A Rock of Sanity in The Fast-Moving Stream of Madness

## CURRENTAFFAIRS \$10.95



IT MUST BE STOPPED

THE SINGULARITY
IT AIN'T HAPPENING

OPEN BORDERS YAY OR NAY? YAY.

## PREFATORY

WE

ARE

Have you noticed lately that we are winning? Because we are. We weren't before. But now we are. We used to lose constantly. No longer! Oh, yes, they still don't admit that we're winning. They do whatever they can to avoid discussing it. But it's quite true. And how wonderful it feels! Incredible things are on the horizon. We will do them together. You have never been more important than you are right now. Onward!

### How to Be A Political Scientist

Mention the "median voter"

Mention George McGovern

Draw a diagram of interest groups

Point out the institutional constraints

Learn how the filibuster works, then mention it

Always prioritize data over values

### JEFF BEZOS, PREPARE TO BE EATEN

Jeff Bezos, you think you rule the world, don't you? Just because you own like half of everything and could destroy anyone's life if they displeased you. We see you swagger around like you own the place, just because you do. But you know what, Jeff? We're going to eat you. You don't think we are, but we are. We're coming for you. This magazine may be little now. But big things start as little things. You laugh at us. This is because you are complacent. Watch out! We are going to nationalize your company. And make you cry.

### Coffee Break

You deserve it. You really do. Pour yourself a cup, and sit down with this magazine. Forget all the madness outside the window. The only things that exist right now are you, the coffee, and Current Affairs. Make sure it is good coffee. The pretentious stuff. This is no time for subpar hydration. We want your magazine experience to be completely perfect. We want you to be relaxed. Peaceful. Everything should be right with your world. Of course, it cannot last. Everything will collapse again



sooner or later. Reality will come flooding back in through the door. But for this one brief moment, we can inhabit an oasis of the mind. We can sip our later, sitting on our balcony, and let all of our troubles disappear. They will be back. But not just yet.

### A Sudden Hankering For MIXE BLOOMBERG



We didn't think we'd feel it. But we do. It's true: in the past, this magazine has been skeptical of Mayor Bloomberg. He is, we have thought, no Mayor Pete. He is not even a Mayor Bernie. We have critiqued him for being "a bit of a racist" and "appearing to think women are literal meat." You may have gotten the impression that we're a bit sour on the ol' Bloomster. But several days ago, shortly after the morning post arrived, we had a sudden revelation. Bloomberg, we have decided, is not so bad after all. He is, after all, the sort of man who knows how to Run Government Like A Business. Perhaps he is The One To Beat Donald Trump. Yes, friends, we are on Team Mike.

Now, readers have a right to wonder: is it relevant that this change of heart coincided almost exactly with the moment a very large check arrived in the mail? And we would answer: No.



### JOB LISTING professional rock chooser

Are you always that person at the party who is good at choosing the rocks? Do you know your andesites from your migmattles? Consider a career as a Professional Rock Chooser, and party and the professional Rock Chooser.



### OUR PRESIDENT

Why on earth would that be relevant? Yes, it is true that Bloomberg Philanthropies has generously agreed to endow the Current Affairs Museum of Architectural Speculation and the Current Affairs Periodical History Archive. But of what possible significance could this be? No quid pro quo was requested, and none was provided. We were generously handed a check. Sometime later (approx. 20 seconds) we revised a preexisting editorial standpoint. Are you suggesting something? How dare you. We like Mike because of his positive personal qualities. Which ones, you ask? Why, they are too numerous to name in this space. So you see, it is outrageous to question our ethics.

### Carnivorous Plants

Most plants are innocent. It is part of their charm. They harm no one. They ask nothing but to be left alone. And yet we do not leave them alone. We kill them and eat them by the score. We bulldoze forests and pluck flowers. We are unkind to the plants; certainly we do not "do unto them as they do unto us."

Good for carnivorous plants, then. At last the Giving Tree gets its vengeance. We are glad that there are some plants that bite back, plants that say "Oh, hell no." Not all plants are placid and passive. Some are out for blood. They take no shit.

Now, it is true that these plants do not yet eat humans. Just flies, mostly. But for a plant to eat a fly is impressive enough. And that is just practice. We trust that the plants are plotting. Today flies, tomorrow: YOU. God bless these savage fauna. May they eat us all alive.



**ANSWER TO LAST MONTH'S** 

Philosophy Puzzle of the Month:

A BIRD IS A THING.



addition to the letherard Spongelebob, this magazine contains a major Copyright Violation. Namely, on page five [5] of this magazine there exists a photograph of one Mr. Michael J. "Mickey" Mouse, allegedly the protected intellectual property of the Walt Disney Corporation. We are said to have "infringed" upon the WDC's "copy right" by showing a mouse in this shape. Reader, we are sure you will agree that this is absurd. For there to be a law against photographing the wrong-shaped mouse is a sign of a society gone mad. We reject such nonsense absolutely. We insist that our mice may look whatever way pleases us. That is the true nature of Freedom, and Freedom is what this magazine has always stood for. So join us, reader! Violate every "copy right" you can! The world's shapes are yours to rearrange according to your aesthetic fancy. You, and we, are free!

(NOTE: this is not legal advice, this magazine is not responsible for consequences of doing what it says to do.)

### This Month's Puzzle:

Define the word "process." Now define the word "thing." Now classify all existing entities as either processes or things and explain your reasoning for placing each entity in each category. Are there any inconsistencies in your reasoning???



JOIN THE

church of the sacred spider

IT IS NOT AS BAD AS IT SOUNDS



Why Ten? M

### HAVE YOU LISTENED TO The Internationale TODAY?

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My name is Ella and I am currently a senior in high school. I submitted my first college application last week and I wanted to let the CA team know that I wrote my personal essay about my journey of embracing socialism after discovering Cur-rent Affairs. I was raised in an Obama-loving household, and Current Affairs has played a transformative role in exposing me and drawing me to the left. Since I started reading Current Affairs in 2017, my understanding of the world and my vision for the future have radically changed. Love the magazine, podcast, everything!! Thank you for all that you do! Sincerely,

was a sweltering day in July 2017. I sat next to my friend Eleanor as our sticky schoolbus pulled away from the Capitol Building. Our cohort of young bipartisans had just heard from a dozen politicians, lobbyists, and businesspeople, but one Congressman from **Portland** stood out. He spoke passionately about low wages, the climate crisis, and challenges working people face. I turned to Eleanor.

**CONTINUED ON PAGE 50** 

### HAVE YOU HEARD THE

Don't Worry. it wasn't really about you!



This Magazine Is

What This Magazine Needs Right Now 9s...





You know, we used to think sing-a-longs were cheesy. That was back when we had internalized the atomizing logic of capitalistic individualism. Singing? TOcapitalistic individualism. Singing? TO-GETHER? How lame! Those folk festival types, how they made us cringe. No longer! The folkies were onto something. Singing together is an important part of life. We cannot live without it. It binds us to one another, and when we all do it together no one person even has to be very good at it. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Collective action! So do it: get your Little Red Song Book, and strike up a few rounds of "Which Side Are You On" or "Joe Hill." In fact, the songs

don't even have to be about class struggle; not every song is "Solnot every song is "Sol-idarity Forever." "This Little Light Of Mine" is a perfectly fine song. So is "All You Need Is Love." But we do need to sing something. Let us not be embarrassed. People who are singing fear nothing.











Relationship Apps p. 40

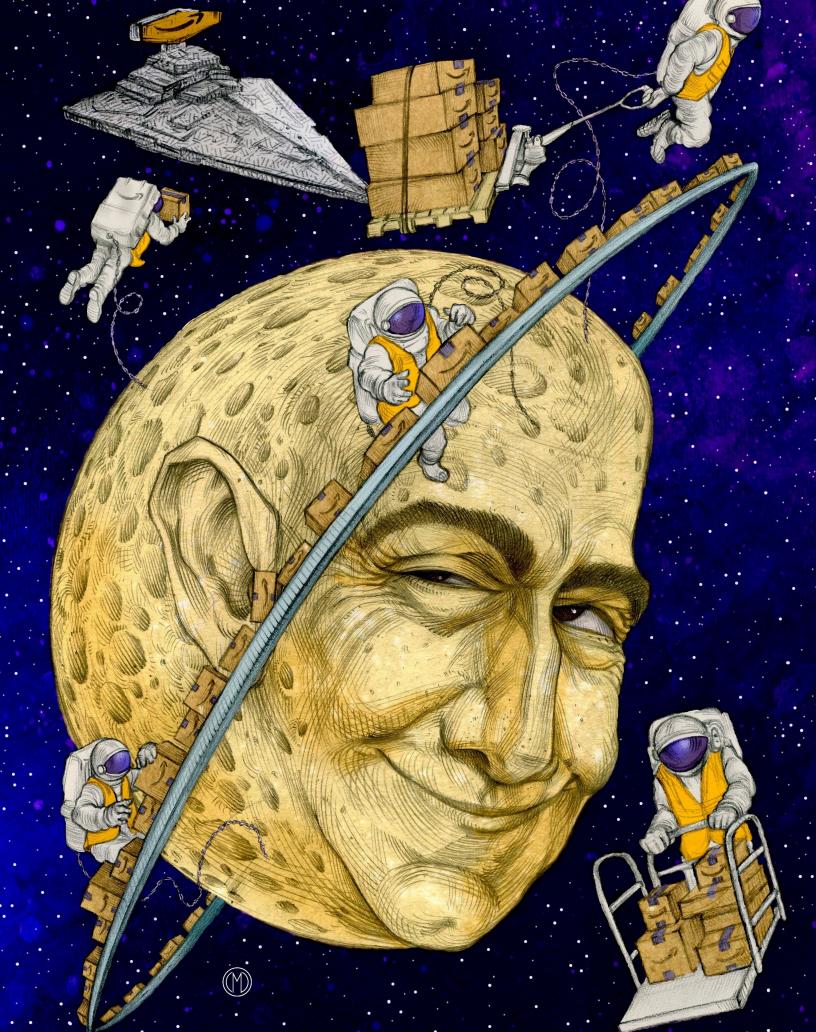
Borders p. 67 Amazon p. 6

Laziness p. 14 The Singularity p. 60

TV Archives p. 44







# BEZICS FUTURE

### by Nathan J. Robinson

should not be excited to live in a world designed and controlled by Jeff Bezos. And even if you are Jeff Bezos, be warned: it's still not going to end well. If we peer into the Amazon future, if we try to imagine the endpoint of its unfolding structural logic, we can see that it isn't going any-place desirable. And unless we change its course, the Bezos Future will come, and it will be dystopian.

Amazon.com started as a bookseller, but for Bezos it was never really about books. While working at a hedge fund in the early 90s, he realized how quickly the internet was growing, and knew that whoever acted quickly would be able to corner the market on online sales. Bezos started with books because there are so many different titles, meaning that it was easy for an online retailer to have a wider catalog than any physical bookstore. The aim, though, was to become an "everything" store, which is exactly what it now is. In fact, it's more than a store: Amazon Web Services dominates cloud computing, and the company owns everything from Whole Foods to Zappos to Goodreads to its own award-winning movie and television studio. Amazon's creepy "Ring" doorbell is expanding video surveillance across the country and its "Rekognition" facial detection software is coming soon to a police department near you. A New York Times investigation in Baltimore showed Amazon had infiltrated many aspects of the lives of people in one city. Merchants conduct their business there, people in need of work perform low-paid menial tasks for the company's "Mechanical Turk" service, a major homebuilder is building houses rigged with Amazon Echo, public libraries have Audible audiobooks, Amazon lockers are at dozens of convenience stores, Amazon trucks buzz around all over the place from Amazon warehouses, and Amazon Pharmacy is now trying to disrupt the drug provision. As tech commentator Amy Webb put it, Amazon has become "the invisible infrastructure that powers our everyday lives... most of us don't know 95 percent of what Amazon is doing." It conducts itself, she says, more like a "nation-state" than a company. It is now the largest internet company by revenue, and growing constantly.

appears to want to "win the market." The goal is endless growth. Amazon everything. There should be no doubt that Amazon will eventually try to destroy public institutions like the United States Postal Service. In fact, the USPS should be an easy target. Amazon has, after all, a giant fleet of trucks and an efficient delivery infrastructure. How long will it be until it decides to let people send packages and letters through Amazon, at costs well below that of government mail? Amazon is ruthlessly predatory; it infamously referred internally to small book

publishers as sickly "gazelles" that it (the corporate cheetah) was to devour, and it squeezes merchants for as much as it can. Because Amazon is *the* online marketplace, it operates almost like a privatized city, where it has absolute power to determine who gets to say and under what terms.

Amazon can even dictate to local governments. When it was searching for a city to house its second headquarters, Amazon had hundreds of municipalities around the country to see who

WHAT BEZOS HAS SAID THE SPACE COLONIES WILL LOOK LIKE

was most willing to rewrite their tax laws to exempt Amazon, and how many public assets (such as land) they would be willing to turn over to the company in exchange for the promise of jobs. It was pitiful to behold; struggling cities who would never be given the headquarters desperately groveling to Amazon, pledging that even with cash-strapped city budgets they would give Amazon as many handouts as it wanted. It was a particularly stark example of the competitive "race to the bottom" that so many local governments face: because they need the jobs, they have to outdo each other in handing the public treasury over to a private company. If Amazon said that in order for it to move to a city, it would need to have the power to choose its mayor, there are places that would seriously consider accepting. None of this makes cities better off in the aggregate: Amazon was going to build a headquarters and create the jobs

somewhere. When Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and others criticized the deal New York City had offered Amazon (with colossal tax "incentives," i.e. exceptions to the rule of law), and the company decided to scrap its plans and leave, AOC was criticized for "killing jobs." But she didn't. Some jobs might not come to New York City in particular, but it didn't make human beings in the aggregate any worse off. If cities cooperate instead of competing, they can dictate terms to Amazon

rather than Amazon dictating terms to the government. As it stands, however, Amazon rules.

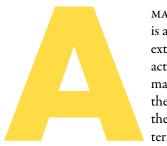
"Nation-state" is a useful way to think about giant corporations, actually. Corporations are, in Elizabeth Anderson's term, "private governments": they are the rulers of the spaces they own, and because they are structured hierarchically, they operate as dictatorships. Everything Amazon does is outside of the sphere of democratic oversight. The more infrastructure we let them build, the more we come to rely on them in our day-to-day lives, the more we turn over to an institution that we do not really control. And someday, perhaps too late, we may find that it controls us, and that a revolution in "who governs" has occurred bit by bit over time. Unable to resist low prices and technological innovation, we installed its surveillance cameras in our house, relied upon it to deliver everything we need, and gave us jobs. Right now, Amazon is a dictatorship within a democracy. Someday the democracy may wither, leaving only the dictatorship. We know Jeff Bezos is not much of a believer in democratically-run

institutions. Amazon treats low-level workers as fungible robotic parts, who exist more as data than as flesh-and-blood humans. You optimize the output of each unit, which means that workers in fulfillment and delivery positions are giving intense quotas. If they could do more, the quotas rise. If they drop below the quotas, they are fired via algorithm, with a system that "tracks the rates of each individual associate's productivity... and automatically generates any warnings or terminations regarding quality or productivity without input from supervisors." Of course, any attempts to form a union in order to negotiate about some of this are immediately crushed. The company culture is infamously stingy and punishing; staffers have to turn in their company backpacks if they ever quit, and in the early days Bezos nixed a proposal to pay for staff members' bus passes because he thought it might incentivize them to leave

at a reasonable hour. A 2015 New York Times investigation of white-collar workers found that they "are encouraged to tear apart one another's ideas in meetings, toil long and late (emails arrive past midnight, followed by text messages asking why they were not answered), and held to standards that the company boasts are 'unreasonably high." The company's "internal phone directory instructs colleagues on how to send secret feedback to one another's bosses."

All of this is done in the name of Amazon's core value: "customer obsession." Everything, supposedly, is about the customer: the prices are made as low as possible, the delivery as quick and seamless as possible, the recommendations as finely-tailored as possible. Amazon takes "the customer is king" to the next level,

and justifies its inhumane work culture by pointing to the wondrous benefits delivered to people buying on Amazon. Indeed, because of its customer focus, Amazon is now the second-most "admired" company in the world (after Apple). People have good experiences using Amazon, even if those good experiences depend on an army of hidden laborers exhausting themselves. Notably, the original "mechanical turk" that Amazon's menial-task service is named after was a fake chess-playing machine that appeared to be a technical marvel but was actually simply operated by a man squashed in a tiny box.



MAZON'S "CUSTOMER OBSESSION" is an irrational principle, and to the extent that people in the company actually believe in it (and I think many are indeed true believers), they should stop. If we think about the delivery of goods from the internet, and how that should opti-

mally be organized, it makes no sense for the person receiving the goods to have their interests dominate. The person driving the truck, the person packing the box, the person making the goods: their satisfaction deserves just as much "obsession." In a rational society, "consumer" interests wouldn't be given priority over worker interests, because workers and consumers are frequently the same people. Institutions (and people) that focus single-mindedly on one thing end up damaging countless other things that are also important. (Say, for example, we maximized economic growth but we accidentally committed ecocide in the process.\_ Capitalistic institutions can be like the "paperclip maximizer"—the machine whose one mandate



WHAT THE COLONIES WILL PROBABLY ACTUALLY LOOK LIKE

is to make paperclips, and which ends up turning the entire world into paperclips—because they are designed to pursue missions without regard to what the consequences of maximizing a single value are, whether that is profit-maximization or power-maximization or even Customer Satisfaction Maximization. Amazon would surely justify its extraction of city tax dollars by saying that it returns this money to Amazon customers in the form of lower prices—but there are values in the world beyond low prices.

Now, one can doubt that Amazon cares solely about the best interests of the customer. If it did, it wouldn't put sponsored products before highest-rated products. What the company cares about is its volume and power. As one former high-level employee put it, it was discomforting that "the consumer, who was after all supposed to be our god, the person whose ecstasy was our very reason for being," was instead approached like "getting a cow to a milking stall and extracting as many pails as possible during each visit." "Customer obsession" is a means toward Jeff Bezos becoming extremely rich and powerful, not the end in itself.

But an interesting question is: for what ends is Jeff Bezos becoming extremely rich? Once you have \$100 billion, you can do anything you want. There is almost nothing you cannot have. Bezos bought the largest private residence in Washington, D.C. (27,000 square feet). He bought the Washington Post. These were to him like pennies are to us. How much is enough? What is the mission? Is it just for Amazon to take over everything? Well, yes, that's the goal. But Bezos has made it clear that he is doing it all in the service of something much larger, something almost completely bonkers: giant space col-

He is very open about this. He gives talks about it. He's been

obsessed with it since high school, when a local newspaper reported he wanted to "get all people off the Earth and see it turned into a huge national park." He says that establishing human colonies in space is "something we have to do" and describes it as his "most important work." We're going back to the moon, he says, "this time to stay." He sells \$1 billion in Amazon stock every year to fund a private space program, in the form of a company called Blue Origin. In lectures, Bezos insists that there is no alternative but to embrace his plan. His reasoning is simple: "The earth is finite, and if the world economy and population is to keep expanding, space is the only way to go." In a lecture, Bezos says that "we have ever-increasing demand for energy," and "will run out of energy on earth." He asks: "What happens when unlimited demand meets finite resources? Rationing." But, he says, "if we move out into the solar system, for all practical purposes, we have unlimited resources."

"Do we want stasis and rationing or do we want dynamism and growth? This is an easy choice. If we're out in the solar system, we could have a trillion humans... a thousand Einsteins. This would be an incredible civilization."

Bezos says he has no idea how the colonies, these "manufactured worlds" with "artificial gravity," will be built. But, he says, this is a question for future generations. His role is to build the "infrastructure" necessary to get it done.

It all sounds completely demented, and makes Bezos something of a real-life Bond villain. For one thing, the whole premise is wrong: there's no reason that endless growth in energy use needs to persist. Bezos recites the economics textbook dogma that human wants are "infinite," but that doesn't have to be true. Most of us want fairly basic things out of life, and it's only the people like Bezos who want to accelerate consumption at all costs who make human life unsustainable. Bezos' company is creating the very problem his space colonies are meant to solve; as Franklin Foer wrote in the Atlantic, "a reasonable debate about planetary future would at least question the wisdom of the same-day delivery of plastic tchotchkes made in China." Bezos is actually strikingly unimaginative: since high school he has maintained a simplistic vision of a civilization where quantity is quality; a "trillion humans" is an amazing society, because of the sheer number of Einsteins it possesses. But why? Why is more better? Bezos explains that if we have to reduce our energy consumption, it will end our progress toward better and better things; in his view, your grandchildren will live "worse" lives if they consume less, which Bezos describes as "rationing." He describes his project as one of saving the planet, which he calls a "gem." Yet his vision for saving the planet does not involve changing the way we live, but fleeing and doing it elsewhere. "We have to go to space to save Earth," he says.

This is dangerous madness. Bezos doesn't have to think about the climate consequences of Amazon—he has donated money to climate causes, but Amazon has threatened to fire workers who pressure the company to do more on the issue. He sees himself, after all, as building the infrastructure we will

need in order to flee the planet.

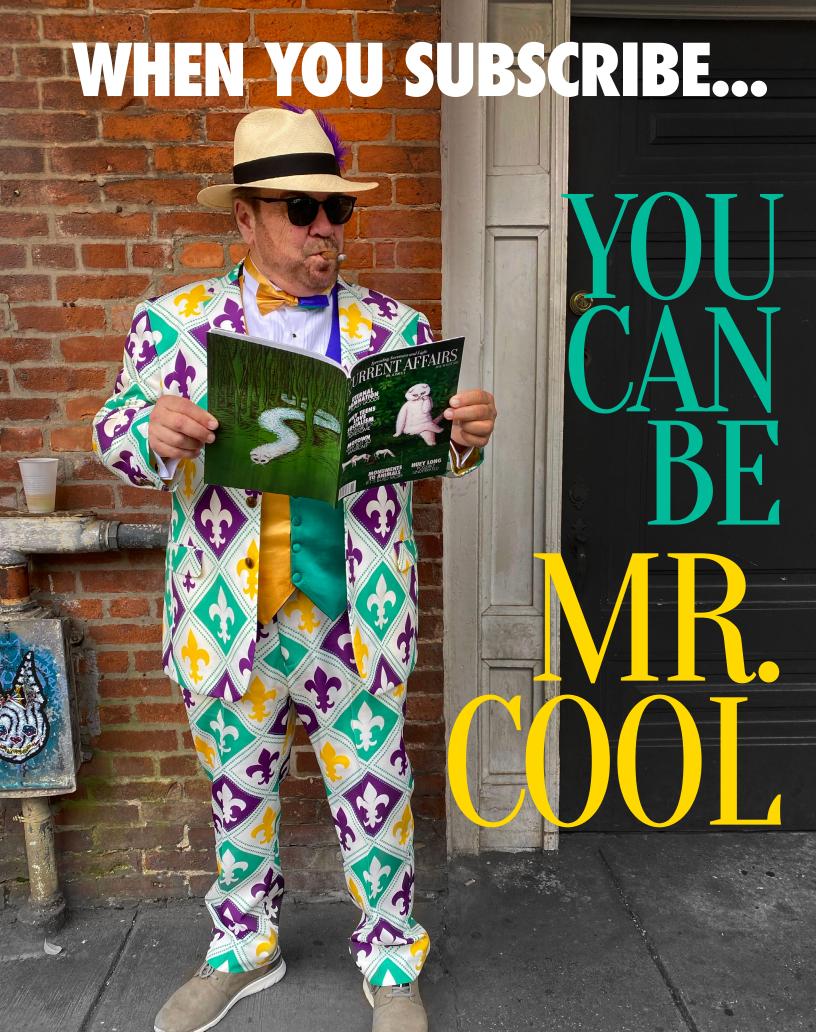
I am not quite sure how Bezos reconciles his missions; on the one hand, he sees himself as conducting a grand plan to move human beings to space, on the other, he sells books and kitchen appliances on the internet. I have a sense that he doesn't, that the space thing is just a grand delusion used to avoid confronting the possibility that what he does is ultimately quite banal and he's just a glorified private postmaster. It must be hard having billions of dollars but no real understanding of what the good life is or how people achieve it.

