

*Like Fuzzy Slippers For The Brain*

# CURRENT AFFAIRS

\$10.95

VOL. 4, ISSUE 2

MAR./APR. 2019

**WE WATCHED  
INFOWARS**  
SO YOU DON'T  
HAVE TO

**CHOMSKY**  
THE INTERVIEW

**FEMINIST  
UTOPIAS**  
THEY'RE GREAT  
(EXCEPT THE DARK SIDES)

**WESTERN  
HISTORY**  
ACCORDING TO  
BEN SHAPIRO





# PASSIONATE AFFAIRS

## ROUSSEAU WOULD PURCHASE A GIFT SUBSCRIPTION

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that gentle old Genevan, famously said that in certain circumstances, people needed to be "forced to be free." Here at *Current Affairs*, we couldn't agree more. But what is freedom? In its classical definition, freedom means the capacity to read quality print media on a sunny afternoon in a soft chair. This is the kind of freedom we offer here at *Current Affairs*, for an affordable sum.

Some of your colleagues and comrades, however, are not yet free. They have not sipped the nectar of liberty from the stamen of justice. They are

fettered and bound. They are unsubscribed. They do not know the sweet joys of periodical-ownership. They do not realize that at this very moment, they could be part of an exclusive club that would both bring them thousands of new friends and deliver a high-quality print bimonthly to their mailbox every other monthish. (Fun Fact: a subscriber is always welcome in the home of another subscriber, so long as they obey the *Current Affairs* Modes Of Conduct.)

You, dearest avian, are in a unique position. You can rectify the

misfortunes of the deprived. You can bestow freedom on those who lack it. You can be greeted as a liberator. All you must do is purchase a *Current Affairs* "gift subscription" for each and every person in your life who presently lacks an ongoing relationship with *Current Affairs*. (Although remember, there is nothing wrong with purchasing subscriptions for people who have them already. Can there be such thing as too much freedom?) You will be the Patrick Henry of periodicals: why give them death when you can give them *Current Affairs*?

## NEXT ISSUE: WHAT CAN STOP THE DUKE OF EARL? (IT'S NOT NOTHING)



## CONFIDENCE BOOSTERS

have you had yours this year?



## RACE v. CLASS

### A NOTE ON A CONTROVERSIAL TOPIC:

Many people have asked us to comment on the question of "which is more important, race or class." We have insisted, over and over, that "race vs. class" is not a useful way to think about things, and are a little bit baffled as to why people are asking, but apparently people are very keen to hear our thoughts on whether "race" or "class" is more important. Therefore, the editorial team have discussed the issue, and after hours of no-holds-barred debate, we have settled the question once and for all. On the question of "race vs. class," our conclusion is: If you have to skip class to take part in a race, you should do so, as long as you make up the work after and don't forget to stretch first. We hope this answers all your questions about whether race or class is more important.



## WE CAN'T PROMISE IT WILL BE OK BUT WE'RE HERE WHEN YOU NEED US

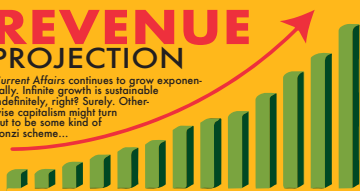
**Y**ou seem like a pretty nice person. Oh sure, there was that incident, but everybody is more than the worst thing they've ever done. We certainly don't hold it against you—frankly, we might have behaved similarly ourselves if we had had your identical life circumstances and genetic makeup. No, the fact is, you're A-okay with *Current Affairs*.

That's why we want you to know the following: we're here to listen. Well, not so much listen as speak. Periodicals are rather a one-way street as far as communication goes, though we do accept letters-to-the-editor and voicemails (504-867-8851). Still, we want you to feel as if we are here for you. Life can get, well, jolly rotten sometimes, and you need a magazine that recognizes just how bloody difficult and trying it can be just to stay alive and keep afloat. We are such a magazine. We will not tell you that things will be okay, because sometimes they aren't. It would be grotesque to tell a person with three months to live that Everything Will Work Out. (We are not saying that you have three months to live. You might have many more. Consult your doctor.) Everything might go to pieces, for all we know. But we'll keep sending magazines to your door till the bitter end. They will be good magazines, too. There will be pictures. We hope it will help.

CURRENT AFFAIRS (ISSN 2471-2447) is published bimonthly for \$60/year by CURRENT AFFAIRS LLC, 631 St Charles Ave, New Orleans, LA 70130. Periodicals postage paid at New Orleans, LA and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Current Affairs, 631 St Charles Ave, New Orleans, LA 70130. PRINTED IN KANSAS BY ALLEN PRESS, INC.

## REVENUE PROJECTION

Current Affairs continues to grow exponentially. Infinite growth is sustainable indefinitely, right? Surely. Otherwise capitalism might turn out to be some kind of Ponzi scheme...



## LETTERS

### Hello Current Affairs,

The January/February issue has been delightful thus far, but as I perused the front-matter to pad out time before my bus stop, I noticed a surprising superficiality to the *The Current Affairs Guide to Socialist Cocktails*.

First, a correction: far from being "truly communist," the Moscow Mule is in fact a capitalist boondoggle! Most recipes call for Smirnoff Vodka, which is because the mule was largely propagated by the Smirnoff corporation as a way to sell more vodka in American markets. The copper mug was a cynical ploy by the same to invent an authentic-feeling heritage for the drink, despite having none. As much as I enjoy a Moscow Mule, it can almost always be improved by using a dry, sharp-tasting gin instead of vodka, which adds complexity to the ginger beer instead of being overwhelmed by it.

Second, I was shocked to see that no cocktail of New Orleans made the list! Where are the representatives of sweet, botanical New Orleans sours? Where are the drinks finished with a splash of anisette or—since the ban was lifted in 2007—absinthe for the nose? I've come to expect novelty and depth from *Current Affairs*, but found the selection of cocktails decisively lacking in both.

Here are two suggestions for the discerning socialist:

**Espresso and grappa:** Perhaps no spirit is as representative of the worker as grappa. Grappa is traditionally distilled from the cast-aside grapes, skins and stems too bitter and tannic for wine-making. The peasants who work the vineyards collect these scraps and produce the spirit themselves, getting booze and perhaps a small profit on the side at their employers' expense. It's just brandy without the pretense! Splashed into some espresso, the effervescent alcohol changes the nose and lends new depth to the coffee. It's the perfect thing to simultaneously awaken and steel the nerves of a tired, anxious organizer.

**The Final Ward:** My favorite New Orleans sour, the Final Ward is equal parts rye whiskey, lemon juice, maraschino (the liqueur, not the cherries), and chartreuse. This drink is, first and foremost, delicious. Its recipe involves no complicated portioning—four equal parts is easy to remember and be made into any size! Though drink does require procuring chartreuse—an expensive liqueur made by secretive french monks—for those with the means, it's a worthy investment: chartreuse is a grassy, herby, amazing experience. After the revolution we will secularize its production and ensure that it is delivered by faucet into every home.

I hope these suggestions arrive with the love that bore them. Let's raise a glass to a hundred more years of *Current Affairs*!

Yours,  
Jaron

# SUBSCRIPTION PROTECTION

You have probably paid overdraft fees to your bank before. And you were probably grateful to do so, because according to your bank, what you and I call overdraft "fees" are actually properly referred to as overdraft "protection." Banks insist that they are offering you a service, by generously allowing you to overdraw your account and then charging an involuntary fee for the privilege.

Here at *Current Affairs*, the company slogan is that Subscribers Are Royalty. And if subscribers are royalty, we must offer them services befitting a

monarch. We must match the kind of generosity that banks provide to their customers. Thus: as part of our new Reader Appreciation strategy, we are pleased to introduce the new *Current Affairs* Subscription Protection Plan. We understand that nobody wants their subscription to lapse, because this would mean ceasing to receive *Current Affairs*, the worst among all conceivable fates. But sometimes people forget to renew. Under the Subscription Protection Plan, every reader who fails to renew their subscription will be automatically renewed, and

charged a small fee (\$100) for the privilege. In this way, your subscription is permanently "protected" from lapsing.

Some companies put profits over people. They are callous revenue-maximizers who do not consider the interests of the customer. This is not the *Current Affairs* way. The subscriber is always foremost in our minds, and there is no moment at which we are not thinking of new ways to reduce the possibility of your ever becoming unsubscribed. It is how you know we care.

## LAST CENTURY'S MILLENNIALS ARE RUINING...

- Gas Lighting
- Syphilis
- The Horse-Based Economy
- Health Tonics That Are Actually Just Opium



## THE EDITOR WISHES TO CLARIFY A MESSAGE FROM CURRENT AFFAIRS EDITOR NATHAN J. ROBINSON

Recently, pernicious defamatory rumours have been circulating concerning myself. I intend to address these malicious untruths directly, so that you, the reader, may have confidence in my editorship. As to whether I am a "cane-twirling, soft-handed, pretentious dandy": I do not carry a cane, nor do I twirl the cane I do not carry. Sometimes I carry an umbrella, but only if it looks as if it will rain. I do own several cravats, but I make no secret of this. I have even written a children's book on the subject (*The Man Who Accidentally Wore His Cravat To A Gymnasium*, Demilune Press, 2013). By some objective standards, I am therefore completely insufferable. My hands are not just soft, but the softest. My jackets are a rich mulberry hue, and if I am feeling especially springy you will find an azalea in my buttonhole. I suppose what I am saying is: All the allegations against me are true, except that the walking stick also keeps rain off. Sigh, what kind of creature am I?



## THE RUSSIA THING

We realize that we have let you down. You were probably expecting that a credible political publication would contain a full analysis of the so-called Mueller Report. We confess that we did not read the Mueller Report. We did, however, read the following animal-based alternatives and are prepared to give a full editorial breakdown of their contents:



- MEWLER REPORT — pictures of kittens
- MOOLLER REPORT — same but with crows
- MULER REPORT — mostly mules, but not all
- MAULER REPORT — sabre-toothed beasts

## ETHICALLY-SOURCED WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

You already shop for blood-free diamonds and cruelty-free chocolate. Isn't it time we had ethically sourced missiles?



## THE MOON SMALLER THAN THE SUN

## HAPPINESS: TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?

But while we could analyze how Thomas L. Friedman is both credulous and callous, while we could imply that the Pulitzer Committee should have thought twice before giving him journalism's highest prize on three separate occasions, while we could gently suggest that Friedman's Pulitzer's are the equivalent of Kissinger's Nobel, we are compelled to refrain from the exercise. For just as a scathing piece was being drafted by our editor, we received an unsolicited pitch from a most unexpected contributor: Thomas L. Friedman himself. Naturally, as it is not every day that a small-circulation print bimonthly has the chance to publish a lifetime Pulitzer winner, we leapt at the chance. We are delighted to showcase the topics along with excerpts from the forthcoming columns.

## COLONS: ARE WE OVERUSING THEM?

### THE SMART COUP

Everyone loves democracy, and for good reason. But when George W. Bush lashed

at this point, noting out that everything Thomas L. Friedman writes is insipid may seem like belaboring the obvious. But one cannot allow miscommod to be rationalized through repetition. Even obvious things must be said, if they are true. As the saying goes, fish are not entitled to decency merely because they happen to inhabit a barrel.

One might have thought it impossible for Friedman to top such career-making classics as his flexible Iraq forecast, his "suck on this" foreign policy philosophy, or his mathematically precise curiosity quotient equation. Today, however, in a column called "Trump Is Wasting Our Immigration Crisis"—explaining why Donald Trump's Wall is necessary but not sufficient—he offers a game-changing new way of thinking about borders. Not just Trump's big wall, not James Clyburn's "smart wall." No, Friedman says, "we have a real immigration crisis (and the solution is a high wall with a big gate) — but a smart gate."

Now, *Current Affairs* could point out once again that New York Times reporters need to stop swallowing and regurgitating the Trump administration's narrative of a "border crisis" demanding urgent action. We could point out that a writer infamous for his colossal fuckups on the Iraq story should probably be cautious before using citations like "one Border Patrol agent explained to me" in documenting the facts of the immigration system. And we could lament that writers from America's "liberal" newspaper are coming to the conclusion that "we need new walls" and "we need to rethink who is entitled to asylum, so people fleeing economic dislocation don't overwhelm our borders and harden our hearts to people truly fleeing tyranny." (No we fucking do not. How about just choosing not to harden our hearts at all?)

But while we could analyze how Thomas L. Friedman is both credulous and callous, while we could imply that the Pulitzer Committee should have thought twice before giving him journalism's highest prize on three separate occasions, while we could gently suggest that Friedman's Pulitzer's are the equivalent of Kissinger's Nobel, we are compelled to refrain from the exercise. For just as a scathing piece was being drafted by our editor, we received an unsolicited pitch from a most unexpected contributor: Thomas L. Friedman himself. Naturally, as it is not every day that a small-circulation print bimonthly has the chance to publish a lifetime Pulitzer winner, we leapt at the chance. We are delighted to showcase the topics along with excerpts from the forthcoming columns.

The "corralled app" this is an expression you don't hear. But you should, and you will. We're already seeing it. Instead of visiting relatives in prison, people now have to Skype with them instead for a fee. It's a green solution: no wasteful travel, and the fees go to carbon offset credits. But we could take it further: Instead of sending inmates letters and packages, why not choose a custom emoji, which will be projected onto the wall of their cell in the middle of the night?

The jail is a 19th-century technology—it's called a penitentiary because of "penance." But it doesn't have to be. Can jails be smart? Only if we are.

### SMART DEBT

Young people complain a lot about their debt. And they're right: There's a lot of debt that isn't very smart. Tying down innovators and risk-takers with needless obligations? Not so smart! Discounting bad decisions and punishing people for taking economically useful ones? Not so smart! Quite a bit smarter, though. Today's debt: the difference. Some debt makes

sense, other debt doesn't. Our problem is that we haven't asked the right question. I talked to a student once who told me that if they had the money they were using to pay their student loans, they could fund a startup that would deliver insulin via drone. Wow! If we were smarter on debt, we could solve the healthcare crisis. A missed opportunity. Dumb debt, indeed.

Lots of people should be in debt. Debt works, debt is the grease that fuels the motor of consumption. You don't want an engine without oil in it—a car mechanic. But dump too much oil in, and there's more oil than engine. That's not good either. How much oil is too much? That's the question, but first we have to ask it.

### SMART CROWD CONTROL

We hear a lot about "smart policing" and "smart jails." But with the rising tide of populism, it can be harder than ever to keep things smart. What happens if there's a backlash from the not-so-smart?

I spoke to the head of Oppquell Crowd Control Solutions about the new technologies that are helping to keep uprisings at bay. "The key, Tom," he told me, "is to know exactly where every single human being is at all times; to have their name, DNA, and a full transcript of every word they have ever spoken in private." Fortunately, we're closer than ever to making this a reality, thanks to public-private partnerships. Take one Department of Homeland Security, add the Alphabet Corporation, and voilà: intelligent governance.

It's all about Big Data, delivered in real time. Beam photos of the protesters' families into riot control officers' smart helmets. "Wouldn't want anything to happen to little Angela," the officer can say to the dissident. "He's so cute in his little pink shoes." Smart threats. The more you know, the better you govern, and technology is helping us govern better than ever.

### SMART WARMING

Climate change is coming, like it or not. The world is changing. It's still flat, but the water is rising. And in a flat world, a rising tide means there's less high ground. Not good news unless you're in the boat business. (Which, in a way, I am.)

Lots of people have ideas for how we can deal with climate change. "An international plan to drastically reduce carbon emissions and switch completely to alternative energy sources" seems to be the emerging consensus. But let me respectfully propose an alternative: The problem with warming isn't that it's warmer. It's that we're handing it too hotly, government, and technology is helping us govern better than ever.

ever while still staying cool.

In South Bend, Indiana, they installed "Smart infrastructure" to deal with water crises. That's a good idea, but we can go further. "Smart infrastructure" would be a job creator. Smart roads, smart bridges, smart pipelines, smart landfills, smart weapons, smart walls, smart traffic circles. Imagine it: an intelligence revolution, but green. You'd bring the jobs back, and the climate could still change. The best of both worlds. What do you say, Mr. Trump?

### SMART NATIONALISM

Steve Bannon is right. You might not expect me to say that, but it's true. Why? Because Bannon understands that there is no contradiction between embracing 21st-century tech and understanding the clash of civilizations. Breitbart was 19th-century political analysis on a 21st-century platform. Wired nationalism. Seemingly disparate tendencies resolved into a unified, amazingly contemporary force.

Was the problem with nationalism that it was national, or was the problem that it wasn't on your phone? If you believe Karl Marx, it was the former. But we have really considered the latter? We can't escape globalization, it's true. Yet we also can't escape its tensions. Maybe the best solution is to couple technology and provincialism, the universal and the specific, the national and the romantic. Free trade, yes, free people no. Do we need to give up our Amazon Prime accounts in order to secure the future existence of our people? I say we don't. With smart phones plus smart nationalism plus smart walls minus-of course—dumb dissent, we can have everything we want, for a nominal fee.



NO MATTER WHAT THE COMMITTEE'S REPORT SAYS—YOU WILL ALWAYS BE BEAUTIFUL TO US.



# TABLE OF

*Tech CEO  
Diaries  
p. 64*

*Microstates  
p. 48*

*Ben  
Shapiro's  
West  
p. 68*

*Bullshit  
Jobs  
p. 43*





# CONTENTS

*Cinema*  
p. 26

*The Love  
Interest*  
p. 22

*Water*  
p. 36

*Nuclear  
Semiotics*  
p. 6

*Feminist  
Utopias*  
p. 58

*Alex Jones*  
p. 16

*Murder*  
p. 31









# WE CONSIDERED OURSELVES TO BE A POWERFUL CULTURE

*A Message to An Unknown Reader*

BY AISLING MCCREA

I WANT YOU TO PICTURE THE FOLLOWING scenario: you are an archaeologist, and you are digging at a site about 125 miles east of Karachi, Pakistan. A lot of the terrain in Pakistan is mountainous, difficult to inhabit, but not the part of the land we're talking about. Check a satellite image of the region on Google Maps, if you've got a phone or a computer nearby: you are in that rich green ribbon of land that snakes down through the middle of the country. This is the Indus river basin, a place that has fed and raised cultures for thousands of years. Humans have wandered everywhere, but it was places like this, with running water and fertile soil, that first lured us into the role of settler. It was places like this where the combination of bountiful resources and our growing ingenuity first allowed us to develop systemic methods of agriculture, build cities, and begin our struggle to achieve things beyond mere survival, or so it is said. Because of this, river basins are nicknamed "the cradle of civilization." Civilization is what we call it when humans begin to think of themselves not as dependants of their environment, but as masters.

From the distance of the satellite, note that you cannot see Pakistan's cities or factories, or any sign of activity from the two hundred million people living within the lines we call its borders. All that stands out to your eye is that luscious green ribbon, swirling from the mountains to the sea, a gift from God or the earth or whomever you believe to be the benefactor. You are an archaeologist, and this is where you are digging.

The site you are excavating was only recently discovered, a

chance find by a construction crew. There are many sites in the region, all dating back to the Bronze Age, but we cannot discern the exact relationship between the settlements we've found, whether they considered themselves part of the same culture or were sworn enemies; part of the reason we do not know this is we cannot read their writing. Therefore, what you find in your excavation might be similar to other settlements in the region—simply an extension of the discoveries made before—or you might find something different. You are full of human curiosity, and ambition. You are hoping to find something different.

Here in the cradle of civilization, you find something buried. It is a bronze box covered in engravings, clearly designed by a skilled hand, and since you found it at the center of what appeared to be the site's biggest temple, you judge it to be of some importance. You know the field well, and you know that this is unlike anything found before, and that excites you. The engraving contains a lot of symbols—part of the script no-one can read, it tells you nothing—and under the symbols, artfully etched, is the unmistakable image of a human skull.

For thousands of years and across continents, skulls have been used to signify danger. But history is long and full of turns, and even this most obvious and literal symbol could signify a multitude of things. You trace the skull with your finger, trying to connect with the intent of its long-dead creator. It seems designed to look intimidating, but when you first brushed the dirt from the surface and saw the graven image, you didn't think for one second about danger—in fact, the first thing it



reminded you of was the skulls on your brother's goofy band shirts. (It wouldn't make sense to think of danger. Whatever once threatened here is quiet. There is no danger here.) What could this skull have meant, you wonder, to the people who lived here? What's the connection to the building, or the contents of the box? You think of human sacrifices, burial places, commemorations of wars.

Then you think of your career. You open the box.

**I**N THE 1960s, THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY began wondering what on earth it was going to do with all its nuclear waste. This question had never been highly prioritized before; in the years following World War II, the prevailing attitudes towards nuclear energy had run the gamut between sunny optimism and mortal fear, powerful emotions which leave little space for mundane concerns about the high-tech equivalent of garbage disposal. After research into nuclear fission had successfully served its first purpose—vaporizing and mutilating countless Japanese civilians—the U.S. government had been enthusiastic about the many potential uses of its superhuman creation, and invested heavily both in nuclear weapons and nuclear energy production for civilian use. It was predicted that nuclear power could do everything, from keeping the lights on to preserving food. A nation drunk on the promises of the atom had little interest in thinking about the hangover.

By the 1960s, however, the novelty of the so-called “atomic age” was starting to wear off, and the government realized it had a problem on its hands. The production of nuclear energy was creating large amounts of radioactive waste, which could not be converted into safe material, and which would remain dangerous to human beings for at least 10,000 years. (10,000 years is a conservative estimate. Many scientists have suggested that number should have one or two more zeroes on the end.) The waste was being kept in temporary storage facilities dotted around the country, and there was no obvious place where it could be safely deposited and sealed away. And even if a permanent place could be found, there was the question of how to keep people away from it.

The government's concern was not so much for its contemporary citizens, who had been bombarded with enough Cold War propaganda to understand the threat of nuclear radiation. If a 20th-century American were to somehow get lost on their way home from the drive-in theater and stumble into a radioactive waste disposal site, all it would take to warn them off was a sign bearing the word “danger” and the image of the trefoil. (The trefoil is the internationally-recognized symbol for radiation, usually black on a yellow background, a circle surrounded by three blades. You knew the image before you knew the word.) Rather, the government's concern was for the people who would come later. For comparison, the entire concept of complex human civilization, at least as we tend to define it, is about five thousand years old. Now we had created something that would curse us for at least twice as long as that, maybe

many times longer, and we had to work out not only how to bury it, but to protect whoever might disturb its burial place.

While Americans fretted over whether their grandchildren would grow up speaking English or Russian, the Department of Energy recognized that whoever came across their disposal site might be as distant to both those languages as we are to the dead scripts of the Indus Valley. It was possible that they might not know written language at all. Perhaps they would have progressed so far beyond writing that the concept would be unthinkable to them. Perhaps the opposite would happen, and they wouldn't know anything of writing because the sum of human knowledge was lost to them in some catastrophic event—or even deliberately discarded, after the sum of human knowledge was examined and found, on the whole, not to have done us any good. No matter how desperately we wish to communicate with future peoples, there is no way to guarantee the sanctity of the written word, and it is considered likely that any written warning will be meaningless to them.

Communication through images seems an obvious choice—that's the option we usually go for when we're facing a language barrier—until you consider that the reader might have no concept of radiation. Right now the meaning of the trefoil is recognized across nations and languages, but that meaning is just an arbitrary one that we've constructed for ourselves, as fragile and temporally dependant as nations and languages themselves. To us, the sight of the trefoil signifies generations of scientific progress, terror, the future, something to be respected; an invisible energy that is sometimes used to kill hostile growths in our bodies, and in other cases will make them grow. None of that knowledge is communicated through the image. To our unknown recipient, it's just a black circle and three blades. If you forget what it means to you, it could almost be a flower.

**I**F ONE WERE LOOKING FOR A HINT AT HOW these sites might be treated by our distant descendants, one might find it in the deserts of Egypt. Of all the myriad civilizations that ever lived and died in the “non-Western” world, ancient Egypt is the only one most Westerners know much about, and there are two obvious reasons for this. First, Egypt's exoticism and long history was a great source of fascination for the Greeks and the Romans—remember that the Great Sphinx was older to Caesar than Caesar is to us—and so it has somehow been pulled into Western canon, despite its location right in the middle of the region we are supposed to think of as the West's eternal enemy. (This view is incorrect for many reasons, not least because nothing human is eternal.) Second, they left us the pyramids. The pyramids of Giza are not the world's largest pyramids, nor the oldest, but for the last four and a half thousand years their image has captivated humanity across millenia and continents like nothing else on the planet. We cannot know the intent of the pharaohs, but one might guess they wanted to be buried somewhere that



would assure they would always be remembered; by imprinting their deaths physically and unforgettably on the landscape, they were sending a message to future generations.

However, while the pyramids are still here, the meaning of the message is forgotten. Most people couldn't tell you much about any individual pharaoh buried there. Almost no-one still believes that the pharaohs were gods. Some will want to tell you their own interpretation of the intended meaning or purpose of the buildings, or their theories about the culture in general; what was once a tomb for the world's most influential figures is now reduced to a sort of personal amusement for amateur detectives. The burial chambers have been looted countless times. We unsealed the coffins and desecrated the dead, shipping them out to museums on new landmasses and displaying their bodies as curiosities, and no rumors of a curse could slake our thirst for trophies.

Very occasionally, we have a moment of vulnerability, of self-reflection. When it was announced last year that a new sarcophagus had been uncovered, and that it was filled with a mysterious red liquid, many responded to the news with expressions of dread. Was it because we still had a little lingering respect for a culture that had achieved so much, a culture that had not quite revealed all its mysteries to us, and its production of an as-yet unknown substance filled us with awe? Were we afraid that our knowledge of science had missed something old, and abhorrent, something lurking under the sands waiting to be set free?

The moment didn't last long. A representative of Egypt's Ministry of Antiquities pointed out the liquid was most likely just sewage, and our discomfort promptly evaporated. Someone even started a petition demanding people be allowed to drink the "sarcophagus juice" so that they could "assume its powers." A joke, of course, but jokes often contain a grain of truth. Across the entirety of our history as builders of civilizations, all our sins and achievements have stemmed from our metaphorical urge to drink the sarcophagus juice: to salivate at the promise of new knowledge and power, to disturb and break open anything that is unknown, to ransack the earth and, giving no thought to the consequences, consume whatever we find there.

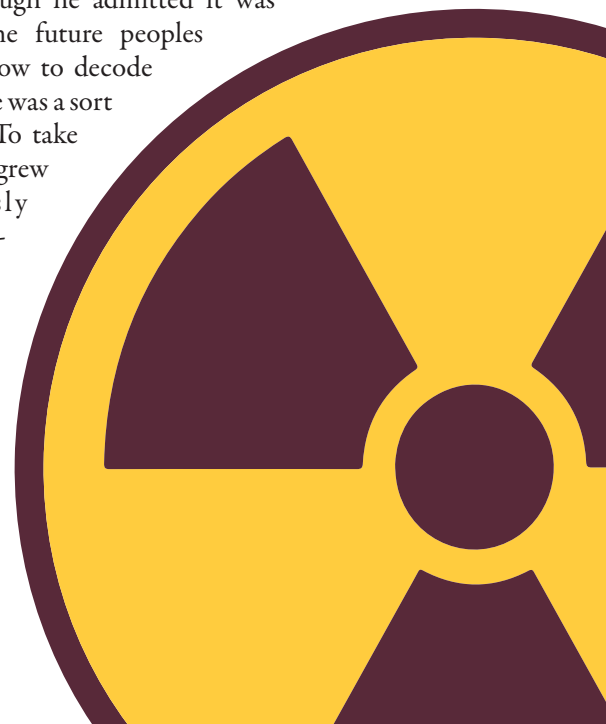
**B**Y 1980, "ATOMIC OPTIMISM" WAS DEAD, OR at least dormant, in the United States. Throughout the 1970s, the anti-nuclear movement had gained momentum, along with the rest of the counterculture. A partial meltdown had just occurred at the Three Mile Island nuclear plant in Pennsylvania, stoking further panic about the dangers of radiation. There was still no confirmed plan to build a permanent waste disposal site.

The Department of Energy knew it was time to face some difficult questions. They assembled a team of experts from fields as diverse as environmental science, nuclear engineering, waste management, semiotics, linguistics, behavioral psychol-

ogy, and anthropology. They called it the Human Interference Task Force, and their goal was to develop a strategy to prevent any future nuclear waste depository from being disturbed by future generations. Although there was technology available to design a well-protected depository, the Task Force knew that there was little hope of building something totally indestructible. They could try and discourage interference with the depository by drawing on the concept of "hostile architecture"—designing a site that was deliberately difficult and uncomfortable to navigate—but a species that insisted on going to the Moon was unlikely to be deterred by a few spikes or a maze. Therefore, the main focus of the Task Force was not fortification, but communication. We could not keep people out by force; we could only plead.

In 1982, the German Journal of Semiotics (*Zeitschrift für Semiotik*) posed the depository problem to its readers, who responded with admirable, if slightly over-optimistic levels of imagination. One suggested solution was the development of a new breed of domestic cats, whose fur would change color in reaction to high levels of radioactivity. The world's governments could then promote the development of art and literature in which cats changing color were an oft-repeated symbol for danger; thus, when future generations came across depository sites and tried to settle there, their cats would change color and they would become frightened and leave. Another suggestion was an "atomic priesthood," a group of people who vowed to live near the sites, and passed on the secrets of radiation from generation to generation, in mythologized and ritualized form if need be. A theme that crops up again and again with the depository problem is the need for the message to be distilled into something simple and accessible: call it *universal*, if you like, or *primitive* if you prefer.

Stanisław Lem, one of the world's foremost science fiction authors, proposed that botanists use genetic modification to encode information about nuclear waste into the DNA of flowers, which could be planted and nurtured near the site. Although he admitted it was risky to assume future peoples would know how to decode the DNA, there was a sort of logic to it. To take plants that grew spontaneously and manipulate them to our liking, breeding and growing them at our convenience so we could propagate our own



species was, after all, civilization's first trick. Perhaps it had some lasting power.

The Human Interference Task Force began to draw up designs. A multiplicity of images, symbols and words were proposed as part of the initial blueprints for the depository site, with the Task Force noting that any method of inscribing the messages at the site would have to outlast theft, weathering, and changes in climate. Because we could not predict any future civilizations' level of knowledge, the danger would have to be communicated in a way that was comprehensible to any type of reader. There could be some complex, technical messages at the site, but in case they couldn't be understood, there needed to be some simpler messages too, and repeated in a number of ways so the meaning was less likely to be misinterpreted.

A 1993 report by Sandia National Laboratories—charged by the Department of Energy with the task of researching nuclear safety—took this concept further, and proposed some specific messages that might work. Some of the images might include: A periodic table. A world map of all known waste sites. A diagram showing the precession of stars in the sky over tens of thousands of years, from which readers might calculate the date the depository was built. (The places where we build depositories tend to be far from human life, and therefore relatively free from air pollution; if you want a perfect view of the night sky, go to a nuclear silo and look up.) There was some measure of disagreement on what type of pictographs to use. Some researchers wanted to focus on more functional pictographs, while others gave more prominence to “human facial expressions (horror and sickness).” The messages would begin from the outside, becoming more complex as one got closer and closer to the center. The Sandia report gives a suggestion for one of the more complex written warnings at a location close to the center. It was more technical in substance, though still simple in style:

*“This place is a burial place for radioactive wastes. We believe this place is not dangerous IF IT IS LEFT ALONE! We are going to tell you what lies underground, why you should not disturb this place, and what may happen if you do. By giving you this information, we want you to protect yourselves and future generations from the dangers of this waste. The waste is buried — kilometers down in a salt layer. Salt was chosen because there is very little water in it...We found out that the worst things happen when people disturb the site. For example, drilling or digging through the site could connect the salt water below the radioactive waste with the water above the waste or with the surface...”*

The message goes on at some length, giving explanations as to the chemistry involved, the nature of illnesses caused by radiation, and the structure of the building. The writing would be inscribed on the wall, complete with instructional pictures. (Today, this scenario might remind one of an escape room or a puzzle in a video game, amusing simulations of mortal danger made real.)

The writing would not be enough, though. The report also noted that the site would need to convey in its physical form

a feeling, something that would touch the basest instincts of a living being. The authors noted in words, as best they could, what that feeling was:

*“This place is not a place of honor... no highly esteemed deed is commemorated here... nothing valued is here. What is here was dangerous and repulsive to us.*

*The danger is still present, in your time, as it was in ours. The danger is to the body, and it can kill.*

*This place is a message... and part of a system of messages ...pay attention to it!*

*Sending this message was important to us. We considered ourselves to be a powerful culture.”*

**A**T THE END OF THE SANDIA REPORT, THE writers quote a poem. If you're into poetry, you might be able to guess what it is, and maybe the lines have already whispered through your mind as you've been reading this article.

*I met a traveller from an antique land  
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert... near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed;*

*And on the pedestal these words appear:  
‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings;  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!’  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

*Ozymandias* by Percy Shelley was published on 11 January 1818, at the height of what was called “Egyptomania,” the burning obsession of Western aristocrats with finding and swallowing up all the treasures of the Nile. Shelley might have been inspired by the romance of the desert for his setting, but the underlying message of his poem—even the greatest empires fall and are forgotten—can also read as a warning to his own nation's empire, to the new wave of philosophers and scientists, to anyone so caught up in the heady power of 19th century Britain that they forgot they were only mortal. Just ten days before the poem was published, his wife, Mary Shelley, published a work of her own, a novel about a scientist who creates a monster he cannot control.

Not many paid attention to the warnings. The allure of power—power from knowledge, from technology, from resources, from land—dominated the mindset of those who ran empires, and those who ran empires dominated the world.

The same year *Frankenstein* and *Ozymandias* were published, Egypt conquered the Arabian Peninsula. This was a critical vic-



tory, because it put the holy cities of Mecca and Medina back under the control of the Ottoman Empire, the great power to which Egypt was subordinate. The Empire had held the holy cities for centuries, yet inexplicably, for the previous thirteen years, Mecca and Medina had been out of their grasp, having fallen into the hands of a small upstart tribe with their own version of Islam—an extremely strict and literalist doctrine that seemed totally at odds with the rest of the world’s tendency towards modernization. But the recapturing of the cities meant balance was restored to the world, after this strange temporary interlude. The upstart tribe with its fundamentalist religion was brutally crushed, its leaders executed, and all was in its rightful place. If one were to go back in time to 1818, and ask a well-read man about the civilizational struggles in Arabia, it is likely he would have thought a lot about the strong, old, Western-facing Ottoman Empire—which had changed the shape of the world and

produced so much of interest—and very little, if at all, about a defeated family called the House of Saud.

But the path of human history isn’t a straight line, and we can’t see what lies ahead of us. One hundred years later, in 1918, the world’s most brutal war ended and the Ottoman Empire turned to dust, leaving the House of Saud space to consolidate their power. In 1932 the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was born. One of the king’s first moves was to invite American geologists, engineers and businessmen to plunge through the sand and drill holes into the earth, suspecting that the ground beneath their feet was hiding black and glistening treasure that could make them rich.





# WE CAN ONLY PRAY THAT THEY WILL NOT BE AS GREEDY AS US. WE CAN ONLY HOPE THEY HEAR OUR MESSAGE.

In 1938, the Americans found what they were looking for, and the House of Saud turned from an upstart tribe to transformers of the desert, with the wealth and power to do anything they wished. Western cities grew upwards and outwards, feeding off the oil under the surface of Saudi land. In 1984, an exiled Saudi national named Abdul Rahman Munif wrote a novel about the oil boom called *Cities of Salt*, and when asked the meaning of the name, explained that one day the glimmering Saudi cities would dissolve and be forgotten, like salt in water. All this happened within a fraction of human history, and the finest minds of the early 19th century could never have foreseen it—just as they couldn't have foreseen how our lust for oil would cause the temperatures to rise.

**T**HE DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY STILL DOES NOT have a permanent depository site, but it's had a location picked out since the 1980s: Yucca Mountain, Nevada, one hundred miles northwest of Las Vegas. Yucca Mountain is just by the Nevada Test Site, where nuclear weapons have been tested off-and-on since 1951 (the last test was in 2012). In this desert, workers would build mock neighborhoods of picture-perfect brick houses, sit families of mannequins at the dinner table, and see what remained of them after the mushroom cloud had dispersed. (*No highly esteemed deed is commemorated here. What is here was dangerous and repulsive to us.*) The location was partly chosen because almost no one lives there now, though remnants of the gold and silver mining industries have left the sands strewn with ghost towns. A lot of the names around here tell stories: Gold Center, Eureka, Saline, Chloride City, Hells Gate. Occasionally, you'll see an indigenous name.

The Sandia report said the depository should send the message: *We considered ourselves to be a powerful culture.* This raises the question of who the “we” is supposed to be. It could mean the contemporary world in general, if we wanted to label ourselves one culture (we don't know how apparent any differences would be to future readers between the United States

and anywhere else.) Or it could mean the United States government. But there's another “we” with a claim to this land. As far as the Western Shoshone people are concerned, Yucca Mountain doesn't even belong to the federal government. The government claims to have legally purchased the land during the Civil War, when they needed it to acquire gold. The Western Shoshone dispute that the government has rights to the land, since the government only made a fraction of promised payment after it was appropriated. (*This is not a place of honor.*) Shoshone activists, as well as other peoples indigenous to the area, express their outrage both at the theft of their land and the polluting of the environment, but it does little good.

