laser Pink Floyd, but there are also other other shows that are mesmerizing.
9. Tennis courts. We do not like tennis, but some people do, and all tastes should be accommodated.
10. Hot tubs with very pleasant bubbles.
11. M.C Escher slide. This is just one small example of the many elaborate types of slides that will exist. Most structural engineers will be focused full-time on slide development.
12. A soundproof poetry chamber where poets can read their work to one another without anybody else having to be exposed.
13. Art wall.
13. Lego building chamber with every brick.
14. Mosques and cathedrals but mostly just because they're beautiful rather than because people are especially religious.
15. Rooftop dog bar.
16. Picnic area with campfire and marshmallows.
17. Children's playground with actual fun elaborate playground equipment.
18. Adult playground with defunct military equipment on springs.

Needless to say, this is not the sort of thinking that makes its way to the top of the *New York Times* Bestseller List in our own time. (As I write, the #1 slot is held by *The President Is Missing*, a thriller novel cowritten by Bill Clinton and James Patterson.) But, literary shortcomings aside, the utopian novels of old were useful in that they helped people see what their societies looked like “from the outside.” They allowed readers to, as the title says, “look backward,” and think about how history would judge them. Strangely, in our own time, there seems to be less of a sense that we exist “in history,” less speculation about how our social priorities will look to people in a hundred, two hundred, or a thousand years. (Sadly, this is in part because so many people doubt that human civilization will last that long.) Scialabba says that these sorts of questions are worth asking, though, since “unless we have reached the end point of humankind’s moral development, it is pretty certain that the average educated human of the 23rd century will look back at the average educated human of the 21st century and ask incredulously about a considerable number of our most cherished moral and political axioms, ‘How could they have believed that?’”

Imagining different worlds can help us here. We can think about what we would put in our dream city, if we had it. How would people be provided for? What would the streets look like? What would people do all day? What would education consist of? You can see the dream-city that the *Current Affairs* editors came up with in the accompanying illustration. We thought about the things we love, and the things that make people happy, and we imagined a place that had them all. Where the libraries and diners are open all night, and there are attics and treehouses and balconies, and there are secret gardens, lazy rivers, slides galore, and friendly animals. Where the police are only police in the most nominal sense, but spend most of their time giving people directions, helping drunk people home, and de-escalating conflicts. (Importantly, when conjuring utopias, we shouldn’t imagine worlds without conflict itself. We’re not trying to change human beings, we’re trying to change the world they live in, and the ambition is not to make sure people never quarrel, but that they don’t engage in war or murder, and resort to solving their differences through rope-twirling competitions or enormous games of Battleship played on pools with foam boats.) It seems silly, I know. But there’s no reason for it to: slides do exist. Nothing we’ve depicted is actually *impossible*, it’s just that people are pessimistic and worn-down.

There are some good reasons why utopianism has acquired a bad reputation. Because it’s thought that a harmonious existence is impossible, utopian thinking is seen as a recipe for disaster, because it gives license to try to fundamentally restructure society in a way that will result in the destruction of our fragile progress. But that’s why utopias should be ideas and suggestions rather than formal designs. Oscar Wilde told us that “a map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at.” (Strictly speaking, this is not the case. The London Tube map is attractive and useful, and does not provide directions to utopia. The Boston subway map, on the other hand, will show you how to

get to Wonderland.) “Maps” are exactly what utopias are useful as. A map is not a blueprint: you don’t have to obey it exactly. It’s a guide, and you still get to decide where you’re going and how you’re going to get there.

In a way, it’s actually far crazier *not* to be a utopian. After all, the world has a such abundance, human beings are so bright and creative and energetic, that it has never seemed clear to me why there should be any serious deprivation. George Orwell said that socialism was such an obviously good idea that it’s astonishing it isn’t universally endorsed:

The world is a raft sailing through space with, potentially, plenty of provisions for everybody; the idea that we must all cooperate and see to it that everyone does his fair share of the work and gets his fair share of the provisions seems so blatantly obvious that one would say that no one could possibly fail to accept it unless he had some corrupt motive for clinging to the present system.

Orwell concluded that socialists themselves were in large part responsible for the unpopularity of socialism. They did a bad job selling it, and many embraced twisted and inhumane regimes that parodied the egalitarian socialist ideal. In our time, we can rectify this by taking these discussions out of the realm of theory, and thinking about them the way Bellamy did: by looking at our own time, figuring out what could be better, and using our creative capacities to make people not just affirm intellectually, but truly *feel*, that the vision is sensible and plausible rather than insane. Why *shouldn’t* there be a communal Lego-pile? Why *shouldn’t* there be Medicare for All? Does the world lack in resources? Of course it doesn’t. What it lacks is confidence and imagination.



OF COURSE, IN RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION “Why should things be so awful when they could be so very good?” you could also give the Steven Pinker response: *actually*, things are going quite well, if you look at the data: life expectancy is up, lynching seems to have stopped (or at least been turned over to the public sector), we haven’t had a civilization-ending war in a while. Capitalism has built houses and saved babies, etc. And admittedly, there are features of our time that *are* impressive. The technology, well, it might not be flying cars, but it’s pretty amazing. (Besides, flying cars would clog the skies and murder all the birds.) We got space age video phone-calls and barely noticed how astonishing it was, and for \$9.99/mo with Spotify, I can listen to the entire catalog of human beings’ recorded musical output. (Though I still prefer the jukebox at Harry’s, the bar on the corner by my building. It only has about 30 CDs-worth, but somehow it’s so well-selected that it seems to render Spotify completely superfluous. Fats Domino, Jimmie Rodgers, Ella Fitzgerald; what more do you need?)

There are a few problems with the Pinkeresque response, though. For one thing, it presents a factually false picture of the world: one reason there are fewer wars now is that we’re all pointing nuclear weapons at each other. Mutually assured destruction is not “peace” any more than two people pointing guns at each other, each afraid to make a false move, is a “non-violent” situation. This view also involves downplaying the existential threat of climate

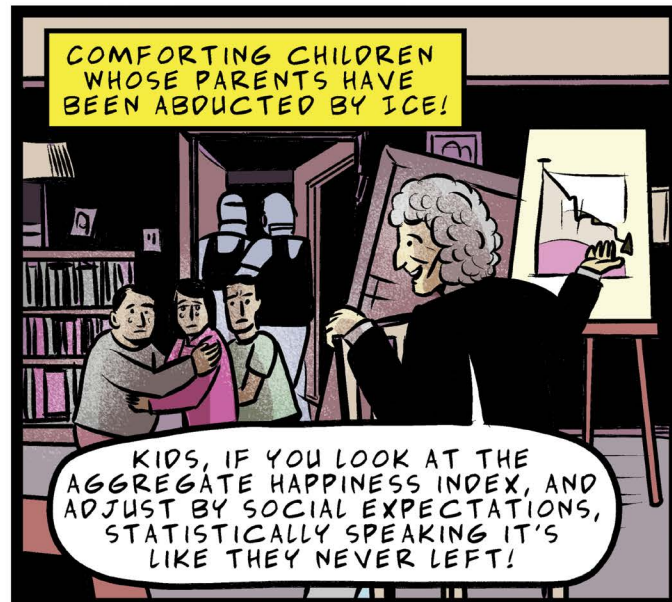
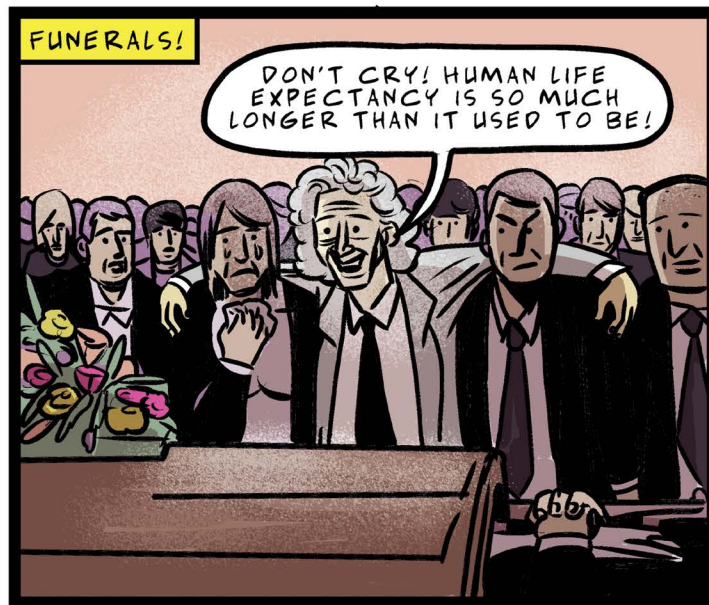
**“Human beings
are so bright
and creative and
energetic, and
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equipped, that
it’s not clear
why there should
be any serious
deprivation.”**

change, which here in a city below sea level is very hard to treat as a mere small bump on the road to progress. Another problem with the cheerful assessment is that it tends to evaluate the existing state against “things as they used to be” rather than “things as they ought to be.” This results in the conflation of “better” with “good,” meaning that even if U.S. infant/maternal mortality is far higher than it needs to be, as long as it’s better than it was during the Great Depression, we will seem to be making “progress.” Finally, the rosy view ignores a whole pile of factors that are getting worse and about which people’s complaints are quite justified: suicide rates, consumer debt, police militarization, public services, immigration policy, incarceration. Progress isn’t spread evenly across society; for the wealthy, we live in a better time than ever. In Detroit, on the other hand, our era looks not just like decline, but like an abject, catastrophic failure. The whole reason that millennials are angry and are embracing socialism is that so many of them work crappy jobs doing work they find pointless, while drowning in debt and with no hope of retirement. Some people’s student loans are as high as \$1,000,000! Say what you want about prior ages, at least their student loans were consistently under seven figures.

We can still agree with the optimists that hope isn’t dead. The evidence is in the brief everyday instances where everything comes together perfectly, and in the visions we can string together out of those instances. No city is a city of dreams, not even New Orleans, but that doesn’t mean we can’t dream of cities, taking everything we love about the places around us and wondering what it might look like if it were permanent and open to all. By letting our imaginations go where they may, we can begin to move toward, well, not a perfect world, but a world with a lot more perfect moments. ♦

STEVEN PINKER

CERTIFIED GRIEF COUNSELOR



SELF-CARE!

SMILE, STEVEN. REMEMBER:
NO MATTER WHAT PEOPLE
SAY, IT'S STATISTICALLY
IMPOSSIBLE FOR YOU TO BE THE
WORST PERSON ON THE PLANET.

CONSOLING THE SAD BUT
INEVITABLE VICTIMS OF
CLIMATE CHANGE.

GRR. RA-AH. GRA,
GRA, GROH. RA-ARGH!
AM I RIGHT?

ADDRESSING THE QUARANTINED
VICTIMS OF A FLU PANDEMIC!

DID YOU KNOW THAT IN THE
MIDDLE AGES, PEOPLE THOUGHT
EATING CRUSHED EMERALDS
WOULD CURE THE PLAGUE?
MORONS!

