

Our Latest Issue... By Far

CURRENT AFFAIRS

\$10.95

VOL. 3, ISSUE 6

NOV./DEC. 2018



AYN RAND
THE WORST?
YES.

STARBUCKS
CAN IT
BE LOVED?

CHERNOBYL
A TOUR
OF ITS DELIGHTS



TRIFLING AFFAIRS

TRIFLE WILL NOT ACTUALLY BE SERVED EXCEPT UPON REQUEST



SEASON'S GREETINGS TO:
The homeless + Migrants + The sad +
The children of Yemen + AOC +
Muntadhar al-Zaidi + You



A BIG LUMP OF COAL FOR:
David Brooks + Rod Dreher + Trump +
Payday lenders + Stephen Miller +
Peggy Noonan + Bosses + The "IDW"



CONTEST

Every Current Affairs reader is eligible to take part in our new contest: "WHAT'S IN THAT ISSUE?" The challenge is simple: send us a note telling us which articles will be in the next print edition of Current Affairs. To keep it easy, you do not have to name the author or the title. You just have to list the subject. If you get 10/10, you will receive a lifetime subscription to Current Affairs. Otherwise, the individual who correctly guesses the most articles will win. Email editor@currentaffairs.org with your notions.

LIFE COULD BE SUCH FUN

We Are Not Amused

So you say you are not amused. Well, do you have the Current Affairs "Big Book of Amusements" in your possession? You do not?? Good gravy! It's no wonder, then. We have pinpointed the source of your discontent. You are hereby fully diagnosed. And Dr. Current Affairs has precisely the prescription for your malady.

The Current Affairs "Big Book of Amusements" is our latest printed tome (informally known as a "book"). It contains a seemingly endless pile of comics, quizzes, puzzles, activities and "et cetera." It is colorful, elaborate, and guaranteed to take up hours of your time. As they say, life is short, why not fritter it away on nonsense? The BBoFA (or BoFA or BOFA) is a weapon to be carried around in your back pocket, ready to be deployed against anybody who says that those on the Political Left are lacking in humor or vivacity. Why, we've got vivacity up the snout! Humor pouring from every orifice! Give 'em a BOFA and watch them reel in surprise.

The Current Affairs "Big Book of Amusements" is edited by Lyta Gold and Nathan J. Robinson. It is a bit expensive, but that is because we didn't want to give you the usual Cheap Piece Of Crap. This is a glorious specimen, fit to be placed under glass and displayed in the Bookatorium (inform. "library"). Give it to an unsuspecting grandparent! Place it on the boss' nightstand! Anyone who buys enough copies to exhaust the global paper supply will be given a free subscription to Current Affairs. Your weekend plans are set: you're about to be amused, possibly to death.*

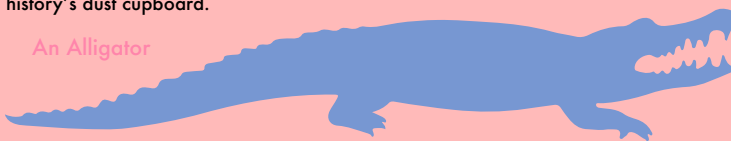
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*If you do, please ignore this section and move on to the rest of the magazine. You are already amused.

FUN FACT OF THE MONTH

Here in New Orleans, for the first 50 years or so of the city's existence, alligator infestations in today's French Quarter were a persistent problem. Our beloved Crescent City was then still a bit of a soupy swamp, and the occasional crocodilian would wander out of the bayou and into the streets. It was necessary to shoo the creatures away in order to find peace. Imagine such a thing! Say what you want about Trump's America, the problem of waking up to find a giant alligator in your living room is—for now—a phenomenon banished to history's dust cupboard.

An Alligator



AT LEAST WE KNOW WHERE THEY STAND

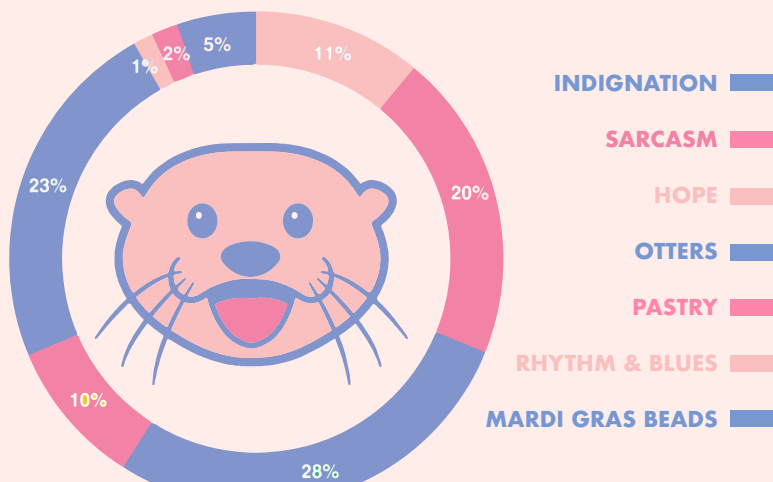
"When you hear people condemning the Spanish conquest for what it did to the native inhabitants, think of the fact that within a decade of the Spanish conquest, human sacrifice ended. That is something to be grateful for, and indeed proud of." Rod Dreher, *The American Conservative*

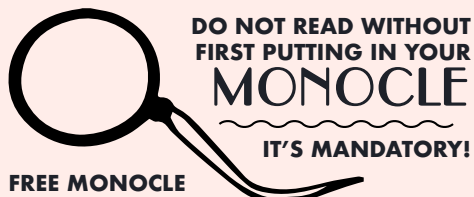
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The "23andCA" Test

We couldn't help it, we were curious—so many people have gotten their genetic profiles done through "23andMe," and it got us wondering: what is Current Affairs made of? Phenotypically, the answer may be obvious: solid political analysis, amusing word puzzles, advertisements for rare gold coins. But what of the genotype? Of what stuff is it comprised? How are its aminos arranged? What pleasant sequence do its nucleotides describe? We submitted the magazine for analysis by Stanford University experts, who promised to give us politically useful proof of our origins. The results surprised us, we confess! Here, for the sake of transparency, is the full breakdown:





UPCOMING
INVESTIGATIVE
REPORT
BOSTON
WHY DO PEOPLE
LIVE IN IT?

HOW ABOUT A
**NICE
CUP OF
TEA?**



QUESTIONS FOR READERS

As a reader of *Current Affairs*, you are wise, attractive, and cool. Your opinions are also highly valued. So we want to know: what sort of things do you think the world will contain in 200 years, if we manage to sort all this out? What do you feel is the most exciting intellectual discovery we can soon hope to make? What do you think the aliens look like? How should society be organized? Email editor@currentaffairs.org

How Wild Animals CEASED TO MAKE SENSE

All wild animals are dissidents. When a developer builds a new gated community, they purge it of wildlife, ensuring that every last creature or plant is harmless to residents and placed intentionally. Animals, if they are not pets or food, are economically valueless and thus must be destroyed. They do not make sense under neoliberal logic. There is no room for wilderness, because wilderness has no economic purpose and therefore makes no sense. Thus: every alligator that wanders into a neighborhood pool, every raccoon that runs off with your picnic, every mosquito that feasts on your juices: they are all class warriors, true revolutionaries, fighting the bourgeois order. Respect their struggle.

A VERY CURRENT AFFAIRS MARDI GRAS

You are, of course, coming to New Orleans for Mardi Gras, are you not? Of course you are. Or, if you are not, you are having a small Mardi Gras of your own in Kenosha or Gary or wherever you may be. But if you do happen to find yourself in our city during Carnival Season, stop by CAHQ and say hi! The Subscribers' Ball is Feb. 23rd.



O U R M A S C O T S

OFFICIAL CANDY



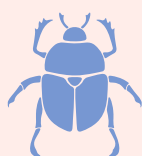
HARIBO
VULCANOS

OFFICIAL FLOWER



FORGETMENOTS

OFFICIAL INSECT



THE
JUNEBUG

OFFICIAL MOTORCAR



THE
STUDEBAKER

OFFICIAL PANDA

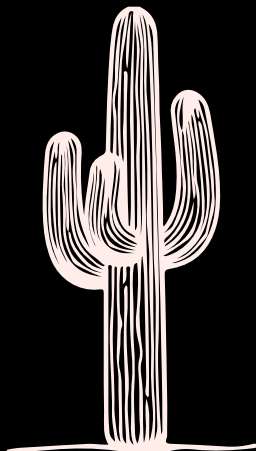


THIS ONE

PART MIKHAIL BAKUNIN, PART MR. ROGERS

We Are EXPANDING

Enterprises, we are told, either "grow or die." As *Current Affairs* has a firm editorial stance against death, we are left with but one option: we must grow. Grow wider than the broadest canyon, taller than a great saguaro. What began as a little magazine, not much more than a pamphlet really, and distributed only in dentists' offices, is becoming a many-tentacled Media Empire the likes of which has not been seen for at least some time. There is now, as you must surely know, a *Current Affairs* podcast. There are *Current Affairs* books. You can purchase a *Current Affairs* "Socialism Is Cool" poster in our online store, or come to the first *Current Affairs* "live show" on January 26th in Washington, D.C.'s "Rock 'n' Roll Hotel" (which is not, alas, a hotel). Soon, there will undoubtedly be a *Current Affairs* news network, *Current Affairs* hand towels, a



line of customized *Current Affairs* PEZ dispensers in the shape of the editor's head, and a *Current Affairs* brand of sparkling water (with a twist of bergamot). This is just the beginning.

Here at *Current Affairs* World

Headquarters, signs of our growing dominance abound. One month ago, we took up only one room in the building. Now we take up two rooms, and have added a plastic palm tree. The sure signs of a media organization on the rise. *The Economist* shall tremble before us.

All of us here are very proud of our office expansion, and our palm tree. At other publications, newsrooms are closing, videos are being pivoted to. Not so at CAHQ. We are not just not diminishing. We are becoming slightly larger with every passing day! Subscriptions are up (remember to renew), podcasts are being Patronized, and newsletters are being distributed into more and more inboxes across the globe. We thank you, the reader of magazines, for making this possible. May you be blessed by whichever deities you happen to believe in today.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[7:32 AM] SUBJECT: hey cumstain

Just got around to hate-listening to your conversation with Seder regarding kavanaugh.

Late to the party - amirite?

anyhoo - I used to be curious about how such evil motherfucount as yourselves came to be.

I was so naive.

I'm pretty sure that you know you're a perversion, even amidst your mangled set.

But in case you have an even slightly positive opinion of yourself - you're a colonic polyp.

I am hopeful that you never

Ever

Ever

Ever

Have an impact on the fate of my country.

But on the off chance you do -

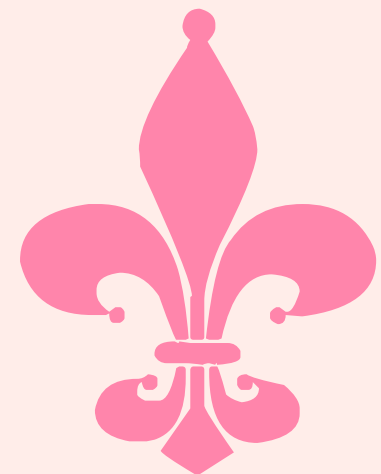
I'm going to puree every faggy outfit in your collection and force feed them to you.

Buy a fucking plane ticket, cunt.

JJ McKeever

Dear Mr. McKeever,
Thank you for your thoughtful note. Have you considered a career as free-verse poet?

WHEN YOU SEE THIS SYMBOL :



IT MEANS YOU ARE LOVED

TABLE OF

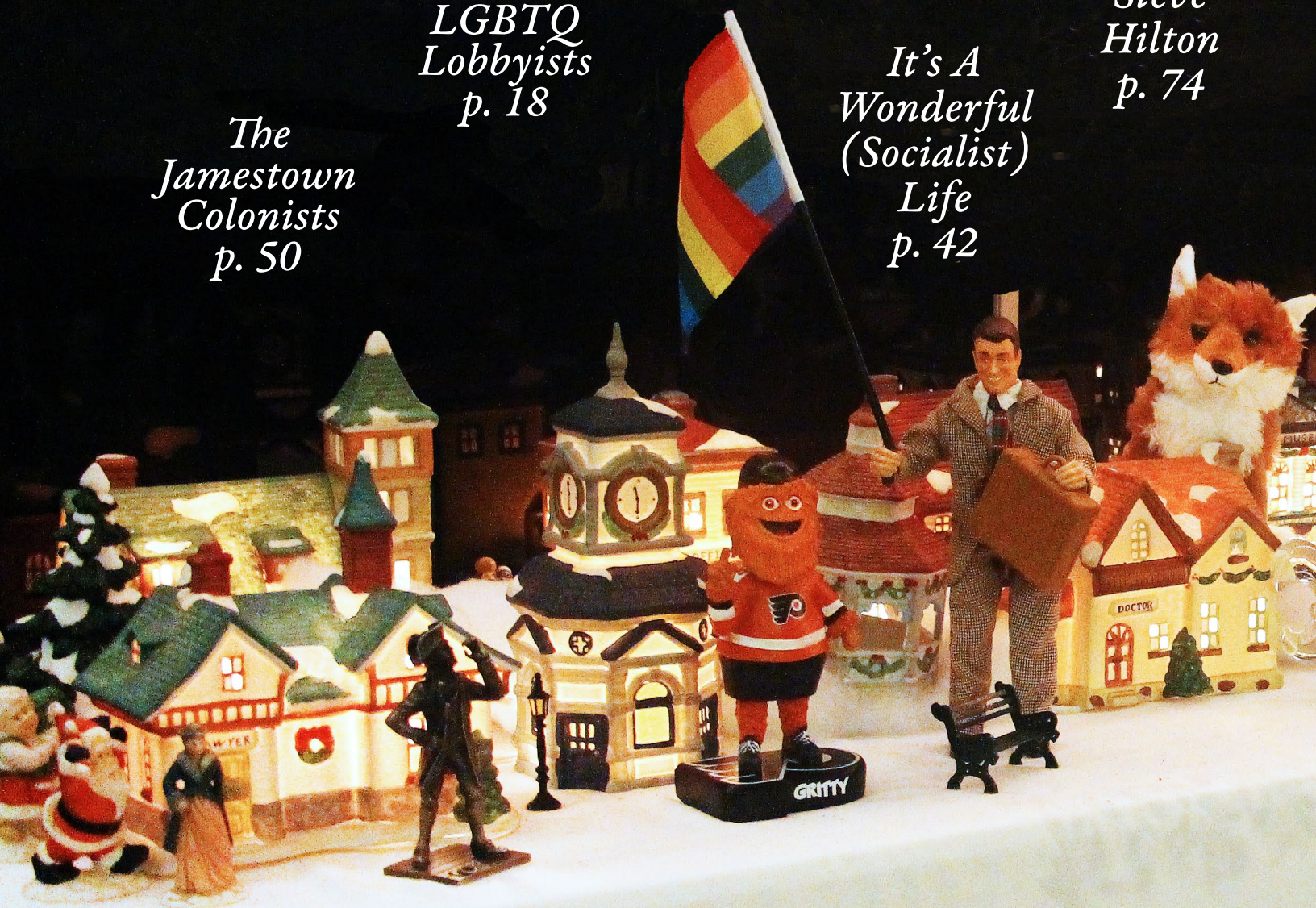
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SHRUG AWAY!

ON AYN RAND'S AMUSINGLY OVERINFLATED SENSE OF SELF-IMPORTANCE

by Nathan J. Robinson

I AM FIRMLY OF THE BELIEF THAT YOU OUGHT TO LISTEN to what people have to say before you dismiss them. Unless we have tried to understand a thing, we will not actually know what we are talking about when we criticize it. So even though I am a leftist, I read a lot of conservative books. I don't do this because I enjoy it. I find it painful, because I find many of the opinions in these books horrifying. But I think it's important not just to "know your enemy," but to check whether your enemy *is* actually your enemy. If all of my opinions come from what I read about someone, and not what they have actually said, my assessment of them might be completely off.

Until recently, I had not read anything much by Ayn Rand beyond a few excerpts and quotations, and a number of articles about her (including Corey Robin's excellent chapter in *The Reactionary Mind*). I was not curious to dive further into her work. What more do you need to know about a person who said things like:

- *"I believe, with good reason, the most unsympathetic Hollywood portrayal of Indians and what they did to the white man. They had no right to a country merely because they were born here and then acted like savages. The white man did not conquer this country..."*
- *"The Arabs are one of the least developed cultures... Their culture is primitive, and they resent Israel because it's the sole beachhead of modern science and civilization on their continent. When you have civilized men fighting savages, you support the civilized men, no matter who they are."*

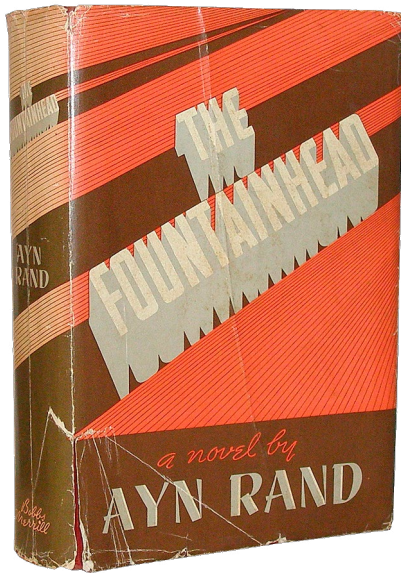
But an acquaintance challenged me on my dismissiveness: *How can you write off someone who is both deeply influential and whose books you have never read?* Ayn Rand is routinely voted one of the greatest writers of the ages by the public. She has inspired everyone from Paul Ryan and Clarence Thomas to Hunter S. Thompson and Farah Fawcett. Both benignly influential people (Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales) and sinister influential people (Whole Foods founder John Mackey) have found Rand's work illuminating.

Now, I do think Rand's popularity is often overestimated, in part

because of the impressive efforts of the Ayn Rand Institute in distributing free copies of her books and the determination of her followers to establish her as a world-historic philosopher. In fact, Rand's magnum opus, *Atlas Shrugged*, had sold only 6 or 7 million copies as of 2011, which commenters noted is about half as many as *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and 33 million behind *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. On Wikipedia's list of best-selling books, Rand appears nowhere. Total sales lag well behind *The Gospel According to Peanuts*, *The Poky Little Puppy*, and the book version of *Jaws*. Rand is an author more known than read. But thanks to the disproportionate influence of her followers (Alan Greenspan went from a devoted member of Rand's inner circle to a position as the most powerful chairman in the history of the Federal Reserve), and her (arguably) strong role in building the radical free-market ideology of today's Republican Party, Rand is worth considering.

Today, the ideas in Rand's books seem like standard conservative talking points, almost too banal to be worth considering. In fact, she escalated pro-market rhetoric to almost ludicrous melodramatic extremes. In her essay "America's Most Persecuted Minority: Big Business," Rand calls antitrust laws "legalized lynching," and says that "every ugly, brutal aspect of injustice toward racial or religious minorities is being practiced toward businessmen." Bear in mind that this was written in the mid-60s, when black people were being attacked by police dogs for attempting to eat lunch. We can see, of course, why Rand's books were especially popular among small business owners and teenagers, many of whom wrote her adoring letters about the intellectual vistas her books had opened up for them. *You are the real victim and everyone else is persecuting you* is the exact sort of message that a lonely bookish boy or a boss dealing with labor unrest is inclined to listen to.

The reasoning in the essay is atrocious. In her effort to prove that businessmen were being "legally lynched" (by the way, since lynching is an illegal killing, "legalized lynching" is just called "the death penalty"), Rand does not actually talk about the injustices faced by racial minorities in the United States. Like many defenders of the privileged, she speaks in abstractions in order to equate in theory two things that



are clearly not equal in practice. (See, for example, use of a phrase like “violence on both sides” to equate “premeditated murder” and “property damage.”) Have a look at this silliness:

“If a small group of men were always regarded as guilty, in any class with any other group, regardless of the issues or circumstances involved, would you call it persecution? ... If this group had to live under a silent reign of terror, under special laws, from which all other people

were immune... would you call that persecution? ... If your answer is ‘yes,’ then ask yourself what monstrous injustice you are condoning, supporting, or perpetrating. That group is the American businessman.”

When people ask rhetorical questions to which they assume the answer is obvious, it’s always worth considering whether the answer is, in fact, obvious. The first question: “If a small group of men was always seen as guilty, would that be persecution?” Well, it would depend on what the group *was*. If the group was “guilty people,” then no. If the group was “people who drown rabbits for pleasure,” then no. Or consider “special laws.” Well, it depends on what the “special laws” were. Rand wants to call to mind the Nuremberg Laws, when she’s actually talking about laws like taxing income over a certain amount. She does not consider one critical difference: People choose to be wealthy! If laws apply to you because of things you *do*, things like “obtaining a large pile of money through selling dubious mortgage-backed securities,” then the fact that they only apply to *you* and *people like you* is not evidence of persecution. The reason the laws apply to you and not me is that you’re the one who did the thing! “Businessman” is not an innate identity, it’s a description of a set of actions.

Rand’s followers believed her a great philosopher, but most of the stuff in her nonfiction essays is about at the level of FOX News talking points, for example “*If workers struggle for higher wages, this is hailed as ‘social gains’; if businessmen struggle for higher profits, this is damned as ‘selfish greed.’*” She sees this as the initiative-destroying, parasitical Left punishing success. But perhaps the reason that businessmen’s struggle for gains are treated differently than workers’ struggles for gains is because businessmen already have large piles of money and workers don’t have nearly as much! You can call both a “struggle for gain,” which it is, but in one case the desired gain is “basic subsistence” and in the other it is “even more wealth than you already have.”

Most professional philosophers have laughed at Rand’s theory of Objectivism, because it claims to produce a rational, objective theory of virtue yet is riddled with fallacies, ill-specified terms, and non-sequiturs. This is the way Rand talks:

Man—every man—is an end in himself, not a means to the ends of others; he must live for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself; he must work for his rational self-interest, with the achievement of his own happiness as the highest moral purpose of his life.

Rand says that when she talks about “selfishness” (as in her book *The Virtue of Selfishness*) this is what she means, and that she is not giving a license for “man to do as he pleases.” She says she is simply rejecting the idea that “any action taken for the benefit of others is good and any action taken for one’s own benefit is evil” because she believes “the doctrine that concern with one’s own interests is evil means man’s desire to live is evil.” She does not, she says, mean by “selfishness” what people think she means, but “if it is true that what I mean by ‘selfishness’ is not what is meant conventionally, then *this* is one of the worst indictments of altruism: Altruism permits no concept of a self-respecting, self-supporting man.” What happens is that Rand says “By selfishness I just mean self-respect,” but then whenever she actually defines what this means in practice, it ends up sounding like... just plain selfishness. She doesn’t seem to care about other people’s suffering, and doesn’t have a problem with many of the acts (such as paying your workers too little for them to afford a decent living, even as you yourself live in luxury) that seem “selfish” under the conventional meaning of the word.

Philosophers have dismissed Rand’s ideas because they don’t answer difficult questions. Here is how she sums it up:

“My philosophy, in essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest ability, and reason as his only absolute.”

But there is more assertion than argument. The purposes of man are announced, not deduced. Objectivism, like many religions, does not contemplate other possibilities and has little room for nuance. By contrast with religions, though, it is a creed built on something Rand calls “Reason” bearing little relationship to the process of self-scrutiny and dialogue that typically characterizes reasonable people. At a certain point, Rand stopped even engaging with people who disagreed with her work, considering them too foolish to be worth bothering with.

Perhaps that’s because the fundamental chain of reasoning in her work simply doesn’t hold up under scrutiny. As it has been summarized, the core Rand argument is that:

(i) one’s own life is logically the ultimate value because it makes all other values possible; that (ii) it is therefore irrational for a valuing being not to defend and further this life above all other values; and that (iii) this entails strong conclusions about the rightness—actually, the moral necessity—of living selfishly.

But you can’t get from (i) to (ii) or from (ii) to (iii), and (i) doesn’t make sense either. My life may make it possible for me to hold other values, but why should I not sacrifice my life to save my child? I am not the only one who holds values, for instance. Are people who save their children’s lives at the expense of their own acting immorally? How does life as the precondition for morality make it necessary not just to follow one’s own interests, but to have those interests *not* be interests in the welfare of others? None of it works, and all of it—if accepted—will turn you into the sort of person that nobody else wants to be around, which is exactly what Ayn Rand turned into. In the introduction to *The Fountainhead*, Rand announces that her intention is to depict, in her protagonist, her “ideal man,” to portray what rational selfishness actually looks like in practice. The resulting “hero,” Howard Roark, is a cold, charmless loner who cannot take criticism and eventually rapes a woman. It’s remarkable that in writing the Perfect Hero, Rand ended up writing the Perfect Asshole, and that it should be so obvious to anyone who doesn’t share Rand’s elitist misanthropy.

Rand fascinates me somewhat, though, for several reasons. First, she occupies an unusual place in the conservative intellectual canon. Her atheism and market fundamentalism put off more traditionalist conservatives like William F. Buckley, while her rigid moralism and idiosyncratic beliefs about Objective moral virtue separated her from libertarians. She made no friends through her attacks on fellow free market thinkers like Friedrich Hayek, whom she described as “pure poison” and “our most pernicious enemy” because he believed it was fair for the government to support some modest social welfare programs.

Reading Jennifer Burns’ excellent biography *Goddess of the Market*, one is struck by how lonely, even sad, Rand’s life was. At first, her certainty in her own rightness led her to relish intellectual debate. Eventually, however, it led her to retreat into a private bubble. She built a small cult around herself, tolerating absolutely no dissent among her followers. This made sense: After all, if her views were all the product of objective rationality, disagreement was illogical. She’d probably say something about how the negation of reason was the negation of life, or whatever, as she explained why it was illegitimate to disagree with her about anything.

Goddess of the Market makes Rand seem pitiable, especially later in life. Her long affair with a young acolyte, Nathaniel Branden, ended in vicious acrimony when he lost sexual interest in her. Her husband, Frank O’Connor, was devoted but somewhat of an ineffectual daydreamer, exactly the opposite of the male heroes from her books. She constantly tried to portray her life as consistent with her philosophy (“I have always lived my life by the philosophy presented in my books—and it has worked for me”), even when it was clearly shambolic. (Editions of *The Ayn Rand Newsletter* were even later than copies of *Current Affairs*, a summer 1973 issue having finally come out in spring 1974.)

THEN THERE IS *ATLAS SHRUGGED*, THE GRAND summation of Rand’s philosophy, the 1200 page 1957 novel that offers Rand’s answer to the question “What if all the creative minds of the world went on strike?” It was made into a three-part film series from 2011 to 2014, which was poorly reviewed and infamously lost more money than it cost to make. (The free market spoke, and decided *Atlas Shrugged* sucked.) I find the premise of *Atlas Shrugged* to be somewhat funny, and an excellent encapsulation of everything delusionally erroneous about the “individualistic” celebration of entrepreneurs. Rand imagines a dystopian world in which the government has hampered business with excessive regulation, leading to economic ruin and misery. Businessmen, tired of being pushed around and having their innovations stifled by ungrateful moochers, retreat to a secret valley where they go on strike, refusing to continue their labors under such oppressive conditions. The title, *Atlas Shrugged*, compares the businessmen with Atlas, who is depicted carrying the celestial sphere on his shoulders. What if Atlas were simply to shrug and wander off, refusing to continue serving humanity? *What then?*

The reason I can’t help but laugh at this is that, well, if there *was* an Atlas, and he *did* stand “holding up the heavens,” and he did shrug and leave, what would happen is... precisely nothing. Because the world isn’t “held up” by Atlas, but by the operation of the laws of physics. It

perfectly capture the grandiose delusion of the American businessman: He believes himself to be far more important than he actually is. If all the bosses went on strike, the workers would be absolutely thrilled. They’d have self-managed enterprises! They would democratically control capital, instead of having to work for someone else merely because he happened to be rich! It would be a day of triumph! It’s goddamn hilarious that Ayn Rand thinks everyone would be worse off if bosses went away. Alright, Ayn: let’s try it for a day! They never do try it, because most capitalists are ultimately useless, and they depend on books like *Atlas Shrugged* to trick people into believing otherwise. Even the “innovators,” the ones who make money from actually coming up with things rather than simply because they have money, are less valuable than they assume. If Mark Zuckerberg fell off the earth tomorrow, we’d all be fine. If Mark Zuckerberg had never existed at all, we’d... also be fine, and probably better off.

Rand’s view of the world is that it is divided into producers and parasites. She is quite clear:

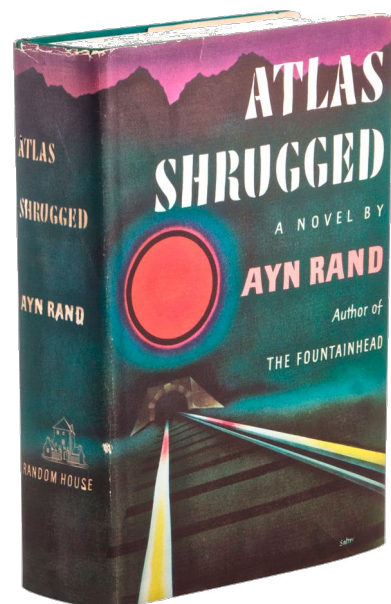
“So you think that money is the root of all evil? ... Have you ever asked what is the root of money? Money is a tool of exchange, which can’t exist unless there are goods produced and men able to produce them. ... Money is not the tool of the moochers, who claim your product by tears, or the looters who take it from you by force. Money is made possible only by the men who produce.”

Amusingly, this is an almost complete inversion of the Left’s basic analysis, which similarly holds that the world is divided into makers and takers, but thinks the makers are, well, the people who actually make the stuff and the takers are the people whose contribution is their “capital” rather than their labor. For the Left, it’s absolutely the case that those who “produce” are the foundation of wealthy, but the laboring masses are the producers! (However, we reject the idea that your labor is the sole foundation of your value since there are plenty of people who have value beyond their capacity to toil. All discussion of work as the core of virtue is demeaning to people who are physically disabled from working.)

