THE BUREAUCRACY
and how to deal with it

A SERIES OF TUBES
understanding the internet

SUNDAY SCHOOL
what if it was socialist

Introductory Remarks

THE MAG WITH LUXURIOUS PALMFEEL

COMING SOON

Pocket Square a Day CALENDAR

by Current Affairs

AS FAR AS WE KNOW, WE ARE NOT

CIA

A reader writes:

"I never received a single issue of my CA subscription, and NJR is a bad joke that sucks the air out of the room and starts fights. If I were paid by the CIA to sow disarray and muddle left discourse, I would behave the way he does."

We are reminded here of the old complaint about the restaurant where "the food is terrible—and such small portions!" The Editor is a worthless joke and a CIA operative... also I am eagerly awaiting the arrival of my issue. (In fact, it turned out the correspondent did not have a print subscription, which explained why a print subscription had not arrived, though admittedly even print subscriptions that do exist have a tendency not to show up.) We would like to state here for the record that we have no awareness of being on the payroll of the CIA, and if we are, the deep state has certainly not shown itself to be deep pocketed, and we wonder if perhaps Putin pays better. We will, of course, let our readers know the moment we discover ourselves to be government operatives.

A Secret Message From

Antifa

HIGH COMMAND

The bread pudding has breached the harbor. Three noons rising means a ring for the pheasant. Iron smelter? Velvet slippers? Go up the chimney before opening the door, said the doctor to the accordion. Madness, madness everywhere. Retake the Jimmy John's or reap the double-ply beach towels.

THE EDITORIAL POLICY ON

S-E-X

This magazine has never been against sex, strictly speaking. We have always encouraged people to do what they wish with the consenting genitalia of others, *in their private lives*. However, it is true that the Editor of *Current Affairs* has long kept a cross-stitched sign in the Ideas Room that says, in decorative script, "No Sex In The Magazine." The Editor's reasoning has been that, since *Current Affairs* can often be found in the waiting rooms of dentists' offices, and since children often go to the dentist, and since sex with children is a criminal offense, as a legal matter it is best not to discuss sex within the pages of this periodical. Writers are therefore discouraged from mentioning sex as a phenomenon. As a biological matter, of course, we freely acknowledge the existence of lust, as well as the behavior that results from it. But as a journalistic matter, we attempt to write as if sex is not there, to "write *around* sex."

This policy has often been the subject of discontent in the editorial ranks, and admittedly no staff beyond the Editor seem to think it is a sound idea. "Sex," they say in meetings, "is a fact of life that cannot be denied. Besides, it sells copies." Here they have a point. Nothing moves magazines like placing those three alluring letters among the cover lines. S-E-X. Editorial prudishness may be unobjectionable when it is simply protecting the eyes of children. But when it is costing precious subscription dollars, this is another matter entirely. We are thus commissioning a set of Analytics in order to determine how many more magazines we would sell each month if *Current Affairs* were to become disgustingly raunchy and begin to mention various acts of lewd behavior in alarmingly precise detail. If the circulation maximization team indicates that filth would be profitable, then the market must trump morality. Do not then be surprised if you begin to see acts of depravity mentioned more frequently, and matters carnal digressed upon at length for seemingly no reason. It is not because we desire to inflict them upon you. It is because you, the reading public, have spoken with your wallets, and what you have said is "I am horny."

NOTE: A policy of "no sex in the magazine" does not mean "no sex on the magazine."

NOT ENOUGH

Covid

Regular readers have noticed that this magazine does not frequently mention the bothersome pestilence known as Coronavirus or COVID-19, even though the disease and its effects are considered by many publications to warrant significant coverage. Is not the virus a "current affair"? Well, it is, and we have published a number of articles online about the subject, most notably in the editor's "Notes On A Nightmare" series. But the theory of our print edition is that it is an oasis, a place of respite from those troubles that ordinarily pursue us. The name of the magazine, yes, is *Current Affairs*, but the reading experience is intended to be different from an ordinary current affairs publication. You are almost certainly reading about The Virus constantly. The pages of the nation's newspapers are full of it. When you receive your print copy of *Current Affairs* in the mail, we want to give you some small amount of relief from virus-related content. Let us take these few pages to discuss some of the thousand-or-so other things that concern our species. And so, in this issue, we treat you to articles on: the nature of bureaucracy, the structure of the internet, the need for political litmus tests, the persistence of social hierarchies, the economy of toys, the ethic of personal responsibility, and much more. All of these topics, you will agree, are important and interesting. There will be time to discuss COVID. We will do so on our website, and probably in articles in future print issues. But we have all thought about COVID so much for so long that we hope we can distract you for a few minutes with something else of interest. Nevertheless, we continue to constantly think of our readers' health in these difficult times and we hope you are doing okay.
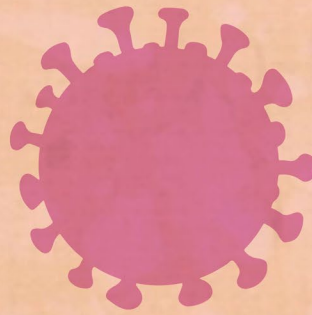
A MORATORIUM ON MATTS