I'M SO HAPPY TO LIVE
IN A SCIENTIFICALLY
ENLIGHTENED
AGE, AREN'T YOU?

CONTEXTUALIZING COMPLETE
NUCLEAR ANNIHILATION!

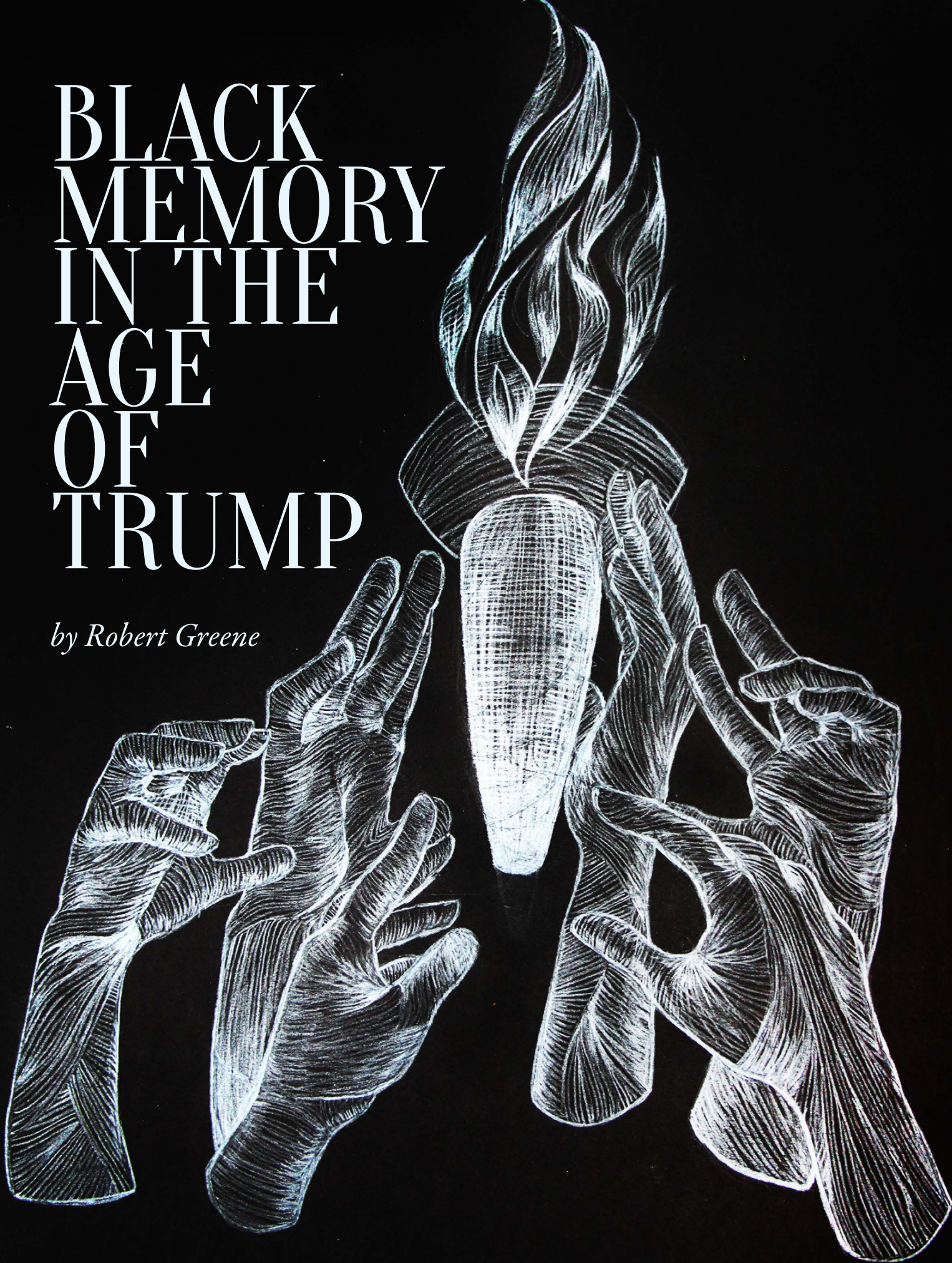
SCIENTISTS-AT LEAST THE ONES
I KEEP IMAGINING I'M TALKING TO-
ESTIMATE THAT THE WORLDWIDE
COCKROACH POPULATION HAS ONLY
DECLINED BY 10%! DON'T YOU THINK
THAT'S JUST INCREDIBLE?

AND THINK ABOUT IT: THERE
ARE NO MORE HUMANS AROUND
TO SQUISH YOU! THE PAST MAY
HAVE BEEN TRAGIC, BUT
THE FUTURE LOOKS BRIGHT!

NEXT ISSUE: REASSURANCE IN THE AFTERLIFE!

BLACK MEMORY IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

by Robert Greene



THE AGE OF TRUMP BEGAN ON JUNE 17, 2015. That was the night of the Charleston Emanuel 9 massacre. Dylann Roof's attack, which left nine African Americans dead and numerous more injured, reminded the nation at the height of the Black Lives Matter protest movement that the nation's deadliest original sin—white supremacy—could strike African Americans anywhere, at any time. The response to that attack was, in some ways, sadly predictable: the immediate celebration of the group of the church's members who forgave Roof for the attack; public praise for the "grace" displayed by African Americans in Charleston for said forgiveness; and Americans across the political spectrum praising the citizens of South Carolina for not protesting and rioting like their kin in Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland. (Never mind that the situations—a terrorist striking a historic African American church versus a lack of accountability for police violence towards African American citizens—were two entirely different situations.) But leading as it did to greater public pressure for the removal of Confederate monuments, the attack did also spark a deeper conversation: one about the very ways in which Americans conceive of their past—and by extension, their present. This legacy is still at the heart of the Age of Trump, a desire to question what makes America America. (And what would make it "great again," and if it ever was.)

Trump's America is, in many ways, a rejection of years of historical research and argumentation that have added necessary nuance to the history of the United States. Scholars have excavated historical truths that had been carefully scrubbed from public memory, from Columbus's indulgence in routine torture that shocked the Spanish to events like the Negro Fort massacre in which Andrew Jackson's troops invaded sovereign Spanish territory and killed several hundred free blacks. Today's adults often learned from textbooks that either whitewashed or outright endorsed crimes against the black and native populations. The 1961 schoolbook *Exploring New England*, for example, describes the massacre of Pequot Indians thusly: "Soldiers killed nearly all the braves, squaws, and children, and burned their corn and other food. There were no Pequots left to make trouble... 'I wish I were a man and had been there,' thought Robert." (In the book, Robert is a fictional white child learning the history of the region.)

When President Trump argued that attempts by activists to remove Confederate statues was a struggle to "take away our culture," it was clear the "our" excluded large numbers of Americans. It was a noted contrast to Barack Obama's remarks at the opening of the Museum of African American History and Culture: "...African American history is not somehow separate from our larger American story, it's not the underside of the American story." President Trump's proud ignorance of American history needs a response—but African Americans have wrestled continuously with this problem, as they remind the nation of its darkest historical moments.

African Americans have long posed the question of what America is and the extent to which they can or should consider themselves part of it. It is at the very heart of the scholarly endeavor

known as African American history. And while most Americans struggle to keep history at arm's length, African Americans constantly fight to keep the past alive. Much of that past is deeply uncomfortable for most Americans to think about. For some, that past is deeply painful, which is precisely why it must be preserved and discussed.

In each era, the kinds of American history being written are inextricably linked to contemporary problems. Fighting over history is fighting over modern politics. The Black Lives Matter movement taking up the cause of removing Confederate statues is a case in point. For them, the links between police brutality in the present, and the building of statues lionizing the Confederacy and immortalizing in stone heroes of white supremacy, were evident. (Sometimes the statues were explicit about what they stood for. One taken down in New Orleans, the Battle of Liberty Place Monument, celebrates the 1874 attempt by the White League to violently overthrow the racially mixed Reconstruction government. An inscription on the monument honors those brave men who fought on behalf of "white people" until the Compromise of 1877 "recognized white supremacy in the South and gave us our state." Anyone naïve enough to think these monuments aren't about white supremacy should look more closely at them; in the case of the Liberty Place monument those very words are used.)

AFRICAN AMERICANS, AND THE AMERICAN Left, have often fought to shift the discourse on history in the public sphere, and the presidency of Barack Obama had in some ways prepped the ground for the shift in thinking about history we're seeing today. Obama couched the nation's history in a story of progress and struggle. His 2013 inaugural speech mentioned American progress "from Seneca Falls, to Selma, to Stonewall," three crucial events in the fight for women, African Americans, and LGBTQ people, respectively. Reflecting this emphasis, in the final days of his presidency Obama gave the approval for the first-of-its-kind National Park centered on the story of Reconstruction in Beaufort, South Carolina.

The Reconstruction period is important to understanding our current crisis of revived open white supremacy. Reconstruction, the time after the Civil War in which black Americans were briefly granted basic civil rights, and even held public office across the South (before white Southern "redeemers" successfully aborted the project and restored absolute white dominance), is often poorly understood by Americans. One example of how Americans still struggle with Reconstruction's legacy occurred during the 2016 presidential campaign. Hillary Clinton, in answering a question about the president that most inspired her (Abraham Lincoln), gave an interpretation of Reconstruction that included elements of the older, "tragic history" narrative of the era. Clinton described the tragedy of Lincoln's death as forgoing an era that "might have been a little less rancorous, a little more forgiving and tolerant" and which instead led to "Reconstruction, we had the re-instigation of segregation and Jim Crow." It seemed the former Secretary

of State ignored the genuine struggles of African American—and more than a few white—Southerners to forge a new, more democratic South in the post-Civil War years. This could not have been done without some “rancor,” but the actual era needed *more* federal backbone, and possibly *more* confrontation, to keep the promises of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to African Americans.

One hates to even imagine how Donald Trump likely sees the Reconstruction period, if he even knows what it was. As Matt Ford showed in his *Atlantic* essay, “What Trump’s Generation Learned About the Civil War,” school children in the 1950s and 1960s still learned about Reconstruction as a mistake, rather than as a small step in the direction of justice that was abandoned far too quickly. The subsequent civil right struggles that continue to this day occur, and are necessitated, in part because Reconstruction was never completed. Much more needs to be done to help many Americans who haven’t taken an American history course in years understand why Reconstruction still matters now. There is a worrying disconnect between how historians view Reconstruction—as a missed opportunity for the United States to truly live up to its creed—and how most people outside the academy view it. They either ignore it as an important period in U.S. history, or continue to see it as a “mistake.” But leftists and African Americans alike have long understood this. Reinterpreting Reconstruction for a broad audience is key.

Such a reinterpretation has been done before, during other times of national crisis. The 1930s Left saw the Reconstruction era differently from the dominant American perspective. Viewing historical battles over the future of the South through a Marxist lens, many leftists began to see the period as the first—and up to the 1930s, only—moment of radical democracy in the South’s history. Bruce Baker’s *What Reconstruction Meant* shows that numerous historians, including several African Americans, tried to push back against the “Lost Cause” view of Reconstruction, which held that the attempt to give African American men voting rights and a proper stake in political debate was a failure and a mistake.