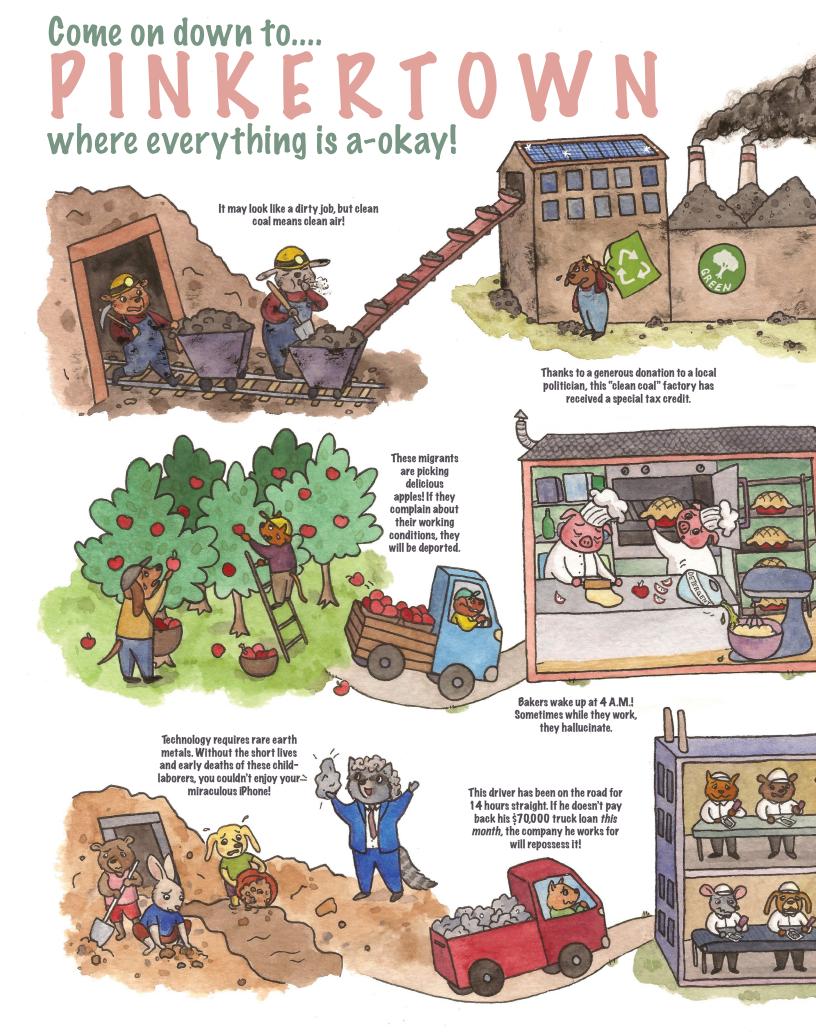
powerful, and having someone that powerful and that delusional is alarming. His internal logic is that amassing endless power and wealth is objectively good, because it serves the Customer and the ultimate mission of fleeing the earth for space. So Amazon *should* do everything possible to avoid paying taxes, because taxes saved can go toward the all-important Mission. It *should* extort whatever it can get out of cities. It should try to take over the U.S. government. After all, if the public doesn't share Bezos' belief that we must urgently build the infrastructure to flee the earth, their will must be overridden.

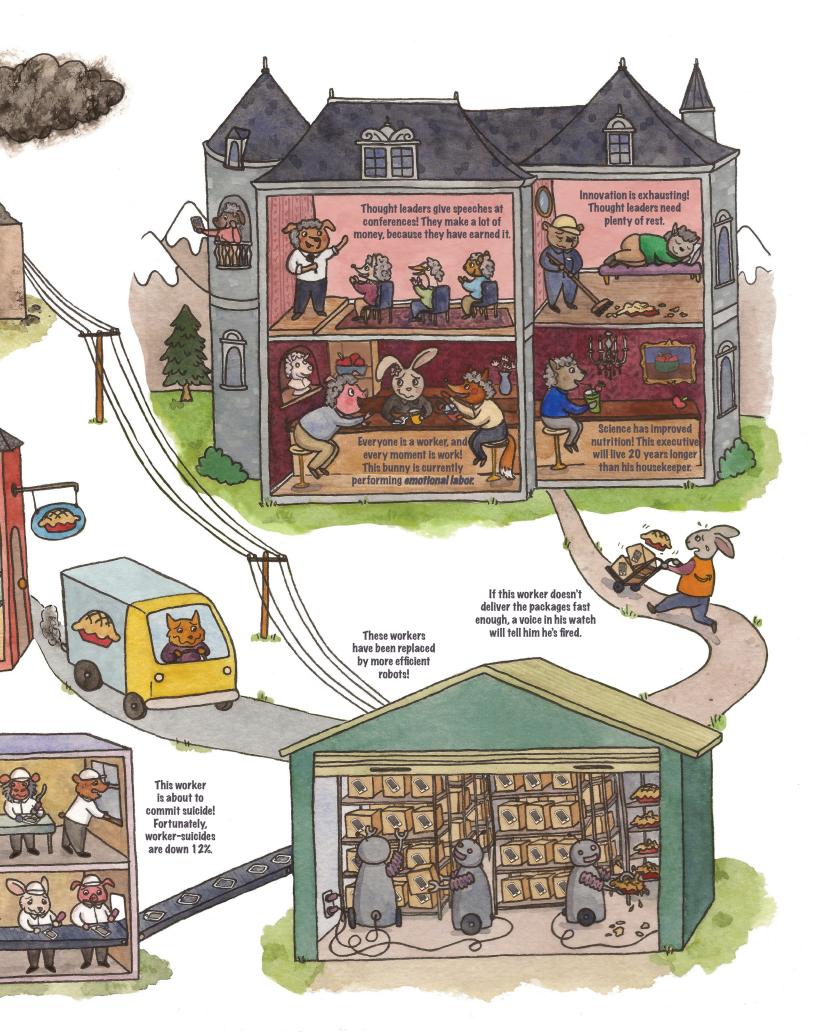
When you are surrounded by yes-men—and when you're a billionaire, you will be—you may not notice when you've drifted off into craziness. Bezos' company is pathologically devoted to growth, even as he says that growth is destroying the world. He cannot and will not stop the company, so he has developed a crackpot plan to put a trillion people in space. Because he has power on an awesome scale, he will get to do many things that further this vision, even if they are a terrible use of human resources.

What if he did succeed in his space mission, though? What if the Bezos Future came about? It would be wretched. For one thing, it would be a dictatorship; Amazon is never going to be a democratic company, because participatory democracy and ruthless efficiency are in tension with one another. Because Bezos doesn't really care about people's working lives, and sees it as ok to keep them in windowless warehouses packing endless boxes for hours and hours on end as fast as possible, life may be an endless circle of boxes being moved around the moon.

The socialist vision is quite different. Not "as many people as possible, as many products sold as possible." We understand that if jobs are hard and endless, that's a social failure. We want to reduce the workweek, give people the leisure to pursue things that truly make life good. Fleeing the earth is a social failure, too. Instead of resigning ourselves to having to live on the moon—I would stress, this is literally a thing Bezos thinks, lest you ever lapse into thinking that the extremely rich are sensible geniuses—let's create a beautiful Earth together, one where work is as much of a pleasure as possible, consumption is not gratuitous but thoughtful, and we live sustainably valuing quality of life above volume of goods. This can be done. But to do it, we must ensure that people like Bezos are not given the power to shape the destiny of our species. •









# In Defense of LAZINESS

BY JOSHUA CHO

ROWING UP IN THE CHURCH, AS MANY KOREAN-Americans tend to do, I remember hearing about the story of Adam and Eve quite often. As an unsophisticated teenager more concerned with "worldly" things at the time, I never reflected too deeply on the ancient Near Eastern story appropriated by Christians to explain how everything in the world sucks because the first humans screwed everything up.

But, I have to confess, there was one part of the story I always found funny. In between the really cool bits about snakes getting their heads crushed by heels and people returning to dust, God tells Adam and Eve that their previous idyllic experience in the Garden of Eden is over, and that they, along with the rest of humanity, are actually going to have to work for a living. The very ground itself has become cursed because of their transgressions, and survival will now require labor. I had always thought that that was a rather overdramatic way of describing the origins of work, and that the Near Eastern author(s) must have written it because they really hated their job(s). While I was too young to have a job at that point, I felt sincere empathy for the situation; I compared it to the loathing I felt when doing my homework.

The reason I share this story is that it presents a strikingly different attitude towards work than the one promoted by our capitalist overlords. The impression we get from this familiar narrative, written by people from a culture, time, and place far removed from ours, is that work sucks, and it only exists because some people named Adam and Eve ate some damn fruit. In contrast, work is now seen more as a blessing than a curse. In our 21st century American capitalist dystopia, we are often told to love work itself. Commonplace mantras like "do what you love," abound, but these seemingly benign phrases are actually wielded to devalue, rather than make us cherish, our work. "Do what you love" is phrased as a commandment, not a mere lifestyle recommendation; if you fail to love your work you have failed to

obey. In many cases, being "passionate" about your job is another nebulous buzzword like "dynamic," and "flexible," which function not just as random descriptive adjectives but as job requirements. It's no longer enough to show up and do your job; now you also have to *enjoy* being a wage-slave.

It's not just ancient Near Easterners who would find our American attitude towards work mystifying; some American work "habits" that foreigners find incredibly toxic include working extremely long hours, almost never going on vacation, barely taking any family leave, not taking sufficient breaks throughout the day, and sending emails after work hours.

While these toxic American work "habits" are clearly the manufactured result of constant corporate propaganda and capitalist domination of the state—resulting from the vicious suppression of leftists and the labor movement by the American government on behalf of the ruling capitalist class, starvation wages, the United States' status as one of the few industrialized countries that doesn't guarantee paid parental leave or paid vacation time by law—one can also make the case that some degree of the American work "culture" is real, in the sense of being deeply internalized.

Here are some findings that many of us might be familiar with from personal experience: although not all employers grant their employees much paid vacation time, many American workers fail to use all their vacation days because they feel guilty about missing work. Even when workers aren't on vacation, they often feel guilty if they're not being productive with their free time; hence why there are plenty of articles telling us how to beat "productivity guilt" (and still be more productive in the process). There are many Americans who think being busy all the time is a sign of how important they are, brag about working ridiculous hours and even pretend to work longer than they actually do. Is it any wonder that there are articles claiming that Americans have a new religion that can be called the "Gospel of Work"?

No matter how you look at it, laziness—the state of not

working and being happy about it, too—seems to be universally despised in the United States. Consider the notorious examples of Republicans engaging in racist dog whistles, such as Ronald Reagan attacking the nonexistent epidemic of "welfare queens" who supposedly drove Cadillacs and defrauded the welfare system to avoid work. There have also been racist comments by overrated "gurus" like Paul Ryan claiming that America has a real "culture problem" of "men not working and just generations of men not even thinking about working or learning the value or the culture of work." And then there's Trump's attempts to strip healthcare, food stamps, and disability benefits by requiring ineffective "work requirements" to make sure the lazy aren't gaming the system and help keep up the pretense that Republicans care about the deficit.

Republicans are not solely to blame here: There's a solid bipartisan consensus on the distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. Joe Biden himself, in keeping with his racist history, channeled Reagan when he warned about the dangers of "welfare mothers driving luxury cars." Even when Democrats follow Bernie Sanders' leadership in championing a \$15 minimum wage, we often hear him and Democrats like Chuck Schumer and Bobby Scott carefully adding qualifiers to eradicating poverty when they say things like "No person working full-time in America should be living in poverty," or "no American with a full-time job should be living in poverty."

The obvious implication of this kind of rhetoric is that there are some people who deserve to be in poverty (those who refuse to work, or work enough, aka "the lazy"), which ends up condemning involuntary part-time workers, the unemployed, and many disabled people to poverty in practice.

This happens despite varying degrees of credible explanations for poverty, ranging from describing unemployment as an inevitable result of recessions in capitalism's systemic business cycles, a consequence of the Federal Reserve's tinkering with interest rates to lower inflation, a persistent trade deficit that props up the value of rich people's dollars, massive job displacement by machines, people studying the wrong thing in college, an alleged "skills gap," and the lack of job opportunities for felons once they leave America's prison-industrial complex. This all in combination seems rather plausible, rather than some nebulous lack of work ethic.

But hey, why bother presenting a nuanced picture by explaining basic economics and the interrelationship between larger social and political forces when it's much easier to dismiss all or most of the poor as "lazy" instead?

Prior to the 21st century, there were widespread expectations that the new millennium would usher in an new age with a lot more time for all of us to lollygag and laze around. The influential economist John Maynard Keynes published a fantastically optimistic essay in 1930 called "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren," in which he predicted a 15 hour workweek by the beginning of the 21st century. It may be hard for those of us living in the present to indulge Keynes' imagination, but he wrote: "For the first time since his creation man will be faced with his

real, his permanent problem... how to occupy the leisure."

Anthropologist David Graeber has described the disappointment felt when the "set of assumptions" and a "generational promise" about what the future would look like—for children born in the '50s, '60s, '70s and '80s—failed to materialize at the turn of the century. The "technological wonders" of flying cars, teleportation pods, and colonies on Mars are still nowhere to be found. A 1957 *New York Times* article seemed to articulate this generational promise when it explained how the "increasingly automatic nature of many jobs," along with a "shorter workweek," would lead an "increasing number of workers to look not to work, but to leisure for satisfaction, meaning, expression."

Of course, one doesn't need to go to a Bernie Sanders rally and hear him talk about how Americans are working longer hours for lower wages to realize that fantasies of a "postwork" future thanks to technological advancement under capitalism were, and always will be, a giant fraud. Instead, we have had presidential candidates like Andrew Yang running around telling people that the robots are going to steal their jobs, and that we have no alternative but to accept a universal basic income and resign ourselves to a bleak future of permanent unemployment because "it's necessary for capitalism to continue." But why is it necessary for capitalism to continue, especially if this shitty future is all it has to offer us?

In reality, technology has not freed us from the drudgery of our bullshit jobs; one could argue that it has actually increased the amount of bullshit in our jobs. With our shiny new technology, employers can harass employees with calls, text messages, and emails outside of work. Amazon has patented heinous wristbands that alert Amazon when workers "are slacking off" or "taking too long" in the bathroom. The company even has an automated system that constantly tracks worker "productivity" by monitoring "time off task," which automatically generates warnings for workers who break from scanning packages for too long, and penalizes their drivers if they take a route their app deems "inefficient." An increasingly large number of people in the extremely precarious and unstable gig economy take orders through apps from predatory corporations like Uber, where some "contractors" experience working conditions so desperate that they commit suicide.

So if technological advances under capitalism were supposed to result in a "postwork" future, or at least spare us from demanding physical labor, but have in reality only resulted in hard, thankless work and/or a bare subsistence income from crushing unemployment, why should laziness be something that is condemned?

T'S NOT EVEN CLEAR THAT WE FULLY UNDERSTAND what laziness actually is, although I'm sure all of us have experienced moments of what we consider to be laziness in our daily lives. There are strong counterintuitive—yet perfectly plausible—arguments from social psychologists that laziness is not merely an un-

willingness to work, but also a way of dealing with complex emotions and situations. Some people would even argue that "laziness" is merely a myth and a convenient default accusation that allows people to avoid asking deeper questions about what lies behind procrastination and the aversion to performing certain tasks. What many people consider to be a "lazy disposition" might be better explained as paralyzing fear and lack of self-confidence in one's ability to accomplish a task, a need for nurture or relaxation, passive rebellion against a task or a person, or even outright depression preventing people from doing something as simple as getting out of bed.

But another reason to resist condemning laziness is that the accusation of laziness has consistently been weaponized throughout history by the powerful against those with less power, successfully justifying theft, exploitation, and massive inequality.

Racist caricatures of lazy Black people didn't start with Ronald Reagan. Long before his time, white slaveowners considered their enslaved subjects to be "lazy" and in need of moral instruction toward proper work ethic. In Frederick Douglass' 1863 lecture "What Shall Be Done With the Negro?", he described the absurdity and irony of this designation of "laziness" when slavery was one of the major foundations of the U.S. economy and most of the European colonial economies in the Americas from the 16th to 19th century. Referring to the "cotton famine" resulting in mass unemployment and misery in Europe when Union forces blocked southern exports of slave-produced cotton during the Civil War, Douglass wrote, "It had been said that the negro was lazy, and would not work. This has been the favorite talk even of slaveowners; but how happened it that all Europe was at the point of starvation the moment the industry of the negro was interrupted?"

It's highly plausible that the slaveowners who propagated the stereotype of the lazy black slave knew they were being cynical, since every immoral project—especially an institution as abominable as slavery—requires some kind of moral justification, no matter how ludicrous it may be. Fanny Kemble, a noted 19th century British actress, observed that the Antebellum South designated "hard work" not as the province of white people but as a marker of slavery:

No white man, therefore, of any class puts hand to work of any kind soever. This is an exceedingly dignified way of proving their gentility, for the lazy planters who prefer an idle life of semi-starvation and barbarism to the degradation of doing anything themselves; but the effect on the poorer whites of the country is terrible.

I speak now of the scattered white population, who, too poor to possess land or slaves, and having no means of living in the towns, squat (most appropriately is it so termed) either on other men's land or government districts—always here swamp or pine barren—and claim masterdom over the place they invade, till ejected by the rightful proprietors. These wretched creatures will not, for they are whites (and labour belongs to blacks and slaves alone here), labour for their own subsistence.

Perhaps more fascinating than the palpable hypocrisy of white slaveowners accusing their slaves of laziness is the highly plausible scenario that this stereotype might have arisen, in part, from slaveowners misinterpreting their slaves' acts of passive resistance (such as working slowly or shoddily, faking illness, or destroying their own tools) as evidence of shiftlessness, stupidity, and genetic deficiencies, rather than the desire for freedom. In *The Gift of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois described how slaves would often avoid strenuous labor as a measure of resistance to their masters:

As a tropical product with a sensuous receptivity to the beauty of the world, he was not as easily reduced to be the mechanical draft-horse which the northern European laborer became. He ... tended to work as the results pleased him and refused to work or sought to refuse when he did not find the spiritual returns adequate; thus he was easily accused of laziness and driven as a slave when in truth he brought to modern manual labor a renewed valuation of life.

HEN WHITE SETTLER COLONIALISM WAS displacing Native Americans from their land, John Locke—a philosopher venerated in American history because of his influence on the founding fathers' conception of property—was one of the earliest white people to accuse non-white people of "laziness." He argued that Native Americans were not entitled to lands they had been living in for centuries because they didn't "labor in" or "improve it," which was related to his central thesis that agriculturalists who mix their labor with the soil are entitled to it (conveniently the kind of "labor" that European settler colonists practiced). However, investors like Locke didn't actually labor in agriculture themselves, meaning by his own formulation, Locke and other members of his class were too "lazy" to have property rights. To get around this, Locke argued that gentlemen like himself were entitled to land because the labor of their servants counted as an extension of their masters' labor. As Locke argued in his famous Second Treatise of Civil Government:

We see in commons, which remain so by compact, that it is the taking any part of what is common, and removing it out of the state nature leaves it in, which begins the property; without which the common is of no use. And the taking of this or that part, does not depend on the express consent of all the commoners. Thus the grass my horse has bit; the turfs my servant has cut; and the ore I have digged in any place, where I have a right to them in common with others, become my property, without the assignation or consent of any body. The labour that was mine, removing them out of that common state they were in, hath fixed my property in them.

Perhaps Locke was a disinterested intellectual grappling with serious thoughts about freedom and property. Or perhaps he was a self-serving and hypocritical advocate for expropriating Native lands because he had significant investments in the English slave trade through the Royal African Company and the Bahama Adventureres Company, and was intimately involved

with American colonialism. He even assisting in drafting the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina*, a document which stipulated "Every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves." Much of his work served as convenient justifications for the rich to remain rich, no matter how little they actually worked.

In many cases, what people consider to be "laziness" has a lot to do with property and perspective. Throughout the history of capitalism, the corporate-controlled press has been relentless in demonizing labor unions for protecting "bad" workers—you see this in the stereotype of the "lazy" union worker. In Upton Sinclair's frequently misunderstood socialist novel, The Jungle, he satirizes the propaganda of "lazy" union workers; his immigrant worker protagonist, Jurgis Rudkis, initially refuses to join the slaughterhouse workers' strike because he assumed the other workers were "lazy". By the end of the novel, Rudkis develops class consciousness as a socialist himself, and realizes his error. Strikes, especially sitdown strikes, can easily be interpreted as laziness-after all, they are a refusal to work. Certain famous photos may appear at first glance to depict "lazy" workers, when they are actually unionized workers going on strike to protest inhumane working conditions.

perceived as being "lazy," "entitled," and "spoiled." An entire cottage industry has sprouted up around blaming young people for failing to buy enough consumer products. For the first time in American history, millennials are doing worse than their parents' generation, despite multiple studies demonstrating that millen.

generation, despite multiple studies demonstrating that millennials actually work very hard. Hard work has not resulted in the rewards promised by capitalism: American millennials are more likely to identify as "working class" than any other generation.

Research shows that when millennials are actually asked what they want from work, they are more likely to want perfectly reasonable and good things that everyone else should want; Gallup found that Millennials want "good jobs" instead of just any job, more time to spend with their family, and that they prefer conversations and coaching instead of soulless annual reviews and bosses. All of these findings seem to indicate that Millennials desire "good jobs" not because they are especially "spoiled" or "entitled," but because they are more class-conscious than previous generations due to deteriorating economic conditions for young people. So perhaps the next time one finds articles describing why many millennials "can't last 90 days at work," leave work for "mental health" reasons or why they switch jobs every two years, one can interpret these findings not as an example of generational sloth, but as an example of psychological struggle in the face of rampant inequality, and/or passive resistance to increasing corporate exploitation.

So accusations of laziness aren't leveled at young people solely because of typical generational warfare; Millennials are called lazy because capitalism is failing, and young people are suffering the brunt of the failure.

The widespread belief that the rich are rich because they work hard, and that the poor are poor because they are lazy and refuse to "pull themselves up by their own bootstraps," are, like the concepts of meritocracy and the "unworthy" or "undeserving" poor, very old ideas, conveniently resurrected whenever necessary to justify suffering. According to this belief—aided by an abundance of perseverance porn—there is no excuse for people who refuse to walk 15 miles to work everyday, or for the people who refuse to follow the example of "inspiring" kids who continue to work at fast food jobs with an arm sling and neck brace after a car accident, because, after all, if these hard-working individuals can do it, everyone else must simply be lazy. Instead of questioning why we lack adequate public transportation or paid medical leave, we are left with poor-shaming anecdotes that should "motivate" us all to work harder.

Aside from the absurdity of knowing that the phrase "pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps" was originally intended to prove the absurdity of succeeding without outside help (because the very act is literally impossible to perform), the continued irony of rich people who don't work accusing the working poor of being "lazy" shouldn't be lost on us.

It's true that there are many rich people who work a lot, but they are not rich because they work hard. They're rich because a capitalist society heavily rewards those who have a lot of investments. Capitalists are quite literally people who receive money from owning a lot of investments, rather than working for every dollar like everyone else. This is why there are obscene scenarios where someone like George Soros can receive \$1 billion in a single day for betting against the pound, and why billionaires like Bill Gates amass fortunes from arbitrary patent and copyright protections rather than their own hard work. Nobody "earns" a billion dollar fortune. And the bootstrapping myth only perpetuates the absurd pattern where the most victimized and hardworking people are accused of laziness by those who don't really work. The philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote a cheeky essay called "In Praise of Idleness" criticizing the hypocrisy of the idle rich, while touting the benefits of a bit more idleness for everyone else:

There are men who, through ownership of land, are able to make others pay for the privilege of being allowed to exist and to work. These landowners are idle, and I might therefore be expected to praise them. Unfortunately, their idleness is only rendered possible by the industry of others; indeed their desire for comfortable idleness is historically the source of the whole gospel of work. The last thing they have ever wished is that others should follow their example.

Notice how accusations of laziness are always directed in one direction by those with the most power and ownership of the media landscape to those with the least. When corporations (who are legally considered persons) refuse to provide job training to entry-level employees to cut costs while professional expectations for new college graduates are higher than ever, the



Not "lazy" workers, but workers demanding justice. The 1936-37 Flint sit-down strike. Photo: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

corporate entities are not accused of being "lazy." When corporations continually push costs onto consumers by fooling them into working harder to clean and recycle plastics that shouldn't have been produced in the first place, or making consumers go through the work of dealing with automated call systems to avoid the expense of hiring more expensive representatives, they are never accused of being "lazy" or refusing to do the work.

So when such blatant double standards are made clear, what exactly is the problem with laziness? Socialists shouldn't shy away from the fact that a lot of the policies they champion would save people from pointless work, freeing up their time to do other things. In fact, making people's lives as easy as possible is the point of a lot of the policies socialists favor. Universal programs don't just provide critical benefits to everyone: by not requiring the heinous bureaucracy of means-testing, you don't have to fill out any paperwork. You just receive the same human benefits as everyone else by virtue of being alive, without having to lift a finger at all.

Imagine a world where instead of filling out annoying FAF-SA forms to go to college, higher education is a public good available to everyone, no matter how rich or poor they are. Imagine that instead of filling out Elizabeth Warren's stupid paperwork to qualify for having some of our debts cancelled, the government automatically cancels all our debt without us having to do anything. Imagine that instead of undergoing asinine and incredibly harmful "step therapy" or "fail first" protocols required by bloodsucking health insurance companies, your doctor simply prescribes the treatment they think is best for you. Imagine that instead of registering to vote and rushing

to the polls before or after work, you're registered automatically when you turn 18. Imagine that Election Day is a national holiday, in which we all go vote and then sit on our asses the rest of the day, and maybe have a picnic.