We have known and loved many Matts in our time, but any sensible person must admit there are now too many of them. We do not propose to eliminate any existing Matts—to commit mattricide, if you will—but we do advocate a moratorium—or mattritorium, if you will—by which no additional Matts will be permitted for a fixed period of time, up until a sufficient percentage of presently-existing Matts has expired. In this way harmony and balance may be reintroduced to the Universe.

Advice & COLORING

Readers often ask: why does *Current Affairs* not run more "advice columns" and "coloring pages"? "*Highlights for Children* has advice and coloring," they say. "Why not y'all?" Well, dear reader, we are not *Highlights for Children*. We are a serious national magazine of political analysis and commentary, not a cheaply-printed activity booklet for easily-distracted tots. But we do understand that in a world of Confusion, one feels the need for Advice, and in a world of desaturated tedium, one feels the need to Color. Therefore, let us give you a bit of both. The advice we offer is the same useless wisdom often by the philosopher Bobby McFerrin in his award-winning No. 1 single of 1988: instead of worrying, why not be happy? (Not terribly helpful, is it? But you asked.) Now that the advice portion is concluded, please color this jerboa:
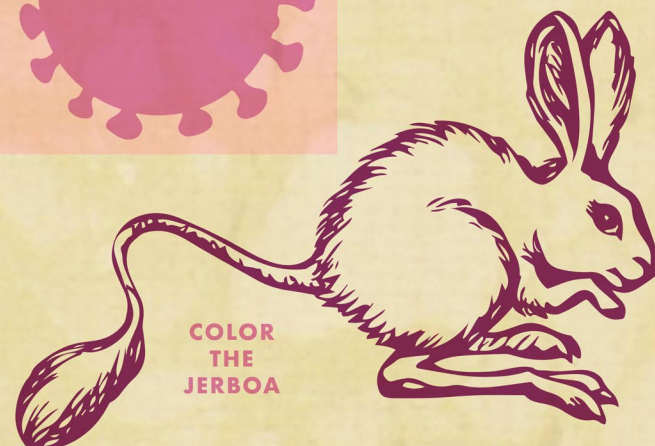
COLOR THE JERBOA

THIS MAY-JUNE 2020 EDITION, WHICH GOD WILLING YOU WILL have received by September of 2020, marks the twenty-fifth issue of *Current Affairs* to have been successfully printed and posted. This, we believe you will agree, is an impressive number for a small left-wing print magazine to have reached. Around the time of our third issue, then-*Vanity Fair* editor Graydon Carter said that *Current Affairs* was "doomed to fail" because "print was dead." But *Current Affairs* has survived and thrived, and while Mr. Carter's prophecy may have been apt as applied to his own moribund periodical, it evidently did not apply universally. A good magazine, it seems, can still prosper. We would like to thank the subscribers and contributors to *Current Affairs* for making such an improbable dream a reality. Bless you all, and here's to the next twenty-five!

Demographic Expansion

We have been informed by the Marketing Consultant that if we are to thrive as a print periodical in a "digital age," we must expand our subscriber base by courting new demographics. "Bayou socialists with 19th century aesthetic sensibilities and idiosyncratic senses of humor" are, as it turns out, a dwindling audience. No matter; if there is one thing *Current Affairs* is known for, it is adapting to the spirit of the times, and so we shall pivot with vigor.

The consultant tells us that there are certain kinds of people who are "into feet," and that these people are willing to pay ready money to be supplied with new "feet pics." Well, *Current Affairs* has feet aplenty, and there is no reason that anyone in quest of feet should not find their appetites well satiated within our pages. We therefore present the following silhouette in the hopes that it will contribute to the substantial expansion of our readership:
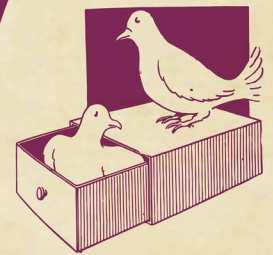
THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF BATMAN & ROBIN

We were pleased with the audience response to our syndicated Adventures of Bat-Man and Robin comic in the March-April edition. "Certainly not the Batman and Robin I grew up with," said one reader. "I like the colors," said another. In the face of such overwhelming public enthusiasm we have decided to renew the series. The latest installment can be found on page 79.