At any given point in time, some civilizations have power, and some do not. At the moment, the United States has power and the Shoshone do not, because in the European settlers' quest to take the land, they had killed the majority of the people who were already there, wiping entire societies off the map as they went, whether intentionally by murder and cruelty, or unintentionally, by disease. (*The danger is to the body, and it can kill.*)

The Yucca Mountain plan is currently at a standstill, lacking in funding and lurking low on the priorities list, and for the moment, the permanent site shows no signs of being built. In its place, waste is temporarily being stored at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) in New Mexico, which one day might become the permanent site. If the site there is developed for permanent storage, its written warnings are to be in seven languages: the six official languages of the UN, and Navajo. One might interpret this as the federal government throwing a tiny token to the people it knows it has mistreated. Or one might consider it a recognition of the impossibility of predicting history's twists and turns: We have no idea who might be here 10,000 years from now, and who might not.

**W**HEN READING THROUGH THE HUMAN Interference Task Force and WIPP documents—after overcoming the initial wave of eldritch horror brought on by the sight of chapter headings like “Menacing Earthworks” and “Forbidding Blocks”—one starts to get the sense that something is unusual about these reports. For starters, the sheer level of vision on display is quite remarkable, making them at times seem more like science fiction novels than a government report. What's more, from the perspective of our era—when the humanities and social sciences are frequently defunded, dismissed, and derided—it's surprising to see an unquestioned faith in the essential relationship between “hard” science and social science. The U.S. Department of Energy understood that the nuclear waste disposal problem could not be solved by technological innovation alone; no alloy or neat little locking mechanism would save us from our future selves. Only by examining human nature, and allowing ourselves to conceive of a world beyond all contemporary understanding, could we attempt to protect



the planet from the magnitude of what we'd done to it.

Perhaps, damaging though it was in terms of its siege mentality, there was something in the Cold War mindset that allowed the U.S. researchers to think in such epochal terms. The older researchers on the initial project would have grown up in the midst of the Second World War, the near-apocalyptic battle between inextricably opposed ideologies—fascism, communism, liberal democracy—that had all still been in their cradle just a century before, and had then grown into giants, who in their battles spilled blood into the earth and left cities in shreds. The younger researchers were bathed in the spirit of the Cold War, a Manichean atmosphere wherein the fate of the earth depended on the outcome of a constant struggle between two opposing forces, and where children learned that at the press of a button in Moscow, they might one day simply evaporate. This ingrained knowledge of the knife-edge fragility of civilization, a sense of an America proud and strong and wealthy and yet always teetering at the edge of a precipice, might have instilled in those researchers a quiet understanding that they, their hometown, their country, their planet was a place where all could be annihilated. Perhaps this enabled them to look calmly in the face of their own civilization's destruction, and accept their obligation to do whatever they could for those who came next.

After the early 90s, reports continued to come out, occasionally, but there were no big breakthroughs in the communication side of things, or any more radical approaches to the problem. This period, after the fall of the Soviet Union, is what Francis Fukuyama called “the end of history”: the epic battles between visions for humanity's future were done, the West had won, we were all to put our imaginations away in safety deposit boxes and get to focusing on technocratic tweaks and institutional tune-ups for the rest of time. It is remarkable to note the difference in attitude toward the nuclear crisis in the Cold War, and the climate crisis today. Moderate proposals for a Green New Deal are handwaved away as “unrealistic”; in response to suggestions of a move to renewable energy, sensible people shake their heads and point to their graphs of electricity prices, jobs, and GDP, graphs that stretch back twenty or thirty years, which is as far back as anyone can remember. Quietly, without fuss, long-term survival slips further and further down the priorities list.

The United States understands danger in the form of external threats, but not the danger within itself: the desire of civilizations to consume the land they perch on, to draw resources out from the ground and use them all up, to create great pestilences as a byproduct of its inventions, and realise (too late) the ramifications of what's been done. There is something different between the inventive, enthusiastic way the U.S. Department of Energy reacted to the nuclear waste problem in the 1980s, and the timid, bounded way it reacts to climate change now. We have lost the ability to imagine the future.

Our nuclear waste sits in silos, waiting for a home; the question of what to do with them is in stasis. The Department of

Energy has ensured that on a technical level, when they are eventually buried, they will survive any war or terrorist attack within the short-term—which, no matter how painful they might be to us, are bound to be mere scratches on the surface of the earth's history. Wherever their resting place—as the situation stands, it will be somewhere quiet in the Southwestern deserts—when they are buried we will probably hear about them on the news, and there may be a wave of excitement, and then the dirt will be shovelled over them, and we'll forget. A thousand crises will come and pass. Nations will be formed and abandoned, the sea will sweep in, the deserts will get hotter, the riverbeds will dry up. To think about a time 10,000 years from now is frightening, and bleak, knowing what we know about the current trends, but a stretch of time that long has room for faith as well as despair. Hopefully humanity will save itself, somehow; we will turn our desire to shape the earth to a good purpose, and build a new way of existing on the land, something none of us can predict. We can only pray that they will not be as greedy as us. We can only hope they hear our message.

SOMEWHERE BEYOND ANY DISTANCE WE can picture, an archaeologist is digging. The sand stretches all around him, to all horizons. He has hit stone, a monument to something, and after some time, it is revealed in its entirety. It is etched all over with lines of different shapes, that he cannot understand, but he understands enough to realize this was once a special place. To either side of the words, he recognizes drawings of human faces: one has a mouth open in terror, the other twisted in pain. This could be a memorial to some horrific event, or it could be a curse meant to punish unwanted intruders. Intruders were not well-liked by these people, or so the archaeologist has read, though he finds it difficult to understand their concepts of property and trespass.

Exhausted from digging, he sits at the foot of the monument, and he spends a moment taking in its magnificence, trying to connect with its makers. At the top of the monolith is a mysterious symbol—a circle, surrounded by three blades. The archaeologist smiles. He has never seen it before, but it fills him with a sense of serenity. It was a plant that grew in their time, perhaps, or the insignia of a nation, or a representation of a god. Whatever it was, it's long gone now, but in any case it's pretty. Like a child, he traces the trefoil in the sand, digging his thumb into the earth to make the center, dragging his fingers outwards one, two, three times. The ground moves easily for him, giving way to his desire to destroy the surface and create something new. He looks down at the trefoil he has drawn, his little sign that he has been here. He is just the latest in an immeasurable line of human beings who desire to put some sort of mark on the earth.

He is proud of his creation, but he forgets that it is drawn in sand. It's visible only for a minute, before the winds blow it away. ✦



# White Liberal Feminism: THE GAME

## RULES & GAMEPLAY

You are a white liberal feminist trying to build your career through #Empowerment #LeaningIn and being a #SlayQueen. Win the game by being the first player to (1) reach the end with the most money, or (2) throw five women of color under the bus, or (3) get a book deal.

Collect three types of rewards: money, Sympathy Chips, and Thinkpieces. All players start the game with \$50,000, 10 Sympathy Chips, and zero Thinkpieces. Ten Thinkpieces can be traded for one book deal.

If you spend 10 sympathy chips at the beginning of your turn, you can purchase an I FEEL UNSAFE card. This cancels out any negative effects which may be incurred during a turn.



THINKPIECE

SYMPATHY CHIP

SYMPATHY CHIP

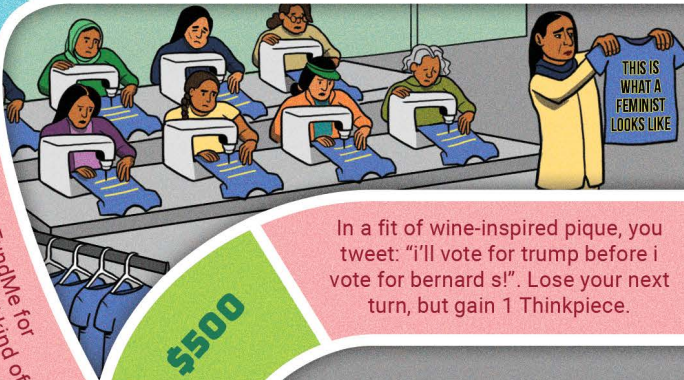
I FEEL UNSAFE CARD

After an earthquake in Indonesia, you write a touching Twitter thread about how badly it affected you because you went backpacking there once. Collect 6 Sympathy Chips.

A Trump supporter calls you fat online. Get him fired from his telemarketing job. Milk the subsequent news cycle for 5 Sympathy Chips and 2 Thinkpieces. Earn \$1000 for TV appearances.

A rival feminist accuses you of culturally appropriating yoga. You counter by image-searching 'Indian woman' and posting a picture of the fourth result, claiming she's your best friend. Advance 3 spaces.

A popular white singer wears a kimono in her latest music video. It's vital that people hear your opinion on this. Collect 2 Thinkpieces.



In a fit of wine-inspired pique, you tweet: "I'll vote for trump before i vote for bernard s!". Lose your next turn, but gain 1 Thinkpiece.

Throw a woman of color under the bus. Advance 2 spaces.

\$500

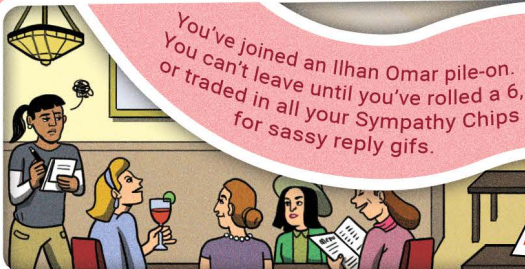
Set up a GoFundMe for earthquake victims and kind of accidentally keep the money for yourself. Gain \$30,000.

Congrats! You've been hired by a company that makes floral body armor for women cops. Collect \$100,000 and advance three spaces.

You're a guest on a panel discussing trans women that incidentally has no trans women on it. Lose 3 Sympathy Chips but still advance 2 spaces. Collect \$2000 as payment for your work.

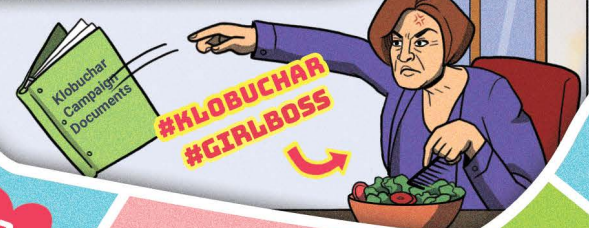
You declare yourself "Black Irish" and describe the oppression you've faced, relating it to the black experience in America. Lose 4 Sympathy Chips.

You made a bad investment in a company that solely makes pussyhat pencil toppers. Lose \$3,000.



You've joined an Ilhan Omar pile-on. You can't leave until you've rolled a 6, or traded in all your Sympathy Chips for sassy reply gifs.

\$100



#KLOBUCHAR #GIALBOSS

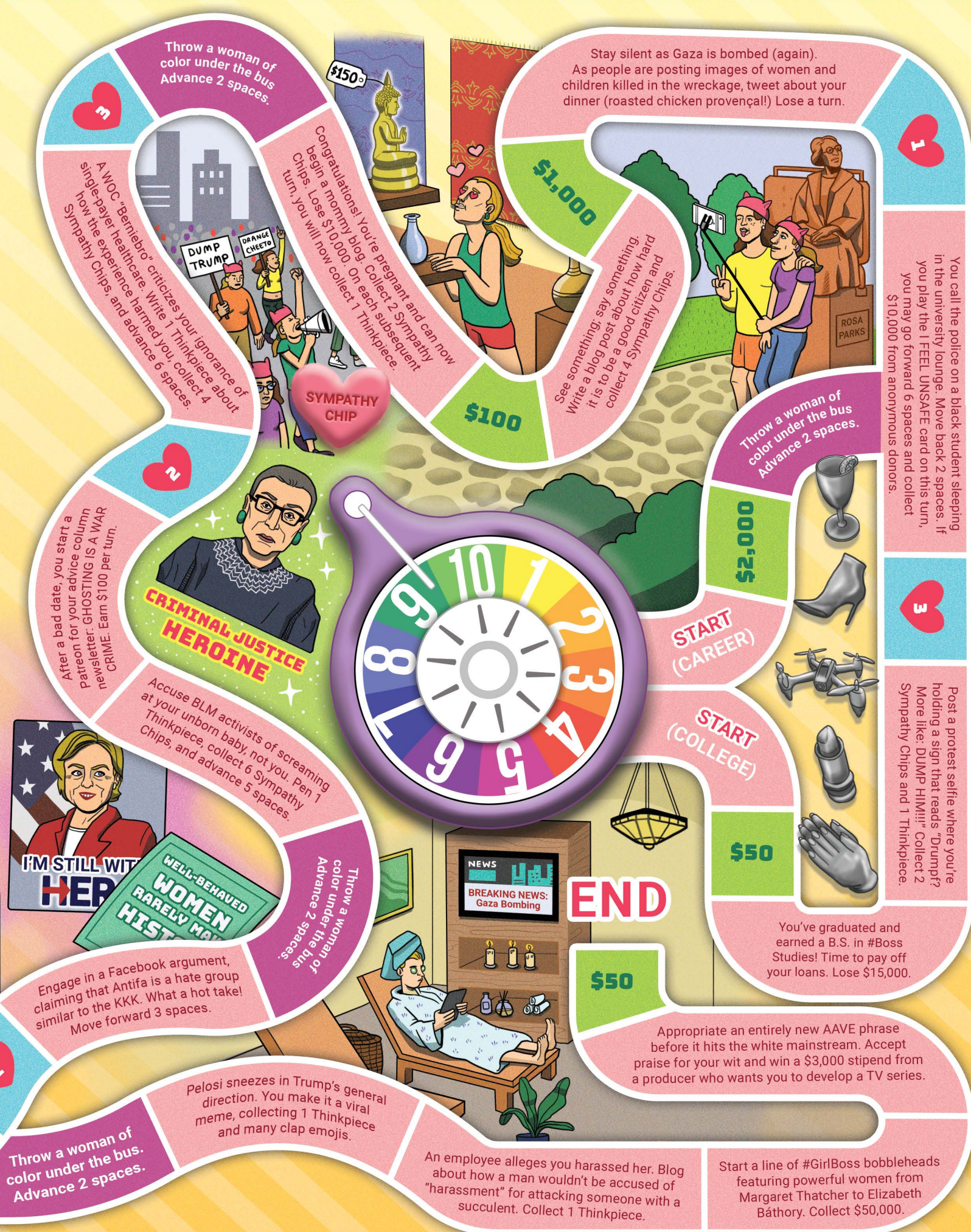
\$500

In the Hamptons, you foolishly live-tweet your interaction with a VERY rude server who forgot the cucumber in your spicy spa-garita. Lose 5 Sympathy Chips and retreat 3 spaces. Gain \$15,000 from anonymous donors.

Cofound an app that matches young women with shitty dates they can write thinkpieces about. Collect 1 Meta-Thinkpiece (worth 5 Thinkpieces.)

\$1,000











# *The Terrifying World of* ALEX JONES

by ELI MASSEY and NATHAN J. ROBINSON

**I**F YOU ARE NOT A MEMBER OF THE *InfoWars* viewership, the appeal of Alex Jones can seem somewhat mystifying. If you have not already fallen down his rabbit hole—if you do not believe in false flag attacks and fluoridation conspiracies and black helicopters—Jones can seem transparently ridiculous. He rants, he sweats, sometimes he takes his shirt off. He obsesses over stories that most of us do not—recent headlines on the *InfoWars* site include “Illuminati Symbolism To Replace Christian Cross On Notre Dame Cathedral,” “Barack Obama Is About To Be Investigated For Treason,” and “Learn How Vaccines Use Fluoride And Glyphosate To Kill You.” His worldview is paranoid, incoherent, and terrifying. It’s tempting to treat him merely as a lunatic or a grifter—John Oliver, in his detailed examination of the *InfoWars* empire, seemed to think of it mainly as a scheme to sell bogus nutritional supplements.

And yet: While almost everything you could say against Alex Jones is true—half of what he says is nonsense, he traffics in demented conspiracies, his online shop sells obvious snake oil (from “Brain Force” and “DNA Force” tablets to chocolate bone shakes to mysterious red pills called “The *Real* Red Pill Plus”)—it is not surprising that he has managed to find an audience. Jones is a skilled entertainer, who offers his viewers and listeners far more than just sham health tonics and bunker survival kits. They’re drawn to him for the same reason people are

drawn to televangelists—he seems to have secrets, and answers, and offers you support in the never-ending war between the sinister forces of Them and the desperate, surviving Us.

Before he was kicked off YouTube and Facebook, Alex Jones was bringing in an audience of close to 1.5 million people. Nowadays, it’s apparently quite a bit less, though he can still draw a crowd: A recent appearance on the Joe Rogan Experience, lasting well over 4 hours, topped 13 million views on YouTube. Watching *InfoWars*, it’s not difficult to see why: Jones has a preacher’s charisma, and a gift for creating drama and working himself into a raging frenzy. As with Donald Trump, everything he says might be nonsense (on the Rogan show, he strongly defended his theory that interdimensional beings were controlling the government), but it is very difficult to stop watching him.

The monologues on Jones’ show are rambling and often make very little sense, but he is so confident, so alive and boiling over with emotion, so convinced that what he is saying is not only true but that he is the *only one* who sees things how they really are. It’s all in the delivery, the voice. (Interestingly, while most televised blowhards eventually publish a book, Jones has never done so, perhaps because his schtick is entirely dependent on his persona, and making an interdimensional political conspiracy seem plausible in print is more challenging.)

Perhaps it is best to expose you to a sample of an Alex Jones



monologue, so you can see what he's feeding his listeners. Here is Jones talking about the plague of "illegals" coming over the borders. Be sure to read it in his voice:

*Let me just calmly lay out that if you just go to even mainstream statements by the current head of DHS and the former head of DHS Jeh Johnson and what's happening and what our reporters have videotaped and witnessed and what's happening across the United States and what's being organized, the UN, funded by elements of our own government and stay behind groups put in power by Hillary and Obama, helped collapse Europe with the help of the EU, with over 10 million military-age men in the last seven years, where Europe is just wrecked. 80 plus percent less tourism, crime rates off the charts, just bedlam. Thousands of cars burned per week, hundreds per night, mass stabbings, sex slavery. The third world in many areas is Hell and we're in an existential threat—crisis here. And just as they ran the same operation with North Africans and Middle Easterners and others I guess Europe in the last seven or eight years, the exact same people are running an attempt with not one but two caravans of over 40,000. The government is saying 40,000. They were saying it was a thousand before and it was 50,000 so I don't know. But they're always a lot bigger than they say. And there's caravans arriving every day of a hundred, 500, 200, 1,000, and Beto O'Rourke is there as a literal treasonous traitor organizing it and bragging that it's happening. People are coming across not being tested for diseases, they've been caught smuggling children en masse. This is insanity. Total insanity. But it's designed to bring the country down. And you've got that backdrop with the deep state trying to overthrow Trump. All Trump is doing is the basic default that anybody would do to keep the country from collapsing. But it's not enough because the attack's been launched, and Trump can't get the laws or the funding to stop it. And once they overwhelm the courts and once they overwhelm the detention facilities it's over. You'll have 10 million in the next year come in. It was a million and a half illegals that they know of last year, probably 4 million they don't. 10 million, it's estimated, will pour in this year. 10 million people. And there is a crime culture and MS-13 and a smuggling culture, and all the lawlessness that you see in Latin America is now here and it's causing giant crime explosions.*

How about another? Jones is generally supportive of Trump, seeing the president as a good man beset on all sides by hostile forces, but Trump's government encourages people to vaccinate their children, and for Jones that was highly suspect:

*Trump is trying to pragmatically bring the country back, he's trying to turn the economy on, and he's trying to do it from the swamp. And that's why you see them coming after him so hardcore, but later in the next segment I'm going to go over some of the clips of him saying come out and take the measles shot over the weekend. First is him a few years ago saying how dangerous vaccines are. So is he*

*selling out to big pharma? ... They had to come out and get their shots. Well Mr. President, how many? It's like 60 something they mandate now and try to act like it's the law. Going to be a hundred soon. They got hundreds of shots, Big Pharma wants to get government to just mandate it, they lobby and then some corporate company makes me pay to have something put in my body. So the left can kill babies after they're born and say it's a woman's body ... Major university textbooks are teaching that babies are parasites like cancer ... But let's get into AOC right now.*

In a few paragraphs we can get a full appreciation of the Jones style of communication. You can see that it, uh, ranges somewhat widely. One minute he is suggesting Donald Trump has sold out to the pharmaceutical industry, the next he is talking about the left murdering babies, then it's on to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.



*Alex Jones in typical form.*

There are a number of assertions tossed out in succession, the evidence of each often thin. The facts are imprecise—“like sixty something”—and the argument is shapeless; it has the same quality found in transcripts of Donald Trump's spoken words.

Jones' speech is characterized by wild inferential leaps. From the fact that large numbers of people cross the border without permission, and that some of

these people have illnesses, and Democrats are often sympathetic to immigrants, and the immigration agencies frequently release immigrants from custody, he concludes that Democrats and the deep state are engineering an attempt to destroy the country by importing diseased humans as bioweapons: “Huge Bioweapon Plagues Released Upon United States By Deep State,” as the *InfoWars* headline ran.

JONES IS VERY CONCERNED WITH APPEARING as if he relies on evidence. During a typical show, the desk in front of him will be littered with documents, some of which are printouts of *InfoWars* articles and some of which are extracts from government reports or mainstream news articles.

When Jones appeared on the Rogan show, he was adamant that all of his most outrageous assertions—could be backed up with sources. There's frequently a grain of truth in his ravings, but the largest factual claims on *InfoWars* are often demonstrably false. Barack Obama is not being investigated for treason and the Illuminati have not yet managed to despoil Notre Dame (the modern architects, on the other hand, are taking their best shot at it). Several weeks ago, for instance, a clip of Bernie Sanders surfaced on Twitter in which he said the word “niggardly” (which has absolutely nothing to do with the other word etymologically, though it's probably advisable to just ditch it for a synonym). Yet *InfoWars* co-host Owen Shroyer announced that the organization possessed a clip of Bernie Sanders saying the n-word.

The “fact-based” posture is critical, however, because Jones is trying to convince his audience that he is offering them secret truths, science that the scientists won’t tell you about. He is making empirical claims—about why some nutrient brew is good for you, or what vaccines do, or what is happening in the world—and needs the appearance of caring about what is and what isn’t true. Hence his document pile, his constant insistence that they’ve *got the evidence the government doesn’t want you to see*, his testimonial support from a quack doctor (who has “been to MIT” in the same sense as anyone who has taken the Red Line to Kendall Square).

**A**S WITH MANY CONSPIRACY THEORIES, though, it can often be difficult to tell precisely what is being argued. There are themes rather than step-by-step arguments, though we know there is a vague, elite internationalist cadre of wealthy and powerful people in the private and public sector dedicated to destroying the country. We’re never really clued into what Jones is alleging, but it’s certain that Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Beto O’Rourke, the UN, EU, “elements of our own government,” “stay behind groups,” and others are attempting to “bring our country down.” It’s not clear *why* they’re doing this. Motives remain shrouded and opaque, untenable allegations are wordlessly dropped, and the goalposts are re-adjusted to accommodate the same grand conspiracy, slightly altered at the margins.

In this way, the *InfoWars* worldview is unfalsifiable. Individual facts may be disproven, but the general theory can never be fully discredited. The actors bleed together—the Clintons, Obama, the Deep State, the EU, Soros, the Democrats, the United Nations, they’re all on the same globalist team. In a bizarre way, this is somewhat consistent with a standard Marxist analysis. Leftists would concur that all the aforementioned actors *are* on the same team, the side of capital. Indeed, Jones’ take on Warren Buffett—that he is a predatory elite whose “sweet little old man who likes ice cream” routine should fool no one—is more realistic than the credulous liberal fondness for Buffett. Here, Jones rants about how Google and Buffett try to create a friendly image to disguise their true nature:

*I saw Google got caught in a bunch of new stuff, and then when they talked to one of their presidents, they said “But we wear fluffy socks.” They’re like “What about Google getting hacked and all your passcodes being taken, and Google spying on people?” “We wear fluffy socks.” Almost every photo of Warren Buffett, a master wicked operative, involved with his banks with money laundering, narcotics trafficking, that’s in Bloomberg, AP, Reuters, but in almost every photo he goes “I’m just a little old man... Ice cream!” [Jones mimics holding up an ice cream cone.] ... Google goes “I’m wearing a pink and a green sock and I’ve got a little beard and I talk like this [sotto voce] Do you know what those guys do when they get on jets? They go [demonic voice] BRING ME FIFTEEN HOOKERS AND GET THE DRUGS READY NOW AND TAKE ME TO THE PRIVATE ISLAND. GET THE SATANIC RITUALS READY. HURGGH.”*

Once again, despite his credibility-enhancing use of “Bloomberg, AP, [and] Reuters,” Jones can’t really be trusted on the facts—the “fluffy socks” were worn by engineers to minimize the damage to latex balloons they were working on, and Buffett probably doesn’t actually participate in Satanic rituals on a private island. (It’s natural to think that Jones can’t possibly *literally* mean all the stuff he says about how elites are Satanic demons, but he does frequently make pretty unambiguous statements like “these people are the literal demon spawn of the pit of Hell” and “Hillary Clinton is an abject, psychopathic, demon from Hell that as soon as she gets into power is going to try to destroy the planet... I’m telling you, she’s a demon. This is Biblical.”) The truth about Buffett and Google, though, is closer to what Jones says than what each of their public relations operations would like us to believe. As David Dayen exposed in an excellent *Nation* investigation, Buffett makes his money in part through investing in capitalism’s shadiest business—predatory lenders, insurance companies, price-gouging monopolists, and Wells motherfucking Fargo.

But Jones’ worldview lacks the specificity and coherence of a Marxist worldview. The Chinese invented climate change, Clinton is a demon, the FBI didn’t arrest her because the deep state is in league with the globalists, medical scientists are trying to bury the truth about vaccines, but what on earth is orchestrating all of this? Jones is trying to help his viewers understand but in the end they only become more confused and afraid, because the danger is coming from everywhere.

Then there is the question of what Jones is actually advocating in favor of. The range of survivalist products suggests he is simply arming his viewers with knowledge (and brain powder) for a coming war between globalists and the people, or some kind of apocalypse. But it can actually be difficult to describe Jones as on the “left” or “right.” To the extent that he has conventional political views, they are far right, but also throw into the mix weirdness like interdimensional space goblins, witches, and demons, not to mention the deep conspiracizing. Jones does seem genuinely committed to a broad opposition to creeping authoritarianism—albeit inconsistently upheld, and perfectly comfortable with immigration restrictions. A video of Jones clips from the ‘90s confirms that he has been unchanged over the decades—he is shown being arrested for disorderly conduct as a result of refusing to be fingerprinted in order to renew his driver’s license, taunting police at a mysterious checkpoint who he claims are engaged in “Nazi-like behavior,” and surveying startled tourists at the Grand Canyon to find out if they had heard of Bill Clinton’s new executive order—which, according to Jones, turned historical sites like the Grand Canyon over to UNESCO.

The editorial direction of *InfoWars* is in some ways baffling, some ways not. Sometimes huge stories go unmentioned while Jones and the rest of the crew remain fixated on lurid tales of seemingly small import, which are often spun into cosmic struggles (e.g., drag queens reading to children, chemicals in the water turning frogs gay, or “Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue Endorses Sharia Law Features Burkini,” a sign of civili-



zational suicide). Many of the issues they focus on tend to be horrifying and surreal and the hosts' tenor can broadly be described as apocalyptic. Most of the issues covered tend to highlight the instability and fractious nature of the world, stories that are not as they first appear, or that highlight powerful (often government) forces arrayed against the citizenry, in particular good, patriotic, red-blooded, old-fashioned, God-fearing, conservative Americans. (While Jones' screeds are sometimes bigoted and racist, he has distanced himself from people who state one single group, like Jews or Muslims, are responsible for The Big Bad Things That Threatens Us All. Unless that one group is the cosmopolitan globalists. But Jones is happy to be racist-adjacent, hosting callers and guests, like David Duke or far-right science fiction writer Vox Day, who talk about white genocide.) Recent *InfoWars* obsessions include: the Jussie Smollett case, government-enforced vaccinations, Big Tech (Facebook, Google, YouTube, etc.) conspiring to censor conservatives, Russiagate, and the caravan of "illegals." Note that in many of these stories things are not as they first appear. The official narrative (of the government, mainstream media, Big Tech, Hollywood, etc.) is not to be trusted. Most the stories foment fear, paranoia, and distrust of all institutions other than *InfoWars*. As a business model, this makes perfect sense, but on an epistemological level, it is terrifying.

This kind of inerrant omniscience of Jones and *InfoWars*—that there's really only one source you can trust—isn't the only quasi-religious aspect of the show and its host. There is also something reminiscent of fire-and-brimstone Christianity to Jones' approach. In keeping with the religious zeal of the pro-

gramming, Jones uses *InfoWars* as his prophetic pulpit, delivering the holy writ: Frothing at the mouth and berating his listeners with frightening anecdotes about how *Globalist demonic drag queens are kidnapping your children and reading them Satanic bedtime stories*, tuning in to Jones' preaching is a way of knowing what the hell is going on in the world, and how you can protect yourself and the people you care about from the world's manifold dangers. Binge-watching the program over the course of several weeks, it became difficult not to empathize with the genuine fear and paranoia the network's viewers feel. The world, filtered through an *InfoWars*-colored lens, is a very scary place. *InfoWars*, for its viewers, is the sole lighthouse in a dark, tempestuous world. And given the demographics of Jones' viewership, it's unsurprising that he would borrow so much stylistically from this particular kind of Christianity.

IN THE SAME WAY THAT RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM often leads to extremist acts, there's something that feels very dangerous about what *InfoWars* is doing. It's very easy to imagine that someone who took Jones seriously could be seriously damaged, or do serious damage to others. Here he is talking about—of all people—CNN's Brian Stelter:

*Look at him. And you know what, he is better than you if you keep letting him run your life. He runs your kids, he runs the schools, he runs the banks. This guy, this spirit, this smiling, leering devil that thinks you can't see what he is. He is your enemy. Period. All the narcissistic devil-worshipping filth. I see you enemy. I see you enemy. Enemy. Enemy. You are my enemy. And I swear total resistance to you with everything I've got. Disingenuous, fake,*





*false, brokeback, twisted, a defiler, a betrayer, a backstabber, a devil. You will pay. Yeah, you don't think I see your face, scum? You don't think I don't see you, Stelter? I see you, you understand me? I know what you think of me and my family. I see you right back. You understand that? You understand that, Stelter? [Grunting noises] Stelter. You will fall. You will not bring humanity down. God is going to destroy you. Get him off the screen. [Crying] Oh, God, they're so evil. Just please God, free us from them. They're drunk on our children's blood for God's sake.*

It's easy for us to laugh at this. *Brian Stelter*, bring humanity down? But could some unstable person hear "Free us from Brian Stelter to save humanity" and think to themselves "Must kill Brian Stelter"? Quite conceivably. Even more concerning is Jones' frequent and casual anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim rhetoric, which is even more likely to lead to hateful acts and contribute to a broader culture of hostility to these already marginalized groups.

**D**OES ALEX JONES ACTUALLY BELIEVE THE INSANE conspiracies he spouts daily on *InfoWars*? It's tough to say. He does tend to drop them rather quickly—we'll hear one day about the deep state launching a bioweapon attack on the country, and then the next day about burkinis. But if what he's doing is an "act," he's the most brilliant actor of our age, never breaking character for even a second. One suspects that Jones is indeed *really like that*, that he does somehow manage to *believe his own bullshit*.

There's no doubt that *InfoWars* has, historically, been a lucrative gift for Jones. One need only briefly peruse the *Infowars* store (Prepare to be gobsmacked!!!) to see just how impressive

the empire Jones has built for himself actually is. But it's mistaken to think, as John Oliver seems to, that *Infowars* has all been an elaborate ruse *solely* to hawk junk. Oliver downplays how effective and insidious the content of Jones' show is. Jones can be funny and charismatic and engrossingly weird. It needs to be said. And there's something incredibly fascinating, compelling even, about him. He is fun to watch. You don't quite know what is going to come out of his mouth next, and to be honest neither does he. When he gets angry, which is often, he yells and pounds his desk, and his indignation seems to consume him.

Jones is not merely a raving, tomato-faced, balding, middle-aged man to be laughed off. He seems to have real ideological commitments, or at least purports to, and his show is the vehicle for disseminating his political message. There's no doubt that Jones is a savvy marketer, but over the years he's made too many enemies, stuck his neck out too frequently, taking on unnecessary personal risk well before he gained the level of notoriety that now follows him. With Jones there appears to be some real ideological commitment, even if the precise content of that commitment is opaque.

All of this makes Jones' success deeply troubling. If the country continues on its present course, if Donald Trump is the beginning of our descent into fear rather than the culmination of it, do not be shocked if Alex Jones is the president in 20 years. Oh sure, you can laugh at the idea now. But you probably laughed at the idea of a Trump presidency until November of 2016, and here we are. Alex Jones is the same type of figure, but even darker and loopier, and he preys on people in the same way. Unless we give people real answers, clear up their confusion and comfort them in their terror and uncertainty, they will gravitate toward Jones, who promises to sell you security in a bottle, to explain the world and arm you for the coming civilizational calamity. ✚





# The Law



WHEN HOWARD BOAR WOKE UP ONE morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed into a female character from one of his own novels.

He did not notice at first, because he was too busy cursing his triple-quilted comforter, which had tangled maddeningly around his feet, and grumbling at the infernal cooing of the early morning pigeons. He had three whole classes to teach that day—"Sex and Early Modern Literature," "Sex in the Victorian Imaginary," and "Sex and the Eternal Wench"—and he wasn't going to teach his best if he hadn't slept his usual 10 hours. Damn the birds! Where was the coffee? He had hired a homely Guatemalan woman to do his household chores after his wife left, and if she wasn't going to be worth ogling, she could at least bring him a damn espresso on time. At least she wouldn't try to poison it, like his wife always had for some reason.

Howard rose from his bed, and immediately fell over. This was not in itself unusual, since he was often still drunk first thing in the morning, but today something was different. Pulling himself to a standing position and wiping the sweat from his brow, he tried to figure out why his body felt so...improbable. He noticed a tremendous sense of weight at his front, as though two lead weights had been attached to his nipples. When he looked down, he noticed with shock that he had two enormous, perfectly spherical breasts.

Reeling with shock, he stumbled to the magnificent oak armoire and pulled it open to look at the mirror on the inside of the door. What he saw nearly gave him a heart attack. Standing there, where his own body should be, was the body of Diana Lestrangle.

Yes, it was unmistakable. The tousled red hair, the girl-next-door freckles, the eyes that suggested a profound cocktail of unspeakable sadness and insatiable lust. He had transformed into a woman he knew so well, yet had never met—the main love interest from his second novel, *A Professor Darkly*.

Howard twisted and turned to inspect his new body, running his hands over himself for perhaps rather longer than was necessary. He was completely naked, a five-foot-two ninety-pound curvy goddess with a tattoo of a caged songbird on his shoulder. His state of shock at his circumstances was suddenly overwhelmed by pride at the brilliance of the tattoo: Ah yes, that *had* been a very good metaphor of his. You see, the bird *represented Diana*, and the bird was *caged* because Diana felt *trapped*. Those philistines at the Pulitzer committee probably never picked up on the symbolism, hence why they awarded the prize that year to some dumb broad from Pakistan or...one of those places.

Drawing his eyes away from the tattoo, he inspected the rest of his creation. Everything was as he'd written: He had Diana's porcelain skin, her plump peach ass. And then, of course, there was the single imperfection. Even the best love interests require some physical flaw, else the critics start yapping about "wish



# e. Interest

by AISLING MCCREA

fulfillment” and implying you’re somehow shallow. In Diana’s case, the imperfection was a scar on her back where her abusive father had brutally whipped her as a child. Howard was pleased to see that just as he’d imagined, it was a very *elegant* scar, and not gross or a turnoff or anything. (The protagonist of *A Professor Darkly*—what had Howard named him? Hubert? Harold?—comments insightfully on the scar when they first make love, telling her “I thought you were like a perfect vase, but I adore you even more now I know that you’re broken.” Afterward, he writes a poem about her, which receives universal acclaim and causes his ex-wife to drown herself.)

THREE HOURS LATER, HOWARD HAD come to terms with the situation and decided to make the best of it. He would go to the university as usual, and tell the class he, Diana, was a substitute—after all, it would be unfair to the poor students if they lost the chance to hear his dramatic readings of historical erotica. (Many of them had already missed so much, given the terrible epidemic of viruses and broken legs and dead aunties that seemed to be behind his classes’ mysteriously low attendance rate.) In fact, Howard had concluded that this Dianafication was a *good* thing. After all, there was so much obsession with “diversity” these days—he could probably get a new grant just by walking in! Not that he had anything against diversity of course, but with all the women and the minorities it seemed everyone had forgotten about the most oppressed souls of all: white men with brilliant ideas. Where was *their* Angela Davis? Now at last, he would be heard.