Imagining this future may be difficult, especially since we're in the midst of a climate crisis that's projected to get much worse. But this could also be a golden opportunity to demand less work. Research shows that one way to lower everyone's carbon footprint is simply to have everyone chill out more by working less. Not all types of work need to be saved, and our livelihoods don't have to depend on wage-slavery or planet-killing energy extraction. Socialists shouldn't be embarrassed to admit that our ideal fantasy of fully automated luxury gay space communism would resemble a futuristic Garden of Eden where we're free to laze around or do whatever we want, while solar-powered machines do all or most of the necessary labor.

ones who rallied behind the "Eight hours labor, eight hours recreation, eight hours rest" slogan to win the 40 hour workweek from idle capitalists who wanted no upper limit to the amount of labor they demanded from factory workers, and there's no reason we can't be at the forefront of a movement to demand less work for all again. It might be easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine capitalists giving up their profits to sustain a shorter workweek, but it's happened before. When people attack socialists for wanting an easy world that encourages laziness, we shouldn't hesitate to agree. We should instead ask: "What's wrong with laziness?"



### by AISLING MCCREA

ERE IS THE FIRST THING YOU LEARN WHILE watching The Genius: you would be extremely bad at this sort of thing, and, if you were somehow chosen to play this game, you would definitely lose. Here is the second thing you learn while watching The Ge*nius*, if you're not lucky enough to be warned by someone first: do not ever, ever, ever, Google or search on Wikipedia or read YouTube or Reddit or forum comments about whichever season of *The Genius* you are watching, until you have finished the season and you are safe from spoilers. Even then, in some cases, you are not completely safe—some seasons have recurring cast members, and season four of the show is an "All-Stars" edition made up of contestants from the previous seasons, so reading about contestants from older seasons can sometimes lead you to accidentally see spoilers for that season. When watching the first few minutes of any season, it is highly, highly recommended you make an actual note of who all the players are, so that you don't risk ever forgetting who someone is and having to Google them. (After two or three episodes, this will become unnecessary, since not only will you know all the players, but you will feel more invested in their success or failure than you do with your own friends).

Here is the third thing you learn while watching *The Genius*: holy fucking *shit* this is a good show.

show from South Korea, which had four seasons and aired from 2013 to 2015. Although it has a cult following outside Korea—thanks to one or two unsung heroes who subtitle and put out all the episodes online—it's still a much smaller following than that of other

shows often described as "cult favorites," yet everyone I know of who has watched this show has become obsessed with it. The term "cult" feels a lot more apt than it does with, say, The Wire. That type of show has obvious stakes, atmosphere and characters whose appeal can be easily ascertained by people who don't watch it, while it is difficult to describe The Genius without sounding like the most inexplicable type of nerd. If you were to stick a random five-minute clip in front of a friend or family member, they would shake their head and ask why you can't watch something normal like Real Housewives of Orange County. Who are these people? A Korean news anchor and an ex-musician, playing incomprehensible card games against each other? How could this possibly be keeping your attention? And the answer is: because this show is one of the most brilliant displays of tension-building, character development and natural human drama you will see in any gameshow.

The premise is as follows: 12 people go into a house, and each episode one person is eliminated, until finally one person—the true "genius"—is left standing. All the players are well-known Korean figures who are reputed to be highly intelligent. Some of them come from the more explicitly smartypants-type careers such as politics, law, newsmedia or tech, though just as many are popstars, actors or athletes. (One of the more satisfying aspects of the game is watching the Korean equivalents of Justin Bieber and Ariana Grande effortlessly outsmart hackers, MENSA members, and congressmen.) Each week, the contestants play a game that requires some level of strategic thinking. For example, they might be asked to bet on an imaginary horse race, where all the players are given one hint as to who the winner is, or they may be required to play some type of card game. However, not only do the players have

to assess the best way of playing the game itself, but they also need to figure out their long-term plan for survival—picking out potential allies, ganging up on possible threats, and disguising their own level of competence. Along the way, they win "garnets," which equate to real-life prize money if the player wins the entire show, but which they are highly incentivized to use along the way, in exchange for in-game advantages that might help them survive a round.

What results is a show where players are forced to strategize more carefully and fiendishly than in any other show I've seen. Sometimes it's difficult to tell if the players are even aware of their own strategies, or if they're just making it up as they go along, carried along by the brilliant power of their own subconscious mental workings. Whatever it is, it makes for great TV: unassuming mediocrities gradually reveal themselves to be born survivors, endlessly dealing and grifting in order to make it to the next round, headstrong loudmouths plant targets on their own backs, those who try to win by being nice walk the tightrope of keeping everyone on their side without being marked as naive, and therefore easy prey. Most of the games require some mix of game-sense, out-of-the-box thinking, mathematics and luck, but they also require social skills, since most games are easier to win if you co-operate, or at least pretend to co-operate, with some of the other players. (Lying is also a social skill.) Just as every MMA fighter has their preferred style or blend of styles, you gradually, over the course of a season, get to know the way each player fights; whether they are more offensive or defensive, whether they play dirty. You don't get this on Family Feud.

Each individual episode is, in itself, a kind of miniature drama, thanks in part to the well-crafted structure editing. The av-



"Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow."

erage Western reality show has a predictable rhythm: last week, this Thing happened, here's a montage explaining how the Thing happened. Here's some of the participants talking to the camera about how crazy it is that the Thing happened. Then some Stuff happens. A commercial's coming up, but please don't leave, more Stuff will happen! Cut to commercial. Welcome to Part 2. We assume you've forgotten the Stuff that happened, but we assure you that Stuff did happen, here's more montages and interviews, and remember, more Stuff will happen. Here's the Stuff. Tune in next week where we'll montage and recap the Thing and the Stuff again. On the plus side, it's easy to tune into these types of shows at random, and quickly understand what's going on. On the minus side, it's extremely grating if you actually want to, you know, watch the damn thing.

The Genius is not going to coddle you, preferring to act in the manner of a teacher who you initially dislike for being too strict, but eventually come to like and respect far more than the teachers who try too hard to be "cool." The rules of the games are explained once, and then perhaps briefly recapped later on in the episode. You will probably not understand 100 percent of the rules of every game, or the exact calculations behind the various players' strategies, and that is totally okay. What is more important than the minutiae of the games is the character development and tension which drives you to watch episode after episode, dying to see whether your least favorite player will finally get their comeuppance, or whether that player you'd written off as an airhead four episodes ago who is somehow still in the game is a fluke, or a modern Machiavelli in disguise. When watching American TV, one can sometimes get the feeling that the producers think you are stupid. The Genius doesn't think you are stupid. The Genius simply thinks that you have to pay attention. And you will pay attention—a benefit of watching a show that's not in English is that, unless you happen to speak the language, you can't really start looking at other things or mess around with your phone while you're watching it or you'll miss the subtitles. If you sometimes resent that tabbed browsing and push notifications have robbed you of your ability to concentrate, a show like The Genius is a great little remedy.

It's also just an enormously fun show. First of all, the opening credit sequences are kind of dorky, like a cut-price Bond sequence—a silhouette of a man getting trapped in a puzzle! Fighting knights on a chess board!—but they're also awesome, and I love them.

Second of all, the show knows how to present an episode with a slow burn, without boring the audience. If the show were a little more bare-bones, it would be at risk of dragging a little during some of the less engaging games (one of the games in particular, "Tactical Yutnori," is essentially Parcheesi with throwing sticks and goes on for far too long; fortunately the producers figure out which games are the most fun as the seasons go on). Nonetheless, even these relatively low points are brightened up with heist music, judicious editing, and highly fashionable outfits

(the contestants are all really attractive and well-dressed). Occasionally, there will be a flashback or even a flash-forward that reveals something new to the audience: that there has been a betrayal, or a twist of some sort, which keeps the pacing tight and energetic. But unlike with many American shows, it never feels like the editors are trying to overwhelm you with over-the-top montages and effects and reaction shots of how *completely shocking and insane* everything is, preferring to keep the audience focused on the characters and the way the games naturally unfold.

The Genius has drama in spades, but it's not drama in the Real Housewives sense, where everyone's screaming and throwing wine glasses all the time. That doesn't necessarily happen in real life, and while it may give us some very entertaining moments, the fact that it happens multiple times per episode makes Western reality TV all feel rather unreal. In contrast, The Genius shows people politely trying to get on with each other, their conflict mostly reduced to a fraction of a second of pursed lips or a passive-aggressive half-joking remark (after all, these are celebrities, and the world of Korean media is pretty small, and after the season is wrapped up, who knows when they might up on a talk show together?). In this way, the show asks us to pay closer attention to the details of each of the contestants, and when someone does explicitly show their dislike or distrust, the tension is much more powerful, and the competition much more subtle in its brutality. Weirdly, the thing it most reminds me of is not another game show or reality show, but the BBC miniseries I, Claudius from the '70s, where you are slowly and inevitably dragged into the quiet and violent drama of a Roman royal family over the course of several generations. The final episodes of I, Claudius and any given season of *The Genius* give me the same distinct feeling, as though I have been in a military unit with these characters and I am watching the last few survivors emerge bruised and battered from the rubble in the last days before peace is declared.

F YOU WANT TO WATCH *THE GENIUS* PURELY AS A game show with some excellent tension and character development, you can do that. But another interesting aspect is watching different worldviews and desires come into conflict. Right from the get-go there is a tangible conflict in the air between the urge to win and the desire—present in the cast in, uh, varying levels—to be nice and get along with everyone. Some contestants make it clear from the beginning that they want to be more co-operative, whilst others, such as Season 1's bullish TV presenter Kim Gura, blithely assert that *The Genius* is a zero-sum game, and that the only way to win is to play ruthlessly and without sentimentality.

One might assume that the latter style is depressingly successful, and at first this may seem to be the case. Those players who insist that the game should be played a certain way, rather than kowtowing to the styles of others, often end up making their worldview a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, insisting so

aggressively to the others that the game should be played by their rules that they actually make it true by sheer force of personality. It is also true that some more unpleasant social and economic dynamics start hoving into view as the show goes on. ("Isn't it only right for the rich to win in a capitalist society?" muses babyfaced popstar Sunggyu in one nerve-wracking season 1 episode.) In particular, contestants who are women are often subtly—and sometimes not so subtly—ignored or dismissed by the men, many of whom automatically choose to make advantageous alliances solely or mostly with men in a way that is blatant and infuriating, especially to those of us who have experienced workplaces and organizations where all the good opportunities "just happened" to go to men. Sometimes, it is enough to make the viewer silently beg the more placid players to get a little nastier, to try and show the assholes once and for all that they won't win, not just for the pleasure of watching them lose but to hope that a more utopian worldview can be vindicated. But then, of course, that is how the assholes win: by creating a system where everyone has to be devious all the time, where everyone is at each other's throats, making it harder for everyone in the long run just so you can survive until next week and maybe one day make a little money. (You might think that, since the players are all celebrities, the prize money wouldn't really matter to them, but don't be so sure—the Korean pop industry, to take just one example, is notoriously exploitative of its stars, many of whom see little-to-no money after giving up the best years of their lives to an exhausting regime of nonstop diets, training and performing.)

Yet there are times where the show can make you hopeful, and suggest that there are other ways of doing things. The assholes do not always win, and there are community bonds that overpower single-minded venality. Some of the bonds on display are culturally specific—some of the contestants feel affinity for each other because they are sunbae and hoobae, roughly translating to senior and junior in the same industry, and therefore seem more inclined to trust each other. But other times, people just do nice things for each other because they genuinely seem to want to do nice things for the sake of being nice. Contestants sometimes make sacrifices for each other, or tip each other off to some of the various goings-on, or simply feel obligated to be good and loyal to one another. These strategies do often pay off, which is thrilling not only because we have sadly been trained not to expect it, but because it shines a light on another way of thinking that can be just as successful as hard-nosed skepticism, if not more.

But then again, perhaps it's best not to think of the show as a one-to-one representation of the real world. As Kim Gura, the season 1 Machiavellian-in-chief himself once states, "This skill is useless in real life." You don't have to see the show as a grand clash of life philosophies to enjoy people screwing each other over and solving highly intricate puzzles. That's just the icing on the cake. •



Tulsi Gabbard is the secret emissary of an underworld king, and her presidential run is part of a sinister plot to install him in a military junta. Her true form is a giant white wyrm. After dropping out, Tulsi will return to the underworld king and apologize for her failure.

Pete Buttigieg will return to "consulting" for an "agency" in an "undisclosed country."



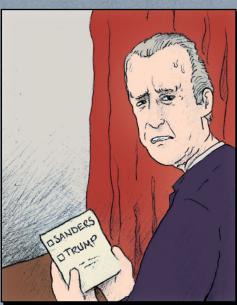


Amy Klobuchar will go back to demon hunting and open a strike-breaking consultancy on the side.

# WHAT THE 2020 CANDIDATES



Julian Castro and his brother will engage in TWIN HIJINKS! One rescues children imprisoned by ICE, the other preserves their secret identity by pretending to be a dull useless bureaucrat. Joe Biden will vote for Trump.





Marianne Williamson will foil an alien invasion with the power of love. But then a video will surface in which she says that crystals can cure autism and she'll be canceled again.



Andrew Yang will transcend his mortal form and elevate his consciousness into a computer.

After a power outage, he'll be stuck in a motherboard somewhere promising an endless supply of one thousand dollars to himself.

**Tom Steyer** will go back to literally no one knowing who he is.





John Hickenlooper will, predictably, become a fracking lobbyist. During a demonstration about the safety of fracking he will fall into a crack into the earth and get devoured by Tulsi in her wyrm form.

# WILL DO AFTER DROPPING OUT



Kirsten Gillibrand will become a professional assassin. She's entirely mercenary and will take all contracts no matter who it is for, but she specializes in MeToo men.

Watch the fuck out, Al Franken.

**Michael Bloomberg** will be fatally stabbed by an enraged waiter who can't believe this fucker doesn't tip.





Kamala Harris will set up on a seastead and declare herself its reigning Yass Queen.



# CAPITALISM AS RELIGION

### by Daniel Walden

NE OF THE FEW THINGS THAT SOCIALISTS and capitalists largely agree on is that the development of capitalism was part of a larger shift in the social and intellectual worlds of Europe, and that this enormous shift was characterized by an increased reliance on human reason and a decrease in religious superstition. This is what the sociologist Max Weber called the "disenchantment" of the world: we no longer view the world as pervaded with divinity or magic, because industrialization and the development of capitalism have stripped these enchantments away. Socialists and capitalists will both, then, be equally surprised to learn from Eugene McCarraher that this story is wildly incorrect, and that we have never lived in a disenchanted world. Rather, the enchantment that supposedly characterized the Middle Ages has persisted uninterrupted into modernity, but has taken different forms, and our capitalist world is alive with tutelary spirits, sacramental rites, and visions of eternal beatitude.

Eugene McCarraher, The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity, Harvard University Press, \$39.95

McCarraher, a professor of history at Villanova University, makes this argument in a brick of a book entitled *The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity*. The text itself takes up nearly 700 pages, with a further 106 pages of endnotes, and the pages themselves (though printed in a readable typeface) are dense with information and narrative. It's the product of nearly twenty years of work, epitomizing the ethos of craftsmanship preached by William Morris, John Ruskin, Dorothy Day, and other figures of Romantic resistance to whom McCarraher introduces his readers. With this architectural attention to structure and prose style, McCarraher's massive book is no chore at all but a genuine delight to read.

Along with his intellectual-historical argument, McCarraher aims to introduce his readers to another way of looking at social and economic history, one that goes beyond bare material relationships and incorporates the spiritual dimension of our experience. This is not a religious view in the sense of being tied to the dogma of any particular religion, but it's rooted in McCarraher's own Roman Catholic background, and the most consistent term that he uses for it is "sacramental." In Catholic theology, the

sacraments are the visible means through which humanity participates in divinity: the words and actions that both signify and dispense God's grace to the faithful. When a sick person is anointed with oil and particular prayers are said over them, the anointing and the prayers signify God's grace but also, according to Catholic doctrine, actually make it *present*. McCarraher's argument seeks to expose the sacramental logic of capitalism—the ways in which capitalism sets up its own gods and ordains rites for the dispensation of capitalist grace (that is, money). He argues that:

...capitalism is a form of enchantment—perhaps better, a misenchantment, a parody or perversion of our longing for a sacramental way of being in the world. Its animating spirit is money. Its theology, philosophy, and cosmology have been otherwise known as "economics." Its sacramentals consist of fetsihized commodities and technologies—the material culture of production and consumption. Its moral and liturgical codes are contained in management theory and business journalism. Its clerisy is a corporate intelligentsia of economists, executives, managers, and business writers, a stratum akin to Aztec priests, medieval scholastics, and Chinese mandarins. Its iconography consists of advertising, public relations, marketing, and product design. Its beatific vision of eschatological destiny is the global imperium of capital, a heavenly city of business with incessantly expanding production, trade, and consumption. And its gospel has been that of "Mammonism," the attribution of ontological power to money and of existential sublimity to its possessors.

This is strong stuff, and it's difficult not to buy into McCarraher's argument from the very beginning, purely based on the rhetorical, intellectual, and moral force with which he states it. I admit up front that I am well positioned to accept most of what he says: like him I am both a Catholic and a socialist, and like him I find it difficult to tell where one of those ends and the other begins. A more skeptical reader might, however, argue that this all sounds very good as a metaphor, but doesn't have much descriptive value for the ways in which capitalism has developed and continues to function. This is where the historical portion of McCarraher's argument comes in, and it's this history that occupies the vast majority of the book.

CCARRAHER BEGINS WITH THE medieval period, "in which the material world and social life could reflect and convey divine grace and power. For serf, lord, merchant, and artisan as for pope, archbishop, and scholastic philosopher, all of life was sacramental, pervaded by the presence of the triune God." In more general terms, the world and everything in it was considered to partake of divinity, and this included human beings, animals, and all natural things. As a result, there was an order to the world and a set of expectations governing how human beings ought to relate to the rest of creation. This was not a wholly benign order, as "the crown of the sacraments could be used to sanction the most oppressive power," but it rested fundamentally on the idea that human beings are stewards of the world, not its owners. In this view, though humanity had fallen, the world was fundamentally a place of goodness and abundance, a gift from God to all of us, and this view was reflected in a wildly different

notion of what "property" was and what one could do with it.. The more conventional historical picture bears McCarraher out on this point. To take an example from English history, most feudal manors included common land on which tenant farmers had the right to pasture animals. The lord who held title to the land in the manor had no right to interfere with this use, nor did he have the right to kick tenants off his land. One of the marks of the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in England was the widespread enclosure of this common land, which contemporaries like Sir Thomas More saw as a kind of theft, since it transformed a public resource into a commodity that could be bought or sold.

But even this privatization was not, at first, absolute. In England and France, for example, by ancient custom derived from Mosaic Law, any grain or fruit that fell to the ground during harvest—or was left on the stalk or vine—was the property of the poor, who had the legally-protected right to come into the fields and recover this leftover food. This practice was known as "gleaning." This right persisted in parts of England well into modernity, until it was ended for good by the House of Lords in a decision on a lawsuit—*Steel v. Houghton* (1788)—a case that is considered by legal and political historians to mark the beginning of the modern understanding of absolute property rights. After *Steel*, a property owner's rights were absolute, and property was fully transformed from a form of stewardship oriented toward the common good into an atomized possession for the sole benefit of an owner, open to the world only to the extent that its owner permitted.

This was the beginning, argues McCarraher, not of a rationalization or secularization of the world, but of a widespread remaking of the image of God and therefore of the sacramental order of the world. John Locke epitomized this tendency when he characterized human beings as "[God's] property, whose workmanship they are," bound "not to quit [their] station willfully," exchanging God the free creator who creates purely out of love for God the petty foreman who has a right to extract value from his creation. This is the other major argument that runs through McCarraher's book: capitalism, having unconsciously retained the idea that humanity bears the image of God, has continually endeavored to replace God with lesser things and therefore to remake humanity in the image of these idols. This replacement is called "rational" because it stops using the term "God," even though these replacements serve more or less identical functions. Think, for example, of Adam Smith's "invisible hand," originally deployed as a metaphor but later characterized by Nobel laureate Paul Samuelson as a "mystical principle" in his 1948 economics textbook, converting a metaphor for the social forces of markets into an incomprehensible mystery of the cosmic order. In mistaking the laws of capital accumulation for fundamental laws of the world, we mistake something temporary and mutable for something eternal and unchanging, and set up for ourselves the impossible task of conforming our lives to these "objective" laws, rather than realizing that we can and should reshape these temporary laws and institutions in the image of the basic and unchanging needs of human beings.

The ways in which we have mistaken the temporary for the permanent, and the profane for the sacred, and the ways in which some people have resisted this misenchantment form

the narrative line of McCarraher's book. The Puritans arrived in America "bearing belief in a world of wonders" and also believing in a secret knowledge by which nature could be made to yield its fruits. This was not, incidentally, the knowledge of how to grow crops in New England (for that, they needed considerable help from the Native community) but the pseudoscience of alchemy. John Winthrop, son of that John Winthrop who exhorted the Puritans to be a "city on a hill," was not only a Puritan Christian but also an alchemist who viewed alchemy "at once [as] religious quest, scientific project, and business enterprise." This alchemical sensibility would substantially influence the burgeoning American theological-economic imagination. For Christian alchemists, those who worked diligently to uncover the secrets of God's creation and applied them with faithful hearts could work wonders, culminating in the transformation of base metal into pure gold. This aligned well with the covenant theology that governed the new Puritan communities, in which thriftiness, hard work, and faithfulness would bring prosperity and material wealth as "God's benediction on the righteous, a reward from the Almighty to the archangels of improvement." Already in early America we see wealth transformed from an accident of birth or chance into the visible sign of God's favor, a halo for contemporary saints. The commercial market soon became identified fully with God's providence, an identification most fully expressed by the contemporary proclamation of the "prosperity gospel," in which God shows his perfect and boundless love for creation by letting some people drive a Mercedes.

NE OF THE THINGS THAT McCarraher leaves unexplained despite its importance perhaps because he assumes a certain degree of religious literacy in the reader—is how the nebulous concept of "providence" lurks at the heart of so much Christian turning toward the worship of Mammon. It is perfectly true that, for Christians, God's providence lies behind everything: it is God's will that sustains all creation from moment to moment, and our very existence is a free outpouring of God's love. In that sense, God lurks behind everything we do and is always at work in us, for even our freedom to do evil bespeaks the divine freedom in which we participate. It's very easy, therefore, to make the small but critical jump from this broad understanding of providence and to trade divinity for divination—to miss the divine beauty imperfectly revealed by all things in favor of treating *particular* things (like a Mercedes) and circumstances (like being born wealthy) as the special barometers of God's will. This is the particular heresy that, for McCarraher, unites all our varieties of capitalist misenchantment: we treat markets as omens of divine favor, entrepreneurs as God's anointed, and economists as the prophets who reveal God's will. Economists bring glad tidings that the GDP continues to rise, which is supposed to reassure us that despite widespread poverty, crushing debt, and children caged on our border, the talismanic power of rising numbers will somehow see us through.

What works against this false and heretical misenchantment is something that McCarraher dubs "Romanticism," a name that he uses because he finds it most powerfully expressed among the poets and artisans closely associated with the Romantic movement. We often see the Romantics characterized as a kind of reactionary movement against the Enlightenment, a gang of literary types who resented "reason" and did a lot of drugs. This is not entirely a false characterization. "Yet Romantic writers of all kinds," McCarraher says, "made clear that their nemesis was not reason but rather reason torn from the fabric of nature and humanity—a rupture that made a demon and idol of reason, a despoiled wreck of nature, and a beguiled slave of humanity." The antidote to the Enlightenment worship of reason is not the total rejection of reason but its completion, its re-integration into the fullness of humanity, which the Romantics termed "imagination." As McCarraher explains:

In the Romantic sensibility, imagination was not a talent for inspiring fantasy, but the most perspicuous form of vision—the ability to see what is really there, behind the illusion or obscurity produced by our will to dissect and dominate...For Romantics, imagination did not annul but rather completed rationality...Though warning of the brutality of instrumental reason—"our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things; / We murder to dissect"—Wordsworth described imagination as 'Reason in her most exalted mood.' Imagination is the ecstasy of reason.

The spirits who most powerfully articulate this "ecstasy of reason" in McCarraher's account are those Romantics who looked to the medieval past for inspiration in building a communal future. First and chief among them is the art critic and social thinker John Ruskin, who praised medieval Gothic architecture for creating beautiful, monumental buildings that were simultaneously scaled to human use, and for involving whole communities in the creation of these buildings, while still providing opportunities within these projects for the individual expressions of particular artisans. Ruskin was also an outspoken critic of mechanization and industrialization, believing that it alienated people both from their work and from one another: he claimed it destroyed the intimate relationship between a craftsperson and their work, as well as the relationships between the craftspeople and those who bought and then used the objects that they made.

Ruskin's disciple and intellectual heir was William Morris, who has garnered admiration in some of this magazine's most controversial articles. Morris became enchanted by the Middle Ages during his undergraduate studies, but he was not some sort of reactionary monarchist pining for the boot of feudalism (you are thinking of Jacob Rees-Mogg). Quite the contrary: Morris's medieval infatuation drove him to utopian dreaming of a world without private property, and this utopian vision led him to Marxism and political friendships with Friedrich Engels, Wilhelm Liebknecht, and Karl Kautsky as well as the anarchists Sergey Stepnyak-Kravchinsky and Piotr Kropotkin. Morris's politics were always animated by a vision of work divorced from profit: one of the characters in his utopian novel News from Nowhere describes artisanal work as its own reward, "the reward of creation. The wages which God gets, as people might have said in time agone."