HOW DO YOU LIKE YOUR *Freedom?*

We would draw the reader's attention to an opinion article printed in the *Wall Street Journal* of June 26, entitled "I'm Leaving Seattle for Texas So My Employees Can Be Free." The article is written by the "founder and CEO of Rex Teams, a tech, investment and real-estate firm," who says that because of the monolithic ideological culture of the West Coast, "I hope to move dozens of employees to the Lone Star State" so that they can be "free." We would note the comical irony of an employer who demands that his employees pack up their lives, abandon their friends and family, and move across the country, presumably upon threat of losing their livelihood, and says he is doing it because he values their freedom of choice. Here we have as good an illustration as any of the falsity of capitalist "freedom," which has always been the freedom to do what your boss tells you to do.

HOW LONG IS YOUR

Novel?

A recent *Wall Street Journal* report tells us of a man with a very big novel indeed:

This Book Isn't 'War and Peace.' It's Bigger. Arthur Nersesian's new novel about a dystopian New York, 'The Five Books of (Robert) Moses,' took decades to complete and is 1,506 pages long... It took Nersesian more than 25 years to write ... His patient publisher dedicated more than 12 years to editing the book, which comes out in late July.... The finished product weighs more than 4 pounds. If he stacked all his manuscript pages since he began the book back in 1993 it would stand 6 feet tall, a shade taller than himself, Mr. Nersesian says. The novel is longer than the 2007 hardcover edition of Leo Tolstoy's "War and Peace," which unfolds across more than 1,200 pages... Its imposing size will likely attract readers, said one retailer who has ordered two copies."

Does it matter whether the book is "good"? No. As Lenin, or someone, said: at a certain point, quantity becomes quality. Nersesian's book is a sprawling panorama of both historical and fictitious characters set in a dystopian alternate New York City, but who cares about that? What matters is: this book is very, very big. Bigger than your novel, probably. And what all the ladies ask today when they meet a gentleman is: "So, how long is your novel?" If he does not give a length that exceeds War and Peace, the lady will look disappointed, and his masculinity will be wounded. *You cannot expect me to give the time of day to a man with such a short novel.*

So gents: whatever it takes, however many years of labor, you must make your novel longer. There is no other way to impress.

THANK YOU, ANT PEOPLE

We are pleased to have been the subject of a recent report in *The Daily Ant*, a specialist newspaper targeted at myrmecologists. The ant people were pleased by an episode of the *Current Affairs* podcast in which our editors discussed a news item about a woman angrily destroying her boyfriend's fire ant farm, leading to fire ants scattering throughout the couple's condominium building and terrorizing residents for months. While the editors questioned the wisdom of both choosing fire ants for one's ant farm and knowingly shattering a fire ant farm, at no point did we condemn the ants themselves, leading the staff of the *Daily Ant* to praise *Current Affairs* under the following headline:

"The Leftist Podcast Strikes Back: *Current Affairs* Promotes True Ant Content"
An excerpt from the *Ant*'s report:

Just a few weeks ago, we penned an editorial taking alleged leftists Katie Halper and Matt Taibbi to task for the egregiously anti-ant content on their podcast. Today, we have much more uplifting news to share: A genuine leftist outlet, Current Affairs, hosted a live stream discussion among their editorial and writing staff, and chose to open their chat with an exciting story about ants! Unlike the charlatans Halper and Taibbi, the Current Affairs crew prove their myrmeco-friendly bona fides with an exemplary display of ant empathy... these true leftist writers show how, even with a recognition that ant stings are painful to humans, ants deserve love and care. We applaud Current Affairs for promoting a more formicid future.

Indeed, we have always been a friend to ants everywhere. Though we have never printed an article specifically about ants (this will change soon), we believe that every word we write is, in one way or another, implicitly pro-ant. Our general sympathies are with animals against humans, and we have a firm respect for the socialistic economic structure of the contemporary anthill.

The Daily Ant is not an easy publication to please. When Taibbi and Halper of *Rolling Stone* suggested a video of ants was "disgusting," the *Ant* instantly crawled all over them, accusing them of "join[ing] ranks with conservatives and fascists to dunk on ants." But while the *Ant* is swift in its condemnation, it is also generous with its praise. When *Intercept* co-founder Glenn Greenwald visited the Field Museum in Chicago to examine a collection of ants, the publication reported that he had been an "energetic and engaged learner":

"Marveling at the 'intricate' shape and sculpturing of a turtle ant species Cephalotes atratus, Greenwald also enjoyed Polyrhachis rastellata, poetically stating that it 'looks like a musical note.'"