Rand did not subscribe to the belief that the people who picked her fruit and built her car were the ones she should be thanking for the world’s bounties. She had contempt for the masses. In fact, in one of her early novels she went even further—in a passage that had such genocidal overtones that she eventually removed it, Rand had a character say:

“Deny the best its right to the top—and you have no best yet. What are your masses but mud to be ground underfoot, fuel to be burned for those who deserve it? What is the people but millions of puny, shrivelled, helpless souls that have no thoughts of their own, no dreams of their own, no will of their own, who eat and sleep and chew helplessly the words others put into their mildewed brains?”

CONTINUED ON PAGE 72



DEMS 2020:



SHERROD BROWN

PRO

- Long record as one of the most pro-labor Senators
- Scores high on "electability" indexes
- Has not done anything terribly objectionable
- Is from Ohio, a useful state to win

CON

- Nobody has heard of Sherrod Brown
- Democrats can't lose his Senate seat
- Weird unclear spousal abuse allegation from the '80s

ROBERT O'ROURKE

PRO

- Has very presidential hair
- Can skateboard, appealing to voters under 18
- Nearly won a Senate seat in Texas, which is impressive
- Has Latinx nickname, which could make people think he is interesting

CON

- Violated pledge not to take money from oil executives
- Declines to even identify as "progressive," a very low bar
- Does not appear to have actual policies

ELIZABETH WARREN

PRO

- Literally designed the best agency in the federal government, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau
- Record of fighting Wall Street and sticking up for poor families
- Really likable

CON

- Was once a Republican, which is icky
- Says she is a "capitalist to her bones," which why, Liz, why??
- The whole Native American thing

ERIC HOLDER

PRO

- In 1969, occupied the Columbia ROTC building and renamed it after Malcolm X, which is awesome
- Moustachioed presidents overdue for return
- His DOJ released some excellent reports on police misconduct

CON

- Declined to prosecute Wall Street executives despite overwhelming evidence of wrongdoing
- Works for evil law firm
- His DOJ didn't actually do much about police misconduct

HILLARY CLINTON

PRO

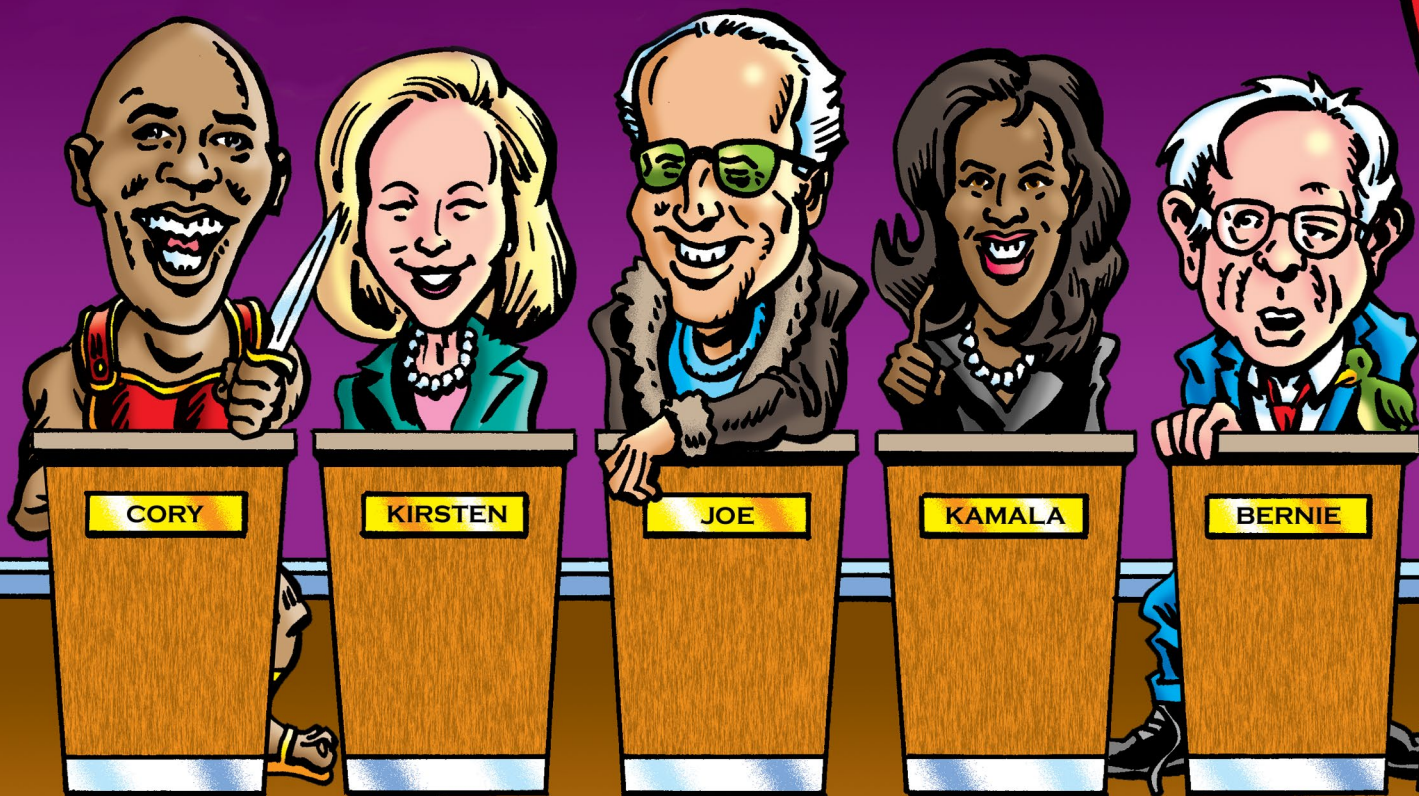
- Experienced at running against Donald Trump
- Overdue for her turn
- Widespread name recognition
- Large numbers of never-used yard signs left over in Michigan
- Would probably go to Wisconsin this time

- Probably no more scandals left to leak
- Won the popular vote

CON

- Would be the worst idea in the long history of bad Democratic ideas

PRO & CON



CORY BOOKER

PRO

- Once saved a freezing dog on a cold winter's night
- Once saved a woman from a burning house
- Impassioned speaker
- Currently has some good positions

CON

- Criticized Barack Obama for being too harsh on Wall Street
- Has taken a lot of corporate money
- Being mayor of Newark only impressive to people who have never seen Newark

KIRSTEN GILLIBRAND

PRO

- Has recently been out front in endorsing a lot of things important to progressives
- A leader in the fight against sexual harassment and assault
- Was first to demand Al Franken's resignation

CON

- Spent the first part of her career as a Big Tobacco lawyer, which is evil
- Used to be pretty anti-immigrant
- Currently courting Wall Street executives

JOE BIDEN

PRO

- Affable "Uncle Joe" persona might play well in the heartland or something?
- Name is associated with Obama, a man people like

CON

- Lets whatever pops into his head come out of his mouth
- Violates the personal space of women and girls; long overdue for a MeToo moment
- Has said he has "no empathy" for millennials in debt
- Has an atrocious record on a long list of things

KAMALA HARRIS

PRO

- Highly accomplished and knows exactly what she's doing
- Lots of experience as a prosecutor
- Multi-ethnic background shows a better, more inclusive America

CON

- Lots of experience as a prosecutor
- Allowed a LOT of prosecutorial misconduct to happen on her watch and even defended it
- Principles somewhat unclear

BERNARD SANDERS

PRO

- Most popular politician in the country
- Signature policy proposals have gone from fringe to mainstream
- Giant coalition of experienced organizers
- Would have won in 2016
- Eight years of Larry David on SNL

CON

- Several years older than Reagan was, and Reagan was quite old
- Socialism still "divisive"
- Crotchety as hell



Seeking Utopia in Louisiana

by ELLE HARDY

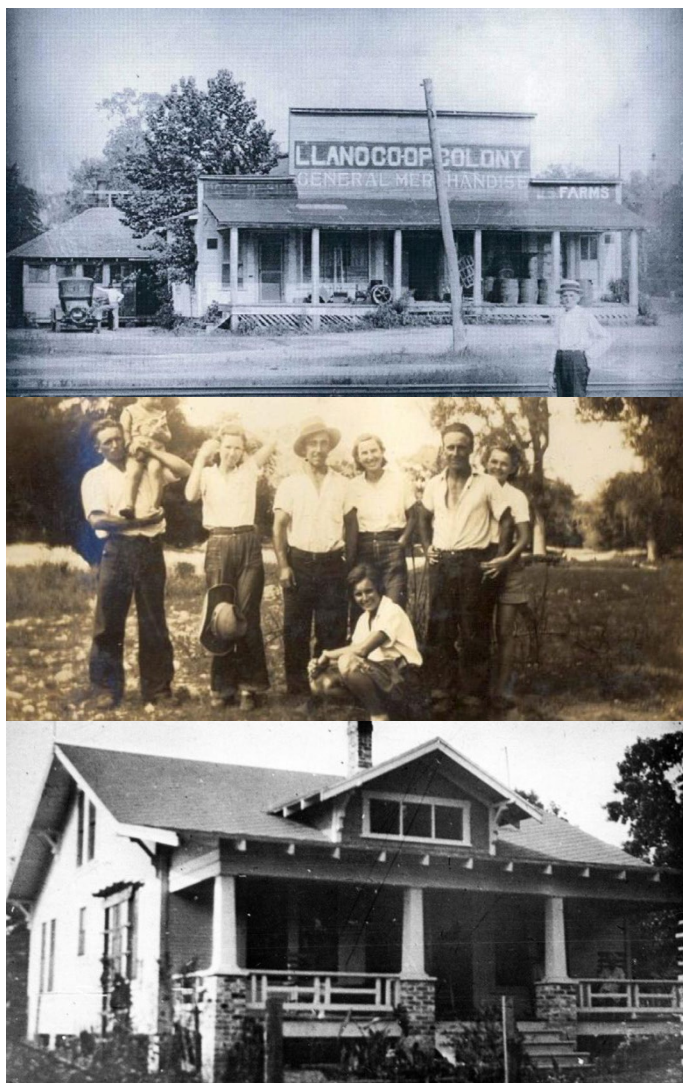
A SOCIALIST PROJECT WASN'T SUPPOSED TO end like this, but no forces of history could have conceived it starting like this, either: a newspaper office bombing, a vice presidential candidate, and the wilds of Louisiana coming together to produce America's longest-lived, non-religious utopian experiment. Three decades after one man's dream saw some 10,000 people create a collectivist reality, what had held it together eventually brought it all undone. But was the settlement of New Llano really a failure?

It began with *Looking Backward*, Edward Bellamy's 1887 science fiction novel. The utopian tale was the third largest best seller of its time—behind *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Ben-Hur*—and had a profound effect on socialists and intellectuals. “This mystery of use without consumption, of warmth without combustion, seems like magic,” says the novel's hero Julian West, “but was merely an ingenious application of the art now happily lost but carried to great perfection by your ancestors, of shifting the burden of one's support on the shoulders of others.”

West falls asleep under hypnosis in 1887, and wakes up 113 years later in the year 2000. He finds a guide, Dr. Leete, who takes him on a tour of the socialist paradise that is the United States. *Looking Backward* inspired at least 165 “Bellamy” or “Nationalist” clubs across the country, where enthusiasts would discuss the book and how they could bring its ideas of nationalizing the economy to life. One enthusiastic patron of these clubs—which had largely disappeared by 1896—was Job Harriman.

Idealistic, energetic, and charismatic, Harriman was a high-profile lawyer and perpetual political candidate. He was Eugene V. Debs' running mate on the Socialist Party ticket for the presidency in 1900, and also ran three times for Los Angeles mayor in his own right. He looked likely to win in 1911, before the men accused of bombing the *Los Angeles Times* building—who he had supported and represented along with Clarence Darrow—pleaded guilty days before the election.

Squarely in the sights of bombastic, staunchly anti-union *LA Times* owner Harrison Gray Otis, Harriman grew disillusioned with politics and public life. But he was still a true believer, and began looking for alternative ways to work towards the future



ABOVE: The colony store; a group of New Llano colonists; a house in the colony. Photos courtesy of the Museum of the New Llano Colony.

that Bellamy had imagined. His electoral defeats confirmed to him that “the movement must have an economic foundation,” and he began outlining a cooperative with a higher standard of living than the average man’s. “If this could be done we could use this community as an example by which other communities could be built.”

Harriman convinced a group of socialist activists in Los Angeles to join his project, and set out to find a suitable site for their community. He discovered a failing company which had tried to build an aquifer and attract residents to an area of land in California’s Antelope Valley, at the western tip of the Mojave Desert. Quick to exploit the situation, he raised a small amount of money and cheaply purchased shares that the company was trying to offload. The collective also bought a small socialist rag, *Western Comrade*, and set about attracting like-minded people to their slice of Eden. In 1914, the most American of socialist collectives was formed by the incorporation of Llano del Rio, and interested members were required to buy stock.

Initially, the board of Llano screened stockholders who

wished to apply to become members. By 1917, there were around 1,100 members of the colony. But a water rights dispute with neighbours in the dry desert, a dam planned on a fault line, and the continued agitation of Otis and his newspaper against Harriman saw the group look for a new home.

A broker convinced the fledgling colony to move to the abandoned lumber town of Stables, Louisiana, near the Texas border. Stables had boomed after the Civil War. Pine became king as agricultural work was seen as more stable and skilled than cotton. Many members did not wish to go to the South, so only around 300 made the move to the 16,000 acre plantation they christened Newllano (later New Llano). In addition to the land, the region’s history appealed to the group, having been a part of “no man’s land”—a strip of land contested by Spain after the Louisiana purchase.

“That created a culture of rugged individualism that still exists today,” says local historian Mary Ann Fussell. “The colonists just kind of fitted in here.” Fussell runs a small museum dedicated to the colony in today’s New Llano, which is nothing like the original.

Cleaved by Highway 171, with dollar stores and fast food chains clinging to the sides, it is a military town serving nearby Fort Polk. The graves of the socialist settlers sit unmarked in a local cemetery, as the colony provided everything but tombstones. Several of the original buildings remain on the other side of the railway track, which is plastered with enough “no trespassing” signs to force a traveller to this part of the country to take them seriously. Few locals know, and even fewer care, about its radical history, Fussell says. The few visitors she receives are there to find out about an extraordinary part of their family history.

THOSE EARLY ADOPTERS OF LIFE IN NEWLLANO had their faith severely tested. The realtor who arranged the sale of land had guaranteed that 115 Texans would join the project, bringing much-needed livestock as payment. But the Texans were not told about the lifestyle and politics of the group, and they soon clashed with the Californians.

Compounding the tensions, conditions were miserable. It was winter, there was no plumbing, food was scarce, and no one had any money. The Texans promptly left, but not before eating what little food there was, taking their livestock, and leaving the Californians to pull plows in the fields for themselves. Those who could afford to or who could find jobs—the war industry was booming—went back to California, no longer wishing to sustain the others.

Those who remained were welcomed by their new neighbors, with the area’s conservative sensibilities the only sticking point. Newspapers in the neighboring town of Leesville were more worried about the colonists practicing free love than socialism, as many of the colonists were divorcees and single parents, or had applied for divorces when they reached Newllano.

Many of the settlers were recent arrivals from Europe, particularly the East, and had arrived in America with their own set



Job Harriman

ing thousands of books and much of his money.

But for all of the personalities that arrived in New Llano, one came to define it and shape it in his image: George T. Pickett. Elected General Manager of New Llano in 1919 after a brief reign by a rival, Pickett took over most of the day-to-day running of the cooperative. Harriman was increasingly away from the settlement, trying to salvage the original site of Llano del Rio, and also chronically ill with tuberculosis exacerbated by Louisiana's climate.

PICKETT WAS STALIN TO HARRIMAN'S LENIN: MORE interested in immediate survival than evangelizing. Less of a dreamer and more of a doer, he possessed the right attributes needed for their leader, and at the right time. Pickett received full authority for decisions about the colony from the General Assembly, and the body was dismantled. (Llano had its own Trotsky figure too, although he was banished from the colony in 1924, four years before Leon was exiled from Russia.)

In the final break with their spiritual leader, Pickett turned his weekly "psychological meetings" into anti-Harriman rallies. Under Harriman's leadership, the colony had at times suffered for his absolute democracy. At least one crop of wheat rotted because no decision was made on what to do with it.

Decisive management allied with good fortune. A successful crop followed Pickett's rise to power, allowing him to consolidate his authoritarian rule. Harriman stayed president until his death away from the colony in 1925. But his position was largely ceremonial after Pickett had taken control, and Harriman's final years saw him disappointed and searching for answers.

All the while, the power struggle and harsh conditions saw all but 65 of the members leave. The remaining colonists agreed to stop their public spats and put on a unified front to help draw new members to the colony. A former realtor and insurance

of utopian dreams. Among the most prominent was Theodor Cuno, a German engineer and grandson of a Belgian baron, who had been exiled for his activities. Cuno had attended the First International and frequently corresponded with Friedrich Engels, who wrote of Cuno's persecution in a 1872 journal article. When Cuno arrived in America, he was part of the Knights of Labor, who wrote the call for the first Labor Day in New York City. He was an old man by the time he and his wife arrived in the colony, and he cemented his status as the unofficial colony philosopher by donat-

salesman, Pickett's skills extended beyond wielding power. He was a remarkably convincing figure, and traveled the country in search of new colonists and raising donations from sympathetic groups. New Llano was dependent on Pickett's leadership. Year after year, he was easily re-elected under the slogan, "Let George get on with the job."

The settlement began to thrive. New arrivals didn't have to be socialists—some openly stated that they were not. They only needed to buy shares and agree to the rules. Colonists could keep their personal property both inside and outside of the settlement. They were given a house with water and electricity, access to three meals a day at the hotel, or food to cook at home if they preferred, free healthcare and education, and even a full laundry service. Money was rarely used between members. "It was such a friendly care free world to live in after the bread and butter struggle of Los Angeles," said colonist Viola Gilbert.

While their working conditions with eight-hour days were very good for the time, some work-averse arrivals were quickly moved on. The colony grew to contain around 60 different industries—including a cannery, basket-making, and agriculture—despite there never being more than 600 people living in New Llano at any one time.

Farming was something of an intellectual pursuit, as colonists read widely and practiced the latest scientific methods. They were good neighbors, trying to widen their export market to local farmers, and educating them about new practices they had learned. Pickett also foresaw the oncoming Great Depression that gripped the country in 1929, expanding their farming interests and holdings into areas such as citrus and sugar in the expectation that the looming bust would send keen workers and potential members their way.

Though they lived very much in a society of their own making, they did not exclude themselves from the outside world. The emigres in particular tended to be well-educated,

There's a Home Waiting for You In The Sunny South

Down where the weather is always mild, where cotton pays big, and corn crops never fail, the Llano del Rio Cooperative Colony has just bought an immense tract of rich, productive land. It is in one of the most healthful, most delightful spots in the great South, a spot that has been out of the way of the worsted migration, passed by the homesteaders. It is in the vast pine forests of the Vernon Parish Highlands.

As rapidly as possible this tract is to be settled up on the plan heretofore followed by the Llano del Rio Cooperative Colony.

16,000 Acres—The New Llano Colony in the Rich Highlands of Louisiana

This is in the HIGHLANDS of Louisiana, and the few some stores you may have heard concerning presidential swamps, and levers, do not apply here any more than they apply in the beautiful highlands of other states where there are no disease-breeding conditions.

Think what an immense tract this is! It means homes for many hundreds of people. It means security for them, and under the plan of the Llano Colony it means getting the complete product of their own soil. It means relief from the worries of unemployment, and it means that the benefits of a cooperative organization on broad lines will be theirs.

The pioneer settlement of Louisiana are just beginning to command attention. Within a year, more than 1000 persons will be located in this great tract, tilling the soil, establishing the secondary industries that will be necessary along with agriculture and horticulture and livestock raising, and the many industries that are a part of every town.

The Land of Cotton

and corn, sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, peaches, oranges, apples, pears, figs, grapes, etc. etc. etc. The land can be used for any other crop that can be raised in any part of the South.

The new Llano Colony is a special community, and the plan has been made by a special committee, and the plan is to have the very best of the land for the new Llano Colony. It will contain nothing but the highlands of Louisiana.

LLANO'S 16,000 ACRE PLANTATION IN THE HIGHLANDS OF LOUISIANA

WRITE AT ONCE FOR FULL INFORMATION ABOUT THIS LLANO EXTENSION COLONY

The Llano del Rio Colony
Stables, Louisiana.

BUT IT WASN'T THAT KIND OF PURITY THAT BROUGHT about cracks in the harmony of New Llano. New faultlines emerged between the older colonists, who were happy to let things continue as they were, and younger colonists, who wanted to modernize. They felt that life in the colony had stood still while the outside world had moved on. Reliance on agriculture, in particular, was seen as backwards, and those who regularly travelled to big cities agitated for change. Food became an emblem of their discontent; its dullness and largely vegetarian nature—meat was effectively a seasoning—was a rallying point.

As, increasingly, was Pickett's leadership. During the Depression, he allowed some people in who were hungry or poor without buying stock, although there were allegations that this was a political move to bolster his numbers rather than altruism. Either way, class division had set in, and both sides argued their case furiously in print.

A leadership figure for the young modernizers emerged, a Texan by the name of Eugene Carl. He had oversight of the accounting books—never a strong suit of the colony—and saw that Pickett's predicted member boom in the Depression never came. They were overstretched financially, and too understaffed to serve some of their interests in neighboring states, such as the citrus and sugar ranches. They launched a coup while Pickett was out of town, electing a new board to take control of the company.

The most American of beginnings would foment the most American of ends. The great socialist project was a dispute between shareholders and the board, and it went to the courts. Two receivers appointed could not make any headway, and Pickett struck a deal to sell off land to a businessman—though he subsequently filed a suit against him for \$13.5 million 10 years later—before the company was liquidated in 1939. Its downfall attracted great ridicule from the outside press, who took glee in the pettiness—and who had been gunning for the colony's collapse since Harriman set it up in 1914.

The history of New Llano is at once an inspiring and a cautionary tale. Any utopia—an attempt to perfect the imperfectible—seems destined to fall, particularly when subject to so many outside forces beyond its control. It is dreamed into life from the horrors of our damaged world, and is doomed by the temptation for its leaders is to cast an intentional community in their own image.

For all of its radical success, New Llano was built on many of the prejudices of the outside world. The earliest colonists had considered opening it up to all, but

decided that there was enough resentment towards them as it was without letting in other races (except for Jews, possibly because they attracted so many recent European arrivals.) In California, the four-dollar-a-day wages that colonists initially received were scrapped as they were attracting "undesirables."

Famously, the translation of utopia from Greek means both "good place" and "no place"—and to many elderly colonists, the double meaning became all too real. New Llano's disintegration saw many elderly colonists were left stranded, living out their lives on nothing but the generosity of the people of Vernon Parish, who perhaps remembered the good neighbors the utopians had been. Yet in spite of the miserable ending, the recollections of many former members, and their relatives who visit Mary Ann Fussell's museum today, show an overwhelming affection for the project and the beliefs that underpinned it.

Pickett, whose authoritarian leadership had both held New Llano together and eventually tore it apart, never stopped believing. He stayed living among the ruins of his Eden—the same place he had once held at gunpoint—until his death in 1959. "I have held the fort for a long time, all alone," he wrote. "It's been pretty close to hell." Historian Yaacov Oved says that Harriman's faith in a socialist communitarian project also stood to the last. "His experience had made him adopt a more realistic attitude toward the chances of a lonely communal outpost in the middle of a capitalist environment," Oved says. "He also came to realize the limitations of socialist ideology in altering people's personalities."

Thousands of people had come to New Llano because the American Dream had failed them. That the colony eventually fell apart was seen not as a failure, but a beautiful success that human nature was always going to destroy. And in one final twist, the competing factions from the last days of the colony united together, unsuccessfully fighting the receivership and liquidation in the courts for the next 35 years. ✚





Should I
STAY
or should I
GO?

WHY GAY NONPROFITS FAIL AND YET SURVIVE

by Yasmin Nair

*Should I stay or should I go now?
Should I stay or should I go now?
If I go, there will be trouble
And if I stay it will be double
So come on and let me know*

THE CLASH, "SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?"

CORPORATIONS HAVE NEVER BEEN MORE POWERFUL and profitable, or come under more scrutiny. At the same time, and as a result, nonprofits have never been more popular: there are 1.5 million nonprofits, and they account for 9.2 percent of all wages and salaries in the U.S, according to the National Center for Charitable Statistics. If that seems like a small percent generated from so many organizations, it is, but it also isn't surprising. Nonprofits have traditionally yielded only ill-paid

Myrl Beam, **Gay Inc.: The Nonprofitization of Queer Politics**, University of Minnesota Press (256pp, \$25.00)

jobs, except for a minority of top brass, who are paid substantially more than anyone else. It takes money, after all, to look good and fly around to raise money to convince rich funders that money needs to be poured into an organization that needs money to pay people to fly around to convince more people to give money.

Nonprofits are the offspring of philanthropic projects founded by robber barons with names like Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Vanderbilt: part tax shelters, part charitable enterprises that set about saving the poor—whose poverty had been created by the pernicious exploitation set in place by the barons in the first place. Nonprofits, especially in the shape of foundations, have historically provided a space for both social mobility and the maintenance of class divisions. The Medicis used their patronage of the arts to distract from their poisoning, blood-letting ways and to become part of the ruling class. Similarly, the wealthy today use nonprofits as tax havens and to buy our silence and loyalty about their dubious corporate practices.

The corporate world at least understands that staff need decent

salaries—even if it does often underpay overseas and contract workers—and funds itself accordingly. But in the average nonprofit, everything from office supplies to toilet paper to salaries has to be begged for, via a grant funding system that forces overworked employees to spend much of their time filling out paperwork and going without sleep to meet constant deadlines. There are entire fields of nonprofits, including those that engage in front-line work like childcare, that pay their employees less than minimum wage and then attempt to justify such practices as necessary. Employee turnover in nonprofits runs at 19 percent on average, and can be as high as 30 percent.

No one enters nonprofit work to make money, unless they plan to defraud and embezzle a lot of it (which happens more often than is widely admitted). The nonprofit world runs on the fumes of exhaustion, desperate hope, and a general sense of futility exuded by its denizens.



AND YET: NONPROFITS CONTINUE to attract eager applicants, nearly all of whom enter the doors as fresh-faced, bright-eyed and idealistic people, some straight out of college filled with the zeal to change the world in what they hope will be the most ethical way, some leaving careers in the for-profit sector after feeling they had their very essences corrupted and drained.

Of late, celebrities and those who seek to emulate them have found a ripe new cause to be excited about: queer youth homelessness. Cyn-di Lauper founded the True Colors Fund, which declares, with great earnestness on its website, that it “is working to end homelessness among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning youth, creating a world where all young people can be their true selves.” Lauper and others are responding to a famous statistic that is often repeated like a mantra for fundraising, as on its website: “In America, 40% of young people experiencing homelessness are LGBT, yet just 7% of the general youth population is LGBT.” Homeless gay teens represent a trifecta of sadness and tears. Criticise such funding priorities, or the gay nonprofit structure that spawns them, and you might as well kill and then slowly roast a dozen Chow Chow puppies in Times Square, such will be the wrath heaped on your head.

Of course, Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the world’s largest gay nonprofit has swooped in on the issue, like a raptor sighting prey from afar, as has the National LGBTQ Task Force (formerly National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and now usually just referred to as Task Force). In fact, several smaller organizations like Streetwise and Safe and Sylvia Rivera Law Project have been working, directly or indirectly, on queer youth issues for several years, but the larger ones like HRC and Task Force completely ignored such long-pressing matters and only turned to them *after* the Holy Trinity of Gay Causes (marriage, hate crimes legislation, and inclusion in the military) had been taken care of.

Over and over, the larger organizations emphasize that queer homelessness is a product of individual conditions, like filial or social homophobia, and avoid the fact that the bigger problems lie in a society that provides no institutional structures of support for queer youth, such as housing and employment. Factors like race and ethnicity also determine what happens to what kinds of queer youth: low-income undocumented or first-generation youth

in high schools are targeted by military recruiters who offer the chance of being blown to bits, in exchange for a promise of citizenship or as a way to escape poverty in areas where young people are given few alternatives. In all this, a young person’s *queer* identity is not a singular feature, but one of several conditions that make them vulnerable. The end of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, fought for by the gay community means he or she can enlist—or be compelled to do so—and also live openly and freely as a gay or lesbian in the military, in exchange for death. (As Eli Massey and I have written in these pages, trans inclusion is still being fought over, but inclusion in the military is in itself an inherently conservative cause that needs to be questioned).

Yet gay nonprofits and their allies insist on treating the problem solely as an issue of homophobia, which allows them to render young people as sad, tragic figures rescued by a few cold beds and stale meals in the glorified shelters that claim to “take them in.” Organizations like HRC are resolutely organized, invested in electoral politics, employ media directors and public relations people and are fluent in the language of *messaging* and *outreach*. This means that issues are reduced to their simplest, most heartrending narratives, which raise a lot of money very quickly from sympathetic donors. Gay nonprofits, the well-off ones, are sleek, streamlined fundraising machines. If you go to an average gay and lesbian nonprofit fundraiser with the expectation of little more than cookies and hummus resting on Indian batik-print tablecloths because you think gay nonprofits are comprised of a few idealistic hippies, you will be sorely disappointed (or pleasantly surprised). Gay nonprofit fundraisers are intensely high-wattage events, attended by men and women in designer clothing who place silent auction bids on gourmet chef services and expensive works of art. Without gay nonprofits, there would simply be no “gay movement,” at least not the sort recognised as such by the mainstream.