This longing for creation without money is vital to understanding McCarraher's variety of Christian socialism, which is rooted in the classical understanding of God's free creation of the world. As Fr. Herbert McCabe, one of McCarraher's most pro-

found intellectual influences, puts it, "God's creative act is an act of God's poverty, for God gains nothing by it. God makes without becoming richer. His act of creation is purely and simply for the benefit of his creatures." Insofar as we imitate this free giving of life, we become more Godlike and thus more like the people we ought to be. Here is where the Christian and secular socialist visions come together: for both camps, the central depravity of capitalism is that it represents a perversion of human nature, a rupture between how we ought to be and how we are forced to behave. We are social creatures who flourish in community with other people, and yet capitalism has made physical and emotional suffering into a precondition for living in any kind of community at all. It has alternately promised an idyllic automated Eden free of labor or a futuristic utopia of unimaginable abundance, but always delivers instead a Pandæmonium, an infernal city of strife in which the nature that draws us together pits us against one another.

Leftists are often skeptical of arguments about "human nature," in large part because such arguments are so often deployed by libertarians and other right-wing types seeking to naturalize and justify the systems against which we struggle. Indeed, these arguments are often phrased in Darwinian terms, where "survival" and "progress" and "improvement" are imperatives whose demands flood our synapses and compel us to desire the ruin of our fellow person so that we might pick their bones. But the truth is that we do have basic human needs: for food and water, for shelter and warmth, for rest and play, for emotional and physical closeness with other human beings. McCarraher, rather than developing some grand unified theory of human nature based on shaky scientific foundations, simply asks us to consider these basic human needs as part of our nature, and their satisfaction as necessary for our flourishing. In doing this he employs a distinction originally made by Ruskin between "wealth" and "illth." Ruskin sought to distinguish between two kinds of abundance and to avoid what he saw as a deep confusion about wealth. In Ruskin's articulation, wealth is what helps us to do well by satisfying our actual needs: a warm bed, good healthy food, a comfortable chair, a well-kept public park, etc. Illth is wealth's inverse—worldly prosperity that satisfies false needs and, in doing so, hurts rather than nourishes its possessor and their society (think of expensive "anti-aging" skin products or cheap plastic toys or SUVs). As McCarraher explains in an interview with *The* Nation, "The distinction is qualitative. Wealth and illth are relationships between the good and the character of the person."

This opens up the ecological dimension of McCarraher's argument: as the misenchantment of capitalism glorifies our instinct for domination, it beguiles us into seeing nature as mere grist for the manufacture of material excess, blinding us to the goodness and beauty of nature as it is. We do not see the "illth" caused by our lust for conquest, for more and better stuff. This is not an anarcho-primitivist argument: part of nature's good is that it can satisfy our needs. But nature is good when used to satisfy our *actual* needs, not the misdirected desires that capitalist advertising seeks to cultivate. It turns out that disordered wants are not only the primary source of our current environmental catastrophe—in the United States we outright destroy 40 percent of the food we produce and drive cars that constitute nearly 20 percent of our CO<sub>2</sub> emissions—but accelerating consumption

itself forms the basis for the entirety of classical and contemporary economics. McCarraher is extremely clear on this point in the same interview quoted above:

As a Christian, I reject the two assumptions found in conventional economics: scarcity (to the contrary, God has created a world of abundance) and rational, self-seeking, utility-maximizing humanism (a competitive conception of human nature that I believe traduces our creation in the image and likeness of God). I think that one of the most important intellectual missions of our time is the construction of an economics with very different assumptions about the nature of humanity and the world.

If only we would properly order our desires, he argues, we would find that "abundance and peace are the true nature of things, not the scarcity and violence that leaven the cosmology of capitalist economics."

It is this moral critique that prompts McCarraher's searing excoriation of economics as it is currently practiced. He spares nothing, for he believes capitalist economics to be nothing less than the scripture and priesthood of a demonic power. I quote his indictment in full:

The grotesque ontology of scarcity and money, the tawdry humanism of acquisitiveness and conflict, the reduction of rationality to the mercenary principles of pecuniary reason—this ensemble of falsehoods that comprise the foundation of economics must be resisted and supplanted. Economics must be challenged, not only as a sanction for injustice but also as a specious portrayal of human beings and a fictional account of their history. As a legion of anthropologists and historians have repeatedly demonstrated, economics, in Graeber's forthright dismissal, has "little to do with anything we observe when we examine how economic life is actually conducted." From its historically illiterate "myth of barter" to its shabby and degrading claims about human nature, economics is not just a dismal but a fundamentally fraudulent science as well, akin, as Ruskin wrote in Unto This Last, to "alchemy, astrology, witchcraft, and other such popular creeds."

The argument being made here and above is a subtle one using some of the technical terminology of philosophy and theology, so it demands a bit of exposition. McCarraher contends that for economics, scarcity is *ontological*—meaning that the field of economics considers scarcity a fundamental fact of existence. The first implicit rebuttal is that scarcity is instead contingent and historical: it is brought about at particular times by particular circumstances, but is not a fundamental condition of existence. Making this rebuttal is part of McCarraher's goal in writing a historical work. The second point, which is no less important, is that obsession with scarcity is alien to our humanity: we are not, at a very basic level, wired to operate as maximizing hoarders of the finite substance of life, and this is a point on which academic anthropology and Christian anthropology concur. Academic anthropology has made extensive study of gift economies\* since the 1925 publication of Marcel Mauss's The Gift, and for the Christian anthropologists "the goal of mankind" is "real unity in love," in the words of Fr. McCabe. The fact that we begin to operate very differently within capitalist society must lead to the conclusion that there is

<sup>\*&</sup>quot;Gift economy" is a broad term used to describe non-market societies or social relationships wherein goods or valuables are given rather than being bought with money or bartered for. Such relationships are widely attested in ancient literatures—the Iliad and the Mahābhārata are both rife with examples—and persist in, among other things, the potlatch ceremonies held by indigenous communities of the Pacific Northwest.

either something wrong with capitalism or something wrong with humanity. McCarraher takes the former view, while even liberals like Jane Goodall, who recently suggested that environmental problems are caused primarily by too many of us being alive, have shown their hands as partisans of the latter.

The charge of attempting to remake humanity usually emerges from the mouths and pens of the right, directed at the left: think of the numerous denunciations of "social engineering" that one sees in attacks on affirmative action or the teaching of minority perspectives on history. Spoken by the right, the charge is usually one of conspiracy—a sinister cabal of elites/liberals/socialists/Jews making plans in a back room to alter humanity for the worse. But McCarraher's charge is not conspiratorial; rather, he contends, the global dominance of neoliberalism as a system has altered our way of thinking and living, adjusting us to "the delusion of democratic promise, the open secret of corporate plutocracy, the supersession of all cultural and political limits on the power and authority of money." No development was more effective in bringing about this adjustment than the advent of mass automation, which was welcomed with the "elysian reveries of the corporate business intelligentsia" while "the fetish of technology diverted attention from its origins in capital's need to achieve complete mastery of the production process." The ultimate project of capitalist automation has been to remake labor in the image of machines, forcing workers to submit to more and more degrading conditions in a vain attempt to temporarily stave off the automation of their work. Automation has become a vision of the End Times, an eschatological horizon beyond which lies the full mechanization of humanity itself.

McCarraher draws on a lesser-known Kurt Vonnegut novel, Player Piano, to illustrate this point. The novel describes a futuristic community in which mechanization has consumed most of the labor: the scientists and engineers live in comfort, tending to the machinery of production, and most people live in wretched poverty, eking out what small living they can working in the factory. All of this is watched over and planned by a master computer network, whose dictates govern the scientists' work. This scenario seemed fantastical in 1952, when Vonnegut published the novel, but we have seen it come to full fruition in the warehouses and distribution networks of Amazon. Presided over by a machine intelligence that no one, not even its programmers, fully understands, quotas are dictated and employees rewarded or punished depending on their ability to meet these quotas. McCarraher, occupied as he is with writing a history, has little to say about the Amazon algorithm, but after being immersed in his sacramental imagination, one sees the advent of such a thing as perhaps the purest contemporary expression of traffic with demons. Through arcane formulae, Amazon's engineers have put the company under the power of an inhuman intelligence that feeds on our collective greed and nurtures it through the imposition of catastrophic deprivation and suffering upon the poor. And since this algorithm's imperatives are a pure expression of capitalist production—get more goods to more people to make more money—it is hard not to conclude that capitalism is, itself, ultimately an infernal order, a perpetual con job in which both spiritual and worldly salvation are always just around the corner if only we will trade a little more misery, a little more blood,

a few more lives. Perhaps the greatest beguilement of capitalist enchantment is this notion that we can purchase the paradise to come on contract: we know, or should know, what happens to those who make bargains with the Prince of Lies.

This seems like a deeply pessimistic view of our current trajectory, and from the perspective of history, it is. Our view of history itself is a construction of capitalist enchantment: it shows us the spectacle of conflict and violence and says that this scramble for acquisition is as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, unto the ages of ages. The theologian David Bentley Hart contends that "capitalism will not have exhausted its intrinsic energies until it has exhausted the world itself" and achieved "the total rendition of the last intractable residues of the intrinsically good into the impalpable Pythagorean eternity of market value. And any force," he says, "capable of interrupting this process would have to come from beyond." To see beyond is precisely what McCarraher's Romantic imagination demands of us. Beneath the spectacle of avarice and violence lies the still more fundamental reality of grace, in which the world and everything in it is pure gift, with no price or condition attached. To see beyond history, then, is to come to know the world as a gift and receive it as such. To live this gratitude, in which everything is given and nothing is ours, is our only way out, and learning to live this gratitude in truth is the real discipline of revolution.

is an extraordinary book, I don't think that it's required reading, and readers who do not share McCarraher's deep religious convictions may not find it as persuasive as I did. It also has notable blind spots: aside from a chapter on the religion of enslaved Black Americans and brief coverage of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s prophetic witness, McCarraher gives very little systemic coverage to the strains of anticapitalism that have run through the Black Church through its history. I will grant that this subject probably requires its own expertise, but McCarraher is plainly acquainted with some of the expert literature, and he ought, perhaps, to have directed curious readers more explicitly to those experts. But even with this gap in mind, it is difficult to characterize this book as anything but a masterpiece for its synthesis of intellectual history, anticapitalist polemic, and Romantic imagination. There is a great deal to be gained from McCarraher's arguments, even if you don't find his worldview entirely persuasive. Whatever our religious commitments, or lack of them, the gift of being here at all is a marvel; we didn't bring it about for ourselves, and it is outside our power to hoard it forever. To try to hoard life

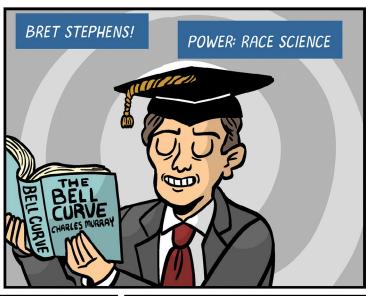
HILE THE ENCHANTMENTS OF MAMMON

That new world has always been present; history has not deprived us of an abiding and infinitely generous divinity. We can reenter paradise—even if only incompletely—for paradise has always been around and in us, eagerly awaiting our coming to our senses, ready to embrace and nourish when we renounce our unbelief in the goodness of things. And we can do this in the midst of imperial decay and in the face of seemingly impossible odds. Knowing that the world has been and will always be charged with the grandeur of God, we can practice, in the twilight of a senescent empire, love's radiant, unarmed, and penniless dominion. \ddots

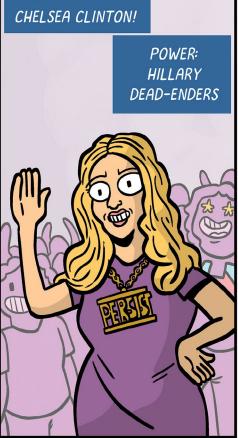
is to forsake our freedom to give it. As McCarraher concludes:

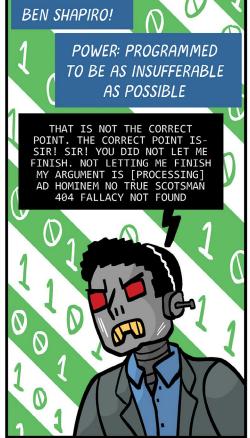
## JEWISH PROTECTION SQUAD!











IT IS A GRIM TIME FOR JEWS EVERYWHERE. THE NAZIS HAVE RETURNED. THEIR NUMBERS ARE GROWING. HOW WILL THE JEWISH PROTECTION SQUAD SAVE US THIS TIME?





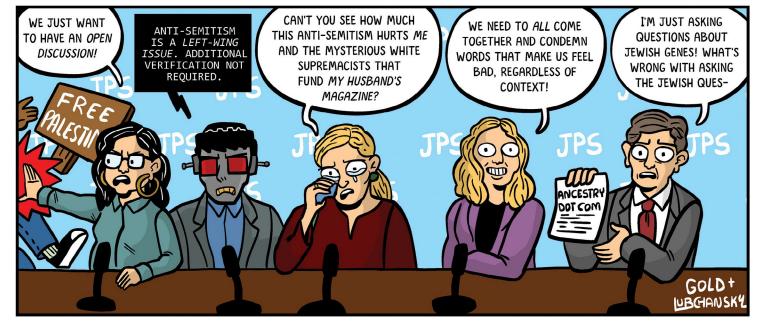














### The Enclosure of Ideas

### BY BRIANNA RENNIX & LYTA GOLD

OWARD THE END OF THE 16TH CENTURY, Miguel de Cervantes was struggling. His writing career, consisting of poetry, a pastoral novel, and 20 or so plays ("which, he noted, were received by the public without being booed off the stage or having the actors pelted with vegetables") had been about as influential as a soft fart. A brief foray into business met with disaster; Cervantes had a keen eye for the hilarity of human failings, but not for numbers, and on top of that, his business lay in supplying the Spanish Armada. Once the Armada was cut to pieces in 1588 by the British navy and some nasty weather, Cervantes' financial prospects worsened. He did manage to win a poetry competition and write a mean sonnet about a duke, but after that, he spent months in prison for "discrepancies in his accounts." In 1604, he sold the publishing rights for a novel, of which the full title is El ingenioso hidalgo don Quixote de la Mancha. The novel—unlike literally everything else Cervantes ever tried in his life—was an instantaneous success. However, since Cervantes had sold the publishing rights, it was his publisher who collected all the cash (for the authorized editions, at least). It was also written into the contract that the publisher would gain another, rather newfangled type of possession: exclusive rights to the character Don Quixote for a period of ten years. After that, Don Quixote would become what we'd now consider "public domain," although this is something of an anachronism.

The enclosure of characters and plotlines into "copyright" remains a relatively new phenomenon, one that didn't really exist before the advent of publishing. It's not like Sophocles and Euripides had to "get permission" from the Walt Homer Company to write Trojan war stories. And even when it came to works closer to Cervantes' own time, authorial ownership didn't exist as such; the scholar H. Parkman Biggs notes that popular medieval romances such as *The Song of Roland* and *The Romance of the Rose* represent "example[s] of group authorship over time" where dif-

ferent writers chose to add new characters, emphasize thematic elements, or edit various versions of the text into a cohesive whole. These changes to medieval romances took place across centuries, so for the most part the writers didn't know each other, or have the chance to approve each other's changes.

But in the case of Cervantes and his imitator—the pseudonymous Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda—Cervantes knew, and definitely did *not* approve.

Cervantes had been working on part II of *Don Quixote* for several years, but he wasn't yet finished when Avellaneda's *Don Quixote* sequel came out in 1614 (right after the ten-year ban on using the character had expired). Pouncing on another writer's characters might have been considered somewhat rude at the time, but there was nothing actually *forbidden* about it. As Avellaneda wrote in his slightly defensive prologue: "I only say that nobody need be startled that this second part comes from a different author, for there is nothing new about a different person pursuing the same story."

Cervantes, however, was not about to let a different person pursue the same story. The second half of his Don Quixote is a furious rebuttal of Avellaneda's fanfiction. As H. Parkman Biggs notes, "Cervantes was so incensed he wove insults to Avellaneda's person, writing ability, and plot choice in the final pages of his version, often to the exclusion of other character or plot development." In one scene, a character describes two devils she witnessed playing tennis with rackets made of fire and Avellaneda's book for a ball. One of the devils says of the book, "So bad is it... that if I had set myself deliberately to make a worse, I could not have done it." In another scene, Don Quixote runs across travelers who know him only from Avellaneda's slanderous version of his adventures. After declaring himself the real Don Quixote and denouncing Avellaneda's lies, one of the travelers says, "I believe it... and were it possible, an order should be issued that no one should have the presumption to deal with anything relating to Don Quixote, save his original author ... "

It's important to note that Cervantes, having finally reached the literary heights he'd always felt he deserved, wasn't angry over money or royalties—he was actually surviving off the goodwill of a wealthy patron at this point. The issue at stake was his pride, and another author's temerity in writing "his" characters—and not only that, but writing them poorly. In this, as in many other matters, Cervantes was ahead of his time.

Today, the intellectual property (IP) rights of creators are—with certain important exceptions—undisputed. Copyright laws have varied over the centuries, and the details are very boring, but what began as authorial ownership for a few decades with the option to renew has mutated into the lifespan of the author plus 50 years. The Walt Disney corporation lobbied hard for the 1976 U.S. version of this law (it was already standard in much of Europe), and throughout the rest of the 20th and into the 21st century, Disney has continued to pressure Congress to extend copyright laws in perpetuity. This is a company that has made its money largely by copyrighting public domain fairy tales, and is currently trying to seize the rest of the world's remaining IP with its greedy little mouse paws.

But even smaller-scale estates maintain legal rights to IP for ridiculous lengths of time. Sherlock Holmes only became public domain in 2014, a full 84 years after Sir Arthur Conan Doyle died, and despite the preponderance of what's called "Sherlock Holmes pastiche"—the uncountable Holmes knockoffs, borrowings, retellings, and reworkings that have appeared in popular art almost since the creation of the character. We've had two official Sherlock movies and two TV shows in the past decade alone, and let's be honest: every logical, dispassionate, socially frigid TV detective who notices details no one else would notice is an indirect descendant of Holmes. Conan Doyle's estate used this as part of their failed attempt to maintain the copyright, as *Smithsonian Magazine* summarized: "The defense of the Doyle estate went something like this: sure, Arthur Conan Doyle's stories are now at least 90 years



old, but other stories about Sherlock Holmes are still under copyright, therefore Sherlock Holmes is still under copyright."

The curious thing about Holmes pastiche, whether licit or illicit, is that it's had an enormous effect on our mental image of the character. As Parker Higgins and Sarah Jeong explain in their now-defunct IP newsletter 5 *Useful Articles*:

Sherlock Holmes—as we know him—is the construct of many authors, artists, and even film-makers. As Authors Alliance co-founder Molly Van Houweling points out, the phrase "elementary, my dear Watson," never appears in any of Doyle's works. And Doyle himself never described Holmes wearing his signature funny hat[;] this pop culture impression of the detective came about through a series of others' interpretations—first, in a few original illustrations by Sidney Paget, which probably influenced the stage actor William Gilette's depiction of Holmes, whose photo inspired American illustrator Frederic Dorr Steele to consistently draw the character in a deerstalker cap, an artistic choice that made its way into a number of cinematic versions.

Sherlock Holmes really is—and has been for a long time—a creation of the public domain, influenced by countless creators. This would undoubtedly have been fine with Conan Doyle himself; Doyle famously grew to dislike his creation, and in their newsletter, Higgins and Jeong note that Doyle once told a playwright who was working on a Holmes adaptation: "You may marry him, or murder or do what you like with him." Miguel de Cervantes may have been more protective of his own famous character, but Don Quixote too has been reimagined and redefined numerous times. In a fitting turn of phrase, the judge who ruled against the Conan Doyle estate in the 2014 copyright appeal said the demand to retain Conan Doyle's solo authorship over Holmes "bordered on the quixotic."

F GENUINE "OWNERSHIP" OF A POPULAR character is ultimately impossible in a creative or philosophical sense, it is nonetheless the legal fiction applied to fiction. A creator might "own" their characters until their death, at which point their ideas become the property of their estate. Then their lazy kids—for reasons that remain obscure and specious at best—get to inherit royalties, even though they rarely, if ever, participated in the creative process. This is increasingly the pattern with popular IP: it belongs not to individual creative people, but to estates and large corporations.

When it comes to certain forms of collectively-produced popular IP, such as superhero comics, corporate ownership already sets in while the creators are still alive. Even before Marvel and DC were gobbled up by even bigger, more rapacious corporations, their lucrative superheroes legally belonged—with some limited exceptions—to Marvel or DC as publishers, not to the people who actually created and developed the characters and storylines. Given the collaborative nature of superhero comics, in which ven-

erable characters are constantly reworked by new creative teams, a non-individuated copyright makes a certain amount of sense. But as currently practiced, comics creators such as Marvel's Bill Mantlo have had to rely on GoFundMe to pay their medical bills, while their characters are turned into profitable toys and billion-dollar movie franchises.

IP has become such a normalized concept that the average person probably doesn't spend much time interrogating it. But the notion that a person—or, stranger still, an estate or a corporation—can "own" characters and stories has had a peculiar impact on the way the public interacts with narratives. The human impulse to mess around with the stories we hear—giving them different endings, transplanting them to different settings, retooling them for new media—runs pretty deep. In addition to well-documented literary borrowings by famous writers throughout history, we can look at the intricate webs of variations on popular fairy tales and folk songs as evidence of how widespread and normal a practice this narrative-sharing is. Scholarly systems like the "Aarne-Thompson-Uther" typography of tales (primarily focused on Europe and the Near East) or the huge Roud Folk Song Index have been devised to try to map the distribution of folk narratives across regions. The Scots murder ballad commonly known as "The Twa Sisters," to take just one example, has more than 20 recorded variants in English and hundreds more in other European languages, all with different character motives, plot twists, and resolutions. Shameless theft and scrapheap scavengery is how storytelling works in a state of nature.

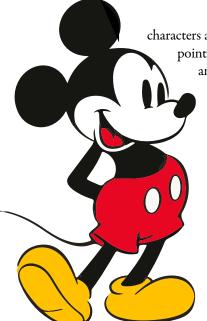
Copyright is an attempt to partition these common lands of imagination into discrete legal properties. Some particularly litigious copyright-holders have taken a crotchety get-off-my-lawn approach to enforcing their narrative ownership: the writer Anne Rice (creator of Interview with a Vampire) has famously pursued legal action against small-time fanfiction writers, while Stephen Joyce, the grandson of James Joyce, was notorious for threatening lawsuits against everyone from the singer-songwriter Kate Bush—who wanted to set a short excerpt of *Ulysses* to music—to ordinary citizens trying to stage public readings of his grandfather's novels. But these lawsuits are the exceptions, not the rule, when it comes to small-time fanworks. Most literary estates or copyright-holding corporations tolerate (and in some cases even welcome) the existence of artworks that borrow from their proprietary narratives, so long as their creators disclaim ownership over copyrighted material and don't earn any money from their work. This magnanimous indulgence, in turn, keeps so-called "fanartists" beholden to the copyright-holders. The impact of copyright hasn't manifested as a change in the effusive proliferation of variations on popular narratives so much as a change in how the public classifies "authorized" and "unauthorized" narratives. "Authorized" narratives are produced by the copyright-holder and/or its licensees and are often religiously imagined, by fans of those narratives, as "canon." Canon is the serious, "real" narrative, whose stakes matter. "Unauthorized" fan-



This is not Sherlock Holmes smoking a pipe.

works, by contrast, are inherently unserious and viewed as categorically incapable of significant artistic merit. This is fundamentally different from how narratives worked before copyright, where the only things that mattered to a reader or listener was a) which versions of a story were actually available to them, and b) which of these versions they happened to like the best.

If this new division of narratives into "authorized" and "unauthorized" is a little strange, perhaps, and out of sync with historical precedent, is it necessarily bad? Is there a justifiable rationale for treating ideas—and particularly stories—as a form of "property"? One obvious reason for doing so is to ensure that writers and other creators don't starve to death: in our present-day capitalist utopia, if a writer's output can be brazenly copied and profited upon by others, they won't have any meaningful ability to make a living off their work, especially if they're an independent creator without any kind of institutional affiliation or preexisting wealth. This explanation has some merit, although if we see copyright as a necessary evil to ensure that individual artists can sustain themselves, that doesn't provide much justification for why copyrighted narratives and characters should be inheritable by estates and corporations after the creator's death (or, for that matter, why a corporation should be able to hold rights over characters when the artists responsible for developing those



An extremely copyrighted thing that we probably should not print here.

characters are still living.) As Sean Andrews points out in *Jacobin*: "In reality, movie

and music collections, journals of scholarly societies, trademarked properties, and patent libraries are often acquired, traded, and licensed by organizations who had no connection to the labor involved in their creation other than the ability to buy it."