W.E.B. Du Bois’ *Black Reconstruction in America* was the most important work to reinterpret the Reconstruction period in the 1930s. For Du Bois, the Reconstruction era was a missed opportunity for genuine black-white solidarity. The book was also Du Bois’ way of staking a claim to African American humanity. If you grant African Americans some sense of political and social agency in the past, then you are saying they are human beings in the here and now, with their own fears and dreams that should be respected. This “usable past” was an attempt to not just educate, but to prod Americans in the 1930s to come together across the color line to change the country for the better. The stakes of the book were clear to Du Bois: African Americans were very much part of the historical narrative of the nation. He wrote a note to the reader at the beginning of *Black Reconstruction in America* which stated, “In fine, I am going to tell this story as though Negroes were ordinary human beings, realizing that this attitude will from the first seriously curtail my audience.”

BY THE 1960s, AFRICAN AMERICAN SCHOLARS and leftist historians continued to chip away at the old Reconstruction history of failed African American governance. African American history, which for years had had a considerable following among African Americans themselves, gained its widest popularity in the late 1960s. At the height of the Civil Rights Movement, people wanted to understand Reconstruction to make sense of the last time African Americans had such a critical impact on American politics. Popular historians such as Lerone Bennett utilized popular media, such as *Ebony* magazine and various news programs, to get across the argument that African American history mattered.

“History is everything; it is everywhere,” Bennett wrote in his essay “Black History/Black Power.” “History to us is what water is to fish.” Later on in the same essay Bennett made the argument even plainer—for him, history was “knowledge, identity, and power.” Understanding the African American past was essential to African American existence in the present, because the present was unintelligible except in light of what had come before. This is also why, for instance, the Black Panther Party of Oakland, California wanted their members to read historical works. The required reading lists for the Panthers included works such as Du Bois’ *Black Reconstruction in America* and *Souls of Black Folk*; Herbert Aptheker’s *American Negro Slave Revolts*; C. Vann Woodward’s *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*; and John Hope Franklin’s *From Slavery to Freedom*. These, and many other titles, were required reading for new Black Panthers to make sure they understood precisely the place of African Americans in the history of the United States. These books were necessary to help new members of the BPP realize that the education they often received in school—one that gave African Americans little more than a submissive role in American history—was erroneous and intentionally designed to give a false impression of the past.

These stories of African American resilience mattered during an age of white backlash. While we think of the Civil Rights Movement as a high point of black struggle for freedom, in reality they were also periods of heavy, sustained white backlash—north and south. Conservative publications loathed the demonstrators, with William F. Buckley’s *National Review* referring to the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963 as “mob rule.” But this view wasn’t just held on the right. The majority of Americans often disagreed with marching as a form of protest, and it’s easy (and convenient) to forget just how unpopular the movement was. Polls from the era show that whites overwhelmingly thought civil rights demonstrations were “hurting the Negro” and wanted them to stop. Northern liberals dismissed attempts at civil rights campaigns in northern cities like New York, Boston, and Chicago. To them, the problems with race and “de jure,” or legally sanctioned, segregation were in the South. The North’s problems were merely a symptom of “de facto” racism, created by customs and the desire of people to “live with their own.” African Americans knew better.



Engraved according to act of Congress in the year 1872 by Turner & Ames in the Office of the Librarian of Congress at Washington.
ROBERT C. DE LARGE, M.C. of S. Carolina. JEFFERSON H. LONG, M.C. of Georgia.

U.S. Senator H.R. REVELS of Mississippi. BENJ. S. TURNER, M.C. of Alabama. JOSIAH T. WALLS, M.C. of Florida. JOSEPH H. RAINY, M.C. of S. Carolina. R. BROWN ELLIOT, M.C. of S. Carolina.

THE FIRST COLORED SENATOR AND REPRESENTATIVES.

In the 41st and 42nd Congress of the United States.

NEW YORK, PUBLISHED BY CURRIEN & IVES, 125 NASSAU STREET.

ANOTHER RESURGENCE IN ATTENTION TO African American history took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Reagan's America was built on the threat of turning back the progress made by African Americans since the 1960s. But early hip hop often made mention of the past, through songs such as "Renegades of Funk," calling back to a proud past of struggle and resistance to tyranny, and movements such as the campaign to make Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday a national holiday kept alive the spark of the halcyon days of the 1960s. It took a national fight to get MLK Day recognized, and Southern states took their obstinacy to ludicrous extremes. (Until 2000, Virginia celebrated "Lee-Jackson-King Day" instead, which honored Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson as well.) Republicans who voted against recognizing Martin Luther King Day, such as Orrin Hatch, John McCain, Chuck Grassley, and Richard Shelby, are still serving in the U.S. Senate. Reagan himself only grudgingly agreed to recognize the day, having argued that "we could have an awful lot of holidays if we start down that road." What animated the fight over King's holiday was a realization, among activists across the left spectrum, that *something* was needed to show that the left still had a strength and purpose in American politics.

Films such as *Glory* and *Malcolm X* were also reminders of black bravery in the face of overwhelming white supremacy. Like *Roots* in the 1970s, these two films were callbacks to historical moments often misunderstood by most white Americans. *Glory* has the distinction of being one of the few Civil War films to state, without hesitation, that the war was sparked by and was about slavery. *Malcolm X*, while stripping away most of Malcolm's internationalist outlook and his career of making common cause with anyone interested in fighting for freedom, was still a significant moment in the modern tale of bringing African American history to the masses.

Today, many historians have taken on the mantle of activist-scholar, a title held in the past by intellectuals like Du Bois, Lerone Bennett, Carter G. Woodson, and Howard Zinn. Today, historians such as Ibram X. Kendi, Keisha Blain, and Keri Leigh Merritt—among so many others—carry forward the idea of historians participating in critical debates in the public sphere. The African American Intellectual History Society, in which Keisha Blain, Kendi, and Ashley Farmer all have leadership positions, has become a key site, both online and through its annual conference, for thinking about the relationship of thorough and objective scholarship with the needs of modern political discourse.

Many of these historians have made clear the link between po-

" H.D. COLEMAN
" J.R. MACHECA
LT. E. A. GUIBET

UNITED STATES TROOPS TOOK OVER THE STATE
GOVERNMENT AND REINSTATED THE USURPERS
BUT THE NATIONAL ELECTION NOVEMBER 1876
RECOGNIZED WHITE SUPREMACY IN THE SOUTH
AND GAVE US OUR STATE.

litical discourse and remembering the past. Karen Cox, for example, pioneered studying how white women in the South created a pro-white supremacist memory of the past with her work *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture*. David Blight's *Race and Reunion* made similar arguments about the intentional attempts by many white Americans, across the Mason-Dixon line, to whitewash the past and forget about both the causes of the Civil War and the national lack of will to properly push Reconstruction forward.

Pushing Americans to understand their own past means historians will have to continue engaging the public—whether it's in op-ed essays, books written through popular presses, or hosting talks and seminars outside the walls of their local college or university buildings. It won't be easy. But we have models for this—Carter G. Woodson's engagement with African Americans through his Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (now the As-

AME—a church that has been a historic place of resistance for African Americans since its founding in 1816—as his target on that particular night? For that matter, the virulent defense of Confederate memorials by much of the conservative Right in America is a testament to how they understand the stakes of the past. In Charlottesville, the extreme right was even willing to utilize violence in defense of a memorial to Robert E. Lee, a man who personally beat his slaves, broke up their families, oversaw the massacre of surrendering black Union soldiers, and declared that slavery was worse for whites than it was for blacks.

We should be using the words of Americans from the past to counter the extreme right's attempt to permanently canonize figures like Lee. Union leaders such as Ulysses S. Grant and George Thomas—a general from Virginia who, unlike Lee, fought for the cause of the Union—perfectly understood the stakes of the post-Civil War attempts by former Confederate leaders to re-

“We should be using the words of Americans from the past to counter the extreme right's attempt to permanently canonize figures like Lee.”

sociation for the Study of African American Life and History) is a worthy example. Professional societies such as the Organization of American Historians are also trying to change this, with the magazine *The American Historian* aimed at non-academics. Their “Process: a blog for American history” page is similarly aimed at both academics and non-academics alike.

DEALING WITH THE RIGHT-WING RESPONSE to these historical arguments is also an important part of the debate over the American past. The defense of Confederate statues seems to indicate a failure to understand what gave rise to those statues. They did not grow out of the ground like trees or emerge from geological pressures like mountains. The statues are man-made totems to white supremacy, and the decision to put them up was made by white Americans across the South desperate to showcase their dominance over an African American population whose political and economic power had been curtailed by the collapse of Reconstruction in the 1870s and the completed rise of Jim Crow segregation by 1900. (Just as with the monuments, the Confederate battle flag, rarely displayed for many decades after the war, was revived and deployed when black social movements began to threaten white power. The Dixiecrats used it in 1948 to indicate their racial views, and Georgia added it to their state flag after *Brown v. Board of Education*.) This right-wing view of the past—best seen in Charlottesville in August 2017—holds that America has been a white man's country, and for it to continue to be “great,” it must remain so.

Again, we can go back to the Emanuel 9 massacre. The extreme Right in America knows the history of the nation as much as the Left does. How else can one explain why Roof chose Emanuel

write history. Grant wrote in his *Memoirs*:

“The cause of the great War of the Rebellion against the United States will have to be attributed to slavery. For some years before the war began it was a trite saying among some politicians that ‘A state half slave and half free cannot exist.’ All must become slave or all free, or the state will go down. I took no part myself in any such view of the case at the time, but since the war is over, reviewing the whole question, I have come to the conclusion that the saying is quite true.”

Likewise, General Thomas thundered against post-Civil War attempts by white Southerners to change the meaning of the war. After dismissing Southern attempts to whitewash the past, Thomas wrote that they tried to argue that “the crime of treason might be covered with a counterfeit varnish of patriotism, so that the precipitators of the rebellion might go down in history hand in hand with the defenders of the government, thus wiping out with their own hands their own stains.” Further, Thomas pointed out that their punishment could—indeed, *should* have been worse—“when it is considered that life and property—justly forfeited by the laws of the country, of war, and of nations, through the magnanimity of the government and people—was not exacted from them.” Leaders of the Union war effort understood, better than it seems most major American leaders do today—what the stakes of the Civil War and Reconstruction were. They knew better than President Trump or his chief of staff John Kelly do what statues dotting the American landscape in honor of Confederate military and civilian leaders represent.