The gay Non-Profit Industrial Complex (NPIC) is like a bloated shark that must keep swimming in order to stay alive: if it stops feeding itself with more causes that funnel more money into it, it will die, and it exists in order to keep existing and also to ensure that mainstream and wealthy gays and lesbians have an arena, a social register of sorts, of their own where capital and social class can be invested and gained and circulated. The task of the gay NPIC is not to fund causes but to coin social currency for a community that hankers, desperately, for legitimacy and validation, to *belong*.

MYRL BEAM’S *GAY INC.: THE NONPROFITIZATION of Queer Politics* considers and to some extent critiques gay nonprofits. The book is ostensibly a collection of case studies of five organizations that Beam was directly involved with in some capacity. Three, the Howard Brown Health Center (HBHC), Broadway Youth Center (BYC), and Center on Halsted (COH) are in Chicago while District 202 and Trans Youth Service Network (TYSN) were based in Minneapolis (they no longer exist). In fact, BYC is a subsidiary program of HBHC, and all three of the Chicago organizations are part of the same ecosystem and exist near each other. TYSN emerged from the ashes of District 202. All five share the same institutional DNA, are urban organizations, and have very similar target populations they aim to serve.

The book *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* remains one of the strongest critiques of what we now think of as the NPIC, but the

critique has never extended too widely, and the history of the NPIC remains occluded by a soft, white, fluffy cloud composed of good intentions and bleeding hearts. Beam reminds us that this massive behemoth extracts the ideals and aspirations of thousands of people who truly want to make change, and that nonprofits, including the gay ones, operate within a state apparatus of surveillance and punishment. In fact, they exert varying and often crushing degrees of both in order to regulate and discipline those who come to them looking for resources, and the disciplinary structure is usually a racist and transphobic one.

Beam writes about the enormous sense of desperation that suffuses the work of the NPIC, where its administrators, like him when he worked in it, understand the grinding hopelessness of a system that will ultimately do little to change things and which subjects its “clients” to great humiliation. He describes an instance where he found himself publicly telling one youth to put back an extra slice of pizza she had picked up, so that there would be enough for everyone else, and how he felt about policing someone for whom the pizza might have been the only meal of the day: “It certainly made clear to me that though my job was many things, uncomplicatedly ‘good’ it was not.” He writes of the constant stress of trying to keep BYC going: “It was beautiful and devastating, and it reflected a reality of queer homelessness and poverty that [HBHC] has never quite known how to apprehend.” That combination of beauty and devastation, that sense among staff and youth of how necessary and even literally life-giving the work can be, alongside the constant awareness that all available resources could disappear at any minute is a thread running through all the case studies.

UNFORTUNATELY, IT TAKES A LOT TO WADE through and find such moments of clarity in an often turgid book that is more focused on making sure to quote the right theorists than on clarity. Beam’s absorption in the organizations he writes about lends poignancy to this book, but it also makes the book sputter and become repetitive. Beam’s reliance on academic theorists also means he gives too little credit to journalists. I know, because I am among the “informants” (his word for those he spoke to in and around the institutions and events he studies) he quotes about the issues—I broke the story on Howard Brown’s financial mismanagement and covered it for a few years for the *Windy City Times*. Kate Sosin, also writing for the *WCT*, produced in depth reports and analysis on queer youth issues that the paper sought and got special grants to produce. Beam ignores such work. I don’t mean to throw a Norma Desmond tantrum about an upstart who dared to not name me (“*I’m still big, it’s the citations that got smaller*”), but to point out that Beam deliberately erases important reporting and

analysis. Instead, he often quotes theorists and intellectuals to *explain* what the informants relay. In the process, Beam, who wants to be critical of nonprofits, in fact reproduces the hierarchy of analysis bred in the biggest nonprofit of all: the academic nonprofit industrial complex, where acknowledging that non-academics might actually produce credible intellectual work is forbidden.



AS SOMEONE WHO WORKS OUTSIDE THE nonprofit structure, my life and work—like that of many, many other radical queers—is also touched upon by the gay NPIC in sometimes intangible ways. At the very least, every one of us has friends, lovers, partners, spouses, and comrades, and any combination of all that, who work in that world. Every week, we scramble to find healthcare or emergency services or just a lifeline and counseling for yet another queer person who might actually have matters made worse for them in a non-queer service sector. The gay NPIC has its tentacles within our hearts and our lives, and we are made to feel grateful for the pittance it offers us—a trans-friendly gynecologist here, a therapist who will not try to cure us there, elsewhere perhaps a doctor who will heal and not lecture us on our sex lives—because it deliberately keeps such resources to itself, instead of working on changing the rest of the world (somewhere along the way, everyone forgot that *all* medical care should be sensitive to trans needs, not just queer medical centers, for instance).

There is no purity among us and we are all aware of the fraught and conflicted nature of the system. A more useful and interesting book would have looked at groups like Gay Shame that have consistently, for 20 years, been holding weekly meetings and constantly critiqued the mainstream gay movement

and presented alternatives to the nonprofit structure; Gay Shame has been instrumental in continually calling out the retrograde politics of San Francisco’s gentrification. It could have looked more closely at nonprofits like Sylvia Rivera Law Project (whose work he does mention in passing) that face different sets of issues and perhaps even some amount of “success,” to really evaluate what happens.

Most importantly, it would have spent some time illuminating *why* so many people continue to enter the gay NPIC, who remains, and why, and who leaves. What are the classed and racialized factors that determine who can afford a lifetime of awful salaries (hint: they’re often privileged and white)? Who has to choose never to enter the NPIC in the first place or ends up leaving it because of economic and other pressures (hint: they’re often people of colour)? What do they really think remains of the NPIC’s potential, if anything? Are there absolutely no successes, and if so, how do they stay afloat in a sea that constantly pushes and exhausts them and forces them to make compromises?

Gay Inc. offers useful critiques but it leaves untouched the question of why Gay Inc. continues to survive when so many of its denizens are constantly asking themselves, “Should I stay, or should I go?” ✚



Capital's Willing EXECUTIONERS

An insider's perspective on how McKinsey & Co., the world's most elite consulting firm, spreads the gospel of capitalism...

TO THOSE CONVINCED THAT A SECRETIVE cabal controls the world, the usual suspects are Illuminati, Lizard People, or “globalists.” They are wrong, naturally. There is no secret society shaping every major decision and determining the direction of human history. There is, however, McKinsey & Company.

The biggest, oldest, most influential, and most prestigious of the “Big Three” management consulting firms, McKinsey has played an outsized role in creating the world we occupy today. In its 90+ year history, McKinsey has been a whisperer to presidents and CEOs. McKinsey serves more than 2,000 institutions, including 90 of the top 100 corporations worldwide. It has acted as a catalyst and accelerant to every trend in the world economy: firm consolidation, the rise of advertising, runaway executive compensation, globalization, automation, and corporate restructuring and strategy.

I came into my job as a McKinsey consultant hoping to change the world from the inside, believing that the best way to make progress is through influencing those who control the levers of power. Instead of being a force for good, I found myself party to the most damaging forces affecting the world: the resurgence of authoritarianism and the continued creep of markets into all parts of life.

Your views of McKinsey's impact on the world will be largely determined by your views on capitalism's impact on the world, for few firms have made a greater impact on the prevailing economic system. If you believe, as I once did, that capitalism is the least bad system devised so far, that its worst excesses can be reined in through effective regulation, that it has been the largest engine for human progress in human history, then McKinsey is a Good Thing. As missionaries for capital, it has helped spread the Good Word far and wide, making

the world more productive and efficient as a result.

If, however, you believe that, whatever capitalism's role in history, its continued practice poses an existential threat to governments, the biosphere, and poor people the world over, then the firm's role is that of a co-conspirator to a crime in which we are all victims. McKinsey is capitalism distilled. It is global, mobile, flexible, and unabashedly pro-market and pro-management. The firm has an enormous stake in things continuing more or less as they are. Working for all sides, McKinsey's only allegiance is to capital. As capital's most effective messenger, McKinsey has done direct harm to the world in ways that, thanks to its lack of final decision-making power, are hard to measure and, thanks to its intense secrecy, are hard to know. The firm's willingness to work with despotic governments and corrupt business empires is the logical conclusion of seeking profit at all costs. Its advocacy of the primacy of the market has made governments more like businesses and businesses more like vampires. By claiming that they solve the world's hardest problems, McKinsey shrinks the solution space to only those that preserve the status quo. And it is through this claim that the firm attracts thousands of “the best and the brightest” away from careers that actually serve the public.

“THE FIRM DOES EXECUTION, NOT POLICY.” I remember the phrase vividly. We were on a conference call with the entire client-service team, including senior leadership. Trump had just begun his term, and the direction of our client, a federal agency, had markedly but predictably shifted. Our team of mostly young do-gooders were concerned about the role we were playing to enable this shift. We were up-in-arms! Well, as up-in-arms as overachieving Ivy League graduates get. To quell dissent, the leader reassured us: We only do execution, not policy.

This categorical claim was meant to assuage our fears. We weren't

The author of this piece has chosen to maintain anonymity.

“HAD MCKINSEY BEEN AS GLOBAL IN THE 1940S, THE ‘NO POLICY’ REASONING WOULD NOT HAVE PROHIBITED THEM FROM HELPING BAYER OPTIMIZE ITS PRODUCTION OF ZYKLON B.”

the ones steering the ship towards the cliffs, we were merely tasked with keeping the ship afloat until it reached its destination.

But politics touches all things. When the direction of an agency is set by the president, helping execute on that direction means participating in politics. Had McKinsey been as global in the 1940s, the “no policy” line of reasoning would not have prohibited them from helping Bayer optimize its production of Zyklon B, adding a grim double meaning to the partner’s promise to only focus on execution.

How did things turn out this way? McKinsey consultants gave 27 times more money to Hillary Clinton’s campaign than Donald Trump’s. The members of my team attended the Women’s March while serving an agency shaped by the man they marched against. The firm hires from top universities and many of its consultants have graduate degrees, both strong predictors of liberal political tendencies. McKinsey is at the top of its field, affording it the unique opportunity to turn down lucrative work that other firms cannot. The firm’s 14 values serve as a gold standard for professional services firms and are actually discussed and largely adhered to.

The best explanation is structural. McKinsey’s governing model, when compared to other firms of its size and age, is anarchy. The Managing Director (CEO equivalent) has surprisingly little ability to control who the firm serves (said a partner about the Managing Director, “you are definitely not in charge”). McKinsey remains the world’s largest partnership, and partners rule. The general rule of thumb is that if a partner can staff a team, the firm will do the work. If associates don’t want to work with a tobacco company or a defense contractor, they don’t have to. As a result, only a small portion of the consultants need to buy into a client relationship for McKinsey to do work with them. What this means in practice is that the firm doesn’t work with North Korea, but that’s about it.

McKinsey has grown to the point that it is taking on work that prior incarnations of the firm would have turned down due to the political risk involved. To keep lavishing its partners with multimillion dollar annual compensation packages, the firm needs to sustain double digits year over year growth. In a world that’s been thoroughly McKinseified, this requires a loosening of standards. With its fingers in more pots than ever, McKinsey continues to be at the epicenter of world-shaping events.

Beyond the impossibility of dividing the practice of governing into “policy” and “not policy,” the claim itself is bullshit. McKinsey teams often have a policy perspective. They will never frame it that way on the shiny slide decks presented to clients. The team will instead present options, with the preferred option appearing first, with the best supporting evidence behind it. Sometimes the pretense is disposed of and a little “preferred option” will appear next to the favorite. (On top of all this, the firm uses the client’s logo and formatting on each slide deck. Rarely in a deck prepared for a client would McKinsey’s name explicitly appear. If any of the materials were to leak to the public, there would be nothing tying it back to the firm.)

Perhaps the greatest secret to McKinsey’s success is its ability to benefit from its clients’ successes without being punished for their failures, no matter what role the firm had to play in either outcome. In perhaps the most famous example, the firm survived Enron’s collapse, despite being as close to the company’s key decision-makers as Enron’s accountants, Arthur Andersen, an entity that died with its host.

DIRECT HARM SERVING GOVERNMENTS

THE “NO POLICY” POLICY IS CLASSIC MCKINSEY: A complete abdication of responsibility (moral or otherwise) for the courses of action it recommends. However, this line may no longer cut it in today’s political environment. This summer, the *New York Times* reported on McKinsey’s termination its contract with ICE:

While stating that McKinsey’s work for the agency did not involve carrying out immigration policies, [Managing Director] Sneader wrote that the firm “will not, under any circumstances, engage in any work, anywhere in the world, that advances or assists policies that are at odds with our values.”

Note again the fiction that the firm isn’t involved in carrying out immigration policy (obviously, McKinsey analysts aren’t physically separating families). According to an award description for one of the ICE contracts, the firm was hired to assist the “ENFORCEMENT AND REMOVAL OPERATIONS (ERO) ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSFORMATION INTEGRATED CONSULTING SERVICES.” ERO is the “papers please” division of ICE, and any transformation and integrated consulting services—a catch-all that could mean literally anything—will have the goal of making the organization more effective at carrying out its stated mission, which will mean more people detained and deported and more families separated.

The second problem with this reassurance is that while McKinsey’s “14 values” may be reassuring to a prospective client, they say nothing about the firm’s larger role in the world. The closest value is a commitment to “observe high ethical standards,” but I only ever saw this applied in the treatment of clients: don’t lie to them, don’t fudge your expenses, etc. If McKinsey had values that considered the human impact of its work and attempted to honor Sneader’s pledge, it would need to pull out of engagements all over the world. Fortunately for the partnership, the value system is free of any mandate to examine the human impact.

The firm was in the news recently thanks to a report it made on the social media reaction to Saudi Arabian austerity policies. The report identified Twitter users who led criticism of the measures, and according to the *New York Times*, after the report was issued, the users were reportedly surveilled or arrested. Following the assassination and dismemberment of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, many US firms and CEOs boycotted the Saudi Arabia Future Investment Initiative (known as Davos in the Desert). McKinsey (along with many other top consulting firms), however, remained “knowledge partners.” The firm’s ties with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman are deep.

In 2015, after preparing a report on how Saudi Arabia can move beyond oil, they began strategizing with the Crown Prince on the privatization of Aramco, the state-owned oil company and, according to Reuters, “the one thing in Saudi Arabia that works well.” The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia may be McKinsey’s single biggest client (between 2011 and 2016, they ran 600 engagements in the Kingdom)—it will take more than the assassination of a journalist (to say nothing of the brutal war in Yemen) to undermine that thought partnership.

This is not to say that no one at the firm objects. According to the *Times*, “Amid the Arab Spring, its consultants in the region argued that the firm should consider curtailing business in Saudi Arabia.” The firm’s relationship to the Kingdom was controversial during my time there and it is one of the most discussed topics on “OurBeesWax,” 4Chan for people with an @mckinsey.com email address. (One choice quote: “If you want to make money in the middle east do it with KSA [Kingdom of Saudi Arabia], end of story - people need to get over this.”)

Of course, there is a justification offered for working with noxious dictatorial regimes. Per the *Times* report:

“But more senior consultants, including partners, said McKinsey was not in the business of passing judgment on its clients’ cultures and values. The best way to improve the kingdom, they argued, was to modernize the economy and make government and companies work better.”

And yet:

“Consultants who aim to help authoritarian governments from the inside often give in to a desire to preserve their lucrative assignments, said Calvert W. Jones, a professor at the University of Maryland who studies the role of consultants in the Middle East. ‘They soft-pedal... their fear is if they speak truth to power at this state of their interactions, they will be tossed out.’”

In the repressive regimes the firm serves, client norms tend to dominate whatever liberal values McKinsey might initially attempt to smuggle in. As Jones says in a manuscript on the role of experts in the Gulf: “As time goes on, they [consultancies] also engage in the art of not speaking truth to power—they self-censor, exaggerate successes, and downplay their own misgivings, due to the incentive structures they face...”

Beyond the obvious conflicts of interest, this moral relativist logic has no end. The Sinaloa Cartel wants to provide better healthcare to its *sicarios*, and North Korea wants to modernize its agriculture practices. The firm’s expertise could help. Who are we to judge our clients’ cultures and values? Even hitmen need healthcare, right? (In fact, they are probably expensive to insure.) And surely North Korea’s citizens don’t deserve to starve?

But by serving unsavory clients, McKinsey lends them its sterling reputation, legitimizing them in the eyes of the wider world. Even if McKinsey’s advice improves practices that help ordinary people, in so doing, they sustain despotic regimes. A competent authoritarian is

Quiz: COULD YOU BE A MANAGEMENT CONSULTANT?

1. Amazon employees have had to pee into bottles because bathrooms were too far away and workloads are too high, what do you recommend as the solution?

- A. Build bathrooms much closer to where employees work
- B. Give employees more break time
- C. Transfer ownership of Amazon from Jeff Bezos to the workers
- D. Make potential candidates drink a gallon of Mountain Dew, see how long they can hold it before offering the job

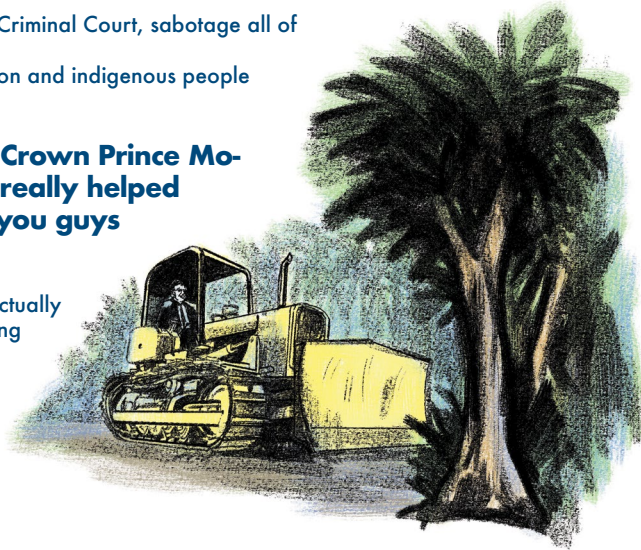
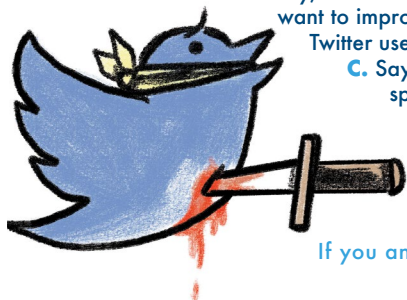


2. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro wants to bulldoze the Amazon and has hired McKinsey to consult, do you:

- A. Explain why the economic value of the rainforest is actually greater over the long run
- B. Respectfully withdraw from the engagement
- C. Secretly gather evidence for a future case in the International Criminal Court, sabotage all of Bolsonaro’s efforts
- D. Diligently research and present the cutting edge of deforestation and indigenous people removal techniques, Bringing The Best Of The Firm To The Client

3. You’re at a team dinner with a client, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. He says, “McKinsey has really helped us target dissidents on social media, but man, you guys really cost an arm and a leg!” Do you:

- A. Laugh nervously and avert eye contact
- B. Say, “I was actually very disturbed by those reports, if you actually want to improve your standing on the world stage, imprisoning Twitter users is probably not the best approach”
- C. Say nothing, secretly record the conversation, and spit in his food when he’s not looking
- D. Laugh along and say, “you know, the 17:1 assassin to dissident ratio is below the peer group average, we have some ideas on how to help.”



If you answered "D" to all of the above, McKinsey would like to hear from you:

www.McKinsey.com/careers

McKinsey&Company

THIS QUIZ IS NOT ACTUALLY SPONSORED BY MCKINSEY AND IS PURELY PARODY FOR AMUSEMENT PURPOSES

more dangerous than an inept one.

This year in South Africa, McKinsey faced the largest scandal in its history (surpassing its deep implication in the Enron implosion and the imprisonment of its former Managing Director Raj Gupta for insider trading). The firm won a bid with the state-owned power company Eskom, with a performance-based fee worth up to \$700 million. According to a *Times* investigative report:

"The contract turned out to be illegal, a violation of South African contracting law, with some of the payments channeled to an associate of an Indian-born family, the Guptas, at the center of a swirling corruption scandal."

McKinsey may face criminal prosecution and has agreed to pay back the \$74 million in fees it received for the six months of work it carried out.

These are just the stories that leaked to the press. McKinsey is one of the most successful government contractors, with federal contracts worth \$613 million between 2012 and 2018, with \$150 million from the Department of Defense and \$63 million from the Department of Homeland Security. The ICE contracts alone were worth \$26 million. Public disclosures do not include the many projects McKinsey does for America's defense contractors. Many of these projects are benign, bordering on banal, but some of them help organizations that make the bombs blowing up Yemeni school buses.

It's a good thing, then, that it's McKinsey doing the work, because, as former London Office Manager Peter Foy told Duff McDonald, "There is no institution on the planet with more integrity than McKinsey and Company."

SHRINKING THE SOLUTION SPACE

WHEN SPEAKING TO CANDIDATES AND clients, McKinsey often claims to solve the hardest problems in the world. Unfucking the F-35 program, overhauling Puerto Rico, and managing mergers and acquisitions for massive multinational businesses are all difficult problems (whether McKinsey has successfully solved them is another question). But the hardest, most consequential problems cannot and will not be solved by McKinsey. Ending poverty, factory farming, and mass incarceration, fixing global governance, averting catastrophic climate change, and managing the automation of the workforce: These are all problems that can only be solved through a mix of movement building and policy-making. Even in cases where the technocratic incrementalism on offer at McKinsey could be useful, the firm's structural inability to look at solutions that would shift power away from those who hold it (their clients and employees) negate its ability to help.

A case study from my time at the firm illustrates this: McKinsey was tasked with reducing violence in a correctional facility through a massive organizational transformation. Some of the work we did probably helped: housing the population based on statistically-determined predictors of violence, offering progressive rewards based on good behavior, and improving training for correctional officers. But the reality is that any approach to reducing violence in a prison that is limited to the prison's walls will only go so far. The biggest reason there is so much violence in prisons and jails is because there are so many people there in first place. And trying to solve that problem without looking at cash bail, prosecutorial discretion, mandatory minimums, and the war on drugs, is like trying to solve a 1,000 piece puzzle with 500 pieces and the wrong box: You may think you understand the problem, but you're missing way too many pieces. When I brought these topics up, I was told they are "out of scope," both because of the client's limited jurisdiction and because the firm "doesn't do policy."

McKinsey shouldn't necessarily be blamed for failing to stanch the bleeding, but its philosophy and recruiting materials sell a kind of tech-

nocratic-utopianism: We just need well-funded, smart people to look at the problems of the world, and one by one they will fall away. A recruiting pamphlet offers undergraduates a chance to "Change the world. Improve lives. Invent something new." This is echoed in the mindset of the nation's elite. When Mitt Romney spoke to the *Wall Street Journal* editorial board during his 2008 presidential campaign, he said:

"So I would probably have super-cabinet secretaries, or at least some structure that McKinsey would guide me to put in place. I'm not kidding, I probably would bring in McKinsey... I would consult with the best and the brightest minds... I believe the free market works and government doesn't—that when government takes over a function which can be effectively managed in the free market, we make a huge mistake."

McKinsey claims to be the distillation of the free market at its best, a true meritocracy made up of the top people from the top institutions who are culled through the "up or out" system (if you stop advancing, you're asked to leave). And if the free market knows best, then why not go to the best of the free market?

And as much as the firm likes to position itself as a truth-teller, objectively scouring the data to come to recommendations, with a group of people who jumped through every hoop to sit at the commanding heights of society, how likely will they be to recommend an idea that challenges their audience (who, almost exclusively, are wealthy, powerful men)? The facts and data all indicate that a single-payer healthcare system would be more effective and cost-efficient, but how likely would McKinsey have been to recommend that to a President Romney looking to solve the healthcare crisis (again, prohibitions on policy aside)?

This belief in the superiority of the free market at the expense of government didn't start with Romney (or Reagan or Goldwater). In 1958, McKinsey consulted on the organizing of America's response to *Sputnik*, NASA. According to historian Christopher McKenna in *The World's Newest Profession*:

"From NASA's establishment, the organizational structure that Glennan and the consultants from McKinsey & Company devised for the space agency promoted the use of outside contractors over building internal expertise... Beyond the bare minimum of internal technical expertise, however, the McKinsey consultants argued that America's free enterprise society dictates that industry should be given as extensive a role as possible."

This approach, "may have dismayed the agency's engineers, but the response cheered NASA administrators." By 1964, 90 percent of NASA's \$5 billion budget went to private companies and 350,000 contractors supported 32,500 NASA employees. Bill Clinton's declaration of the end of big government in 1996 and George W. Bush's pledge to substitute contractors for half of the remaining federal workforce in 2002 were influenced and made possible by the work that McKinsey did in establishing the contractor state. In an ironic twist, two months before the disastrous rollout of healthcare.gov, McKinsey warned senior White House staff that, "the project lacked comprehensive testing, noted many functions were dependent on contractors and warned against taking risks to meet deadlines."

The hollowing of NASA was not an isolated event. According to *The Firm*, in the 1980s, McKinsey helped Carlos Salinas privatize 85% of Mexico's state-owned businesses, Margaret Thatcher do the same in Britain, and West Germany do the same in East Germany. The firm has played a role in privatizing government assets in Latin and Central America, Eastern Europe, and Asia. In some of these cases, privatization was inevitable, but in many, McKinsey made it more likely. Inexperienced leaders looking to make a mark turn to McKinsey for ideas, and they are all too eager to recommend privatization. The firm can point to all of its experience managing privatization elsewhere, as well as the influx of cash and positive Western press about how this shows you're a "serious reformer." Beyond the fees, McKinsey is motivated to do this work by its pro-market ideology. That privatization increases inequality, primarily benefits the wealthy, is not immune to corruption, and fundamentally shifts management incentives towards pleasing shareholders and away

from the public interest is of little concern to McKinsey.

Beyond the literal privatization of public assets, the steady creep of corporate approaches to governing amounts to privatization in all but name. Government cannot and should not be run like a business, as even the *Harvard Business Review* admits. One particularly egregious example was McKinsey's recommendation that the BBC use an internal market to buy and sell services, which led to endless internal negotiations to do tasks as simple as reserving studio time. McKinsey's perceived success at improving corporate governance has led to calls from publications like the *Economist* that it may be "McKinsey's turn to try to sort out Uncle Sam." In anticipation of the beginning of Obama's presidency, the magazine unironically hoped that "Obama may favour McKinseyites in much the same way as his predecessor seemed addicted to hiring alumni of Goldman Sachs." As we all know, the Goldman Sachs-stuffed Treasury Department led to stable markets and steady growth throughout the Bush adminis-

competitors, "Large organizations choose from a relatively small set of major consulting firms, which, like Johnny Appleseeds, spread a few organizational models throughout the land." As a result, "...schools assume the structure of the workplace, hospital and university administrations come to resemble the management of for-profit firms, and the modernization of the world economy proceeds unabated."

McKinsey's reorganization of most of the large companies in post-war Europe demonstrates mimetic isomorphism in action. Facing extreme uncertainty and pressure from American firms, European companies modeled themselves after organizations perceived to be successful (American ones) and relied heavily on a single source of vital resources (McKinsey). Whether American corporate success was due to the decentralized organization model or the fact that their competition was in literal ruins is of little consequence. Decentralization took off because the cool companies decentralized, with McKinsey whispering in their ears. The net

"The facts and data all indicate that a single-payer healthcare system would be more effective and cost-efficient, but how likely would McKinsey have been to recommend that to a President Romney?"

tration. They go on to hope that Obama hires "the best technocrats" like Ford Motor CEO turned Defense Secretary Robert McNamara. That these two parties contributed to and presided over the financial crisis and Vietnam War respectively apparently does nothing to shake the *Economist's* confidence in the wisdom of technocratic businessmen.

SPREADING MANAGEMENT-FRIENDLY IDEAS

McKinsey claims to be a dispassionate assessor of data and provider of recommendations, but its bias is given away by the name of the industry it helped create: *management consulting*. The people who enlist its services and pay its fees fall firmly on one side of the labor-management divide. McKinsey will never make a recommendation that truly threatens its core audience—any analysis is bounded. Searching for cost savings? Everything is on the table, except executive bonuses, of course.

The initial rise of McKinsey and other management consultancies was due less to the force of their ideas or the ability of their people than to government anti-monopoly legislation, specifically the Glass Steagall Act of 1933. According to Christopher McKenna, in addition to separating commercial and investment banking, "the legislators also outlawed the consultative and reorganizational activities previously performed by banks." This created an opening for management consulting firms: "Corporate executives, aware that the New Deal laws prohibited them from employing trade associations, industry cartels, or bankers to create industry benchmarks and to learn about administrative innovations, turned instead to management consultants as their primary source of interorganizational knowledge." At McKinsey, there are benchmarks for everything, whether it's the percentage of expected R&D savings following a pharma merger or the cost of temporary IT labor in the American Southwest. Over the years, McKinsey's work with pretty much every player in every industry has made it the panopticon of global business, willing to share what competitors are up to (as anonymized "best practices" of course), for a price.

In addition to the favorable regulatory environment, McKinsey's pro-market, hyper-rational ideas spread through what organizational theorists Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell call "mimetic isomorphism," the tendency of institutions facing uncertainty to become more and more alike. In a quest for legitimacy in the eyes of employees, customers, and

effect of these forces was to exacerbate some of the most damaging trends in contemporary life: the growth of wealth inequality and the increased insecurity of private employment.

In the 1950s, McKinsey consultant Arch Patton pioneered the field of executive compensation after discovering that worker wages had risen faster than management wages. (Gasp!) This led to a lucrative business: helping executives justify more and more extreme paychecks. According to the Economic Policy Institute, the typical CEO made 20 times the median employee's compensation in 1965. In 2015, that ratio had climbed to 286. When Patton was asked in the 1980s how he felt about his legacy, he had one word: "Guilty."