Another reason that's often trotted out to justify this type of copyright is the idea of "quality"—that the integrity of an artistic work is protected by discouraging knockoffs, or, at any rate, making it clear to the public which is the "original" and which are mere derivatives. Cervantes would have been a fan of this! Nevertheless, this

argument doesn't really hold water. The J.J. Abrams-directed Star Wars films, for example, are deemed to be "canon" or "official" because J.J. Abrams was hired to produce them by Disney, the Star Wars copyright-holder—but they're not much more than lazy rehashes of the original movies. As one scathing review of The Rise of Skywalker put it: "Fans of the series will groove to the old familiar beats and see the old familiar sights. For some, that will be enough—maybe even satisfying. Others may find themselves wondering exactly why they used to love this stuff so much." Many unauthorized fanworks produced by Star Wars fans are likely better than Abrams' films, and certainly no worse. Star Wars' copyright-holder corporations have also licensed a number of tie-in novels, which are qualitatively indistinguishable from fanfiction, but are somehow deemed more "official" than regular fanfiction by virtue of having been blessed by the copyright-holder. In the world of "high literature," there's also the irritating notion that "serious" artists who borrow from works in the public domain, however lazy the end result, are being playful, experimental, and drawing on a deep well of shared culture, whereas "fanartists" who scaffold their creations onto works that are still copyrighted are mere hacks or starry-eyed weirdos. When a writer imagines a romance between two characters from popular fiction, they are doing "low art," whereas when John Updike invents a backstory for the romance between Gertrude and Claudius in Hamlet, he is doing "high art." It doesn't matter whether the former work is actually more artistically interesting than the latter; certainly, no critic is going to review the fanwork, because it's outside the scope of what is now deemed to be "real" art, and certainly could never hope to scale the heights of "high" art.

HE OTHER DOWNSIDE CREATED BY THE designation of stories as property is that it actually prevents talented artists from making the kind of art they really want to make, and then distributing their creation freely and attempting to make a living from it. Writers who dabble in "fanworks" generally view these efforts as labors of love, as practice for (or distraction from) more "original" works they could write—unless you are savvy like E.L. James, of course, in which case you might just change the names of the principal characters in your successful softcore-porn fanfic (about Twilight) and then make extraordinary scads of money off it (the 50 Shades of Grey franchise). Let's suppose you are a writer who is pretty serious about your vocation, but for the particular story you want to tell, you want to use the backdrop of Tolkien's Middle-earth, with all its rich invented history and loaded underlying commentary on issues like environmentalism and racism. Tolkien himself was extremely open to the idea that people create new art about what he termed his "legendarium" after his death, famously writing in a letter to a friend that "I would draw some of the great tales in fullness, and leave many only placed in the scheme, and sketched. The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama." Indeed, the entire metafictional conceit of Tolkien's books The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings is that they are "found" manuscripts that Tolkien himself merely "translated," a kind of textual layering that lends itself very well to alternate interpretations. And since lots of people know the story of *Lord of the Rings*, the way lots of people know the Bible or Shakespeare or Jane Austen, there are certain unique narrative effects that you can accomplish by thwarting your reader's expectations, or complicating familiar themes. Unfortunately, you can't actually write your Middle-earth book and have it taken "seriously," much less try to make any money off it, because—despite the fact that Tolkien has now been dead 47 years—the copyright over his stories is owned by the Tolkien Estate and something called the "Saul Zaentz Company." (Per Wikipedia, the former is currently suing the latter for marketing Middle-earth-themed casino games, while the latter has served papers on a number of Hobbit-themed pubs in the United Kingdom.) In the past, the collective reworking and elaboration of shared stories was what gave rise to mythologies and folklores, but this formerly respectable and utterly natural way of producing fiction is now considered inherently frivolous and subject to legal action.

We might also, perhaps, think that there's a kind of cultural sickness that comes from perceiving stories to be "owned." People actually make themselves miserable over the idea of their favorite stories being "ruined" by a bad sequel or adaptation, which is absurd—not because being upset over narrative is *per se* absurd, since the emotional stakes of a good story can absolutely feel real, but because no one is obligated to accept a story they think is badly told as somehow more "real" than, say, an-

other version of that story that they themselves could choose to imagine or write. There are constant reverberations of agony on the internet every time J.K. Rowling tries to retcon a weird new interpretation onto one of the characters she wrote, or re-reveals herself to be an anti-leftist TERF, as if J.K. Rowling has some magical power to dictate what is "real" and "unreal" in a fictional story whose every conceivable alternative permutation has probably already been worked out through millions of freely-available fanworks.

O IF WE DON'T LIKE COPYRIGHT-ED narratives, what are the alternatives? We might be tempted to simply get rid of copyright altogether, condemning it as a ludicrous attempt to impose property concepts on the human imagination—but then what about the "starving artist" problem? We can certainly look for alternative ways to fund artistic creation: one creative solution that's been proposed by

Jacobin writer Dean Baker is issuing a tax credit to those who agree to bring their works into the public domain. But here's the problem with that idea: imagine a scenario where a new writer creates a delightful, original fantasy world, the next Lord of the Rings or Harry Potter. They get a tax credit, their work goes into the public domain—and a large entertainment corporation produces a megablockbuster based on it, pocketing all the proceeds from ticket sales and consumer products. The original writer would ultimately make next to nothing off her work. Other artists could make work based on the material, but without the resources to compete with the megablockbuster, they would make very little profit and have difficulty drawing attention to their (possibly superior) interpretations. People sometimes have a fantasy that if Good Art exists, it will be noticed and praised, but really, even Good Art has to be marketed like anything else.

Another possibility is to keep copyright around, but make the terms much shorter—certainly, no longer than the life of the original author. After the author dies, their works automatically enter the public domain, and no legal chicanery can be used to artificially extend the copyright. This still wouldn't entirely solve the money problem outlined above, where the best-resourced company can turn a newly-available story into a sizzling spectacle and thus crowd out smaller artists who want to create alternative versions. But then, at least, we would likely be in a world of *competing* blockbuster adaptations, each responding, potentially, to a different perceived public impulse, which would also reinforce the public's perception that stories are not *owned*. And then there would be an increased ability for small-time artists to earn something by producing robust alternatives for those dissatisfied by the blockbuster productions.

Neither of these avenues are perfect. For example, they don't solve the issue of collective ownership of work, as in the super-

hero comics model, where the "creation" of a character is rarely a solo project. But it's important to start somewhere, as we gradually move toward a more honest understanding of how the creative process really operates. There's a wonderful scene in the movie *Shakespeare In Love*, in which Shakespeare—at this point in his life mostly unsuccessful, and struggling to write *Romeo and Juliet*—is walking through the filthy, colorful mess of late 16th century London. He seems almost unaware of the tumult around him, even as he passes by a preacher condemning the immorality of the Globe and the Rose Theater. "A plague on both their houses!" the preacher cries.

This is what artists do, and how art really works; it's borrowed from the living drama of the world, from overheard conversations, gossip, news, popular myths, and, of course, already existent art. Shakespeare himself famously borrowed heavily from existing sources, including Roman comedies and translations of Italian works. Romeo and Juliet (1595) itself largely derives from Arthur Brooks' poem "The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet" (1562), which according to an article by Ryan McKittrick was "taken from a French poem by Pierre Boaistuau (1559) that was based on an Italian story by Matteo Bandello (1554), which was itself inspired by Luigi da Porto's Giulietta e Romeo (circa 1530)." Not everyone steals quite as effectively as Shakespeare, but everybody steals, and it's impossible to tell where an idea begins and where it ends. Does an idea only count if it's published and copyrighted? Should we all slap a ™ on the end of our statements or our text messages, lest a writer friend use it later on in a play? Is it ever remotely meaningful to say that someone "created" a character, an idea, a phrase, or a plot?

Ultimately, we need to ensure that artists have enough to live on, and have a fair chance to market their works against gigantic corporations (maybe by slaying those gigantic corporations, or at least dismembering them). But as it stands, copyright doesn't guarantee a living wage for artists, and paradoxically, it can strangle creativity. A world where Shakespeare couldn't steal from writers who stole from other writers is one in which *Romeo and Juliet* and most of his other plays don't exist. And the act of having your own work "stolen" can itself be creatively fruitful; Cervantes, procrastinating on the completion of his Don Quixote sequel, seems to have needed a rival to tilt at in order to finish his work. As Biggs points out, "from a utilitarian perspective a lack of limited monopolies can actually lead to truly exceptional creative productivity." A little angry creative rivalry, divorced from the need to make money, can go a long way.

A UBI for artists could be the ideal solution, though the details might need some hammering out. Regardless, we need to push for a world in which the biggest obstacle to artistic production isn't the need to make ends meet, or the jealous corporate enclosure of the intellectual commons, but simply one's fellow obnoxious artists, whose bad iterations of "your" characters—or their own inferior originals—can only be countered by superior work. May the best version win.



## personalities for sale

#### BY TYLER WALICEK

NE EVENING, IN OBSERVANCE OF THE TIME-LESS capitalist ritual of the job hunt, I found myself seeking some labor from which I could be alienated. For me, this usually consists of idly browsing Craigslist for copywriting opportunities while silently lamenting the dearth of career-track journalism jobs. I thought maybe I'd caught a small break when I came across an advertisement from a company called VIDA Select that was promising "flexible ghostwriting work." At worst, I expected it to be yet another poorly compensated gig churning out sponsored content masquerading as blog posts. Instead, the ad described VIDA Select as "an online dating-management company," with the acronym being short for Virtual Dating Assistants. As I read further, I realized with creeping horror that they were selling something much more insidious than the most shameless product placement. VIDA Select helps its clients realize a warped fantasy: the chance to exert undue, outsized power over real-world dates with real people. It's a deal with a peculiarly modern kind of devil: a niche market catering to those who are cynical enough about the technological dating game that they're willing to pay to rig it in their favor.

Online dating has attained near-total cultural ubiquity, with social-romantic media such as Tinder, Bumble, Match.com, Plenty of Fish, Grindr, and OK Cupid promising unprecedented access to love and sex. Yet before any chemistry takes place, you must first allow your digital self-construct to be wrung through the all-powerful algorithm. A "dating profile" is a means of compressing and formalizing your quasi-intimate details into a kind of currency for the platform. The information itself is lossy—a few edited pictures with flattering framing, a few lines of humor or biographical information—leaving only a pastiche of authentic identity. Conveying much of one's real personhood is almost impossible under these constraints.

There's already a faint sense of dehumanization that begins to gather force as you swipe unthinkingly through Tinder or the like. Faces flit by in mechanical procession, as if on a Taylorized assembly line. Potential matches appear in greater quantities than the most active social calendars could accommodate. However, this access to a functionally endless stream of potential pleasures is the chief selling point of digitized dating, whether the ultimate goal is love, sex, friendship, or pure ego gratification.

Because host platforms determine a user's "desirability" based on opaque, inherently flawed metrics engineered by fallible developers, they inevitably end up replicating all kinds of existing biases. There's effectively no oversight in these spaces. Dating profiles could easily be written by anyone—like a bot, maybe, or an underemployed journalist. The partial anonymity and simplicity of profiles mean that the system can be gamed with relative ease. This has given rise to a secondary market, fed by a glut of personal data. The parasites that have latched onto the underbelly of the dating-tech industry have names like "Tawkify," "ODately," "Next Evolution Matchmaking" and the truly repugnant "Profile Pimpers." All of them style themselves as 'dating concierges,' 'matchmaking services,' or similar euphemisms. Of this new crop of weird, amoral-at-best corporations, VIDA Select is the most successful. Geared toward men seeking women, it's attained profitability by leveraging loneliness, sexual frustration, and blatant misogyny. (There is a women's section on the site, but it comes across largely as an afterthought, and the website's default content is written from a heteronormative, male-centric angle). By dangling the lure of sex in front of a desperate or greedy clientele, VIDA functions like a kind of technological incubus.

Here's how VIDA and similar services work in practice: for a steep monthly fee, the company will delegate all your Internet dating to "ghostwriters" who will perform as you, remotely inhabiting your online personae, speaking in a voice, it's promised, more practiced at digital wooing than yours. In an extension of the "personal brand," VIDA will furnish you with your very own team of clandestine PR reps, deputized to impersonate you in order to land you dates with women, and, implicitly, sex. As VIDA's website touts, unironically, "we'll attract her using your own 'voice' and personality so you don't have to pretend to be someone you're not." It continues: "...We use a combination of math, science and psychology to ensure you get dates with your most compatible matches... So you can finally beat the odds when we stack them in your favor!" The site is also rife with assurances like: "Good news: you no longer have to fight an uphill battle to date high-quality women!" VIDA does not clarify how women's quality is assessed.

If your primary interest lies in scoring with women—only the high quality ones, of course—then VIDA might work for you. But if you are seeking a long-term partnership or true love online, why would you ever found that relationship on a distasteful lie? VIDA's FAQ shrugs off this concern: "It's highly unlikely that a girl who is in love with you would leave you just because the first few messages she received before you'd even met in person weren't sent by you." Considering how staggeringly creepy that revelation would be, I somehow doubt you could avoid catastrophic blowback. And once again, VIDA does not exactly show their math for calculating the "high unlikelihood" that you'd get found out and summarily dumped.

If this kind of romantic-epistolary duplicity sounds familiar, that's

because writers of heightened comic satire have built plots around it for centuries, from the classic play Cyrano de Bergerac (1897) to the 2013 film Her. But only in our lonely era of neoliberal excess and unfettered techno-capitalism could a real-world market for the boutique services offered by VIDA Select arise. And it works! Or so they claim—as to how many clients actually get dates, VIDA cites the suspiciously high rate of 99.6%. Regardless, in the past few years, the company has expanded rapidly. Along with a purported seven figures in revenue, VIDA boasts dozens of employees: from ghostwriters to "matchmakers," "account managers," "photo analysts," "stylists," and "relationship managers." In a damning tell-all published in Quartz, former ghostwriter Chloe Rose Stuart-Ulin revealed that touching up photos, adding inches to clients' height, and lying about age were all common practices. Now of course, regular users do this kind of thing all the time; the difference is that VIDA has systematized the deception to an unsettling degree. They've created an entire ecosystem of professionalized romantic deceitfulness, with their sights trained on unsuspecting targets.

At more expensive tiers of the service, once phone numbers have been exchanged and flirtation moves out of the app, VIDA operators will actually take over a client's text messages and continue attempting to facilitate a real-world meetup. (How far could they possibly take this? Body doubles and actors? Full-scale theatrical sets?) Naturally, the women on the other side of the conversation are supposed to be kept in the dark about all this, as the company itself makes clear. ("Will my date know I hired a matchmaking service? Not unless you tell her," promises the FAQ with a conspiratorial wink). Elsewhere, VIDA's founder and CEO Scott Valdez puts it more bluntly: "We advise our clients to take it to your grave." So much for the "high likelihood" of your girlfriend still sticking around after she finds out!

From the innocent date's point of view, the scenario reads like a paranoiac's delusion. Instead of texting, sharing intimate details or photos, and maybe finally meeting up with an attractive stranger, you're actually talking to a whole *team* of paid manipulators, a *Truman Show* of 'artists' both touch-up and pick-up. This introduces a new dimension of frightening possibilities into the already anxiety-laden business of texting and meeting up with strangers. How horrifying to discover that any fears you may have had about your date misrepresenting themselves actually vastly underestimated the extent of their dishonesty. How scary to discover you're a mark—the target of a scam intended to mislead you into sleeping with the con artist.

HO WOULD USE A SERVICE LIKE THIS? You might envision the stereotypical unemployed, basement-dwelling nerd, but Valdez told GQ magazine that most of their clients work in tech, finance, and law. He may be lying, but on the other

hand it takes a decent salary to retain VIDA's dubious expertise: their prices range from \$495 to \$1,695 a month. Meanwhile, the company's freelancers—the romantic Mechanical Turks who perform all the actual work—are paid a pittance. Wages start at \$12 an hour, plus a \$1.75 commission per phone number obtained. (Out of all the salacious details I've learned about this corner of

the market, the least surprising is that a corporate writing job pays abysmal wages). Meanwhile Valdez, as CEO and self-described "Head Honcho," reaps the bounty of those sizeable profit margins while seeming to personally embody the sleaziness of his creation. GQ reports that on "Valdez's personal desktop are hundreds of Excel spreadsheets, each one meticulously documenting and ranking every single online message he has sent to women of romantic interest," stretching back fifteen years. While it's hardly unheard of to catalogue relationship metrics using spreadsheets, the magnitude of Valdez's collection suggests a distressingly reductive view of relationships as quantifiable transactions.

The problem with VIDA isn't the concept of sex as a quantifiable transaction or paying for pleasure per se; a "dating concierge service" is not really comparable to consensual sex work. This is something else entirely: a systematic method of impersonation, the chief purpose of which is to allow clients to circumvent context and deprive their dates of informed consent. Valdez acknowledged to a reporter at Inquisitr that his work exists in "an ethical gray area," but was quick to add that, "overall, our service does a lot more good than it does bad." I'm pretty curious as to how he's defining those value judgments—what does this 'good' actually entail, and which instances of 'bad' went unreported on in the press coverage? What we do know is that sexual deceit—rape by deception—is recognized as a criminal offense. Even if VIDA's services doesn't run afoul of any laws, their judgment as to ethical matters is, at the very least, severely miscalibrated.

More than anything, I'm surprised the service works at all. Though the initial ad I saw promised the chance to exercise one's "wit" and "creativity," the work of performative flirting itself amounts to little more than copying and pasting canned responses. A training manual provides a sample opening line: "A beautiful seaplane. A suitcase full of cash. And a dashing co-pilot. Whereto?" Speaking to VICE, Valdez cited another opener, this one of his own creation: "Why don't we go halfsies on a bottle of Jack and create a bastard child before next weekend?" That's the caliber of searing wit and devilish charm VIDA will deploy on your behalf, for a monthly cost that may rival most people's rent.

Given these execrable lines, the 99.6 percent success rate touted by VIDA seems overstated at best. The service's promotional materials claim that "VIDA's unique, scientific approach to dating has helped thousands of singles find true love." Of course, from a financial standpoint, the company is incentivized more than anything to retain users—as a result, they have a vested interest in *not* facilitating steady relationships. VIDA's business model would probably yield higher profits by providing a stream of Tinder matches that lead nowhere, or, at least, nowhere beyond a one-night stand. Is that maybe the point? "Our clients tend to date beautiful women who are more physically attractive than they are," the site insists. Is VIDA Select really just geared towards ordinary brief hookups? Or is it a platform for something more sinister?

Among the many issues posed by VIDA is the fact that a ghost-writer could easily mask warning signs that potential dates would otherwise find alarming. This is especially concerning given that dangerous men might be drawn to the service to inflate their odds of in-person contact. The VIDA site is careful to note: "You should not use our service if: You don't respect women. If you're looking to

cheat on your partner or see how many notches you can put under your belt, this service is not for you. We're here to help ethical, all-around good guys meet similarly amazing women. [...] If you're the "player" or cheating type, we'll need to respectfully decline your business." But Valdez has admitted that past clients were later found to have domestic violence charges. (Not that this problem is exclusive to VIDA: Tinder, OK Cupid, Plenty of Fish, and others have repeatedly allowed minors, domestic abusers, and convicted sex offenders onto their platforms and, conveniently, managed to dodge anything resembling accountability.)

It's hard to say how VIDA could ever determine that a client is a "player" who doesn't respect women. It's harder still to imagine that they're so categorically opposed to "players" that they'd turn down \$1,695 a month if a client was flagged. After all, this is a company whose training manual is called *Women On Demand*. Their *entire business model* is pay-to-play.

closer look at certain pages on the site really gives the game away. No matter how much hedging VIDA does around words like "ethics" and "true love," it's clear that manipulative pick-up 'artistry' is engrained in its ethos. A list of photo tips contains the following: "The secret lies in evolution—that's right, we're talking Darwin, survival of the fittest, alpha male theory. Biologically speaking, alpha males are desirable mates, so you want to subconsciously convey your alpha status in your photos."

The Darwinian "alpha male" framework alluded to here is a core tenet of evolutionary psychology, an infamously sophistic school of thought that purports to explain disparate realms of human behavior through a reductionist evolutionary lens, down to an impossibly granular level of detail. There may indeed valid evolutionary explanations for plenty of human behaviors, but the field trafficks in reactionary fallacies about women's supposed inferiority, racial IQ differences, the injustice of age of consent laws, bigoted xenophobia, transphobia, and a lionization of vicious interpersonal competition as an immutable part of human nature. These features have attracted charlatans and armchair evolutionary psychologists who push unfounded, fallacious theories with little to no scientific basis. Their conclusions conveniently align with the interests of patriarchy and capitalism—almost like a lot of these beliefs were reverse-engineered and data contorted to fit existing predilections for laissez-faire economics, structural racism and sexism, murderous foreign policy, and other treasured pastimes of right-wing authoritarians.

This underlying ideology is visible underneath the marketing veneer of the VIDA website, its company training manuals, and Scott Valdez's bloviations. Taken together, they maintain that women are categorically drawn to hypermasculine caricatures, and that any man who doesn't display a cartoonish degree of machismo will fail to measure up. (From the website: "Manly' men build things. They go camping. They go hunting and fishing. They own the dance floor.") Pick-up artists and incels (self-described "involuntary celibates" of the internet) share a lot of the same ideas and use similar terminology, finding value and intense envy in the mythological hypermasculine practice of sleeping with as many "high-quality" women as possible. In this way, VIDA Select's model maps seamlessly into the logic of

internet misogynists, those woman-hating reactionaries who have enthusiastically made common cause with neofascists.

Such a repellent enterprise as VIDA is made possible by the convergence of a number of pernicious and dehumanizing modern forces. VIDA thrives in the space where capitalist exploitation and patriarchy reinforce each other, where manipulation and outright lying become acceptable tactics, where the ends of accumulation—sex, money, or social capital—are held up as the ultimate metric of success. The egoistic process that drives the rich to so shamelessly flaunt their wealth is also present in the mindless pursuit of endless sexual conquest: both fetishize accumulation for its own sake. But VIDA Select is also a natural extension of the false meritocracy, in that it weaponizes capital to confer unfair advantages in the dating game. All of it encourages dishonesty and the active denial of human feeling in service of mercenary ends.

Exploitative companies like VIDA Select can only exist in the gap made by alienation; the distance between self and other, men and women, employees and bosses. The cultural superstructure peddles fantasies of unlimited validation, pleasure, and self-indulgence, in which some of the most intimate and joyful functions of human life—sex and love—are outsourced to unpaid, unseen workers. Formerly organic social relations are objectified and quantified while skeevy elites turn a profit. And it's all for a fantasy—not of romantic happiness, or sexual satisfaction, but of accumulation, women assigned to numbers and tallied up on a spreadsheet. Alienation is an inexorable product of capitalist society, one that walls us off from the value of our labor, from solidarity and communality, from a true understanding of ourselves. But the inherent desire for genuine human connection remains. It may not be easy these days, given exploitative tech companies' dominance of so many parts of our lives, to achieve real connections with each other. One of the best ways, however, is to put our actual selves out there: not as market commodities, or manipulative tricks, but as real people looking for a little sincere reciprocal attention.



"Do you think the buildings speak French? Hahahaha. Hey honey, did you hear me? Honey? I said, 'do you think the buildings...because buildings...they don't...I thought if we came here, it would make you happy..."



# What Gets LOS ST TO ST TO

#### BY CIARA MOLONEY

'm not much given to ranking such things, but if you put a gun to my head and asked me to rank my favorite sitcoms, *The Likely Lads* would easily make the top tier. It aired three seasons on BBC between 1964 and 1966—which, because it's British television, means twenty episodes and a Christmas sketch—following Terry and Bob, two young men working in a factory in the north-east of England. It was commissioned because The Beatles were big and that made someone at the BBC want a show about young northerners, even if they ended up in Newcastle instead of Liverpool.

Terry and Bob are instantly, vividly realized: they are united in their shared ambitions of getting drunk, picking up girls, and watching football, but there is always a tension between Terry's pride in being working class and Bob's ambitions for social mobility. Bob will always blame Terry for his bad behavior, but the phrase "pushing an open door" was invented specifically to describe Bob. While many 1960s sitcoms are warm, wholesome and full of wacky misunderstandings, *The Likely Lads* is vulgar, realistic, and incredibly modern. Season one's "Older Women Are More Experienced"—in which Terry dates an older woman and Bob dates a younger one—ends on a punchline that wouldn't feel out of place in *Peep Show*. It's a show I adore, and that I will evangelize for any chance I get.

Of the twenty episodes produced, only ten survive.

The BBC had no official policy on archiving until 1978. Well into the 1970s, it routinely destroyed recordings of its programs: to wipe and reuse the tapes, to free up storage space, or just because they thought it had no further value. Tapes sent abroad for broadcast in other countries were expected to be destroyed, or returned to be destroyed, after the program was shown the number the times for which it had been licensed.

There was definitely a hierarchy to what was saved and what was destroyed, although one that's only intermittently recognizable from fifty years' distance. The BBC's wiping of its own archives is a case study in not knowing what will turn out to be important. *The Madhouse on Castle Street*, a 1963 teleplay featuring a then-unknown Bob Dylan, was junked—in 1968, after Dylan had become famous. Most of the episodes of music program *Top of the Pops* that aired before the mid-1970s are lost, including a 1966 performance by The Beatles. Most of *Till Death Us Do Part*, the sitcom that was adapted in the U.S. as *All in the Family*, is lost.