Also, commercialization of the past alone cannot save us. *Malcolm X* required money from prominent African American celebrities to be completed. The proposed United States National Slavery Museum could never find enough willing sponsors, and plans had

to be scrapped. Martin Luther King, Jr. has been used as a salesperson for a variety of products over the years (most recently in a widely-mocked television commercial for Dodge trucks), and his holiday has become a milquetoast call for public service—divorced from the kind of radical political outlook that characterized King for much of his career. (A career that included staunch criticisms of the very milquetoast liberalism that now celebrates him, as in “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” King even denounced the social effect of car commercials... elsewhere in the very speech that Dodge used to promote the new Ram.) There is the danger that any historical figure or moment that speaks to America’s radical past will immediately be appropriated by the Right—or, more likely, by the moderate center, which has also done much to strip away the radical roots of the Civil Rights Movement from mainstream narratives about it.

A hunger for understanding the past informs much of modern discourse on the Left and among African Americans. The popularity of Ta-Nehisi Coates is based largely around his deft usage of American history to talk about the problems of the present. While some of the left may disagree with his prescriptions for healing what ails Black America now, no one can disagree with the power of his essays about the Civil War, the Civil Rights era, and America’s repeated failure to deal fairly with African Americans. The success of Colson Whitehead’s *Underground Railroad* or Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing* both point to continued interest in understanding American slavery. African Americans are not flocking to these narratives to wallow in the pain of the past, however; they’re trying to keep alive those stories so that they can draw strength to face the problems of the present.

As a young boy, I recall being taught about the giants of the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks domi-

nated Black History Month. Yet there was one figure whose historical form changed in every teacher’s hands: Malcolm X. For some, he was merely ignored to get to the giants of our idealized civil rights past. But for one teacher, in my eighth grade year, he was “bad.” I still remember it: Malcolm X was bad, and Martin Luther King, Jr. was good.

And I remember thinking, quietly, sitting in the front row: *She’s wrong.*

I’d never thought that about what any teacher had said before in class. But I just knew—*knew*—Malcolm wasn’t this bad guy that she made him out to be. I wasn’t entirely sure of what he stood for. I knew he was a proud African American man. I knew he stood up for others who couldn’t stand up for themselves. And I knew—beyond a shadow of a doubt—he was a *good* man. Folks should not be given a sanitized version of the past. But they should be allowed to work through the nuance of the past and understand that every historical figure was complicated in some way. Malcolm X was one of the most fascinating, complex, brilliant, committed individuals in the country’s history, and turning him into the “bad” counterpart to the “good” King not only presents a simple-minded fabrication of history and erases the man’s true character, but prevents us from engaging seriously with Malcolm’s life and thought in order to draw lessons from it.

Ultimately, historians are participating in a fight about competing narratives of the past. But African Americans have led the way in this fight for over a century, refusing to yield to an explicitly white supremacist interpretation of the past. This is a way of holding on to hope in dark times—thinking about what people in the past did about the oppression they had to face and endure. ♦

PUBLIC OPINION *during the Civil Rights Era*

Do you approve or disapprove of what the ‘Freedom Riders’ are doing?

22% Approve
61% Disapprove
18% No opinion

Do you think ‘sit-ins’ at lunch counters, ‘freedom buses,’ and other demonstrations by Negroes will hurt or help the Negro’s chances of being integrated in the South?

57% Hurt
28% Help
16% No opinion

Conducted by Gallup Organization May 28-June 2, 1961, and based on personal interviews with a national adult sample of 1,502.

Do you think mass demonstrations by Negroes are more likely to help or more likely to hurt the Negro’s cause for racial equality?

16% Help
74% Hurt
10% Make no difference/no opinion

Conducted by Gallup Organization May 22-May 27, 1964, and based on personal interviews with a national adult sample of 1,640.

People have different views about the Negro demonstrations. With which view do you agree? Some people say the Negroes should stop their demonstrations now that they have made their point even though some of their demands have not been met. Others say they have to continue demonstrating in order to achieve better jobs, better housing, and better schooling. With which view do you agree?

73% Negroes should stop demonstrations
19% Have to continue
8% Don’t know

Conducted by Gallup Organization October 8-October 13, 1964, and based on personal interviews with a national adult sample of 1,550.

(SUBPOPULATION: Whites)

All in all, do you feel the demonstrations by Negroes on civil rights have helped more or hurt more in the advancement of Negro rights?

85% Hurts Negro
15% Helps Negro

Conducted by Louis Harris & Associates during October, 1966, and based on personal interviews with a national adult sample of 1,250.

THE CURRENT AFFAIRS HANDBOOK OF SURREPTITIOUS RESISTANCE TO THE NFL'S ABSURD NATIONAL ANTHEM RULE



It has come to our attention that the National Football League (NFL) has adopted a draconian rule to punish football players who choose to take a knee during the "Star Spangled Banner." In support of the principled athletes targeted by this cowardly decision, we provide the *Current Affairs* Handbook of Surreptitious Resistance to the NFL's Absurd National Anthem Rule. We hope these ideas will spur creative ways to circumvent the haters.

But first, some background. For those of you unfamiliar with this sideline drama, the kneeling practice is a form of silent protest against police brutality. It was inaugurated during the 2016 preseason by Colin Kaepernick, who was then a quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers. When asked about his decision to respectfully kneel during the Star-Spangled Banner, Kaepernick explained: "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder." [Insert: vigorous clapping from the *Current Affairs* masthead.] Eventually, many NFL players—overwhelmingly Black—and professional athletes in other leagues began to kneel during the National Anthem. Kaepernick's brave stand even inspired children and teens to protest at their school games.

The blowback the protesters have since endured would be comical, if it were not so depraved. Kaepernick has been blackballed from the league in a possibly illegal collusion scheme between team owners. School students have been threatened with expulsion and other forms of punishment. Opponents of the protest have hijacked a conversation that should be about police brutality, with nonsensical arguments that kneeling during a song by a slaveowning racist who hated free speech is somehow an attack on veterans and the version of American Freedom that cannot tolerate quiet kneeling. President Trump, who we definitely know cares about one sport and one sport only—golf—weighed in through his Twitter bully pulpit to coerce the NFL players into standing upright before games. Vice President Pence, ironically, staged his own protest exit in protest of the football players' protest of a sports game that was allegedly no place for a protest. Even the Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi, our alleged ally and torchbearer of the #Resistance, perpetually waffles on supporting these peaceful protesters. Like the British, who once appeased Hitler by making their national soccer team do the Nazi salute before a friendly game, the (figuratively) poor NFL owners have concluded they have no choice but to cuddle with pseudo-fascist forces. At *Current Affairs*, we believe the NFL's reaction to these protests is downright cowardly and that the players should be able to protest anything they want, any time they want. In this spirit, we submit to the National Players Association a list of 12 proposals to circumvent the NFL rule. We hope these ideas match the NFL rule in absurdity and proportionality.

1. HIRE A LICENSED PROFESSIONAL to fly a private prop plane equipped with a powerful sound system. As the Star Spangled Banner is about to begin, have this person fly their small plane over the stadium and play "Lift Every Voice and Sing."

2. COMMISSION A CARDBOARD CUTOUT of yourself kneeling while wearing your team uniform. This replica should be between one and one-and-a-half times your size. Bring the replica onto the sidelines and stand behind it during the National Anthem. If possible, hire an independent printer to support the local economy.

3. THEY SAID YOU HAD TO STAND, but they didn't say where. Before the anthem, slip out with some of your teammates and find the owner's box. As the anthem plays, stand ominously above him in total glaring silence. Do not speak. Just collectively stare at him while he squirms.

4. CONSPIRE WITH PLAYERS FROM YOUR TEAM and the rival team to attend the postgame conference in matching jerseys, displaying the photographs and names of people recently killed by the police. Make the occasional exception for the team member who insists on wearing a rainbow or some other fun and colorful jersey. After all, this is a game.

5. AS THE ANTHEM PLAYS, perform a beautiful and informative interpretive dance about police brutality. Be sure to incorporate a modern dance style—the last thing you need is a poor review from any *Times* art critic who may be in the audience. Do not choreograph sitting poses.

6. SECRETLY SUBSTITUTE the official game football with a football on which the most artistic player on your team has painted a police officer in uniform. Use this lesson to encourage police forces to think about how it makes them feel to see themselves being kicked around, and how it must make Black people feel to see police officers kick them around all the time. If using oil paint, complete the painting 2-3 weeks in advance to ensure the art fully dries by game day.

7. WRITE A STRONGLY-WORDED LETTER highlighting issues of white supremacy and police brutality in the United States and abroad. On Valentine's Day, attach a copy to a candy gram and mail it to your team's coaches and owners. Do not splurge—these people deserve no better than forlorn candy corn from last Halloween.

8. FIND SOMEONE YOU CARE ABOUT DEEPLY. Inform the television studio that you plan to propose during the National Anthem. When the time is ripe ("Oooh, say can you seeeee"), get down on one knee and propose. Remember to annotate your proposal with a list of obstacles that love has to overcome in this world. Include police violence and anti-black racism.

9. ADD A LITTLE POLITICS to your touchdown dance by pulling out a Black Lives Matter flag and waving it at the crowd. Will the refs hit you with a 15-yard excessive celebration penalty? Probably. But letting the other team start with a 15-yard advantage is a political message all by itself.

10. ON MARDI GRAS, bake NFL commissioner Roger Goodell a small King Cake. Obtain 50 heat-resistant mini-figurines of Black human beings and incorporate them into the batter. Cover the cake in fondant painted with the United States flag. Let Goodell chew on that symbolism.

11. DURING THE ANTHEM, release a large amount of your team's mascot: a pride of lions, a bunch of bears, a shipful of raiders, a horde of Vikings. The rule is only about players kneeling, not the crowd running in terror. And plus, no one can fault your team spirit. (Note: Washington players are not permitted to use this tactic. Also, change your goddamn name.)

12. HIRE A MARCHING BAND to join you on the field. Instruct them to begin playing the national anthem five seconds after the "official" anthem begins. The discord will make a powerful representative message about the chaos that police cause for communities of color. When confronted about your musical decision, explain that doubling the amount of national anthems was actually, if you think about it, twice as patriotic.





MONUMENTAL HYPOCRISY

by Daniel George

AFTER THE HORRIFIC 2015 CHARLESTON church massacre was carried out by an avowed “neo-Confederate,” the Stars-and-Bars was removed from the South Carolina statehouse, and corporate retailers like Amazon, Walmart, and eBay pulled all merchandise featuring the infamous flag, as did the National Park Service. The election of Donald Trump, who drew strong support from the Deep South, has appeared to deepen antipathy towards Confederate symbols, and white nationalist protests in Charlottesville and elsewhere have intensified counter-efforts to remove statues, street signs, and building names honoring Confederate leadership from public display. Even the revelation that the *Game of Thrones* showrunners are developing a new fictional series called *Confederate*, which imagines modern implications of a Southern victory in the Civil War, was swiftly met with widespread derision in progressive circles.

In almost every case, those on the left unquestionably support actions taken against Confederate iconography, and understandably so. Objects evoking white supremacy, Jim Crow, and the inhumane bondage of black men, women, and children serve as an active source of pain for African Americans at a time when black lives are *still* systemically devalued, and there would thus seem both a practical and moral imper-

ative for progressive support of their removal.