In the corporate world, the most terrifying words in the English language are: "I'm from McKinsey, and I'm here to help." The firm's appearance is known as a harbinger of layoffs (one of most famous representations of consultants in pop culture is "the Bobs" from *Office Space*). While McKinsey will claim that it never identifies individuals to be cut, its willingness and effectiveness in recommending the axe begins in its roots. In 1935, James O. McKinsey left the firm he started to run a client, the Midwest department store chain Marshall Field. He was tasked with implementing the cost-cutting measures he recommended, resulting in "McKinsey's purge" of 1,200 employees. In *The Firm*, McDonald writes, "McKinsey was a true forerunner of the 1980s revolutions in reorganization, downsizing, and rationalization-- which are really just layoffs in different guises... McKinsey once argued that it 'only assesses situations, not people.'" Note the classic obfuscation. What are situations without people? McDonald goes on, "...it may not be too far off the mark to suggest that McKinsey has been the impetus for more layoffs than any other entity in corporate history."

Would these companies have laid off their employees, McKinsey or no? The presence of data-driven outsiders provides cover for executives to do things they may not have done otherwise. McKinsey could also point out that their competitors were taking similar steps (probably following the firm's recommendations). Would these companies have survived without mass layoffs? In some cases, no, but in many cases, alternatives were possible but not considered (like looking at executive compensation or the cost of expensive consultants). Sometimes, layoffs are not even framed as necessary, like when McKinsey client Procter & Gamble laid off 13,000 workers and the CEO said the public "has come to think of corporate restructuring as a sign of trouble, but this is definitely not P&G's situation."

In most companies, the fastest way to find savings is to reduce head-

count, but McKinsey doesn't have to live with the consequences of the decisions it makes—the irreparable damage mass layoffs can do to a company's culture and operations, in addition to the impact they can have on the lives of the terminated.

MCKINSEY PEOPLE

FOR ONE OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL CAPITALIST enterprises in history, McKinsey controls surprisingly little capital. There are no factories or machines owned by the firm. It has no products, really (a few godawful pieces of software aside). Even its offices sit in rented glass and steel towers in the world's major cities. McKinsey is nothing without its human capital. Who, then, are these extremely expensive people?

There is a type. By and large, they have at least one degree from a prestigious university. They are intensely analytical and eager to deconstruct the world around them. They have been rightly called “insecure overachievers,” a type of striving neurotic endemic to the Ivy League campuses that feed McKinsey's halls. While there, I worked with Rhodes Scholars, special operators and fighter pilots, doctors and advisers to presidents, physicists, journalists, and Olympians. Excluding the US government, McKinsey employs the most Rhodes and Marshall Scholars as well as STEM PhDs from top programs. It also recruits heavily at top medical and law schools (though decreasing the number of practicing lawyers in the world may be the most unambiguously good thing McKinsey does). More than 70 past and present Fortune 500 CEOs are McKinsey alumni, and the odds of a McKinsey employee becoming a public company CEO are the best in the world (1 out of 690). Its alumni include Sheryl Sandberg and Chelsea Clinton, Google CEO Sundar Pichai and former Enron CEO Jeff Skilling, and Yul Kwon, the winner of *Survivor: Cook Islands*. The firm also has a habit of producing some of the nastiest Republican politicians (Tom Cotton and Bobby Jindal). Many of these people had the ability, determination, ruthlessness, and emptiness that could only be filled by professional achievement needed to attain these positions of status and influence.

McKinsey is far from the only company to harvest fresh graduates from the Ivy League, and if it disappeared tomorrow, the best and the brightest would continue to fill the ranks of Bain and the Boston Consulting Group (and Goldman and Google). But McKinsey was the first firm to make the bet that raw ability and potential trumps experience. It was the first major consulting firm to hire straight out of business school and the first to hire straight from undergraduate programs, consistently drawing the top students from Harvard.

This is part of a larger pernicious trend. The age at which students start committing to “careers of excellence” is getting younger and younger. Students begin recruiting for jobs in management consulting in the fall of their junior year amid an environment that leaves them, “...wondering whether there's something wrong with them if they're not interested in consulting and investment banking.” This is in large part due to the hyper-competitiveness capitalism engenders. Young people are making decisions about their academic and professional careers before they've had a chance to interrogate their values and thoughtfully decide how they want to spend their lives. One of the biggest appeals of management consulting is that it serves as the undecided major of careers, opening more doors than it closes. College seniors with a McKinsey offer can accurately make a two-year commitment, learn useful skills, gain an impressive network, and gold stamp their resume before joining the Peace Corps and returning to their previously-planned career of do-goodery. Beyond the skill-building, McKinsey markets itself as a place to do good while you're there (two of the four practice cases on its interviewing page are in the social/public sector despite less than 10 percent of the firm's work coming from those sectors).

But those two years change you. Idealism turns to cynicism in the face of the cold realities of the world. Shitty college apartments and dining

hall meals turn into luxury Starwood properties and expensed Michelin star dinners. The job opportunities at the end of the brief stint can pay \$300,000 per year (private equity shops being a prime post-McKinsey destination). And throughout this time, you're surrounded by other people who made the same decision. For some of them, those two years turned into four turned into ten. Most others will leave as planned, but not to a career of do-goodery. All of these people have come up with justifications for their decision and are eager to share them. Some examples, “you're building career capital that you can apply to whatever nonprofit or political cause you support down the line,” or “the speed and innovation of the private sector makes it the best place to have impact,” or “someone is going to do the job, so might as well be me (and I'll do more good than the likely replacement).”

Precious few of my colleagues have shown signs that their post-McKinsey careers will be more prosocial than their McKinsey career, but even for those who do, their understanding of how to improve the world has been thoroughly McKinseyfied. In *Winners Take All*, writer and former McKinsey analyst Anand Giridharadas describes what he calls “MarketWorld,” which is:

“...an ascendant power elite that is defined by the concurrent drives to do well and do good, to change the world while also profiting from the status quo...these elites believe and promote the idea that social change should be pursued principally through the free market and voluntary action...that it should be supervised by the winners of capitalism and their allies, and not be antagonistic to their needs; and that the biggest beneficiaries of the status quo should play a leading role in the status quo's reform...The MarketWorld problem-solver does not tend to hunt for perpetrators and is not interested in blame.”

I've seen this tendency in myself. It was harder for me to embrace a Left worldview because of the social ties I have with people who are perpetrators of the many harms inherent in our system. I have also seen this in my former colleagues, like a healthcare specialist who volunteered for numerous Democratic campaigns and strongly opposed single-payer healthcare. The definitive evidence he marshalled for why single-payer was a terrible idea was a *Vox* piece arguing that the system would only save money if doctors were paid less. Clearly, this outcome was more intolerable than 30 million Americans continuing to go without insurance. On his McKinsey engagements, he works primarily with doctors and healthcare administrators, the people whose paychecks and jobs would be most negatively affected by a transition to a single-payer system. Their lives and livelihoods are far more salient than the millions of uninsured who exist only as numbers in spreadsheets. Any solution that requires redistribution of any wealth or power from the ruling class (the only class who can afford to hire McKinsey) is not even worth considering.

It is the same situation described by Tolstoy: “I sit on a man's back choking him and making him carry me, and yet assure myself and others that I am sorry for him and wish to lighten his load by all means possible... except by getting off his back.”

WE ARE NOW LIVING WITH THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE world McKinsey created. Market fundamentalism is the default mode for businesses and governments the world over. Abstraction and myth insulate actors from the atrocities they help perpetuate. Businesses that resisted the pressure to rationalize every decision based on its impact on shareholder value were beaten out or eaten up by those who shed the last remnants of their humanity. With another heavyweight on the side of management, McKinsey tipped the scale even further away from labor, contributing directly to the increase in wealth inequality plaguing the world. Governments are now more similar to the private sector and more reliant on their services. The “best and the brightest” devote themselves to client service instead of public service.

Not all of these results are wholly attributable to McKinsey—there are many conspirators to these crimes. But no firm has touched more and been seen less. ♣

Fresh Hot Takes On Gender

FROM OUR EDITRIXES



BY *Lyta Gold* AND *Brianna Rennix*

After the smashing success of Fresh Hot Takes on Gender Part I, we have received quite a few compliments, but also a number of reader complaints, which demanded to know when Current Affairs became a radical feminist publication. In the interest of satisfying some readers' hunger for Subjects To Become Angry About, here are even more Fresh Hot Takes on Gender for you to consume. If these infuriate you, we recommend a soothing solution of hot oat milk, sriracha, and dealing with it.

1. I Just Want To Be Respected As A Human Being With Both My Tits Out

2. Alternatively: I Would Prefer To Have Every Inch Of Skin On My Body Covered Up At All Times, But I Get So Sweaty

2. Men Should Be Banned From Public Life, No Of Course I Don't Mean That Literally But Also Yeah Kind Of Literally

3. I Like Leftist Men Who Are Feminists But Don't Insist On Their Feminist Credentials And If

You Feel Like Discussing This With Me Then You Are Exactly The Type Of Leftist Man I Don't Like

4. Why Do I Persist In Being Attracted To Men Even Though They Are Frustrating And Don't Have Breasts

5. I Want To Drive A Monster Truck With Spiky Wheels Over The Corpses Of My Enemies While Also Wearing A Fairy Princess Dress, Is That A Gender

6. I Realize The Historic Origins of This Practice Are Sexist, But I Would Like to Bring Back the Thing Where Menstruating Women Retreat To A Comfortable Tent Far From Everyone Else's Bullshit

7. When Will Men Realize That Hearty Back-Slaps And Arm-Punches Are The Only Kind of Flirting I Know How To Do (Because I Was Inexplicably Socialized As A Closeted Frat Boy From The 1990s)

8. When Will Men Realize That Simply Being Polite Is Not An Invitation To Fuck

9. When Will Men Realize A Goddamn Thing

10. Why Is A Suit Just Called A Suit When A Man Wears It, But a Pantsuit When a Woman Wears It?

11. Relatedly: Why Do "Three-Piece Suits" For Women Come With A Random Extraneous Skirt and No Waistcoat? Do They Think This Is Some Kind Of GAME?

12. Also Relatedly: Why Do So Many Women's Trousers Have Blind Pockets and No Goddamn Belt Loops? WHERE THE FUCK AM I SUPPOSED TO PUT MY THUMBS WHEN I'M TRYING TO LOOK CASUAL?

13. Asexuality Is A Perfectly Legitimate Sexuality And Let's Be Real, It May In Fact Be The Only Justifiable One

14. I Urgently Need Scientists to Develop Swimsuits And Winter Sleepwear That I Can Pee From Without Taking The Whole Damn Thing Off

15. Maybe Incels Would Be More Fuckable If They Didn't All Look Like Week-Old Hairballs Suddenly Discovered Under The Couch

16. Are My Playful Misandry And My Playful Misogyny Simply Smokescreens for My Sincere Dislike of Most People?

17. Counterpoint: Is Playfully Misanthropic A Gender In Itself?

18. I Don't Have "Girl Friends" and "Guy Friends," I Have "Friends Who Will Listen To A Detailed Description of My Morning Dump" and "Other"

19. When Will Disney Finally Make A Movie About A Princess Being Ousted From Power And Forced To Learn About Collective Self-Government

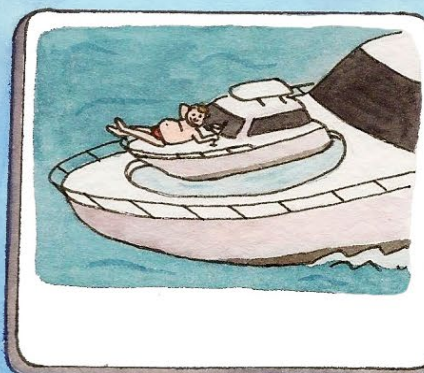
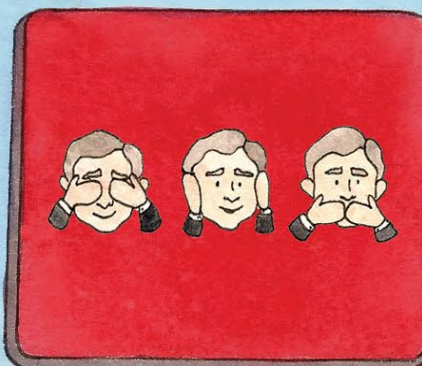
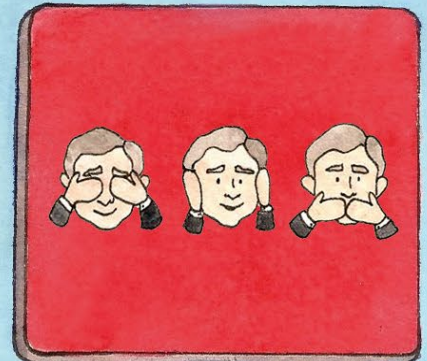
20. Much Like ICE, Gender Categories Should Be Abolished Rather Than Reformed



Memory

Test Your Bush Atrocity Recollection Skills

Can you keep George W. Bush's crimes from slowly disappearing from your recollection? Each card depicts a horrendous thing done by Bush. There should be two cards depicting each bad thing. Place all the cards image-side down. On your turn, flip over two. If you get a match, you keep them. If you don't, turn them back over. When it's your turn, you'll need to remember which atrocities you saw, so that you can figure out where the pairs are! When all the cards have been taken, the person with the largest pile of criminal wrongdoing "wins."

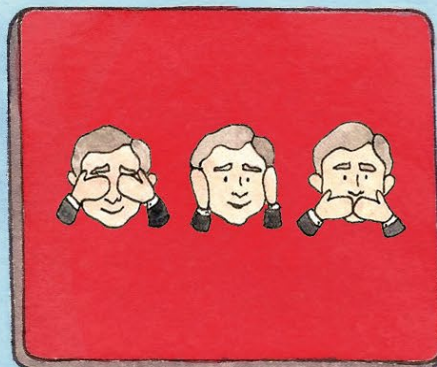
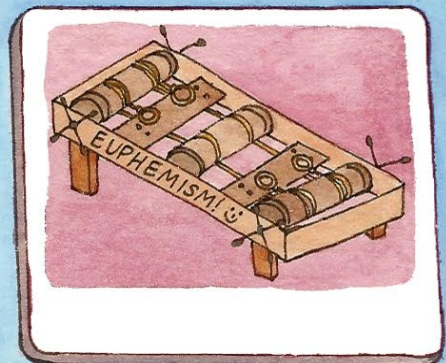
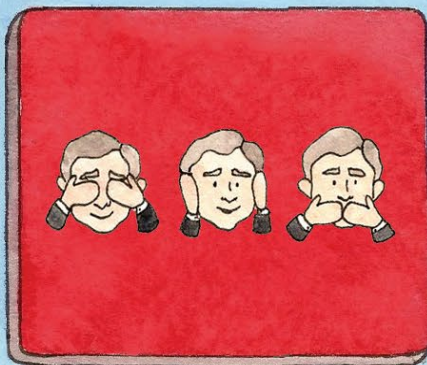
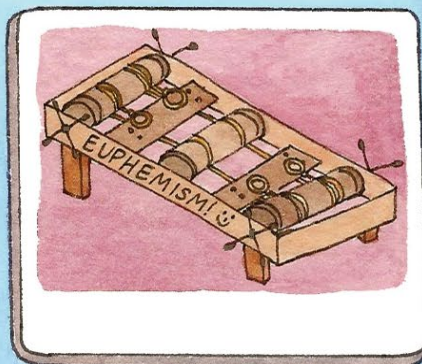
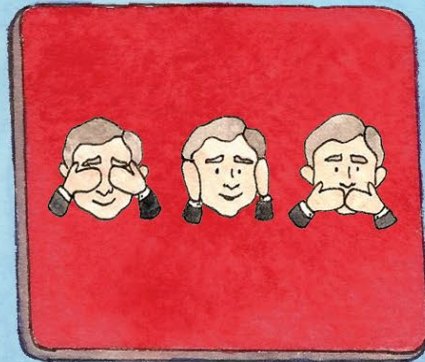
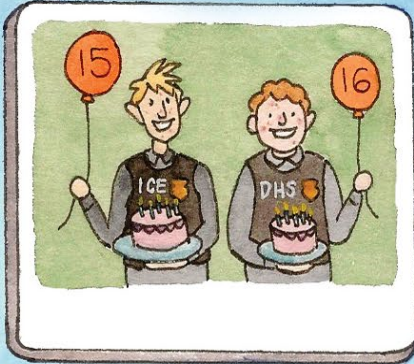


CARDS

Abu Ghraib ♦ Imaginary WMDs and the illegal war in Iraq ♦ Hurricane Katrina ♦ Indefinite detention, extraordinary rendition, and enhanced interrogation techniques ♦ Creation of ICE and DHS ♦ Patriot Act and warrantless surveillance ♦ The eternal war in Afghanistan ♦ BAPCPA, the bankrupt "reform" act that has helped drown the middle class ♦ Obscene tax cuts for the rich ♦ Guantanamo



Make some
additional
cards of your
own! There's
no shortage of
possibilities!





The Significance of

J20

BY VANESSA A. BEE

ELIZABETH LAGESSE AND MIKE WEBERMANN PLANNED to mark the Inauguration of Donald J. Trump with a day of protest in Washington. They lived together in Baltimore, mostly to accommodate Elizabeth's employment as a graduate researcher and developer at John Hopkins University. That position was ending, though, which opened the door for new opportunities. Mike was the director of public education and grassroots activism at an animal rights organization, but he hoped to start his own project, which could be done from anywhere. The couple hoped to relocate to the West Coast not long after Inauguration Day. The morning of January 20th, 2017, Elizabeth and Mike put on some black clothes and rode down to Washington, D.C., unaware that this day would upend their lives for the next 18 months.

Together, Elizabeth and Mike had moderate experience protesting. Mike grew up in the D.C. area and, as a teenager, participated in the antiwar movement against the American invasion of Iraq in 2002. In later years, his advocacy centered more around environmental policy. Back in her home state of California, Elizabeth had participated in direct actions around public health issues and expanding immigrant rights, often in the context of academia. Formative parts of their romantic courtship had involved joining together to protest. Early on, they joined the Black Lives Matter movement following the police

killing of Freddie Gray. Protesting was part of their being. So heading out to protest on January 20th seemed natural to Elizabeth and Mike. Trump embodied a direct threat to their community and to every social justice cause they cared about. They felt it was important for the world to see his administration resisted from Day One. And if showing up accomplished nothing else, then at the very least, their bodies would contribute to a crowd bound to draw attention away from Trump.

THERE WAS POTENTIAL FOR RECORD-BREAKING CROWDS on Inauguration Day, but Washington D.C. could handle it. Despite being smaller than many American urban areas, Washington is the mecca for protestors. Every year, people of all creeds, ages, and backgrounds descend upon the District of Columbia to exercise their First Amendment rights. Between 2014 and 2016, the city saw at least 2,436 demonstrations, a number that does not include protests for which it did not issue permits. This would mean an average of at least two daily protests for 1,095 consecutive days—except that almost half of these took place in 2016 alone. Though firm data is not yet available, the tally for 2017 might very well surpass these numbers.

This intensive protest schedule has created a well-oiled permitting

and policing machine. Despite the complications that can arise from protesting in a jurisdiction with oversight between the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD), Capitol Police, National Park Police, and over 30 additional police agencies, local activist organizations have extensive experience in coordinating protests and permits. Protest organizers routinely warn the police force on duty of how much civil disobedience can be expected. In the same vein, seasoned activists understand what behaviors and circumstances risk arrest. This coordinated dance rarely leaves either side surprised.

Soon after Election Day, a horizontally-led collective of radicals announced the launch of Disrupt J20. They described the project as “a series of massive direct actions that will shut down the Inauguration ceremonies and any related celebrations and the city itself.” The collective had strong anarchist leanings, but pledged “respect for a diversity of tactics and the plans of other groups.” In that spirit, the collective lent support to planning efforts by affinity groups and individuals oriented towards social justice, whose protests plans varied in degree of confrontation.

In the weeks preceding the Inauguration, MPD learned a vast amount of information regarding the J20 demonstrations. The Department is well known for monitoring social media pages, surveilling activists, and infiltrating planning sessions with undercover officers. Moreover, much of Disrupt J20’s activities were public. The collective led massive planning meetings, maintained a sophisticated website, and shared schedules and rally points. The group also openly held fundraisers and press conferences.

MPD was aware of the possibility for unprecedented crowds, and reinforced its ranks by borrowing around 3,200 police officers from other law enforcement agencies. It had routes for the permitted marches, and some information about the direct actions scheduled around entry checkpoints. It was aware that, typical of large protests in the District, there would be street medics and journalists with identifying markers. MPD knew, from the Disrupt J20 agenda and planning meetings, that the protest contingents would vary in focus, size, and degree of subversiveness. It also knew that there would be a

handful of non-permitted marches—code for *black blocs*.

A black bloc is a tactic rather than any fixed ideological group. It describes the practice of demonstrating in a group anonymized by its all-black attire, often accompanied by face-coverings. While black blocs are fluid and can be joined by anyone, the groups most partial to the tactic tend to be anarchist coalitions like Antifa (named for its anti-fascist politics) and other groups skeptical of private property and state authority.

M

IKE HAD REASSURED ELIZABETH THAT ARRESTS for protesting were rare in D.C. If the situation became uncomfortable, they would have plenty of opportunities to leave. Mike had seen MPD give ample warning if arrests were imminent. He could even think of many instances where activists expected, and even hoped for, arrests that never materialized. The city’s police force had become more cautious after 2002, the year that Police Chief Charles Ramsey and his assistant Peter Newsham allowed the illegal arrests of almost 400 individuals near Pershing Park during demonstrations against the World Bank. The protesters responded by suing the city in civil court for MPD’s violation of their constitutional rights. The backlash from that chapter in MPD history was still fresh: Only in the spring of 2016 was the last outstanding lawsuit finally settled. In the end, the city paid nearly \$14 million in attorney fees and payouts.

The civil lawsuits filed by the protesters after the Pershing Park arrests led to crucial reforms in how local law enforcement managed First Amendment assemblies in the District. Notably, MPD guidelines no longer authorized officers to “kettle” protesters (a practice of encircling and detaining protestors abruptly). Instead, officers were required to give protesters substantial warnings, time, and space to disperse and avoid arrest. The reforms also required MPD to make an effort to identify individuals rather than detaining indiscriminate groups. In the intervening 14 years since Pershing Square, protest-re-





All photographs courtesy of Sarah Hailey

lated arrests and criminal charges had become an anomaly in Washington. Nevertheless, the *Disrupt J20* organizers cautioned protesters to exercise their best judgment.

The morning of January 20th, 2017, was gray and cold—the menace of rain and tense energy charged the thick air. In their black clothing, Elizabeth and Mike melted seamlessly into the black bloc. Minutes before their arrival downtown, some individuals had popped out of the march and smashed some store windows nearby. Police officers on site observed the window-smashers, but took no steps to intervene or pursue the responsible individuals. But then, just as Elizabeth and Mike began marching in earnest, the police proceeded to kettle the black bloc.

It happened fast.

Dozens of MPD officers aggressively funneled the protest off-route and encircled everyone, purposely blocking all individuals from exiting the march. With the protesters trapped in a ring of riot gear, the officers enthusiastically discharged pepper spray and sting balls at the protestors, like Silly String at a birthday party. Elizabeth and Mike had been in the protest for precisely nine minutes when MPD arrested them, along with 232 other protesters and bystanders.

If the J20 protesters in the black bloc do not recall hearing amplified dispersal orders, it's because none were ever given. One MPD commander would admit as much while testifying in court later. The protest was not “static,” he claimed, so the mandated warnings—giving protestors the opportunity to leave and avoid arrest—would not have been effective.

But the so-called exception cited by the commander simply does not exist. Failure to give warnings because a protest is not sufficiently “static” is neither allowed by the First Amendment Rights and Police Standards Act of 2004, nor by the Department’s own standard operating procedures for First Amendment assemblies. But this hiccup did not

stop MPD from pressing forward. In a press conference held the afternoon of January 20th, now-Interim Chief of Police Peter Newsham announced his intent to charge each protester with felony rioting. This was worrisome, but there was yet hope that things would blow over once the cameras were off the Inauguration. Newsham’s threats were only as good as a prosecutor’s willingness to execute them.

Most chief prosecutors in the country are elected by voters (with the exception of a few jurisdictions in which the governor or the state Supreme Court appoints them). But Washington is a unique jurisdiction. Because it sits on the District of Columbia, a federal plot of land, the city does not enjoy the same degree of independence and congressional representation as the 50 states. This lack of complete self-governance and autonomy extends to the local criminal system. While the District of Columbia has its own penal code, the majority of its criminal statutes—including all adult felonies—are enforced by the federal prosecutors in the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the District of Columbia, instead of an elected district attorney. On the day of Elizabeth’s and Mike’s arrest, the U.S. Attorney in charge of that office was Channing D. Phillips, an Obama appointee.

The defense bar waited breathlessly to see what would come of the J20 arrests. Certainly, the federal prosecutors could have laughed Newsham’s charges out of the room. Prosecutors of all stripes—federal, state, or local—share a nearly unfettered discretion to pursue charges or let people go. More than that, they benefit from an extraordinary degree of deference, such that their decisions are seldom subject to review or challenge. Together, these norms imbue them with immense power. Prosecutors can press charges to send a message, even where this threatens the constitutional rights of law-abiding citizens. They can decide to pursue the gravest of charges every time, and prioritize convictions and wins over fairness and justice.

But prosecutors can also choose erring on the side of leniency and render unjust statutes obsolete by refusing to enforce them. Or by adopting a culture of transparency in what they choose to charge and how they negotiate pleas. Or by refusing cases tainted by sloppy police practices.

In this case, charging hundreds of individuals with felonies for a few smashed windows would have been unusual, if not objectively excessive. The numbers also created some impracticality to pursuing each individual this aggressively. And in the background of all this lingered the high probability that the mass arrests were no more legal than the Pershing Park arrests.

Nevertheless, the federal prosecutors opted to indict 217 of the ar-

restees with a litany of charges: conspiring to riot, inciting a riot, and actually rioting, along with several counts of property destruction. For some defendants, the charges carried over 70 years of prison time.

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Due to the sheer number of defendants, the evidence available for each case was voluminous. The prosecution had obtained testimony from nearby witnesses confirming that masked individuals had smashed some windows, and that individuals were seen changing out of black clothes. It had footage of *Disrupt J20* meetings in which marches were discussed, and video of the actual black bloc on Inauguration Day. In one video, a photojournalist livestreamed the events while commenting excitedly. The prosecution also had the many items seized: 188 personal cellphones to which the police held on for weeks; the backpacks of street medics full of medical supplies; a black flag and other anti-fascist symbols seized from the raid of a *Disrupt J20* activist's home days after the march, as well as the computer on which he'd kept notes related to the protest planning; and whatever social media data Facebook, Twitter, and Google had handed over to law enforcement.

But quantity is not the same as quality. The prosecution had set out to prove the existence of a conspiracy, but nothing in the many hours

of confiscated footage and hundreds of electronic devices showed the protesters entering an advance agreement to engage in criminal activity, or affirmatively encouraging others to do so. The officers who witnessed the window-smashing had neither chased nor identified the individuals responsible at the time. Since then, no other conclusive evidence had materialized to prove that any of the arrested protesters had personally taken a crow bar to any window on January 20th.

Taken together, the seized evidence amounted to little more than banal objects and innocuous activity. Without identifying information, the only tangible justification for the mass arrest was an assembly of people exercising their free speech rights in the vicinity of a crime scene. In an independent report assessing the police's conduct on In-

auguration Day, the Police Foundation appeared skeptical that MPD could show probable cause for each defendant's arrest. The prosecution lacked conclusive proof that any specific defendant had either rioted and destroyed property, or conspired to do so. Its case was thin.

Despite the paucity of evidence, the prosecution aggressively pursued its case. In June 2017, five days before a status hearing scheduled for Elizabeth's case, the U.S. Attorney's Office approached Elizabeth with a deal that would allow both her and Mike to move on with their lives, while guaranteeing the prosecutor two wins. Her charges would be reduced to a misdemeanor with no jail time and a \$500 fine if, and only if, Elizabeth convinced Mike to accept the same deal by the day of the status hearing. Otherwise, the deal was off the table.

Deals like the one offered to Elizabeth and Mike are common. More than 95 percent of all criminal cases are pleaded out. Prosecutors can play defendants off each other, offering pleas and sweet incentives in exchange for milder consequences, so long as the defendant offers something in return: a guilty plea, information to resolve facts unknown to the prosecution, testimony to take down other defendants. Pleas reflect a reluctance to go to trial. Part of the story is that it's very risky for the prosecutor chasing high conviction num-

bers to lay out its evidence and actually convince a judge or jury that a conviction is warranted. Juries can be unpredictable, particularly when the defendants look like the J20 protesters: mostly white and mostly young. Trial is costly in both money and time for all parties involved.

The J20 case demonstrates how the risks of trial create a perverse incentive for prosecutors. In their eagerness to avoid going to trial, prosecutors are motivated to threaten extravagantly high sentences, and then frame smaller pleas as the reasonable choice. Plea deals like the one offered to Elizabeth reveal just how insignificant the prosecutor actually finds the gravity of the crime or defendant's involvement, but that makes no difference: no regulations or professional ethics rules seriously restrict prosecutors from pursuing excessive punishment.

These prosecutorial theatrics have real negative effects on the lives of defendants, even ones as comparatively privileged as the J20 defendants. Elizabeth and Mike were forced to indefinitely suspend their plans to move to California and to relocate to the pricier Washington, D.C., where their case was ongoing. Some friends were aware of their arrest, but awaiting federal trial under the threat of decades of prison time was not exactly a relatable experience. Elizabeth and Mike found it difficult to explain why they had been arrested in the first place, where things stood with their legal case, and to convey just how much stress the limbo caused.

Of course, dozens of other defendants were in their situation. But unlike civil class actions, where plaintiffs are encouraged to share information with one another, facing prosecution in the criminal system is an isolating experience. Although the 217 protesters were arrested together and indicted based on the same incident, their cases were independent of one another. Each defendant had their own lawyer, whose job it was to protect the interests of their individual client. In this environment, it's hard to know who to trust. Most lawyers admonished their clients to avoid discussing case strategy with other J20 defendants.