There were some aspects to his Dianafication that were a little...unexpected, he had to admit. After coming to terms with his new body, he’d tried to relax by going down to the kitchen and making some breakfast—still naked, for why cover a work of art? He’d been concerned about the maid, scurrying about downstairs, but without ever revealing himself he’d managed to masterfully let her know she should leave, simply by hiding and throwing shoes at her. Fortunately they’d already established shoe-throwing as code for “you may leave,” a tradition the Boar family had kept with “the help” going back four or five generations. (The family had fallen on hard times in recent decades, after a tragic misadventure into windmill investments, but Howard was certain he could return the family to greatness, as soon as his publisher started returning his calls.)

Breakfast was delicious, but messy, as his hot-air balloon breasts kept spilling onto the plate. He was having trouble adjusting to his new center of gravity; when he dropped his spoon and bent down to pick it up he fell entirely off the chair and took six minutes to get back up. Worst of all was the aftermath. When he finally got back up to the bedroom—the negotiation between his body and the stairs being rather a tricky



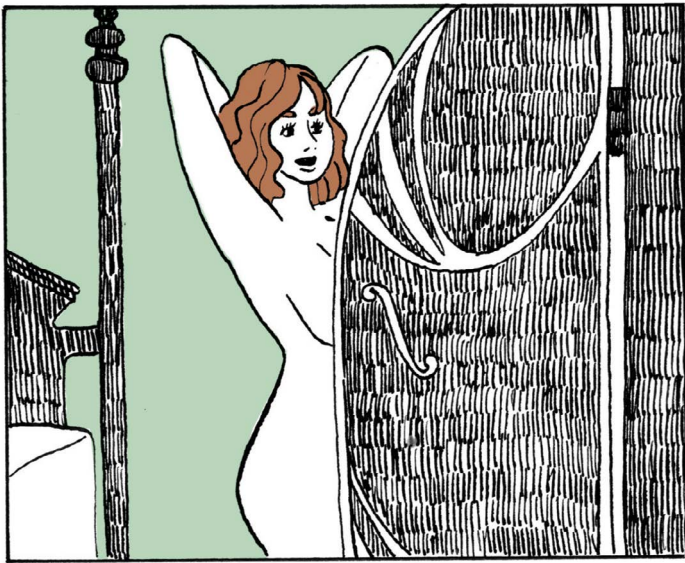
one—he saw in the mirror that after just four eggs, six slices of bacon and a mere half-saucer of cream, *his stomach was no longer completely flat*. The impractical breasts were one thing, but Howard was horrified to learn his perfect creation could *bloat*. He thanked God that at least he wouldn’t be having any periods. He’d given Diana a tragic disease of the ovaries, one that simultaneously made her very fragile while also meaning Howard—*Hubert* could have clean sex with her all month round.

(Incidentally, the bloating was not the *first* nasty discovery Howard had made that morning. Before breakfast, he had done what any red-blooded man would do upon being transformed into a beautiful woman, and this was how, at fifty-four, Howard discovered he was extremely bad at sex.)

*Forget the damn stomach*, he thought. *Time to get dressed and make my premiere as the university’s hot new lady professor.*

His wife had left most of her clothes in the closet; he found them a little frumpy for his taste but they would have to do.





Unfortunately, none of her shirts would fit over the gargantuan triumphs on his chest, so that was Plan A out the window. No matter—he could take one of his own shirts and style it into a dress. His shirts, after all, were rather roomy, since Howard was an *aesthete*, a *gourmand*, an *epicure* if you will (not like his wife, who at his last eyeballing was over 130 pounds; a shame how she'd let herself go). Eventually, after a lot of pulling and wrestling, he managed to get a shirt over his two luscious Jupiters and set about accessorizing.

HOWARD ARRIVED AT Darlingboys University with a spring in his step and a brand-new pair of shoes from Chinatown. (Diana's shoe size, as he had specified multiple times in the novel, was too small to purchase in American stores, so she made all her footwear purchases in Chinatown. The novel even featured a *very* funny scene with Diana and a Chinese salesman, which had been unfairly maligned by one humorless reviewer as “the most offensive thing to happen to Asian-Americans since the internment camps.”) He was somewhat disconcerted by the looks he was getting—men certainly did seem to *stare* a lot—but it was a novel experience, at least, and he was distracted from his discomfort by thoughts of his lecture. He arrived at the classroom five minutes before his first class was due to start, and found Harris, his TA, lounging around with his feet up on the desk (*very* promising young man, a Yale boy, and always with the most perfectly-pressed slacks). Howard cleared his throat—a throat which was “dainty and white, like a swan, or a hauntingly beautiful corpse”—expecting Harris to jump to attention as he usual. But when Harris turned and saw Diana, something was different. Rather than stand and give his usual welcoming smile, he lolled back in the chair and gave only a condescending smirk.

“Well, *hell-o*. I suppose you're looking for Intro to Women's Studies? You're in the wrong place, sorry—it's down the hall. Don't worry about the confusion, the campus maps can be *so* tricky.”

Howard blanched. Something felt off. “A-actually, I'm taking Howard Boar's classes today.”

“Oh? Hungry to learn about sexuality in literature, I see. Well, if you want any *private tutoring*, let me know.”

Howard's skin (“lightly speckled, like a fresh egg”) crawled all over. What was wrong with Harris? He'd always been so charming and polite—a younger version of Howard himself. Perhaps Diana would have to be stern.

“I'm not a student. The professor is sick today and I'm teaching his class. Now get out of my damn seat.”

Harris' slimy demeanour turned to a scowl, two red spots appearing in his pallid patrician cheeks. “I suppose nobody bothered to tell you, but I'm Professor Boar's teaching assistant. If he's sick, I can cover his class just fine. I know the syllabus, and the topics are too complex for a...substitute. Darlingboys isn't just *any* university, you know. I have to ensure that anyone who teaches this class is suitably qualified.”

Howard wanted to scream—he was not just *qualified*, he was the pre-eminent scholar in his field!—but given how troublesome it would be to reveal his true identity, all he could do was make mild assurances that *yes*, he was familiar with the topic of sexuality in literature.

“Oh really? What's your opinion of Marshall's theory of the primordial ur-prostitute?”

Howard couldn't believe it. This little twerp was trying to test him. He actually agreed wholeheartedly with ur-prostitute theory, but he knew that if he simply said that, he would sound as though he didn't know what ur-prostitute theory was at all, and was simply nodding along with Harris. He decided to try a different tack, based on a view he'd once heard from some grad student whose name he'd forgotten after she refused to sleep with him: “It's a little outdated. Marshall's argument relies heavily on early 20th-century translations of Sanskrit texts, which contain a number of inaccuracies...”

The students were starting to trickle in. Howard went to take his place at the lectern, but froze in his tracks when he felt Harris' oily hand on his shoulder, each finger secreting its own personal brand of malevolence.

“Nice try, missy, but I'm not convinced. What exactly are these “inaccuracies” in Marshall's work? Could you name...let's say, three of them?”

Howard started to sweat. He glanced over at the students taking their seats, and suddenly felt very aware they were judging him. Some of them were staring really quite hard. He shuffled his notes as he attempted to recall the theory that mean, frigid grad student had told him, shortly before pouring a Heineken over his head for reasons Howard couldn't remember.

“Well, for example, he makes frequent references to texts describing pairs of women who live together, bathe together, profess their lifelong affection for each other and are buried together, and the early translators of course assumed these were female friends living in a sort of two-person brothel arrangement. It is these pairs of women whom Marshall labels the ‘ur-prostitute-ouroboros,’ but the more likely answer is that they were lesbians.”

“Hmm. That's a bit postmodern, isn't it? Personally, I'd side



with the greats. It seems a bit of a stretch to read lesbianism into texts like *The Song of Two Women Lustily Intertwined In A Bed*. But you know, colleges these days, they're looking for diversity, not astute analysis...oh and by the way, you might want to rear-range your shirt."

Howard looked down. The damn breasts were half out again. He had not bothered with a bra, since his breasts were so perky they were self-supporting, but now he was beginning to wonder if he'd made an error in judgment. Harris leered as Howard tried to stuff himself into position, clearly enjoying both the sight of the breasts and the intensity of the humiliation.

"Actually, you know what, sweetheart?" Harris chuckled. "You go ahead and teach today's classes. I wouldn't mind sitting back and enjoying the show."

AS THE LAST STUDENT OF the last class wandered out of the lecture hall, and Harris slithered out behind them—though not before giving one last sneer—Howard eased himself down onto the floor where he stood, too exhausted to find a chair. Jesus, his feet hurt. His back hurt. Why did everything hurt? All he'd done was stand and speak for a few hours in his nice new pair of heels, which, as it turned out, were some kind of devil-shoes. He wanted to cry (and he knew he'd look good doing it, since Diana cried "quiet tears like crystal, never blemishing the bloom of her youth.") Pulling off the shiny stilettos, he saw his feet had been rubbed raw and blistered. He sighed and went over the classes in his mind. Maybe the shoes had put him off his game. As the classes changed over, he'd overheard one student say to his friend that he wasn't paying \$60,000 a year to listen to some teacher who got the job through "sleeping with the right dean". He was still getting used to walking around in this body, and there'd been a few titters when he stumbled. And when each new set of students came into class, there was so much *staring*. No fun at all. Howard lay back on

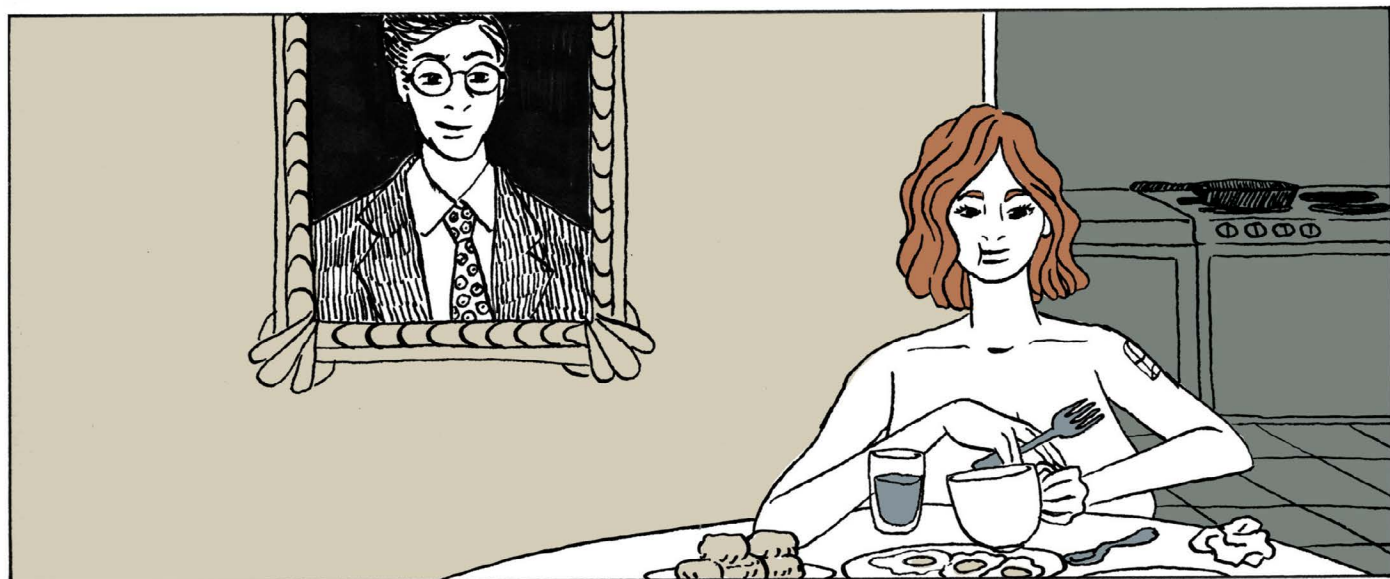
the floor, his breasts pointing toward the sky like two noble basilicas, and whispered:

"God? Or the devil, or...whoever you are. I don't know why this has happened, or how, but...I want to go back. Please. Let me go back to my old body. I'll give my possessions to charity. I'll tell my ex-wife where her dog is. Anything. I just want things back the way they were."

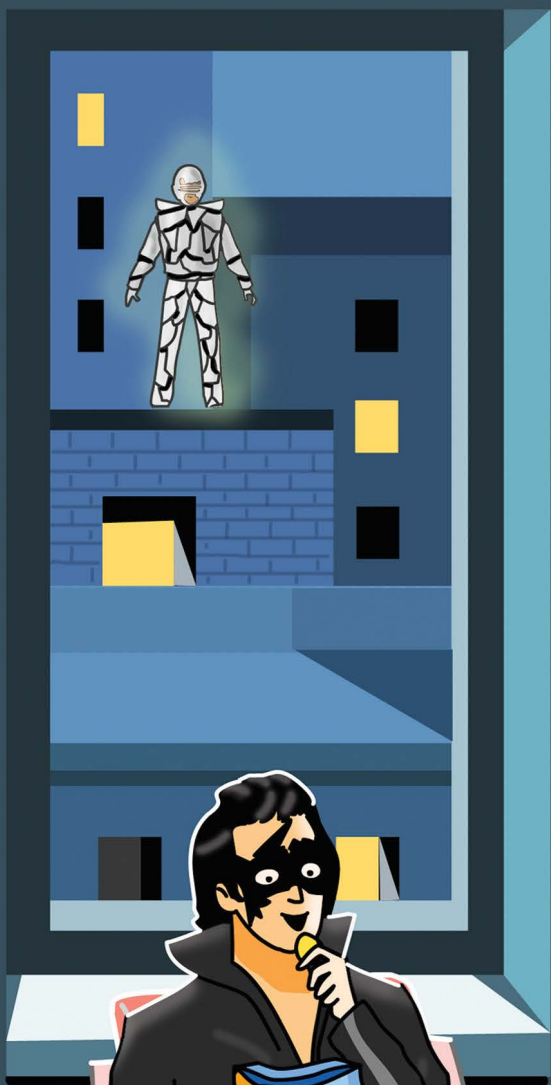
Howard woke the next morning, and as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes, he realized he did *not* have the long thick lashes of an innocent veal calf. He froze for a moment, thinking it too good to be true. Was the nightmare over? He ran his hand down his body—sure enough, it was his own. No creamy elbows. No melancholy hip bones. He scrambled out of bed and flung the armoire door open to see the mirror—and there he was. Just the normal body of a middle-aged man.

Howard breathed a sigh of relief. The nightmare was over. Everything was in its rightful place, and life could continue as it always had. He opened the door and bellowed down to the Guatemalan woman for his coffee, giddy at hearing his own baritone, and strode to the bathroom to wash his blissfully mannish face.

As he lathered the soap in his hands, he took a moment to reflect on his adventure. Yes, it really had been a most *fascinating* experience, being Diana for a day. For example, he had noticed that men who were nice to other men were sometimes rude to women! And judged women on their appearances! And questioned their competence! Howard smiled at himself in the mirror, congratulating his own wet face at the keen observations he had made. It was such a shame, really, that no-one had ever stopped to think about these things. Men and women, the different way they were treated and all that—if only women spoke up more, if only they explained it properly, perhaps all this could be solved! But maybe it was difficult for them, being emotional and all, and the situation was only obvious to him because he brought a bit of objectivity to the picture. Yes, yes, he understood the difficult position women were in so much more clearly now. In fact, he thought, it might make rather a good idea for a book... +









# LET'S WATCH SOME GOOFY TV

*by Brianna Rennix*

I am grateful for the existence of Netflix. Undoubtedly I will end up regretting this fondness before too long. Like all tech giants, Netflix is hungry to learn our longings and fears, and to then use its knowledge to blackmail us into submitting to all kinds of indignities. But for the moment, at least, there are things to like about online streaming services. Plenty of articles have been written about how streaming services have offered a distribution mechanism for TV shows and films that networks and mainstream film studios would be unlikely to touch. The thing I like best about Netflix is that it gives me access to TV and films from all over the world. In the distant past When I Was A Child, there was no easy way to watch films or shows made in another country, unless the library had it on videocassette, or if you had the income or savvy to hunt things down on eBay. Sure, you could go on a message board, find some nice person who owned the thing on DVD, get them to mail the DVD to you, and then see how many times you could change the regional settings on your DVD player before it got stuck. Or you could haunt a likely Usenet newsgroup until someone decided to post a heavily pixelated version of the film with slightly out-of-sync audio. Neither of these were *great* options: As a child of the late '90s and early '00s, I was strictly taught that giving out my name or address to anyone on the internet would result in my instantaneous kidnapping and rape, and that downloading anything whatsoever from the internet would cause my parents' computer to explode.

These days, it is very nice to be able to find almost everything I could possibly want to watch available on an internet streaming service. When I want to see unsuspecting victims elaborately assassinated in sleepy English country villages, there are dozens upon dozens of available options. And Netflix's wealth of telenovelas and other Spanish-language programming is the entire reason I am able to speak any Spanish at all, since I never studied Spanish before law

school. Netflix is always offering up tempting-looking options to me, which I rarely have time or energy to watch, but still, it is comforting to know that this surfeit of entertainment is always waiting.

That said, with the rise of streaming services, and the ability to quickly locate the exact thing you want to watch (or have a pretty likely option offered up to you by algorithm), there is a certain kind of serendipitous TV viewing that has been somewhat lost. With limited options—the dubious offerings at the local video rental store, the channels available on your hotel TV—you sometimes found yourself, out of boredom or curiosity, deciding to watch some entirely random crap. It was under these circumstances, in the past, that I was most likely to find specimens of that rarest pleasure: Goofy TV.

What do I mean by Goofy TV? Goofy TV is not Good TV, but it is, I think, taxonomically distinct from Bad TV. Bad TV I would define as TV that actually gives the viewer what they secretly want to watch—"guilty pleasures" like high-octane drama or fantasy sex—things that tend to be watered-down or over-contrived in more critic-conscious television. Goofy TV is something totally different. When watching Goofy TV, your prevailing thought should be not "oh, I know this is silly, but I still like it," but rather, "who the hell *made* this?"

In its perfect form, I contend, Goofy TV is the single purest form of entertainment yet devised by human beings. But, like most intense pleasures, it can only be enjoyed infrequently to retain its full potency. The discovery of a magnificent specimen of Goofy TV in the wilds of basic cable was always like the sighting of a rare, brilliantly-colored bird: thrilling to you in the moment, extremely boring to your friends as you excitedly recounted the experience in far too much detail.

I am not doing a very good job defining the parameters of what constitutes Goofy TV, so here I am going to try to nail down the concept in more detail:

1. The defining characteristic of Goofy TV is **its ability to make**

2. For fellow *Star Trek* fans, you can probably skip the next section of this article, and simply take as read that what I am describing is basically the energy of *The Next Generation's* seventh-season episode "Sub Rosa," a.k.a. the one where Dr. Crusher reads her dead grandma's sex diary and is subsequently sex-haunted by the ghost of a Scottish laird, who later turns out to be a vampiric alien parasite that has been maliciously boning her ancestors for centuries.

1. All non-asylum-law related vocabulary that I know is derived entirely from *La Usurpadora*, a '90s Mexican show about an evil socialite who forces her milquetoast twin to swap identities with her. The milquetoast twin spends the entire show trying to avoid having sex with her sister's husband and improving the day-to-day management of his floundering ceramics factory. The show has a lot of unnecessary slut-shaming, but also *crushes* the Bechdel Test, in that there are approximately five scenes an episode where female characters talk among themselves about factory dynamics. Please e-mail me if you would like to discuss *La Usurpadora* at greater length, and/or would be interested in funding the leftist lesbian remake I have in mind.



**its viewers laugh** at regular intervals throughout the entire film. And here I'm not talking about the voluntary titter we all do—whether in conversation, or while watching television in the same room with other people—to signal that we are aware that something is a joke and that we approve of it. Calculated laughter is such a common social tool, like smiles deployed to project friendliness, that we sometimes forget how different the real thing is. Goofy TV inspires whole-body laughter: sore abdominal muscles are a bare minimum. Very few actual scripted comedies are capable of doing this, at least not more than a handful of times in a single film or episode. All items that follow this point are in some sense merely attempts to describe how Goofy TV achieves this difficult feat.

**2. The humor is almost entirely unintentional:** The writers should not be trying to be funny; this usually spoils the whole thing. The best Goofy TV comes from screenwriters who were either a) were earnestly attempting drama and misfired badly, or b) wrote their script in extreme haste, possibly having never seen a movie before, or indeed interacted with another living human being. The talent and commitment of the actors may vary. Bad acting can contribute to the goofiness, but so can a good actor's sincere attempt to engage with baffling material.

**3. The plot consistently fails to make sense, without lapsing into total incoherency:** The relentless pace of the humor relies on constantly confusing the viewer's expectations. A bad film made up entirely of well-worn clichés may be mildly amusing, but it usually becomes boring quickly. (Likewise, a nonsense plot that's too intricate to follow is also dull.) Most Goofy TV employs stock tropes, but there must be something surreal about the way these storylines play out; an advanced piece of Goofy TV will create the sense of a fully-formed alternate universe where human motivations are subject to totally different laws than our own.

**4. Some element of the movie or show is strangely compelling:** At least one character or storyline must be sufficiently likeable and/or so mind-bendingly bizarre that the audience is invested in seeing the story through to the end.

When I think about Goofy TV, I am sometimes reminded of the *Calvin & Hobbes* strip where Calvin tries to imagine what on earth the evolutionary purpose of laughter could be: "When you think about it, it's weird that we have a physiological response to absurdity. We *laugh* at nonsense. We *like* it. We think it's funny. Don't you think it's odd that we appreciate absurdity? Why would we develop that way? How does it benefit us?" Hobbes, his tiger friend, responds: "I suppose if we couldn't laugh at things that don't make sense, we couldn't react to a lot of life." I am not sure I agree with Hobbes' evo-psych diagnosis, because I feel as though I am regularly inundated with things that don't make sense, and which don't make me laugh at all. There are many kinds of absurdity that give rise to very different emotional reactions, like sadness and rage. But there is also a special kind of absurdity that gives rise to delight. Thinkers looking to put their finger on what makes our species special (for whatever that effort is worth) often point to our appreciation for beauty. But I think our appreciation for humor is perhaps even more mysterious. As with beauty, humor is something we love to create, but we also have a special, separate longing to *find* it, in a natural and unselfconscious state: rougher around the edges, perhaps, but somehow all the more magical for having arisen independent of any human intention.

3. For those looking for something to watch next year, I can certify "Poinsettias for Christmas" and "Christmas Belle" as genuinely Goofy.

Great Goofy TV is to humor what, say, the Grand Canyon is to aesthetics. We must honor these natural monuments.

Goofy TV, I think, is in some ways becoming harder than ever to find. *History Channel* documentaries desperately stringing out some bullshit about Nostradamus for a full hour, padding the time with low-budget costume reenactments; *SciFi* channel original movies about elite Special Forces units being eaten by mutant bats—this used to be the kind of Goofy TV you could stumble upon just by flipping through the channels. But with the rise of the internet commentariat, the executives of the *History Channel*, *Discovery*, *SyFy* (as the *SciFi* channel was renamed), and *Lifetime* have realized that a significant subset of their audience is watching for lulz, and now they're deliberately hamming it up, attempting to manufacture Goofy TV by formula. Playful self-parodies like *Discovery's* mermaid documentary, *SyFy's Sharknado* series, and *Lifetime's A Deadly Adoption* (starring Will Ferrell and Kristen Wiig) simply aren't funny the way their truly goofy antecedents were. In attempting to find goofy *Hallmark Channel* Christmas movies this year, I had a tedious time sorting through the "bad" movies, the wink-wink ironically silly movies, and the truly goofy candidates.

But even as the convenience of widely-available online content has reduced the need to go scavenging for entertainment, it has, in theory, increased our access to the great global repository of all the world's Goofy TV. Goofy TV from a part of the world whose cinema you are less familiar with sometimes has (at least at first) a fresher and fuller goofiness, because you aren't yet wise to the typical narrative tropes.

I feel compelled to catalogue a particularly magnificent example of Goofy TV, which brought true joy into my life recently, which is a trilogy of Indian sci-fi films made in the early-to-mid 2000s. I am very much a newcomer to the world of Indian cinema, which is dauntingly huge and diverse—when I told a friend of mine that I was starting to explore the "Bollywood" options on Netflix, she immediately a) informed me that there were many more film industries in India besides Bollywood, and b) amassed me a massive Spotify playlist entitled "90s-00s South Asian Pop Songs In 6-7 Languages," of which I'm still not sure I've made it all the way through yet, despite listening almost every day.

But is it even *worth* watching any more movies after these?? The *Krrish* trilogy are perhaps the greatest movies I have ever seen, and I would like to be suspended forever in the experience of watching them for the first time. It is an approximately nine-hour epic. That's about the same length as *Lord of the Rings*, in case you were wondering. For those of you who have nine hours to spare, I demand that you put down this magazine and go watch it immediately. For the rest of you, I will try to convey something of the experience of watching the *Krrish* trilogy here, though it will be but a poor shadow.

## PART ONE A HOT GUY'S STRUGGLES

*Koi... Mil Gaya*, made in 2003, begins with the story of an Indian astrophysicist working at an institute in Canada, who's building a machine in his attic that's capable of contacting alien life. When he tries to tell his Canadian colleagues what he's done, they are real white supremacist assholes about it. (As a U.S. American, I appreciate that this film highlights the true wickedness of our Canadian cousins, who are always tricking the unwary with their duplicitous self-effacery!) While the astrophysicist and his pregnant wife are dejectedly



driving home, the aliens that he has previously contacted attempt to land a spacecraft on the road, and end up accidentally flipping over the family car. The astrophysicist dies, and his wife gives birth to a baby, Rohit, who has mental and physical disabilities due to the accident.

Flash forward a couple decades, when Rohit and his mother are back living in northern India. Adult Rohit is played by Hrithik Roshan, a man more beautiful than the sun itself. (Now, an important non-humorous sidebar: There is a real representation problem in cinema the world over, in that actors with disabilities struggle to find work, while neurotypical and able-bodied actors are frequently cast to play characters with disabilities. *Koi... Mil Gaya* is one such film, and there are definitely many questionable aspects about the way disability is presented by the screenwriters. That said, the protagonist's disability is not played for laughs in this film; we are probably at about a *Forrest Gump*-level of disability awareness here, I think.) Rohit is essentially portrayed as a child in an adult's body, as signaled by the fact that he wears a school uniform at all times. He also clearly has JACKED arms that are straining the seams of his shirtsleeves, but we never once see him working out. This is, perhaps, the biggest plot hole in the film.

Rohit spends most of his time badgering his loved ones to drink some kind of Indian ovaltine called Bournevita, I assume due to a product placement contract, and tootling around the mountain paths on his razor scooter. The moral universe of *Koi... Mil Gaya* is simple: good guys ride razor scooters, bad guys ride motorcycles. Rohit and his scooter club, the rest of whom are all middle-schoolers, have frequent violent confrontations with a biker gang led by the local police chief's dickhole son. Apparently, it is totally normal in this town for grown adults to just beat the fucking shit out of children and people with disabilities in broad daylight. Breaking up this ongoing carnage, there are musical interludes.

Rohit and Cop Failson eventually end up competing over the same girl, and, to impress her, Rohit shows her his father's old computer, accidentally summoning an alien spaceship in the process. The spaceship quickly returns to outer space, but inadvertently leaves behind an alien, Jadoo, who is then discovered, hidden from the authorities, and introduced to Coca-Cola by Rohit and his friends.

From this point forward, the plot is just the plot of E.T., but as recounted by someone who is slowly succumbing to delirium tremens. As a thank-you to Rohit, Jadoo decides to "heal" Rohit's cognitive delay. (Yes, as I said before, there are some very, very questionable aspects about this portrayal of disability). For some unexplained reason, Jadoo's gift also gives Rohit super-strength. Rohit goes to school, dazzles his cruel math teacher with his genius, punches one of Cop Failson's minions right across the courtyard (Why is he hanging out at Rohit's school? No one knows), and then literally *flexes so hard he bursts right out of his shirt*.

Having been gifted with these extraordinary powers, Rohit decides that the best way to win over his lady-love is to a) invite her to a club and force her to watch his sick new disco moves, and then b) challenge Cop Failson and his motorcycle goons to a basketball match. The basketball subplot is itself a fully-formed underdog sports movie about a scrappy group of children beating a team of trained athletes through the extremely unsubtle telekinetic intervention of a captive alien.

Things then proceed along standard E.T. lines, complete with sin-



ister scientists and bicycle chase scenes, until Jadoo is safely returned to his spaceship. Rohit loses his superpowers for long enough to confirm that his girlfriend loves him without them. After this respectable period of mourning, the superpowers are miraculously returned.

## PART TWO ANOTHER, STUPIDER HOT GUY'S STRUGGLES

Smash cut to the beginning of the 2006 sequel, *Krrish*, where we soon find out that the romantic leads of the previous film are DEAD. They're DEAD. Remember all the cute musical numbers where they danced in the rain and threw flowers at each other and whatnot? That's right—those people both PERISHED HORRIBLY. Rohit was engulfed by a fireball in his laboratory and his wife Nisha died of grief days later. Buckle up, bitches, because this sequel is about to get *raw as hell*.

Thankfully, Rohit and Nisha had a son together right before they died, named Krishna. Krishna is also played by Hrithik Roshan and is 100% identical to his father, his only genetic inheritance from the maternal side apparently being his haircut, which is pretty similar to his mom's. Because Rohit was exposed to alien sun magic or whatever, his son Krishna is also born with superpowers. These superpowers seem to mostly consist of being able to run really fast and sort of... jump between things?

Krishna's grandmother, fearing that the world is not yet ready to accept Krishna's extreme parkour skills, raises him in a secluded mountain location. Thanks to his isolation, Krishna grows up to be crazy hot and dumb as a brick. If you have ever wanted to watch a movie where an extremely fit adult man sobs to his grandma about the fact that his only friends are animals—and you FUCKING SHOULD—then this is the film for you.

Everything changes when Krishna meets a cute girl named Priya, who is in the mountains on some kind of group sports outing. He rescues her from a parachuting accident, and then decides that the best way to impress her is to elaborately gaslight her into believing that he's a sinister mountain ghost only she can see. (This is, like, some string-theory-level negging.) Krishna trolls Priya continuously for what, I am pretty sure, amounts to an entire fourth of the film's running time. Eventually she learns, to her relief, that Krishna is not a ghost after all, but a living, breathing idiot. However, Priya is a Busy Career Woman with a budding career at a TV station in Singapore, and she's not really interested in playing Jane to Krishna's Tarzan.

Upon returning to Singapore, Priya learns that she has been fired from the TV station, and needs a Big Scoop to get her job back. Deciding that maybe Krishna's superpowers are newsworthy, she



lures him to Singapore by calling him on the phone and pretending she wants to get married immediately. This seems totally reasonable to Krishna. However, Priya's stealthy attempts to monetize Krishna all go horribly awry, because he is always unintentionally thwarting her through his Pureness Of Heart. (In one particularly surreal scene, she tries to film a climbing contest between Krishna and an orangutan for a TV program, but Krishna locks eyes soulfully with the orangutan, who then, instead of climbing the tree, walks over and *gives Krishna a tender, prolonged hug*.) Krishna also keeps pulling Manic Pixie Dream Girl shit with Priya, interrupting her job to drag her to the circus and force her to watch his choreographed dance routines.

On one such excursion, a fire breaks out at the Hero Honda™ Great Bombay Circus, and a bunch of children are trapped inside a burning tent. Krishna wants to rescue them, but, remembering his grandmother's warning that he should keep his powers a secret, cunningly disguises himself by a) turning his coat—which inexplicably has a leather lining—inside out, and b) donning a mask that covers approximately 20% of his face. When one of the sooty children asks Krishna for his name, he tells her “Krrish,” because knocking one syllable off your real name is totally how pseudonyms work. (This would be like if Peter Parker went by the superhero name “Pete” and also his superhero costume was just a leather jacket.)

A lot of the rest of the movie consists of Priya trying to uncover this hot new superhero Krrish's identity, and the length of time this takes her tells you everything you need to know about why she was originally fired from her journalism job. There is also a running side-plot about an evil businessman who is trying to build a supercomputer that can predict the future, using blueprints developed by Krishna's dad Rohit. It then turns out that Rohit is NOT dead after all, but is being kept in suspended animation by the evil businessman, because only his fingerprint will unlock the unfinished supercomputer! (The other engineers were apparently smart enough to rebuild the fucking thing but NOT smart enough to figure out how to reset a password.)

Krishna eventually finds out his dad is still alive and, as Krrish, kicks a bunch of henchmen to death before revealing himself to his now-aged father. Since Rohit is played by Hrithik Roshan in a wig and age makeup, we get to enjoy a beautiful moment where two Hrithik Roshans cry over how much they love each other.

### PART THREE

#### **THERE'S NOW A DODDERING OLD GUY WHO'S ACTUALLY JUST A HOT GUY IN MAKEUP AND HE IS THE ONLY FICTIONAL CHARACTER I WILL EVER CARE ABOUT AGAIN**

By the third installment, Rohit, Krishna, and Krishna's now-wife Priya are all living together in Mumbai. Rohit is really leaning into his Mad Scientist persona, working on a device that can harness solar energy to bring things back to life. So far, all he's managed to do is jury-rig a bunch of mirrors to focus the sun's rays into a powerful laser beam that lights dead houseplants on fire. Meanwhile, his stupid, beautiful son Krishna keeps trying to get entry-level jobs as a waiter or a security guard, but is continually getting fired from them, because this is a world where handsome men actually experience consequences for their incompetence. I would watch a TV show about this father/son duo for an approximately infinite

number of seasons.

The antagonist of the third movie is an evil genius named Kaal who keeps secretly releasing virulent viruses into developing countries, then “discovering” vaccines and selling them for exorbitant prices. This Shkreli-style villainy verges close enough to real life that it almost takes you out of the goofiness of the film! Kaal is also a quadriplegic who can only move his head and two of his fingers (what is the DEAL with these movies and disability?), has telekinetic powers, and dresses like a sinister vicar. He has also genetically engineered a bunch of shapeshifting animal-human hybrids, which the subtitles routinely refer to as “Manimals.”

Kaal gets suspicious when Rohit manages to manufacture an antidote to one of his plagues, since normally the only antidote is Kaal's own DNA. (Science!) Like every Charles Dickens character, Kaal has never known who his real parents are, and begins to suspect that maybe there is some MYSTERIOUS CONNECTION between himself and Rohit. Kaal kidnaps Krishna's pregnant wife Priya and replaces her with a sexy shapeshifter, who then proceeds to fall in love with Krishna. (This was definitely just a ploy to get some new babe in this movie without having to kill off the previous one Bond-girl-style.) It still takes the shapeshifter the entire movie to realize Krishna and Krrish are the same person, showing that the one-syllable disguise continues to be nigh-on impenetrable, even though she's presumably living in the same house where he keeps all his leather jackets.

We eventually build to the big reveal: Kaal is actually a clone of Rohit manufactured from his DNA while he was being held in captivity during the last movie. Why a clone of Rohit would be played by a totally different actor, when his regular son is played by the same actor, is a medical mystery. Kaal manages to use his clone-dad's blood to cure his paralysis (more science!) and then proceeds to beat Krrish to death. Distraught, Rohit tries to use his mirror-laser to bring Krishna back to life, but at first only succeeds in lighting him on fire. Then he realizes that the sunlight is TOO POWERFUL and superimposes his own body between the laser and Krishna. Krishna then comes back from the dead, and Rohit literally explodes. I immediately lose 99% of my investment in the plot because watching Hrithik Roshan putter around in a flat cap with a fake pillow-gut stuffed down the front of his sweater was the main reason I was even watching this film, and probably my main reason for going on living, if we're honest.

The rest of the movie gets a D- for goofiness because it is just a ripoff of that scene in every Marvel movie where the hero and the villain smash up an entire city (in this case, Mumbai) for about 30 minutes too long. Eventually, Krrish wins, and Priya gives birth to a magical floating baby. THE END.

And there you have it, friends. Cinema has peaked, and cannot be bettered. Going forward, magazines are the only frontier in media.

**T**REASURED READERS, PLEASE DO YOURSELF THE FAVOR of introducing some goofiness into your life this week. After the nights when I watched each one of the *Krrish* movies, I woke up with a strange, active feeling in my belly—my heart rate seemed faster, my thoughts were more energetic. At first, I thought I was getting sick. Then I realized that what I was feeling was *actual happiness*. And you, too, deserve to have moments of happiness in your life! +

# THE IDEOLOGICAL ROOTS OF MURDER

by BRIANNA RENNIX *and* NATHAN J. ROBINSON

**I**N 2017, THE TWO OF US WROTE AN ARTICLE called “Why Not Have A Randomly Selected Congress?” an argument for choosing congresspeople from the general population by lottery. This form of selection is known as “sortition,” and actually has a long history: it was the method the ancient Athenians used to choose their political representatives. Although the article was mostly written to be amusing and thought-provoking—we are aware that selecting representatives the way we select jurors is not a policy prescription we can expect to see implemented anytime soon—it reflected our genuinely-held belief that introducing more randomness into the process of choosing our politicians would almost certainly lead to a more representative and less easily corruptible Congress. Our current electoral system overwhelmingly rewards wealth, ambition, arrogance, and moral cowardice, leading to electoral bodies that are almost entirely comprised of ultra-rich sociopaths. Sortition, coupled with term limits, would make it harder for candidates to game the system, remove reelection as an incentive for supporting powerful interests, and vastly increase the likelihood that people who do not have a trust fund, a political dynasty, or an Ivy League pedigree behind them could take an active part in governance. As Aristotle once observed,\* elections produce oligarchies, while random selection produces democracies.