According to Terry Gilliam, the only reason the BBC didn't wipe *Monty Python's Flying Circus* is because he bought the tapes before they had the chance. Peter Cook wasn't so lucky: he offered to buy the tapes of his and Dudley Moore's seminal sketch show *Not Only... But Also*, but the BBC wiped them



gence officer kidnapped and trapped in a mysterious village—exists, but even in the narrow field of "shows about spies that aired on ITV", all but two episodes of *The Rat Catchers* and the whole first season of *The Avengers* are missing. All of *Coronation Street*, the long-running soap set in a fictional town in Greater Manchester, survives, but *Crossroads*, a cheaply-made but popular soap set in a Midlands motel, is missing 2,850 of its original 3,555 episodes. ITV wiped their coverage of the moon landing too.

the United States as in the U.K., but a huge amount of television was still destroyed. Almost all of *The Tonight Show* under the reign of host Jack Paar as well as the first ten years hosted by Johnny Carson is lost, because NBC recorded over the tapes. Although footage—mostly from other sources—survives of the early Superbowls, the telecasts were all wiped until Super Bowl VII in 1973. Most of Walter Cronkite's newscasts between 1962 and 1968 are lost, with a few exceptions, such as his coverage of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Kennedy assassination and his criticism of the Vietnam War. Game shows, soap operas and daytime television were routinely destroyed.

DuMont Television Network broadcast in the U.S. from 1942, when television was in its infancy, to 1956. They aired what is considered the first TV sitcom—Mary Kay and Johnny—and America's first TV soap opera, Faraway Hill. Jackie Gleason got his start there, debuting The Honeymooners as a recurring sketch on his variety show before developing it into a sitcom for CBS. They aired music program The Hazel Scott Show, one of the first TV shows in the U.S. to be hosted by a Black person, during the summer of 1950: despite good ratings and critical acclaim, it was cancelled when Scott was named as a communist sympathizer in an anti-communist pamphlet called "Red Channels," and the show found itself without a sponsor. They also aired The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong, starring Anna May Wong as a detective, which became the first U.S. show with an Asian-American lead.

None of these shows survive intact. DuMont preserved most of what it produced as kinescopes, but money troubles meant they began melting down these film copies to recover the silver content. In the mid-1970s, well after its collapse, Du-Mont's remaining library was loaded onto a couple of trucks and dumped in the East River. Of all the many, many programs that aired on DuMont—roughly 20,000 episodes—only a small fraction, about 350, survive.

American and British shows have the relative advantage of being more likely to have been exported to other territories that might have held on to a copy. Broadcasts of the Oscars in the 1950s and into the 1960s were wiped by the American stations that aired them, but kinescope copies made for European broadcast survive. Many of the episodes of *Doctor Who* 

we have only survive because overseas broadcasters kept hold of their copies instead of returning or destroying them. But for most countries—lacking either the institutional expertise to produce television programmes on the scale of Britain and America, or the imperial cultural capital to export their media worldwide—overseas distribution was effectively non-existent.

It's hard to describe the role of *The Late Late Show* in Irish society, but the death of Gay Byrne, its first and longest-serving host, sending the entire nation into mourning should give some indication. Ireland's first television station—the public broadcaster Telefís Éireann, now called RTÉ—was launched in 1962, and The Late Late was one of its flagship programs. Byrne was twenty-eight when it debuted, and would host it until his retirement in 1999. The show discussed subjects that were hugely taboo in Ireland, from contraception to homosexuality to divorce to the influence of the Catholic Church. He was an immensely talented broadcaster—famously handling a phone-in competition winner revealing that her daughter had just died with extraordinary deftness and grace—but his effect on the nation is far beyond any equally talented broadcaster anywhere in the world. For an entire country for nearly forty years, he was *the* man on television, practically television itself. And yet. RTÉ wiped almost everything for the first fifteen years of its existence. "TV then was live, ephemeral and disposable," Hugh Linehan writes for the Irish Times, "so all the early Late Late Shows and much more got wiped."

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation had a policy of wiping and reusing tapes well into the 1970s, and so almost all their broadcasts from the 1950s and 1960s are lost. According to Bob Ellis in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, a collector once posed as a silver nitrate dealer in order to buy kinescopes marked for destruction. The collector sometimes rented out these copies to schools, and when a student recognized her father, an actor, in a Shakespeare production, the actor lodged a complaint, believing that ABC still owned the tapes and was making extra money out his performance. Warned that the police were coming, the collector destroyed almost all of the material, like the police raid in *GoodFellas* but with episodes of *Six O'Clock Rock* instead of cocaine.

Almost all Greek television from before the 1980s is lost. Only nine out of 185 episodes of Flemish sitcom *Schipper naast Mathilde* survive. A bunch of Japanese anime programs are lost or incomplete. Destroying television was such a wide-spread practice all over the world that it seems like a hopeless inevitability. Sure, the BBC wiped their coverage of the moon landing, but NASA wiped *the master tapes*. The only footage we have of the moon landing is kinescope recordings. If the original tapes could be found, we could now yield a much higher quality transfer than was possible in 1969, since recording technology has always been ahead of playback technology. But they were wiped, probably in the 1980s.

IPING BASICALLY NEVER HAPPENS anymore. The cost of both recording and storage steadily plummeted, and broadcasters realized the value of reruns, then home video, then streaming rights.

But the fundamental values and beliefs that enabled wiping remain unchanged: that art is the property neither of the public in general nor the artists specifically, but of copyright holders, free to do with it as they please.

All art rightfully belongs to the commonwealth of humanity: this is true when it comes to critical interpretation, but it's also literally true. It is our heritage, our history, a lineage stretching back to when humans first told each other stories and sang each other songs and painted on cave walls. The function of copyright should be to protect the rights of artists as workers, ensuring they receive fair compensation for copyable works. It doesn't really work that way—Taylor Swift is planning on re-recording her early albums because Scooter Braun bought up her back catalogue—but in theory, it's a good idea, perverted by work-for-hire arrangements and ever-extending expiration dates that corporations like Disney lobby for. But regardless, copyright is about the right to reproduce and distribute a work, not about ownership. The ultimate destiny of all copyrights is to expire, and for the work to enter the public domain. Copyright holders are just temporary custodians.

And they have proven themselves unfit custodians. Capitalist economies are hostile to art preservation, because it's expensive and time-consuming and provides little monetary return. When TV wiping ended, it wasn't because everyone realized it was wrong, it was because the financial calculus of archiving changed. Although some of the worst offenders, like the BBC, are public bodies, the scarce resources they are provided incentivize the same kind of mindset, especially when there is pressure to perform along the same metrics as their for-profit equivalents. The BBC wouldn't have needed to free up storage space or reuse tapes if they had sufficient storage and enough tapes.

Preservation isn't just a matter of not destroying, it means actively saving. Physical media degrades, digital media becomes corrupted or incompatible. As Heather Alexandra wrote about video games, "It's not enough to keep our old games in a box at the back of the garage. Exposed circuit boards and EPROMs are damaged by dust and bright light. Humidity eats away at magnetic media."

According to Martin Scorsese's Film Foundation, 90% of American films made before 1929 are lost. A big part of that is willful destruction—particularly of silent films, considered worthless in the talkie era—but a large part is that nitrate film, which was standard until the 1950s, can spontaneously combust if it's stored improperly. A huge amount of culture has

been lost in fires: the 1937 Fox vault fire, the 1965 MGM vault fire, the 2008 Universal Music Group fire in which the *New York Times* estimates between 118 and 175,000 master recordings were destroyed. Digitization can feel like a cure-all, but that has its own problems: when *Toy Story* was going to be put out on DVD, it was discovered that as much of a fifth of the original digital files had been corrupted, and a film print had to be used for the DVD instead. Even if digitization was a cure-all, the proportion of analogue copies of film, television and especially music that has been digitized is shockingly small. In 2013, it was estimated that "less than 18 percent of commercial music archives had been transferred and made available through streaming and download services."

HE OTHER SIDE OF THE PRESERVATION coin is accessibility. It isn't worth much for something to exist if it's locked away, misfiled in some giant warehouse, never to be stumbled upon again. Corporate copyright holders have always been hostile to accessibility, because artificial scarcity creates demand. Before the launch of its streaming service Disney+, Disney spent decades purposefully limiting availability of its animated films on home release to increase their market value, placing the films in the "Disney vault" for years at a time. On the flip side, tons of media has been buried because its existence is embarrassing to the brand—Disney refusing to release Song of the South in North America, or the Censored Eleven Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies cartoons that Warner Bros. still haven't released despite announcing a decade ago that they would—or more often, because it would just not be worth the cost to release.

"Over in England, there are thousands of formerly-labeled tape boxes in warehouses that are now un-labeled because the Sellotape that was used to attach the track sheets to the boxes disintegrates after a few decades and the sheets fall off, leaving the boxes completely devoid of information," according to music historian Andy Zax, "No one is ever going to spend the money to play the tapes back to find out what's on them, so they just sit there." But nothing that stupid and dramatic needs to happen for stuff to just sit there. After winning an Oscar for directing Rocky, John G. Avildsen made Slow Dancing in the Big City, an unabashedly corny romance that polarized critics and fared poorly at the box office. It's never been released on home media since its run in theaters in 1978, even though its soundtrack was rereleased on CD in 2005. Fist of Fun, Stewart Lee and Richard's Herring delightfully anarchic 1990s BBC sketch show, was only released on DVD and download because Lee and Herring bought the rights from the BBC. Their follow-up sketch-variety show, the gloriously strange and breathlessly funny This Morning With Richard Not Judy, has never been released since its original broadcast, and the only reason you can watch any of it is because of fans digitizing and uploading their VHS recordings.

There are so many shows that aren't lost or missing or destroyed, but just aren't available. Tons of these were unsuccessful at the time but seem valuable in hindsight: a decade before *The Sopranos*, David Chase created *Almost Grown*, a drama following the same couple in different time periods from the 1950s to the 1980s. It got good reviews, but had poor ratings—competing directly with *Monday Night Football*—and was canceled after airing nine of its thirteen episodes. The show has never been rerun or given a home release, even after the opportunity came along to slap "from the creator of *The Sopranos*" on the box.

Asylum, a sitcom/stand-up hybrid that aired one season in 1996, seems to hold the seeds for at least half of British comedy in the 2000s. Most notably, it was created by Edgar Wright, who went on to direct Shaun of the Dead, Hot Fuzz, and Scott Pilgrim vs the World, marking his first collaboration with Simon Pegg and Jessica Hynes, three years before they would create cult sitcom Spaced. It's never been released on DVD or streaming. The last time I checked, it existed in low-res You-Tube uploads of VHS recordings, but they could disappear at literally any moment. Just because a copyright holder isn't doing anything with their copyright doesn't mean they won't rigidly enforce it.

The argument is that there isn't any real demand for these shows or films to be released. And that's pretty much true: old television, especially, has basically zero cultural cache outside of a handful of super-popular behemoths, almost all of which are from the last twenty years. But demand is something that's cultivated. You can't demand something if you don't even know about it, and nobody is doing a multimillion dollar ad campaign and a media tour and a PR blast to promote *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. We're constantly bombarded with the hot new shows you just *have* to watch, while the older and obscure programs that are available quietly disappear.

One of the big reasons films and TV shows sit in warehouses gathering dust is the cost and complexities of managing the different copyrights involved. *Frank's Place*, a character-driven dramedy about a black Ivy League professor inheriting a New Orleans restaurant, aired one season in 1987-88, and has never been given any kind of home release thanks largely to music rights: the show had a distinctive soundtrack of jazz and R&B. *SCTV* was unreleased for decades thanks to music copyrights. When it was finally released by Shout Factory, music had to be edited or even entire sketches left out. *Daria* originally aired with a soundtrack of contemporary pop songs, often with a particular relevance to the events of the episode, but on VHS and DVD almost all music was replaced.

We've been sold the myth that everything is available online. It's a myth that buoys entertainment companies designing the market so they have complete control over access. If you



buy something on DVD or Blu-ray, it's yours to have and to own, but if you buy a film on iTunes, it can disappear without warning if it's removed from the iTunes store. Entertainment is moving more and more towards streaming services, which means monthly subscriptions, which means paying a continual fee for access without ever actually owning anything.

We're in the era of Peak TV. More and more television is being produced—channels formerly focused primarily on reruns of The Love Boat pivoting hard into original content and seemingly every entertainment company launching a bespoke streaming service—while less and less of it is released in any kind of "permanent" physical format. Netflix, for example, has moved more and more towards original content, with exclusivity as the primary selling point, not breadth and depth of catalogue. But if something is exclusively distributed by one platform, what happens if that platform ceases to exist? Some of Netflix's early original series like Orange Is the New Black were definitely released on DVD or broadcast traditionally in international territories, but the vast majority of Netflix's originals haven't been. If Netflix collapsed, the rights to a lot of its programming would be bought up by other entertainment companies. But—though they mostly don't release viewership numbers-Netflix pumps out so much content that there's



II can't stop thinking about what Earl Blumenauer said.

Eleanor laughed. "He's a socialist. That means you're a socialist."

I was taken aback. A socialist? I thought of my uncle and grandmother who saw socialism as a path taken by the naïve and impractical. "Socialist" seemed radical in a way that made me squirm, like there was a splinter in the tissue of my identity. I took the middle ground, deciding to call myself a "moderate socialist."

I FaceTimed my sister to fill her in on my ideo-

logical development. Her amused yet disapproving look said it all. "Ella," she said, "there is no such thing as a moderate socialist."

So I began my quest to see whether I was a socialist after all. It wasn't until I stumbled across Current Affairs, a small New Orleans-based magazine, that I found my answer. Instead of a com-plex economic system, socialism was presented as a set of principles: solidarity, democratic decision making, and the belief that everyone deserves a fulfilling life. The more I read, the more questions I had. Why do sick individuals go bankrupt over medical bills while insurance companies make huge profits? Why does society see poverty as laziness? Why do CEOs make billions while workers are paid minimum wage?

Near the end of sophomore year, my U.S. History teacher challenged our class to brainstorm solutions to institutional racism. I spent all afternoon reading Current Affairs and came across universal enfranchisement: a proposal to ensure that every adult U.S. citizen has the right to vote, regardless

of previous or current incarceration. The next day, I volunteered to present first. The second I finished, a wave of hands shot up. "Shouldn't people lose the right to vote when they commit a crime?" one classmate asked.

"The people most impacted by the criminal justice system should have a voice in its reform,"

"I'm fine with people who served time voting,

but people still in prison?"

"The only way to truly protect voting rights is to remove any exceptions that can be manipulated to disenfranchise certain groups."

"Do you want serial killers voting?"

"I see 'good' and 'bad' people both in and out of prison. You cannot determine morality based on whether someone has been incarcerated.

Having responded to every classmate's concern, my proposal stood undefeated. I felt impassioned, and asked myself why I had been able to counter every disagreement on the spot.

I realized that the words I spoke came from genuine conviction rather than a memorized script.

Advocating for universal enfranchisement went beyond fulfilling an assignment. It meant standing up for my true beliefs, rather than compromising them to make an argument more palatable for my

I thought back to junior year English class, when we read Dr. King's "Letter From a Birmingham Jail." Dr. King wrote "The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be." Since the summer of 2017, my fear of being called a socialist has dissipated. I know what I believe in: dignity and liberation for all. These are the principles that drive me to challenge my family members, speak up in class, and organize protests.

In the future, new questions and new answers will cause my beliefs to evolve. But, whatever my beliefs are, however they are perceived, I will actively and unapologetically stand for them. +

guaranteed to be a lot of stuff on there that basically nobody has ever watched and no one would bother buying the rights to.

And that's on *Netflix*, the aspiring monopolist. What's going to happen to shows produced for Crackle or DC Universe when they collapse? Right in the river, next to DuMont.

So much of the history of television's survival is the history of home recordings and eccentric collectors, of dusty mislabeled film canisters found hidden away or thrown in a skip. But in the streaming era, there are no archival traces. Pirated copies could survive—it's how we held onto Nosferatu and the Star Wars Christmas Special and Todd Haynes's experimental short Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Sto*ry*—but quite apart from the ethics and legalities of it, piracy is an inefficient archival tool, generally privileging the popular and well-known that is least at risk anyway. What needs to happen is a sea change in values, in how we think about art and archiving and ownership.

n 2018, two lost episodes of The Likely Lads were discovered in a private collection. They hadn't been seen since 1967. They weren't aired on the BBC, or put up on streaming anywhere. They were included as a special feature on a restored DVD rerelease of the 1976 spin-off film. Both episodes are delights—"A Star Is Born" is about Terry and Bob entering a talent competition despite their lack of any discernible talent, and "Far Away Places" is ostensibly about the lads going on holiday but is mostly about them not having the money to go on holiday—but quite apart from the merits of the episodes themselves, they feel sort of miraculous. A window into the past that had long been boarded up. An hour spent with old friends I thought I'd never see again. A melancholy reminder of all that was lost but the joy of a lost thing found.

These lost episodes are a piece of culture willfully destroyed only to be rescued from the abyss by pure chance. The mass wiping of television history should be a cautionary tale, making us realize the value of maintaining a complete, accessible, universal public archive. But instead, the same attitudes that enabled wiping stay put. The lost episodes of The Likely Lads were released on DVD, a format fast becoming antiquated, as a bonus feature, by a niche distributor that specializes in restored classic television. It's not hard to imagine a similar case where a kinescope recording might be found, and left on a shelf to gather dust, right alongside Slow Dancing in the Big City and Almost Grown.

Specific policy changes to ensure preservation and access reform of the copyright system to the benefit of workers and the public, nationalizing broadband and ensuring full coverage in rural areas, making as much of existing archives as possible available online—are important, but more than that, we need a revolution in perspective on art. Too often, copyright is treated as a way to extract rents: intellectual property to be exploited, not public property to be protected. But public property is exactly what it is, and we need to start thinking about art that way: as something that needs to be decommodified. Something precious to human life, not just to the market. 4



# SANDINO VIVE



# PENDLUTION REVIOLENTATION

#### BY ELISA SCHOENBERGER

EFORE THE CUBAN REVOLUTION IN 1959, tourism companies used posters and other visual media to sell Cuba as an exotic playland. These advertisements prominently featured alluring women who enticed tourists to come to an island filled with casinos, luxurious hotels, and other sumptuous delights. But this all changed dramatically after 1959. The revolution categorically rejected the idea of Cuba as a fantasy island for rich and wealthy foreigners. Revolutionary Cuba was going to be for Cubans. New publishing houses quickly formed to produce visual media for this new Cuba: designers, marketers, abstract expressionists, and other artists signed on to the revolution. No longer would sex be used to sell products, whether physical goods or services, or Cuba itself as a lush, available resort. Instead, visual artists sought to portray Cuba as the worker's paradise where everyone worked for the collective good. Was this "propaganda?" Yes. But no more so then the sexy casino girls.

Smiling workers. AK-47s. Charlie Chaplin. These are only a few of the diverse array of images found in Cuban poster propaganda after 1959. Cuban revolutionary heroes like Che Guevara and Jose Martí, and international comrades like Angela Davis and Ho Chi Minh also feature prominently in posters, sometimes in bright bold colors, other times in black and white photo collages. The posters are a real contrast from the dreary hack work that people usually associate with the word "propaganda." But despite their high artistic quality, these posters should not be mistaken for art for art's sake: the artists had a mission, and

that mission was to sell a particular image of the Cuban Revolution to the Cuban people as well as the rest of the world. The image they were promoting was Cuba, the brave new socialist utopia, striving towards a better life for Cubans and fighting against Western imperialist aggression. The United States had long been a menacing shadow over Cuba, starting with Cuba's war for independence from Spain in the 19th century—which bloomed into the Spanish-American war—and the U.S.'s subsequent meddling in Cuban internal affairs.

Freed from U.S. influence, artists and creators took the charge to create a new visual culture for Cuba very seriously. As Cuban artist Felix Beltran wrote in his 1970 essay "The Poster as a Medium of Political Confrontation," the poster art that had existed in pre-revolutionary Cuba arose from an exploitative, capitalist advertising world that used tropes like "scandalous violence and eroticism" to arrest the viewer's attention, all in service of an "imperialist offensive that trie[d] to stop critical feeling" against the existing order. The Revolution, however, sought to re-purpose the poster and other forms of visual advertising in order to reflect, as Beltran put it, "revolutionary progress and the international reflection of our country with other peoples." Beltran believed that it was important that the new posters "reflect graphically the aspirations of the public" by clearly expressing revolutionary ideals in visual form: "the most important aspect in poster design is to diffuse a message efficiently and clearly." Similarly, in a discussion about Cuban posters for Cuba Inter*nacional* in 1969, poster artist Edmundo Desnoes spoke of the need to introduce "a new vision, new preoccupation without appealing nor exploiting the sensationalism, sex, sentimentalism, the illusion of aristocratic life." The purpose of this new visual culture was to inform and educate the public, without falling into the old exploitive paradigms.

REATORS GRAVITATED ENTHUSIASTICALLY towards this new vision. The Cuban artist Raul Martinez was originally an Abstract Expressionist, but changed his entire artistic philosophy and output after the Revolution. In a 1979 interview in *Art in America* with Eva Cockcroft, he explained that he was inspired by the Revolution's emphasis on using art as a medium of communication with ordinary people: "now I had a need to have my message understood. I wanted my paintings to reflect the life that surrounded me." Many early posters used a social realist style that the Cuban government dubbed "the people with strong arms"—you know the type—but over time, the aesthetic style of the posters diversified, and later posters showed the influence of psychedelic art, pop art, and other art movements.

In addition to smaller publishing houses, such as the Casa de las Americas, three principal publishing houses for posters were founded. The first was Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC) that printed movie posters as well as cultural events posters. Then there was Editora Politica (EP) founded in 1962, which also went by several other names, including Commission of Revolutionary Orientation (COR) and the Department of Revolutionary Orientation (DOR). EP publicized public information and government campaigns, like posters on safety and sugar harvest goals. The Organization of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa and Latin America (OSPAAAL) also published *Tricontinental Magazine* from 1966 until 1990, which included folded-in posters. Cuban archivist Lincoln Cushing notes that the magazine was quite popular, with 30,000 subscribers at its peak in 1989.

The posters produced by these publishing houses were not only popular, they were ubiquitous. In *Revolución! Cuban Poster Art*, Cushing notes that posters were in "halls, community centers, schools, private residences and beyond." Film posters were specifically sized for special kiosks found across the country. They were deliberately intended to be a part of the everyday fabric of Cuban culture. As Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier describes in Cuba en la gráfica: "Every commemoration, every event, every contingency of our collective life is accomplished by posters, creating a living account through their images of the contemporary history of our Revolutionary process."

That "living account" meant a constant reminder to the public of the successes and aspirations of the Cuban Revolution. Posters were used to enfold Cuba's longer history into a revolutionary narrative, encouraging the public perception that the 1959 Revolution was not a self-contained, ahistorical event, but rather an event that had been in the making for decades. Notably,

both film posters and political posters constantly depicted the Cuban writer and liberation martyr, Jose Martí (1853-1895), who was killed in battle in Cuba's war of independence to free itself of Spanish rule. Many posters also commemorated the 1953 Moncada barracks attack, a failed assault by Castro and other revolutionaries against a military barracks during the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. Sometimes the posters brought the two themes together, as in the 1983 OSPAAAL poster "Cuba and Martí Present at the Moncada" by Rafael Morante, clearly emphasizing the connection between the nationalist, anti-colonial hero of Cuba and the heroes of the Revolution. Perhaps the most frequently-recurring hero depicted in the posters was Che Guevara, most notably in Elena Serrano's 1968 "Day of the Heroic Guerrilla October 8th" showing a map of South America with Che's face in the center. Another frequent theme was Cuba's victory over the United States in Playa Girón (Bay of Pigs) in 1961, emphasizing the belief that the moral superiority of the Cuban Revolution and the passion of its people led to the defeat of a better-resourced imperial power.

Other posters sought to energize the public around the government's goals. For example, one of the first government efforts was a massive literacy campaign that sent 100,000 literacy teachers, 56,000 of whom were young women, to the country-side. Nevertheless, the poster campaign around the issue failed to highlight women's central contribution to the effort—Mario Masvidal's 1961 "Against the Yankee Imperialism, Become Literate!" shows a young male scout stabbing an eagle with a pencil, with the accompanying text reading, "Every Cuban that learns to read and write is a smack we give to Imperialism."

Another notable poster campaign was for the 10 Million Sugar Harvest, or "Zafras de los Diez Millones." Sugar had been one of the most important crops in Cuba for centuries, and in 1970, the government set a target to produce 10 million tons of sugar. This initiative was incredibly ambitious, requiring the effort of the entire island. A massive propaganda program for the harvest was launched across Cuba. The Artistic Director for the initiative—Olivio Martínez Viera—created ten posters using colorful and creative typography which were to be rolled out to announce each time a million tons of sugar had been harvested. The posters were pasted onto road signs throughout the country, celebrating the campaign's progress and egging people on to achieve their massive goal. (The Sugar Campaign ultimately failed: only eight of Martínez's posters were ever displayed, until the remaining two were published in 2002.)