Yet there is also an ongoing strand of condescension towards the Deep South, expressed most explicitly through the contemporary culture war politics of the Civil War, which feels less like a sincere attempt to reduce harm than a means of preserving the myth of our own American exceptionalism.

The left ought to more seriously consider the inconsistent application of our principles towards Southern symbols. For instance, why are the stars-and-bars regarded as an irreducibly racist emblem while the American flag is spared such totalizing scrutiny? After all, the stars-and-stripes flew over chattel slavery for decades and could justifiably be seen as a symbol of our government’s policy of genocide against Native Americans, the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, the dropping of nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the setting up of Japanese-American internment camps, Vietnam, Iraq, CIA skullduggery, drone warfare, and countless other acts of imperialism, military aggression, white supremacy, and political and corporate malfeasance.

Well, one might fairly say, the stars-and-stripes certainly reflects its fair share of moral turpitudes (a sum far greater than the short-lived Confederacy, in fact), but it also expresses a particular narrative of collective pride around country, independence, freedom, patriotism, ingenuity, and the honoring

of veterans. Like any other symbol, flags have a multitude of meanings, and a culture that values freedom of speech and pluralism ought to tolerate varied and at times conflicting meanings that inhere to the same symbol. I happen to find this argument personally convincing. But if we accept it, what do we say to those Southerners who say the Confederate flag stands for Southern identity and pride? Or to those who see it as a means of memorializing soldier ancestors who died bravely on battlefields? (Remember, in every generation, frontline soldiers are drawn from the working class, not from among rich planters.) Why do we extend such open-mindedness towards one symbol but not the other?

THIS TENDENCY IS ALSO PRESENT IN THE ongoing efforts to remove monuments to Confederate leaders like Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson and accompanying reluctance to extend similar antipathies towards monuments of founding fathers such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson who were slave owners (serial sexual abusers in Jefferson's case), and also traitors (who happened to win their war against foreign occupation that institutionalized white supremacy in the Constitution). Confederate leaders like Lee and Jackson were absolutely racist, but not uniquely so when measured against the pantheon of American heroes. Their martial foe Abe Lincoln, as was the case of most white men in the viciously racist mid-19th century, made execrable public statements about black people that would well warrant the removal of his likeness from our national landscape. It is sometimes illuminating to show people a selection of quotes and ask them to guess whether they were uttered by a Confederate general or Honest Abe. For instance:

- *"There is a physical difference between the white and black races that will forever forbid the two races from living together on terms of social and political equality."*
- *"There is a natural disgust in the minds of nearly all white people to the idea of indiscriminate amalgamation of the white and black races ... A separation of the races is the only perfect preventive of amalgamation."*
- *"Inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race."*

(Spoiler: all were said by Lincoln.)

As much as I hesitate to ever dignify any "argument" made by Donald Trump, when he semi-coherently questioned why Confederate monuments should be removed while monuments to Washington and Jefferson were left standing, he had a point: our principles are applied differently above and below the Mason-Dixon line. Consistency would seem to demand serious consideration of dismantling or re-contextualizing racist monuments of many venerated heroes enshrined in the National Mall, even Jefferson's lonely memorial, and on Mt.

Rushmore. And yet, despite occasionally feinting at such actions, the left never actually acts upon objects of the Union's violent, racist, white supremacist past, content to selectively raze Confederate monuments as the preferred form of atonement.

As a native northerner, I cannot suppress the sense that the removal of Southern icons is a performance of ritual purification that purges a *particular type* of racial shame while allowing us to maintain the abiding myth of our national exceptionalism. By making the Confederate flag the "racist one" and declaring Southern political and military leaders to be distinctly evil in type rather than degree, we effectively project the great weight of national sins onto the South. In doing so, we obfuscate the imperialist and genocidal past associated with American empire. Every well-meaning liberal who tries to mount an argument for how Washington, Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, and other enshrined Union heroes are "different" is *ipso facto* engaged in whitewashing American genocide, colonialism, white supremacy, and militarism, which seems a far greater transgression than mere logical inconsistency.

A more reasonable assessment of objects like Confederate statues in our national landscape might start from the premise that America, from its inception, has been a racist and violent country that has produced racist and violent leaders. Such a starting-point invites an honest discussion about how and why being vested with power in this nation has led so many ostensibly intelligent and honorable people to commit, countenance, or rationalize such horrific crimes under the stars-and-stripes—a dynamic still at play today as we venerate our otherwise delightful recent ex-presidents who are guilty of outright war crimes. (George W. Bush may be fun at a frat party but he still violated the Nuremberg Principles.) It might also allow us to advance beyond the hagiography we reserve for Union heroes who have committed grave atrocities and harbored repugnant racial beliefs (fun fact: William Tecumseh Sherman, who waged a ruthless campaign of "total war" throughout the south in his "March to the Sea," has a massive golden 24-foot statue in New York City that is regularly "re-gilded" at a cost of hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars; because, hey, he's our war criminal!)

Furthermore, the practice of slavery is not unique to the Confederacy and, in fact, remains part of our national and international landscape today. Most conspicuously, the practice is codified in the Union's Thirteenth Amendment, which provides a loophole for the forced servitude of prisoners. Hillary Clinton, the intersectionality-tweeting former Democratic candidate, proudly wrote of her support for free prisoner labor while an occupant of the Governor's Mansion in Arkansas in the 1980s, a predilection shared by the latest corporate-backed centrist Kamala Harris. Furthermore, modern corporate supply chains serving US consumers currently exploit millions of people around the world as slave laborers. Our sitting president and his children have been dogged by accusations that their apparel lines and other branded ventures like golf clubs



A MEDIOCRE MAN

A HERO FOR OUR TIMES...



ACCURATE STEREOTYPE PICTURES PRESENTS A CANNESBAIT PRODUCTION FEATURING THE PERFORMING TALENTS OF MATTHEW MUSSBENDER AND HENRY HAY LOOMIS AND OSWALD ISAIAH AND JACK GOLFINIKAS ALONG WITH MICHAEL McDONAGHEY
AND UNDERPAID FEMALE COSTARS TEESE REATHERSPOON AND JANUARY LEWIS DIRECTED BY MELVIN SCORMESE PRODUCED BY BARNEY WEINTRAUB SPECIAL EFFECTS BY STARVATION STUDIOS

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in Dubai have involved unlawful, exploitative labor practices. This is to say nothing of recent U.S. foreign policy in Libya authored by Clinton and Barack Obama that violently overthrew Muammar Gaddafi, destabilized the country, and created the conditions for the horrific re-emergence of slavery.

I personally recognize my complicity in this awful predicament. In addition to voting for Clinton and Obama (and working for the latter's campaign in Cleveland in 2008), I also write daily on an Apple device, drink coffee whose source I often don't know, and work in a town called Hershey—the same Hershey that, along with Mars, Nestle, and other major chocolate-producing multi-nationals, has been implicated in child slave labor practices in West African cocoa plantations as a standard facet of their business model. As we are enmeshed in totalizing capitalist systems, none of us is entirely culpable as individual consumers (or voters) for supporting such egregious forms of abuse. But these modern practices exist on a deeply troubling scale, and it would perhaps be wiser for the left to focus more on agitating to change immoral corporate and imperialist systems that are actively subjecting living humans to forced or exploited labor.

I worry that we have grown far too accustomed to the Deep South serving as a useful means of annexing our country's racist sins to a particular region—even while modern slavery persists, black citizens are locked in northern prisons and given longer sentences than whites convicted of similar crimes, tragically gunned down by police officers in northern streets, and sent utility bills for lead-poisoned water flowing through northern pipes. But the South is not uniquely “evil,” nor should it be portrayed as the primary locus of racism and bigotry in our national mythology.

SEEN IN THIS LIGHT, CONTEMPORARY BATTLES over Confederate iconography seem secondary to the problems of actual power structures that perpetuate income and wealth inequality, institutional and environmental racism, corporate malefaction, imperialism, and lack of opportunity. They also attack an “enemy”—poor white southerners—who are likewise affected by many of those power structures. Removing a flag from a statehouse, or toppling a statue commemorating the southern war dead is an easy, satisfying, cathartic, and ultimately superficial victory for the left. (Frankly, it's a bit like liberals grandstanding about Trump's latest vulgar all-caps tweet while the President's administration destabilizes the Middle East, dismantles environmental

and economic regulations, and funnels wealth upwards.)

There is a subtler point here that goes beyond our inconsistent application of principles. When we constantly attack, mock, and disparage the narratives, symbols, and icons that imbue peoples' lives with meaning we are sure to alienate them. While liberals are admirably committed to defending representational diversity, an uncomfortable reality is that it still seems to be acceptable to punch down upon poor white folks, especially in the Deep South, or to rest comfortably on the assumption that they must be racists/bigots or (tiki) torch-bearing members of the KKK.



A statue of Robert E. Lee is removed in New Orleans, May 19, 2017.

In his latest comedy show, Dave Chappelle insightfully critiques this liberal tendency to embrace dehumanizing terms like “white trash” and “deplorable,” and how this disdain—when coupled with the failure of the Democratic party to offer anything substantive to the rural poor—produces conditions that logically give rise to the Trump phenomenon. Such analysis is far more astute (and empathetic)

than anything trotted out by MSNBC or CNN these days.

Aside from the condescension attendant in our posturing towards poor white southerners, it is also the case that these folks are part of a national cohort whose life expectancy rates are dropping, due mainly to “deaths of despair” linked to suicide, drug overdose, alcohol-related liver disease, and cardiovascular disease—a trend especially concentrated in southern states like West Virginia, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, and Arkansas. Globalization, neoliberal trade deals, automation and AI, lack of regulation, declining mining, forestry, and trucking industries, and myriad other factors have gutted the south of jobs—much less dignified jobs with a livable and rising wage—and the safety net in southern states has been dramatically reduced since the Clinton administration led the bipartisan assault on welfare. Lack of healthcare access and hospital shortages have led to deteriorating physical and mental well-being (those of us in healthcare know the Deep South through the unfortunate epidemiologic moniker of “The Stroke Belt,” and the region is now becoming a hotspot for poverty-driven tropical disease with conditions resembling developing nations); and unequal access to higher education and other means of betterment have fostered a sense of anomie—a toxic feeling of being left behind by the larger culture that cuts even deeper than the embattled notion of “economic anxiety.” Over 20% of southerners live below the poverty line. And to add insult to injury, researchers who model the economic impact of climate change are showing the Deep South will suffer disproportionately from the effects

of a warming climate. It is perhaps understandable that such material conditions might—for some—foster nostalgia for the distant past and resentment at those who attack cherished symbols associated with it.