But the J20 defendants took a different approach, resisting the atomized advice of their individual lawyers. In a show of solidarity, they circulated a pledge to resist the prosecutor's charges, and to not harm co-defendants if one chose to take a plea deal. This commitment was purely a matter of honor, but it generally held up. More than 20 individuals would eventually take a plea, but none testified against the other defendants. Elizabeth and Mike rejected the prosecution's deal out of principle. To eke a win out of the remaining 194 defendants, the prosecution would have to try their cases before a jury.

THE FIRST TRIAL DATES WERE SET FOR DECEMBER 2017 and June 2018. In court, the prosecution focused on the defendants' conduct to argue that the cases did not implicate the First Amendment. "This is DC. We know protests. We know dissent. They can be powerful. They can be beautiful. They can effect change," said Assistant U.S. Attorney Jennifer Kerkhoff to the jury. "What you will see and hear in this case, this isn't a protest."

Lenese Herbert, a law professor at Howard University, says that this approach—framing a given civil action as something other than a "protest" in a bid to circumvent the protections afforded by the right to free speech—is a relatively new trend, although it has been applied to Black neighborhoods for much longer. Attacking protest *per se* is not a winning strategy. "Protesting is as American as apple

pie," Herbert says. One could imagine a universe in which the constitutional protections afforded by the First Amendment (which protects speech) and the Fourth Amendment (which protects individuals from government searches and seizures) are combined to create a sort of super-right to protest. But as the J20 charges demonstrate, this is not the case at all.

In the end, Elizabeth and Mike were wise to hold out against the prosecution's proffered plea deal. In unusual fashion, the two judges presiding over the trials issued decisions that would severely limit the prosecution's ability to secure wins against the remaining defendants, including Elizabeth and Mike. Before the first trial even concluded, Judge Leibovitz dismissed the felony charge of riot incitement for lacking legal grounds. In the second trial, it came to light that the prosecution had improperly withheld evidence that could have helped the defendants. The prosecution had withheld from the defendants that footage of a Disrupt J20 planning meeting had been secretly filmed and fed to the police by far-right group Project Veritas. Worse yet, the prosecutors had not disclosed that several minutes of the video were edited out. The footage cut contained commentary by the person filming, which could have helped the defendants' argument that they were not part of any pre-planned effort to riot.

AS PUNISHMENT FOR THESE UNDERHANDED DEALINGS by the prosecution, Judge Morin not only dismissed the conspiracy charge, but also prohibited the prosecution from pursuing this charge in any future related cases. The first jury acquitted all six defendants in December 2017. Six months later, a second jury acquitted another five defendants. Its hands tied by Judge Morin's order to drop the conspiracy charges, the U.S. Attorney's Office dismissed every remaining case.

Despite the validation from Judges Leibovitz and Morin—confirming that the prosecution had pursued charges it could not support, and that it had actively withheld exculpatory information from the defense—the federal prosecutors faced virtually no consequences for risking decades of the J20 defendants' lives. In fact, after the trials concluded, Assistant U.S. Attorney Kerkhoff was promoted to lead the office's Felony Major Crimes division. In addition to complete autonomy in how they charge people, prosecutors enjoy near-absolute immunity for their choices. External checks on prosecutorial power are weak.

The unchecked behavior of the prosecutors in the J20 trials is indicative of a larger problem. In her book *Arbitrary Justice*, Angela J. Davis, who teaches law at American University, writes that a 2003 study "discovered that judges found prosecutorial misconduct in over two thousand cases, in which they dismissed charges, reversed convictions, or reduced sentences. In hundreds of additional cases, judges believed that the prosecutorial behavior was inappropriate but affirmed the convictions under the *harmless error* doctrine." State bars, the other potential arbiter of ethical conduct among lawyers, are even less effective. Since 1970, state authorities have disciplined only a few dozen prosecutors.

The overall lack of consequences makes it difficult to accurately assess the prevalence of the worst misconduct—practices like prosecutions without probable cause, using abusive charging and plea bargaining tactics, concealing exculpatory evidence, or introducing evidence that is false or obtained impermissibly. "Ironically," Davis says, "all of those killings of unarmed young black men—although some women too—and the failure of prosecutors to hold the police accountable has served to educate the public about the power of prosecutors and how important it is to hold them accountable."

Thankfully, there are some available means of increasing accountability. Davis credits movements like Black Lives Matter, and the increasing interest in criminal justice issues taken by civil rights organizations with broader missions, for improving public education on the subject. This raised consciousness among voters has allowed the Left to pursue accountability and reforms through local prosecutor elections, with some success. While career prosecutors cannot be voted out of office, changes at the top of the office can have a real impact in the direction of the prosecutor's office. When given the chance, voters have responded positively to the option of a less aggressive prosecution strategy. In Philadelphia, for example, progressives helped elect former civil rights defense attorney Larry Krasner. Importantly, Krasner promised that he would "decline to prosecute cases forwarded by the police that lack support by sufficient and legally obtained evidence."

There may also be opportunities for local jurisdictions controlled by liberal majorities to experiment with reforms in how the prosecution and defense interact with each other. Some advocates have pushed for "open file" reform, the idea that prosecutors should turn over a defendant's whole file as part of the discovery process. Alternatively, the judiciary could be reformed to become more active in the fact-finding process—for instance, through the creation of a specialized court official entrusted with unrestricted access to the prosecutor's complete defendant file. Whatever precise reforms we settle for, a more transparent system could better protect our constitutional rights under the First and Fourth Amendments, which in turn would yield more just outcomes for everyone.

Unfortunately, the democratic path to reform faces even greater hurdles at the federal level. Each of the 93 U.S. Attorneys in charge of the federal prosecutors around the country is appointed by the President of the United States, typically with the recommendation of the local Senator, and serves at the pleasure of the President. Their offices are part of the Department of Justice and typically answer to the Attorney General, who himself is a Presidential appointee. Unlike the chiefs of their offices, career federal prosecutors enjoy many of the strong protections extended to federal employees and can serve for decades, spanning several administrations.

Hypothetically, concerned citizens could complain about their local federal prosecutors to their congressional representatives. But as Davis explains, prosecutors do most of their work behind closed doors. This makes it difficult for ordinary voters to access the information that would allow them to understand the true extent of prosecutorial misbehavior, let alone have a real say in who leads the

local federal office. In other words, federal prosecutors are even less accountable to the jurisdictions they represent than their state and local counterparts. This setup prevents us from demanding accountability from federal prosecutors — a hindrance felt even more starkly in the District of Columbia. A progressive President could make a real difference, particularly if she could be pressured into nominating not only a progressive Attorney General, but also a progressive advocate to lead each U.S. Attorney Office. Although most of the prosecutions occur at the state and local level, the Department of Justice's centralized nature could help revolutionize the nature of prosecution nationally.

But even in the most hopeful of scenarios, including a progressive administration, the J20 trials are not the last time that the right to free speech will be threatened. It is also probably not the last time the Left will face a hyper-aggressive prosecution of what was, and should continue to be, constitutionally protected activity. D.C.'s federal prosecutors failed to harshly punish the J20 protesters this time around, but their attempt should be a warning shot. If the Left is serious about preserving its right to organize against reactionary forces in the streets, now is the time to give real thought to how much discretion and how little accountability federal prosecutors benefit from. Collectively, we are all too complacent about this reality.



IN JUNE 2017, ELIZABETH BECAME A PLAINTIFF IN A CIVIL lawsuit filed by the ACLU. The complaint alleges that the District of Columbia, Chief Newsham, and several MPD officers violated the First and Fourth Amendment, and that their conduct amounted to assault and false imprisonment. The lawsuit does not name the prosecutors in her case. Elizabeth hopes that it will give the J20 defendants a chance to see some accountability, and ensure that what she went through does not happen to anyone else. The J20 protesters were lucky, even though the Inauguration Day cases derailed their lives for the first 18 months of Trump's administration. They can rest easier now, knowing the criminal case is closed once and for all, even as the ACLU civil suit goes on. Still, it would be naïve to conclude that the U.S. Attorney's Office walked away empty-handed. For at least 234 people who showed up on January 20th, protesting may never feel quite the same again. "It really does chill speech when you're afraid that what you say, and the details of what you wear, and how you look, and which march you're at, and how you act [will be used against you]," says Elizabeth. "These are all things that were criminalized in this case." ♣

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THREE WEEKS INTO THE MINERS' STRIKE - AND THEY COULD LOSE EVERYTHING, IF I DON'T STOP FLY BOY HERE. AND LITTLE MISS LOVESTRUCK, WHOEVER SHE IS.

THANKS SO MUCH FOR HELPING ME, DOLL. YOU'RE THE BERRIES! WHEN WE GET THESE AERIAL PHOTOS I CAN FINISH MY ARTICLE ON THE STRIKE.



OF COURSE! ANYTHING FOR THE CAUSE.

THE RIP-ROARING RADICAL EXPLOITS OF

RED ROSE

SOCIALIST ADVENTURESS

THE MINING CAMP'S JUST OVER THAT RIDGE!



JEEZ, WHOEVER LITTLE MISS LOVESTRUCK IS, SHE'S GIVING AWAY THE FARM!

THANKS, DOLL! WE'LL GET A GOOD LOOK AT THE STRIKERS' NUMBERS, WHAT KIND OF FORTIFICATIONS THEY'VE BUILT ...FOR THE READERS BACK HOME, OF COURSE!







It's A Wonderful SOCIALIST *Life*

by GREG BELVEDERE

IHAVE A CONFESSION TO MAKE: I LOVE *It's A Wonderful Life*. You might like the movie, or you might find it cheesy. But I'm one of those people who tears up at the end of the film. Having seen it many times, I even get a bit choked up during the first half, watching the set up for those end moments. I would wager most people don't have this reaction. Probably even fewer people are like me and get emotional at the points when the socialist message of the movie comes through the clearest. Because at its core *It's A Wonderful Life* is a movie about socialism and how socialist values can triumph over capital. It makes a more thorough—though at times subtle—case for socialism than any piece of American popular culture I can think of and it contains as many lessons about solidarity and collective action as it does about the kind of holiday morality we usually associate with it.

I'm not the first person to point this out. When the holidays come around, you sometimes see an article that briefly mentions the movie's economic or even socialist message. But I want to take a deeper dive. People have called it communist propaganda since it came out. It caught the attention of both the FBI and the House Un-American Activities Committee. They did not like the fact that the movie

portrayed the capitalist Henry F. Potter so negatively. Indeed, Potter is one of the classic villains of American cinema. He is also, I would argue, an accurate portrayal of what is wrong with capitalism. Despite his considerable wealth, he seems to have no other interest than accumulating even more money at the expense of Bedford Falls' poorest citizens. He has no friends or family. He owns slums, department stores, the bus line and eventually the bank which he uses to squeeze people even more, so he can own even more. Yet he never seems happy.

Then we have the protagonists: George Bailey and the Bailey Building and Loan. George fights to keep this business going because he believes that Bedford Falls needs it, so that people have a place to go for loans and they don't need to crawl to Potter. We get the impression that his father started the business for this purpose. This is one of the major conflicts taking place in this movie—the fight between the Bailey Building and Loan and Potter.

This institution that George Bailey repeatedly makes sacrifices to save is at the very least an attempt at a "socialist business." For some residents of Bedford Falls, it offers a way to finance the building of a new home so they don't have to live in Potter's slums. For others, it is a place they can keep their money knowing it will get invested back

into their community. We don't have all the details on this fictional company's operating practices, but we can get a good picture by looking at actual building and loan companies and paying attention to some key scenes from the movie.

According to Investopedia, "building and loan associations are usually mutually held, meaning that depositors and borrowers can direct the financial goals of the organization." So people who deposit or borrow money with the Bailey Building and Loan have some kind of say in its operations. This is the basis of democratic socialist institutions. But it also presents a weak point for capital to exploit. When we look at the board it is made up of local businessmen, including Potter. I would estimate that these men deposited large amounts of money into the building and loan, which has given them seats. At one point we learn that Peter Bailey put Potter on the board in an attempt to placate him, a move he seems to regret. To make the institu-

and living and dying in this community. Well, is it too much to have them work and pay and live and die in a couple of decent rooms and a bath? Anyway, my father didn't think so. People were human beings to him, but to you, a warped, frustrated old man, they're cattle. Well, in my book he died a much richer man than you'll ever be!

This speech impresses even the board of local businessmen. They decide not to liquidate the building and loan so long as George takes over for his father. Although George wants nothing more than to get out of Bedford Falls, he stays because he knows what it would mean for his hometown.

WE SEE MORE OF THIS SOLIDARITY AT WORK IN the bank run scene. A larger bank calls the loans of both the BBL and the local bank. Afraid that the BBL will go bust, worried customers crowd outside



tion truly socialist, the Baileys would have to change how they award seats, but the building and loan still has a collective element to it.

Potter can't stand the Building and Loan. Mostly because it represents economic activity he can't control, but also because the very idea of it is antithetical to his view of the world. After Peter Bailey dies, the board meets to decide who should succeed him as head of the BBL. Potter calls to liquidate the BBL and complains that it gives out loans too easily to people and that this creates "a discontented rabble instead of a thrifty working class." Of course, this kind of argument has not disappeared. You can hear a whole array of right-wing pundits make similar claims today about how working people just need to work harder, or how they have a culture that does not value work. George Bailey had a response that gets me as choked up as the graveyard scene gets some people

What'd you say just a minute ago?... They had to wait and save their money before they even ought to think of a decent home. Wait! Wait for what? Until their children grow up and leave them? Until they're so old and broken-down that they... [sic] Do you know how long it takes a working man to save \$5,000? Just remember this, Mr. Potter, that this rabble you're talking about . . . they do most of the working and paying

the door looking to get their money out while they still can. Potter sees this as an opportunity to buy the bank and the BBL. He sees people panicking and offers to buy their shares for half of what they are worth, thinking they would rather get half than lose everything if either the bank or the BBL goes under. In the case of the bank, the scheme works and Potter takes over. But when it comes to the building and loan George Bailey makes a passionate plea for solidarity that reminds everyone their well being is tied to that of their neighbors.

You're thinking of this place all wrong. As if I had the money back in a safe. The money's not here. Your money's in Joe's house... and in the Kennedy house, and Mrs. Macklin's house, and a hundred others. Why, you're lending them the money to build, and then, they're going to pay it back to you as best they can. Now what are you going to do? Foreclose on them?... I beg of you not to do this thing. If Potter gets hold of this Building and Loan there'll never be another decent house built in this town. He's already got charge of the bank. He's got the bus line. He's got the department stores. And now he's after us. Why? Well, it's very simple. Because we're cutting in on his business, that's why. And because he wants to keep you living in his slums and paying the kind of rent he decides. Joe, you lived in one of his houses, didn't you? Well,

have you forgotten? Have you forgotten what he charged you for that broken-down shack? Ed. You know, you remember last year when things weren't going so well, and you couldn't make your payments. You didn't lose your house, did you? Do you think Potter would have let you keep it? Don't you see what's happening? Potter isn't selling. Potter's buying! And why? Because we're panicky and he's not. That's why. He's picking up some bargains. Now, we can get through this thing all right. We've got to stick together, though. We've got to have faith in each other.

At this point people start complaining that they need money to pay their bills before the bank opens up again. Mary Bailey offers to use her and George's honeymoon money to tide them over. This is one of many times George has sacrificed his own desire to see the broader world so he can save the little slice of it he has seen already. We see the solidarity of the working people of Bedford Falls prevent the capitalist villain from making their lives more difficult.

We get a glimpse of how terrible the town would become without the BBL later in the film when, George sees what it would be like if he had never been born. No longer Bedford Falls, "Pottersville" shows what happens when capital gets its way. On the surface it seems a much more lively place to live. Instead of the sleepy Norman Rockwell town, we see a place with an active nightlife. (Mary Bailey is an unmarried librarian, which is apparently the worst fate that could conceivably befall a woman.) But a closer look reveals how much the citizens of Pottersville suffer under the stress of a place dominated by unrestrained capital. Bailey Park—the development of low cost homes that George built—is a graveyard. The friends and neighbors he helped to get out of the slums still live there and their personal lives have suffered because of it. His friend Ernie the cab driver—who Potter complained should not have gotten a loan—is now divorced. No doubt his marriage could not stand the extra economic stress he went through. Bert the police officer goes from being a friendly figure to someone quick to draw his gun on George (who he thinks is mentally ill). Indeed, we see a lot more law enforcement in Pottersville to protect property rights and deal with the unrest caused by income inequality.

The friendly neighborhood bar run by Mr. Martini in the Bedford Falls universe is run by one of his employees in Pottersville. The crowd here looks either callous and well-off or beaten down and mean, looking to drown their sorrows more than celebrate life. In Pottersville, Nick the bartender squirts a panhandling Mr. Gower with soda. The Nick of Bedford Falls would never do that, having shown concern for a crying George Bailey. Pottersville Nick makes homophobic cracks at George and Clarence the guardian angel, after Clarence mentions angels and tries to order some mulled wine. The two soon get kicked out for not fitting in. Though I'm sure Bedford Falls had its share of intolerance, when economic times are bad people become even more susceptible to bigotry.

The juxtaposition between the two versions of this community seem as relevant as ever. Due to the rampant exploitation of capital, many small towns that used to look like Bedford Falls now look far worse than Pottersville, which at least had jazz clubs. Instead, they are some kind of ruin of their former selves. We have a president whose real estate background and mean spirit brings to mind Henry Potter. A president who leverages the kind of bigotry that becomes easier to pander to in tough times. In fact, Trump almost makes Henry Potter look like George Bailey—a Potter presidency might be preferable to this one.

The film is also about the decision people make about whether to pursue wealth or to build a better world for all. George wants noth-

ing more than to travel. He dreams of building grand structures for everyone to see, monuments to his own ego. But whenever he has to make a choice between this dream and helping the people of his town, he chooses the latter. On some level he realizes these dreams pale next to the homes he has built in Bedford Falls and the difference he has made in the lives of his neighbors. Potter tries to capitalize on George's ambition. He flatters George and tells him that a bright young man deserves more than the average yokel. He offers him a job with a comfortable salary and the chance to travel like he has always wanted. When asked what will happen to the building and loan if he takes the job, Potter tells him not to worry. A lot of people would jump at this job offer and feel totally justified doing so. I can hear the refrain, "I need to do what is best for me and my family." Of course Bailey declines the offer and tells Potter off... again.

We are reminded here that we should not measure ourselves by Potter's or capital's standards. We should not mark success according to salary, notoriety, or the perks we can gain for ourselves but rather by how we serve something greater. Not that building a better world requires everyone to wear a hair shirt. But we can learn something from George Bailey. You can't buy or scare off somebody willing to make some personal sacrifices.

DESPITE HAVING GENDER ROLES AND RACIAL caricatures that fall in line with the times, we do see some ethnic solidarity in the film. Bedford Falls has a large number of Italian immigrants. The film's director Frank Capra was an Italian immigrant who dealt with his fair share of discrimination. John Wayne once said of him, "I'd like to take that little Dago son of a bitch and tear him into a million pieces and throw him into the ocean and watch him float back to Sicily where he belongs." We see this racist attitude towards Italians reflected in the film when Potter ridicules George Bailey for "playing nursemaid to a bunch of garlic eaters" by helping them get loans for new homes. But the Baileys seem to love their Italian neighbors and take great joy in christening the Martini family's new home—even as they drive home in a broken jalopy while their friends have brand new cars. As an Italian-American, *It's A Wonderful Life* always provided a good depiction of how things have changed for the group I find myself in, and taught why we should do our best to welcome other newcomers the way the Baileys welcomed their Italian neighbors.

Some people might object to the labeling of *It's A Wonderful Life* as "socialist." I know that my Trump-voting uncle loves the movie. How socialist could it possibly be? To me, the socialist themes are obvious, and I've wondered why it's not widely recognized this way. Why does my uncle identify with George Bailey even though he sounds a lot more like Potter when we discuss economic issues? The first reason is that no matter how socialized in structure an organization like the Bailey Building and Loan is, most people don't recognize any kind of financial institution as socialist. It doesn't matter that institutions like this and the solidarity that people in Bedford Falls show come a lot closer to what most socialists have in mind than gulags and bread lines. Right-wingers who like the movie just see George Bailey as a kind, honest businessman and Potter as a nasty, dishonest one.

The second reason gets a bit more complicated. People see George Bailey's actions as having to do with his personal morality, not as having any kind of broader political significance. Considering that many



of the good deeds he does are not of a strictly economic or political nature, this makes sense. You can find this skepticism on both the Left and the Right. To the Right, for whom the only acceptable form of collective economic action is charity, nothing about Bailey's actions seem like socialism. They see socialism as something imposed on people by the government, and they don't think of the movie as having a socialist message because George and his neighbors act in solidarity of their own free will. Likewise, many on the Left might just see the actions of one man and nothing that constitutes a political project of any kind. It's "just" charity and interpersonal kindness. Some on the Left might make the mistake of thinking it's not socialist because it does not involve government programs.

I think this message of the film gets overlooked by both Left and Right because it asks people to look at some of their economic choices through a moral lens. While right-wingers like Potter have no trouble arguing that moral failings contribute to a person's own poverty, he would reject the idea that someone has a moral obligation to look out for the well being of others. In fact Potter does so explicitly in a scene where he suggests to Peter Bailey that he should foreclose on some people who can't make their payments. "These families have children," says Peter Bailey. "They're not my children" responds Potter.

I hesitate to criticize the Left response. I worry that it sounds too much like the centrist liberal moralizing that I find tiresome and unhelpful. I don't want to minimize the material conditions people need to grapple with and the often difficult choices they need to make in order to survive under these circumstances. I don't want to suggest the mere presence of "good" people like George Bailey can solve systemic social problems. Nor do I ignore the fact that choices don't always look as clear as they do in the movies.

BUT IF *IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE* HAS A message, it is that our lives matter. How we live them matters. What we choose to do with our talents matters. Yes, material conditions influence our decisions. But not everyone who finds himself in the same situation makes the same decision. More importantly, not every situation calls for us to look out for number one above all else. Once we reach a certain level of material wealth, it becomes harder to justify acting entirely in our own self interest, especially when it negatively affects others. Sometimes, like George Bailey, we do have a choice.

One thing I've noticed about the socialists I know is that they often find work doing something that helps others, when they could have had far more lucrative careers. They are teachers or they work at nonprofits. The half-dozen lawyers on the *Current Affairs* editorial staff could find high-paying jobs in big firms if they wanted to. If I wanted to, I could have found work that pays more than the jobs I have held (public librarian, stay-at-home dad, writer). The Henry Potters of the world will surely suggest that if someone is not rich it is because they could not hack it well enough to make a large salary. But the George Baileys of the world know better. To some extent, that seems as important to socialists as the desire for a socialized means of production. They reject capitalist values as well as capitalist economics. The George Baileys of the world might not get the extravagances Potter promises. But Potter never got the experience of mutual aid we see at the end of the film, nor any of the other things that really make for a wonderful life. ♣

[illegible]

THE CAMPUS

AS IT EXISTS IN THE MIND OF A U.S. CONSERVATIVE





CUCK·ZONE

DINING HALL

Tofu Burgers

Quinoa Shakes

Ancient Grains

FREE PALESTINE

The University of
RADICAL FEMINIST PRAXIS

WHITE TEARS
LIVE STREAM

PRONOUN
POLICE

Next time say
"they/them!"

BURKAS +
THONGS

FREE WEED

FREE LUBE +
CONDOMS

COLLEGE OF
GRIEVANCE STUDIES

Smashing the
Patriarchy 101

Microaggressions

YOU'RE SPECIAL

KNOW YOUR GENDERS

FRIENDLY REMINDER:
IT'S NOT OK TO BE WHITE

NO
H8



Learning from JAMESTOWN

BY BRIANNA RENNIX

LIKE MOST HUMANS OF MY GENERATION, I first encountered the early history of Virginia through the Disney movie *Pocahontas*. I was a dumb white kid with no knowledge of the underlying historical or political context, and I *loved* that movie, because it was about living in the forest with a bunch of animal friends, and because the girl got to rescue the guy for a change, all things which were highly appealing to me as a child. Pocahontas spent her time running through misty glades and swan-diving off cliffs into pristine lakes, which seemed like a cool way to live. So you can imagine my excitement when, a few years later, my family relocated from New Hampshire to the exact location where *Pocahontas* supposedly took place: the bit of eastern Virginia that's marketed to tourists as the "Historic Triangle," Yorktown, Williamsburg, and Jamestown.*

But my high hopes for the Virginian outdoors were shortly dashed, because it turns out that *there are no fucking cliffs in Jamestown*. There is not anything resembling a waterfall in the slightest. These were all Hollywood lies. Jamestown is a *goddamn swamp*. The land all around is flat and boggy and teeming with mosquitoes. Sometimes, in the early morning, the strong breath of the marsh settles in a kind of a golden haze over the street, and everything smells like salt and old fish.

Every few months, it felt like, my class went on a field trip to a reconstructed version of the Jamestown settlement, and watched some guy in knee-breeches make a candle, and we would then be assigned to build a popsicle-stick model of the colonists' triangular fort. At one point, a film crew showed up to make a live-action

Jamestown movie with Colin Farrell, and some random people from my school ended up in the background as extras. And then, when I was in high school, the Queen of England came on a visit to mark the 300th year since Jamestown's founding, and stayed in the fancy Williamsburg Hotel where my brother happened to be working for the summer. (I, meanwhile, was stuck manning the till at a toy store that sold tricorn hats and replica muskets and other Revolutionary War paraphernalia, which the Queen did *not* visit, probably galled by these reminders of our glorious victory over the lobsterbacks.)

The story of Jamestown was so over-taught in Virginia schools, and so over-exposed in our local tourist industry, that I came to find it tedious. But since leaving Virginia, it's actually been rather startling to me to realize how little place Jamestown has in our national mythology. Most people think that Plymouth Rock was the first permanent English settlement in North America! But Plymouth Rock was founded a good 13 years after Jamestown. Why do we have a whole holiday founded around Plymouth Rock, and none at all around Jamestown? Not to get overly sectarian about this, but the Pilgrims *fucking sucked*. So rigorous was their modesty that they covered the midriffs of their hats with belt buckles! They objected to Catholicism on the grounds that it was *too much fun*! In 1659, they straight-up BANNED CHRISTMAS and levied a fine of five shillings against anyone who tried to celebrate! (Where is Fox News' segment on this bold early salvo in the War On Christmas?) The Pilgrims are, apart from anything else, not the right mascots for a national holiday founded on conspicuous gluttony and the playing of ritual games.

I would like to propose that the story of Jamestown is a far more characteristically American story, and a far better basis for

*To locals, this part of Virginia is known as "The Peninsula." Virginia has four peninsulas, so this was a real power move on our part.

a national feast day, than the story of Plymouth Rock. After all, the architects of Jamestown were men of business. They were risk-takers. They were *disrupters*. They weren't the type of men to handle a spade, but their fingers were sensitive to the pulse of the market. They felt for that pulse unceasingly, even through unpromisingly necrotic tissue. In difficult times, they were not too proud to eat their boots. In desperate times, they were not too proud to eat each other. In the end, after several false starts, their colony encountered no problems that a cash crop and an unlimited supply of forced labor could not fix. The men of Jamestown believed in free enterprise! Surely they deserve annual offerings of undercooked turkey.

missionaries, plagued by hunger and afraid to be alone in a strange land, came to look for Don Luis at his village, Don Luis and his kinsmen chopped them all up with their own axes. This story is disturbing, and poignant, because it's easy to imagine the feelings of everyone involved: for "Don Luis," long years of alienation, anger, and heartache, buried for survival's sake beneath a veneer of ingratiation; for the Jesuits, missionary zeal giving way to terror and impotence, as they realized how very far they were from home—a realization no doubt familiar to Don Luis, who had endured the same as a child in Spain—and how ill-prepared they were to cope with the strange realities of a new land.

When the English came to Virginia nearly 40 years later, there



THE STORY OF JAMESTOWN, CAPITALIST UTOPIA

THE ENGLISH SETTLEMENT AT JAMESTOWN WAS founded in 1607, between the James and York Rivers. This wasn't the first time that Europeans had tried to settle the region: A few years earlier, a small group of colonists who had tried to settle further south in Roanoke, North Carolina, had up and vanished into thin air. And in fact, in 1570, the Spanish had made an abortive attempt to set up a mission very near to the site where Jamestown was later planted. A group of Spanish Jesuits were led there by a native guide, who had been lured or abducted from the area as a child by a Spanish trader. This Indian, named "Don Luis" by the Spanish, professed himself a devout Catholic and had spent more than a decade begging for the chance to return home to convert his kinsmen to the faith. Upon leading the Jesuits to Virginia, however, Don Luis quickly dropped his pretense of piety and returned to his people, leaving the Jesuits to fend for themselves. When the

was some vague lip-service paid to religion, but for the most part, everyone was pretty open about the fact that they were there to get rich quick. The enterprise was organized by the Virginia Company, a London-based joint-stock company that was empowered by royal charter to more or less self-govern its colonial settlements without needing to answer to anyone but its shareholders. Jamestown historian James Horn writes that, among the first batch of settlers, "between a third and a half were described as gentlemen," a small handful were craftsmen, and the rest were seamen and laborers.

Notably, agricultural know-how was *not* prioritized as an important skill among the settlers, most of whom had come to seek gold and scout for a sea route to India, and likely did not anticipate staying in the New World for more than a year or two. The settlers chose a site for their encampment that, conveniently, wasn't being used by the local Paspahegh tribe—because the site was *garbage*. Half the island was rendered uninhabitable by marshland, and there were no freshwater springs, meaning that water had to be drawn from wells that were easily polluted by the saline and brackish water of the nearby Chesapeake Bay. The wetlands thrummed with mosquitoes,

and the mosquitoes were all fat with unfamiliar blood.