The posters, however, weren't intended for a Cuban audience exclusively: OSPAAAL—whose magazine was circulated in 87 countries and was published in English, Spanish, French, and Arabic—also created over 300 posters that supported and celebrated revolutionary movements across the world. OSPAAAL posters sometimes focused on specific leaders, such as Nelson Mandela—featured in one poster as "the symbol of the anti-apartheid struggle"—or Patrice Lumumba, whose profile is incorporated into the shape of Africa, alluding to his Pan-African goals. Others depicted the liberation struggles of specific

## ANGEJA DAVIO





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Editor at Large Yasmin Nair countries. Vietnam, for example, held a special place in the Cuban imagination and featured in many posters at OSPAAAL, as well as other Cuban publishing houses. One OSPAAAL poster about Vietnam, Ernesto Padrón's 1971 "Together with Vietnam," shows five rows of conical hats from above, charging forward with guns. These international posters were both outward- and inward-facing: they situated the Cuban communist project within a landscape of worldwide struggle, and emphasized the enduring success of the Cuban Revolution, by showing that Cuba was now in a strong enough position to offer support—ideological and moral support, as well as material and military support to other nations fighting for freedom.

In other international posters, artists creatively adapted indigenous and historic imagery to create a visual language for modern liberation struggles. A 1969 poster "Guatemala" by Olivio Martínez shows a figure in the ancient Mayan style, but holding a modern gun. In Berta Abelenda's 1968 "Day of Solidarity with the Arab Peoples," a man drawn in the ancient Egyptian pictorial style is shown with a gun on his back and hieroglyphs of grenades and bullets next to him. Faustino Pérez's 1970 "Day of Solidarity with Zimbabwe" shows a pith helmet with an arrow sticking through it, with the pith helmet symbolizing European colonization, while the arrow symbolizes the people of Zimbabwe and their coming victory over their Western colonizers.

These internationally-circulated posters also proved to be an excellent medium for criticizing the United States, particularly its treatment of black radicals. For instance, Angela Davis appeared in at least two OSPAAAL posters, one by Felix Beltran, showing her face in profile with the words "Liberty for Angela Davis" on the top, and another by Alberto Rostgaard, showing her with four sets of arms—two in handcuffs in front of her and two above her head breaking the handcuffs—reminiscent of Hindu iconography. George Jackson, who was killed during an alleged prison escape,

is also featured in one of OSPAAAL's more striking posters, which depicts Jackson's body arched in pain, bleeding the American flag.

These posters served as a reminder to Cuban people (and the rest of the world) of the hypocrisy and racism of the United States. This fit into a broader pattern of political messaging: Castro and other revolutionaries focused on U.S. racism as evidence of the corruption and immorality of Western imperialism. The Cuban government had itself proclaimed an "end to racism" in 1960 and projected a self-image of harmonious racial integration that contrasted with the violent racial oppression of the United States.

ut this self-image wasn't a complete picture, and the fault lines in Cuba's own relationship to race is also evident in the posters. Notably, while artists were attempting to solve the problem of communicating across different cultural contexts and languages, these OSPAAAL elied on stereotypes of coun-

posters relied on stereotypes of countries to represent them, often relying on historical and ancient iconography. Posters reflecting Africa frequently used images of tribes, while Middle Eastern posters relied on images of sheiks and other stereotypes. Solidarity posters for countries in Asia used Buddhist statues, Vietnamese conical hats, and other images that reinforced notions of exoticism and orientalism. While the government self-promoted Cuba as an enlightened racial paradise—Fidel Castro famously pronounced that racism had been "eliminated" in Cuba just two years after the revolution—significant racial inequalities persisted.

Cuban posters may have had a singular mission, and abound in artistic diversity—from the childlike figures of Eduardo Muñoz Bachs, to the flat color images of Mederos, to the black and white photorealism of René Azcuy Cardenas, to the typographical experi-

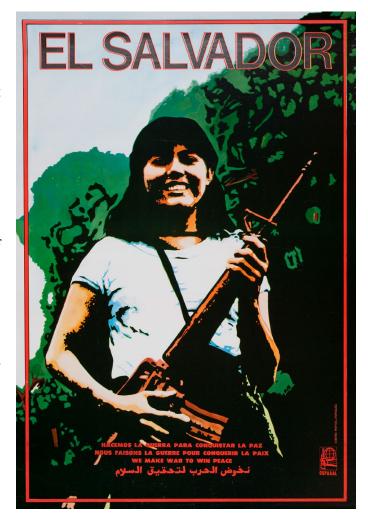
mentation of Olivio Martínez—but the posters are also mired in their own contradictions about race, gender, and sexual orientation. As propaganda, they reflect political aims, but also casual, hypocritical bigotry. Their rich visuals can be seen as a testament to the health and bounty of the Cuban Revolution, showing that artistic creativity can flourish freely when artists were freed from the corruption and poverty of capitalism and imperialism. But contradictions, censorship, and oppression were also an indelible part of the Cuban Revolution. A propaganda effort, no matter how talented the artists and visually impressive the results, must always maintain message discipline. The posters are remarkable not only for what they depict, but also for what they were not permitted to show.

There's no question that the government limited the types of messages that poster artists could illustrate. Most of the publishing houses were government-owned; EP published posters for the Cuban Communist party and other branches of the government, and OSPAAAL, although less closely tied to the state, was likely also subject to government influence. The Cuban government controlled other art in Cuba, too: as Linda Howe writes in *Transgression and Conformity: Cuban Writers and Artists after the Revolution*, the Cuban government's "official standardization of cultural norms" meant that artists had to follow the party line or they lost their jobs or ability to publish. Worse, they could even be arrested and imprisoned, like the writer Heberto Padilla.

Different commentators have held varying views on the extent of Cuban censorship in various fields and across different time periods. In his scathing review of Cuba's treatment of intellectuals in 1985 Harnessing the Intellectuals: Censoring Writers and Artists in Today's Cuba, Carlos Ripoll points out that the Penal Code punished people for "false, oppositional" propaganda with a sentence between seven to fifteen years. Like Howe, he points out the attacks on various Cuban writers for "immoral" and oppositional actions in Cuba. By contrast, in Art of the Revolution, Susan Sontag sees a less stringent Cuban policy about expression, writing that Cuba had "not...come to any particular solution, not to put great pressure on the artist... The Cuban government was pragmatic and largely respectful." She acknowledges that other arts, such as literature, failed to enjoy such a relationship with the government, but believes that posters were "special" in part because of their "adaptability." Openness about artistic freedom varied throughout the decades, as Linda Howe notes. The 1970s and 1980s were marked by erratic censorship and condemnations of artists. Despite the varying levels of repression, this active uncertainty probably caused some artists to engage in self-censorship to avoid consequences.

Censorship also wasn't just about the content: artists were also sometimes punished for their identities. Raul Martínez, one of the best known poster artists, was dismissed from his post as a teacher of design at the University of Havana in 1965 for being gay. Another poster artist, Reboiro, went into exile in France in 1982 because he was persecuted for being gay by the government.

The tension between the ideal Cuba that the posters sought to present and the real Cuba persisted up through the Special Period—



the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, whose subsidies had accounted for 80 percent of Cuba's International Trade, which essentially led to a war economy in peacetime. Rationing went into place throughout Cuba. Paper, ink, and other supplies were in short supply, and poster printing came to a standstill. ICAIC went from publishing one poster a week in the 1970s-1980s to two posters a year in the Special Period. Adapting to the times, a new group of students from the Higher Institute of Industrial Design (ISDI) began creating new posters, focusing largely on movies and cultural events. Poster artist Pepe Menéndez calls the 1991-2000 a period of "clandestineness" due to the precarious nature of publishing; the print runs were very small. When the situation improved from 2001 to the present, artists continued to make lively posters—for example, Michelle Miyares Hollands created Las Reinas del Trópico in 2009 to commemorate a week of Mexican movies, cleverly configuring the bared legs of the rumbera dancers into the shape of a giant pineapple—but most poster books and exhibitions following this period don't include new "solidarity" propaganda posters of the kind that flourished in earlier decades.

While poster art struggled to keep a foothold, tourism reemerged as a dominant industry. The Special Period and resulting economic downturn made tourism a financial necessity, and as a result Cuba's tourist industry has thrived, despite the U.S.'s trade embargo and

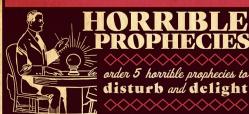


limited tourist travel. In February 2019, Forbes reported that Cuba hoped to have 5 million tourists visit the island; moreover, tourist dollars were projected to exceed \$3 billion in revenue last year. With this renewed focus on tourism, the advertisements have reverted back to displaying Cuba as a tropical paradise. For instance, a 2007 poster found in Buenos Aires, Argentina shows a couple clad in swimsuits relaxing in the water. Other images depict brightly colored buildings and classic cars, once again marketing Cuba as an exotic destination, enhanced from being cut off from the rest of the world for so many decades. It remains to be seen whether Cuba's self-presentation through advertising will revert to something more closely resembling its pre-revolutionary form.

But the question also remains: what will be the future of Cuba's poster art? Will it return to a purely commodified form, a tourist trinket that people can photograph or bring home, devoid of meaning beyond a memory of a paradise island? Or will artists have to continue to produce politically relevant art that only tells part of the story of the Cuban experience at the behest of a repressive government? One hopes that Cuban poster art can find a middle ground, making lively, truth-telling work that is nonetheless free of both repression and commercialization. A kind of art that can explore the full range of experiences of Cuban life, whether it's the struggle for democracy, or women's rights, or just the depiction of everyday experience.

This kind of honest art is hard to come by in every country. Americans might sneer at the kind of obvious, government-supporting propaganda found in something like the 10 Million Sugar Harvest, but then blithely turn on their televisions for the Super Bowl and watch high-budget advertisements for products they don't need, bookending a sporting event that increasingly functions as a right-wing pro-military parade. Whether propaganda is open or subtle, based on open repression or implicit encouragement, it inhabits art much more than we think. Cuban poster art, with its history of "strong arms" and lively visual experimentation is simply a more vivid example than most. 4

## this month in





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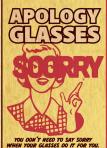


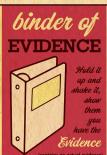
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# SINGULARITY PROPHETS

### by Benjamin Lee

NCE THE DUST SETTLES, AND WE LOOK back on the decade that has just ended, my guess is that we will come to see the countless post-Y2K promises of artificial intelligence and machine learning for what they really were: immensely successful if you go by Bloomberg tickers and ad engagement, but empty in delivering on their utopian promises. Google promised to democratize information access. Instead, its algorithms reinforced the marginalization of women and people of color, and it mostly functioned to upsell rather than enlighten. Engineers at YouTube built a personalized recommendation algorithm that has dramatically increased watch times, but has also radicalized people with fringe content and traumatized children with creepy, violent, and scatological videos. Workers on Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform became the unseen labor force of the machine learning revolution by annotating training data in exchange for wages no one could possibly hope to live on. (A median wage of \$2 hourly, with only 4% of workers earning over \$7.25, rates that are theoretically unlawful but of course aren't thanks to the magical legal fiction of "independent contracting").

Our internet footprints have also been harvested many times over in the form of private, proprietary datasets and public datasets—a hundred million Flickr images here or a few billion Instagram posts there. Our data is indiscriminately "taken from the 'wild,' essentially as-is, with minimal effort to sanitize," Facebook researchers tell us. It will be used to keep you more hooked and sell you more things. You may have heard that the ability of computers to classify dogs and cats is on the rise, but so too is the capacity for human classification, facial recognition software that

can be used by states and companies to "identify" gay men and ethnic Uyghurs and criminals and bad workers and ugly ones, too. Oh, and if all that wasn't bad enough, these machine learning models can have industrial-scale carbon footprints.

There are plenty of technocrats and self-identifying "rationalists" who are worried about the consequences of machine learning. Oxford philosophy professor Nick Bostrom says that we are facing "quite possibly the most important and most daunting challenge humanity has ever faced. And—whether we succeed or fail—it is probably the last challenge we will ever face." Elon Musk calls the challenge "the single biggest existential crisis that we face and the most pressing one." MIT physicist Max Tegmark considers this the "most important conversation of our time."

But what is the machine learning crisis they're talking about? It is not that generations of black women have been told by Google search results that they are "angry" and objects of sexual gratification. It is not that our internet activity is being sold wholesale to companies as training data for ad personalization. In fact, it has nothing to do with this trend of mass marginalization and exploitation at the hands of a predatory and terrifying "surveillance capitalism." Instead, they're concerned about the prospect that machine learning will suddenly "explode" in growth and precipitate an apocalyptic event, better known as the singularity. When Peter Thiel says "people are spending way too much time thinking about climate change, way too little thinking about AI," he isn't referring to the way AI is used to spy on, manipulate, gaslight, and steal from people. He's talking about the moment when artificially intelligent machines become more intelligent than humans, which he says "will be as momentous an event as extraterrestrials landing on this planet."

HE FANTASY OF CREATING SUPERINTELLIGENT computers has tickled technologists since the days of ENIAC. Alan Turing, the father of computer science, ended a 1951 lecture entitled "Intelligent Machinery, a Heretical Theory," by stating that:

"It seems probable that once [a] machine thinking method [starts], it would not take long to outstrip our feeble powers. There would be no question of the machines dying, and they would be able to converse with each other to sharpen their wits. At some stage therefore we should have to expect the machines to take control."

Fourteen years later, British mathematician I.J. Good first coined the phrase "intelligence explosion" and penned his famous thought experiment in a monograph entitled "Speculations Concerning the First Ultraintelligent Machine":

"Let an ultraintelligent machine be defined as a machine that can far surpass all the intellectual activities of any man however clever. Since the design of machines is one of these intellectual activities, an ultraintelligent machine could design even better machines; there would then unquestionably be an 'intelligence explosion,' and the intelligence of man would be left far behind. Thus the first ultraintelligent machine is the last invention that man need ever make, provided that the machine is docile enough to tell us how to keep it under control."

Beginning in the 1990s, Ray Kurzweil, a notable futurist and now a Director of Engineering at Google, began popularizing his speculations of an impending utopian future of superintelligent machines in his bestsellers *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence* and *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology.* However, it is Oxford's Bostrom who succeeded in legitimizing the idea of an intelligence explosion as an actually-existing threat to humanity. A scenario previously confined to science fiction and occasional "what if" speculation was placed into the mainstream of both academic and popular discourse. It wasn't just an



"They're here!"

idea. The clock was ticking. Bostrom warned in 2014 that we need to wake up and take action:

"Picture a school bus accelerating down a mountain road, full of quibbling and carousing kids. That is humanity. But if we look towards the front, we see that the driver's seat is empty."

Armed with charts and foreboding parables, Bostrom and his fellow futurist Max Tegmark have been remarkably successful at seducing audiences with the threat of a cataclysmic intelligence explosion. Between the two of them, they have spoken at the United Nations Headquarters, written bestsellers that made it onto Barack Obama's "Best of 2018" reading list, been the subject of a 12,000 word New Yorker piece, and made appearances on the podcasts of Intellectual Dark Web "renegades" Joe Rogan and Sam Harris. Research institutes dedicated to studying this existential risk have cropped up over the years, including The Future of Humanity Institute (FHI) Bostrom founded at Oxford in 2005. Musk and Sam Altman founded OpenAI to ensure that artificial general intelligence "benefits all of humanity"; it has since received a billion dollar investment from Microsoft. A host of scientific and technological luminaries have encouraged the studying of an intelligence explosion as an existential threat, including Bill Gates, Stephen Hawking, Yuval Noah Harari, Jaan Tallinn (co-founder of Skype), Tim Berners-Lee (inventor of the World Wide Web), Martin Rees (Astronomer Royal) and recently 2020 presidential candidate Andrew Yang. "Every time I went out to Silicon Valley during the campaign, I came home more alarmed about this," Hillary Clinton wrote in her book What Happened. "My staff lived in fear that I'd start talking about 'the rise of the robots' in some Iowa town hall. Maybe I should have."

The underlying argument is simple: Over the past century, machines have become increasingly good at accomplishing certain tasks that require "narrow" forms of intelligence. Computers are superhuman at chess and Go but are nowhere near proficient at writing *Current Affairs* articles. And yet, given the observed exponential growth of computing power predicted by "Moore's Law," as well as the continual developments in AI, we might conjecture that machines will improve at increasingly generalized tasks over time, leading first to artificial general intelligence (when machines can do anything we can do intellectually) and eventually *perhaps* to superintelligence (when machines outperform us across the board) via self-improvement.

It is the prospect of unilaterally smarter machines that is an immense logical jump and is highly contentious within the AI community. In response to the incessant questions about machine superintelligence in the press (e.g. "Will Machines Eliminate Us?" in the MIT Technology Review) leading researchers have often dismissed the idea. Yann LeCun and Yoshua Bengio—two of the pioneers of deep learning, the subfield that has powered most of the recent advances in machine learning—say the issue is of minimal concern. The idea nonetheless easily stokes the imagination. "This is a genie that once it's out of the bottle, you're never getting it back in," Joe Rogan said on The Joe Rogan Experience.

There are disagreements within the singularity discourse about when superintelligence will occur and how it will happen. But skeptics are offered a 21st century revival of Pascal's wager: even if there is an infinitesimal chance of superintelligence occurring in the foreseeable future and eliminating humanity, then it should still be the most important issue of our time, because if it did happen, it would be so much worse than anything else that could happen. It's easy to see how this kind of utilitarian provocation could lead to a kind of obsessive fear of something that one has very little evidence of actually happening. Are there good evidence-based reasons to think we are on the brink of this, and that this exponential growth will happen? Well, it doesn't matter very much, because what if it did? And so what begins in rationalism ends in faith. Renowned atheist Sam Harris says "We have to admit that we are in the process of building some sort of god." We have to.

"Many of the points made in this book are probably wrong," Bostrom tells us in the preface of his 2014 bestseller *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies*, perhaps the single most influential work in the singularity discourse. The book is full of counterfactuals and conditional forecasts, and Bostrom says that he has "gone to some length to indicate nuances and degrees of uncertainty throughout the text — encumbering it with an unsightly smudge of "possibly," "might," "may," "could well," "it seems," "probably," "very likely," "almost certainly," with "each qualifier... placed where it is carefully and deliberately." But these smudges can serve to insulate him from criticism, and once gripped by the fear that his nightmare scenario is designed to elicit, the qualifying "smudges" fade from view.

OSTROM'S OWN BACKGROUND IS IN THE intellectual movement of transhumanism, which he defines as "an interdisciplinary approach to understanding and evaluating the opportunities for enhancing the human condition and the human organism opened up by the advancement of technology." The movement has long been popular among the techno-libertarians of Silicon Valley, and many transhumanists—including Bostrom, Ray Kurzweil, and Peter Thiel—openly hope for radical life extension via technological means such as artificial intelligence, biological enhancement, and brain-computer interfaces. In 1998, Bostrom co-founded the World Transhumanist Association, now known as Humanity+ (which happens to have received multiple donations from Jeffrey Epstein). Though Bostrom no longer describes himself as a transhumanist, he has championed many ideas central to the movement in his research. Papers with a transhumanist flavor that have been authored or co-authored by Bostrom include "Embryo Selection for Cognitive Enhancement: Curiosity or Game-changer?", "Why I Want to be a Posthuman When I Grow Up," "Whole Brain Emulation: A Technical Roadmap," and "Are We Living in a Computer Simulation?"

The line between transhumanism and eugenics is not always completely clear; Bostrom's conception of superintelligence includes biological methods of enhancement in addition to machine intelligence. In the second chapter of *Superintelligence*, Bostrom asks us to suspend disbelief and entertain paths to superintelligence by way of whole brain emulations and iterated embryo selections in pursuit of "...if one wished to speak provocatively... less distorted expressions of human form," aligning with his belief in "human enhancement," the transhumanist euphemism for non-coercive eugenics. "The eu-

genics movement as a whole, in all its forms, became discredited because of the terrible crimes that had been committed in its name," Bostrom rued in a 2005 paper on transhumanist thought. Though often overlooked by the press when discussing his work, Bostrom has published extensively on human enhancement, drawing conclusions such as "there are no compelling reasons to resist the use of genetic intervention to select the best children."

Indeed, in *Superintelligence*, Bostrom describes a viable path to superintelligence in which "social elites" gain first access to biological enhancement mechanisms and inspire a "culture shift" among others. "Many of the initially reluctant might join the bandwagon in order to have a child that is not at a disadvantage relative to the enhanced children of their friends and colleagues," says Bostrom. It is not always obvious whether we are hearing of a dystopia to be avoided at all costs or something considered logical and not to be fought against. Bostrom has written:

"One can speculate that some technologies may cause social inequalities to widen... Trying to ban technological innovations on these grounds would be misguided. If a society judges these inequalities to be unacceptable, it would be wiser for that society to increase wealth redistribution, for example by means of taxation and the provision of free services (education vouchers, IT access in public libraries, genetic enhancements covered by social security etc.)."

Central to the singularity discourse is the persistent trope about technology that machines will either liberate us or eviscerate us, bifurcating our collective future into rapture or ruin. And so the singularity technocrats speak in dichotomies: Max Tegmark and Elon Musk tell us that AI development may be "either the best or the worst thing ever to happen to humanity." (It's not possible it could be neither?) Berkeley Computer Science Professor Stuart Stuart Russell posits in his 2019 book *Human Compatible: Artificial Intelligence and the Problem of Control* that:

"If we succeed in creating provably beneficial AI systems, we would eliminate the risk that we might lose control over superintelligent machines.... Humanity could proceed with their development and reap the almost unimaginable benefits.... We would be released from millennia of servitude.... Or perhaps not. Bondian villains may circumvent our safeguards and unleash uncontrollable superintelligences against which humanity has no defense. And if we survive that, we may find ourselves gradually enfeebled as we entrust more and more of our knowledge and skills to machines."

It is not exactly nuanced. And makes it difficult to have serious and careful conversations. Discussion of technology's relationship to the social and economic structure is conspicuously absent. Russell, one of the more measured singularity technocrats (who believes that whole brain emulations are "obviously a bad idea") devotes only a handful of pages in his 300-page *Human Compatible* to the topic of algorithmic bias, the encoding of human bias such as racism into machine learning systems via training data. But algorithmic bias is extremely important: if existing inequities are incorporated and amplified by algorithms, injustice will become that much more entrenched and hard to eradicate.

Bostrom and Tegmark refuse to engage at all with the long history

of technology as a marginalizing force from the perspective of race or gender. Tegmark asks in his 2017 book *Life 3.0: Being Human in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*: "if AI-assisted brain scanning technology became commonplace in courtrooms, the currently tedious process of establishing the facts of a case could be dramatically simplified and expedited, enabling faster trials and fairer judgments. But privacy advocates might worry.... Where would *you* draw the line?" The question is not just one of privacy, though. It is also about whose brains will be the ones being scanned, and how these supposedly "fairer" judgments are made. The introduction of aggressively invasive technology in an unequal world threatens some classes of people more than others.

Likewise, Yuval Noah Harari goads us with a similar question in *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*: "What will be the fate of all these lawyers once sophisticated search algorithms can locate more precedents in a day than a human can in a lifetime, and once brain scans can reveal lies and deceptions at the press of a button?" To Tegmark and Harari, the main ethical questions around machine jurism are around projected massive job loss at the hands of automation. They concern the fate of the lawyers, but not the fate of the underclass who would be processed and judged by this robo-court system.

Indeed, some of these prophets almost seem to be fantasizing about life in the Orwellian future. Harari dreams up a Google that:

"...watches every breath you take, every move you make, and every bond you break; a system that monitors your bank account and your heartbeat, your sugar levels and your sexual escapades. It will definitely know you much better than you know yourself... Many of us would be happy to transfer much of our decision-making processes into the hands of such a system."

Many of us, yes, but others of us will have our decision-making process thrust into the hands of such a system against our will—employers will demand it as a condition of employment. There is, in these predictions, a wholehearted whitewashing of the exploitative monetization of our personal lives at the hands of surveillance capitalism. Already, our biometrics are monetized by insurance companies and our sexual activity is pawned off to menstrual tracking apps. The crucial question is not just how much will the machines know, but whose interests will they serve?

It's unsurprising that technocratic capitalism is left untouched within the singularity discourse, given that it is dominated by techno-libertarians—mostly white, mostly male. In fact, one of the greatest ironies of the singularity discourse is that many of its arguments read more effectively as critiques of capitalism itself. One of Bostrom's most famous arguments is his "paperclip maximizer" AI, which is given the sole mandate of producing as many paperclips as possible. But how do we specify its utility function to prevent it from depleting our energy sources in order to continue making paper clips, or destroying the humans who tried to prevent it from continuing to make paper clips? It is a titillating thought experiment, though it amounts to little more than a recycling of King Midas's classic wish-gone-awry, where the desire to turn everything to gold upon touch presents unexpected challenges for alimentation and intimacy—a tale of human greed. Bostrom introduced the thought

experiment to illustrate the dangers intrinsic to the fact that "artificial intellects need not have humanlike motives." But the thought experiment rings truer as a critique of the profit maximization and corporate greed under capitalism, and their role in fueling climate change. If we create an institution that is solely to maximize profits, but maximizing profits means destroying the world, we clearly need to rewrite our program. Bostrom prods us to consider a paperclip AI harvesting metal from our blood in order to continue to pursue its deadly mandate, but the thought is nowhere as fear-inspiring as the recent fires in Australia.