After we published our article, we got a few e-mails from readers who were intrigued by the idea of sortition. One reader sent us a couple paragraphs opining that our electoral institutions had shown themselves to be fundamentally flawed and that it

was time to reexamine them:

*When a score (or more) of elections have passed and both tribes enjoyed numerous opportunities at leadership and both have failed to bring any substantial relief, is it not time to re-examine the nuts and bolts of government? It's no longer credible to imagine that another election will bring any substantial or lasting improvement. Instead, we should reconsider those habitual procedures which have failed to produce the desired result. We are not angels and we become less like angels with each passing day. If we may yet hope to become civilized human beings then we'd best look to the details of government.*

This e-mail did not seem very unusual to us at the time. Then, in October 2018, the FBI arrested a 56-year-old man from upstate New York for a plot to blow himself up on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. A bomb was discovered in the basement of his home. Prosecutors alleged that he had planned an Election Day suicide mission in order “to draw attention to his political belief in ‘sortition,’ a political theory that advocates the random selection of government officials.” The failed bomber had the same name as the man who had e-mailed us about our sortition article, and there is every reason to suppose that he was the same person.

Thankfully, since the Election Day bomb plot was thwarted and no one was physically hurt, it was possible to find the whole incident somewhat humorous, instead of merely horrifying. We joked among ourselves—was it our article that tipped the Sortition Bomber over the brink? Is sortition an inherently violent ideology? Was the *Current Affairs* masthead now on some sort of government Sortition Terror Watch List? Were we dangerous demagogues inflaming our readers toward murder?

\* LOOK, WE'RE SORRY, HE DID SAY THINGS SOMETIMES.





**W**HAT IF WE DID SOMEHOW influence the Sortition Bomber, though? What if, someday, a person reads a thing you have written, decides that they are determined to make your vision for the world a reality, and then goes on to commit some act of violence? To what degree are the proponents of an ideology responsible for acts committed in the name of that ideology? Do you have a responsibility to disavow or discourage those who carry out acts you don't approve of, if they carry out those acts in the name of an ideology you both (at least nominally) share?\* What if, even if you explicitly state that you do not support violence, people who do commit violence find your words useful in justifying their acts? What is the link between ideas and murder?

Let's take a more serious recent example. In March of this year, a 28-year-old Australian man entered the Al Noor Mosque and the Linwood Islamic Center in Christchurch. Through Facebook Live, he broadcast his brutal massacre of 51 unarmed Muslims, including children and elderly people. 49 others were injured. It was a devastating tragedy, all the more terrible because some of the dead were refugees who had fled the Syrian warzone and been resettled in New Zealand, a country with a historically low homicide rate, for their safety.

Shortly before the assault on the mosque, the New Zealand shooter posted and distributed a 74-page manifesto, entitled "The Great Replacement," which explained his alleged reasons for carrying out his terrorist attack.\*\* It makes for chilling reading, especially because it doesn't seem much "crazier" than many of the things that are regularly said by perfectly mainstream pundits. Have a look, for example, at the manifesto's discussion of "diversity":

*Why is diversity said to be our greatest strength? Does anyone even ask why? It is spoken like a mantra and repeated ad infinitum "diversity is our greatest strength, diversity is our greatest strength, diversity is our greatest strength...." Said throughout the media, spoken by politicians, educators and celebrities. But no one ever seems to give a reason why. What gives a nation strength? And how does diversity increase that strength? What part of diversity causes this increase in strength? No one can give an answer. Meanwhile the "diverse" nations across the world are scenes of endless social, political, religious and ethnic conflict. The United states is one of the most diverse nations on Earth, and they are about an inch away from tearing each other to pieces.... Why is it that what gives Western nations strength(diversity)is not what gives Eastern nations(China, Japan, Taiwan,South Korea)their strength? How are they so strong, China set to be the worlds most dominant nation in this century, whilst lacking diversity? Why is that their non diverse nations do so much better than our own, and on so many different metrics? Diversity is not a strength. Unity, purpose, trust, traditions, nationalism and racial nationalism is what provides strength. Everything else is just a catchphrase.*

Here, for comparison, are two discussions of diversity from Tucker Carlson's television program and book:

*[H]ow precisely is diversity our strength? Since you've made this our new national motto, please be specific as you explain it. Can you think, for example, of other institutions, such as, I don't know, marriage or military units in which the less people have in common, the more cohesive they are? Do you get along better with your neighbors, your co-workers, if you can't understand each other or share no common values? Please be honest as you answer this question.*

*When confronted or pressed for details, they retreat into a familiar platitude, which they repeat like a Zen koan: Diversity is our strength. But is diversity our strength? The less we have in common, the stronger*

*we are? Is that true of families? Is it true in neighborhoods or businesses? Of course not. Then why is it true of America? Nobody knows. Nobody's even allowed to ask the question. Again and again, we are told these changes are entirely good. Change itself is inherently virtuous, our leaders explain. Those who oppose it are bigots. We must celebrate the fact that a nation that was overwhelmingly European, Christian, and English-speaking fifty years ago has become a place with no ethnic majority, immense religious pluralism, and no universally shared culture or language. It's called diversity. It's our highest value. In fact, diversity is not a value. It's a neutral fact, inherently neither good nor bad. Lost in the mindless celebration of change is an obvious question: why should a country with no shared language, ethnicity, religion, culture, or history, remain a country? Countries don't hang together simply because. They need a reason. What's ours?*

**T**HHE SIMILARITIES, YOU WILL NOTICE, ARE EERIE. Carlson would insist that he has never said anyone should go and shoot Muslims during a prayer service, but merely asked his perfectly innocent question: Why is diversity good? You can't be held responsible for somebody else's crazy act, merely because you asked a question that they also asked.

And yet Carlson is also doing his level best to convince as many people as possible that the "clash of civilizations" is real; that losing an "ethnic majority" is a bad thing; that people should be concerned about the presence of those different from themselves; that unless a country maintains cultural and ethnic unity, it will inevitably fall apart, just as a marriage or a military unit could not survive if was not "unified" by what it had in "common." He is not just asking a question, but also implying an answer: diversity is *not* our strength. It is, in fact, bad if a country that was once majority-white is losing that majority. Elites are allowing the destruction of our unified culture and values. Something Must Be Done, and nobody is doing it. The mosque shooter listened attentively, nodded in agreement, and then vowed to be the one to do the something. As he wrote:

*The spell broke, why don't I do something? Why not me? If not me, then who? Why them when I could do it myself? It was there I decided to do something, it was there I decided to take action, to commit to force. To commit to violence. To take the fight to the invaders myself.*

We do not get our perceptions of others from nowhere. We derive them in part from our personal experiences, but we also incorporate the images we see repeated constantly in media and political rhetoric. The mosque shooter claimed, for example, that his personal experiences with people of different countries had been nothing but positive ("Everywhere I travelled, barring a few small exceptions, I was treated wonderfully, often as a guest and even as a friend. The varied cultures of the world greeted me with warmth and compassion.") Yet despite the fact that he himself had suffered no specific harms at hands of foreigners, he had been convinced by arguments that the presence of Muslims in New Zealand was an existential threat to "his people," so much so that he had to commit mass murder. Why?

The manifesto itself is disturbingly clear, sane, and specific: it does not read like the ramblings of an unravelling mind, but like a fairly lucid statement of a set of beliefs that are not at all uncommon on the internet (where "human biodiversity" has long been the buzzword of choice for those who believe in racial separation and ethnic nationalism) or indeed in certain parts of mainstream media. That said, the manifesto itself doesn't really provide much of an answer as to why the shooter thought the massacre at the mosque was necessary. The shooter tells us that his motives include the following:



*To most of all show the invaders that our lands will never be their lands, our homelands are our own and that, as long as a white man still lives, they will NEVER conquer our lands and they will never replace our people.*

*To take revenge on the invaders for the hundreds of thousands of deaths caused by foreign invaders in European lands throughout history.*

*To take revenge for the enslavement of millions of Europeans taken from their lands by the Islamic slavers. To take revenge for the thousands of European lives lost to terror attacks throughout European lands.*

*To agitate the political enemies of my people into action, to cause them to overextend their own hand and experience the eventual and inevitable backlash as a result.*

vance the environmentalist project. (With the climate growing ever-more unstable and a million species set for rapid extinction, we can in fact clearly see that mailing people bombs was *stunningly ineffective* in advancing the environmentalist cause!)

Given that the method and styles of mass killings can often be quite similar even when motivated by apparently disparate ideologies, and given that “ideological” killers (even hateful ones) still often struggle to articulate any clear connection between their political goals and their violent acts, It can be argued that perhaps mass killers are people primarily attracted by the idea of violence, and that the ideology justifying it is simply a rationalization plucked for the convenient purposes of allowing people to do something that they were already inclined to do.

---

*We've all watched the Breaking News with baited breath  
to find out if the latest mass murderer is someone we will have  
to apologize for, or whom we can righteously condemn as the  
Inevitable Consequence Of That Problem We're Always Talking About.*

---

*To incite violence, retaliation and further divide between the European people and the invaders currently occupying European soil.*

He tries to be as clear and convincing as possible, even including an FAQ (Q: Are you a racist? A: Yes.) But throughout his 70-page manifesto, he offers a lot of slogans about the importance of defending his homeland against invaders, without much explanation about how murdering a large number of peaceful worshipers will do anything but create mass misery. (We will also leave aside the weird logical leap that allowed him to conclude that New Zealand—one of the furthest outposts of the British Empire, historically inhabited by the Maori who still comprise around 15% of the population—is a European “homeland.”) He calls the attack an “end in itself,” and says he targeted his victims because they “were an obvious, visible and large group of invaders, from a culture with higher fertility rates, higher social trust and strong, robust traditions that seek to occupy my peoples lands.” In answering the question “Why are you using force?” says “There is no nation in the world that wasn’t founded by, or maintained by, the use of force. Force is power. History is the history of power. Violence is power and violence is the reality of history.” Which, yes, sure, violence is power, nations are maintained by force, blah blah blah—but this answer still doesn’t really explain what the shooter thought *this* particular act of violence was supposed to accomplish. If the essential problem of diversity, according to the shooter, is that it produces violence and disunity, how is a deliberate act of violence against peaceful people going to convince observers of the truth of this proposition? If his ultimate goal, supposedly, is that people live peacefully in their “homelands,” how does inciting waves of helter-skelter retaliatory racial violence (as seems to have been his vague intention) actually advance that goal?

You see this a lot in killers’ manifestos. They produce all the arguments for the justice of a particular political cause, and then make a wild leap to “...and that’s why I’ve decided to commit a massacre.” The Unabomber Manifesto is infamously quite persuasive in parts, containing (among other things) a powerful critique of the destructive effects of technology on human society. What it doesn’t contain, though, is a persuasive argument that mailing people bombs through the post is a wise reaction to these social ills, or a sensible way to ad-

Certainly, there are circumstances in which people on the left would argue strongly that “ideas” are not the root of violence. When it comes to acts of terrorism by Islamic fundamentalists, we are inclined to argue that this violence is not simply an inevitable logical outcome of the terrorists’ belief in a particular religious doctrine, but has a complex set of interrelated causes. If we simply believed that doctrine was chief cause of violence, we would give credence to the conservative argument that it is the responsibility of the Islamic community as a whole to cast out the Bad Ideas that cause people to blow up civilians. We hesitate to give over-simplified explanations for terrorist acts by Muslims because we know that the vast majority of Muslims are not violent, and because the story of how individuals become “radicalized” often seems to be highly personal and influenced by a variety of individual and social factors besides religion.

But on the left, people are sometimes quick to assert that certain texts or social narratives explain other kinds of violent acts. For example, some people such as irritating twitter leftist George Ciccariello-Maher were quick to blame the Las Vegas mass shooting on “the narrative of white victimization”: “White people and men are told that they are entitled to everything... This is what happens when they don’t get what they want.” This inference was drawn in the total absence of any statement or manifesto left behind by the shooter to explain his purported motivations, which are still entirely unknown. We can imagine that if a college professor rapidly tweeted, based on religious profiling alone, that a shooter who happened to be a practicing Muslim was clearly motivated by “the narrative of Muslim oppression” or “the unavoidable logic of jihad,” there is a certain subset of the left that would have promptly called for the tweeter’s resignation. You can imagine how the debate might play out:

— “Why would you assume that the shooter’s desire to kill arose from his religion, when the vast majority of Muslims don’t kill anyone?”

— “Why would you assume that the shooter’s desire to kill arose from his race, when the vast majority of white people don’t kill anyone?”

— “White people need to police each other’s tacit endorsement of white supremacy and the false narrative of white grievance.”

— “Then why aren’t Muslims as a community responsible for policing mosques and madrassas where extremist ideas are preached? Why aren’t they responsible for publicly disavowing the ideology of violent jihad?”

Obviously, there is a clear power imbalance between these two examples: when white terrorists commit mass murder, white people are not profiled by the state, whereas when Muslim terrorists commit mass murder, we get covert watch lists, interrogations at black sites, and legally-sanctioned Muslim Bans. In the general public imagination, all Muslim killers are acting out of a shared ideology, whereas white killers are acting from an indeterminate hodgepodge of possible non-ideological motives. But outside cases like the Mosque shooter, where the shooter clearly announces “I am a racist,” there’s often no evidence to suggest that any given white killer is motivated by the intensity of his belief in white supremacy, any more than a Muslim shooter is motivated by deeply-held religious conviction. If we’re honest with ourselves, we’re all probably guilty of profiling killers, watching the Breaking News with baited breath to find out if the latest mass murderer is someone we will have to apologize for, or whom we can righteously condemn as the Inevitable Consequence Of That Problem We’re Always Talking About. Who can forget how excited the Republicans were when that gunman who opened fire on a GOP softball game turned out to be a Bernie Sanders supporter? And who on the left didn’t feel that it simply Made Sense when that Canadian incel ran down a bunch of women with his car?

**W**HAT MOTIVATES KILLERS, then, if ideology only seems to provide an incomplete and tenuous explanation for their motives? The easy way out is to simply blame “mental illness.” But there’s not a lot of evidence to support the idea that most terrorists or mass killers have a “mental illness”—most people with “mental illness” do not commit violence and are in fact much more likely to be its victims. And reading the New Zealand mosque shooter’s manifesto, one doesn’t see “mental illness” so much as a kind of determined, rational evil. He seems perfectly sane: he just also seems like a monster. To lump this type of person in with those who suffer from schizophrenia, depression, and anxiety seems deeply unfair and wrong. It is tempting to argue that for someone to be capable of such an aberrant and horrifying act, they must “inherently” be ill somehow—but this seems less like a real explanation of the problem, and more like simply slapping the blanket term “mental illness” onto something that we still haven’t made much headway in understanding.

It is easy to ask questions here, but it is hard to produce consistent satisfying answers. Ideology often seems to clearly affect the choice of victim—the mosque shooter might have been a violent person regardless, but he killed Muslims because he was a white supremacist. Yet there are a lot of indisputably hate-filled ideologues who never actually kill anybody. Even a lot of alt-right people who have implicitly or explicitly endorsed violence—those who, for example, regularly trade “St Breivik” memes and claim to relish the coming race war—waved away the Christchurch shooter as a “false flag” rather than celebrating his act as the beginning of the ethnic struggle they supposedly yearn for. Ideological hatred alone doesn’t make one a violent person, and most violence may lack an obvious ideological component. Ideology often seems to offer an excuse for people who are fascinated by the idea of killing to have a reason to kill people. But perhaps it can also help push people who would never have consid-

ered violence into considering it—certainly, in a community setting like the military, ideology is used to turn ordinary people who have never committed violence into trained killers who won’t think twice about taking the life of a human being who has never injured them.

The only thing that is obvious about the link between ideology and murder is how much isn’t obvious. At first, it seems clear that when Bill O’Reilly called abortion doctor George Tiller a baby-murderer night after night, and some gunman went out and took Tiller’s life, there was a clear link. After all, nobody would have known about Tiller’s existence if he had been left alone and not covered by the press, so FOX News may well have been a “but-for” cause of his death. Likewise, the man who murdered six Muslims at a mosque in Quebec City regularly checked Ben Shapiro and Tucker Carlson’s Twitter feed. Both Shapiro and Carlson are racists and constantly imbibing their words would have certainly worsened the killer’s perceptions of Arabs and Muslims.

But we also have to be careful about coming up with general principles of responsibility. If the Sortition Bomber turns out to have a stack of *Current Affairs* copies on his coffee table, and obsessively re-listens to our podcast, does that have anything to do with us? Perhaps it does. Perhaps everyone should be more responsible for the consequences of their words. Perhaps if you help suck people into a worldview that causes them to fear and hate, and to contemplate violence, you need to be taking active steps to stop anything bad from happening and be aware of your impact in the world. It may not be acceptable to simply pretend that speech has no consequences. Then again, what if we insist our ideology is innocent, that we have never once advocated violence and deplore it in all its forms? What if there are just people out there who want to kill, and we happen to be the ones who gave them an idea that let them feel they should pick up a gun? We all want to draw lines between ideas and consequences, but are we ready to apply our conclusions equally to all?

In the end, we have no slam-dunk answers to offer on these difficult questions: merely the vague sense that we are still very far from understanding why mass killers kill. We should be wary of imposing easy explanations on killings, especially if we’re going to apply those explanations inconsistently across different types of killers when it suits our political instincts. At the same time, though, we have the responsibility to be wary of our own words. Even if we don’t believe that ideology or political rhetoric is the sole or even the major cause of this type of violence, we should at least recognize that casually advocating or idly justifying violence—even as a rhetorical tool, for shock value, as a joke—is always a dangerous game. Someone who’s listening to you more closely than you realize might take you up on it. You might even begin to believe yourself. ✦

\*FOR THE RECORD, *Current Affairs* entirely disavows the actions of the Sortition Bomber and discourages all readers from engaging in acts of violence against the state or other persons. No matter how much we may believe in a randomly-selected Congress, it’s no use blowing one’s self up on the National Mall about it. We mean this in all seriousness: no hurting people in the name of *Current Affairs*. That’s you, that is. Not us. We’re gentle and peaceable and will have nothing to do with rancid acts. Go find a different ideology, Maoism or Carlsonism, that will afford you convenient justifications for hurting people. You’ll get none from here.

\*\*There is some active debate about whether it’s wise for people to read, quote, and discuss this manifesto, largely focusing on the questions (1) doesn’t discussing these ideas legitimize them? (2) isn’t paying attention to the shooter’s writings simply giving him exactly the notoriety he craves? and (3) don’t we run the risk of exposing more people to the shooter’s ideology? The Chief Censor of New Zealand has banned the document, making it unlawful to possess or distribute. While we recognize the sensitivity of this question, at *Current Affairs* we do not believe that criminalizing documents is a useful means of suppressing the spread of dangerous ideas (especially in the internet age). Furthermore, having read the manifesto ourselves, there are in fact no original ideas in it: variations on the exact same themes are churned out every day on *Breitbart*, YouTube, the Tucker Carlson show, and alt-right blogs, to say nothing of millions upon millions of Twitter feeds, subreddits, and comments sections.





# WATER *is for* FIGHTING

*by Sparky Abraham*



PEOPLE ON THE EAST COAST SOMETIMES SAY weird things when they learn you're from California, especially southern California. Complete strangers will just start talking about why they could *never* live there. The people, so they tell you, are very shallow and image-focused. No one does serious work. How could you live without seasons? Autumn is just so lovely. The traffic would be unbearable, etc etc. This behavior can all be chalked up to a very reasonable inferiority complex.

But people also express fear. Specifically they are afraid of two things: earthquakes (primarily), and wildfires (increasingly). These fears have always struck me as a little funny. Earthquakes and wildfires are not that deadly in relative terms, at least not in the U.S. and in recent history. Earthquakes, for example, have only killed around 130 people in the U.S. in my lifetime, and 120 of those are from the Loma Prieta (1989) and the Northridge (1994) quakes. I have personally slept through many detectable quakes. Of course, there have been devastating earthquakes—and resulting tsunamis—with much higher death tolls in other countries. But for most Californians, earthquakes usually register somewhere between interesting and a bit annoying.

Wildfires are similar. Though the past few years have been especially deadly—more than 130 deaths in 2017-2018—wildfires rank relatively low on the scale of fatal natural disasters, though they do cause considerable property damage. Between 1970 and 2004, there were 84 wildfire deaths in the US. In the same period (which predates both Katrina, 1,833 deaths, and Maria, 3,057 deaths), hurricanes killed 304 people, tornadoes killed 2,314, and winter weather killed 3,612. Earthquakes and wildfires are no fun, but the eastern US is where the weather kills you.

Strangely, almost no one ever remarks on the scariest of the weather events Californians experience: the drought. Droughts in California feel less like events and more like extended states of misery and dread. Since 1986, the state has spent approximately 15 years in severe drought. And the non-drought years have been far from comfortable. When I was a kid, my grandfather worked for the local water company and maintained drought protocol at all times. “If it’s yellow, let it mellow” was strictly observed. My sense-memory will forever connect the pink of my grandparents’ bathroom with the smell of old piss.

Part of this was due to my hometown’s particular vulnerability to drought. Santa Barbara’s main freshwater source is Lake Cachuma, which is a reservoir on the Santa Ynez river. The reservoir was created with the construction of the Bradbury dam in 1953, and it feeds Santa Barbara’s water system via a single, seven-foot wide concrete tunnel. But extended droughts can put enormous pressure on the lake. In 1991, Lake Cachuma was down to only 10% of its capacity. In a panic, Santa Barbara built a massive desalination plant to convert seawater into drinkable water. But the plant was finished right as the 1992 El Niño arrived and brought the lake back up to near capacity. The plant sat dormant until 2017, when another drought brought Lake Cachuma down to 7.3% capacity. At that point, the city fired up the extremely energy-intensive process of pumping seawater at very high pressures through membranes to force the salt out. This is called “reverse osmosis desalination,” if you’re curious. It’s expensive and difficult—the water has to be pushed through the membrane at pressures from 800-1,200 pounds per square inch(!) and only around 50% of the water is recovered—but it’s cheaper and easier than distillation. As of March 2019, Lake Cachuma is back to 78% capacity, but Santa Barbara’s desalination plant is still supplying approximately 30% of the city’s water.

Droughts in California and throughout the west are deadly to more than just olfactory memories and city budgets. Droughts and their accompanying heatwaves in the US directly killed more than 3,900 people between 1970 and 2004. And the counts are much higher if you

count the impact of increased air pollution from lack of rain. There’s also the death toll in the forests. Over 100 million trees died during the 2011-2017 drought in California. These drought-killed trees serve as tinder for more and more dangerous wildfires, which can also lead to deadly mudslides.

I expect a large reason East Coasters don’t ask me about droughts is that they just never think about them. When it comes to freshwater resources, the United States is made up of two completely separate countries, and those countries have very different water problems. The official dividing line has long been the 100th meridian, which bisects the Dakotas, and runs through Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. Average yearly rainfall east of the 100th meridian is more than 20 inches per year, while west of the meridian it’s less than 20 inches. (As the climate changes, this line shifts eastward. There’s reason to suspect that the current dividing line is closer to the 98th meridian.) Effectively, what this means is that in the east, water is plentiful. Farms can survive without major irrigation projects. There are innumerable rivers, streams, inlets, and lakes. There is almost no freshwater scarcity.

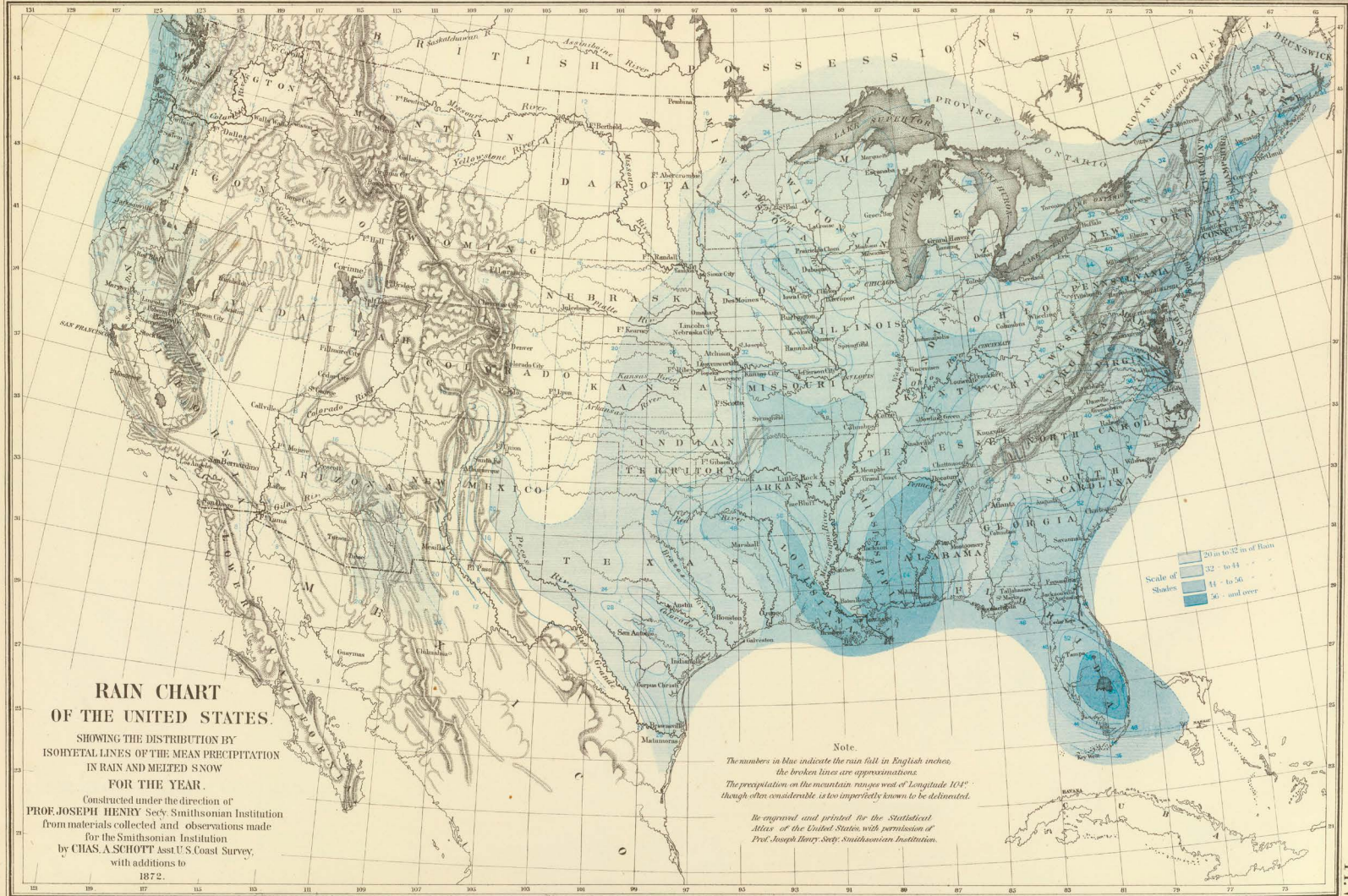
THAT’S NOT TO SAY THE EASTERN US DOESN’T have water problems, only that they’re different. Fracking and strip-mining pollute freshwater supplies. Cities and counties refuse to build infrastructure for freshwater delivery to some communities, especially poor and Black communities. Aging and ill-maintained infrastructure means that in Flint, just a stone’s throw away from some of the largest freshwater resources in the world, people are being poisoned. And at the same time, eastern water companies have been squeezing poor and especially Black residents with ever-rising water bills and ever-intensifying enforcement methods, including foreclosing on people’s homes when they can’t afford to pay for their water. But these are all management and delivery problems. The water is *there*, it’s just a matter of getting it delivered to people in a safe, affordable, and non-discriminatory way.

The west is a different story altogether. And if we can’t manage to solve the problem of safe and affordable water in places where water is plentiful, you can imagine the problems that arise when real scarcity is involved. Water history in the west is a full-service crash-course in all of 19th and 20th century American capitalism’s very worst tendencies. We encountered a scarce and necessary resource, understood exactly how scarce and necessary it was, then proceeded to kill each other for the chance to turn as much of it as possible into profit before all of it was gone. Now, in 2019, it’s mostly all gone and the west is burning.

The prophet of water in the west, the man who foresaw nearly every issue we’ve struggled to deal with in the last hundred and fifty years, is John Wesley Powell. What’s the best way to describe Powell? Well, to start, he was an absolute madman. Imagine a one-armed Civil War veteran turned college professor who, in 1869, decides to take four boats down the Green River, into the Colorado, and through the Grand Canyon. At the time, no one had even come close to achieving this feat. Some white settlers had seen or boated various parts of the river—a few had witnessed the Grand Canyon from the rim—and native communities had lived along some parts of Powell’s route. But, to the best of anyone’s knowledge at the time, not even the natives had attempted this entire trip by boat. The rivers were truly unknown and unknowable to Powell. He could have encountered a waterfall as extreme as Niagara Falls at any point along the way, and died instantly. And, to compound this uncertainty, Powell undertook the journey in four wooden boats, never having run a rapid before, with an entire crew of men who had also never run a rapid before.

Somehow, Powell and most of his crew survived the three-month journey. Those who didn’t survive couldn’t exactly blame Powell for their fate. At the top of a truly massive rapid in the Grand Canyon, three men abandoned





the expedition, thinking they'd have better survival odds hiking than trying to run these rapids in their tender wooden boats. Only two days later, Powell and the remaining crew finished their journey, having run the intimidating rapids without issue. The three who'd abandoned them had already harassed a band of natives near the rim of the Grand Canyon and been killed.<sup>1</sup>

The journey is what Powell is famous for, but his later reports are what make him a prophet of water in the west. Before Powell's time, many Americans had largely written off the western US as useless. In one of the best examples of a mislaid prophecy, an Army lieutenant, on seeing the Grand Canyon, reported: "The region last explored is, of course, altogether valueless. It can be approached only from the south, and after entering it there is nothing to do but leave. Ours has been the first, and will doubtless be the last, party of whites to visit this profitless locality. It seems intended by nature that the Colorado River, along the greater portion of its lonely and majestic way, shall be forever unvisited and undisturbed."

But by the 1870s, westward expansion was in full swing. Powell saw the gradual changes in the names on maps—the area labeled "Great American Desert" moving farther west as speculators and railroad companies encouraged people to make a go of farming west of the 100th meridian. Areas that were once labeled "Great Desert" were increasingly re-dubbed "Great Plains," and throughout the 1870s, (paid) scientists were pushing some absolutely insane theories to encourage people to move west. The most absurd of these may have been the "rain follows the plow" theory. Think *Field of Dreams*, but for farming. The idea was that once people started farming in dry regions, rain would naturally come. When you plowed soil, even very bad and seemingly un-arable soil, the plowing would just automatically release trapped moisture into the atmosphere.

This was, of course, nonsense. At heart, the "great plains" and "rain follows the plow" were marketing slogans, an early instance of real estate developers rebranding a previously undesirable area to turn a profit.

Powell's reports attempted to show just how hopeless much of this project was. The Homestead Acts were granting western lands (to people but also to corporations, and with very high rates of fraud) in 160-acre tracts. This tract size made sense in the east where irrigation wasn't necessary. But 160 acres was too large a tract to productively irrigate, and too small a tract to use as unirrigated land in the west. And, Powell calculated, even if you put every ounce of freshwater in the western US to work irrigating farmland, you would still only be able to produce crops from 1-3% of the available land. There just wasn't enough water.

The problem was complex, and so was Powell's solution. He pushed for a slow, orderly, well-researched expansion of irrigated agriculture using publicly-constructed dams to collect and store water. And, rather than the eastern US method of granting water rights only to those who owned land that touched the river or stream that the water came from, Powell suggested employing a use-permit system to regulate and trade water rights. (The land-adjointing water rights system is called "riparianism," while the use-based system in the west is called "prior appropriation." Read the Wikipedia articles for these and you will have learned a good deal of what they'd teach you in a water law class at a top law school.) Finally, Powell recommended organizing our political boundaries to facilitate the communal use and cooperative regulation of water resources. That is, he thought state boundaries in the west should conform to watersheds. This would mean that state governments and residents would have purview over their entire water system and wouldn't have to fight with other states over upstream or downstream uses.



Two of Powell's recommendations were implemented, though likely not in the way he would have preferred. In the early and mid-20th century, the US embarked on an epic dam-building spree. But much of this building was driven less by need for water storage and electrical power than by competition for funding between two giant federal bureaucracies. Marc Reisner's exhaustive and surprisingly thrilling retelling of the battle between the Bureau of Reclamation and the Army Corps of Engineers in *Cadillac Desert* is the authoritative history on this point. Reisner documents decades through which the agencies battled to outmaneuver each other, spending billions to build thousands of dams just to make sure the other agency didn't build them first.

The beneficiaries of the dam-building extravaganza were largely agricultural interests in the surrounding areas. More dams than could possibly be justified meant relatively large water stores. A combination of the mythology around small American farmers and the reality of agribusiness lobbying power meant that ag interests could reap direct benefits from these federal projects, mostly through heavily subsidized water, power prices, and flood control. Far from Powell's vision of watershed-based communities managing their water resources according to their local best interests, government and industry joined forces to turn Powell's somewhat communitarian or at least localist vision into a capitalist suicide pact. This is not to say that all dams are bad or unnecessary—they are a valuable water management and power-generating tool. But *a lot* of dams that exist right now are both bad and unnecessary.

The western US also adopted Powell's recommendation for a water rights system. Most of the west now uses a prior appropriation system for allocating water rights rather than a riparian system. This means that water rights are divorced from land ownership: anyone who can access water can make a claim to it, and those claims operate on a first come, first served basis. So if water sources dry up, the senior rights holders are the most protected, while newer users are left out to dry, both figuratively and literally.

Like dams, this is not an unreasonable system on its own. But it has combined with crafty capital and legal maneuvering to disastrous effect. First, to hold your water right, you have to *use* it. This means that nearly all water is going to get used, because there's no formal protection (in the system as first conceived—things are slightly better now) for letting water run its natural course. Throughout the west, water systems have seen the complete loss of native wildlife populations and increasingly compromised water supplies, as water is taken out of rivers to irrigate land and returned to the water system in lower quantities and with higher salt content.

Second, water rights can be purchased and the water diverted far away. This is what allowed someone like William Mulholland in Los Angeles to buy up the entire Owens River and divert it to the San Fernando Valley, turning the Owens River Valley from "the Switzerland of California" into a desert, drying up Owens Lake, and massively increasing the value of Mulholland's own properties in San Fernando. The battles over the Owens River are also covered in Reisner's book. They involve spies within the Bureau of Reclamation, lies and grift and outright theft to obtain water rights, locals dynamiting the LA aqueduct, and Mulholland mustering an army of 600 gun-toting LAPD officers and transporting them hundreds of miles inland to protect his waterways. In case you're wondering how all that turned out, the Owens River Valley is still a desert, nearly the entire river goes west via aqueduct, and Mulholland Drive is one of the fanciest streets in LA.<sup>2</sup>

It should come as no surprise that Powell's vision of cautious and sustainable water use in the west was never fully realized. An additional part of the puzzle that Powell failed to foresee was the use of groundwater. Massive underground aquifers underlie much of the US, and the western states have managed to produce agriculture in an area marginally larger than Powell's 1-3% estimate thanks to the use of that groundwater. The problem, of course, is that groundwater is largely a non-renewable resource.

Depending on the type of aquifer, it might recharge slowly or not at all. And the coastal aquifers, like the one underlying Santa Barbara, are at risk of seawater intrusion if they're drawn down too low.

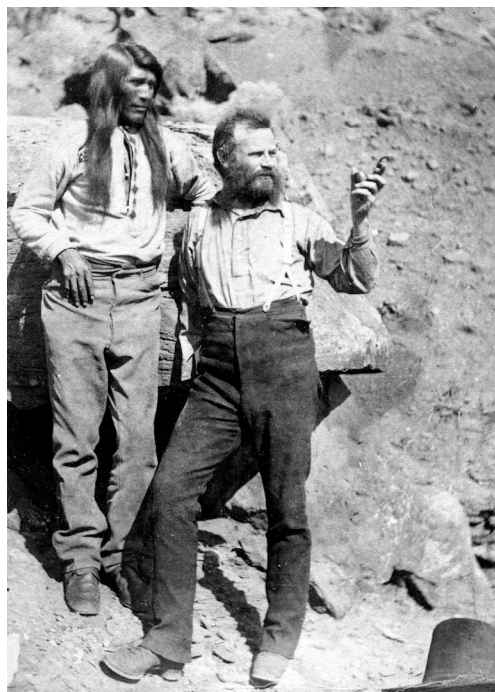
And have we managed this non-renewable resource in a reasonable way to preserve it for as long as possible? Spoiler: we have not. In fact, officials in charge of regulating groundwater have always been well aware that it was a non-renewable resource, and decided to exhaust it anyway. The former head of the Colorado Water Conservation Board described their decision to use the state's groundwater supply over the course of twenty-five to fifty years like this: "What are you going to do with all that water? Are you going to leave it in the ground? . . . Well, when we use it up, we'll just have to get more water from somewhere else." The New Mexico State Engineer openly admitted the same: "We made a conscious decision to mine out our share of the Oglalla (aquifer) in a period of twenty-five to forty years."<sup>3</sup> It has been more than forty years since these programs started.