Sending a bunch of feckless rich kids and some leathery sailors to an uncharted bog on the other side of the planet went about as well as you'd expect. James Horn's book *A Land As God Made It*, describing the founding of Jamestown, is filled *ad nauseam* with ominously-titled chapters like "A worlde of miseries," "Extremitie and Miserie," and "A Plantacon of Sorrowes." Within the first months of the colony's existence, wrote settler George Percy, "our men were destroyed with cruell diseases as Swellings, Flixes, Burning Fevers, and by warres, ... but for the most part they died of meere [famine]." It turned out that not having any plan for how to produce their own food had been a *poor strategic move*. Seeing

gled and was often forced to rely on trading with the Indians to survive.

But the colonists were *way* out of their depth with the Indians, who numbered about 30 tribes and were organized into a sophisticated tributary federation. The Indians were fully aware that the colonists were dangerous (Wahunsonacock, the paramount chief of the federation and dad of the real-life Pocahontas, told the settlers early on that "your coming is not for trade, but to invade my people and possess my country") but also knew that the colonists were, at the moment, weak and easily exploitable. Wahunsonacock would put embargos on food trade with the colonists in order to starve them into selling weapons to the Indians. Relations vacillated along the



how badly things were already going, the ruling council on the ground in Jamestown contemplated arranging for the gentry to return to England, leaving the lower-born colonists to their fates, while investors abroad toyed with cutting their losses and letting the whole colony die off.

A core mass of settlers at Jamestown managed to keep their bodies alive with the help of provisioning ships that travelled periodically from England to relieve their distress, but even so, conditions were miserable. In the cutthroat world of colonial enterprise, there was little solidarity. The crews of the supply ships would stay docked in the harbor, eat much of the food that was intended for the colonists, and then, having artificially increased scarcity, would jack up the price of the remaining food. During the winter of 1608, the colonists somehow managed to accidentally burn down most of their fort, leaving them at the mercy of the elements. Physically weakened, unable to successfully cultivate the land themselves, finding that fresh water was scarce and hunting poor, and with their energies constantly diverted away from settlement-building and towards gold-prospecting, the colony strug-

entire spectrum of cautious friendliness and violent attrition. The ruling council at Jamestown was constantly haunted by the prospect that the settlers (who clearly knew their leaders were incompetent) would all defect to the Indians. Four Germans among the earlier settlers had quickly got sick of the English and joined up with a local tribe, and used their inside knowledge of the settlement to help their new friends launch raids on the colonists. John Smith wrote of his fears that the greater mass of the colonists hoped to escape the colony and "live idly among the Savages."

One particularly illuminating episode occurred in 1609, when an English ship carrying supplies and a new governor was wrecked en route to Jamestown on the uninhabited Bermudas. The marooned crew discovered that the islands contained a bounty of delicious fruits and near-tame animals. Unsurprisingly, many of the men soon decided that easy living in a tropical paradise was extremely pleasant, and began to wonder if trying to make it to Virginia was *really* worth the effort. Several people were caught trying to sabotage the building of a longboat intended to reach Jamestown. One of the conspirators, Stephen Hopkins (who "had

much knowledge in the Scriptures, and could reason well therein”), proceeded to “allege substantial arguments, both civil and divine... that it was no breach of honesty, conscience, nor religion to decline from the obedience of the governor, or refuse to go any further led by his authority (except it so pleased themselves) since the authority ceased when the wreck was committed, and with it, they were all freed from the government of any man.” Another man named Henry Paine, who was caught attempting to steal weapons and supplies in support of this anarchist uprising, put the same thing a bit more bluntly. “With a settled and bitter violence, and in such irreverent terms” that the fastidious chronicler “should offend the modest ear too much to express it in [Paine’s] own phrase,” Paine opined that “the governor had no authority of that quality... and therefore let the governor (said he) kiss, etc.” (Hopkins managed to escape execution, but Paine, for his use of ghastly swears, was summarily shot.)

In the end, the naysayers were suppressed, and the survivors of the wreck managed to sail on to Virginia. If they had expected conditions in Virginia to be anything like the Bermudan idyll they had just left behind, however, they were in for a rude awakening. Several months earlier, a drought had resulted in a widespread shortage of food, among the Indians as well as the settlers, and the settlers’ desperate attempts to steal provisions from the Indians were *not* appreciated: the Indians responded by putting the colony under siege, killing anyone who tried to leave (and sometimes stuffing the mouths of the corpses with bread, as a gruesome fuck-you-very-much). As famine had settled in, the Jamestown colonists had begun eating their horses; then dogs, cats, rats, mice, and snakes; then their own boot leather. Then, at last, the settlers had resorted to cannibalism. Colonists dug up recently-buried corpses for food, and, in at least a few cases, murdered and ate other colonists. (This was recorded in some near-contemporary chronicles, and then confirmed with archaeological evidence.) By the time the tardy delegation from the Virginia Company got onto the scene, a colony of 500 settlers had dwindled to just 60. All the others, with the exception of those few who had joined the Indians, were dead.

Emaciated settlers, seeing the new arrivals, cried out, “We are starved, we are starved” and begged for food. But the new governor, who had anticipated finding a thriving colony rather than a charnel house, had not brought enough food to feed the starving colonists, and had to wait for the next supply ship to relieve their distress. One man came out in the street “Blaspheameinge exclaiminge and cryeing owtt that there was noe god... Alledgeinge that if there were A god he wolde nott suffer his creatures whom he had made and framed to indure those miseries.” He later fled into the woods and was killed by Indians.

Salvaging the colony was contingent on bringing in new bodies, and getting those bodies to survive long enough to put in some amount of useful labor. The Virginia Company’s leaders also began to think that recruiting military veterans, accustomed to fighting the wild Irish, would be the right way to put the Indians in their place. But despite their best efforts, they simply couldn’t seem to recruit settlers who were truly prepared to give their *all* for the Company. The people who did come—according to their leaders’

reports—were uninterested in work and spent most of their time bowling in the street. Colonial governors believed that the settlers were deliberately slacking off in a bid to hasten the failure of the colony, on the theory that if the Virginia Company investors pulled out, the colonists would be allowed to sail back to England. The settlers themselves, however, spoke of a repressive governing regime that meted out punishments with a heavy hand. During the early years of the colony, according to one 1624 pamphlet:

we averr that the Colony for the most parte remayned in great want and misery under most severe and Crewell laws sent over in printe... and as mercilessly executed, often times without tryall or Judgment. The allowance in those tymes for a man was only eight ounces of meale and half a pinte of pease for a daye, the one and the other mouldy, rotten, full of Cobwebs and Maggotts loathsome to man and not fit for beasts, which forced many to flee for reliefe to the Savage Enemy, who being taken again [i.e. recaptured by the colonial government] were putt to sundry deaths as by hanginge, shooting and breakinge upon the wheele. And others were forced by famine to filch for their bellies, of whom one for steeling of 2 or 3 pints of oatemeale had a bodkinge thrust through his tounge and was tyed with a chaine to a tree untill he starved. If a man through his sicknes had not been able to worke, he had noe allowance at all, and soe consequently perished. Many through these extremities, being weery of life, digged holes in the earth and there hidd themselves till they famished.

NOT ONLY WAS LIVING WITH THE INDIANS regarded as a better bet than sticking with the colony: even *digging a hole and dying in it* was preferable. And indeed, the Virginia bog continued to devour settlers at a rapid pace. When John Rolfe arrived in Jamestown in 1616, he found 205 officers and laborers, 81 farmers, and 65 women and children: 351 settlers in total, out of the 1,500 settlers that had been sent to England since 1609.

The Virginia Company’s investors, meanwhile, were disappointed by the settlers’ failure to discover gold, silver, or other mineral wealth in Virginia, and began to seek other means of making the colony profitable. They were reluctant at first to invest in tobacco, because His Majesty King James had self-published an entire pamphlet about how much he hated smoking (“loathsome to the eye, hatefull to the Nose, harmefull to the braine, dangerous to the Lungs”), and because the strains native to Virginia were bitter to the English palate. But after John Rolfe managed to successfully transplant a pleasanter Caribbean variety to Virginian soil, tobacco became a profitable cash crop, and the Company realized that this was their best shot at a good return in the short term.

While this shift to tobacco production was advantageous to investors, however, life did not improve substantially for most settlers, who still suffered from disease and overwork. As tobacco production increased, savvy businesspeople soon realized that trade in servants and laborers could itself be a very profitable enterprise. With the African slave trade still in its early stages, the destitute of England were considered a suitably disposable labor pool. Between 1617 and 1623, hundreds of homeless boys and girls were forcibly transported from London to Jamestown to serve as laborers, an ef-

fort which was characterized as a charitable mission: “for redeeming so many poore soules from mysery and ruyn and puttinge them in a Concion of useful Service to the State.”

During the early years of the tobacco boom, about 95 percent of the incoming settlers were indentured laborers, which was a lucrative business for traders: Desperate people were enticed by stories of abundant food and fertile land. However, because of malnutrition and disease, nearly 3/4 of these servants died, most of them within just six months of arriving. The Company could barely send laborers fast enough to keep pace with this terrifying mortality rate, packing them by the hundreds into overcrowded ships where passengers were profoundly vulnerable to communicable diseases. Pro-Jamestown propaganda during the period contained darkly humorous Q&A exchanges, such as this one from 1623, in which the “divers Planters that have long lived in Virginia” dispelled unsavory rumors of mass worker die-offs in winter:

The new people that are yearly sent over which arrive here for the most part very Unseasonably in Winter, finde neither Guest house Inne, nor any the like place to shroud themselves in at their arrivall...

soe that many of them by want hereof are not onely seen dyinge under hedges and in the woods but beinge deadly by some of them for many dayes Unregarded and Unburied.

ANSWERE. To the first they Answered that the winter is the most healthfull time and season for arrivall of new Commoners. True itt is that as yett theris no Guesthouse... for any dyinge in the fields (through this defecte) and lyinge unburied, wee are altogether ignorant, yett that many dy suddenly by the hand of God, wee often see itt to fall out even in this flourishinge and plentifull Citty [London] in the midst of our streets, as for dyinge under hedges theris noe hedge in all Virginia.

It's a sign of how truly shitty things were that this was the best the Virginia Company's spinmasters could do with the existing facts. Rumors of people dying under hedges in Virginia are exaggerated, because there are *no hedges in Virginia!* Step right up!

Eventually, in 1623, the Crown decided to take Jamestown off the Company's hands and turn it into a royal colony. The settlement's expansion, in conjunction with the booming tobacco industry, had led to deeper and deeper encroachments into Indian lands, which

EMPLOYMENT LISTINGS

SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER, IDF Tel Aviv, Israel

SUMMARY: The Israeli Defense Forces are on the lookout for a dynamic, passionate, no-holds-barred Social Media Manager willing to operate victorious social-media campaigns, bold brand storytelling, and aggressive click colonization. This is a fast-paced, hyper-alert environment, as the forward march of IDF's brand strategy tends to encounter resistance from bad actors pushing deceitful narratives. In order to properly dominate and occupy mindshare, the IDF Social Media Manager will need a good eye for the most photogenic soldiers, along with a keen grasp of metaphor and the power of imagery (e.g., “a burning kite can be as devastating as a forest fire, rockets are like tornadoes, every thrown rock is a potential 9.0 earthquake,” etc).

PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITIES:

- Brand advancement, including the creation of muscular new memes and hashtags.
- Must be able to deploy the #Holocaust in any situation regardless of context.
- Positive brand identification: Need to work with the Clean Slate Team to enlist in charity campaigns, gay rights advocacy, and puppy rescues, no matter how disconnected these projects are from the actual day-to-day operations of the IDF.
- Disruptive pivoting campaigns: Must be able to make connections to Iran and Syria on-the-fly with little evidence. Must assist in maneuvering outrage away from the corrupt and incompetent Israeli government.
- Damage control and triage: In case of an IDF oopsie, need to be prepared to blast out a consistent victim-blaming message across the entire war crimes apology ecosystem.

DESIRED SKILLS & QUALIFICATIONS:

- Must be able to describe bullets in non-lethal terms.
- Must have taken at least three courses in pinkwashing.
- Extensive knowledge of Gal Gadot memes.
- Proficiency in euphemisms.
- Flexible morality, or the ability to re-contextualize all behavior as “defending the State of Israel”, even when said behavior flagrantly defies Jewish ethics.
- Demonstrated mastery of Oppression Redirection: The ideal candidate will have the ability to recast any criticism, no matter how valid, as anti-Semitic.
- Fluency in fear-mongering strongly preferred. Must be able to convince influencers that Israel is constantly under threat from all sides, even if one of those sides lives in an open-air prison full of rubble and poisoned water.

To apply, send resume, writing sample, and documented proof of ability to dismiss human suffering as the fault of the sufferers to has.bara@idf-prpgnd.il





led the Indians to launch a coordinated massacre of nearly a quarter (347) of the English settlers. (This massacre was organized by chief Opechancanough, whom some historians believe was the same person as, or a close relative of, the mysterious “Don Luis” who had returned with the Spanish Franciscans in 1570). As England’s territorial ambitions in the New World became more expansive, and diplomacy with the Indians broke down, the Crown wanted tighter control over the development of the colony. Although Jamestown’s life as a company town was over, it continued as a royal colony for about 50 more years, before being burned down during Bacon’s Rebellion, a popular uprising animated by a combination of anti-elite and anti-Indian sentiment.

SO WHY WOULD A JAMESTOWN-THEMED HOLIDAY be better than a Plymouth-themed holiday? Firstly, the story of Jamestown captures many important American values, such as: showing up in a home that is not your own, and wondering where all the food is already. Secondly, what better way to *really* ratchet up the tension at an awkward family gathering than by drawing straws to see whose child will get cooked for dinner? (The eating-other-humans-out-of-bitter-ne-

cessity period of Jamestown history is officially known as “The Starving Time,” incidentally, which is also a way better name for an eating-centered holiday than “Thanksgiving.”)

Thanksgiving, as many American Indian commentators have pointed out, is a holiday that promotes a false narrative of U.S. history. It celebrates a moment of amity between Indians and colonizers, which—even if it weren’t largely fictional—certainly isn’t representative of the trend of Anglo-Indian relations over the next four centuries. The story of Plymouth portrays the United States as a free country founded by strong-willed refugees consciously rejecting state tyranny. The story of Jamestown portrays the United States as a runaway business venture fueled by the greed of capitalists, the desperation of the poor, and the misery of slaves. Jamestown shows that the United States, from its very inception, has treated natural and human resources as equally inexhaustible, and equally expendable. It shows the arrogance of distant elites whose knowledge of their own incompetence is rendered painless by their indifference to human consequences. It’s obvious from the historical record that many of the ordinary people involved in this enterprise did not like where it was going, but did not know how to stop it. We should probably remember Jamestown at least once a year. ♣



AN ORAL HISTORY OF RUSSIA

AS RELATED BY YOUR VERY CONFUSED #RESISTANCE UNCLE



BUCKLE UP, KIDDOS: We're going for a ride. Now I don't want to do this, but I darnfucking have to, okay? That's because I *REMEMBER* THE COLD WAR. That's right. You millennials were blibbering into your bibs and playing with stuffed bears while I was out there fighting the real bear. The Soviet bear.

And let me tell you: The Soviet bear might hibernate. But he never sleeps.

Don't give me "the Russians aren't Soviet anymore! Lol! Lenin meme!" Go wipe your ass with your Che Guevara shirt. I know more about Russian history than your Marxist Professor Of Relativism And Feelings Studies, all right?

All right. LET'S GO.

Rus' was founded in the 10th century by Tsar Tolstoy. For centuries the Russians were good Christians until the godless communists overthrew the tsar and threw his family in a gulag. YEP! The same monstrofuckingstrocitry gulag you make jokes about.

Princess Anastasia escaped and hid in a Faberge egg until Rasputin died (or SEEMED TO, HOLD ONTO THAT ONE, FOLKS). She got out and led a counter-revolution against Stalin (YASS QUEEN YASS), but she was betrayed and guess what? GULAG.

After the captain of the Red October defected to the U.S., the KGB got mucho bolder with its spying operations. Remember Alger Hiss? Of-fucking-course you don't. He was put to death for TREASON, along with the famous spy couple, Boris and Natasha Rosenberg.

The KGB has been trying to infiltrate American society for GODDAMN DECADES. In the '80s they embedded spies among us posing as normal families. AMERICAN families. But the heroic FBI saw right through their disinformatziya'n ways.

That's right, ultraleft broscialists: The FBI are fucking heroes. The Deep State's got it DOWN. They weren't fooled by the false-flag destruction of the Berlin wall. They knew those nuns in El Salvador were really commie agents. And all those "leftist" politicians in South America who were "legitimately" elected? LOL. LOL LOL LOL LOL LOL.

After turning back the crimson tide of would-be-Vlads-the-Impaler spawned by Trotsky's "exile" in Mexico (SPOILER ALERT: He was working for Stalin the whole time, and his "death" was a cover-up op—educate yourself!) the FBI knew they had one job: keep the Potemkin Pyotrs out of the U.S. presidency.

And they did their best.

They did their GODDAMN WARRIOR BEST.

But that's where Rasputin rides into the story again.

Or should I say: RasPUTIN.

That's right, folks. Direct descendant. The media doesn't cover this. They've missed this NEON GLARING RED HOT connection entirely. LOL. AGAIN.

I did some business in Belarus in the late '80s. I saw the KGB firsthand. They slapped an import tax on my leg warmers even though I filed the right paperwork. That was Putin's KGB. They're good. They don't give a shit about the rules.

LISTEN UP: In the Matroyshka Maze of the Russian government, there's only one rule: You win or you die. And winter is coming. There's no treason they won't stoop to, no useful idiot they won't exploit.

That's why I don't want to hear anymore mealy-mouth "stick to the facts, Uncle Barry. Russia obviously did something in 2016 but that doesn't mean they've stuck their red tentacles into every crevice of the American body politic."

HA. HA HA HA HA. I just had to pop another Oxy 'cause I was laughing so hard I hurt my side.

The Russians sided with the Nazis in WWII. The national SOCIALISTS. Yeah, I know, Berniebros: The Russians turned on the Nazis, but only after the U.S. stormed Normandy. That's cause the tides of war were turning in the heroes' direction.

"Dasvadanya! Live to destroy the West another day, eh, comrades?"

DUHDUHDUHDUUUUUUHHHHHH HERE COMES MUELLER! He's gonna impeach Trump and Extraordinarily Rendition him until the Cheetoh spills how he and his whole family down back to Grandpa Drumpf were Russian plants all along.

And once the Cheetoh tree has been pruned, we'll re-grow the tree of liberty and water it with the SWEAT and BLOOD of a War

With Russia. Maybe it'll even

be a Hot War this time.

What do you say, Vlad?

Ready for a little de-

struction? Let me assure

you: there won't be any-

thing *mutual* about it this

time. ☺

HAHAHA. GET

READY VLAD! WE'RE

COMING FOR

YOU! THIS COLD

WARRIOR HAS

NEVER SHUT

UP AND WILL

NEVER STAND

DOWN! AND IS

STILL OWED SEVEN

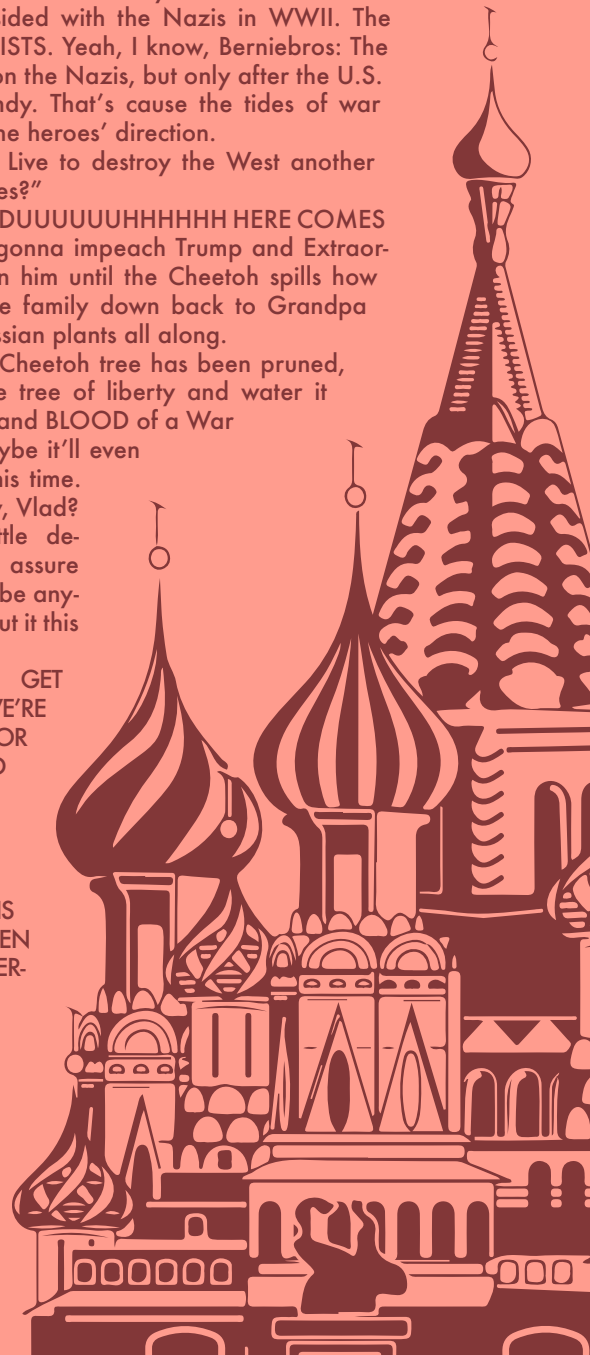
THOUSAND AMER-

ICAN DOLLARS

FOR THAT BULL-

SHIT IMPORT

TAX!



a Love Letter to a **SOULLESS BUSINESS**

by AISLING MCCREA

*I*T IS 2005, AND I AM WEARING CHEAP LIP GLOSS AND knockoff UGG boots in a town you've never heard of. By traditional measures of living standards, it's not a bad place to be—a seaside town where unemployment is consistently low, the local hospital has a pretty good reputation, and the countryside is just a short drive away. The group I'm wandering around town with are all about 13, and we all fucking hate it. Left to roam the streets on a school half-day, we swarm the pastel-bricked streets in vulgar clouds—not criminals or even petty ne'er-do-wells, just kids brimming with the vague agitation that comes from not having anywhere to go. Last time the school had a half-day, we were supposed to meet up with a group of other kids, who never showed up. It turned out one of them had, in an act of raw spontaneity, jumped off the pier and broken his arm. The consensus was that he had done this to show off to his friends and misjudged the distance—personally, I suspect it was just a creative way of filling an empty afternoon.

After doing an aimless circuit or two of the town center, we decide to sit in the Caffè Nero. Caffè Nero is a popular “Italian-style” coffee chain in the UK with 668 outlets dotted throughout the country (as of 2014, there are also 25 in the U.S., mostly in the greater Boston area). They have big white cups, little individually-wrapped chocolates at the counter, wood panelling, and enlarged photographs of wrinkled Italian men reading wrinkled Italian newspapers. We're all trying very hard to like coffee. I occasionally have a cup of hot milk at home with a little bit of coffee in it, which I do enjoy—I think, from the diagrams helpfully plastered on the wall, this is most similar to a “latte,” so that's what I order. A friend of mine tries his first coffee, one of the special ones with white chocolate and caramel and cream, more like a dessert than a beverage. He puts four packets of sugar in too, before even tasting it—he wants to be sure he won't dislike it, because he knows that when he's an adult businessman, he'll have to drink coffee in meetings. When he finally takes a sip, he does a spit-take and we all laugh about it for weeks. We get a lot of mileage out of it—there aren't a lot of other events to reminisce about.

I'VE BEEN THINKING A LOT RECENTLY ABOUT WHAT it means to grow up in the suburbs. Specifically, I've been noticing the differences between the creative inspirations

and endeavours of people who grew up in major cities, compared to those who grew up outside them. (Bear in mind, this is possibly an entirely spurious connection I've made here—I've been too busy drinking my way through winter to commission a dedicated research project.) Generally speaking, the city creatures I've known have been products of and contributors to specific “scenes.” Maybe as a teenager they liked a certain music venue or neighborhood, whose faces and figures became familiar after regular weekend visits—they would go to see one beloved band, who'd open for another, who'd become a new favorite to emulate and maybe even befriend—they would come to have a sense for the good places to eat and drink, far away from the places where the tourists go. The city's scene would open itself up to them, flower-like. Of course, not everyone who grows up in a city has some cool documentary-worthy adolescence—there's drudgery and banality everywhere—but from speaking to people I know, there is at least a sense in cities that something is happening around you. If you can't get in the door—the door behind which excitement and creation and possibility is happening—you can at least see the door, hear the sounds escape from underneath it.

Growing up suburban, there is only a dim sense that there might be a door somewhere, in a place that may as well be Narnia, and the key is held by people who aren't you. Culture and music and food from countries you couldn't place on a map—these belong to other people, they are rare commodities that can only be loaned to you on special weekend trips to visit your cool older friend in the city, or seen second-hand through a screen. Suburban kids build their cultural world the way magpies build treasure troves, picking up whatever oddments of interest that happen to be floating around their quiet streets—the George Carlin CDs borrowed from a grumpy uncle, the weird French film caught on late-night TV, the taste for *banh mi* picked up from the town's single authentically non-Western restaurant. To put it simply, suburban kids take what they can get when they're building their tastes. Sometimes this results in a surprising eclecticism that causes them to start a truly original creative project and become the next media darling. More often, it means we end up bored out of our minds and spending a lot of our time at Starbucks.

IT IS 2010 AND I'M MISERABLE, FOR REASONS THAT are too boring to get into. I've recently moved for university, to a place which plays host to all the usual franchises, as well as a strong counter-cultural scene and a lot of thriving independent businesses (though the city is becoming increasingly expensive and difficult for its working-class denizens). My dorm is poorly built and I sleep in a five-foot-two bed that's fixed in place, with a three-inch gap between the bedframe and the wall that is impossible to clean properly. When I lie down, I can see the buildup of dust and crud in the gap, plus an empty Doritos packet that the previous tenant must have dropped down there. It makes me feel ill. Always, I crave loveliness and warmth, and I seek it in the dregs of a coffee cup. I am dimly aware that I have a desire, bleating away in the back of my mind, to seek out small hangouts run by and for people who actually live here, and to not be just another bougie student ruining the neighborhood. But honestly, a much bigger part of me wants Starbucks.

On difficult days, I love to go there after class and blot everything out—the saddest possible variation on a drinking habit. I like the names of the improbably complicated orders you could make, which—in spite of being the subject of many a hacky standup routine—still makes me feel cosmopolitan, like a plucky TV heroine making her way in Manhattan. I like the impractically large sizes you have to race to finish before they get cold—the sense of abundance makes me feel nourished. I like the sticky, sickly syrups in all those baked-good flavors. I like that everything's the same as in any other branch, because when things get bad, I can go there and pretend I'm anywhere I want. And even though I know about the tax-dodging and the dangers of globalization and... all that stuff, I can't break the associations I've had since I was 13 years old. Starbucks and Caffè Nero and every other franchise that's supposed to represent a cultural vacuum—they still represent glamour to me, just as McDonald's represents the excitement of a childhood birthday to a lot of us. I couldn't snap my fingers and get rid of that, any more than I could get rid of a fondness for Disney movies or Kraft cheese.

EXCEPTING THE RARE FEW OF US RAISED BY strongly anti-corporate types, most people in the modern West have some strong attachment to products marketed to us by big companies that don't always act very nice. It's part of the reason why I believe that changes to these companies have to be forced by mass political action, not by individual consumption choice. It's been the fashion for a long time, peaking perhaps in the 1990s and early 2000s, to decry consumer culture as "phony" and advertising as a drug. This isn't wrong, perhaps, but it doesn't make the associations people have with consumer products and large businesses any less real. That goes especially for suburbanites, for whom these places were our adolescent playgrounds, their products a small but thrilling echo of the products we imagined "city people" would consume. It probably sounds silly to a lot of people, but coffee chains meant something to me that an independent coffeehouse didn't. (They don't any more, incidentally—when I see a stray Starbucks or Caffè Nero in the street, I check my pulse and don't

feel it quicken one bit—but the bond I had with those places only faded after years of living in major cities with more to offer.)


The small-town love of franchises can be an easy target for disdain. In 2012, an 85-year-old columnist for a local newspaper in North Dakota went viral for her passionate review of a newly opened Olive Garden, prompting mockery from those who found it hilarious that someone would have a genuine reaction to "fake" Italian food (though Anthony Bourdain was not one of those people—he not only defended her on Twitter, but ended up publishing a collection of her columns). But spare a thought for us poor suburban kids. We were bored, and frustrated, and heavily discouraged from loitering (loitering is legalese for "existing in a space without spending any money"). And these places were a kind of refuge for us, and they took on a meaning, even if that meaning

is difficult to reconcile with the cynical reality that it was all cooked up by marketing. My affection for these coffee chains was the artificial tied up in the real; my memories of my friends and our idle chatter were real. Combing the sand out of our hair in the toilets while we gossiped, under a picture of an Italian peasant woman probably okayed by a 15-person committee? Real. The craving for another life was certainly real, and one I suspect is common to all teens regardless of where they grow up. But I didn't have a "real" place in which to have these experiences. I had the suburbs, and the imitations of reality that the suburbs offer.

So cut suburbanites some slack. We can only build our treasure troves with what we're given. ♣





A photograph of a forest path. In the foreground, a yellow sign with black text in Cyrillic is visible. The path leads into a dense forest of tall evergreen trees. The sky is clear and blue.