This is not to make poor white southerners out to be uniquely victimized. However, it should give us pause, if not a touch of compassion. When we smugly disdain the worldview of these folks, tag them as hopeless bigots, white supremacists, and possessors of “privilege,” and grandstand about how we’d be better off without them, we are effectively denigrating a swath of humanity that is suffering as a result of the structural poverty that the left normally interrogates head-on. And when our venal political class continually fails or refuses to offer these folks a platform that might materially improve their lives (much less uses insulting terms like “white trash,” “basket of deplorables,” and other anti-poor rhetoric cribbed directly from the rightwing playbook), or when liberal establishment figures un-ironically encourage the Democratic Party to abandon everyone besides wealthy “urbanites” and secede from the South (#Bluxxit!) we are witnessing, and perhaps abetting, a profound moral failure. Worse yet, as Chappelle pointed out, this type of systemic contempt and neglect sows the seeds for the election of demagogues like Trump and virtually guarantees that the Deep South will remain deep red.

NOW, IN THE MIDST OF THE FIFTIETH anniversary of Martin Luther King’s Poor People’s Campaign, it is only natural to think about how the reverend might counsel us through these tumultuous times. In reading *The Radical King*, Cornel West’s powerful compendium of King’s speeches earlier this year, I was shocked by how frequently the civil rights leader had spoken about class, poverty, labor, and U.S. imperialism in addition to race. King went to great lengths to emphasize the color-blind nature of economic exploitation wrought by modern capitalism; in his words: “The same forces that oppress Negroes in American society oppress poor white people.” In one of his last penned speeches before his tragic assassination in 1968, King wrote a stirring call-to-arms: “The dispossessed of this nation—the poor, both white and Negro—live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize a revolution against that injustice, not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing...to lift the load of poverty.”

Such rhetoric carries no less moral valence today. Leftist leaders like Bernie Sanders and Keith Ellison, as well as Jeremy Corbyn in the U.K. have, by and large, continued to hew a position consistent with King, bearing witness to social and economic injustice and considering the full spectrum of suffering across the poor, working poor, and vulnerable—neither excluding nor scapegoating any demographic group.

“The practice of slavery is not unique to the Confederacy and, in fact, remains part of our national and international landscape today.”

We don’t have to like Confederate iconography, and we can support democratic efforts to remove or recontextualize flags, statues, street signs, and building names. But civil rights icon Andrew Young, for example, has counseled against the removal of Confederate monuments and flags on the basis that—given the despairing reality for so many poor folks in the South—we would be much better choosing substance over symbols and fighting what King famously termed the “Three Evils of Society”—racism, poverty, and militarism. Our activism and organizational efforts would be considerably more valuable if applied to building movements like the Fight for \$15, organized labor, a federal jobs guarantee, voter enfranchisement, Black Lives Matter, and local and national democratic socialist campaigns. Being committed to anti-racist, egalitarian values means consistently focusing on the most serious threats to those values, rather than emphasizing the symbolic and hypocritically pointing at a convenient scapegoat. ♦

CAN YOU WIN THE

GOP

SENATE PRIMARY?

RULES

You are competing for the Republican nomination. Pick a character. Get a die. Place a token on the character's starting space and try to get to the nomination.

If a character lands on the **GAFFE** square, they have to roll a die to see how many squares they must retreat.

If a character lands on the **SCANDAL** square, they have to roll a die (4 or better) to stay in the race.

If a character lands on the **ADVANTAGE** square, they must roll to see how many squares they should advance.

But if the **GAFFE**, **SCANDAL**, or **ADVANTAGE** square contains an asterisk, they must obey the instructions following the asterisk instead.

THE HOLY INQUISITOR

GAFFE: While attempting to defend a woman's bathroom from a hypothetical trans invasion, you slip on wet tiles and crack your skull.

SCANDAL: Breitbart uncovers a terrible secret: your daughter has been happily married to another woman for ten years. You rush to publicly disavow her but it's too late. Your base now doubts your commitment to the homophobic cause.

ADVANTAGE: Your adorable turtle, Mr. Sheldon, is a social media star. He now accompanies you on campaign rallies, and poses nobly on signs that read "ENFORCE MONOGAMY NOW!" even though his species is highly promiscuous.



OIL COMPANY C.E.O.

GAFFE: During a debate you accidentally blurt, "well, of course we know climate change is real! We just can't make any money on it!"

SCANDAL: One of your offshore rigs explodes, gushes uncontrollably, and begins suffocating 400 adorable baby dugongs per day. "Roll a die to see how long it will take to plug the well with silt and golf balls. Retreat the number of spaces you rolled. If you roll a six, oil has killed the entire global dugong population and you must exit the race."

ADVANTAGE: Cash flows into your coffers faster than oil onto sacred tribal land.



MERCENARY MANIAC

GAFFE: You sold weapons to jihadists who—at the time—were U.S. allies, but have since been reclassified as murderous enemies. "Return to start and suspend your campaign until the jihadists have become allies again (15 mins)."

SCANDAL: You accidentally invite an investigative reporter to your private murder island, where you hunt "the most dangerous game". You failed to hunt her, however, and she got away from the island with photographs and several very suspicious bones. "Wait a turn while your surrogates question her integrity. She'll disappear soon enough, and after that she'll 'disappear' forever."

ADVANTAGE: The medals and decorations on your chest are actually a mixture of 1950s Boy Scout patches and triathlon participation medals, but whenever your opponents point this out, you accuse them of Disrespecting The Troops.



BOOTSTRAPPING BLACK CONSERVATIVE

GAFFE: You divert from your prepared speech to tell the audience your personal theory about the extraterrestrial origins of the Fed. End the Neptunian Fed!

SCANDAL: You admit that when you said you grew up "in government housing," you meant your father was the mayor of a medium-sized Midwestern city.

ADVANTAGE: Right-wing media is very eager to have you on their platforms—finally, a black person they feel comfortable with—and they give you far more attention than your half-baked policy proposals really justify. You gain considerable name recognition.



LITERAL NAZI

GAFFE: You accidentally say something obliquely white supremacist.

SCANDAL: You accidentally say something explicitly white supremacist.

ADVANTAGE: You deliberately say something the New York Times decides to label "racially charged rhetoric" and "dangerously radical statements, like something a motorcycle bad boy might whisper in your ear."



THE SENSIBLE SACRIFICE

GAFFE: Shout "Mr. Trump, this is NOT what it means to be a Republican" on the Senate floor about something that is 1) the very definition of being a Republican, and 2) you voted for six times.

SCANDAL: In a moment of unaccountable rage you call one of your opponents "a fucking moron." While he is an absolute fucking moron, you still "retreat three spaces and apologize profusely to all the other players for the rest of the game."

ADVANTAGE: The remaining five "compassionate conservatives" endorse you enthusiastically in the nation's most prominent newspapers. "No matter what you roll, you advance zero spaces."





Monopoly Capital and The

RULES

of the

GAME

by VANESSA A. BEE

THE GAME OF MONOPOLY WAS ORIGINALLY QUITE different when it was first patented in 1904 by a progressive woman named Lizzie Magie. Magie's game, called "The Landlord's Game," was like the version you grew up playing, in that it could be won by accruing as many land lots, properties, and cash as possible. But her version came with a twist. At any time, the players could choose a more egalitarian future by voting in the Single Tax rules.

Once activated, the Single Tax required players to redirect all fines and rents on empty lots into the Public Treasury's coffers. For any player to erect properties or collect a fine on an existing property, the Treasury first had to receive rent on the land. These public funds paid for public utilities, transportation, and college, which then became available to everyone for free. Residual funds were redistributed as higher wages for everyone. No individual could really win the Single Tax game, other than by collaborating to break up all monopolies.

Magie admired the radical philosopher Henry George, and hoped the Single Tax rules would educate players of all ages about his proposal for common land ownership. These calls for bold reforms emerged from anxieties of the first Gilded Age. Magie and George had lived through an era marked by rapid economic growth, deep inequality, political corruption, and sprawling industry trusts controlled by a few men. The status quo seemed unsustainable. If this sounds familiar, it's because our own

Gilded Age has all the symptoms of the first.

In *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, the economist Thomas Piketty attributes the spike in American inequality to an imbalanced distribution of the national income. By national income, Piketty means the sum of labor income (the wages earned by workers) and capital income (the earnings from physical assets like houses and factories, and financial assets like investment accounts and corporate profits). Much like the first Gilded Age, advances in technology have magnified American productivity. We become better at creating and selling more stuff and in turn, our pie of national income grows larger. The problem is that since the 1970s, the slice of income going to workers has not kept up with their share of contribution.

The statistics are depressingly familiar. Today, the richest one percent controls 40 percent of the country's wealth and about 90 percent of all income gains. Inheritances and other intra-familial transfers of assets explain *some* of this phenomenon. That so few families have so much to pass on certainly contributes to inequality. But patrimony alone cannot account for how aggressively the owners of capital have been able to commandeer more than their fair share. To understand this rapid concentration of wealth and income, we must also consider the metastasis of corporations into colossal trusts, happening at the same time as the government shirks its duty to protect consumers and workers.

The year 2015 alone saw a reported 4.7 trillion dollars' worth of merger and acquisition deals. Chemical companies Dow Chemical merged with DuPont and on the food side, Kraft and Heinz became one. Two

A semi-review of: Eric Posner and E. Glen Weyl, **Radical Markets: Uprooting Capitalism and Democracy for a Just Society**, Princeton University Press, \$29.95, 368pp.

years later, Amazon purchased the Whole Foods chain, while the CVS pharmacy brand acquired the insurer Aetna. In 2018, the pharmaceutical firm Bayer is taking over the agricultural giant Monsanto in a sixty-two billion dollar deal. Year after year, thousands of firms across the economy swallow their competitors or other businesses in the supply chain to control more of their market.

But should we *actually* care about the unions of these corporate leviathans any more than we do about royal weddings? With our economy controlled by tangles of subsidiaries and shell companies anchored in exotic locales, keeping score of who owns whom seems like a futile effort. Corporate names and logos blur together in a sea of deals reported only in the most boring articles for only the most boring lawyers. For at least a while, our food tastes the same; our prescriptions cost the same; our quality of service seems the same. So we sit like frogs in a pot of simmering water, undisturbed by the aggressive consolidations of corporate power around us. By the time we notice the changes, it's often too late.

THE COMMON WISDOM IS THAT, IN A FAIR ECONOMY, market competition fosters innovation as firms attempt to build on each other's advances. It also leads to higher quality, lower prices, and better deals for consumers, workers, and other producers in the supply chain. Firms that wish to thrive and grow are supposed to cultivate their relations with all these stakeholders, or risk losing them to competitors. An economy where firms possess too much market power breeds opposite conditions.

In a series of papers on this subject, the economist Marshall Steinbaum describes market power as a "concentration and substantial power" that allows firms to "skew market outcomes in [their] interest, without creating value or serving the public good." In other words: the more powerful a firm becomes, the more it can crush stakeholders and competitors without consequences. This is true of monopolies—when a producer has exclusive control over the supply of a product or service—but it really extends to any firm with concentrated market power.

The menu of "crushing" options at their disposal is quite diverse. Generally though, they fall in the categories of consolidation, barriers to entry, and a broader set of anticompetitive behavior. The larger that firms become, the easier they can increase their control of the market. The recent deals illustrate just how frequently corporations with a lot of market power consolidate with their competitors. After the purchase is complete, firms can integrate the new acquisition into their brand. Sometimes, they simply maintain the purchase as a separate subsidiary though the consolidation gives them much less reason to vigorously compete with each other. In other cases yet, the firm might shut down the new purchase forever.