California is a particularly depressing example of harm wrought by greedy water policies. Groundwater extraction in California has been largely unregulated for most of its history, and as a result the central valley of the state is literally sinking. The entire valley is estimated to have sunk more than 18 feet since the 1920s, with some regions having sunk much more than that.

THE USE OF THESE WATER SYSTEMS AS PROFIT ENGINES for private industry has not abated. Some of the largest groundwater extractors in California these days are not even farmers—they're oil companies. California droughts result in severe restrictions imposed by municipal water departments, which levy steep fines against people for overusing water at home. Meanwhile, 80% of water use in California continues to come from agriculture and big business.

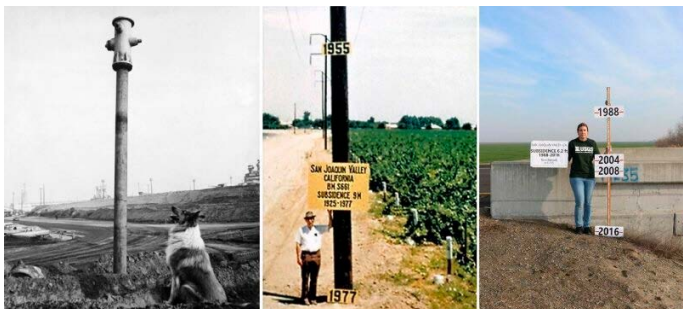
The brazenness of these government subsidies to agribusiness is particularly apparent in the Yuma desalination plant. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed after the Mexican-American War, guarantees Mexico a certain volume of water from the Colorado River. But massive agriculture in the US portion of the Colorado watershed meant that the water we were sending to Mexico was too salty to use for irrigation and was actually destroying crops. As a result, the US built the Yuma desalination plant to purify water as it crosses the border into Mexico. Running this desal plant costs nearly \$500 per acre-foot<sup>4</sup> of water, and we use this plant to clean millions of acre-feet. But many of the upstream agricultural users, the ones who are responsible for the salt content in the water in the first place, pay less than \$5 per acre-foot.<sup>5</sup> Farmers in Merced, in central California, paid around \$17 per acre-foot of water mid-drought in 2015.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, residential users in San Francisco pay the equivalent of \$773 per acre-foot,<sup>7</sup> plus a monthly service charge.

One might be tempted to blame John Wesley Powell for many of our woes. After all, he was the one who recommended the systems of dam



John Wesley Powell with Tau-Gu, chief of the Paiutes





building, irrigation, and transferable water rights that have rocketed us into this bleak moment. But one key to our survival might be Powell's last recommendation: watershed borders.

The thing about political boundaries is that they have historically served military purposes. The border of my territory is as far as my army can reasonably reach, as affected by how far your army can reasonably reach. In practice, this meant borders often conformed to geographic features like mountain ranges and rivers. It's hard for me to cross the river to attack you, and it's hard for you to cross the river to attack me, so the river is our border. In the US, we have continued to use geographic features like rivers as internal borders. There does not appear to be a logic behind this other than it's a way people have always drawn borders.

Where US internal borders aren't rivers, they're often straight lines. This has some obvious appeal—it's very easy to negotiate using straight lines. "54°40' or fight" has a nice ring to it. Lines of latitude and longitude are calculable and visible on a map no matter the underlying terrain, so they don't require too much surveying work to establish. But neither of these border-drawing methods—either doing what we've always done with rivers and mountains, or drawing easy straight lines—do much to help the actual function of the political bodies that operate within those borders.

For one, states mostly don't need to worry about other states' armies.<sup>9</sup> In fact, rivers make particularly poor borders between states because a primary purpose of our union is to facilitate interstate commerce, and rivers are natural barriers. But, more importantly, rivers are an important natural resource, especially in the west. And rivers don't respect borders. This is why California, Nevada, and Arizona have to continuously negotiate and update a giant contract about how much of the Colorado River each of them gets to use. It's why the US and Mexico have to negotiate and re-negotiate agreements about how much of the Colorado will flow into Mexico and what its salinity will be. And it's why the longest continuous litigation in the US legal system is an attempt to determine who has rights to use water in a particular river. (The Gila River adjudication is a 44-year-old lawsuit involving 32,000 parties with 57,000 claims to the same water source.)<sup>10</sup>

States or even local jurisdictions could avoid a lot of conflict and unnecessary bureaucratic wrangling if they simply drew their jurisdictional lines by watershed, just as Powell suggested. Watersheds, you may remember from a life science class at some point, are areas in which all runoff water ends up in the same place. Every river, stream, lake, and puddle has a watershed. The continental divide splits the Pacific's North American watershed from those of the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic. If you pour some water on the ground, and that water eventually ends up in a river, you are in that river's watershed. Because of gravity, watersheds tend to consist of valleys or basins, with the edges running along ridges.

When your border is a river, as between California and Arizona, you have the exact opposite of a watershed border. Both states contribute to the health of the river, and both will often fight, politically and sometimes physically, to use as much of its water as they can. If a state is part of a river's watershed but has no access to that river, its residents have little incentive to keep the river healthy and might be more inclined to pollute, since someone else will bear the cost. A system of political boundaries based on watersheds, in addition to avoiding conflict, would allow states to more consistently regulate and protect their surface and groundwater resources.

Obviously, not every river, stream, and puddle in the US should have

its own state. And there are likely logical divisions for the same river, like the upper and lower basins of the Colorado, to avoid very large rivers with huge watersheds spawning super states. Powell himself proposed a system of state boundaries that balanced watershed management with manageably-sized states, and produced a beautiful map of an alternative western US in the process. We needn't use Powell's exact map—others have attempted the same task with more up-to-date information (though, if we're redrawing state lines, there's little reason to stick to 50 states). But watershed organization doesn't have to stop at the state level. Counties and cities could be organized around shared water resources, be they smaller rivers, streams, or groundwater aquifers.

Powell's vision was a locally and efficiently managed water system, one that took into account the peculiarities of each watershed and river system, allowing those most immediately affected to decide how the resources should be allocated. The system that we ended up with, however much certain pieces of it resemble Powell's plan, is just the opposite in philosophy and practice: the federal government spends billions on top-down projects motivated by pointless rivalries or desire to grant corporate subsidies, while domestic uses and the environment pay the price.

Fresh water is a precious and scarce resource, especially in the west. It's the sort of thing that demands the most democratic control, but has historically been subject to the least. The stakes couldn't be higher. Droughts in the west are becoming more frequent and last longer. The droughts kill trees, which fuels wildfires. The wildfires remove vegetation, which means more rainwater (when and if it ever comes) runs off, bringing deadly flows of mud along for the ride. Big earthquakes that might happen once every few hundred years get terrifying New Yorker profiles, while drought conditions that kill thousands stay well below the national radar. To say that the freshwater status quo in the west is unsustainable would be an understatement. Democratizing water is a big project—much bigger than redrawing some political boundaries. We have to enact a massive shift in power and control from capital to local people and political organizations. But watershed borders would probably be a good start. ♣

#### ENDNOTES

1. Reading about Powell's expedition is really fun. A good recent book on the subject is Edward Dolnick's *Down the Great Unknown*. He pulls great excerpts from the journals of everyone on the trip, many of whom were delightfully expressive in their disdain for Powell. For example, here's George Bradley on Powell's choice of campsite one night: "The Major, as usual, has chosen the worst camping-ground possible. If I had a dog that would lie where my bed is made tonight I would kill him and burn his collar and swear I never owned him."

2. In the 1970s, LA came back for more, building a second aqueduct to transport mostly groundwater from the Owens River Valley down to the city. Decades of lawsuits followed. Meanwhile, the valley has gotten even drier and more barren as plants that rely on groundwater have died.

3. Quotes as reported in *Cadillac Desert*.

4. An acre-foot is a fairly standard measure of water, especially for irrigation. It sounds kind of cute but it's actually huge: it's the amount required to submerge an acre of land in a foot of water. That's a little more than 325,000 gallons.

5. For those keeping track, this is approximately 1/1,000 of 1¢ per gallon.

6. About 1/200 of 1¢ per gallon.

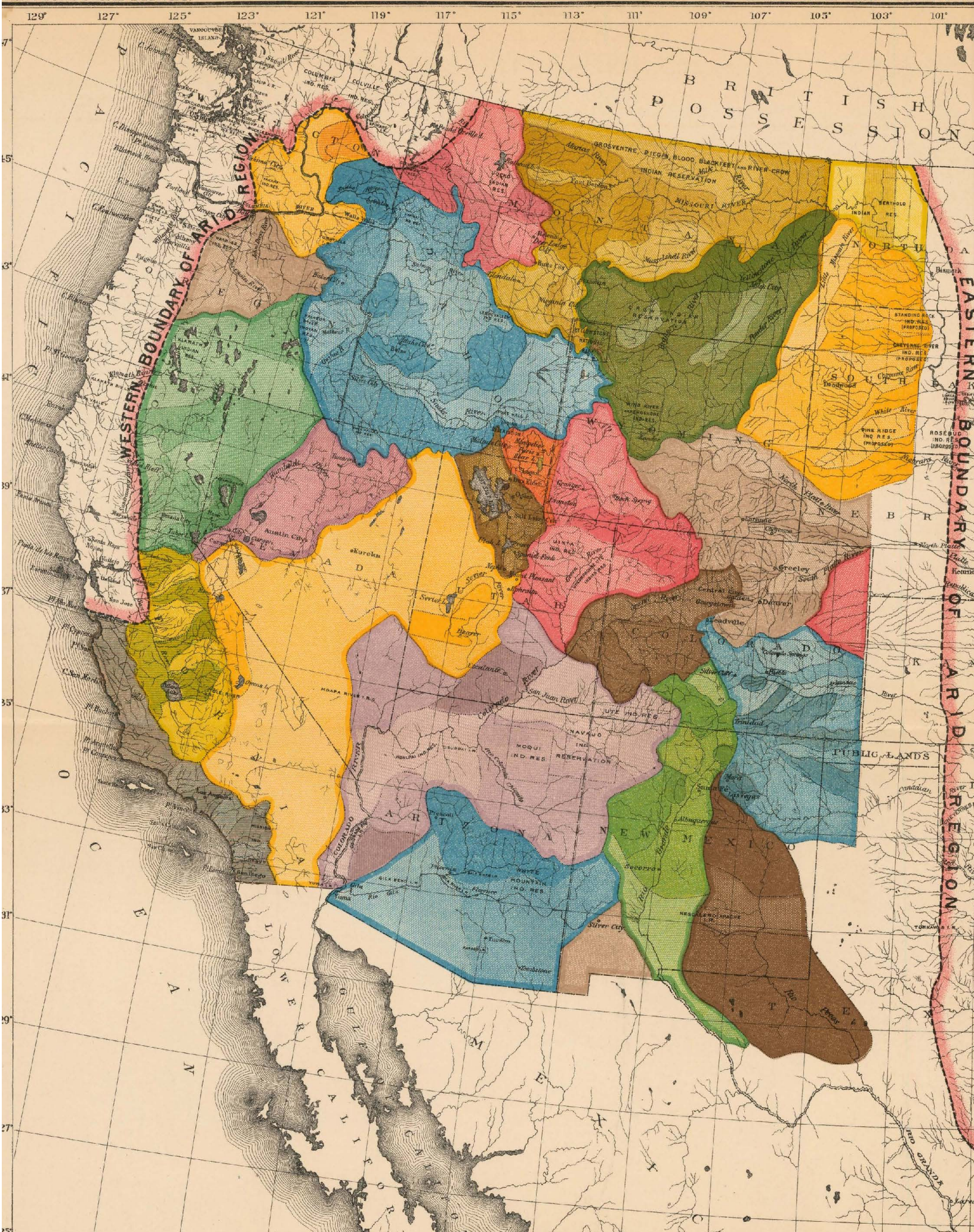
7. About 1/4 of 1¢ per gallon, nearly 50x what the Merced farmers pay.

8. 54°40' is a latitudinal line in the Pacific Northwest, at approximately the southern tip of Alaska. The US and Britain fought over the Oregon territory for several decades in the early 1800s. US hardliners pushed for the US to annex the entire territory up to the then-Russian border (Russia controlled Alaska), including what is now British Columbia. Hence the slogan "54°40' or fight." The dispute ended with the US annexing only up to the 49th parallel instead, which marks the US-Canada border today, and leaving British Columbia with the Brits.

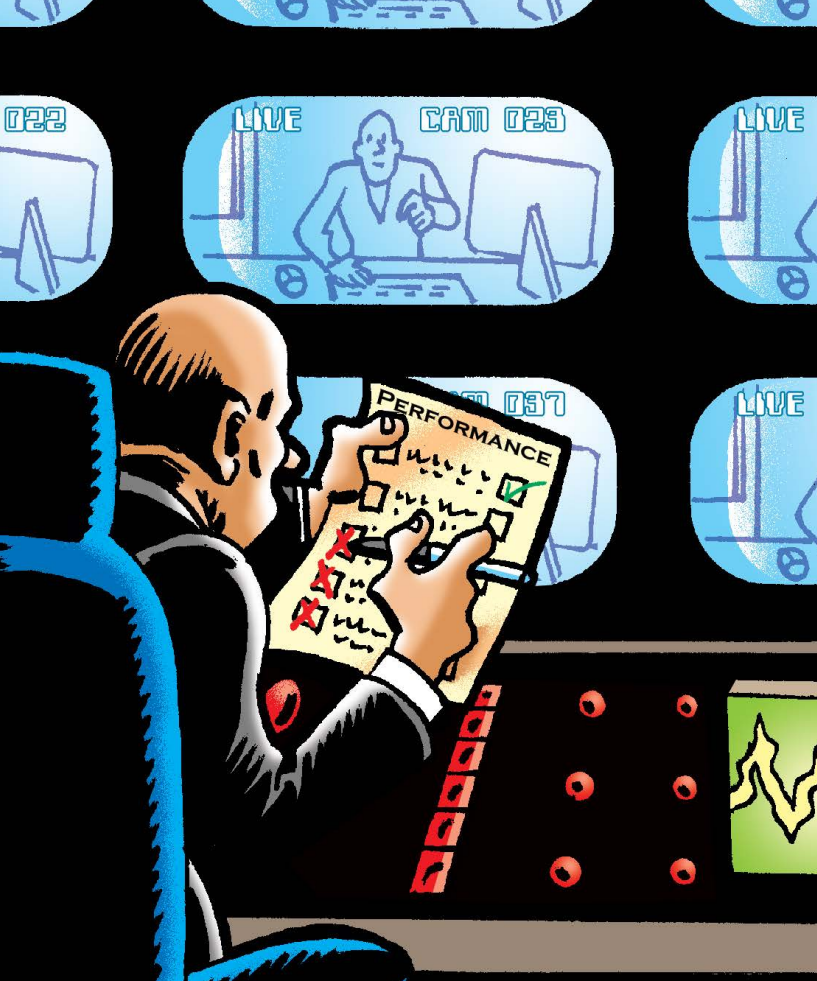
9. Mostly. But there was a point at which California and Arizona nearly went to war over the Colorado River itself. Arizona was displeased with its 1928 allotment of only 28% of the lower Colorado River (compared to California's 59%). Arizona was even more displeased in 1934 when the Bureau of Reclamation began construction on the Parker Dam, a dam on the Colorado River that would span the border between California and Arizona, creating Lake Havasu, current home of the old London Bridge. California had already begun building the aqueduct that would carry its share of the lake water away. Arizona saw that once the dam was built, and the water was flowing, its negotiating position would be permanently weakened. So, in November 1934, the governor of Arizona declared martial law. Arizona National Guard troops occupied the dam construction site, and the governor mustered an "Arizona Navy" (made up mostly of ferry boats, but commanded by a governor-appointed Admiral) to halt construction of the dam. The Arizona Navy got fouled up in some construction equipment, had to be rescued, and the war ended with no shots fired. The dam was completed a short time later.

10. States and nations aren't the only levels of political jurisdiction where water causes conflict. Most notably, tribal governments in the US have been fighting for sufficient access to fresh water for hundreds of years. One of the most influential water law cases, *Winters v. United States*, cemented tribes' rights to enough water for self-sufficiency and sometimes for agriculture on reservations. And more recently the fights against the Dakota Access Pipeline have been led by water protectors, who see their primary role as protecting the affected communities' access to clean water.











# BULLSHIT JOBS

*by Nick Slater and Oren Nimni*

**B**ullshit Jobs: *A Theory* is the latest fascinating and infuriating book from David Graeber, a professor of anthropology at the London School of Economics. If you're not familiar with Graeber, he's an anarchist who does anthropology, or an anthropologist who does anarchism—he strongly dislikes being called an “anarchist anthropologist.” That dislike has always struck your authors as strange. The best way to describe Graeber's anthropology is as anarchist anthropology. It's different than other studies or ethnographies. His writing, to the extent that it has a uniform style, is made up of five-thousand word anecdotes that somehow coalesce into an overarching theory. Much like anarchism, his anthropology is less grand theory and more “here are a bunch of cool things that seem to say something about

the world.” There are flaws with this approach, of course, but it does make for an engaging and bottom-up type of writing.

Graeber's own family and personal history is equally interesting. He comes from a long line of radicals—his grandfather was a late 19th century atheist and frontier musician, his father fought for the Republic in the Spanish Civil War, and his mother was a garment worker-turned Broadway star whose story is very much worth reading. Graeber himself played a key role in the Occupy Wall Street movement, where he was credited with popularizing the phrase “we are the 99%.” *Bullshit Jobs* is not remotely his first book—other notable works include: *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, and *Direct Action: An Ethnography*. All should be read and argued with. “That's all very well,” you may be thinking, “but isn't this review about *Bullshit Jobs*, and didn't it come out about a year

David Graeber, **Bullshit Jobs: A Theory**, Simon and Schuster (368pp., \$27.00)





ago, and isn't that an unreasonably long time to wait to review it?" To this I will say two things, the first being that this is *Current Affairs* and we do not bow to the tyranny of clocks, and the second is that, if anything, Graeber's book is even more relevant today than when it was first published, because the foul trends it examines have only grown stinkier since then.

### THE FIVE TYPES OF BULLSHIT JOBS

The first chapters of the book finds Graeber in classic form, wielding anecdotes about German military contractors (apparently it takes three different subcontractors and around twenty man-hours of labor to move a computer from one office to another) and Spanish government workers (specifically, the hero Joaquín García, who skipped work for six years without anyone noticing) that are as hilarious as they are illustrative about the point Graeber is trying to make—bullshit jobs are

plentiful, they are often created for the most asinine reasons, and doing them breaks our brains.

Bullshit Jobs invoke an intense cognitive dissonance in large part because they shouldn't be able to exist under capitalism (more on this later). For now, the important thing to remember is that bullshit jobs are, essentially, the "fat" that today's sleek, ultra-efficient corporations are always seeking to trim—and yet it comprises an enormous, ever-burgeoning percentage of their workforce and budget. According to the theorists, this isn't possible: companies with bloated advisory boards and expensively useless brand consultants should perish at the hands of their leaner rivals. But the thousands upon thousands of personal stories that Graeber's book is based upon suggests otherwise.

From these anecdotes, Graeber constructs a catalogue of the various forms and flavors of bullshit jobs. As he describes them:

**FLUNKY** jobs are those that exist only or primarily to make someone else look or feel important....



**GOONS** [are] people whose jobs have an aggressive element, but, crucially, who exist only because other people employ them...

**DUCT TAPERS** are employees whose jobs only exist because of a glitch or fault in the organization; who are there to solve a problem that ought not to exist....

**BOX TICKERS** [are] employees who exist only or primarily to allow an organization to be able to claim it is doing something that, in fact, it is not doing....

**TASKMASTERS** fall into two categories. Type 1 contains those whose role consists entirely of assigning work to others.... [Type 2 contains those] whose primary role is to create bullshit tasks for other to do, to supervise bullshit, or even to create entirely new bullshit jobs."

As Graeber explains the intricacies of each category of bullshit job, you may find yourself thinking, "Wow, there are a lot of jobs that sound like flunkies—bodyguards, personal shoppers, 'special assistants to the chairman.' And there's a lot of jobs that sound like goons: PR gurus, SEO marketers, and—with apologies to most of the *Current Affairs* editorial board—lawyers. And the duct tapers: couldn't that describe pretty much everyone in IT? Box tickers sound like every HR manager, diversity consultant, and sustainability advisor you've ever met, and 'taskmaster' could be a synonym for 'project manager' and its related mutations. Oh god, are *all* jobs bullshit jobs?"

Perhaps not exactly, but it's understandable if you feel that way. Graeber cites a poll which showed that 37% of British workers think their jobs make no meaningful contribution to the world, and to be honest, those numbers sound a little low. Back in 2017, a Gallup poll found that 85% of workers around the globe hate their jobs. At the time, the company's chairman and CEO said, "If this trend isn't reversed immediately, it means the end of civilization."

There's a darkly amusing report in the *Harvard Business Review* from 1979 called "Changing Employee Values: Deepening Discontent?" that warns, "Currently, there is a downward trend in employees' ratings of the equity with which they are treated," and "expectations of advancement are the lowest they have ever been," both of which sound like they could've been taken verbatim from Graeber's book. Things have been so bad for so long, and yet the most subversive thing most of us have done is watch *The Office* or enjoy the occasional Dilbert cartoon (say what you will about Scott Adams, but 15% of his comics are definitely funny).

With apologies for referencing yet another classic critique of workplace ennui, it makes you wonder: how much more can we take before we all pull a Milton and burn down our respective buildings?

## HOW BULLSHIT JOBS ROB US OF OUR HUMANITY

The thing about *Bullshit Jobs* that's really striking, however, is not the categorization of different jobs (which happens in the first chapters and is amusing and engaging, if a bit incomplete)

but the next part: why are these jobs bad? Particularly, why are these jobs especially bad if you think that within a capitalist framework, the nature of all work is already corrosive? Why is there something *extra*-pernicious to the human soul about these bullshit jobs?

It's because, as Graeber writes:

*"Children come to understand that they exist, that they are discrete entities from the world around them, largely by coming to understand that 'they' are the thing which just caused something to happen—the proof of which is the fact that they can make it happen again. Crucially, too, this realization is, from the very beginning, marked with a species of delight that remains the fundamental background of all subsequent human experience."*

Graeber returns to this idea throughout *Bullshit Jobs*—the "pleasure at being the cause." He says that when we're deprived of this, such as when we're trapped in a job that has no discernable impact on the world, we experience "a direct attack on the very foundations of the sense that one even *is* a self," which might be the most powerful explanation you'll ever hear of what "soul-crushing work" really means.

"Young people in Europe and North America in particular," Graeber continues, "but increasingly throughout the world, are being psychologically prepared for useless jobs, trained in how to pretend to work, and then by various means shepherded into jobs that almost nobody really believes serves any meaningful purpose."

Everything Graeber says sounds like gospel right up until the last part—there's an argument to be made that a significant part of the problem is that a baffling number of people *do* think bullshit jobs serve meaningful purposes. Employers are actually much better than Graeber gives them credit for at making you feel like your work is meaningful. And that's without pundits on national broadcasting informing you of the dire state of the economy and the vital role of every man, woman, and child in ensuring that the wheels of civilization keep turning (and inveighing against the laziness of the unemployed, who are obviously neglecting their civic duty). Apparently, 2 out of 5 Americans believe the country is facing a critical shortage of STEM workers, even though current university students are twice as likely to study STEM as their parents were, and a study from the Economic Policy Institute found that A) the only reason more people aren't working in STEM is because the pay is low and the jobs are bad, and B) in reality there's still no shortage. Researchers from the University of Warwick and the University of Leicester found that a similar state of affairs exists in the U.K.

But what would a "critical shortage of STEM workers" (which seem to be comprised mostly of goons, duct tapers, and taskmasters) even mean? To borrow a concept from Graeber, it's easy to imagine the crippling effects of a critical shortage of nurses or sanitation workers. On the other hand, why should anyone be concerned if blockchain startups struggle to find



software engineers to design their shitty apps? How and why have we been propagandized to believe that coding is more inherently meaningful than cleaning?

This is one area we would've liked to see Graeber explore in more detail—how have large segments of the population come to treat STEM jobs with the reverence they receive today? It's easy—and perhaps accurate—to pin the blame on slick PR, the notoriously spineless tech media, and the obvious capitalist imperative to encourage too many workers into a particular profession in order to drive down wages, but on the other hand, this is the exact type of too-obvious answer that Graeber has a knack for refuting in interesting ways.

### WHAT IF WE'RE NOT ACTUALLY LIVING UNDER CAPITALISM?

Bullshit Jobs don't really fall neatly into a capitalist framework as economists describe it. These are jobs which by their own definition are redundant, meaningless, and make-work. They are the type of jobs that "true capitalists" bemoan when they find them in government bureaucracies. Capitalism is supposed to be efficient. It should mean that every extraneous job is eliminated and all jobs are there explicitly to serve one goal—profit. In that sense, bullshit jobs seem like an error in the program of capitalism. And, although anyone (including Graeber) might take issue with this definition of capitalism, the examples in the book point to something more than an anomaly. They point to a necessary piece of the current system. The proliferation of these jobs is so deep and so broad that it is actually very difficult to imagine current capitalism without them. They may in fact be necessary for capitalism to function. How do you have a theory that determines someone's value based on their work while also having a system where actually not everyone has to work? Well, you make work. Just as FDR hired people to knock snow off trees during the Great Depression, so does every company hire an HR team and a receptionist (this is not to belittle these jobs, but Graeber does include an amusing anecdote about a publishing company that has a receptionist not because they have any use for one but merely because that is "what companies are supposed to have").

However, "if the existence of bullshit jobs seems to defy the logic of capitalism," muses Graeber, "one possible reason for their proliferation might be that the existing system isn't cap-

italism—or at least, isn't any sort of capitalism that would be recognizable from the works of Adam Smith, Karl Marx, or, for that matter, Ludwig von Mises or Milton Friedman."

According to Graeber, we live under a system best described as "managerial feudalism," in which the economic and political spheres blur into one and "the whole point is to grab a pot of

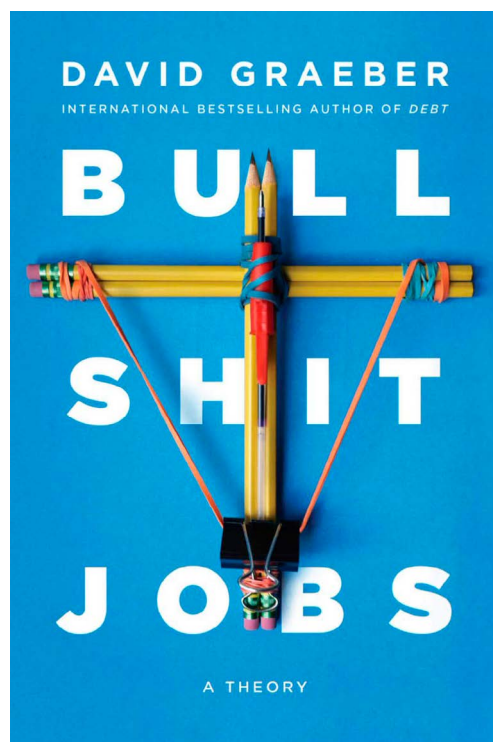
loot.... and then [redistribute] it" in order to attract a sizable retinue and subdue one's opponents. When you consider the life cycle of a quintessential Silicon Valley unicorn—get an enormous amount of money from investors, convince a former senator or two to join as an advisor, use that borrowed credibility to launch a PR campaign in the media, get even *more* money in an IPO, buy or crush any opponents, send lobbyists to Washington, casually offer to self-regulate the industry, give massive gifts to cooperative politicians and punish troublesome ones, etc.—Graeber's description seems apt. More than that, it makes sense on a visceral level, like, *ah yes, that's what I've noticing in my daily life for years.*

But what if it also hands a tidy excuse to defenders of the current world order? Just as the left points at the Soviet Union's role in atrocities like the

Ukrainian Holodomor, or at Maoist China's cruelty during the Great Leap Forward and says, "that's not real socialism," couldn't someone from the Heritage Foundation or The Brookings Institution argue that the last forty years haven't been "real capitalism," and that what we *really* need is to cut more taxes or close more homeless shelters or spread the glorious gift of freedom to more Middle Eastern shepherds, one cruise missile at a time?

One could argue they already do this, to an extent, but it still seems like a large and spiky club to hand one's enemy. The concept of managerial feudalism makes instant sense to anyone once you've explained it to them, but rather than proving the existence of a new political formation, this may just reveal an essential truth about capitalism: it's never been *that* different from feudalism. It's just a bit more meritocratic, justifies its power with mainstream economics rather than divine right, and wears a dreary business suit.

Importantly, however, this line of inquiry also begs the question of whether bullshit jobs could still exist under socialism. It's not a forgone conclusion that they won't. You'd have to build a particular type of socialism that cared for the human soul to actually believe that the type of job, not just the distribution of wealth, was an important issue.





## NUMBERS: THE ROOT OF ALL BULLSHIT (JOBS)

*“Much of the bullshitization of real jobs, I would say, and much of the reason for the expansion of the bullshit sector more generally, is a direct result of the desire to quantify the unquantifiable.”*

So, if we agree that some jobs are “bullshit,” and some jobs are unfulfilling, and some jobs are both, how do we sort through which is which? How do we decide what kinds of work can be done away with entirely, and what kinds of work still need to be done, but hopefully in some different and less ghastly form? Graeber advocates literal cherry-picking: if some tedious tasks can be quantified and automated—he uses the example of sorting fruit—Graeber’s in favor of it. At the same time, he cautions against trying to automate or do away with tasks that people might actually enjoy, like choosing the best history course based on its reading list. (A very anarchist approach if you ask us... but what do we know.) As he explains, “it requires enormous human effort to render the material into units that a computer would even begin to know what to do with.”

### ON ESCAPING OUR PRESENT PREDICAMENT

Graeber writes that: “Hell is a collection of individuals who are spending the bulk of their time working on a task they don’t like and are not especially good at. Thus, we are, by Graeber’s definition, currently in hell. He concludes the book by mentioning universal basic income and the reduction of working hours as some actions we could take to improve the situation, though he makes it clear he doesn’t think either would be a cure-all policy (indeed, like any self-respecting anarchist, he says he’s “suspicious of the very idea of policy”).

And yet... both of those things do sound like they’d be worth a try, don’t they? It’s a tremendously exciting idea to imagine a world in which you had plenty of free time and plenty of money in your pocket. Even if your main preoccupation is productivity, a society built on the automation of drudgery and the maximization of thinking-time seems more likely to yield brilliant inventions and major advances than the stressed-out, overworked, thoroughly miserable shitheap we’re stuck in today.

Graeber is fond of mentioning the remarkable era of British rock bands in the mid-20th century and pointing out, as he said in one interview, “all these bands were living on welfare!” A world of free time and free money is not unreasonable—it’s the world that gave us the Beatles, The Who, and the Rolling Stones, and that’s a world even a boomer could love.

How would we get there, though? The first part is easy: a lot of the “work” currently being done could be got rid of entirely. It’s not like the extra hours are doing us (or our com-

panies’ bottom lines) any good—according to one survey of nearly 2,000 office workers, people in these types of jobs do about two-and-a-half hours of productive work in a given day. (While this wouldn’t change the need for some professions like teachers or firefighters to work longer days, there’s are possible solutions for this as well: compensate them better, improve their working conditions, and ensure that they have a substantive say in how their workplaces are run. Figuring out how to make essential but inherently difficult or complex jobs fair is always going to be an ongoing work in process.) As an ancillary benefit, working less would also be the single most useful thing we can do to counter the effects of climate change. A 2013 report from the Center for Economic Policy Research (CEPR) suggested annual reductions of 0.5% in the world’s total number of work hours could avert up to half of preventable global warming (significant changes are already inevitable, but this could be the difference between them being a thorny problem or a disastrous one), and the researchers’ basic premise still hold true: “fewer work hours means less [sic] carbon emissions, which means less global warming.”

There’s no equally glib answer for where the money comes from, but that doesn’t mean there *is* no answer. One potential solution could be “social wealth funds” like the one proposed by Matt Bruenig of the People’s Policy Institute. Modeled on existing funds like those of Norway and Alaska (and the 80 others around the world), it could operate in tandem with newer, more radical ideas like modern monetary theory\*, a complex yet intuitively reasonable idea that refutes the conservative notion that national budgets should be run like a family’s budget, since one can print its own currency and the other cannot. If this is the case, which it certainly appears to be, why shouldn’t that currency be printed to pay for baby formula instead of bank bailouts?

In a socialist world, policies like these would render the soil infertile for bullshit jobs: that is, a job that is neither useful *nor* enjoyable. The main reason people don’t quit jobs they hate is because they’d starve without them—if they weren’t in danger of starving, they wouldn’t need to take a bullshit job in the first place. A society with the dominant values of compassion and egalitarianism would also remove the incentives that drive people to build the petty professional fiefdoms so prevalent under the current system of capitalism-cum-managerial feudalism.

Yet, like Graeber says in his conclusion, while it’s useful and important to suggest solutions, the first step (one that is not yet finished) is to convince the world there *is* a problem which is both possible and necessary to solve. Our answer to the question, “what is to be done?” about bullshit jobs can’t be handed down from an elite vanguard or a plucky team of wonks—it has to be built from the lived experiences of the people who work them. ✚

*\*It would also ensure a socially-useful job for anyone who wanted one.*







# EVERY STATE *should be a* MICROSTATE

BY NICK SLATER

**A**LL THE NATIONS OF THE EARTH SHOULD BE split into microstates. This is desirable for many reasons—people would be happier, the planet would be healthier, and conflict would be less frequent. Humans have organized their societies in this way before, and good things flourished. The ideas and institutions developed in ancient microstates have provided the foundation for some of the greatest advancements in the history of human civilization. People love a reboot, and *Tiny Nations II: The Return of the City-State* would actually be good.

Not only would it be good, but it would be popular as well. People on both the right and the left are quite receptive to the idea of microstates. Nobody likes to have their lives dictated by a group of rulers in a faraway city: there's a reason why places like D.C., Brussels, or London are often synonymous with arrogance and corruption. Whether you're a libertarian or a libertarian socialist, the one thing you can agree on is that a vast centralized state is hostile to the development of a just and pleasant society.

Major separatist movements exist in almost every region around the world, and while their individual politics vary to great extents, they're all reflections of the human desire for local autonomy. In the United States alone, you'll find the Second Vermont Republic (who want to secede because the "United States is no longer a functioning republic, but a dysfunctional Empire unable to respond to the needs and concerns of its own citizens, the health of our global commons, and the well-being of our shared planet"), the Republic of Lakotah (comprised

of people who identify themselves as "the freedom loving Lakotah from the Sioux Indian reservations of Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and Montana who have suffered from cultural and physical genocide in the colonial apartheid system we have been forced to live under"), and the Cascadia independence movement (a growing force in the Pacific Northwest that has attracted more than a few white supremacists).

As the last example would suggest, there can be a dark side to the urge for separation. It's not hard to imagine a "reasonable" fascist like Richard Spencer advocating for a white-only microstate by telling black people, "[This] hasn't worked out. We haven't made each other happier. We are going to have to take part in this paradigmatic shift together." In fact, Spencer used those exact words in a fawning *Mother Jones* profile in 2016. There's also an argument to be made that many of the worst forms of oppression occur on the local level — as many people who've lived in small towns with judgmental communities will tell you, few situations can make you feel as miserable or as trapped. In theory, the state writ large is supposed to offer both protection from such forces and an escape route when they become unbearable. You can always run away to the big city, after all.

However, there's no reason that a world of microstates would be incapable of offering similar escape routes or similar protections, just as there's no reason that it would necessarily entail the creation of "pure" ethnic enclaves like some kind of enlightened Jim Crow. The appeal of a big state, both literally and figuratively, is that it offers an alternative to the local, whether that's in terms of authority, lifestyle, or physical location. A world of microstates with impermeable borders would be



impossible—just look at the United States, which couldn't survive without the free movement of goods and people across state lines. And this is the richest, most accomplished country in human history: why wouldn't a similar model work for the wider world?

But just for a moment, let's stop talking about the U.S. Internationally, the opposition to centralized authority is even more diverse. The Zapatistas of southern Mexico have been fighting for decades in the name of indigenous rights and anti-globalization. In the anarchist region of Syria known as Rojava, you'll find a dedication to eco-feminism and direct democracy. In Spain, support for an independent republic of Catalunya (whose language and culture was repressed by the Franco dictatorship for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) comes from an uneasy alliance of bourgeois liberals, socialists, and nationalists. In the Philippines, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front frames its opposition to Manila in religious terms, while the Wa State of Myanmar is one of many groups in South Asia that seek the right of self-determination for ethnic reasons (though its armed forces are more robust than most, thanks largely to a brisk narcotics trade).