CHERNOBYL AS IT IS NOW

by Nick Slater

FOR MUCH OF THE TWENTIETH century, daily American life was shaped by two great fears: the fear of socialism and the fear of a nuclear apocalypse. The state's propagandists spent decades trying to entwine these fears in the minds of people like you and me. Their efforts often betrayed the absurdity of their aims, producing such ludicrous inanities as the invasion-survival fantasy film *Red Dawn* and the "Kiddie Kokoon," a prefabricated fallout shelter that may or may not have been able to survive a direct hit from a Communist pigeon's turd.

But in the late 1980s, an accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant gave the propagandists a coup beyond their wildest imaginations. The world had never seen such a severe nuclear meltdown—the International Nuclear Event Scale classified it as a Level 7 incident, its maximum threat level. It was the first time in history that a Level 7 incident had been recorded. Nobody knew exactly what that meant, but they knew it wasn't good. "The Soviets owe the world an explanation," said U.S. President Ronald Reagan in a radio address, criticizing their "secrecy and stubborn refusal to inform the international community of the common danger from this disaster." Suddenly, all those

All photographs by Nick Slater



state-stoked fears of hideous mutations and uninhabitable wastelands didn't seem quite so ridiculous.

The consequences were both immediate and long lasting. The Chernobyl tragedy became a potent rallying cry for Ukrainian nationalists and was one of the main causes of the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. Decades after the accident, Chernobyl-related costs continued to consume a substantial portion of the national budgets of many Eastern European nations, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Chernobyl became a place of infamy in our collective imagination. Part cautionary tale, part freak show, it both terrified and tantalized people across the globe. The Soviet-enforced secrecy only heightened its aura of mystery and danger. Today, Chernobyl is commonly regarded as an irrevocably contaminated wasteland, an undead museum of humanity's post-apocalyptic future.

Spoiler alert: It's not.

As I discovered during a recent visit, the eternally poisoned Chernobyl of our nightmares has little in common with the fast-healing Chernobyl that exists in reality. This is quite a hopeful and encouraging revelation. However, there's also a darker side to this story, one that shows how our most "justifiable" fears can—and are—manipulated to cause immense human suffering.

EARLY IN THE MORNING ON APRIL 26TH, 1986, A REACTOR exploded at a remote nuclear power plant in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. At first, local government officials

tried to downplay the severity of the accident. But soon there were reports of abnormal radiation levels as far away as Sweden, and the name "Chernobyl" became notorious around the world.

Radioactive fallout spewed into the air for weeks, and a massive forced evacuation ensued. Almost 190 settlements were abandoned, and more than 350,000 people were eventually relocated. The clean-up efforts required over half a million soldiers, scientists, and laborers from all corners of the Soviet Union. Economic costs reached more than \$18 billion U.S. dollars. Huge graveyards of planes, tanks, trucks, and trains were left to decay into rusty irradiated hulks, then buried in sand. Today, the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone is a closed military area covering over 1,000 square miles of contaminated territory.

You can learn these facts, and many more, at the Ukrainian National Chernobyl Museum in Kyiv, which my wife and I had visited the day before our excursion to the Exclusion Zone (this "unusual" spelling is actually the correct Ukrainian form, though most people are more familiar with the Russianized equivalent). The museum does an admirable job of conveying the shock and horror of the world's most infamous nuclear accident. As you ascend the stairs to the main gallery, you'll find ghastly black signs hanging from the ceiling, with the names of abandoned towns and villages crossed out by red lines. Eerie lights and haunted tree branches creep down from the walls. You'll see the protective gear, thin and useless and heartbreaking, that was worn by the first "liquidators," as the cleanup crews were called, and watch clips of them tossing chunks of radioactive waste off the roof of the blown-up reactor with their hands. There are frozen



clocks and dead men's wedding rings, pictures of ghosts in gas masks and a shaky handwritten letter from a prisoner dying in excruciating pain from radiation sickness. There's even a glass box containing the grotesque mutated fetus of a pig.

The most shocking thing I saw at the museum, though, was a video of somber men in white lab coats, pushing buttons in a control room so outdated it looked like a *Star Trek* set. They wore pointy white hats and smoked cigarettes, their eyes darting in nervous zips away from the camera. According to the little sign next to the TV, they were gathered to commemorate the official, permanent shutdown of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, and they were doing this in 2000, nearly a decade and a half after the accident.

The worst nuclear meltdown in history, the panic-inducing disaster that had required the evacuation of everyone within 1,000 square miles, apparently had not been severe enough to stop work from continuing in the same building where the meltdown had occurred... for *fourteen fucking years*.

The men in pointy white hats looked pensive, sad, even bored. But they did not look afraid.

FEAR IS NOT A USEFUL EMOTION, DESPITE ITS FINE reputation Among vicious goons such as Kevin D. Williamson. When people like him speak in praise of "wonderful, salubrious fear," they purposely confuse a few occasional side effects of fear—heightened alertness, instinctive decision making—with the essence of fear itself, which is crippling anxiety. They also ignore the fact that fear

makes humans tremendously bad at judging the appropriate response to a given threat, which is why we worry more about terrorist attacks than traffic accidents.

However, there are some fears that do seem reasonable even if they aren't particularly useful, and the fear of accidental nuclear annihilation is one of them.

According to energy researcher Benjamin K. Sovacool, there have been 99 significant accidents at nuclear power plants since 1952. Today, there are 450 of these plants scattered around the world. Anton Chekhov once wrote, "If in the first act you hang a pistol on the wall, in the next act you must fire it." For the last 70 years, humanity has been busy hanging hundreds of pistols on every wall on Earth, and the only miracle is that so few of them have been fired so far.

Nuclear annihilation is an especially potent fear because, as pop culture teaches us, it has many ways to strike you and each one of them is more horrifying than the last. First, there's the possibility that you could be vaporized without warning, your time on earth permanently extinguished before you have time to clear your browser history. Or you might be just far enough outside the initial explosion that you'd have time to take one last look at a giant blossoming mushroom cloud before you're engulfed by an onrushing wall of flames. Or maybe you're so far away that you don't even see or hear anything, but then you start vomiting and losing your hair, and the next day you're dead from radiation poisoning? Or maybe you're even *further* away but the cancer still seeps into your bones and organs and brain? Or, god forbid, what if you somehow survive it all, but everything you eat or drink or touch is



contaminated, and your children are born as hideous mutants?

This fear feels so vivid that we can't even bring ourselves to tell stories about it. We just don't want to think about such things. With the exception of recent schlock-horror flop *The Chernobyl Diaries*, Hollywood has never made a feature film about the Chernobyl meltdown. People find this particular type of fear too feasible, like race wars or global starvation.

Ever since the atom was first split, humans have feared that our nuclear future was likely to be a nasty, brutish, and short one. J. Robert Oppenheimer, who led the U.S.'s efforts to develop nuclear technology, was worried enough to quote the *Bhagavad Gita*, saying, "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." He would spend the rest of his life trying to stop nuclear proliferation around the world.

On the whole, this seems like a good idea. Humanity doesn't need more nuclear *anythings*, be they bombs or power plants. Call it "Chekov's gun control." But in our (justifiable) panic to put the nuclear genie back in its bottle, we've also infected people with some dangerously misguided fears.

In the case of Chernobyl, these fears have proven far more harmful than the meltdown itself. 30 years after the accident, a World Psychiatric Association report stated that "from a public health perspective, the biggest impact of the Chernobyl disaster throughout the years has been on mental health, specifically major depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), stress-related symptoms, and medically unexplained physical symptoms."

Ukrainians have borne the brunt of this psychological anguish, but the consequences of Chernobyl stretched across national borders. After the accident, countries as far away as Greece and Denmark reported

spikes in terminations of otherwise wanted pregnancies, due to fears of mutation or radiation poisoning. The International Atomic Energy Agency estimated that between 100,000-200,000 abortions were induced in Western Europe alone. You don't need to be an anti-choice fanatic to acknowledge that hundreds of thousands of human babies *whose mothers wanted to have them* should have been born, but were not, because of baseless fear, and this is probably not a good thing.

Now, for comparison, here's another number: two. That's the number of people who were killed in the Chernobyl explosion. Their names were Valery Ilyich Khodemchuk and Vladimir Nikolayevich Shashenok. Another 47 people would later perish as a direct result of the meltdown. Many of them were first responders and firefighters who sacrificed their lives on suicide missions into the smoldering reactor core, suffering hideous pain to prevent the damage from spreading. Their names, too, deserve our grief and respect. Sadly, the list of deaths may grow longer still. In a 2005 report for the UN, an international team of more than 100 scientists suggested that an additional 4,000 people may eventually die of causes related to radiation exposure from Chernobyl.

This is a tragedy. Every single human being who died as a result of the Chernobyl meltdown was a person like you or me. They didn't want to leave this world so soon. They had favorite foods, beloved pets, and dreams for their futures that almost certainly did not involve dying in nerve-wracking pain while being prodded by government doctors. They deserved a better fate than that.

Still, these two things are true: What happened at Chernobyl was tragic, and the worst nuclear meltdown in history was, by itself, much



less impactful than conventional wisdom or “common sense” would lead you to believe. In the words of Dr. Burton Bennett, who led the UN’s research:

“This was a very serious accident with major health consequences, especially for thousands of workers exposed in the early days who received very high radiation doses, and for the thousands more stricken with thyroid cancer. By and large, however, we have not found profound negative health impacts to the rest of the population in surrounding areas, nor have we found widespread contamination that would continue to pose a substantial threat to human health, within a few exceptional, restricted areas.”

This is a useful message if your goal is to give people hope and strengthen their spirits. However, it’s much less useful if you’re trying to make them terrified, resentful, and susceptible to nationalist pandering—a favorite pastime of right-wing Ukrainian politicians like former president Viktor Yanukovich and their well-paid American consultants like Paul Manafort, who was paid over \$60 million to brainwash Ukrainian workers who earn an average of \$200 a month. There are fortunes to be made in keeping the old lies alive.

Little wonder, then, that the truth has been so effectively suppressed.

PEOPLE VISIT THE CHERNOBYL EXCLUSION ZONE FOR many reasons. The abandoned buildings and haunted landscapes have attracted photographers, scientists, urban explorers, Soviet nostalgics, “experience” junkies, and hack writers ever since the Exclusion Zone was opened to the public in 2011. Last year almost 50,000 tourists

came, mostly foreigners, many of them as repeat visitors.

As we drove through the flat and featureless Ukrainian plains, our guide Marek told us about an amateur historian from Germany who’d just made his 29th trip to Chernobyl. I thought he sounded like a tedious crackpot. But after spending a while in the Exclusion Zone myself, his infatuation is a bit easier to understand.

If you’re invigorated by travelling in places that inspire weird and uncomfortable ideas, Chernobyl is your Shangri-La. This is a place that gives you a clear understanding of how much senseless suffering results when our actions are guided by fear. Especially, and this is an important point to make, when those fears are inflamed and inflated by authority figures. The Exclusion Zone’s physical environment offers so many touchable manifestations of nationalist paranoia, bad science, and militant patriotism that you can’t help but recognize how harmful they are to human happiness.

Yet in many ways Chernobyl is also a hopeful place. Birds, fish, and wildlife are thriving there once again, and small groups of *samosely*, or “self-settlers,” have defied government orders and returned to their old homes (by all accounts, they’re doing just fine). Forests have regrown. Flowers have rebloomed. The goddamn mosquitoes never left. The land is resilient, and its people are, too.

TO ENTER THE EXCLUSION ZONE, YOU MUST GO THROUGH a military checkpoint. Special permits are required, along with special medical insurance and many other special and mysterious things that must be processed by a visibly hungover Ukrainian army guard before the boom gate is lifted and your vehicle



is allowed to pass. As you might imagine, this is not a swift process. Brows must be wrinkled. Phone calls must be made. Forms must be signed. National security is at stake.

At last, our permits were approved and the guards waved us through the gate. As our van set off down the cracked asphalt road, my wife and I pressed our faces to the windows. The landscape was indistinguishable from our native Minnesota. Thick green forests stretched out in every direction, sprinkled every so often with tall fields of golden grass. Overhead was a pale blue sky streaked with wisps of white, a perfectly nice and unremarkable bit of terrain. I dozed off after the first few kilometers.

I was jolted awake when our driver spotted a herd of wild horses and slammed on the brakes. “Come on,” said Marek, beckoning us out of the van. The horses were grazing in a meadow across the road, a bit too far away to get a decent picture, so we just stood and stared at them for a few minutes. They didn’t even bother to look at us. “This is good place to be animal,” Marek said, “because here are no hunters. I think if I am horse, Exclusion Zone is heaven.” When we got back to the van, the driver informed us that he’d just seen a moose.

Our next destination was an abandoned summer camp for children. There we followed Marek into the woods, swatting at the bugs that buzzed around our ears. A patch of moss covered part of the trail. He warned us not to step on it, because these days the moss is the most radioactive thing in the woods. The German historian had learned this the hard way. “He step on too many mosses, so his boots was contaminate,” said Marek. My wife asked what fate had befall-

en the poor fellow. “Eh, guards say his boots must stay in Exclusion Zone.”

Marek led us deeper into the forest, winding through a narrow tunnel of shrubs and trees. At last we came upon a clearing. “Here is where children sleep,” he said, pointing to some thin-walled plywood cabins covered with peeling, slightly ominous paintings of strange cartoon characters: ducks who were not quite Donald, mice who weren’t quite Mickey. A rusty seesaw, overgrown by weeds, groaned in the wind.

As a Westerner raised on a diet of James Bond thrillers and Tom Clancy spy novels, I felt a bit confused by what I was seeing. Surely this “summer camp” must have been some kind of front—a secluded brainwashing facility, or perhaps a Party-financed indoctrination center for the little comrades. But Marek said that he’d attended similar camps as a child, and mostly they just played football and roasted hot dogs. I was embarrassed to realize how, even as an avowed socialist, I’d unconsciously swallowed the Red Menace fear-pills that have been fed to me since birth.

The Duga radar station, on the other hand, seemed much more on-brand for the Soviets. After trekking through dense forest for over an hour, we reached the main control center of this massive and menacing installation. A huge skeletal grid of metal bars and tubes, it stood nearly 500 feet high and stretched almost 2,500 feet long, looming over the trees like a monstrous Connect Four set.

Once, the Duga had been the crown jewel of the Soviet anti-ballistic missile early warning system. It emitted a rapid, high-pitched



tapping noise that could be heard on radio frequencies all over the world, earning it the nickname “the Russian Woodpecker.” Many defense experts in the West worried that it was some kind of Soviet mind control device, a fear that was spread by newsmen like Walter Cronkite on their nightly broadcasts.

The sound was so annoying that it could, in theory, drive you insane if you listened for too long, but that was pretty much the only threat the Duga posed to anyone. Despite a price tag of well over \$7 billion U.S. dollars, the station was utterly useless, as detailed in the fascinating documentary *The Russian Woodpecker*, which makes an at-times convincing case that the Chernobyl reactor was sabotaged by a high-ranking bureaucrat who’d authorized the Duga’s construction in order to avoid being humiliated during a routine inspection.

Stumbling through the looted innards of the control center, it was easy to see why the Duga had never worked. The maps on the walls looked like they’d been drawn by amateurs with more enthusiasm than skill, and the scale model dioramas exhibited the kind of craftsmanship you’d usually find at a middle school science fair. The total lack of technological sophistication was almost charming. This had been the pride of the Communist war machine, the terror of Western airwaves, and it was about as dangerous as your grandmother’s toaster. Looking at the Duga, it was clear that in the Cold War arms race, the U.S. was Usain Bolt and the Soviets were two guys in a potato sack.

When I asked Marek how to climb to the top, he shook his head. “Some weeks ago, Ukraine government remove ladder. There was ‘stalker’, one of guys who make illegal visit to Exclusion Zone,” he

said, wiping the sweat from the back of his neck. “He climb to top when drunk. Then he fall. Very far to ground. He dead, of course. So now you can’t go up.” He squinted up at the sun. “But, ah, if I don’t see...”

A few minutes later I’d shimmied my way halfway up the tower. The breeze, which had been so gentle and soothing back on the ground, had become much fiercer. The straps of my backpack whipped against my face, and the higher I climbed, the more I questioned my judgment. When I reached the top, though, I forgot my fear and just marveled at the view.

The vast Ukrainian plains spread out beneath me, a sea of greens and browns and yellows. I could see a small silver dome far in the distance, the site of the explosion, with its reactor now entombed in a radiation-proof sarcophagus. It seemed like such a tiny thing, an insignificant man-made dot amid the endless expanse of nature. It didn’t make sense that this little metal box had changed the course of millions of lives.

CHERNOBYL MAY BE THE WORLD’S MOST FAMOUS ghost town, but the reputation is not quite deserved. For one thing, the town of Chernobyl itself is still inhabited—it has a general store, multiple hotels, at least one bar, even a post office. Workers from the power plant live there in rotating shifts for a few weeks at a time. They get bonus hazard pay and free military surplus clothing, which almost makes up for having to spend half their lives in a “town” with a few drab little pre-fabricated buildings and a 10:00pm curfew. Everything is isolat-

ed, colorless, sad, alive only in the most technical sense. In the early evenings you can see small groups of camo-clad men standing in the empty streets, drinking beer, and staring at their phones.

Most of them work at the nuclear power plant. Although it's been decommissioned for years now, a lot of work still remains to be done. There are containment structures to maintain and radioactive waste to inspect, windows to wash and doors to guard. At mid-day, the workers pause their tasks and climb into vans, which drive them to lunch at a large cafeteria in a blocky gray building a few kilometers away from the plant. They pass through scanners that measure the radiation levels of their clothes and bodies, before heading upstairs to eat chicken, mashed potatoes, and dark purple *borscht* brought daily

eerie, forlorn atmosphere of a place that's usually bustling with people but is now abandoned and quiet.... an emotional afterimage that makes it seem not just empty but hyper-empty, with a total population in the negative, who are so conspicuously absent they glow like neon signs," to quote the *Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*. Pripyat is a glimpse of a world where humans disappeared and life just went on without much fuss, where George Carlin's famous words ring true: The planet was fine, it was the people who were fucked.

This was where we spent our final hours in the Exclusion Zone. Marek led us through the crumbling supermarket and the weed-choked soccer field, past the sinister yellow Ferris wheel and the broken-down bumper cars. He took us to one of the twenty local

"Yet in many ways Chernobyl is also a hopeful place. Birds, fish, and wildlife are thriving there once again..."

from Kyiv. Then it's back to the plant, then back to their bleak little shared rooms, then back to drinking in the dimly lit streets, then back to bed, until it's time to repeat the process again in the morning. Marek has friends among the workers, and he says they're all half-mad with boredom.

Before the meltdown, the people who worked at the power plant lived much different lives. They didn't live in the town of Chernobyl, first of all, but rather in a much larger and prettier settlement called Pripyat. Located about two kilometers away from the plant, Pripyat had been built in the 1970s as a model city for the bright young scientists and engineers who came to work there. Nearly 50,000 people once lived in its gleaming apartment towers and residence halls. Their average age was 26. It was a highly coveted honor to live in Pripyat, with its riverside cafés, pristine boulevards, and ambience of bucolic tranquility. When its inhabitants were forced to evacuate after the meltdown, many of them wept for days, because they knew they would never again live in a place of such peace and beauty.

Pripyat is where you'll find the Exclusion Zone's most dramatic images of ruin and decay. Lonely streetlights stand in the middle of the forest, and sunken boats can be seen from the riverside café. A broken grand piano sits on stage of the run-down theater, while puddles of foul water slosh at the bottom of a huge empty diving pool in the nearby sports center. Dirty pillars of concrete jut upwards from the slowly encroaching tides of vines and roots, relics of an already-vanishing civilization.

It's also in Pripyat that you'll be most sensitive to the *kenopsia*, "the

schools, where some morbid photographer had collected a pile of children's gas masks that lay rotting on the cracked tile, and then to the hospital, where more grisly stagings awaited us (a psychologist could write a dozen books about the barely-suppressed death wish of a certain type of Exclusion Zone tourist). We climbed the stairs of a 16-story apartment building, stopping every few floors to poke our heads into one of the desolate two-bedroom units where young families used to live, gawking at their toilets and stepping over piles of broken glass in their bedrooms.

From the roof, we could see the grand central plaza of Lenin Square peeking out from a sea of green. A long grey building was topped with red Cyrillic letters that proclaimed: *Let the atom be a worker, not a soldier*. Marek chuckled when he translated the words for us. Those quaint, disingenuous Reds knew how to lay it on thick.

The sky began to turn the color of fire. As I stood at the roof's edge, fidgeting with my camera settings, I glanced down at the bones of the city and spotted another tour group wandering through the weed-choked streets. For a second, I could almost imagine what Pripyat had been like before the meltdown, before Cold War fears had frozen the city in time.

I could picture people walking their dogs and going out for ice cream. I could hear friends chatting in restaurants and couples laughing in the park. I could feel the human energy of postal workers, fire fighters, bus drivers, math teachers, doctors, dentists, gardeners, janitors, managers, secretaries, and retirees all going about their days. They were buying bread, washing their cars, playing a game of tennis. They brushed their teeth, they ironed their shirts. They gossiped with their neighbors. They made love and celebrated their birthdays.

It seemed like they'd been happy. ✦

EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY

Test Your Knowledge of A Totally Legitimate Field

Evolutionary psychology is often unfairly maligned as “the phrenology of our times,” a “bullshit science” that makes “unverifiable claims” on the basis of “scanty evidence” in order to uphold “sexist, racist, and homophobic hierarchies.” This is incorrect. Evolutionary psychology is an extremely real science. Drawing from social science datasets, it concludes the necessary existence of hard biological facts. Sure, we haven’t found most of the genes or highly differentiated brain structures that must exist in order to prop up the vast majority of the theories of evolutionary psychology. But that DOESN’T mean it’s mostly pseudoscience. It means the biologists who should be working on this problem are lazy, and also probably jealous.

How do we know evolutionary psychology is perfectly legitimate? Well, for starters, it has not one but *two* science terms in its name. And furthermore, it’s just common sense: Homo sapiens evolved in a vicious, winner-take-all state of nature, and therefore the deepest, realest elements of human psychology are hardwired, brutal, and individualistic. The false trappings of “civilization” came later, and overlaid our natural psychology with gentle, feminine, decadent, shallow, cosmopolitan, unnatural, and legalistic behaviors. Anyone who attempts to call this “sexist,” “pure ideology,” “vaguely anti-Semitic,” or “extremely convenient” just doesn’t understand science.

Here’s a quiz to test your knowledge of evolutionary psychology. Please keep in mind that evolutionary psychology employs different standards of proof than the hard sciences. These standards are unfalsifiable, and therefore cannot be questioned.



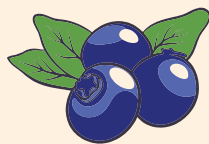
1. Lobsters’ serotonin receptors are much like humans’, to the point where lobsters can be affected by antidepressants. Lobster social structure is hierarchical. What does this tell us about human beings and our innate need for hierarchy?

- A.** Human beings, like lobsters, desire to be ruled by a single Uberlobster, who reigns under the sea on a throne of barnacles and blood.
- B.** Human beings, like lobsters, desire to be eaten by a larger, more intelligent, and more mobile species. That’s why I’ve set up radio beacons inviting alien gourmands to descend to our world and choose among us. Welcome, diners of the galaxy! I’m the meatiest!
- C.** Human beings, like lobsters, sometimes die of exhaustion while molting, which is why getting dressed in the morning is so haaaard.
- D.** Human beings, like lobsters, only mate when the female of the species selects a male, lurks outside his house, and pees a mighty stream of pheromone-scented urine on his door. If this isn’t what your personal mating behavior looks like, you are not obeying your natural genetic instinct, and must correct yourself accordingly.

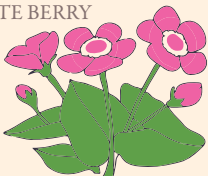
2. Studies show that women have a slight preference for the color pink. This phenomenon must be unrelated to the aggressive ubiquity of pink clothes and toys marketed at girls. Culture isn’t an “innate” driver of human behavior (unlike the market, which is a naturally occurring force, much like plate tectonics). Evolutionary psychologists theorize that women evolved to like pink because it helped them find and pick berries in the wild. Which piece of evidence best supports this theory?



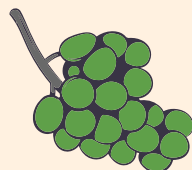
A. HALP I AM WOMAN AND I CANNOT LOCATE BERRY



B. WHERE IS BERRY???



C. IS THIS BERRY?



D. I CANNOT FIND BERRY AND I WILL STARVE

3. Prominent and respected evolutionary psychologists have written books and papers elucidating the following concepts: Men are naturally promiscuous as part of an evolutionary strategy to knock up as many chicks as possible; rape is part of human nature because chimpanzees do it, and also because it ensures the knocking-up of as many chicks as possible; human females developed breasts as part of an evolutionary strategy to attract men, because men would associate the shape of boobs with the shape of butts and therefore become twice as horny.

If these theories are correct, which of the following policy proposals would you logically have to endorse? You may select multiple answers.

- A.** As men are horndogs and rapists, too aroused by the double whammy of boobs ‘n’ butts to think clearly, they should no longer be permitted to vote or own property.
- B.** Given that men are non-selective in their lusts (i.e., are simply reasonless animals who want to mate with as many women as possible), they should be loaned out to women on a rotating basis. Since the only driver of human evolution is the quest to pass on one’s genes, we can trust that men will be perfectly content with this arrangement.
- C.** When a male artist draws a square, he should have his pencil slapped out of his hand. Biologically, he ought to respond only to round shapes, like boobs ‘n’ butts.
- D.** If men complain about this arrangement, demanding to be treated as full human beings with the right to vote, own property, choose their own romantic partners without coercion, and live whatever creative and fulfilling lives they choose, they will have to be sent to Male Re-Education and Recreation Camps, where they will be forcibly instilled with the indisputable truths of evolutionary psychology, and also taught to weave very curly baskets.

4. Why does this quiz only attack strawmen? Why does it fail to address very serious claims, like (((human biodiversity))), or how young women are genetically programmed to prefer older men even though older men’s dicks don’t work? Where can I address my angry emails? Are you making fun of me? Evolutionary psychology is very serious business! I AM TALKING TO YOU. MEN ARE TALKING.

In your angry response to the editors, choose the extinct animal you believe most encapsulates your prehistoric rage. Please provide a plausible explanation of how you would take down this animal with only a few pointy sticks and no knowledge of modern physics. Since your ancestors were naturally selected to hunt these animals, and you’ve inherited their genes, you should be fully capable of the task.

- A.** Woolly mammoth (*Mammuthus primigenius*)
- B.** Irish elk (*Megaloceros giganteus*)
- C.** Sabretooth tiger (*Smilodon*)
- D.** Dire wolf (*Canis dirus*)

Thanks to all the friends of *Current Affairs* on Twitter who contributed ideas to this quiz!
Truly, humans are a cooperative and generous species.



GRITTY

IS A WORKER

GRITTY

and the Left

BY NATHAN J. ROBINSON

“GRITTY” IS THE MASCOT OF THE Philadelphia Flyers hockey team. He is a seven-foot-tall orange monster, whom *City Lab* called a “fuzzy eldritch horror, whose googly eyes and maniacal grin seemed engineered to unnerve rather than delight young NHL fans.” He has also been referred to as a “ghastly empty-eyed Muppet with a Delco beard” and a “shaggy orange Wookiee-esque grotesquerie,” according to a *New York Times* report on his “heroic ascendance.”

When he debuted in September of 2018, Gritty was seen as a thoroughly bizarre choice of mascot—the Flyers are owned by Comcast, and corporate spokes-creatures are usually harmless and whimsical. Many were appalled—one writer went so far as to announce that “acid trip of a mascot must be stopped.” Gritty seemed, well, *gritty*. He wasn’t weird like a muppet, he was weird like a hallucination. As one commentator put it, he “feels like he wasn’t held back by the usual cultural gatekeepers,” and seems “like an accident, a hairball that corporate America coughed up and then didn’t bother to sand the rough edges off.” Gritty has a wild beard and demonic bug-eyes. He’s the sort of thing that artists are always dreaming up, but that would always get vetoed by a committee before any company would be publicly associated with it.

Perhaps that’s partly why, after a round of initial mockery in which people wondered what the Flyers were thinking in

choosing this beast as their public ambassador, Gritty was embraced online as an anti-fascist symbol. Leftists on Twitter began making memes of Gritty, in which he was shown threatening to seize the means of production, eating Donald Trump, gulping down alt-right “Pepe” frogs, and generally causing mayhem at capitalism’s expense. *Jacobin* declared that “Gritty is a worker,” and the Philadelphia City Council’s resolution honoring Gritty says that he “conveys the absurdity and struggle of modern life under capitalism.” “Liberté, Egalité, Gritté,” declared the *Guardian*.

WHAT ACCOUNTS FOR THIS? WHY DO people like this thing? I confess, I like him myself. He’s inherently funny, I can’t help but look at him and feel joy. And yet I don’t know why. I think a number of writers have come close, by saying that he “exemplifies, in some abstract way, the utter strangeness of life in 2018, and is a “weird and scary avatar for a weird and scary time.”

He feels “huggable but potentially insurrectionary,” and as the *Guardian*’s Colin Horgan wrote:

The gigantic face, the wide mouth set in a permanently crazed smile, and the massive swirling eyeballs made Gritty a grotesque underdog in a social media world of aesthetic perfection. He is hideous, yes, but one cannot help love him for it.

That’s the strange thing: He is oddly lovable. My theory for to



explain the leftist memes is that Gritty resembles a demented muppet version of Karl Marx. But it's also true that there is something deeply *endearing* about him. He feels like an underdog. He looks like he's ready to fight, but I wouldn't be surprised if he fell on the ice. He isn't just freaky, he's oddly relatable.