Consolidation can double as a barrier to entry when the absorbed company is a startup that could have or supported or even become another competitor. But there are other types of barriers. Patents give the holder an exclusive and enforceable right to supply a product for many years, even if this monopoly of use could hurt society at large. Then there are refusals-to-deal agreements—where firms conspire to do business with an exclusive list of companies—which more subtly cripple young businesses trying to enter a market.

Firms will even compete with their own customers if it advantages their bottom line. Amazon, for example, is an online platform that hosts vendors but doubles as a manufacturer. Amazon has been known to copycat their vendors' successful products, promote the replicas aggressively, and sell them at a much lower price than the vendor ever could (in part because the economies of scale allow Amazon to make things more cheaply). Discounting a product so deeply—sometimes at a loss!—that no competitor can match them *and* stay in business is called predatory pricing. A sibling of this practice is the more common price-fixing scheme, in which firms illegally arrange to supply the market

at an agreed-upon price.

Despite their many shapes and forms, these different anticompetitive plots have one thing in common: a commitment to strengthen the firm's hold over market, consumers, and workers. Consumers pay for this concentration of power at the checkout line. This is because firms tend to decrease production numbers after merging. Having few to no competitors gives them even less reason to lower their prices. Market power also stymies innovation and quality, as competitors are thwarted from supplying better, affordable products. Sometimes, the outcome is mere inconvenience. In others, it's the difference between life and death. Consider the case of the EpiPen, an anaphylactic drug patented through 2025. In just six years, the hedge fund that owns this drug raised its price by 500 percent, to \$600. But we know that 60 percent of all American households do not have the means to cover a \$500 emergency. This monopolist's accrual of market power means that thousands of adults and children with severe allergies probably went without this lifesaving drug.

Concentrated market power hurts workers just as much. Steinbaum explains that monopsony occurs when firm consolidations give workers fewer places to work. He explains that mergers routinely trigger layoffs and decreased production. This helps sustain a pool of involuntarily unemployed workers. Firms leverage this pool's lack of work options to offer temporary contracts, irregular hours, lower pay, inadequate benefits, and less-than-safe labor conditions. When fewer firms dominate the market, precariousness can spread to workers in their supply chain. A firm that is virtually the only buyer in the market can force businesses in its supply chain to provide goods and services at a lower cost. The supplier may compensate for the resulting higher production costs, paying its own workers less.

FIRMS ALSO RELY ON ANTICOMPETITIVE CONTRACTS to maximize their control over workers' skill and income. Non-compete agreements forbid workers from quitting for a competitor, while no-poaching agreements memorialize promises between competitors to not hire each other's workers. The firm with a tight grip around the labor market can abuse and discriminate against segments of its workforce—all too often women and people of color. To add insult to injury, powerful companies routinely gag workers from airing their grievances in court by sneaking arbitration clauses into the employment contracts. Arbitration provisions force disputes—including civil rights violations—before a private arbitrator of the firm's choice.

Law professor and podcast host Ian Samuel recently drew attention to the fact that, despite the #MeToo movement, many white-shoe law firms forced summer associates to agree to arbitrate any sexual harassment claims. The ensuing outrage caused several prominent firms to rescind the clauses, and top law schools also began requiring law firms that recruit on campus to disclose their use of arbitration clauses. This unexpected outcome was refreshing. But it was also rare. Overcoming these contract clauses remains nearly impossible. No corporation is going to change its practices when it has a financial interest in retaining them.

When capital consolidates, local communities isolated from the halls of power suffer, too. Steinbaum puts it like this: "*Market power redistributes wealth and opportunity away from disadvantaged communities, be they poor, minority, or physically isolated... In Hanover, Illinois, for example, the purchase of machine part manufacturer Invensys spelled the end of a 50-year-old factory, despite its 18 percent profit margin. The jobs were sent to Mexico, and the profits were shifted to Sun Capital in New York City... To make matters worse, weak local economies are self-reinforcing: Less economic activity means less tax revenue for schools, public transportation, and other basic needs... As geographic segregation becomes more entrenched, it has become easier and easier for firms to identify and prey on vulnerable populations.*"

But within the halls of power, concentrated market power thrives. Enormous firms throw their weight in donations and perks to extract

political favors. They secure more power for themselves through business-friendly bills, tax breaks, exemptions from regulations, building permits and approvals for expansion. Like Acting Director of the Bureau of Financial Consumer Protection and former U.S. Representative Mick Mulvaney once told a room of bank lobbyists: “We had a hierarchy in my office in Congress. If you’re a lobbyist who never gave us money, I didn’t talk to you. If you’re a lobbyist who gave us money, I might talk to you.” That’s the heart of what the market power game does: allow its winners to reap the benefits of a game rigged in their favor. (Mulvaney’s quote is useful as an explicit admission of what we all know to be true, namely that political access is on sale to the highest bidder and that we live in an oligarchy in which ordinary people’s influence on policy pales next to that of the wealthy.)

THE AUTHORS OF *RADICAL MARKETS: UPROOTING Capitalism and Democracy for a Just Society*, Eric Posner and Glen Weyl, like to split the baby. “Like those on the Right,” they write, “we think markets must be strengthened, expanded, and purified.” Like those on the Left, they believe “existing social arrangements generate unfair inequality and undermine collective action.” Where they deviate from the Right is in their belief that market fundamentalism is outdated, and from the Left, by their skepticism that sprawling government bureaucracies can save us all. I picked up *Radical Markets* shortly after reading Posner and Weyl’s op-ed arguing that “the real villain in our gilded age” is market power. Their book proposes “Radical” solutions to deconcentrate market power in five distinct areas: private land property, voting, migrant labor, concentrated industries, and digital consumer data.

But before we dive into their chapter on concentrated industries: a couple of housekeeping items. The title of this book almost feels like a slight of hand to lure the reader of leftist persuasion into thinking this will be a Chomskyesque read (e.g., me). In reality, the “Radical” in the book title does not mean what you probably think it means. Early on, Posner and Weyl define *Market Radicalism* and *Radical Markets* as “institutional arrangements that allow the fundamental principles of market allocation—free exchange disciplined by competition and open to all comers—to play out fully.” You could say that the authors advocate for the fair economy in which, as we previously discussed, competition flourishes to our collective benefit. In their view, auction mechanisms are the ultimate embodiment of the Radical market. So bidding appears in many of their proposed solutions. Posner and Weyl do not merely entertain capitalism with begrudging resolve. They actually love it all. This is why you will find approving quotes and theory from economists like Adam Smith and Milton Friedman throughout the book.

When they are at their *second* worst, they erase the left for convenience. Political context is flattened from historical events where it suits them (e.g. describing the coup in which Brazil’s corrupt right-wing removed the progressive president Dilma Rousseff as an ejection “for abusing her power”). The intervention of government is disappeared (describing the grain market as “the classic example of a perfectly competitive market,” without mentioning the *billions of dollars* that the federal government provides in subsidies to support grain). And the left’s push for egalitarian forms of governance is ignored (claiming that “capitalism is blamed for increased inequality and slowing growth, yet no alternative has presented itself”).

At their *absolute* worst, their libertarian streak leads them to propose a revamped indentured servitude program in which people would import personal servants from developing countries and pay them less than minimum wage. (Libertarians delight in offering new justifications for old forms of exploitation.) Their idea is terrible, as many other writers have noted, and nobody should ever consider introducing it or anything like it.

But it is also important to understand that Posner and Weyl are throw-ideas-at-the-wall type. Inevitably, *some* of their proposals are interesting and should be given serious thought. The book chapters on land monopolies and voting, for example, raise problems and suggest solutions that the left could build upon for more radical (little r) outcomes.

Their chapter on corporate market power raises interesting questions. Posner and Weyl recognize that labor market power harms workers and consumers but focus almost exclusively on the problem of institutional investors. Firms like BlackRock passively manage assets through mutual funds and pension funds. These are pools that aggregate the savings of all types of people, and invest them by either buying shares of a company (stocks) or lending money to the government (bonds). An investor is passive when it rarely ever sells these assets, based on the theory that holding onto them is more profitable in the long term than active trading. Posner and Weyl argue that we should not be fooled by their passiveness. In the shadows, these institutional investors are titans so large that together they control almost a fifth of the American stock market.

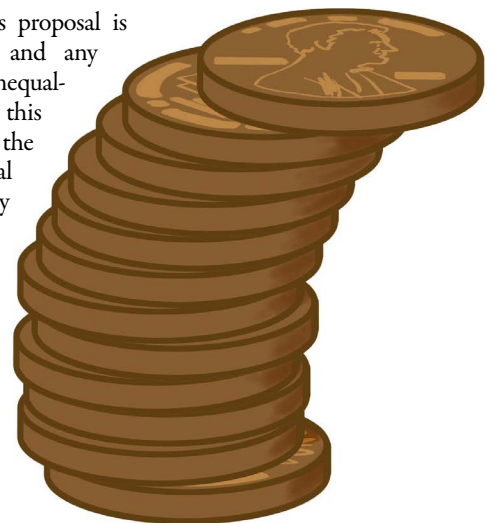
What really alarms the authors of *Radical Markets* is that a surprising number of powerful brands we think of as independent, and even as competitors, actually share the same institutional investor as their largest shareholder. Think of two major airlines or general retail stores. The research in this area shows that when this occurs—particularly between competitors in the same industry—consumer prices rise while the investment in innovation falls. Posner and Weyl believe this may not be coincidental. To guarantee profits, institutional investors may be covertly pressuring competing CEOs into not competing against each other.

Their fears may be warranted. Indeed, some institutional investors have become open about their wish to influence the companies in which they hold a large stake. Not long ago, the CEO of BlackRock told an Australian paper:

“We can’t sell the shares, which means we have to be more active than an active manager ... You have two choices: sell the shares if you don’t like it, or really force public change. So, what we have become is highly active.”

The solution that Posner and Weyl propose is two-fold. First, institutional investors should be banned from owning significant shares of firms that are competing in the same industry. This scenario would still allow them to diversify their holdings across different industries, and to own as much of one company in any industry. This proposal would make an exception for smaller investors. Institutional investors could own stakes in competing firms, but only up to one percent. Second, the authors would prohibit mergers that concentrate political power. Per their calculations, these changes “would transfer about 2% of national income from the owners of capital to the broader public,” while decreasing “the share of income captured by the top 1% by a percentage point.”

Posner’s and Weyl’s proposal is perfectly reasonable, and any dent into our gaping inequality gap is helpful at this stage. But breaking up the power of institutional investors would hardly uproot capitalism or “dismember the octopus” of concentrated markets as the book title suggests—especially considering how completely fucked our antitrust landscape is.