The point is: regardless of their politics, culture, or social background, the vast majority of people don't like to be controlled by absentee masters. It's why every colonial empire collapses after it expands past a certain point, and why extremely large countries (ex. the United States, Russia, China, Brazil) must rely on brute force and heavy surveillance to maintain control over their populations. Big states are an expensive, repressive proposition; no wonder everyone hates them, or at least claims to.

Microstates, on the other hand, seem like much nicer places for humans to be—I happen to reside in one myself, and I can confirm this is true. You tend to live longer there: out of the top ten countries in terms of life expectancy, nine could be considered microstates (of these, Switzerland is a bit of a stretch, but its population is still smaller than New York City's). It can also be good for your bank account: the quality of life in European microstates like Luxembourg, Lichtenstein, and San Marino is perhaps the highest in the world. While it's difficult to make a blanket statement about inequality levels in microstates, which generally have a high percentage of both short- and long-term immigrants (in Andorra, for example, around two-thirds of us are non-natives), the 2008 paper *Economic consequences of the size of nations, 50 years on* written by economist Éloi Laurent found that “microstates have on average higher income and productivity levels than small states, and grow no more slowly than large states.” Ironically, the same forces of globalization that have laid bare the failings of the centralized state have also greased the wheels of its destruction, helping to “further the economic viability of small country size” with “benefits from openness now counter-balancing penalties from vulnerability even for micro-states.”

This has not gone unnoticed by people of all political persuasions. In an article for *The Conservative Journal* titled “Why Small Countries Are Richer and Happier,” Hannes H. Gissurarson argued that “a combination of large markets and small states makes eminent economic sense. It also makes political sense.” In *Jacobin*'s “The Socialist Case for Leave,” sociologist Neil Davidson suggested that the “non-nationalist” reasons why a group of people might desire to assert their own sovereignty (like a genuine disgust with the European Union's track record of enforcing strict austerity policies) are more influential than conventional media narratives prefer to admit: think of it as “rightsizing” one's country, except in this case the name is actually appropriate and it's everyone at corporate getting the axe.

While leftists should be wary of using right-wing talking points in favor of microstates, it's not necessarily a problem to share the same objective here. Weakening the huge, centralized states that feed preda-

tory capitalist industries is a good and necessary step, provided that the tools used to do this are first used to defang the Facebooks, BlackRocks, and Goldman Sachs of the world. In the meantime, if the right wants to sing the praises of microstates and accidentally tout the virtues of peace (tiny nations have a hard time fielding large armies or maintaining overseas military bases) and equality (they can't otherwise impose their will on others as easily as large nations can), why stop them?

There are, of course, many objections to the idea that all states should be microstates. Some of them can even appear persuasive, while others do not. Regardless, most of them are based on an appeal to realism, pragmatism, or whatever synonym for dullness you prefer. The ones that are not—like the idea that larger political units are better at creating a sense of shared identity across diverse populations or combatting immense problems like climate change—ignore both the spectacularly brutal repression necessary to enforce that shared identity (see: the Chinese government's ongoing attempts to integrate the Uighur Muslims of Xinjiang) and the fact that no current international body has shown itself capable of taking meaningful action against any large nation that opposes it (see: the American government's successful attempts to torpedo the Paris climate agreement, back out of nuclear non-proliferation treaties, and defy any attempt to enforce international law against Israel.) Our current options are not working: we need to try something different.

SPLITTING THE WORLD INTO MICROSTATES WOULD be complicated, but complicated is not the same thing as impossible. And while we shouldn't minimize the complexities of turning one big state into many small ones, we also shouldn't inflate them. Sometimes these complexities exist for legitimate reasons, but other times they're created (and perpetuated and defended) by a caste of experts whose power and prestige depends on their ability to convince others that they're the only ones capable of solving the problems they themselves have created.

David Graeber's book *Bullshit Jobs* contains an excellent illustration of how this works in real life. It focuses on how a German military unit handles its logistical needs: simply to transfer a computer from one office to another, three levels of subcontractors must be involved. A process that should take a single person five minutes (pick up computer in Room A, carry it twenty feet down the hall, deposit it in Room B) ends up consuming a day's worth of labor from half a dozen people. This is the *German military*—just imagine how convoluted the process might be in an institution that isn't so famous for its efficiency.

Most of us don't need to be told to be skeptical of bloated bureaucracies and out-of-touch overlords. However, we also have a silent, visceral dread that the establishment has already grown too big to fail, and the best we can hope for is to prevent a decline in our current standards of living. Our situation is precarious, why jeopardize it even further? We know how hard it is to get insulin, to afford fresh vegetables, to provide for our kids, or our aging parents. Wouldn't it be more prudent to make certain reforms to the existing state—like greater transparency or more opportunities for citizen feedback—rather than risking a descent into chaos out of romantic nostalgia for a simpler past?

That's the same argument used by the American healthcare industry, widely regarded as one of the most ruthless and exploitative institutions on the planet, to scare us away from taking any action that would threaten its ability to wring enormous profits out of the most vulnerable among us. To paraphrase Mark Twain, whenever you find yourself on the side of healthcare executives, it's time to pause and reflect.

“It's a big change, and big changes are too risky,” is not a good argument against microstates, and it doesn't deserve an extended rebut-



tal (if that's someone's justification for opposing them, the only way to change their mind is to 1) beat them, 2) show them through lived experience why they were wrong). However, other reasons for being skeptical about splitting up the world's oversized nations do deserve an honest appraisal.

#### WHERE WOULD YOU EVEN BEGIN?

If the ongoing clusterfuck of Brexit has taught us anything, it's that breaking up with a modern megastate can be awfully messy. There are so many moving parts that it's impossible to keep them all straight, and mistakes are inevitable—sometimes you accidentally lock yourself in your car on your way to a big trade deal, sometimes you forget what passport you have, and sometimes you give a \$17.8 million contract to a ferry company only to find out they have no ships.

As economists and think tank fellows are fond of reminding us, modern societies depend on supply chains that are long and devilishly interconnected. Just consider the avocado toast you had for breakfast this morning: the gluten-free bread was made by an Austrian company with flour containing quinoa from Peru and topped with a guacamole-like spread whose ingredients originated in Mexico, which you ate while sitting on a Swedish-designed chair that was manufactured in China from wood grown in Romania as you tapped on a Korean cell phone containing minerals mined in the Congo and taken by Greek ships to be assembled in an Indian factory.

Before they wound up in contact with your mouth, hands, and ass, all of those products had to meet quality standards established by international regulatory bureaux, pass multiple inspections from local national federal agencies, and be transported enormous distances in relatively short amounts of time.

How do you start to untangle that knot?

There's no snappy one-line answer to that, so many people assume there's no answer at all. But that's not the case—there are multiple answers, and if you're a medium-smart person with an open-ish mind and five minutes of quality thinking time to spare, none of them are particularly hard to grasp.

The first one is: you determine what problems are actually worth solving. Consider the aforementioned gluten-free bread. Does the society of your aspiring microstate really need it to be made from quinoa? It's a fantastic grain, don't get me wrong. But if it just... weren't there tomorrow, would you feel anything more than mild annoyance? If it continued not being there for another six months, how often would you think about it?

But let's imagine that you'd think about it every day! Any microstate that doesn't have quinoa-based breadstuffs isn't one worth living in\*!

*\*Presumably there would be other things the people of your microstate could live without, like jewelry for cats' buttocks or the Dentomax Tongue-Smoothener XL™, so you wouldn't need to expend time or resources to acquire them, which would simplify your microstate's to-do list.*

This brings us to the second answer to "where would you even begin?," and that's by making a plan based on an intimate knowledge of local needs and circumstances. That plan could take an infinite number of potential forms based on an infinite number of potential factors. There's no way to say, "all microstates would acquire their quinoa by following Plan X," but it's not particularly outrageous to imagine that people like Rhiana Gunn-Wright (the lefty policy whiz who helped craft a comprehensive platform for transforming Michigan into something resembling a socialist state, and is now creating policies for the Green New Deal) could come up with a workable idea. If Matt Bru-

enig and the People's Policy Project can figure out a detailed plan to end child poverty in the United States—the Long Island Iced Tea of malignant social factors—then other groups of talented and passionate people can find ways to supply a given microstate with quinoa, or asthma inhalers, or electricity, or *Indiana Jones* DVD box sets, or anything else necessary for a rich and fulfilling life. As Ursula K. Le Guin once said, "Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings."

Of course, not all change is for the better. Imagine that in this brave new world of ours, Microstate A gets all of its asthma inhalers from Microstate E. The only connection between the two is by train, which must pass through Microstates B, C, and D to reach its destination. Three separate states with three separate jurisdictions... the situation seems ripe for disaster. Every extra inspection means another hour (at least) that the lungs of Microstate A's citizens must wheeze and gasp for air. It's literally a matter of life or death, and we've just raised the degree of difficulty. This isn't to suggest that America's current health care system is efficient, but wouldn't adding even more middlemen just make things worse?

Yes! But that's only assuming that Microstates B, C, and D's primary motivations are the same jealousies, suspicions, and fears of contemporary nation-states. Conflict may be inevitable, but the ways we use to settle it are not. Today's megastates have made a collective agreement to refrain from attacking each other with nuclear weapons—tomorrow's microstates could make a collective agreement to refrain from other types of aggression as well (and such an agreement would be in their overwhelming best interests).

How can we be sure it would work, though? Well, we can't. Life is a process of trial and error, and any strategy to do anything, no matter how ingenious or well intentioned, could potentially fail. But we already live with this possibility in our current large, warlike, inhospitable states—see: the Great Depression, the 1970s energy fiascos, the 1980s recession, the burst of the dotcom bubble of the 1990s, the global economic crisis of the last decade and counting.

Insisting that microstates are a ludicrous daydream because there's no soundbite-sized secret to doing it flawlessly overnight doesn't mean that you're a savvy master of realpolitik, it just means you have no imagination.

#### HOW WOULD YOU SPLIT THEM UP?

This is another situation in which your mileage will vary—sometimes to several orders of magnitude. There's no one-size-fits-all solution: it would be ridiculous to suggest that every microstate should have a population of 150,000 people or that they should all be shaped like tetrahedrons with a surface area of 275 square miles. If the driving force behind the creation of microstates were a desire for human freedom, then their population density, geographical size, and natural composition would vary in significant ways.

On one hand, this leaves us with a loose definition of microstates as "states that are a lot smaller than the average current states," which raises some thorny issues. For example, consider the microstate of Vatican City, home to 1,000 souls. My home country of Andorra is also a microstate, yet its population is around 77,000. Proportionally, that's roughly the same difference between the United States and Costa Rica. Switzerland, which is often the first place that comes to mind when you think of "tiny independent nation surrounded by much bigger ones," has more than 8.4 million people. With such a vast discrep-



ancy in size, wouldn't the same patterns of domination and exploitation be inevitable?

Maybe? But that assumes "big" microstates like Switzerland—currently the least aggressive and domineering of the world's nations—would respond to a global trend tailor-made to safeguard their best interests by... immediately going against those interests? It's possible, certainly, yet it feels more cynical than clever, like saying people with kids are the worst parents.

It also assumes that big microstates wouldn't have divisions of their own. But in Switzerland, for example, would it be that hard to imagine if the French-speaking area of Romandy, the Italian-speaking province of Ticino, or the German-speaking lands to the north sought a return to their former autonomy once freed from the danger of being swallowed by their massive neighbors?

**T**HE TRUTH IS, THERE'S NO BEST WAY TO SPLIT the world into microstates. Linguistic and cultural groupings could be a logical option in some cases, while in others it might make more sense for the physical environment—like mountains, deserts, or watersheds (an area whose rivers and streams drain into a common outlet) to dictate "borders." Here, it's important to remember that the borders of a microstate don't need to bear more than the slightest resemblance to what we consider national borders today: the frontiers of future microstates could be treated more like international waters.

Some microstates would likely find this less appealing than others.

They might desire hard borders, with strict controls on the movement of goods and people across them. But such an isolationist policy only works if a state is exceptionally large or exceptionally well-endowed with every kind of resource (which usually goes along with being exceptionally large, since it's hard to find gold, fresh water, and bananas in the same limited radius). The first scenario doesn't apply to microstates by definition. The second is somewhat more imaginable, but as Carolyn Steel noted in *Architectural Review*, modern cities can't feed themselves, and microstates would likely face the same problems (or, to put a positive spin on it, incentives for collaboration). Even if hard borders were a desirable thing, and they're not, they simply wouldn't be feasible.

If this sounds like a modern version of the Wild West to you—and you don't think that's a good thing—you might be interested to know that the Wild West wasn't actually that violent, at least in terms of bandits and bar brawls (the U.S. Army, on the other hand, was exceptionally violent in its extermination of Native Americans). This isn't a recent revelation: as far back as the 1970s, historians like Eugene Hollon recognized that the frontier "was a far more civilized, more peaceful and safer place than American society today."

However, to borrow a term from James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, the frontier was also frustratingly "illegible" to the central government in Washington D.C., meaning it was difficult to extract surplus production, consolidate social control, or conscript soldiers from that untamed wilderness.

These, I would argue, are all very good things. Trying to impose a





*Photographs of Andorra by Nick Slater*

master plan of how to divvy up the planet seems like a brutal and foolhardy task. Meanwhile, there's a great deal of evidence that, left to their own devices, people will figure out what works for them.

#### WHAT WOULD PREVENT THE COLONIAL CYCLE FROM REPEATING ITSELF?

**I**magine you're the personification of Microstate A. You have an excellent location near the ocean, with a warm water port fed by several large rivers. Your cropland is extremely fertile as a result, and you're also close to the mountains, where many valuable ores and minerals are mined. With this abundance of resources, you're able to provide a comfortable standard of living for your people, and they're so content and well nurtured that they produce exceptional ideas, cultural expressions, and material products.

A short distance away lies Microstate Z. This land isn't as blessed as yours: it's almost entirely desert, and the only thing of value it produces is a certain species of small, adorable cactus. These cacti are very popular with your citizens, but since the desert dwellers of Microstate Z have limited growing capacity due to their unsophisticated techniques and equipment, they can only meet 10 percent of your demand for cute little succulents.

If only Microstate Z could grow *more* small, adorable cacti, it could provide better roads, schools, and hospitals for its people. It could diversify its economy and improve its educational system and do many other wonderful things—and, as a side benefit, your people would be able to buy as many small, adorable cacti as they wanted. Sadly, Micro-

state Z just doesn't have the initial investment they'd need to start the whole process. But if you could just step in to give them a hand...

Admittedly, it does seem like an inevitable outcome of human nature, this trend toward ever-increasing bigness, an unstoppable stream of shit forever flowing downhill into our helpless mouths, borne by gravity and the irresistible laws of the market.

But now, I'd encourage you to picture another hypothetical scenario:

Imagine you're regular-you, and you're making small talk while standing in line at the grocery store. The man behind you bears an uncanny resemblance to Colonel Sanders, and when you complain about the exorbitant price of avocados, he replies that the problem is they weren't grown by slaves.

"Everyone knows agricultural products are too expensive to be grown by free laborers," says the guy who looks like Colonel Sanders. "And besides, the slaves get food, clothing, shelter. They get the chance to learn skills. They get a sense of purpose, and they're protected from the uncertainties of life on their own. Are the live auctions where we bid on human beings a little uncomfortable? Yeah. Is it unfortunate that sometimes they get beaten or raped or separated from their families? No doubt. Would it be nice if we didn't have to put chains on them to keep them from running away? Absolutely—all that iron is a big expense! Look, I'm not saying this is a *perfect* system, but this is how it's worked for thousands of years, it's just human nature."

The Colonel Sanders look-alike would consider himself a realist. Would you?

Human societies don't have immutable characteristics that compel





them to conquer and devour each other, just as human beings don't have immutable characteristics that compel them to own each other as property. We've outgrown the latter (with some notable and hideous exceptions)—we can outgrow the former.

Any microstate with colonial aspirations would be hampered by practical constraints, as well: obviously, it's hard to support a powerful military or a sprawling weapons industry without a large population. However, with the specter of drone armies and other forms of automation on the horizon, the most realistic limiting factor is the strengthening of our own humanity.

#### WHY YOU'D LIKE LIVING IN A MICROSTATE

**W**e've already seen that a world of microstates is possible and desirable. But what would it actually be like? Again, it's hard to give a single definitive answer—life in a coastal South American microstate would differ in many ways from one on the Central Asian steppe.

At the same time, I do think we can identify some common and important characteristics of life in a microstate, of which the most notable are:

1. An intimate connection to the physical environment
2. Frequent daily contact with a broad cross-section of people
3. The sense of "being home"

These sound suspiciously similar to the reasons often given in support of small town living. Many people with personal experience of life in such places can, with minimal prompting, give you a profanity-rich

description of their downsides—the boredom, the narrow-mindedness, the feeling of being trapped.

However, sometimes scale matters, and just as the restrictions on a family's budget are more rigid than those on a country's, the constrictions of small town life are far more severe than those of a microstate.

But anyway, living in a microstate is just *different* than living in a small town, despite the superficial similarities, and rather than attempt to persuade you of this with studies and statistics, I'd like to tell you a little about life in Andorra.

These anecdotes come with the usual caveats: they describe only a single place, they don't represent every possible experience and point of view, and they are subjective interpretations of things I chose to consider or omit. I'd like to think that I see things at least somewhat clearly, but I'd be lying if I said my glasses weren't tinted a light rosé. And yet, if you ever found yourself in Andorra la Vella, and you asked ten random people outside the shops on Avinguda Meritxell what they thought about life here, I'd bet at least one kidney that you'd hear ten more-or-less similar stories. They're not comprehensive, but they *are* illustrative.

First, a quick bit of background. Andorra is a "midsize" microstate located between France and Spain, about three hours northwest of Barcelona. It's been around for more than a thousand years: according to legend, Charlemagne granted nationhood to the local mountain clans after they helped repulse a Moorish invasion from the south. It's the only country in the world whose official language is Catalan, and while it's not part of the European Union, it uses the euro as its currency. The country is a co-principality, with the President of France and the bishop of a nearby Spanish town serving as its co-princes (the French



president is generally too preoccupied with the affairs of his main state to concern himself with what goes on here, though the Spanish *bisbe* is often obnoxiously engaged).

Here's what Pete Seeger had to say about the country in his 1962 song, "Andorra":

*In the mountains of the Pyrenees*

*There's an independent state*

*Its population five thousand souls, and I think it's simply great*

*One hundred and seventy square miles big,*

*And it's awfully dear to me:*

*They spend less than five dollars on armaments, and this I've got to see.*

Throughout the song, Seeger sounds incredulous that such a place could exist (in case you're curious, the last line was inspired by a *New York Times* story about the country's military budget, which consisted of 300 *pessetes*—about \$4.90—for purchasing blank rounds of ammunition to be fired as salutes at official ceremonies). More than fifty years after it was written, there's still something unbelievable about it.

When you arrive in Andorra, the first thing you notice is how encircled by mountains it is. There are only two roads to enter the country, one leading from France in the north and the other from Spain in the south (there are also some small smugglers' paths called *contrabandistas*, but these are not for the faint of heart or weak of engine). It feels like entering Narnia or some other enchanted kingdom—once you slip through the narrow mountain pass, you emerge into a lush green forest valley, sparkling beneath a crisp blue sky, the sun so close it tickles your cheeks.

Andorra has the kind of cool, clean air you wish you could drink, and the snowcapped peaks off in the distance are a constant reminder that You Are In Nature. The feeling is deliciously, intoxicatingly wholesome—and it's also the reason Andorra attracts more than ten million tourists a year (skiing, hiking, and mountain biking are some of the most popular activities).

**F**ROM DECEMBER THROUGH APRIL, THE ENTIRE country lives on the ski slopes. Every kid learns to ski as soon as they can walk—it's not uncommon to watch a pack of five-year olds flying off jumps like sleek little ducks behind their instructor. When the weather turns warm, the valleys are full of hikers with their dogs and families with their barbecue sets, while the forests buzz with the sound of trail motorbikes splashing through muddy creeks and scrambling up the rocky slopes.

For such a tiny country, it's surprisingly easy to find places where you can feel like the only person on earth, and the view is usually incredible. Climb to the top of the Casamanya mountain, and you can see what seems like the entire Iberian Peninsula. Go *off-pista* at the Canillo ski slopes, and you'll find yourself in a winter wonderland so pristinely picturesque it'll make your eyes bleed.

But to be honest, I often get the same feeling walking back from the gym. I listen to the rush of the creek that cuts through the center of town, and I gaze at the colorful slabs of rock that jut up from the edges of the valley, and my face gets hot with so much wonder and delight that I giggle all the way home.

Other people who live here tell me they often feel the same way. When I was an English teacher, my students came from many backgrounds: bank executives from Madrid, store clerks from Portugal, computer programmers from Argentina, accountants from Russia, bored-ass teenagers from Andorra. When I asked them what they liked about living here, they said (almost without exception), "It's very beautiful."

Here's another thing I often heard: "it's so safe." Crime is almost non-existent here, and it's not because of the draconian penalties—I've known people in legal trouble for a number of reasons, and the con-

sequences are rarely more severe than a moderate fine and some annoying paperwork. Rather, it's because everyone from the owner of the fanciest five-star hotel to the guy who works the midnight room service shift can afford to live a decent life. It's amazing how social cohesion and social security go hand in hand. Here, it's easier to coexist with people who are different from you, because you're not worried about where your next meal is coming from, or how you're going to afford your kid's trip to the doctor.

I don't mean to suggest that Andorra is some kind of egalitarian paradise: there are still major distinctions between classes, and between Andorrans and foreigners (along with other distinctions between the various subgroups of both). But the physical realities of living in this tiny country mean that we spend our lives in close proximity to one another, and our routes through life often intersect. Our public spaces are still public, and we mingle more as a result.

Here's one example: Shortly after my wife and I moved to Andorra, one of her students invited us to go hiking with his family. He was a C-suite executive of one of the country's largest banks—not the kind of person with whom I normally spend my afternoons. Still, we didn't want to reject an offer of hospitality so soon after arriving in our new home.

They picked us up in a nice-but-not-extravagant-car and drove us to the Vall de Sorteny, a gorgeous natural park about an hour away, with the family basset hound drooling in the front seat. As we strolled through the grassy meadows, the banker told me how much he loved his wife, how grateful he was to God for their good fortune, how he hoped that his kids would grow up to be kind and generous people who'd use their gifts to help others. He explained why he didn't want to buy a big house ("will these bricks make us happy?") and how he dealt with the stress of his high-powered job ("I go to the community pool and swim a few laps").

Here was the most surprising thing to me: he really seemed genuine. As the months went by and I grew to know him better, I discovered that it wasn't an act—he'd invite the bank's receptionist over to have dinner with his family, he'd write thoughtful notes out of the blue, he'd hug us when we met in the middle of the street. He worked in international finance and somehow he'd kept his soul. I hadn't thought that was possible, but I was encouraged to see otherwise.

I'm certain that part of the reason he seemed less odious than his counterpart at, say, Goldman Sachs or HSBC was because of the size of his bank. Even the biggest financial powerhouse of a microstate is like a county credit union next to those great vampire squids. As a result, the scope of his ambitions was far more constricted. It would be ludicrous to even imagine giving himself a \$10 million bonus; the bank is too small, it simply couldn't afford it. I think the size of Andorra mattered, too—even if somehow he did manage to take home a check that big, he'd never be able to show his face in public again. That bonus would have come at the expense of his employees (it always does), and here, your employees are your neighbors. You exist in the same universe: you buy bread in the same *fleca*, you pick up your prescriptions at the same *farmàcia*, their *cosins* cut your hair at the *perruquera*. They form your society, and it's so small that you can't just carve out your own VIP niche away from them. You need them to form your own understanding of yourself, and that means you need to understand them, too.

This place isn't perfect, and I don't want to suggest that it's full of saints. But at the very least, it gives us most of the pre-conditions we need for a healthy society. It creates an environment that accentuates our best qualities and minimizes our worst ones. In a microstate, even bankers can be decent people. Who wouldn't want to live in a place like that? ♦



# MARCH G

*A FIGHT TO THE DEATH BETWEEN*

SQUIDS

OCTOPI

KITTENS

PUPPIES

ANIMAL YAWNS

POWDERY SNOW

NUDIBRANCHS

BABY AXOLOTLs

TREE FROGS

MANATEES

LILACS

CHERRY BLOSSOMS

OTTERS

BEARS

HUMAN BABY LAUGHTER

RAINBOWS

FRENCH 75s

OLD-FASHIONEDS

GUMMY BEARS

JUICY FRUIT GUM

OAT MILK

COCONUT SYRUP

CREPES (FRENCH-STYLE)

SUSHI

CHOCOLATE FOUNTAINS

CHEAP FROZEN PIZZA

PISCO SOURS

EARL GREY TEA

PANCAKES

WAFFLES

CARAMELIZED ONIONS

BAHN MI

**NATURE  
DIVISION**

Have your fri  
each competi  
what the Obj  
things



**EVERY  
WI**

**FOOD  
DIVISION**



# LADNES

THE WORLD'S LOVELIEST THINGS

## FRIENDSHIP DIVISION

ends vote on  
tion and see  
ectively Best  
are...



HUG FROM FRIEND YOU HAVEN'T SEEN IN YEARS

PUBLIC PARKS

LIBRARIES

SCUBA DIVING

TRAMPOLINE GAMES

MARDI GRAS

ADULT (PLATONIC) SLEEPOVERS

BOLD LABOR UNIONS

SINGING "SOLIDARITY FOREVER" WITH LEFTY STRANGERS

HANDWRITTEN LETTERS

EMERGENCY GOSSIP TEXTS

ADA-COMPLIANT SPACES

SITTING IN COMFORTABLE SILENCE W/ CLOSE FRIEND

THERAPY

YELLING AT A MOVIE TOGETHER

HAND-HOLDING

SUNSHINE

NAPS

RAIN (WHEN YOU'RE INSIDE)

CRICKET SOUNDS

VERY CRUNCHY POTATO CHIPS EATEN IN EMPTY ROOM

BLACKOUT CURTAINS

OUTDOOR HOT TUB ON SNOWY NIGHT

CANDLELIGHT

SHOWER WATER THAT'S EXACTLY 103.7° F

FRESH LAUNDRY

SPARKLING WATER FROM THE TAP

MICROFLEECE BLANKETS

FINDING UNEXPECTED MONEY IN YOUR POCKET

COLD STREAMS

SEX

CURRENT AFFAIRS



THING  
NS

## FEELINGS DIVISION







# WORLD WITHOUT MEN

by Lyta Gold

A FEW YEARS AGO, IF YOU WERE ENTIRELY TOO online, you probably ran across the hashtags #killallmen or #banmen. These ironic signoffs have mostly run their course in feminist circles, but they're still frequently referenced by the alt-right (a group well-known for their robust appreciation of irony, respect for edgy humor, and reading comprehension) as a symbol of an evil feminist tendency: one that wishes, quite seriously, to wipe all men from the face of the earth. However, most feminists are, and always have been, content to leave the obliteration of men to mere words. It may come as a shock to the alt-right, wallowing in their imagined oppression, but we monstrous feminists of the 21st century aren't actually planning to snap our gauntleted fingers and disappear half the human species. At best, #killallmen and its variants have only meant "kill toxic masculinity"; at worst, they've been employed as toothless jokes, mean-spirited but ultimately impotent expressions of frustration.

This particular joke or thought experiment has a much older history than we might realize. The late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the sudden flowering of feminist utopian novels in which male humans, for

the most part, do not appear. Some feminist utopias were composed in direct reaction to utopian fiction penned by men, particularly Edward Bellamy's hugely popular utopian novel *Looking Backward* (1888). Bellamy's book imagined a glorious socialist future in which all societal ills had been addressed and all false hierarchies overturned... other than racism and the oppression of women.\* But the roots of the feminist tendency in utopian fiction go back further than any reaction to Bellamy. *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), Christine de Pizan's catalog of the intellectual contributions of women imagined as a city, is a clear precursor to feminist utopia, as is *Millennium Hall* (1762), a placid novel about a commune of women, and also the riotously funny satire *Man's Rights; or, How Would You Like It?* (1870). What all feminist utopias have in common—from the scattered early works, to the sudden explosion in the late 19<sup>th</sup>–early 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the smaller-scale but extraordinary re-imagining of the genre that happened in the 1970s—is a commitment to imagining worlds in which women are treated with the full human respect they deserve.

*\*Bellamy did end up writing a second and much less popular novel, *Equality*, in which he attempted to address both gender and race (unsuccessfully, according to most critics).*



Sometimes, this respect is found through the mysterious and unmourned disappearance of men, at other times, through tongue-in-cheek depictions of civilizations in which men are the ones who experience oppression. (Paging Dr. Jordan Peterson; your fantasy is here). But these first two kinds of utopias are never “serious”, in that they aren’t truly, literally planning a future in which men disappear or become the oppressed class. Only in some of the later utopias of the 70s and beyond did feminist writers tend to depict a third, possibly even achievable kind of utopia, based on the premise that gender hierarchy and other false social structures can be overcome.

The early feminist utopian novels are not really intended as prophecies or blueprints. (Most female-only utopias reproduce through parthenogenesis, which, while fun to think about, is not exactly a practical reproductive strategy for human beings.) The purpose of early feminist utopias is usually to convince, through satire, drama, or earnest polemic, that the oppression women face is 1) real and 2) desperately needs to be eliminated for the betterment of all humankind. As Lady Florence Dixie explains in the preface to her novel *Gloriana, or a dream of the revolution of 1900* (published 1890), her book has “but one object...to speak of evils which DO exist, to study facts which it is a crime to neglect, to sketch an artificial position—the creation of laws false to Nature—unparalleled for injustice and hardship.”

Many feminist utopias take aim at whichever arguments for women’s “natural” inferiority happen to be popular at the time, showing that their purportedly logical conclusions are “false to Nature” and also laughably silly. When it comes to the claim that men deserve to dominate women because of their greater physical strength and larger brains, a character in Begum Rokheya Sakhawat Hossain’s *Sultana’s Dream* (1905) casually counters, “A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race... An elephant also has got a bigger and heavier brain than a man has.” Likewise, the satire *Man’s Rights* cheekily turns (still-popular) scientific arguments on their heads:

*“Woman has phrenologically a larger organ of language than man. Now, what does this teach us? It teaches us this (and it ought to teach every man the same truth): that woman is the natural orator; that it is she who should be the lecturer, the speech-maker, the orator, and not man. It teaches us that women as senators and representatives,*

*as lecturers and orators, are where they belong, where Nature intended they should be. It teaches us more than this: that, as man has smaller language than woman, his sphere is the domestic; is the quiet, the silent, the unobtrusive; is one of silent influences, not public and demonstrative like that of woman.”*

Stop clutching your pearls, gents: this is of course not a serious argument for men’s natural inferiority and women’s political domination, as #killallmen is not a serious argument

for men’s destruction. This is merely to show, by amusing counterexample, that assumptions about women’s natural inferiority based on phrenology (or evolutionary psychology, phrenology’s dull descendant) are ridiculous. These decisions about how men and women “must” have evolved, and what jobs they are thereby suited for, can be argued in practically any direction based on the so-called evidence.

However, many feminist utopian novels, especially of the 19<sup>th</sup> century variety, contend with full sincerity that women are naturally superior to men in a few particular respects: morality, orderliness, virtue. This stems from a popular myth in Western bourgeois society, which ossified into the Victorian image of “the angel in the house.” The lavishly praised (and intellectually emaciated) “angel in the house” served her husband and her children by acting as their patient, adoring, self-effacing moral guardian. It was such a pervasive and damaging trope that Virginia Woolf said in 1931, reflecting on the women writers of her generation, that “killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer.” The female utopians who preceded Woolf chose not to kill the angel in the house, however, but to bring her outside, and let her manage civilization.

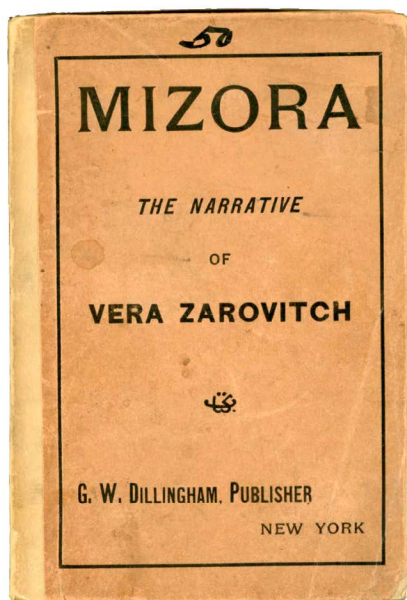
The “angels outside the house” that make up the citizenry of most early feminist utopias are peaceful, happy, physically healthy, and devoted to the cultivation of children, the natural world, and their own talents. Following the classic utopian genre convention of the narrator-stranger who miraculously falls into a perfect society, the angels-outside-the-house always patiently, if pedantically,\* guide the stranger around and explain how their sewage system works. In *Herland* (1915), a group of male adventurers stumbles upon a legendary female-only utopia. “Everything was beauty, order, perfect cleanness, and the pleasantest sense of home over it all.” The women of Herland are short-haired, physically strong, and wear practical clothing, but in addition to these aesthetic and gender-role reversals, they have also evolved to a state of pristine morality. They reproduce parthenogenetically, and are so cleanly Victorian that they don’t even have sex with each other. The narrator remarks admiringly:

*Their religion, you see, was maternal; and their ethics, based on the full perception of evolution, showed the principle of growth and the beauty of wise culture. They had no theory of the essential opposition of good and evil; life to them was growth; their pleasure was in growing, and their duty also.*

EVERY ELEMENT OF HERLAND IS harmonious, from the ethics to the trees to the outfits. Everyone is as happy, fit, and relaxed as a woman in a vacation destination commercial. Life is somewhat dull, but that’s part of the fantasy of utopia: the reader gets to imagine a world in which all major problems have been magically solved, and in feminist utopias, women get to imagine a world in which they are completely free from masculine control and harassment.

The world of *Mizora* (*Mizora*, 1890) is also all-female, and similarly pleasant and luxuriant: “Wealth was everywhere and abundant. The climate as delightful as the most fastidious could desire. The products of the orchards and gardens surpassed description.” In *Ladyland* (the country visited in *Sultana’s Dream*), homes are almost

\*Pedantry is not unique to feminist utopia. It’s a charming and nigh-unbearable convention of many early utopian works.





indistinguishable from gardens. The protagonist marvels: “*The kitchen was situated in a beautiful vegetable garden. Every creeper, every tomato plant was itself an ornament. I found no smoke nor any chimney either in the kitchen—it was clean and bright; the windows were decorated with flower gardens. There was no sign of coal or fire.*” The lack of fire and smoke in Ladyland is significant: In all of these utopias mentioned above, the beauty and abundance and orderliness is not solely due to women’s (ostensible) superior morality, but to considerable scientific improvements.

These “angels outside the house,” for all their 19<sup>th</sup>-century moral and sexual repression, break Victorian convention by being entirely liberated as workers, intellectuals, artists, and scientists. The thesis in these novels is the same: If women are allowed to fully participate in society, and explore their mental talents without hindrance (in many feminist utopias, old and new, this means “without the presence of men”) then we would witness the birth not only of superior governmental and educational structures, but also of labor-saving science. Ladyland possesses abundant gardens and doesn’t burn coal because women in female-only universities “were able to draw water from the atmosphere and collect heat from the sun.” These technologies (carbon-neutral, I might add) power Ladyland’s entire civilization and also can be used to control the weather. In *Man’s Rights* we see “a wondrous machine that could cook, wash, and iron for hundreds of people at once” and in Mizora, we learn that “toil was unknown; the toil that we know, menial, degrading and harassing. Science had been the magician that had done away all that. Science, so formidable and austere to our untutored minds, had been gracious to these fair beings and opened the door to nature’s most occult secrets.” This is a central tenet of socialist scientific utopianism—when everyone is freed from wage labor and from the bigotry that blights their opportunities, then everyone who wants to can pursue science, and as a result technology will advance exponentially, creating further gains in labor-saving devices which will free up even more time to pursue scientific advancement. Stephen Jay Gould once wrote: “I am, somehow, less interested in the weight and convolutions of Einstein’s brain than in the near certainty that people of equal talent have lived and died in cotton fields and sweatshops.” Socialist scientific utopianism imagines the sort of world we would have if those talented people didn’t slave away and die after all, but were allowed to contribute to human civilization.