"There are various principles and norms, which are currently deeply entrenched and often endorsed without qualification, that would need to be examined afresh in a context of radical AI," wrote Bostrom in a 2018 whitepaper with his Future of Humanity Institute colleagues Allan Dafoe and Carrick Flynn. In the singularity discourse, democratic ideals fit the bill. Harari asserts in *Homo Deus*: "Liberal habits such as democratic elections will become obsolete, because Google will be able to represent even my own political opinions better than I can." Bostrom and his co-authors concur: "It is possible that the epistemic value of letting political decisions be influenced by many human opinions would be reduced or eliminated if superintelligent AI were sufficiently epistemically superior to humans." To Bostrom and Harari, the right machine is even a cure for an ignorant electorate.

In fact, the most nightmarish increases in state power, aided by technology, might be justified in the name of stopping the wrong machine. In a 2018 paper, Bostrom presented his Vulnerable World Hypothesis, which calls for "greatly amplified capacities for preventive policing and global governance" in order to monitor AI research and combat nefarious actors from developing superintelligence. One proposed solution is Bostrom's "High-tech panopticon":

"Everybody is fitted with a "freedom tag"—a sequent to the more limited wearable surveillance devices familiar today... worn around the neck and bedecked with multidirectional cameras and microphones. Encrypted video and audio is continuously uploaded from the device to the cloud and machine-interpreted in real time. AI algorithms classify the activities of the wearer, his hand movements, nearby objects, and other situational cues. If suspicious activity is detected, the feed is relayed to one of several patriot monitoring stations. These are vast office complexes, staffed 24/7.... Citizens are not permitted to remove the freedom tag, except while they are in environments that have been outfitted with adequate external sensors."

Bostrom takes his time enumerating what wonders might be accomplished by such a system: "many forms of crime could be nearly eliminated... It might also generate growth in many beneficial cultural practices that are currently inhibited by a lack of social trust." He even calculates its price (less than 1% of the world's GDP). He leaves the downsides to a footnote, saying "The Orwellian-sounding name [of the freedom tag] is of course intentional, to remind us of the full range of ways in which such a system could be applied." In a *Wired* interview, Bostrom said that he was "not sure every reader got the sense of irony," but he had little interest in enumerating potential abuses or thinking about how different populations interact with the criminal punishment system.

HE ANTHROPOMORPHIZATION OF MACHINES has long been ingrained in the vocabulary of machine learning, from "neural networks" to the very concept of a machine "learning." But the singularity discourse doubles down; to join the debate is to enter a world in which machines are human, and we are machines. Stuart Russell describes our collective past as "agricultural, industrial, and clerical robots"; Tegmark entertains a world in which self-driving cars are not only liable for lawsuits but also "are allowed to hold insurance policies," "own money and property," "[make] money on the stock market," and "buy online services." "If you're OK with granting machines the rights to own property, then how about granting them the right to vote?" Tegmark asks. The question of machine rights is thus not far behind.

Indeed, for Tegmark, certain utopian futures for humans are "biased against non-human intelligence: the robots that perform virtually all the work appear to be rather intelligent, but are treated as slaves, and people appear to take for granted that they have no consciousness and should have no rights." To disabuse us of the notion that machines should not have rights, Tegmark devotes an entire section of Life 3.0 to explaining "How Slave Owners Justify Slavery," to show that the things that will be said to justify denying machines rights were also once said of Blacks. "Once upon a time, the white population in the American South ended up better off because the slaves did much of their work, but most people today view it as morally objectionable to call this progress." In a 2017 Future of Life Institute panel, Kurzweil, too, expressed worry over machine rights: "if we create [artificial general intelligence], everybody assumes that it's just a machine, and therefore, it's not conscious, but actually it is suffering." Likewise, in the section "Voluntary Slavery, Casual Death" of Superintelligence, Bostrom pontificates whether "working machine minds are owned as capital (slaves) or are hired as free wage laborers;" we must "consider the plight of the working-class machine."

Indeed, the singularitarians frame the question of machine rights as a question of immense philosophical and ethical consequence. But what about the rights of people under a "high-tech panopticon" or machine jurism? By spilling more ink in expressing genuine, nuanced concern for the hypothetical rights of machines than for the rights of people, the singularitarians suffocate questions of marginalization. It is the culmination of incessant anthropomorphization of machines within the singularity discourse.

intelligence, we are told, which means that we live in an age of endless hagiographies of the "intelligent" machine. The keynotes and op-eds speak of smarter and smarter machines that will replace our doctors and compose us music, free us from toil and enrich every facet of our lives. And thus, we are constantly goaded with an implicit question: what happens if these machines keep getting smarter?

In the singularity discourse, the question is rendered explicit. And

it is a question that continues to pick up steam, steadily accruing followers and attention. "Just had a call with Nick Bostrom who schooled me on AI issues of the future. We have a lot of work to do," Andrew Yang tweeted last March. "It's important that Neuralink solves this problem [of a brain-computer interface] sooner rather than later, because the point at which we have digital superintelligence, that's when we pass the singularity and things become just very uncertain," said Elon Musk in an interview last July about his company Neuralink—valued at half a billion dollars—that is designing implantable brain-computer interfaces. The language of superintelligence is here to stay.

So why does the discourse continue to spread? Certainly, the singularity indulges technologists' fantasies and attracts publicity with alarmist headlines. But I think there is more to it. In her incisive 2018 book *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, Safiya Umoja Noble dissects the rise of our reliance on machines for decision-making:

"I often challenge audiences who come to my talks to consider that at the very historical moment when structural barriers to employment were being addressed legislatively in the 1960s, the rise of our reliance on modern technologies emerged, positing that computers could make better decisions than humans. I do not think it a coincidence that when women and people of color are finally given the opportunity to participate in limited spheres of decision making in society, computers are simultaneously celebrated as a more optimal choice for making social decisions. The rise of big-data optimism is here, and if ever there were a time when politicians, industry leaders, and academics were enamored with artificial intelligence as a superior approach to sense-making, it is now."

I would posit that an analogous phenomenon can be observed within the singularity discourse. It is no coincidence that as machine learning continues to seep further and further into the tapestry of our lives, the rhetoric of superintelligence has caught on in full force among the technocratic elite. As we begin to hold the tech executives, managers, researchers, and engineers accountable for an ever-increasing list of transgressions, they have been abstracting away responsibility by positioning the machines as our greatest enemy, rendered rhetorically just human enough to bear the blame. The legitimate concerns of marginalized and exploited groups surrounding machine learning are drowned out by the universal danger of a machine intelligence explosion, where the Google executive and the Mechanical Turk worker are equally at risk. When we push back against the rhetoric, we are patronized. "Only a few of us seem to be in a position to think this question through," says Sam Harris.

And yet, ironically, embedded within the singularity discourse is also an unrelenting faith in the machine—the persistent optimism of Silicon Valley that if we *just* solve the singular problem of aligning the machines with our own interests, we will be delivered into a utopian vision of the future. It is this recurring dichotomy of fear and deliverance that transmutes the narratives of those at the heart of the machine learning technocracy from posturing opportunists into heroes. They are our singularity prophets, divining with machines. •



# REFUSE vs.















# SHOULD WE JUST OPEN THE BORDERS?

BY BRIANNA RENNIX & SPARKY ABRAHAM

F YOU WANTED TO PINPOINT AN EXACT DATE WHEN THE United States became destined to be a global superpower—a nation rich beyond its wildest dreams, able to enforce its will around the world—you could do worse than February 2, 1848. With a few quick pen-strokes on the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the Mexican-American War ended, and the landmass of the United States grew by 25 percent. Importantly, that 25 percent included the territory that had, up to that point, been known as Alta California.

The central valley of California has fairly unique geography. It's been subject to millennia of flooding, leaving hundreds of thousands of acres of top grade soil. It's also extremely sunny—nearly 300 days of sunshine a year—but compensates for the lack of rain with snowmelt from the uniquely tall and snowy Sierra Nevada mountains. The combination of these factors—along with huge aquifers of groundwater, more than one deep water port, some navigable rivers, abundant fish and fur stocks, hundreds of miles of desirable oceanfront property, and some gold to boot—all but guaranteed significant wealth for whatever industrializing nation included California.

This potential, though not yet realized, was an open secret in the 1840s. The United States attempted to buy New Mexico and California from Mexico in 1842, but Mexico refused. Undeterred, the United States invaded Mexico on the flimsiest of pretenses and, on February 2, 1848, took more than half of Mexico's land mass essentially at gunpoint.

Thus was born the U.S.'s southern border. (Well, sort of. The Treaty of Mesilla, aka the Gadsden Purchase, added southwest New Mexico and southern Arizona, including Tucson, in 1854, at a price of around \$12 an acre in 2018 dollars.) And thus was the land area formerly known as Alta California transferred from Mexico to the United States. In that instant, approximately 80,000 people went from living in Mexico to living in the United States without moving a muscle. Alta California was destined to be the fifth largest economy *in the world*, with a GDP more than three times Mexico's *national* GDP. Through this successful conquest, the United States was propelled on its path to unprecedented national wealth, and future generations of Mexicans were consigned to the now-pitiable position of being, in the (attributed) words of Porfirio Diaz, "so far from God, so close to the United States."

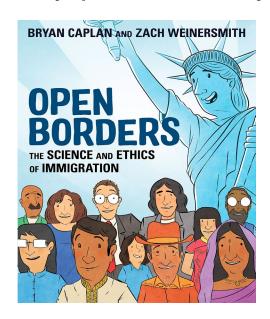
At first, when this particular portion of the U.S.-Mexico border was drawn, it was—like all borders in the United States, and most in the world—radically open. People came and went as they pleased. The line determined jurisdiction for various important political and civil

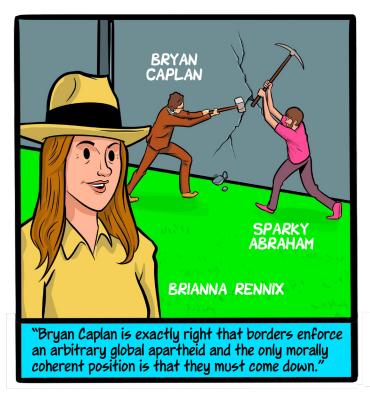
Bryan Caplan and Zach Weinersmith, **Open Borders: The Science** and **Ethics of Immigration**, First Second, \$19.99

questions, like legal regimes and taxes, but it wasn't a physical barrier. People could (and did) stroll across the border at will to grocery shop, visit friends and relatives, work, sell goods—you name it. There were important differences between living in Juarez and El Paso, and different rights and duties imposed on people living within a few hundred feet of each other, but there was no physical wall between them.

What ultimately ended up setting the United States down the path toward a militarized border—maintained via a gigantic bureaucracy willing to inflict violence on anyone with the gall to attempt a crossing—was old-fashioned American racism. In 1875, the United States enacted its first set of restrictive immigration laws aimed at preventing Chinese people from entering. This particular brand of racism, as is often the case, went hand-in-hand with exploitation. The railroad industry was happy to use Chinese immigrants as cheap labor but the United States couldn't tolerate the Chinese community building any wealth or power, and therefore barred Chinese people from entering the country. The federal government detained and then left Chinese immigrants to languish, sometimes for years, on Angel Island in the San Francisco Bay even when they had previously gotten permission to enter. This was the beginning of the end for our *de facto* national policy of open borders.

Exploitation of other nations and people, both foreign and domestic, was far from new in U.S. history (see slavery, Native genocide, etc.). But it's interesting that immigration restrictions rose simultaneously with the U.S.'s foreign imperialist activities. Over the following decades,





"But Caplan has some weird ideas about why things are so good in the US and so bad for our neighbors."

immigration quotas were established as U.S. corporations gobbled up land in Central and South America and meddled in the Mexican Revolution. Unauthorized immigration was criminalized just as the United States threatened to invade Colombia on behalf of the United Fruit Company. Anti-Latin American sentiment soared as the United States toppled democratically elected governments in Guatemala and Chile out of fear that they would nationalize industries profitable for American companies. Ronald Reagan railed against immigrants and asylees as he funded the death squads who murdered their families to protect U.S. business interests. The 20th century was an incredibly prosperous time for the United States—that prosperity largely built the wealth that the nation enjoys today—but a substantial portion of this wealth was built on the backs and corpses of people in other countries, particularly (although far from exclusively) in Central and South America.

T'S WORTH KEEPING THIS HISTORICAL CONTEXT IN MIND when we turn to *Open Borders: The Science and Ethics of Immigration*, an illustrated book published by libertarian economist Bryan Caplan and cartoonist Zach Weinersmith. The book portrays itself as comprehensive: it purports to cover *all* moral and philosophical arguments in favor of open borders, and to neutralize all potential opposing arguments. In practice, the book focuses largely on one "fairness" argument—that restrictive borders are discriminatory and arbitrary—and one "outcomes" argument—that restrictive borders stifle (economic) growth. A cartoon version of Caplan walks the reader, panel by panel, through his arguments and their support.

The first thing to say about the book is that it's mostly lovely. Caplan is an engaging and persuasive writer—in his other works, he can be charming even when advocating for terrible things (like massively defunding public education). Here, he's advocating for open borders, a morally unimpeachable policy. Weinersmith's illustrations are delightful, and the tone of the text nicely matches that of the illustrations. The second thing to say about the book is that we mostly agree with it. That

is, we believe restrictive borders constitute a grave injustice, and that the world would be a better place if people were free to cross between Mexico and the United States just as they're free to cross between Colorado and Nebraska.

But despite the book's clear writing, fun drawings, and correct (in our view) conclusion, it must be treated with some caution, as with the rest of Caplan's work. Bryan Caplan is a committed and staunch libertarian economist. He seems to be an *earnest* libertarian economist, in that he appears to have some intellectual integrity and is willing to follow his arguments to their logical conclusions, even when those are at odds with the status quo and the consensus in his profession. But we must be careful to agree with him only where his underlying reasoning, assumptions, and principles are defensible, and not only because we reach the same conclusion.

This is particularly important when it comes to open borders. There are strains of left and socialist thinking, both historical and current, that are very hostile to open borders. The (purportedly) left arguments against open borders run from protectionist (immigrants harm the interests of domestic labor) to supposedly benevolent but extremely misguided (like Angela Nagle's infamous 2018 article, "The Left Case Against Open Borders," which makes the unconvincing argument that it is better for would-be immigrants to be kept in their home countries by force so that they can organize their way out of oppression.) Unconvincing as most of these arguments are, they have a kernel that should be taken seriously. Some big businesses do want open borders. Libertarian economists want open borders. Given these unsavory bedfellows, are we sure that we, as leftists, want open borders? Should Bryan Caplan's support for our position give us pause?

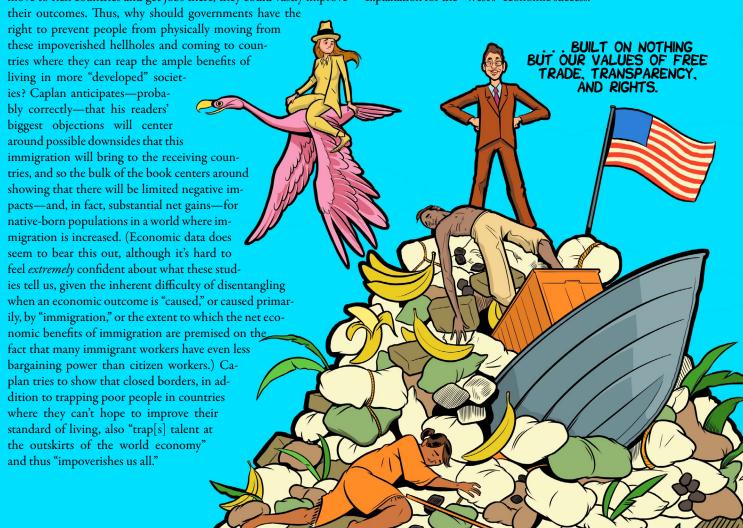
Caplan's case for open borders largely rests on two underlying premises: first, that closed borders are unethical, and second, that capitalism is good and open borders will only make it work more effectively. ("Socialism" is definitely one of the major bogeymen of his book: each mention of the dread word is accompanied by a cartoon panel of

goose-stepping Reds.) Caplan's case for the moral wrongness of borders is compelling, and strongly-stated. The first chapter of his book is called "Global Apartheid," and the opening image shows the outline of a looming black wall topped with barbed wire. "Immigration laws tell peaceful people where they're allowed to live and work," a cartoon version of the Statue of Liberty informs us. "Immigration laws don't merely *allow* discrimination. They *require* it. It's wrong to tell people where they can live or work because they're black, or women, or Jews. Why isn't it equally wrong to tell people where they can live or work because they were born in Mexico, or Haiti, or India?"

This line of argument is the biggest strength of Caplan's book. He appears to sincerely believe that free migration is an essential human freedom, and correctly characterizes immigration laws, of their very nature, as fundamentally oppressive. In this sense, Caplan is a much clearer moral thinker than, say, the all-too-common kind of liberal who likes the feel-goodery of belonging to a "nation of immigrants," but balks at the idea of large numbers of poor immigrants moving into their neighborhood; who tells themselves that immigrants are necessarily "better off" in their home countries than working in the United States, and believes that a "secure" border is a necessary condition to any discussion of further immigration reform.

But there's something that feels *wrong*, or at any rate incomplete, about the context in which Caplan enfolds these important truths. The rest of his argument about the moral necessity of open borders boils down, essentially, to the following: some parts of the world are rich, and their residents enjoy many luxuries. Others are desperately poor, and their residents struggle to survive. If poor people could move to rich countries and get jobs there, they could vastly improve their outcomes. Thus, why should governments have the

What Caplan doesn't explore in very much detail is why certain parts of the world are rich and others are poor. Caplan puts forward an image of the United States as a magnet for immigration because the United States is simply a good country to live in. He doesn't dwell on the fact that one very substantial reason rich countries like the United States have so much abundance is precisely because they exploit the resources of poorer countries, or that the conditions of poverty and violent insecurity that drive many immigrants to move to more prosperous countries are directly influenced by rich countries' economic and foreign policy decisions—to say nothing of the much longer history of imperial conquest and political meddling pursued by the United States and other powerful nations. This, by itself, doesn't alter the validity of Caplan's argument that restricting the free movement of people is immoral. But Caplan situates an immigrant's decision to move in a kind of historical vacuum of rational cost-benefit analysis. For a libertarian, the logic of the free market dictates that people should be allowed to move where they can get work, because it's only "fair." But for a leftist, unfairness is inherent not only the immigration restrictions that prevent people from moving who wish to move, but in the unequal global hierarchy that forces people to leave their countries who otherwise would not wish to. At various points in the book, Caplan also declares himself to be a "fanboy of Western culture" (which apparently boils down to favoring "reason" and "enlightenment") and does some slightly creepy IQ comparisons across various countries, suggesting that worldwide IQ will rise if people are able to migrate to better-resourced areas—avoiding any serious analysis of power by vaguely implying that there's a cultural explanation for the "West's" economic success.





VEN IF WE AGREE WITH CAPLAN THAT OPEN BORDERS are a moral imperative, how should we think about his second premise—that opening up borders will bolster the existing capitalist world order, which is presumed by Caplan to be a good thing? Perhaps, if we feel strongly enough that immigration restrictions are immoral and should be abolished, we should be willing to countenance the "open borders is compatible with global capitalism" argument as a means of bringing some of our political opponents around to our side. (Admittedly, most of our political opponents aren't ideologically rigorous libertarians, but are ordinary oligarchs with a vague Ayn Rand gloss—so it's hard to say how far they'd be persuaded by these arguments anyhow.) But adopting some of Caplan's assumptions feels icky, and possibly dangerous. Caplan views immigration, in an economic sense, as "economic trade in labor," which he thinks should be free in the same way that he thinks trade in goods should be free, and writes that "progress always hurts someone, but the secret to mass consumption is mass production." To illustrate the economic boons of immigration, cartoonist Zach Weinersmith has drawn giant globes made of cash that will presumably be generated by immigrants multiplying their wages through relocation. Even if you think Caplan is right about these things, it feels like typical capitalist magical thinking that treats laborers as statistics and infinite growth as an inherent good, without exploring its long-term environmental viability or actual quality-of-life improvements for ordinary people. Also, accepting the premise that "progress always hurts someone" feels like a license to play utilitarian games with (other) human beings' lives.

Certainly, insofar as available economic evidence suggests that immigration hasn't had the catastrophic effects on wages that many anti-immigration propagandists want you to believe, the potential economic benefits of immigration aren't something we necessarily want to deemphasize. But at the same time, if you think that the global economy is deeply unfair, we don't want to become too enthusiastic about arguing that opening up borders is the mystical solution that, without more

action, will somehow cause the global economy to become fair. Rather, many leftists have envisioned open borders as something that—even if it won't be the singular cause of the dismantlement of unjust economic systems—can increase worker power by allowing greater solidarity and organizing across national lines. Caplan, by contrast, wants to assuage public fears that increased immigration is likely to result in any significant political changes. He extensively cites studies that show that immigrants assimilate quickly, vote at slightly lower rates than the general population, and possess political views that are pretty close to the median (albeit slightly more "fiscally liberal" and "socially conservative" than average.) But those studies, to the extent we think they're reliable, are based upon the present-day pool of immigrants, which is much more limited than what's envisioned under an open borders regime. It's hard to say if this is a good predictor of how a much larger influx of immigrants would affect U.S. politics, for example—and ideally, we on the left would want an influx of working-class immigrants to affect U.S. politics, with workers from different parts of the world joining unions and bringing their own political and organizing traditions to bear on U.S. debates.

It's also worth mentioning that although Caplan writes predominantly from a libertarian perspective, he pitches open borders as something that pretty much anyone of any ideological persuasion can find moral and practical reasons to support. His goal is to shift the baseline assumption "immigration must be restricted except under X conditions" to



"immigration should be open, and any exceptions should be tailored to the specific immigration-related problems a country believes would need to be prevented." Caplan calls these restrictions to assuage public anxiety "keyhole solutions": his idea being that *any* increase in immigration is good, so we should be willing to countenance (at least in the short term) new or ongoing immigration restrictions of various kinds, provided we can gradually increase the number of total people who are allowed to immigrate. Some examples of keyhole solutions he proposes



are a) taxing immigrants' income to offset any negative economic impact on native citizen workers, b) restricting immigrants' eligibility for all but emergency government services, c) requiring English fluency or cultural literacy tests, and d) raising proportional levels of immigration from non-Muslim countries (i.e. calming Islamophobes' anxieties about the prospect of a North American caliphate by simply admitting *more* non-Muslim than Muslim immigrants, so that Muslims perpetually remain a minority group.)

Caplan concedes that he doesn't think these keyhole solutions are "fair," but emphasizes that as long as more people are able to immigrate, the result will still be an improvement on the status quo. There's a sense in which this is perhaps true—but it's also rather naïve to believe that these keyhole solutions are a natural stepping-stone to eventual open borders. There's an equally good chance that these kinds of concessions will just

result in the continuing entrenchment of immigrants' second-class status: by explicitly legislating their position as go-to economic scapegoats for capitalism's ravages on the vulnerable, by encouraging restrictions that are tailored to favor more "productive" and educated immigrants over the kinds of immigrants Caplan thinks most desperately need to immigrate, by feeding the notion that certain "cultures" are inherently superior to others and that some "dangerous" cultures need to be artificially restricted, regulated, and monitored. A case for open borders that touts these kinds of keyhole solutions as incremental progress toward the eventual goal, rather than as compromises that could derail the movement entirely by authorizing lawmakers to develop even more intricately discriminatory policies than before, doesn't feel quite adequate.

One thing that rich, successful people love to tell themselves is that they are rich because of their intelligence, their discipline, and their good habits. It's a comfortable, self-reinforcing myth. Wealth proves virtue, and everyone else's lack of wealth proves their lack of virtue. It's much more comfortable than confronting the fact that vast wealth is accumulated, under the best of circumstances, via blind luck and more commonly by outright theft. The history of the United States and Mexico shows this clearly: the trajectories of our nations' respective fortunes depended so heavily upon a contingent moment in history, where one nation took a rich territory that had previously belonged to another—a contingency that was then reinforced by many dozens, even hundreds, of additional contingencies, leading the United States to gradually view the hardening of the southern border as politically advantageous. A case for open borders that fails to reckon with past and present exploitation is necessarily going to feel like something between a Pollyanna pipedream and a smokescreen for further violent depredations. That's not to say that Caplan's arguments have no merit, or that there's no common ground to be found between leftist and libertarian advocates for open borders. But—in the same way that Caplan's comic book occasionally throws out a cautionary vision of a closed-borders world of tightly-sealed, totalitarian socialist states—leftist open borders advocates have a mirror nightmare vision, of a world homogenized and subjugated to the whims of the global rich, where people are free to move where they will but their autonomy in each new place only increases by negligible fractions. If we believe that most countries in the world mistreat the poor, then allowing the poor to move from country to country only gets us so far. Open borders is not the solution to global injustice: it is simply a rectification of one injustice among many, creating the opportunity for a more fully international community to tackle other injustices wholesale.



## The Illustrators



C.M. Duffy



Ellen Burch



Nick Sirotich



John Biggs



Harriet Burbeck



Tyler Rubenfeld



Jesse Rubenfeld



Matt Lubchansky



Ben "Skutch" McGehee



Aidan Y-M



Christopher Matthews



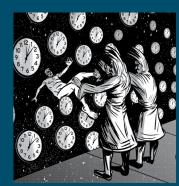
Mort Todd



Nick Sirotich

# Jeff Jordan

JEFFJORDANART.COM



Mike Freiheit