THE LAST GILDED AGE SPURRED THE PASSAGE OF A number of laws designed to break up the dominant trusts of the time (hence the name “antitrust”). The responsibility of preventing anticompetitive behavior in the markets is technically spread between several federal agencies. But the strongest antitrust statutes—the Sherman Act and the Clayton Act—are enforced by the antitrust divisions in the Department of Justice and Federal Trade Commission (DOJ and FTC). A third law, the Glass-Steagall Act, regulated market power in the financial sector but was repealed at the end of President Clinton’s second term. The Sherman and Clayton Acts require the government to investigate anticompetitive tactics like predatory pricing and barriers to entry. It must also review mergers and acquisitions that would consolidate market power horizontally, along with factors like the merger’s effect on consumers. In the process of approving or challenging a merger, the government can seek to break up companies at risk of becoming a trust.

The antitrust laws do not ask the government to consider the effect of corporate consolidations on workers. That’s because unions held much more sway when the Sherman and Clayton Acts were passed in the early part of last century. The drafters expected this would remain the case. On the Senate floor and in the statute, they made clear their expectation that bargaining power would complement the antitrust scheme. They made it even clearer that the laws were not to prosecute labor organizing. Even if enforcement was lax, workers would at least be cared for. In an ideal world, Big Labor’s activities might even trickle down some additional protections to consumers.

Unfortunately, the drafters grossly underestimated the incoming assault on labor from the private sector and every single branch of the government. Congress would severely weaken Big Labor with the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, which spurred states to adopt right-to-work laws. And as the lawyer Sandeep Vaheesan explains in a forthcoming law review article, what labor protections remain for workers do not extend to individual contractors. Meanwhile, the federal regulators and courts continue to pervert the antitrust laws to attack workers, while letting corporations swell into the monsters they’ve become today.

Chronicling the government’s history of enforcement and lack thereof, Vaheesan describes an important shift in the government’s approach. Though it routinely targets small fish engaged in price-fixing schemes, it has shown much less enthusiasm towards big players. When the regulators are not shutting down their investigations into sketchy practices by the likes of Monsanto and Google, they are settling out of court for weak penalties and prosecution agreements that require neither names nor admissions of guilt. When a unique occasion arose to break some of the concentrated market power in the financial industry—a byproduct of repealing Glass-Steagall—government punted again. Indeed, Congress could have leveraged its multibillion-dollar corporate relief package to force the largest financial firms to break up in order to receive public money, or risk failing. Instead, the government shrugged and concluded that some firms were simply too big to fail.

It also used to be that the DOJ assumed corporate consolidations were illegal. This is how it helped break up the Standard Oil and American Tobacco trusts. Now mergers proceed unless the *regulators* can show that they have any of the anticompetitive effects outlined in a set of self-imposed guidelines (which, coincidentally, Eric Posner helped write). These days, all firms have to do to get the government to sign off is sell a few assets and pinky-swear to not apply certain anticompetitive tactics. The government’s disinterest in an aggressive approach to antitrust is working out as well as you would expect.

When Live Nation asked for permission to buy Ticketmaster in 2010, DOJ recognized that Ticketmaster was the largest concert promoter in the industry and charged consumers high ticket fees as a result. Live Nation controlled 80 percent of the concert promotion market. Merging

these giants into Live Nation Entertainment (LVE) would concentrate a lot of market power. From day one, LVE would be a powerful brand that possessed long-term exclusive contracts with concert venues, managed major artists, and owned major music festivals along with hundreds of concert venues. The industry’s high startup costs would make it even harder for newcomers to break in. Nonetheless, the government gave its stamp of approval. All LVE had to do was “license [Ticketmaster’s] primary ticketing software to a competitor, sell off one ticketing unit, and agree to [not punish] venue owners who use [competitors].” Today, LVE continues to dominate the industry, and also faces serious allegations of anticompetitive violations.

The antitrust regulators have shown little appetite for adapting the old antitrust guard to the modern economy. In one such example, Steinbaum makes the salient point that by price-fixing what independent contractors can charge for various services, the gig economy might actually be creating cartels. On the flipside, the government has proved much braver when it comes to suppressing bargaining activity. Vaheesan explains that the FTC frequently uses its enforcement power to punish work stoppages and what it calls “collective action that did not produce offsetting consumer benefits.” The FTC does this across many professions, ranging from public defenders and doctors to truck drivers and organists, *in addition to* lobbying states and local governments interested in improving collective bargaining rights.

The courts have been worse. Vaheesan writes that in the early days of the statutes, the Supreme Court ruled that Congress could not regulate goods at the production stage. This helped trigger the first mass wave of mergers and acquisitions, which helped create giants like General Electric and DuPont. The Court also undermined the legislative exemption for labor so egregiously that Congress actually amended the Clayton Act to overrule the bad Court precedent.

Though the Supreme Court somewhat straightened up after that slap on the wrist, district court judges were hardly deterred from their mission to erode workers’ rights. Some rogue judges applied the antitrust laws to forbid secondary boycotts—enforcing their rulings with jail—while others reached the extreme conclusion that antitrust laws bar collective bargaining altogether. Just this term, the Supreme Court ruled that employers could use arbitration to prevent their employees from suing them in a class action.

IN THIS CONTEXT, BREAKING UP INSTITUTIONAL INVESTORS feels like a drop in the ocean (albeit a helpful drop). The economists and lawyers cited through this piece, and other leftists who write in this field, offer a litany of other common sense solutions that would help: ways to measure the impact of a merger on labor market power, overturning precedent and rules that allow regulators and courts to use the antitrust statutes against labor, and a return to the original purpose of the antitrust laws and the vigorous enforcement that its drafters envisioned, among other solutions.

But to uproot capitalism, as Posner and Weyl suggest, we may need to think even further outside the box. Over at the People’s Policy Project, Matt Bruenig proposes a social wealth fund that would allow the government to become an institutional investor. The difference is that the shares and proceeds would go to the public. From the Open Markets Institute, Vaheesan wants us to rethink our emphasis on competition altogether. “While the United States needs vigorous antitrust enforcement to stop and undo corporate consolidation and monopolization,” he tells me, “we don’t need a general competition promotion program. Whether it is cities and states scrambling to attract mobile capital or workers vying for ‘gigs’ on online platforms, we see the real limits of competition as an organizing principle. In many areas, we need cooperation and solidarity, not competition.”

Maybe it’s time we upend the rules of the game. ♦

SOCIALISM ON THE AIR

QUALITY LEFT BROADCASTING

from the editors of

CURRENT AFFAIRS

comes an hour of
RADIO DELIGHT



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“...And we’ll NEVER be lonely any more!”

LIFE CAN BE A DESPERATELY SOLITARY PLACE. YOU may find yourself drifting down darkened roads, wondering where everybody is and how to find them. Is something going on somewhere that nobody told you about? Is there a parade on the other side of town? Why else would everything be so empty? Even the strangers passing by do not stop to introduce themselves. Nobody comes up and hands you a balloon, nobody asks you if you'd like to come and play the washboard with them. I have been haunted for years by a suicide note I once read about, that said something like “I am on my way to the bridge now. If one person smiles at me on my way there, I will turn around.” They did not turn around.

I don't know what to do about the quiet desperation of other human beings. I want to at least be able to reassure them. But in a world where so many things are so fundamentally broken, it's very difficult to offer any reassurance that isn't B.S. *It will all be all right.* Will it? Possibly it won't. Then what? What I really wish, what I daydream about, is for there to be a morning where every sad, lonely person wakes up to hear a noise outside their window. And blearily rousing themselves, they go to the window, and pull aside the curtains. Dazzled by the light, they can't quite tell what's on the lawn at first. But, rubbing their eyes, they realize that it's... everybody. Everybody has come by to say hello. They have brought donuts. One of them *is* a donut. They have instruments, but they're playing something pleasant, nothing too jarring while you're still sleepy. They've just stopped by to say hello. Don't worry if you're not dressed, they don't care, half of them aren't either. They're visiting you to tell you that, well, not that it's *okay*, but that whatever happens, they all care about you and want you to be okay, and if you need them, they'll be around. If you want them to go, they'll go. If you want them to stay, they'll stay.

I realize that not everybody would be pleased if an enormous crowd

of critters showed up outside their front window, donuts or no donuts. Some people avoid social functions for a reason, they certainly don't want a spontaneous party in their honor. But I do wish there was *something* there for All The Lonely People, some way of making sure that whether they wanted to go outside or not, they would at least know that there was love out there for them specifically.

This is a fantasy, of course. Dinosaurs are too extinct to go around cheering up depressed people. But one reason I write is out of an attempt to send, as best I can, the message from the creatures outside. *It may not be all right, but you'll never walk alone.* It needs to be transmitted over and over through space, in case anybody out there needs to hear it.

Here is one thing I have done in the past to deal with depression. I am not sure whether it made any difference, or whether it was the pills. (It was probably the pills.) And it sounds very stupid. But I used to imagine myself as...a company, with a board of directors. And my board of directors was all the people, living and dead, whom I admired. My board had some extraordinary people on it. Among them: Eugene Debs, Malcolm X, Fats Domino, Emma Goldman, Frederick Douglass, Noam Chomsky, Cab Calloway, Nawal El Saadawi. And if I was feeling low, I would mentally call a meeting of the board, all these extraordinary people, and I'd ask them what they thought I should do, what they would have done, etc., and all these brilliant historical figures would give me their wisdom and it would help restore my spirits.

As I say, I may have been tricking myself with this technique. But I have always found it comforting to think about other people, their struggles, their insights. They are there outside the window, bearing signs that say Keep Going. They have been through it all, and come out the other side. And with all of them, and all of us, you'll never be alone anymore.

—Nathan J. Robinson

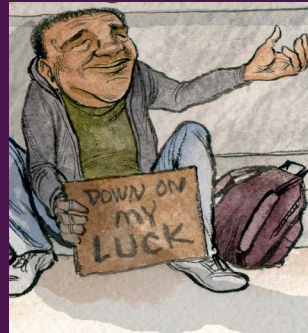
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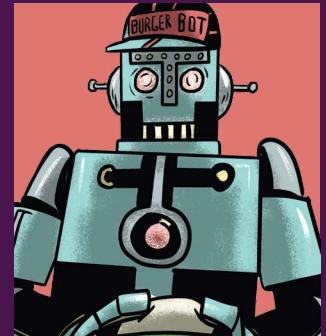
Hokyoung Kim



Lizzy Price



C.M. Duffy



Mike Freiheit



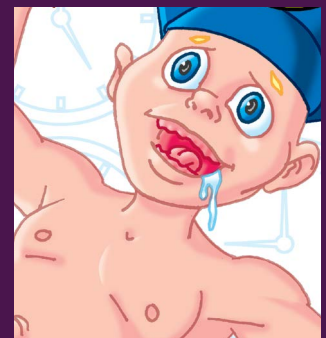
Maxwell Singletary



Nick Sirotich



Lizzy Price



Mort Todd



Chris Matthews



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Vanessa A. Bee



Hokyoung Kim



Tyler Rubinfeld



Pranas Naujokaitis



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