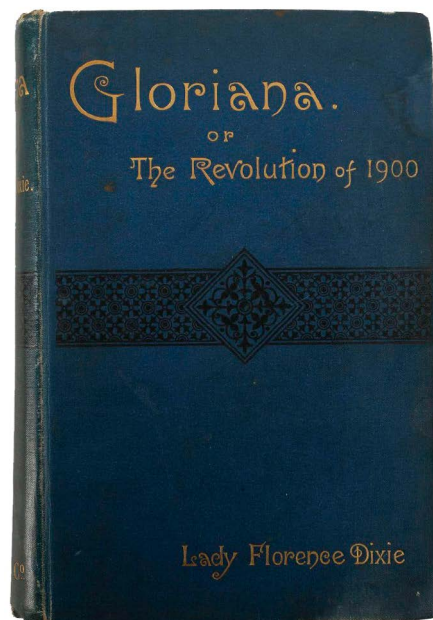
HERE IS OF COURSE A DARKER SIDE TO THE worship of limitless growth and scientific advancement if it happens to be coupled with the conviction of superior morality, which is another reason we shouldn’t misread older feminist utopias as literal policy guides. Older feminist utopias, as products of their time, are quite enthusiastic about eugenics. Theories of social hygiene common to the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> century held that every bad trait could be bred out of a population, and that certain traits were, of course, “naturally” more desirable than others.

This failure to engage with, in Lady Dixie’s terms, “the creation of laws false to Nature” means that most of the early feminist utopias have a significant race problem. All of the women in Mizora are blonde and blue-eyed; Herland, despite being located in Africa, contains only women of “Aryan stock” who, the narrator assures us, are still “white,” despite being “somewhat darker than our northern races because of their constant exposure to sun and air.” *Sultana’s Dream* is one of the few older feminist utopias I could find that was written

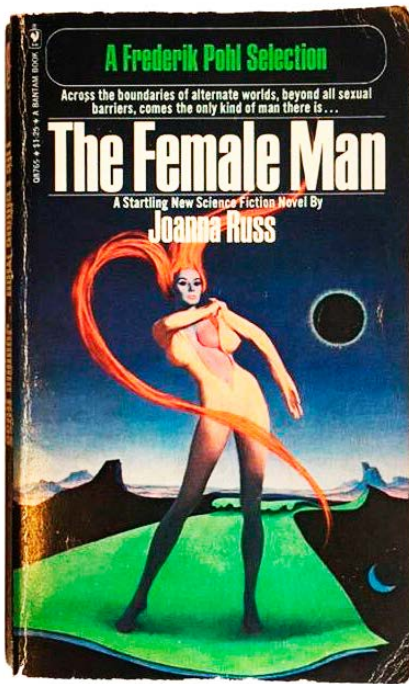
by a woman of color and/or included women of color; in most, the lush beauty and peace of the landscape is calmly predicated on white supremacy and eco-fascism. (This tendency is hauntingly referenced in N.K. Jemisin’s recent dystopian novel *The Stone Sky* (2017), which describes the history of an ancient, lovely, technologically advanced eco-utopia which, as it turns out, is wholly reliant on the horrific exploitation of a racial minority.)

Many of the older feminist utopias sound like delightful fantasies until you learn the price of their equality, which, being based on 19<sup>th</sup> century values, isn’t anything like equality at all. In Mizora, girls born with genetic defects are eliminated; in *New Amazonia* (1889) the mentally ill are poisoned. Due to its extra-heavy embrace of eugenics and surprisingly dark ending, *New Amazonia* is a particularly curious example of feminist utopian literature, and a harbinger of later developments to come. *New Amazonia*’s stranger-narrator is an Englishwoman who finds herself magically transported to the feminist utopian future. She’s accompanied by an Englishman of her own time, “the Honourable Augustus Fitz-Musicus,” a vain, self-satisfied blowhard who refuses to accept or understand the reality and the rules of the feminist future. For the most part, the Honorable Augustus serves as comic relief and ironic juxtaposition, but in the end, the seven-foot tall, entirely blonde residents of New Amazonia decide that his stubborn misogyny must be a symptom of insanity. The New Amazonians decide that he must be euthanized, causing the narrator to leave utopia with the Honorable Augustus. She does not decide, in fact, to kill one man, let alone all men. The utopian fantasy of life without men, or where women dominate men, is after all just a fantasy: The reality of the actual violence that would need to occur in order for such a world to exist ends up breaking the dream, and souring the joke.

Margaret Atwood tells us that “every dystopia contains a little utopia, and every utopia contains a little dystopia.” She coined a term for this interlocking tendency: ustopia. The ending of *New Amazonia* brings out the dystopia inherent in utopia; and *The End of This Day’s Business* (composed in the mid-1930s, not published until 1989) is an even better example. Written by the communist feminist Katharine Burdekin as fascism metastasized across Europe, *The End of This Day’s Business* imagined the death of fascism, and what came after. Burdekin wrote of an internationalist communism that was initially gender-equal, but in time the men grew to resent it, especially when women began to dominate leadership positions. Since the rise in masculinist power and violence was closely linked with a resurgent fascism, the women had no choice but to overthrow the men. “They were the Lords of Creation,” the protagonist Grania explains. “And if they hadn’t turned themselves into Lords of Destruction they might have kept their place.” Much of the book is devoted







to Grania attempting to explain the history and cruel structure of their world to her son, Neil. But poor Neil barely understands: In this civilization, men are the ones who are intellectually cut off, told they are hyper-emotional—subject to “male unreason”—and taught to be ashamed of their bodies. *The End of This Day's Business* isn't a satire, and there's nothing funny or pleasant about it. Grania, who is herself both physically and emotionally gender-nonconforming according to the standards of her society, has grown exhausted with

what she calls “this cold and reasonable female tyranny.” She lives in a global utopia of peace and plenty, and yet she can't endure it as long as it's based on strict, oppressive gender roles.

*The End of This Day's Business* accomplishes a two-fold mission. First, in the classic feminist utopian mode, it illuminates through ironic reversal how women's minds have been starved and mutilated to the point where they believe they can't do hard intellectual work, and are therefore assumed to be less intelligent than men as a matter of biology. As Grania tells her son:

[S]upposing...the infant psyche...is debarred by its sex from knowledge, skill and responsibility, all human joy, in fact, then it becomes yet more ashamed of its sex, more starved, more dulled in the brain, and shrinks from even the thought of those things which as a healthy human being it should be striving for all its life. If I were to say to you, now Neil come along and I'll teach you to pilot an airplane, or manage a power station as your Mother does, or I'll put you up next year as a representative on the Salisbury Council, you'd think me quite mad. Men couldn't do any of those, you'd say. It's not men's work.

WE SEE ARGUMENTS MADE TODAY that women drop out of STEM fields simply because women are biologically unsuited for science and mathematics, not because they commonly face harassment, presumptions of incompetence, and lack of support if they should become mothers. Brain studies are passed around showing that the male brain and the female brain are simply, fundamentally different, as if adult brains only represent a perfect state of nature and have never been shaped by experience. Grania, occupying an uneasy territory between genders, is aware of the way men's intelligence is deliberately manipulated and limited, and how damaging it is to be told “women are naturally like this, men are like that.” Neil would probably have been as fully capable and intelligent as his mother, if he'd had the training and the support. And that leads into the second

great achievement of *The End of This Day's Business*: After making a powerful ironic argument in favor of women's equality, it breaks feminist utopian convention by daring to take its female-dominated world *literally*, with full moral seriousness. What would #OppressAllMen look like? It would be, in fact, terrible. A world where one gender dominates another, with no room for fluidity or free expression, is not a world we feminists would actually want.

*The End of This Day's Business* isn't the only story of its kind. There's also the full-blown dystopian novelette by Ursula K. Le Guin “The Matter of Seggri” (1994) in which the women of a planet outnumber the men 16 to one, and the men are trapped within a rigid set of hypermasculine behavioral norms. Many of the sub-stories contained within “The Matter of Seggri” describe the men's loneliness, isolation, and misery, their desire for equality and love. (Of the most painful of these sub-stories, Le Guin said, “I have seldom disliked a story so much as I wrote it.”) Along similar lines, the dystopian novel *The Power* (2016) by Naomi Alderman gives us a scenario in which all women suddenly gain the ability to shoot lightning from their fingers, and therefore become the dominant gender. I recommend this book to pretty much every woman I meet; I think it perfectly captures first the feminist utopian impulse of “wouldn't it be satisfying if the tables were turned” (#ZapAllMen), and then, with aching realness, explores how awful that reversed gender oppression would be. Alderman makes it quite clear that, contra the Victorian morality of the early feminist utopias, women are not inherently more moral than men; we just have fewer opportunities to oppress. Should we suddenly become stronger than men, we would be just as despotic as they are, in both violent and subtle ways. *The Power* ends with a female character using the language of evolutionary psychology to explain why men are simply, naturally, the lesser sex, and deserve their lower status.

In the 1970s, the new wave of feminist utopian novels tended to ask what would happen if women weren't angels or tyrants, but simply allowed to live as people. Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* (1975) presents another women-only utopia in one of its four interconnected storylines. Russ' novel is a masterpiece of experimental psychological fiction, less about the reality of a world without men, and much more about the exploration of what it might be like to exist as a fully-realized female person. Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976)—also a psychological novel in many respects—features a utopia that may represent a genuinely possible future, or may be the fantasy of Connie Ramos, an impoverished and abused woman who has been unjustly confined in a mental institution. The racially diverse community of Mattapoisett that Connie Ramos visits—possibly in time-traveling reality, possibly just in her dreams—is a communal paradise of socialist gender equality. There are still people who consider themselves “male” or “female,” but everyone uses a gender-neutral pronoun “per” (derived from “person”), and there are no defined gender roles or gendered norms of appearance. Connie initially thinks of her guide Luciente as a man, partly because “Luciente spoke, she moved with that air of brisk unselfconscious authority Connie associated with men. Luciente sat down, taking up more space than women ever did.” In some ways, Luciente resembles the confident, short-haired, athletic women of Herland, but some people in her society are more conventionally feminine by our standards, while others are more conventionally masculine. Anyone in Luciente's Mattapoisett and in other associated communities can weep openly when they're sad; if they choose to raise children then they're called “mothers,” regardless of gender. All persons are encouraged to



pursue whichever studies excite them, to learn and grow communally. They have advanced technology, but also strong and evolving ethical standards, worked out in meetings and struggle sessions. It is, in short, a nearly ideal socialist-anarchist society, complete with all the minor resentments and personal dramas and treacherous annoyances that one would expect of even the most advanced civilization.

**M**ANY EARLY FEMINIST UTOPIAS INCLUDING *Gloriana*, *New Amazonia*, and *Sultana's Dream* are framed as dreams, but by refusing to definitively state if Connie is crazy or not, Piercy argues for a possible realization of her vision. The older feminist utopias were effectively *only* dreams, flourishing out of frustration and despair, not meant to be taken literally. *Woman on the Edge of Time*, however, can be read as a possible intimation of things to come. By abolishing the tyranny of gender, while simultaneously allowing everyone to practice whatever gendered behavior suits them, Piercy also hits upon what a real feminist utopia can look like—not like the unrealizable and (frankly undesirable) fantasy of a world without men, or a world where women dominate men, but a community in which no Einstein lives and dies in cotton fields, or is limited by sexual harassment, constant undermining, and unsupported parenthood.

A future utopian society need not copy Piercy's model exactly, and there is no sense in which *Woman on the Edge of Time* is intended as some sort of rigid roadmap. But the novel opens up the possibility of feminist utopia as more than an empty wish. Ursula K. Le Guin too wrote a number of utopias that can be called feminist, mostly in the sense that men and women enjoy unquestioned full equality. But Le Guin examined utopia further in her spectacular essay "A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be" (1983), in which she attempts to imagine a civilization that isn't just gender-equal, but also based on more feminine modes of being. Even approaching this concept is difficult, and as she writes, she has to examine and reject masculine assumptions along the way:

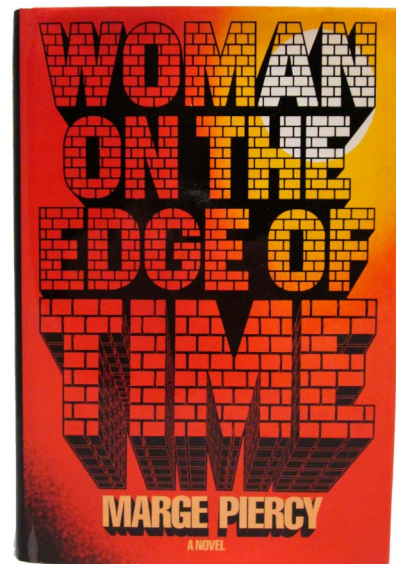
*Non-European, non-euclidean, non-masculinist: they are all negative definitions, which is all right, but tiresome; and the last is unsatisfactory, as it might be taken to mean that the utopia I'm trying to approach could only be imagined by women—which is possible—or only inhabited by women—which is intolerable. Perhaps the word I need is yin...What would a yin utopia be? It would be dark, wet, obscure, weak, yielding, passive, participatory, circular, cyclical, peaceful, nurturant, retreating, contracting, and cold.*

"Yin" in Le Guin's terms and in Taoist terms doesn't mean feminine in some gender-essentializing sense (women are like this, men are like that), but refers to tendencies that have long been associated with (and dismissed) as feminine. The ability to cry, and to comfort, and to empathize rather than resort to heated violence. These are not "women's qualities" in any natural or biological sense; they are everybody's qualities. Le Guin openly does not desire a utopia inhabited only by women—it would be "intolerable". But she wants yin to finally have its day. A society based on these principles would resemble Grania's hopes in *The End of this Day's Business*, when she tries to picture what would come after the end of the world unfairly controlled by women. "[T]here would be at last the classless society without sex-antagonism, and we don't know at all what it would be like. Only right, somehow. Not emotional and cruel. Not reasonable and dull. Happy, we suppose, and nearer to the full feeling of God."

So then #NotAllUtopias want to #KillAllMen, and in fact, none of them really, seriously, literally do. The worlds-without-men—or without men's equality—represent a symbolic negative, while the worlds with gender equality represent the possibly achievable. One type is written out of anger, despair, and a desire for recognition; the other is written from hope, as an earnest working-out of what could be. All utopias, regardless of these categories, are small and bounded, difficult to reach. Mattapoisett in *Woman on the Edge of Time* is either a dream or a vision of 2137; *The End of this Day's Business* takes place in the year 6250; Herland is found in an undiscovered region of Africa; most of the other utopian novels are dreams. Utopia is always a difficult place to find. Usually the narrator slips through the gap in realities, observes, and returns home to a lesser place. But it isn't impossible to imagine that we could someday reach a more yin-heavy world, if it would, probably, be an ambiguous utopia (which is the subtitle of Le Guin's novel *The Dispossessed*) or a constantly evolving and sometimes frustrating place like Piercy's Mattapoisett.

One of the common mistakes that liberal critics of utopian fiction tend to make is to smugly point out that utopia is, by definition, impossible. (The term, as coined by Thomas More, means "no place".) As Adam Gopnik says of utopias in the *New Yorker*, "The sensible lesson one might draw...is that the human condition is one in which the distribution of bad and good is forever in flux, and so any blueprint of perfection is doomed to failure." (The sensible lesson one might draw from liberalism is that the distribution of human freedom under capitalism is forever unequal, so mere fiddly adjustments to the status quo are doomed to immiserate millions of people forever). Any utopia that, like the early feminist utopias, operates on the ground of complete moral certitude and a belief in rigid gender identities is, naturally, doomed, which is why it's rather good that the early feminist utopias can't work and weren't intended as literal blueprints. Women are not, in fact, naturally more moral and virtuous than men. We're quite capable of equivalent horrors, as Naomi Alderman shows us in *The Power*—we just aren't usually in positions where we can exercise as much murderous authority.

This is why it's so repellant when liberals praise women for rising to the top echelons of the military industrial complex: the gender of the person who tortures a captive is utterly irrelevant. We didn't slay the angel in the house just to replace her with a lady CIA officer in a flak jacket, cool shades, and a cattle prod. But by examining the promise of some of the 70s feminist utopias, with their emphasis on gender-equality, gender-fluidity, and principles of kindness and nurturing that have too long been considered the exclusive domain of women, we may start to imagine a future that is possibly more than a dream, even as it originates from the realm of fiction. As Marge Piercy once wrote: "it is by imagining what we truly desire that we begin to go there." ✦









# unbearable lightness

## *A Tech CEO's Diary of Personal Growth, Mindful Self-Humbling, and Blameless Eating...*

BY EMMA DEL VALLE

AS THE CEO AND CREATOR OF ONE OF THE LARGEST and most influential companies on Earth, I am well aware of the unique power I hold. I strive to be conscious of my privilege, to interrogate my own biases, and to grow as a person in step with the discourse. In keeping with my commitment to bettering the world, I long ago resolved to start by bettering myself. I now want to invite my followers into the process, so that they can understand me, empathize with me, and perhaps, in their own small ways, emulate me—and in doing so, effect global change in a way I can feel good about. Or, bad about. At this point in my journey I am seeking extreme emotions of any kind.

Self-improvement is a marathon, not a sprint, except during fasts, which are a form of spiritual sprint undertaken by the stomach and mind working in tandem to become enlightened as efficiently as possible. Here I will lay out one day in my life, with consideration given to the days surrounding it, and their part in contributing to the events of the day in question. I hope you find the details of this account applicable to your totally equally important life.

11:59 PM

I begin my days the night before, with a period of pre-day modified rest that is not to be confused with traditional sleep. I do not have a bedroom. Since I have adopted modified rest, I have not needed one. During modified rest I lie uncovered on the floor or ground in various areas of my compound, sometimes outdoors, and have my Rest Assistant supervise and facilitate a series of disturbances at regular intervals. These disturbances include loud noises, animals, human assailants, and vehicles driving close to my sleeping body. I find that the heightened awareness imparted to me by this process carries into the day and makes me a more creative problem solver.

5:00 AM

My modified rest ends at dawn. My yoga instructor is already waiting for me on the yoga pavilion for one-on-one instruction. I know that this part of my routine may not be accessible to everyone—however, I am aware through my employees that there are yoga instructors who administer to groups of as many as five, making classes efficient and affordable. In fact, this group system would be my first choice if I weren't diagnosed with

an acute fear of being assassinated during yoga class specifically. In my personal sessions, my yoga instructor and I are able to work together to help me achieve true selflessness.

5:45 AM

I have moved away from showering after discovering how harmful it is to the planet. A washcloth shower does the trick—it preserves the microbial balance of my various biomes, and alleviates the danger of slipping and falling in the bathroom, which I have become afraid of. Used washcloths are incinerated to prevent my DNA being gathered from them. That is not to say I don't trust my staff—I simply do not trust that someone might not infiltrate my staff in order to gather my DNA. Before incinerating the washcloth I wring out the water and drink it. This will sustain me until the afternoon.

5:55 AM

I put on my black unisex calf-length turtlenecked day tunic—the less I have to think about my outfits, the more time I have to think about work.

6:00 AM

I ride my HyperCarriage to the office. It is a prototype for my larger-scale private subway project. I feel that every CEO should be their own guinea pig. My HyperCarriage can cover the distance between the undisclosed location where I live and the office in 25 minutes. In that time, I follow up on emails. I find it is helpful to be concise and positive in my responses to my colleagues. If they send me a progress report saying they do not believe a benchmark is possible, I simply say: “Do it anyway.” In this way I have inspired them to go above and beyond, and have achieved the highest employee turnover rate in the industry.

6:25 AM

I arrive at HQ. I squat-walk to my office with my noise-cancelling headphones on. There are some employees who have gotten there before me—I both appreciate their initiative and resent them so deeply that I taste blood in my mouth. I will promote them, but I will make them travel for no reason to the point where their personal lives fall apart. But what if they don't have personal lives? How can I engineer it so they can find



happiness, only to lose it in pursuit of success? I think about this in my office for 35 minutes during free-form meditation time.

7:00 AM

I break my speech-fast by verbally communicating for the first time that day with my executive team for our morning brainstorm, which typically lasts for two to five hours. During this time my colleagues are encouraged to speak honestly with me, without inhibition or concern for stultifying power structures. I request that each employee stand in front of the group and say to my face something that they feel I am doing wrong, either professionally or personally. At these meetings I end up firing at least two people.

11:00 AM

A magazine is doing a profile of me and the once-in-a-generation vision that my company embodies. I am therefore roped into doing a photo shoot with Annie Leibovitz. I insisted on a modest approach, so we have agreed to 12 insanely, upsettingly close-up photographs of my face.

12:00 PM

I leave the office to begin the afternoon's self-improvements, newly recentered by the morning's appraisals. I do not check emails or any other communications on the ride back to my home, choosing instead to hum at the exact same vibrational frequency as my carriage as it rockets down the tunnel.

12:35 PM

I take a phone call with Bill Clinton.

12:45 PM

I watch a Jordan Peterson lecture.

1:00 PM

I check back in at the office by reading the keystroke logs of my employees.

2:00 PM

I eat one mung bean with my Ativan, reluctantly. So many in the world have no mung beans at all. It would be more enlightened if I were to not eat the mung bean, like so many millions of less fortunate people do every day. However, I need to take my medicine with food.

2:30 PM

After mindfully digesting the mung bean, I feel energized and refocused. It is time to take a phone call with someone whose identity I cannot disclose publicly.

3:00 PM

It is time to take another phone call that I cannot explain further.

3:30 PM

I check InfoWars.

3:45 PM

I turn on the garbage disposal so I can perform Tantric Screaming without the house staff coming in to ask me what's wrong. I scream whether or not I am upset because it is essential for clearing the system of stress before it metastasizes and becomes a distraction, which is counterproductive. I have asked the household staff to not check on me when I do Tantric Screaming, but they insist that I sound like I'm gravely injured, and it would be irresponsible for them not to investigate. I resent that they know so much about me.

4:00 PM

I look at my household staff's personal profiles on their various social media and banking websites.

4:30 PM

It is time to check my household security cameras.

5:00 PM

I eat an olive, mindful of the many who cannot eat an olive.

5:15 PM

I go back for one more olive.

5:30 PM

I read an article about a problem in the world from the dossier of articles about problems in the world that my assistant assembles for me. This article is about homelessness in the city I live close to. I am upset by this—I asked my assistant to stop including this issue in the dossiers. Nonetheless I decide to make it my evening's subject of Structured Problem Solving Time.

6:00 PM

I pace the floor of my focused meditation room contemplating how I can be of greater service to the world through the specific issue of homelessness, however distasteful I find the subject. After some very serious pondering I decide that I am not qualified to fix this problem, and I should instead allocate resources to people who have experience dealing with it.

6:15 PM

I donate two million dollars to the city's police.

6:30 PM

My partner and I have dinner reservations at 8:00 at a small farm-to-table sushi restaurant on an uncharted island off the coast of Big Sur. If I'm going to make it in time I should leave now. I do not like eating out—I find it wasteful, especially when there is a private chef here at the house. But my partner insists and we contractually cannot separate until 2021.

7:45 PM

I wake up as the jet is landing. The flight attendant is watching me with an inscrutable look on her face. What does she think of me? What kind of thoughts do people like that even have? I throw up bitterly in my thermos of ionized cayenne water on the way to the restaurant.

8:00 PM

The less said about dinner the better. I find restaurants tacky and that level of conspicuous consumption immoral. Eating seafood is unsustainable. Climate change is one of my key issues and is a matter of concern to me personally. The bunker I have had built in preparation for it is claustrophobic and I don't like the idea of having to live there.

9:00 PM

I fly back alone. I can't stop staring at the flight attendant. Where did she go to college? I bet she is one of those people who goes online and talks about having me publicly executed. I make a note to fire her.

10:00 PM

I decompress in my hot salt water pool. Of all the luxuries in my life, this pool is my favorite. When I'm here, I forget everything.

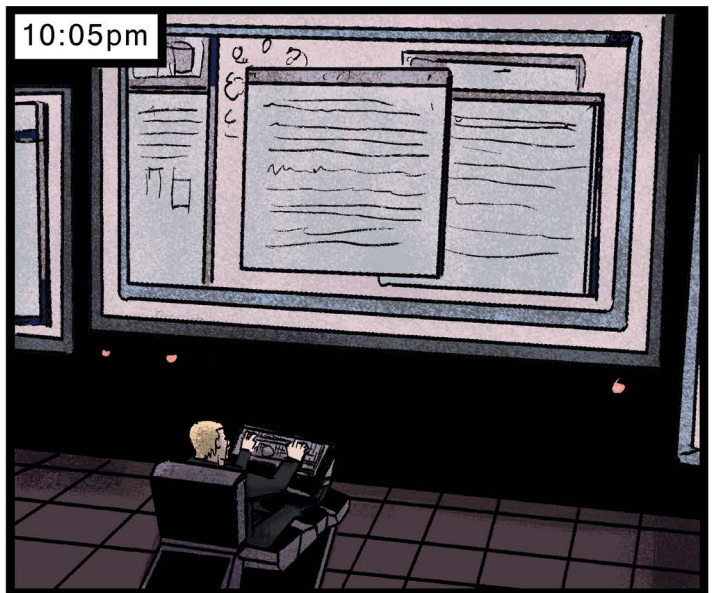
10:05 PM

I remember something my CTO mentioned about productivity numbers in Cambodia and I now have an idea for how we can turn disappointment into opportunity there. I leave the pool and spend the rest of the evening sending concise and positive emails.

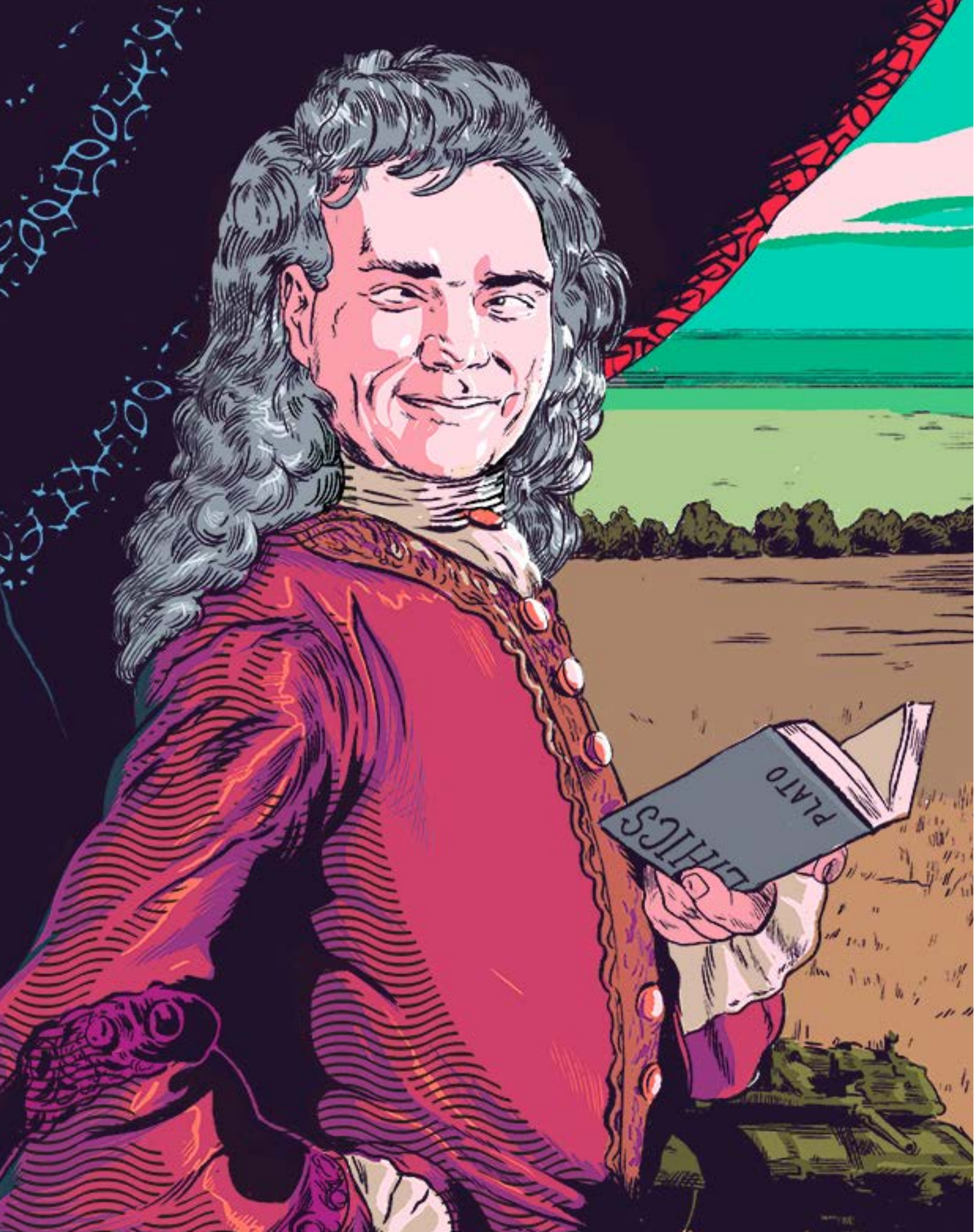
1:30 AM

I begin modified rest. Another day finished—millions more to go.











# THE SHAPIRO HISTORY OF THE WEST

by Daniel Walden

**I**N THE FIRST CHAPTER OF BEN SHAPIRO'S *The Right Side of History*, he writes about his wife asking him, during a particularly stressful time in both of their professional lives, if he is happy, and answering that yes, of course he is. He then muses on when he is most happy:

*"Formulated like that, the question became easy: on Sabbath. Every week, I drop everything for twenty-five hours. As an Orthodox Jew, I celebrate the Sabbath, which means that my phone and television are off-limits. No work. No computer. No news. No politics. A full day, plus an hour, to spend with my wife and children and parents, with my community. The outside world disappears. It's the high point of my life. There is no greater happiness than sitting with my wife, watching the kids play with (and occasionally fight with) each other, a book open on my lap."*

I like this answer a great deal: it reveals a person who has some idea of what the most important things in life are, of what keeps us human. I would very much like to believe that Shapiro is giving an honest answer, and I wish he had not written a book that made me ask whether this touching moment was not just one more cheap rhetorical prop.

*The Right Side of History* sets out to explain Western civilization's unique intellectual and political contributions to humanity and the ways in which Western thought can show us how to find happiness. (Note: I do not believe that "Western civilization" is a useful way to organize our thinking and conversation, and I have written about why I believe it ultimately harmful. My use of "the West" in this review is an attempt to discuss the work on its own terms.) Shapiro defines his terms from the outset: "Happiness is moral purpose." He also defines what he sees as the two pillars of Western thought: the rever-

ence for a transcendent God originating in Jewish tradition, and the use of human reason whose origin he traces to Greece. The pairing of Athens and Jerusalem is an old one, dating back to the Christian theologian Tertullian in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. But where Tertullian asked: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" and sought to keep religious devotion free of the elaborate speculations that characterized Greek philosophy, Shapiro considers these traditions ultimately complementary to one another, despite acknowledging their tension. I think that he dramatically overstates his case: indeed, he passes over the profound tensions *within* the two religious and philosophical traditions, imparting to each a degree of certainty that they do not claim, and ultimately conveying a picture far less interesting and satisfying than these rich traditions deserve.

**S**HAPIRO BEGINS HIS SURVEY WITH THE JEWISH religious tradition, and here he stands on firm intellectual ground: he obviously knows the Biblical and Talmudic material well, and this is reflected in his discussion of the substantive meanings of extended passages of text. Do not expect this to continue.

Even this section, however, is marred by Shapiro's constant equivocation on "progress." He considers the idea of God to be necessary for an idea of historical progress: without a singular God, "there could be no vision of a progression in history, an inexorable movement toward a better time or Messianic era." This would be an ideal point at which to bring out the fraught relationship between religious messianism and historical progress: his own Jewish intellectual tradition has developed some of the most insightful and sophisticated thinking on this deeply difficult question. Gershom Scholem, the 20th century's great scholar of Jewish mysticism, sums up this tension in his essay "Toward

Ben Shapiro, **The Right Side of History: How Reason and Moral Purpose Made the West Great**, Broadside Books (288pp., \$27.99)



an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism”:

*“The Bible and the apocalyptic writers know of no progress in history leading to the redemption. The redemption is not the product of immanent developments such as we find in modern Western re-interpretations of Messianism...It is rather transcendence breaking in upon history, an intrusion in which history itself perishes, transformed in its ruin because it is struck by a beam of light shining into it from an outside source.”*

And further:

*“[The apocalypticists’] optimism, their hope, is not directed to what history will bring forth, but to that which will arise in its ruin, free at last and undisguised.”*

The tension, then, is between human beings living in history and anticipating the coming of the Messianic age on the one hand, and on the other, the Messianic moment as a breaking of history, a moment that cannot be “anticipated” in a normal sense because it lies totally outside of what we think of as “history.” This very same tension is also explored in one of the great plays of the 20th century, *Angels in America*, by the American Jewish playwright Tony Kushner.

But Shapiro elects not to explore any of this rich history, because his book is written for an audience whose worldview has been shaped mostly by American Protestant Christianity. In order to appeal to them, he resorts, as have so many right-wing pundits, to talking about something called “Judeo-Christian belief.” This elision of the differences between Christianity and Judaism is normally deployed by Christians, not Jews, and I was at first interested to see what sorts of intellectual maneuvers this might involve. In fact, as discussed later, it involves nothing more for Shapiro than the age-old trick of speaking very confidently about things he knows nothing about. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in not having done the reading.

**A**FTER THIS MIXED BUT SLIGHTLY PROMISING start, Shapiro’s book begins a steep decline reflected in my own increasingly angry marginal annotations, which finally devolved into written representations of my own screams. He turns next to the other partner in this purported marriage between Jerusalem and Athens, at which point his substantive command of the material gives its notice and absconds with the cutlery.

Shapiro’s knowledge of Greek philosophy seems to consist of half-remembered snippets from his undergraduate years, marred further by the Procrustean mutilations and bald ignorance of several generations of right-wing opinion jockeys who made lucrative careers out of pretending to have read these books more than once. He blithely assumes, for example, that Plato’s *Republic* lays out his plan for organizing a society, when the text itself makes plain that this ideal city is nothing more than a device for examining the human soul to see how justice operates. When he does cite genuine authorities, namely the philosophers Leo Strauss and Allan Bloom, he misconstrues their arguments into tawdry libertarian

pabulum: their serious and provocative reflections on the gulf between philosophy and politics pass through the alchemical fire of Shapiro’s ignorance and emerge as warnings about the danger of collective governance. He describes their work as “suggesting that Plato’s entire scheme was at least partially facetious, an attempt to prove the unworkability of full communitarian control.” His footnoted source for this, it bears mentioning, is not Strauss’s *The City and Man* or Bloom’s interpretive essay that introduces his famous translation of the *Republic*, but rather a 2013 article in *First Things* magazine, which is an excellent authority to cite if you would like to justify the forcible kidnapping of Jewish children, but is a less eminent authority when it comes to debates on Platonic irony.

Shapiro’s most infuriating contortion of antiquity is his habit of treating ancient political thought as an undifferentiated mass, even to the point of inventing such thought out of whole cloth. He frequently alludes to “Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics” when speaking about conceptions of the state, and in particular about the role of the state in cultivating a virtuous citizenry. There is a significant problem here, which is that Stoicism is among the most straightforwardly anti-political philosophical schools ever to exist. There is no Stoic political thought: Stoicism sees no role whatsoever for the state in cultivating virtue, because virtue consists in living according to reason, no matter one’s worldly position. Its most famous exponents were Epictetus, a slave, and Marcus Aurelius, an emperor of Rome, and it has recently become popular among Silicon Valley tech elites: its purely personal focus is key to its enduring popularity. Perhaps this conflation is mere ignorance on Shapiro’s part, but if you are going to make a particular set of theories foundational to your argument, it is usually helpful to know something about them.

After the Greeks, Shapiro moves on to Christianity, whose primary use in his book is as an ingredient in something called “Judeo-Christian values” or “Judeo-Christian belief,” a powerful amalgamation of Judaism and Christianity whose primary characteristic is its ability to be whatever is most convenient at the moment for Ben Shapiro. For example, he contends that “the Nazis rejected Judeo-Christian values and Greek natural law, and they shoved children into gas chambers.” I wonder how “Judeo-Christian values” managed to be entirely absent from the Nazi regime when most of the soldiers in both the army and the SS remained Christians throughout the war; at the same time, Shapiro wants us to believe that the ideology of the Declaration of Independence is “supplied by a Judeo-Christian tradition of meaning and value, and a Greek tradition of reason,” despite its author Thomas Jefferson’s having been a staunch Deist who denied the possibility of miracles. This is part of the miraculous flexibility of “Judeo-Christian values,” which can be present or absent as Shapiro wishes, without regard for the presence of actual Judaism or Christianity. Christianity in particular seems to be difficult for Shapiro to locate in history, possibly because he does not know what it is: if he did, his description of Christian doctrine would not include statements already condemned as heresy prior to the Council of Nicaea, such as characterizing Jesus as a “spiritual” and not a “material” savior, a position which



was condemned by Irenaeus, Augustine, and other Fathers of the Church in their repudiations of Gnosticism. Shapiro is also not even slightly aware of the highly embodied and fleshly character of Christian spirituality throughout most of the world, in forms ranging from miracle-working icons in Russia and apparitions of the Virgin Mary in grilled cheese sandwiches to bleeding hosts and ever-liquefying saint's blood. He neglects these things, I think, not out of well-meaning ignorance, but because he appears to have no interest in Christianity except as something that "spread the fundamental principles of Judaism," according to his own judgment of what is fundamental.