I am encouraged by the way some leftists have embraced Gritty as a symbol, because I honestly think it shows us trending in the right direction. I can think of at least seven reasons why Gritty is, in fact, an objectively good icon for the Left. First, he's silly, and it's good to be silly. One of the things the alt-right has always said about the Left is that we have no sense of humor. The ferocious goofiness of Gritty shows otherwise. Second, there's something kind of humble about

Gritty. He doesn't seem like he takes himself too seriously. He's aggressive, and uncompromising, but he doesn't seem like an *asshole*. (Unlike, say, that smirking Pepe frog.) Third, Gritty projects strength. With Gritty you feel like you're winning, even if you're not. Fourth, Gritty has a kind of Mr. Rogersesque self-affirmation vibe: He is "unapologetically himself," and so encourages you to be unapologetically yourself. Fifth, he subverts capitalist cultural aesthetics, which demand that everything be safe and family-friendly. Gritty isn't safe. Sixth, Gritty is orange, which is a nice counterpoint to the orange of Trump and seems to suggest "burning down the system." Seventh, the aforementioned resemblance to Karl Marx.

Some leftists I know think the whole Gritty thing is absolutely ridiculous. He is, after all, a corporate mascot.

AYN RAND & ATLAS, CONT'D (from p. 9)

And for those of you would sacrifice the few who know life, who are life? I loathe your ideals because I know no worse injustice than justice for all. Because men are not born equal and I don't see why one should want to make them equal. And because I loathe most of them.

(Rand always spoke through her characters, and even cited John Galt in her nonfiction writings as if he were an actual philosopher, so when a character is talking about why inequality is bad and moochers are worthless, it's a safe bet she's speaking her own mind.)

The disgust, bordering on hatred, that Rand felt for most people is the reason the *National Review* said the book seemed to scream "To a gas chamber—go!" It was an exaggeration, but not much. Rand consistently denounced the ungrateful hordes, which is why fringe right-wing economist Ludwig von Mises wrote to Rand of *Atlas Shrugged* that: "You have the courage to tell the masses what no politician told them: you are inferior

and all the improvements in your conditions which you simply take for granted you owe to the effort of men who are better than you."

READING AYN RAND REMINDS ME of why I'm on the Left, and what I like about people, and why misanthropy and "heroic individualism" are dead ends that are at odds with reality and can turn people bitter and lonely. No one of us holds up the world alone, we hold each other up, and if Atlas abandoned his post he'd come back to find the rest of us all working together in acts of mutual aid and support. Objectivism is funny, because it's so irrational yet so convinced of its own rationality, but Ayn Rand not only couldn't see the humor, she had a principled objection to laughing at herself. ("The worst evil that you can do, psychologically, is to laugh at yourself. That means spitting in your own face.") Personally, I love to laugh at myself, and I like people who do the same. Self-confident, narcissistic,

nasty megalomaniacs are not the sort of people I enjoy spending my time on earth with, and Ayn Rand's philosophy encourages precisely those sort of tendencies. We can be glad that most people don't seem to want to read books like that, but at the same time Rand's ideas have seeped deep into the American consciousness: Her rhetoric comes out of the mouths of Republican politicians everywhere. The "neoliberal" turn has eroded neighborliness and sanctified the pursuit of naked self-interest, with no regard for the welfare of others, as unobjectionable. In Ayn Rand's novels you can see the type of people this ultimately creates: joyless and loveless, incapable of laughter. It's no surprise that Howard Roark's buildings are ugly, his personal relations are frosty, and his sex is rape. This is the world Randian individualism will give you, if you let it.

So capitalists: Shrug away! We'll find out who really produces what matters, and what can really hold us together. ✚



He's owned by Comcast, for God's sake! But I don't think we should grant corporations permission to decide who gets to own what. Gritty has broken free of his institutional origins. He belongs to all of us. No company can "own" him. His very appearance shows that he can serve no corporate master.

It's so strange that a hockey mascot can be so perfectly designed—and by accident!—as to make me feel so warmly towards it. I do think there's something just "refreshing" about him. I wish there were more cultural risks taken, more common characters who were ugly, flawed, and strange. I am tired of being lied to by the world of commercials, I want to see things as they really are: off-kilter, demented, gritty.

I am certainly conscious of the warning from the *Guardian's* Horgan that if we spend too much time online, we may end up at a point where "democracy is purely about who has the funniest cartoon mascot." I am under no illusion that Gritty is a substitute for sensible social policy, much as I might wish otherwise. However, I have always placed "joy" at the center of my politics, and when Gritty's nearby, I can feel nothing but joy. He seems like he may make just everything okay.

IT IS NOT SURPRISING TO ME THAT the *Wall Street Journal* panicked at the Left's embrace of Gritty. "Gritty belongs to Philadelphia, not to far-left activists," insisted an op-ed entitled "Antifa Appropriates a Creepy Mascot." The *Journal* lamented that "the same leftists who want



statues of Thomas Jefferson removed are now petitioning for Gritty to replace Mayor Frank Rizzo on a downtown mural." This is actually a fantastic idea, since Gritty is darling and Frank Rizzo was a racist who once declared that he was going to "make Attila the Hunt look like a f*ggot." If the *Wall Street Journal* tells you not to do something, *generally* speaking you're on the right track. (I am sure there are exceptions.)

He will get old eventually, I am sure. Perhaps he has already exhausted his welcome, and is no longer funny even to the small fraction of people who enjoyed the joke the first few times. I do not much care. I want to keep him forever. I want more creatures like this, ones that aren't designed by marketing departments. I want a richer and stranger culture, one with fewer Mickey Mouses and more Grittys. Let's have armies of these things walking down the street.

It's true, we live in absurd times. Why resist it? Why try to escape life's grittiness? We should celebrate the bizarre, adore the unusual. When a few hints of the unexpected disrupt our regularly scheduled cultural program, it can only add vitality to an otherwise dessicated landscape.

A Gritty Left is a good Left, one with a sense of goofy fun, revolutionary commitment, and human frailty. Just to look at him, you know which side he's on, and you can tell it's the side you ought to be on too. ✨

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THE PHONY “POPULISM” OF A FOX NEWS GRIFTER EXTRAORDINAIRE

by Douglas Gerrard

ONE OF THE ODDER LESSONS OF THE PAST FEW years is that the radical right are now more effective “internationalists” than the left. Their leader, Donald Trump, is also at the vanguard of a global movement. He is the model for Salvini in Italy. He is one-third of a new Axis of the Americas with Bolsonaro and Duterte. And he is “Mr. Brexit.” An especially fruitful solidarity has developed between the U.S. and Great Britain. A host of ghoulish figures in the U.K., eager to ingratiate themselves to Trump and his fluctuating inner circle, provide a steady stream of internet propaganda for the President. Nigel Farage inaugurated this new Special Relationship with a speech at a Trump rally. Piers Morgan defends him on Breakfast TV. Even more overtly extremist figures—like Katie Hopkins and Tommy Robinson—praise Trump in far-right media.

Among these high-profile names, Steve Hilton’s has gone largely unmentioned. The one-sentence summation of Hilton’s political career is that he was the principal architect behind the modernization of the Conservative Party, a process that began in earnest under David Cameron (for whom Hilton was director of strategy). Hilton’s effect on this ossified party was transformative: as one commentator described, he moved the Tories “away from the traditional emphasis on immigration, law and order, and anti-Europeanism, towards a more metropolitan, compassionate and liberal vision of conservatism.” Enmeshed with his offbeat politics were a set of peculiar, eye-catching habits, like wearing shorts to work and walking around No. 10 without shoes on—a real buzz for the press, who love nothing more than

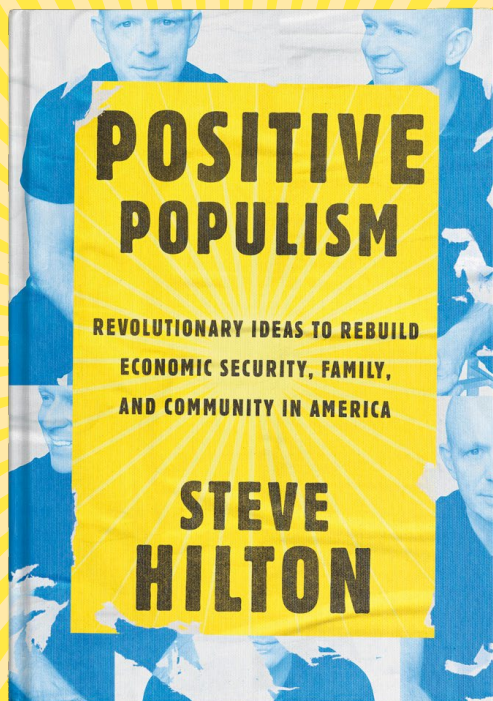
an unthreatening establishment eccentric. Broader recognition arrived after he was parodied by the political satire *The Thick of It*, in the figure of Stewart Pearson, a herbal tea-drinking spin-doctor who talks marvelous, impenetrable nonsense, at one point declaring that “knowledge is porridge,” at another floating the idea of “[doing] away with computers,” and offering thoughtful maxims like “time is a leash on the dog of ideas.”

But this fictionalized silliness was barely parody. Take this account of a meeting he attended while in government:

Hilton suggested that one of the United Kingdom’s biggest problems was too much cloudy weather—“Why can’t we fly planes over the eastern Atlantic,” he suggested, “to drop chemicals on the clouds and force them to break up, and get rid of their rain before they get to our shores?”

Eventually Cameron grew tired of visiting Hilton’s thought emporium, and in 2012 Hilton left the government amidst a flurry of broken friendships. He moved to California, where Stanford had given him a job as a visiting scholar, and where his wife was a higher-up at Google. In many ways, Hilton crossing the Atlantic made sense, given that his professed politics were the kind of wacky, free-associating libertarianism that feels distinctly foreign to the U.K. His surest philosophical conviction was in the therapeutic properties of deregulation, but he was as likely to propose consciousness-raising classes for schoolchildren as a cut in property tax. Silicon Valley seemed a natural habitat for his type of creature, given that, unlike in Britain, people there don’t break out in hives at the idea of someone cycling to work or walking around the office shoeless. The West Coast, and particularly the Bay area, has long been a comfortable haven for rich conservative assholes who get a quiet thrill from role-playing as dirty

Steve Hilton, **Positive Populism: Revolutionary Ideas To Rebuild Economic Security, Family, and Community in America**, Penguin Random House (240pp, \$28.99)



hippies. (See Burning Man.)

In Britain it was assumed that Hilton would make a shit-ton of money and then return to be “the Tory candidate for a trendy English city,” as Labour MP Jon Cruddas put it. Mostly, however, he wasn’t thought of very much. Then came the twin eruptions of the Brexit vote and the 2016 Presidential campaign, and suddenly, Hilton was everywhere. He re-emerged on the British political scene, where he opined that his old boss Cameron was a coward who lacked the spine to publically support Brexit. Hilton was then regularly invited onto Fox News to give his insider’s account of the forces powering this new age, which he happily did. His wrinkles were more prominent than before, but his skin was still eerily sleek, as if he was sweating olive oil into his V-necks.

When the Presidential election ended with Trump in the White House (Hilton’s preferred and predicted outcome), his appearances on Fox transitioned into a regular program, *The Next Revolution*, which airs every Sunday at 9pm Eastern Time. Hilton declared that he was a populist—this, it turned out, had been the philosophy animating his seemingly vague and contradictory pronouncements down the years. “I only really heard of it as a political notion here in the campaign last year,” he said in an interview. “I won’t say I’d literally never heard the word, but it definitely wasn’t part of any thinking.”

Hilton’s mushrooming reputation as a house pundit of MAGA conservatism has since resulted in a new book, *Positive Populism: Revolutionary Ideas to Rebuild Economic Security, Family, and Community in America*. It is a manifesto for his Ideas, and like that other politician’s staple, the stump speech, it includes a lot of fluff about his upbringing. Hilton was born to impoverished Hungarian immigrants, a fact he often returns to, as it gives him a privileged vantage point from which to alternately celebrate and condemn immigration. From these straitened circumstances, he bagged a scholarship to Christ’s Hospital, a private school with a civic mission to provide a little learning for fatherless children,” and from there went on to Oxford.

Hilton uses this rags-to-riches narrative to position himself as an expert on educational innovations. Hilton discusses the independent Khan Lab School as his model for post-revolution U.S. education. Khan Lab—which Hilton helped found and which both of his children attend (at the

cost of \$60,000 dollars per year)—has implemented a number of educational innovations, with the goal of “reducing stress [and] increasing independence.” Students there are grouped not by grade or age, but by “independence level,” which means that they move fluidly between classes based upon how quickly they are able to master particular tasks.

Interesting though this might be, the aspect of Khan Lab Hilton wants the education system at large to replicate isn’t its learning environment, but its management. Rather than “give teachers more money and freedom to design their own curriculums,” the lesson he draws from Khan Lab is that the education system needs to be defunded entirely, and replaced by the Koch brothers’ fever-dream of total school choice. Now, while it goes without saying that school choice is a deeply malign idea, the really striking thing here is Hilton’s framing. Using Khan Lab to argue for school choice is like using lettuce to argue for the health-benefits of burgers. It isn’t representative: *of course* a parent-founded school will be excellent when the parents are Silicon Valley millionaires. And of course millionaire parents will be happy to direct their children’s education—time is a privilege of money, despite every tech CEO claiming to sleep four hours a night. If you’re filthy rich, all the shittiest and most time-expensive parts of raising a child can be laundered through a small army of employees: there’s no need to bear the drudgery of middle-school maths revision if you can afford a tutor; no need to badger them to clean their room if you have a maid come by the house every Wednesday. Just imagine having to shoulder these responsibilities *and* help administer your child’s education. Without them, why not, say, part-design their curriculum? It might be fun.

THERE IS, THROUGHOUT THIS SECTION, A HORRIBLE kind of doublespeak at work. In Hilton’s telling, it’s the elitists who believe in equal treatment, the elitists who want a universal standard of education for all. If I write that school choice would saddle poor parents with an unmanageable burden, this sentiment can be absorbed and vomited back up as the patronizing maxim that “poor parents can’t be trusted to make wise choices for their kids.” All the while, the borders of the possible are strictly policed: Hilton’s belief in sweeping school reform is coupled with a certainty that “public policy can’t determine whether a child is born into a rich family or a poor one.” That public policy might be able to reduce the likelihood of the family being a poor one in the first place isn’t considered.

Education is the most radical element of Hilton’s agenda: the rest consists of mostly modest adjustments to existing systems—some good (emboldened anti-trust legislation), some bad (“opportunity” immigration), and some asinine (forcing local governments to hire more entrepreneurs). I felt an encroaching disappointment as I waded through it, chapter by wearying chapter. *Where was the populist “revolution” I was promised?* All I was seeing were these weak, lousy reforms!

Say what you like about the rest of the new MAGA commentariat, but they’re rarely boring. There’s a perverse fun in watching Alex Jones or Ann Coulter rolling merrily around in their own filth and stupidity, watching them bask in the pure libidinal energy that comes from saying the dumbest, most wrong shit imaginable. There’s none of that in Hilton’s book: no irate moral dudgeon, none of the frothing about globalism or George Soros that Hilton indulges on his TV show. Despite his insistent promise that *Positive Populism* will guide America’s next great transformation, many of its core prescriptions are dreadfully familiar. The idea of school choice isn’t fresh or exciting: it’s been a white whale of the American right since Milton Friedman, and the book’s grand vision for healthcare is just the kind of government-insured, market-delivered system that smarter capitalist nations instituted decades ago. These are the tactics of a worn and weary capitalism, not the wages of a populist revolution,

In some places Hilton’s imagination is even narrower, with several of his

ideas being merely warmed-over versions of policies he concocted while in government. This is most obvious during a chapter on community, which opens with a meandering description of the “Big Society,” Hilton’s central ideological contribution to the Cameron coalition and as pure a distillation of the spirit of late-noughties Britain as I’ve come across. The Big Society was a vague and rarely defined thing, more an ethos than a program, but the basic idea was to marry austerity economics to a conception of civil society based upon voluntary action rather than state institutions. As Cameron put it in a retroactive back-and-forth with Margaret Thatcher: “There is such a thing as society, it’s just not the same thing as the state.” Cameron contrasted “Big Government” and “Big Society,” insisting that while Conservatives may despise the former they embrace the latter, which can do all the things social democrats ask of government.

Given that Hilton wants to realize a version of this in America, a question naturally presents itself: what happened when it was implemented in the UK? He elides this question, and no wonder, because the Big Society in practice was a vicious mess, demonstrating only the cruelty of its designers and the vacuity of its promise to somehow disentangle an idea of community from economics. The facilities he identifies as the constituent parts of a community—public libraries; neighbourhood parks; youth clubs—all need money to function; the Britain he presided over provides an object-lesson in what happens when they’re deprived of it. Since 2010, over 600 public libraries have been shuttered, along with more than 500 youth centres. Uncountable green spaces have been concreted over and sold off to property developers. Austerity was the only real policy the coalition had: everything else was decorative, and the Big Society was the gaudiest bauble of all, a vast shiny distraction from the brute fact of 110 billion pounds in spending cuts.

The Big Society USA is similarly designed: control of local services would be devolved to the level of the neighbourhood, such that the “right to run” them would be vested in voluntary community associations. With next to no Big Government funding available, however, these associations would be forced to function like auction houses, subcontracting the design and operation of their facilities out to the highest bidder. What happens if a local businessman wants to transform an underfunded park into a set of condos? As was the case with British councils under austerity, the “right to run” would quickly become chimerical—it would be the right to sell off for peanuts. Hilton attempts to resolve this problem by appealing to his expressed support for anti-trust laws, but who ever said that only large companies could ruin communities? Anyone who has lived in a rapidly gentrifying city will know that most small businesses behave like temporarily embarrassed monopolies, and will seek to maximise their profits just as furiously. An artisanal bakery looks a lot like a Whole Foods when it’s replacing a beloved public library.

There is a brief, tantalising suggestion in Hilton’s book that capitalism might be in some way responsible for the withering away of American community, with Hilton tracing the start of this process back a half-century to the neoliberal turn that began under Reagan. “It’s clear that something important was lost in those years,” he writes, sounding—not for the first time—like a high-school student padding out an essay. What could have prompted this loss? Might it be that neoliberalism, in treating all interpersonal ties as economic contracts, is in fact antithetical to any con-

ception of community? No, of course not, silly. The real culprit is *government centralization*. A few wonkish tweaks to infrastructure, a little more deregulation to encourage local investment, and what had been sundered by “elitist attitudes and policies” will be made whole again.

Throughout this thick mush of ideas and innovations, there’s a noticeable absence of any references to *conservatism* or the *right wing*. In fact, Hilton strenuously denies any political allegiance at all; his populism is variously “postideological” and “pragmatic,” committed to “solving problems at the human level.” Instead of nasty partisan questions, he wants us to ask “Is this reform more human, or less?” a question so poisonously vapid it caused my brains to seep out through my ears. But amidst the pabulum, there’s a valuable lesson to be inferred about the ideological space in which he operates. Take his advocacy of a “business-friendly living wage,” by

which he means a living wage that is proportionate to a corresponding cut in payroll tax. This is the classic Hiltonian manoeuvre, in that it includes one entirely decent and sensible policy that a genuine populism would doubtless incorporate (A living wage, hooray!), and then marries it to something the Cato Institute would approve of (Business-friendly, meaning amenable to those who... do not want people to have a living wage). Almost every vaguely progressive measure on show here has an implicit reactionary counterpart or context—for instance, a proposed ban on non-compete con-

tracts—which prevent low-wage workers from moving jobs—is coupled with something called “Universal Free-Market Training,” which is basically a way of readying people for the gig economy. When viewed together, the message is clear: you will never have job security again.

Despite its self-declared renunciation of ideology, the ideological function of *Positive Populism* is pretty transparent. Hilton is clearer about what he wants than most of the new right-wing populists, but their techniques are essentially the same: acknowledge the popular anger that might instead be channelled towards left-populists like Bernie Sanders or Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, and then seek to assimilate it into a politics that offers people sops and convenient enemies while protecting the basic architecture of capitalism. Hence the clever wonkery of pairing a signature Sanders policy like the living wage with a swingeing tax cut.

There’s a danger of the left falling for the “populist” trappings of Hilton’s conventionally conservative ideology, as Zack Exley, a former Sanders staffer, demonstrated when discussing his appearance on *The Next Revolution*:

What Fox does all day every day is they point at immigrants, they point at activists, whipping up racism, that’s what they do all day long. But Steve for an hour points at corporate power. If we can’t engage with somebody who’s doing that, that’s crazy.

Hilton’s endorsement of the living wage is encouraging, but only because it shows how core progressive demands have wormed their way into the national dialogue. It doesn’t make him a comrade, and whatever leftist concessions he makes aren’t an invitation to compromise; they’re an incentive to keep pushing. We shouldn’t mistake a fig leaf for an olive branch. *Positive Populism* is capitalism on the defensive, but it’s also capitalism on manoeuvres, casting around for new places to deposit its discontents.

THE PROGRAMMATIC CLARITY AND POST-IDEOLOGICAL mission of *Positive Populism* make for an odd combination. We are told, with often brutal precision, exactly what Hilton’s popu-



lism will do, but he's never quite so lucid when describing what populism is. Instead of definition, the book trades in cliché: populism means "power to the people," he writes, like David Brent reaching for his guitar. Populism is "the idea at the heart of America itself." The inside sleeve isn't any more informative:

By focusing on what populism is for, and not just what it's against, Hilton provides a coherent philosophy and practical blueprint for how the movement can have an impact beyond one election cycle, and in people's everyday lives. That's Positive Populism.

What is Positive Populism? This exact set of policy proposals? What if we instituted a living wage and raised taxes—would that be Positive Populism? By the book's conclusion, Hilton has overdosed on his own ambiguity, and populism is finally held responsible for every great transformative event in American history:

Populists peopled the West, extinguished slavery, and fought for women's suffrage. They won two world wars, established civil rights, and built the greatest economy in the history of the world.

As well as suggesting that Hilton thinks populism means "anything done by people," this passage illuminates an important feature of our current politics. Contemporary populism functions like a political Rorschach test, an empty signifier onto which any set of principles can be plausibly projected. It isn't "postideological"—nothing is—but its capaciousness makes it a useful way of smuggling ideology in via a nebulous and untainted political form. In Hilton's hands, its capaciousness is such that seemingly any measure, from the abolition of slavery to the abolition of zoning regulations, can be incorporated within it.

In an invaluable bonus, the apparently indefinite scope of this populism also serves to obscure the colossal ideological shift necessary for Hilton the Tory modernizer to become Hilton the flagwagging Trump fan. Because if there's a consistent ideological thread running through Hilton's career, then Hilton isn't simply a conman, or a bone-deep careerist who read the tealeaves of Western conservatism and hitched himself to its ascendant "populist" wing. But Hilton is an opportunist and a fraud, and evidence of the shallowness of his professed convictions is easy to find. Some of it is by omission: while he worked for the Tories, Hilton espoused a vague, gestural environmentalism, formalised in the slogan "vote Blue, go Green" (at one point, in a typically befuddling touch, Hilton arranged for silver birch saplings to be handed out during a press conference). It isn't as if climate change has become less of a problem in the intervening years, so why does *Positive Populism* not include a single measly subsection on it?

Or take immigration, the primary antagonism wherever the new right-wing populism rears its head. *Positive Populism* dissembles here, with Hilton integrating some very Trumpian passages with more innocent stuff about the value of legal immigration (remembering, at all times, his own immigrant background). It's a different story on his show, however, as was evidenced during a discussion he had with Ann Coulter about Trump's migrant separation policy. Here is what Coulter said about the widely-circulated images of caged, weeping children:

They're laughing and crying on all the other networks 24/7 right now: do not fall for it Mr President... These kids are being coached; they're given scripts to read by liberals. Don't fall for the actor children.

An appropriate response to this might be to scream, or to thump your head repeatedly against the nearest metal surface—and if not that, to at least offer some pushback, *anything*, in the name of moral dignity. Hilton, as craven a starfucker to have ever simpered his way into a Fox News green room, simply giggled. Actually, that isn't quite right—he also said "umm," "well," "right," and "see, I knew I wouldn't get a word in!" before cutting to a break.

And yet: while in the UK Hilton was supportive of immigration, even claiming to have voted Green in 2001 in protest at the 'skinhead conser-

vatism' of the Tory election campaign. That is, when he thought of it at all – having scoured a number of books about the coalition, I've been able to find precisely one mention of him even considering immigration while in No. 10. It reads thusly: "Hilton was anxious that immigration should not become a focus in the 2010 election campaign."

TO REALLY MAKE SENSE OF STEVE HILTON, YOU have to stop listening to him for a moment, and treat him instead as an anthropological object, to be understood by being situated in the politics that produced him. He began working for the Conservative party at the start of the 90s, when the central antagonisms of British politics were just beginning to collapse into one another. Thatcherism produced Blairism, which in turn gave birth to Cameronism, and any pretence of authentic ideological difference between the main parties resolved into arguments about who was a better friend to the City. New Labour took us into Iraq and deregulated the banks; Cameron passed gay marriage and "hugged a hoodie." Politics narrowed: an indigenous British "Third Way"—a kind of social democracy with Thatcherite characteristics—became the only game in town. You could nudge the dial a little, but you couldn't question its base assumptions: an economy given over to the market, and a cultural sphere dominated by a bland, legalistic liberalism. The Tories may have only come to power towards the end of that time, after the 2008 financial crash had set Britain on its inertial course towards Brexit, but they were fashioned firmly in its image.

Hilton rejects this elite consensus now, but it was precisely its atmosphere that gave him a Westminster pulpit from which to preach his curious brand of civic-minded, environmentally conscious blue-sky bullshit. After all, the Tory party before Cameron had little need for ideas, at least not the sort he was selling. His weaver-of-dreams role may have been unusual, but its function was clear; to modernize the party, and in doing so to capture some of the metropolitan, upper middle-class constituency that delivered New Labour four successive terms in government.

If Brexit brought this era to a close, then, it wasn't the politics of Steve Hilton that did it, but a self-conscious rejection of them by an embittered and marginalised Conservative base. It signified this base, steeped in an Englishness more inflexible than their rulers realised, wreaking their revenge on the modernisers and detoxifiers who had held their votes captive for a decade.

IT IS OBVIOUS THAT STEVE HILTON IS A FRAUD, AND THAT THE populist movement he claims membership of represents a backlash against the politics he has spent his life building. Of course, demonstrating someone to be a fraud isn't much good on its own. It isn't going to get him booted off FOX—if that were how public life worked, CNN would have successfully impeached Trump on primetime. And so, towards the end of his terrible book, I began thinking about what it would take to defeat Steve Hilton and anyone else who tries to peddle new fake "populisms." It seems to me—and this is hardly an original insight—that it would require widespread acquaintance with a compelling left-populism, one that explains people's grievances and presents them with real solutions, all in the same register of speech. A populist message, with a populist substance: nothing resembling the capitalist tweaks and machinations on show here. Hilton has previously professed admiration for Bernie Sanders, but it's interesting to imagine what would happen to his show in the event of a Sanders Presidency. Confronted with the reality of instituted populism, I expect that he'd become just another outraged Fox host, crying socialism at the first sign of a tax hike.

If you want phony populism to go away, you have to offer people the real thing. +

DOOM DOOM DOOM

YOU'LL NEVER GET AMERICANS TO CUT DOWN ON MEAT CONSUMPTION

YOU'LL NEVER GET AMERICANS TO GIVE UP GUNS

YOU'LL NEVER GET AMERICANS TO EXTEND HEALTH CARE TO MINORITIES

CLIMATE CHANGE WILL KILL US ALL

PRIVACY IS

ALGORITHMS ALREADY KNOW US

DOOM

WE'RE ALL GOING TO BE LOCKED IN CONCENTRATION CAMPS IN 20 YEARS ANYWAY

WE MIGHT AS WELL LET GOOGLE AND FACEBOOK TAKE OVER SCHOOLS, MOST TEACHERS SUCK ANYWAY

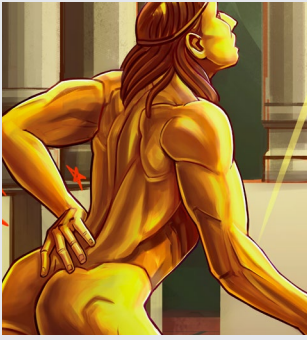
THE COUNTRY IS FULL OF DELUSIONAL IDIOTS WHO ARE EASILY LED BY DEMAGOGUES, UNLIKE ME. I AM VERY SMART AND BELIEVE IN SCIENCE

LIFE IS PAIN, AND ANYONE WHO SAYS OTHERWISE IS SELLING SOMETHING, AND NO DIDN'T STEAL THAT FROM THE PRINCESS BRIDE AND YES I TOTALLY HAVE A POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OUTSIDE OF CHILDHOOD MOVIES, JEZ!

The internet these days
You've got keyboard nihilists, and complacency—why, it's none other than extreme online Cool and world-weary Cool believers in nothing but the fall of their personal closed-a-

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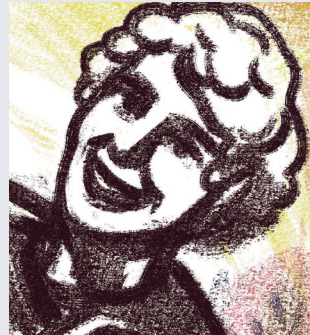
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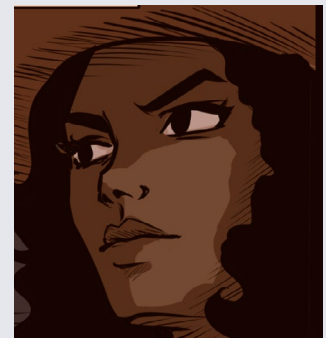
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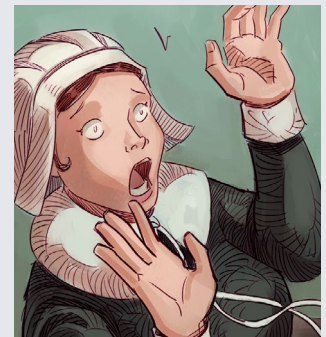
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