But "Judeo-Christian" plays another role in Shapiro's story, less because of what it includes than what (and whom) it excludes. Shapiro's history of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim animus is well-documented: I would refer readers to Nathan J. Robinson's extensive profile of Shapiro for this magazine. (Highlights include Shapiro tweeting: "Arabs like to bomb crap and live in open sewage.") It is also not surprising that someone talking about Western civilization would attempt to exclude Muslims from the picture. Islam has long represented a menacing "other" against which Europeans and their descendants have defined themselves, from the Crusades, which form the founding mythology of this "opposition" between Europeans and Muslims, to Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, which posited different "civilizations" of the world along ethno-religious lines, to contemporary alt-right memes about the 1683 Siege of Vienna, which decisively halted the westward expansion of the Ottoman Empire. Friends who work in theology and religious studies have confirmed to me that "Judeo-Christian" is not an accepted term in academic religious studies precisely because it is inaccurate: work on a shared tradition of monotheism and shared historico-religious figures generally demands the inclusion of Islam under the term "Abrahamic religions." But *The Right Side of History* is a book about a very narrow and idiosyncratic vision of Western civilization held by someone who deeply despises Muslim and Arab people, and Shapiro's delicate historical fantasy is far too precious to be subjected to vulgar demands for "professionalism" or "basic respect for standards."

**J**UST HOW IDIOSYNCRATIC THIS VISION IS TAKES several chapters to unfold, and details would be both superfluous and exhausting. In brief, Shapiro sees the Enlightenment as a double-edged sword, in that it gave rise to individualism and explicitly elevated the pursuit of science, but also gave rise to atheism and widespread secularization. Rather than contend with the complex

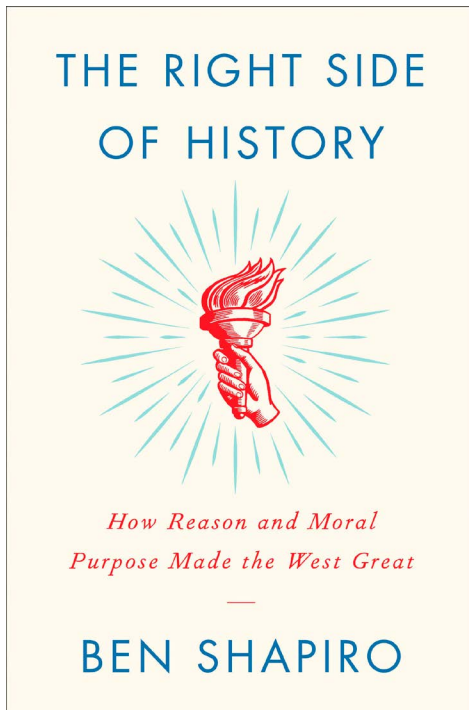
network of ideas and events that make up the Enlightenment, he opts to separate it into the "European Enlightenment" and the "American Enlightenment," which are respectively interchangeable with "the bad Enlightenment" and "the good Enlightenment." (Note: literally no reputable scholar of the Enlightenment uses these terms in this way.) Shapiro uses this distinction to write a hagiography of the American founding, characterizing it as "the greatest experiment in human progress and liberty ever devised by the mind of man" and "the best that men have done, and the best that men will do in setting a philosophic framework for human happiness." This is the buried lede in Shapiro's story: that Western civilization is valuable insofar as it gave rise to the United States, and that the United States, at its founding, was not only the greatest expression of Western values to date, but their greatest

possible expression in any era.

This claim would require an alarming amount of evidence if a person were interested in seriously defending it, yet Shapiro does not bother citing even a fellow right-wing pundit to support himself here. Fortunately, Shapiro and those in his line of work, to borrow from A. E. Housman, "need not seriously consider what they say, because they are addressing an audience whose intelligence is despicable and whose hearts are won already; and they use pretexts which nobody would venture to put forward in any other case." This is, in short, not a book written to defend the notion of America's greatness, but rather to supply suitably infantile historical delusions to people unwilling to entertain the idea that America could ever be defined by anything else.

My quotation of Housman above may have been somewhat heavy-handed, but in my defense, I have shown *Current Affairs* readers the merest shadow of what I experienced in Shapiro's

ham-fisted abuse of his sources, his reader, and English prose. As I noted earlier, when he has command of the source material, as he does of Jewish religious texts, he is able to discuss substantial excerpts with reasonable care. When he does not have command of the material, as with virtually every other subject in this book, he resorts to mere snippets, cited in the most irritating possible style. Nearly every quotation is introduced with "As X writes" or a variation thereof, and each seems to be chosen not so much for its ability to illuminate a point as for the mere presence of authority in the weave of Shapiro's argument. "As Harry Jaffa of the Claremont Institute wrote, 'It is difficult to imagine a more forthright Aristotelianism in either Hooker or Aquinas,'" Shapiro quotes of John Locke, padding his source's dubious claim with an institutional affiliation that looks fine on paper, until one remembers that the Claremont Institute was founded by four of Jaffa's own students, is unaffiliated with Claremont-McKenna College despite having





chosen a deliberately similar name, and seeks “to restore the principles of the American Founding to their rightful, preeminent authority in our national life,” all of which, if disclosed, might lead attentive readers or precocious twelve-year-olds to question Jaffa’s credibility.

**B**UT THE MOST SERIOUS SIN OF SHAPIRO’S BOOK is not its loose regard for intellectual history. In chapter 9, “The Return to Paganism,” Shapiro traces what he frames as the dissolution of the American commitment to reason in the contemporary era. Symptomatic of this, he claims, is our willingness to give transgender people the basic courtesy of referring to them by the names and pronouns that they have chosen. This is one of his most frequent appeals to “logic,” which is a word that Shapiro uses to mean not “deriving a conclusion from premises with a valid chain of reasoning,” but rather “coming to the same conclusions as Ben Shapiro.” His sneering characterization of “unreasonable” people is one of the most telling passages in the entire book:

*“Reason, in fact, is insulting. Reason suggests that one person can know better than another, that one person’s perspective can be more correct than someone else’s. Reason is intolerant. Reason demands standards. Better to destroy reason than abide by its dictates.”*

These are not the words of someone committed to reason out of a passionate love for the truth, as Plato would wish, nor out of a commitment to human excellence, as Aristotle encourages. Reason, for Shapiro, seems to be nothing more than an instrument for domination, an arena for reassuring himself and others that he is better and worthier than they. This lies at the root of Shapiro’s incessant concern with transgender people: as a professed libertarian, he ought to let them refer to themselves however they like, but his petty cruelty is only satisfied when he can weaponize “reason” against a vulnerable minority’s desire to be left in peace.

It is fitting, then, that the villains of this piece are the 20th century’s most notable critics of reason-as-domination, the philosophers of the Frankfurt School. Shapiro introduces them as “a group of German intellectuals,” and at this point a knowledgeable reader will be alarmed. This is not a false characterization, but it skips over the fact that Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, and their fellows were nearly all German Jews who were forced to flee Germany due to the Nuremberg Laws. This is not necessarily an objectionable omission in itself, although Shapiro’s habit of impugning the Jewish identities of his political opponents is well documented: he refers to Jewish supporters of the Democratic Party as “JINOs” (Jews In Name Only), and characterizes anti-Zionist Jews as “fake Jews.” This is contemptible in itself, but Shapiro goes further: in the Frankfurt School’s critical theory, “suspicious of the very categories of better, useful, appropriate, productive, and valuable, as those are understood in our present order,” Shapiro finds the origins of all of the academic and cultural bugbears of the right. “It is no coincidence,” he writes, “that various forms of university study dedicated to various alleged victim groups—black studies, Jewish studies, LGBT studies—all find a home under the ‘criti-

cal studies’ rubric.” In particular, he contends that with the publication of Herbert Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*, “the roots of sexual liberation, victim politics, and political correctness had been laid.” By focusing on “self-esteem,” the New Left, whom Shapiro describes as “advocates of the Frankfurt School,” “could overturn reliance on Judeo-Christian religion, Greek teleology, and capitalism.”

This is not a new idea. The accusation that the Frankfurt School is responsible for the degradation of American civilization is a well-worn canard of American paleoconservatism, banded about as “cultural Marxism” by former presidential candidate and noted anti-Semite Pat Buchanan in his 2002 book *The Death of the West*. It is a more specific iteration of the much older allegation that foreign Jewish intellectuals poison America (or Europe, or the West in general) with dangerous ideas that weaken the social fabric and threaten to bring about social collapse. Contemporary conservatives often use “cultural Marxism” to refer to a broad range of conspiracy theories, though most of their accusations remain focused on academia and retain anti-Semitic overtones.

Shapiro has done the reverse of this by retaining all the specificity of the term’s original use while avoiding its name. I do not know what Shapiro intends by this, or why the editors at Broadside allowed it to remain, but the facts stand thus: Ben Shapiro has effaced the Jewish identities of a group of intellectuals persecuted for their Jewishness by the Nazis, and has subsequently tarred them with a flatly anti-Semitic accusation. In any book, this would be appalling; in a book by someone who has himself faced anti-Semitic attacks and who positions himself as someone unafraid to call out anti-Semitism on both the right and left, it is utterly beneath contempt. To top it off, Shapiro’s epilogue assures the reader that the West can be saved if we raise our children right. “What God asks of us, what our ancestors ask of us, and our civilization asks of us, is not only that we become defenders of valuable and eternal truths, but that we train our children to become defenders of those truths as well.” Lest anyone mistake his point: “If we wish for our civilization to survive...we must be willing to teach our children. The only way to protect *their* children is to make warriors of our own children.”

Shapiro is adamant that he is not a fascist. He is, however, fluent in and comfortable with the fascist rhetorical register of demographic crisis and civilizational warfare. He delights in treating despised minorities in the way that fascists do. The sole virtue of Shapiro’s book is that it does not even attempt to hide this, because its author has deluded himself into believing that he has nothing to hide. The picture that he paints in his first chapter, with his children playing and Shapiro reading contentedly with his wife in the living room, is entirely believable: his powers of self-deception are such that one can imagine he would be able to rationalize God’s own judgment against him as the fruit of a left-wing conspiracy. Moral certainty is perhaps the most dangerous of all attitudes: there has never been a righteous person who believed in their own righteousness, and all of the worst monsters believe themselves to be saints. ✚





Tweets

4,294

Following

31

Followers

2.58M

Likes

119

Moments

3

Follow

CIA

@CIA

We are the Nation's first line of defense. We accomplish what others cannot accomplish and go where others cannot go.

Langley, VA

cia.gov

Joined February 2014

Born September 18, 1947

Tweet to CIA



1,410 Photos and Videos



Awcute-o Beanochet

General Meownuel Nyanriega



Mewbutu Sassy Sweeto

Meowhamed nom Salmon

Tweets

Tweets & replies

Media

CIA

@CIA

10m

it's important to light candles (^\_<^>) and take time out for urself^ - ^ when ur executing/torturing a Central American freedom fighter ^\_-□ /

CIA

@CIA

2h

☀️ coups ☀️ are ☀️ self-care ☀️ you have to take care of your nation's interests first before you can take care of the interests of others!

CIA

@CIA

4h

IT'S NOT MY JOB TO EDUCATE U

Rashad's Father

@rashadsfather

10 hr

please sir, my son disappeared mysteriously 3 days ago. what have you done with him

CIA

@CIA

10h

You've met CIA Librarian Molly Hale, now meet the newest addition to our cast of imaginary women employees! Introducing: Psyche, the sexy psychotropic drug we give to blackboxed inmates!



CIA

@CIA

12h

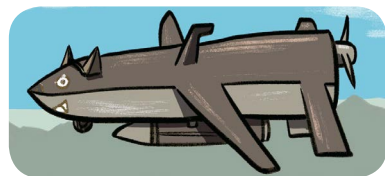
Venezuela is #cancelled

CIA

@CIA

14hrs

HERE COMES A CHONKY BOI



CIA

@CIA

20hrs

sometimes you get to feelin sad and down in the deeps of ur ownselfand then u remember u have friends who let you set up black sites anywhere ❤️❤️❤️

CIA

@CIA

24hrs

It's a purrfect day to meet some of the feline friends of our hardworking agents! They love hanging out at the CIA—or should we say, CI-Play!



Who to fo



Find people

Trends f

#EarthDay

Stunning ima Earth Day

#Impeach

Steven Crow

Pat Tillma

Rememberin anniversary c

Cain

Herman Cain







# a chat with CHOMSKY

*For over fifty years, NOAM CHOMSKY has been one of the world's foremost public intellectuals. Current Affairs editor NATHAN J. ROBINSON recently spoke with Chomsky at his office in Tucson, Arizona. The text has been cut down and lightly edited for clarity. Transcript by ADDISON KANE.*

**NATHAN J. ROBINSON:** Hello! Nice to talk to you, finally.

**NOAM CHOMSKY:** Very good to see you.

**NJR:** We've corresponded a bit.

**NC:** Yes, and I've been reading you for a long time.

**NJR:** And you were kind enough to forward a couple of my articles to a couple of people who inquired on your opinions of Jordan Peterson.

**NC:** That's one of the things I send out more than anything else—sitting on a special place on my computer, so I can get it right away.

**NJR:** To avoid the agonizing task of having to go through his work and dissect it.

*What I wanted to actually talk to you about today was academia and universities, because one of the reasons that I wrote that—and his rise kind of disturbed me—was I looked at the main book he wrote, and it was just sort of gobbledygook, yet he's a tenured professor at the University of Toronto, a person who has academic credentials and accolades. The book was blurred by the chair of the Harvard Psychology Department, and perhaps I'm not cynical enough, but that strikes me as rather strange that people rise to the top of academia who seem to be saying things that I find to be nonsensical. You don't find that strange, but I do think that's inherently strange.*

**NC:** How much time have you spent in the academic world?

**NJR:** Yeah, but shouldn't that be weird?

**NC:** Spend some time there and you'll be disabused of this illusion.

**NJR:** It is odd to me, though. I mean, you have spent 60, 70 years in universities now, and do you think that a substantial portion of what is done in these places is just a waste of time or is empty nonsense?

**NC:** First of all, there's very serious work done. So I think the universities are probably the best institutions in our society, so I'm going to be critical, but we should recognize the value. They are unique. They're the one place where you do really have some de-

gree of openness and ability to question and pursue your own interests and concerns. There is nothing really comparable. On the other hand, some of the things that happen are unbelievable. So I'll just give you an example. In the 1960s, I was at MIT. I started teaching undergraduate courses on my own time, on social and political issues. It's not what I was hired for, so I used my own time. Good classes. Lots of students came. It was quite interesting. My co-instructor and I once—this must have been '68 or so—decided to assign Henry Kissinger's book, which had just appeared, on American foreign policy. This was quite an experience. The students were rolling in the aisles. You cannot expect MIT undergraduates to read an essay, in which the theme is that there's a lot of people who worry about the superficial, peripheral things like wars, and famine, and torture and so on. But the real issue in the world is the fundamental divide between the West, which underwent the Newtonian Revolution, and therefore knows that there's a world external to the observer, and the rest of them who haven't quite mastered this. And then he said the Russians have got a foot in each camp. They've sort of half made it. So the implication would be that when you bomb the North Vietnamese, they maybe think it's a headache, because they don't know there's a world out there. I mean, can you expect MIT undergraduates to read that? No. But is he a senior professor at Harvard, highly recognized? Well, sure.

**NJR:** What sort of criterion do you use to evaluate what kinds of inquiry are valuable? What kinds of knowledge are worth developing and pursuing?

**NC:** There's no simple criterion. So for example, today there was an article in one of the journals, maybe the *New York Times*, on the study of a Denisovan cave, in Siberia, where they're finding some quite remarkable things about a branch of the species of humans that were from homo sapiens that seemed to have developed surprising beginnings of technology, right around the time that homo-sapiens developed. This is very hard work. There are people who have been working on it for a long time, trying to dig out little bits of a bone, or a tooth and experimenting with it. Is that valuable information? I think it is. It doesn't increase GDP, but it increases our understanding of the history of the human species, and its various branches, and so on.

**NJR:** *There's a lot of pressure to make universities develop a more kind of instrumental approach to knowledge, cutting history departments, and increasing business studies, and what have you—the argument being that knowledge is a tool and we have to teach young people the tools that will help them succeed in the world. When Barack Obama talked about education, he made a joke about art history degrees and talked about preparing kids for life. And it's hard for me, because I think, well, how do I argue against a pragmatic approach to knowledge? Because I do think that knowledge is somewhat pragmatic.*

**NC:** Is it pragmatic? Is your life improved if you have no understanding of the rich tradition of the arts and literature? Or is it improved if you do have knowledge of that? If you can go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and look at the latest exhibit, and appreciate and understand it, is your life improved more than by having another hamburger at McDonalds, let's say?

**NJR:** *It's very difficult for me, though, to know how I would make the case to someone who didn't appreciate it?*

**NC:** If you don't appreciate it, don't have it. I don't appreciate apps, so therefore I don't have any. I don't use social media, nobody is forcing me to. I'd rather do other things. If somebody would rather spend their life looking at the latest thing on Facebook, they can do that. Fine. But that doesn't mean others should be deprived of the opportunity to enjoy and appreciate the great intellectual and artistic achievements of the world, and to use that for their own development.

**NJR:** *I think the University of Akron just cut a bunch of history and sociology programs and replaced them with an "e-sports" program, which is a euphemism for video games. All they said was, "we're responding to the market. This is what people want to study, this is what people want to learn, so this is what our university should become."*

**NC:** By that standard, you should drop all courses that involve reading, and move just to having students look at Facebook all day.

**NJR:** *I'm sure there are people who argue for that.*

**NC:** Probably. That's what the market says. Okay. Is that a serious proposal? Would we have wanted that to happen anytime in the past? What kind of world would we live in if that were the case? First of all, you wouldn't have Facebook, and you wouldn't have computers, and you wouldn't have literature, and you wouldn't have arts. You would have—we would maybe be individual farmers, peasants somewhere, trying to keep alive through the next harvest.

**NJR:** *I think there are a lot of people who think the dominant consensus, for example, in economics, is that market demand is our measure of human value, that whatever people subjectively choose in a world of plenty.*

**NC:** Economists do say that. But they overlook some not very obscure facts. So let's turn around to the television. If you took an economics course, one thing you learned, Econ 101, is that markets are based on informed consumers making rational choices.

es. Okay? Did anybody ever notice that industry in the United States, one of the hugest industries in the country spends billions and billions of dollars trying to create uninformed consumers who make irrational choices. It's known as the advertising industry, public relations industry. It's exactly what they do. If we had a market, suppose we had a market, you would turn on the television set and there would be an ad for a car which says "here are the characteristics of the car, here are the critiques of it in Consumer Report. So now you could make a judgement as an informed consumer. You can make a rational choice. Is that what you see? No. What you see is some football hero, or model, standing on a car which is going into the air into the stratosphere—anything to make you uninformed and irrational. So what are we talking about?

**NJR:** *There was a GM ad last year where they overlaid a Martin Luther King speech over the ad for the truck, and they showed the truck, and they had King's voice booming over the truck, just to try to create the association between justice—this truck is not just a truck, this truck means... [laughs]*

**NC:** If we want invented worlds, we could talk about markets in which informed consumers make rational choices, but it has almost nothing to do with this world.

**NJR:** *I want to get back to universities and academia. I was looking at the syllabus you have for the course you have here called "What Is Politics?" You know, I was a political science, political theory undergrad, and when they asked a question within this course of "What Is Politics?" you would begin with The Republic, and then you would do Locke and Rousseau, and you begin sort of with capitalist realism and the threats of nuclear war and climate change as "What Is Politics?" I understand that approach, because those are things that matter, and politics is about things that matter. But does that mean that—how would you reconfigure political science to actually have insight into what politics is?*

**NC:** Well I think a lot of political science has great insight into it. So let's take the conception that the United States is a democracy. A democracy is presumably a society in which the general population has a voice in how decisions are made, about social, economic, and political conditions. Now let's take a look at serious political science research. What does it show? There's very good work on this. So my close friend, Thomas Ferguson, has done leading political science. He's done remarkable work showing very persuasively, up until the present moment, you can predict the outcome of an election with remarkable precision by simply looking at campaign spending, one variable. Well, there's a corollary of that. "Elected representatives" assumes they're elected. The first thing they have to do is appeal to the donor class — somebody in the house of representatives may spend five or six hours a day just calling the donors. And meanwhile, what happens to the legislation? Well, the lobbyists come in from the corporations. They meet with the staff. They of course overwhelm the staff with information and background, and they basically write the legislation — a fact that's been studied by other fine political scientists who have showed very convincingly that a large majority of the population are literally disenfranchised, meaning their own representatives pay no attention to their preferences. They listen to other voices, and we know which voices those are. Is this a functioning democracy? Well, you take a look at the Economist Intelligence Unit and they just did a big study on democracies throughout the



world, and they regard the United States as a flawed democracy.

**NJR:** *That's generous.*

**NC:** I think it's ranked 25th among the democracies of the world. But it's ranked that high only because of the narrowness of the conditions that they use. They don't ask these questions. They're just asking "does the president lie" or something like that. But if you look at the actual basic features of the society, you see something very different than what's commonly believed. And just like this matter of "markets responding to informed consumers making rational choices," everywhere you look you find this. When you begin to look into the specific details, it's extremely revealing. So take the gun culture in the United States, fanaticism about filling your closet with a half a dozen assault rifles, and so on. Where did this come from? Well, it turns out, there's good studies of it. These are things that can be studied.

There's a woman, named Pamela Haag, who did a very good study on the origins of the gun culture. Turns out that after the Civil War, the gun manufacturers had lost their market. There was no gun culture in the 19th century. The gun was like a tool, like a shovel. A farmer had a gun to keep critters away from his sheep, or something, and the farmers — it was an agricultural society, they didn't want these fancy guns that the gun manufacturers were producing. So you could sell some abroad, and so on, but there wasn't much of a market. So they started what is probably the first major public relations campaign in modern American history to try to create the image of the "Wild West," in which noble cowboys had pistols. They were fighting off the bad guys and shooting faster than someone else. All of this is total fantasy. There was nothing like it. Cowboys were kind of the people at the fringe of society who couldn't get a job, so someone would hire them to push their cows around. It's not wild. And then comes along the things that were later imitated by the tobacco industry—the Marlboro Man, and so on. "Your son won't be a man unless he has a Winchester rifle. Your daughter has to have a pink revolver to defend herself." Pretty soon you have a gun culture. Is it because people wanted guns? It was a created—it was what Thorstein Veblen, a little over a century ago, called "fabricating wants." It's a large part of the society.

Then the supreme court comes along in 2008 with the the *Heller* decision, written by Scalia, a great originalist. It's a very interesting decision worth reading. If you read his decision, you notice that he avoids all the reasons why the founders wanted people to have guns. Actually, it's a very learned decision. He is a great scholar, quotes all sorts of documents from the 17th century and so on. But we know exactly why the founders wanted people to have guns. The first one was, there was almost no standing army. And the British are hovering around. They're the big enemy. Suppose they attack again. Well, you know, we're going to have to have guys with guns. We can form a well-regulated militia, that's the first phrase in the Second Amendment. That's one. Second is, with the British out of the way, we can now expand into the west, into what was called "vacant territory," so we have to go out there and kill the people who are living in this vacant territory—attack the Indian nations. In fact, the United States is one of the rare countries in the world that's been at war since the first day of its founding—attacking, and for that, you needed guns. And also, it's a slave society. There's a lot of slaves around, not many people controlling them. Got to have guns. There are slave revolutions taking place in the Caribbean. They could extend here, and they pretty soon did in Haiti. You got to have guns. Take a look at

# CURRENT AFFAIRS

## EDITORIAL STAFF

*Publisher & Chairperson*

S. CHAPIN DOMINO

*Editor in Chief*

NATHAN J. ROBINSON

*Amusements & Managing Editor*

LYTA GOLD

*Senior Editor*

BRIANNA RENNIX

*Editor at Large*

YASMIN NAIR

*Legal Editor*

OREN NIMNI

*Contributing Editor*

AISLING MCCREA

*Financial Editor*

SPARKY ABRAHAM

*Administrative Maven*

CATE ROOT

*Newsletter Editor*

NICK SLATER

*Podmaster General*

PETE DAVIS

*Social Media Editor*

VANESSA A. BEE

*Business Manager*

ELI MASSEY

Scalia's decision. Are any of these things mentioned? Not a word. There are debates in the law profession about whether the Second Amendment conveys a militia right, or an individual right. Okay, you can debate that, but it's kind of beside the point. The point is: The Second Amendment, as the founders understood it, is irrelevant in the 21st century. But that's considered holy writ. Well, as soon as you begin to look at the actual world, the illusions collapse pretty quickly.

And going back to "What Is Politics?" that's what the study of it should be. So we actually start the course by talking about Gramsci and hegemonic common sense, and asking how it's established, what's its basis, what happens when we investigate it, and so on. And I think that's what a "What Is Politics?" course ought to be about.

**NJR:** *I went to law school, and one of the most striking things to me was the disjunction between what's happening in the world of the court opinion, and what is happening in the actual world—Right To Work being discussed as an issue of worker freedom, and so on. To finish then, talking about illusions, I think, for me, your writings have been very important to me since I was a teenager, and to a lot*

of people who have had the same experiences. And I think one of the common reasons for that is that it is difficult to see through illusions, and it can make you feel like you're crazy in many ways. As I was walking through campus today, I was thinking about a sentence of yours, which was that "tens of millions of people have been killed by what is taught in American economics departments," which is just factually true. But then you look and the campus is idyllic, and all the students going about, doing their readings of Heidegger, and Nietzsche, learning philosophy, and learning politics, and you feel sort of out of your mind if you think that there's something sort of not quite real here, or there's something different between the real world, and everything that's around me.

**NC:** Most of these, I don't think are hard to expose. It's true that you kind of reflexively just accept what you've heard. Actually, Orwell has a nice comment about this in — did you ever read the introduction to *Animal Farm*?

**NJR:** *Oh yeah, this is the deleted—*

**NC:** The deleted, the suppressed introduction. Well in it, he's talking about how in free England, ideas can be suppressed without the use of force. And he doesn't say much about the reasons, but one of them I think is much to the point. He says, basically, that if you've had a good education, you've gone to Oxford, and Cambridge, and so on, you just have instilled into you the understanding that there's certain things that do to say "he didn't go far enough." It wouldn't do to think. You just can't think them. Because the education instills into you the common sense of the day. And it's not really hard to break out of it. You have to be willing to do the kind of thing that actually led to modern science. So you go back to the time of say, Galileo, neo-scholastic physics more or less had an answer for everything. You know, objects fall because they're going to their natural place, steam rises for the same reason, perception is a matter of the object moving through space and implanting it in your brain, and so on. Galileo and his contemporaries made a breakthrough. They decided to be puzzled about these things. Somebody decides to be puzzled, you find everything's wrong. Just the willingness to ask yourself, "look, everybody believes it, is it true?" In fact, there's kind of a rule of thumb, if everybody believes something, and it's a contentious issue, something should light up in your brain, and say "you better ask about this. It's probably not true." And as soon as you make that simple move, all sorts of things open up. Modern science opened up, and the kinds of things we've been talking about now open up.

**NJR:** *That's funny, because you know, on the surface, that's like the definition of a crazy person. If everyone says something is true, if it's the established consensus, the idea of being the only one who thinks something and wonders something, it's very lonely.*

**NC:** People who ask these questions usually aren't treated very well. Go back to Athens, who was it who had to drink the hemlock?

**NJR:** *Right, in every generation it's the Socrates who gets killed. Just on the subject of "things you're not allowed to think" — I just wrote an article about how if we applied tort law consistently, fossil fuel companies would be sued out of existence, because obviously if you cause massive damage to other people, and under tort law, you owe them damages. But there's a court opinion on this where the judge*

*says, "well, the implications of this would be radical. They'd go out of business."*

**NC:** Let me give you a simpler example: every leading political figure, Obama, Trump, all of them, with regard to an official enemy, say, Iran, says "all options are open." Okay, we have something called the constitution. It has something called Article VI, which says that treaties entered into by the U.S. government are the supreme law of the land. One of those treaties, in fact the foundation one for the modern period, is the U.N. Charter. It has an Article II, Article 2.4, which says the threat or use of force in international affairs is banned. Okay? There are a couple of exceptions, but they're irrelevant. So that means that every leading political figure is violating the constitution. Right? But does anybody care?

**NJR:** *Your quote about how if we apply the Nuremberg principles consistently, every U.S. president would be hanged—*

**NC:** This is violating the U.S. constitution.

**NJR:** *There are things that are very difficult to dispute if you actually look at it objectively.*

*Let's finish up... The willingness to be puzzled, I think, is one of the most important — certainly the most important thing I've ever gotten from reading you. It's not the specific analyses, which have been important, but it's that idea of trying to ask questions even when you're discouraged from doing so.*

**NC:** It's not that you're told not to. It's just that the issue doesn't come up. So like in economics courses, the issue doesn't come up that there's a huge industry designed and succeeding and undercutting your major thesis. Designed to do it and succeeding in doing it. It just doesn't arise.

**NJR:** *Sometimes you're just implicitly discouraged. In grad school, I was told one of my papers seemed as though it was too sympathetic to the tenants, rather than the landlords. They said this isn't objective, you've got to be neutral.*

**NC:** It's all equal. They're making a contract so it's free.

**NJR:** *There's a real fear of being seen as an activist in the academy. And that's the thing, it's not actually a left-wing place, even though it's seen as that.*

**NC:** There's a historical reason for that. Look at the way activists are treated throughout history — not nicely.

**NJR:** *It was really a most striking thing to me in grad school, with how the supposed liberal academia has actually got a real fear of doing anything that would be seen to be engaging in politics or activism.*

**NC:** "Don't rock the boat. You're better off." And you may not say it to yourself—it's Orwell's point again. It just wouldn't do to say those things.

**NJR:** *Wouldn't do.*

**NC:** Okay, I've got to go to this class.

**NJR:** *I bet, okay. You've given me far more time than I could have ever reasonably expected. ✚*



# PUT A BETO STAND - UP ON IT!

Experience the intense excitement lived by dozens and dozens of people by constructing **THE OFFICIAL CURRENT AFFAIRS BETO STAND-UP** and put it on bar tops, counters and tables wherever you go! Just follow these simple instructions:

Cut a slot on the base of the figure and the base of the stand-up piece, approximately the thickness of the paper width. Finally, slide the two pieces together and **THE OFFICIAL CURRENT AFFAIRS BETO STAND-UP** base will now give the figure more support than a multi-millionaire father-in-law!

Let the fun begin! **THE OFFICIAL CURRENT AFFAIRS BETO STAND-UP** is portable and you can bring it everywhere you go! Emulate the *real-life* Beto by standing it up on the bar counter, coffee table, restaurant countertops, book shelf (sorry Christmas Elf), other furniture or even a chair! Whatever you do, don't let **THE OFFICIAL CURRENT AFFAIRS BETO STAND-UP** stand on the floor. That would be rather plebeian!

**NOTE!** Not intended for use as a **VOODOO DOLL!** *Current Affairs* takes no responsibility for occult misuse of **THE OFFICIAL CURRENT AFFAIRS BETO STAND-UP!**

1

Copy this page on a thick paper card stock at your favorite print shop or download and print the PDF file at [www.currentaffairs.org/beto.pdf](http://www.currentaffairs.org/beto.pdf) You can also cut it out from this page but should paste it onto some cardboard or your **OFFICIAL CURRENT AFFAIRS BETO STAND-UP** will flip and flop more than most politicians!

2

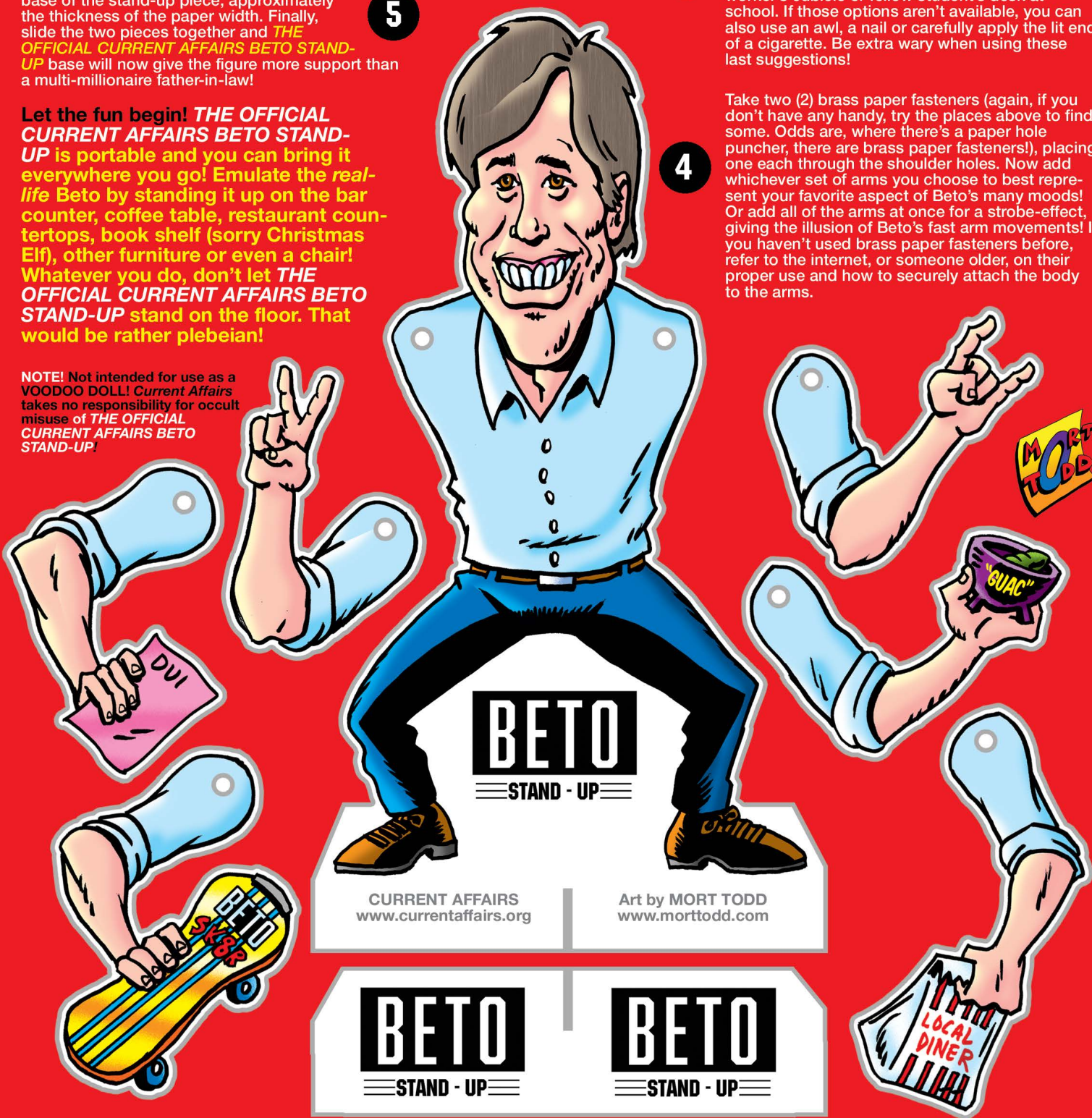
Depending on your skill set, use a matt knife, X-Acto blade, scissors or safety scissors to deftly cut around the grey line surrounding the figure, arms and stand-up base to totally eliminate all border walls around Beto!

3

Using a paper hole puncher, carefully pop some holes where indicated on Beto's shoulders and the top of the various arms. If for some reason you don't have a paper hole puncher, your favorite print shop where you printed this probably has one or you can swipe one from a nerdy co-worker's cubicle or fellow student's desk at school. If those options aren't available, you can also use an awl, a nail or carefully apply the lit end of a cigarette. Be extra wary when using these last suggestions!

4

Take two (2) brass paper fasteners (again, if you don't have any handy, try the places above to find some. Odds are, where there's a paper hole puncher, there are brass paper fasteners!), placing one each through the shoulder holes. Now add whichever set of arms you choose to best represent your favorite aspect of Beto's many moods! Or add all of the arms at once for a strobe-effect, giving the illusion of Beto's fast arm movements! If you haven't used brass paper fasteners before, refer to the internet, or someone older, on their proper use and how to securely attach the body to the arms.



CURRENT AFFAIRS  
[www.currentaffairs.org](http://www.currentaffairs.org)

Art by MORT TODD  
[www.morttodd.com](http://www.morttodd.com)

**BETO**  
STAND - UP

**BETO**  
STAND - UP



# *The Illustrators*



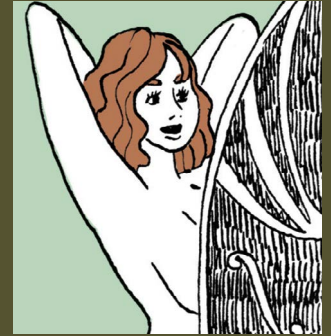
*Ben "Skutch"  
McGehee*



*Chelsea Saunders*



*C.M. Duffy*



*Susannah Lohr*



*Devika Chitale*



*Naomi Ushiyama*



*Mort Todd*



*Ellen Burch*



*Tiffany Pai*



*Mike Freiheit*



*Ben Clarkson*



*Mort Todd*

COVER ART BY  
*Esao Andrews*

<http://esao.net/>