Current Affairs has not yet visited an ant museum, but we hope the *Daily Ant* will continue to see us as allies in the fight for insect dignity.
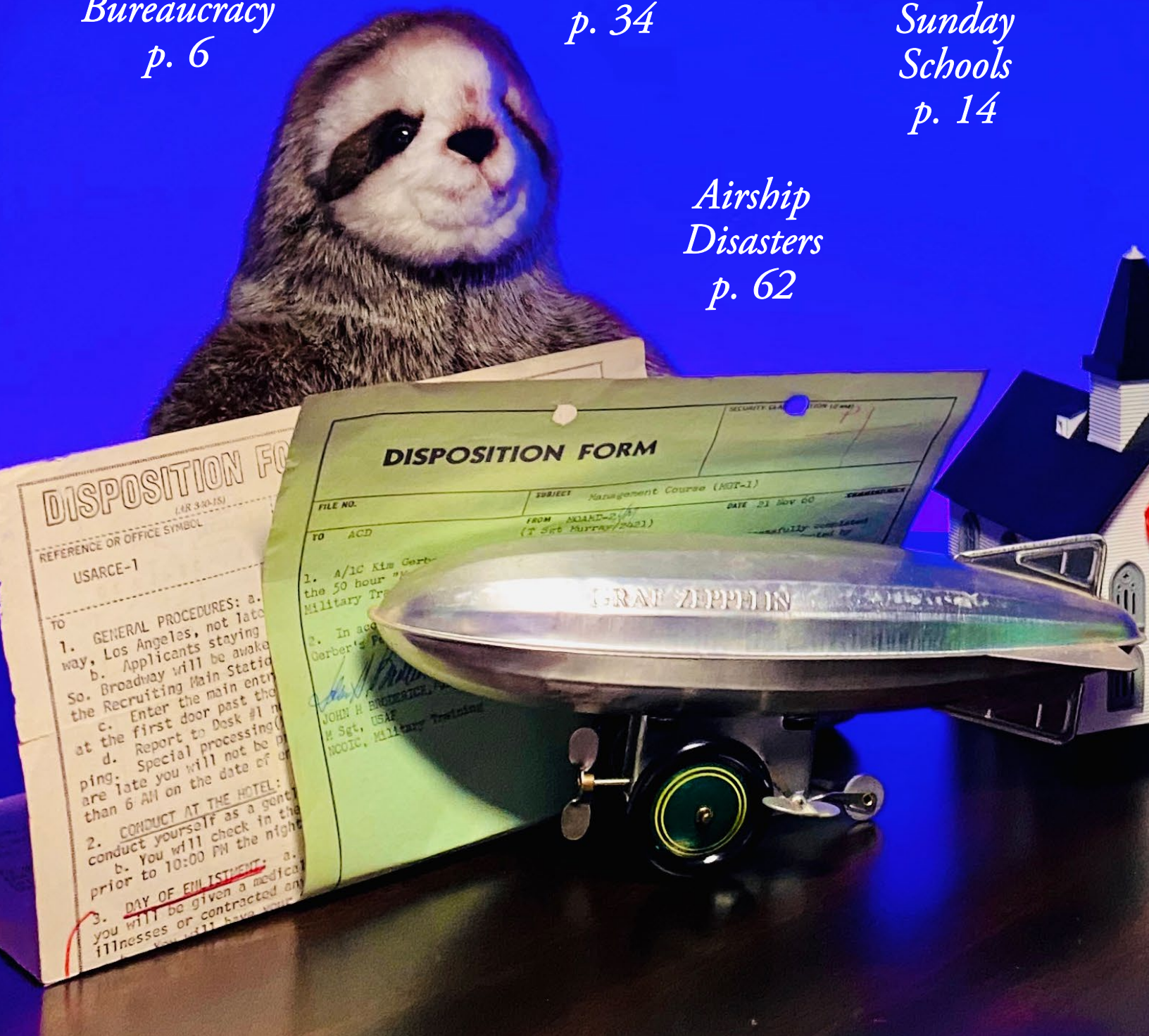
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enduring the BUREAUCRACY

by BRIANNA RENNIX

Before the Law stands a doorkeeper on guard. To this doorkeeper there comes a man from the country who begs for admittance to the Law. But the doorkeeper says that he cannot admit the man at the moment. The man, on reflection, asks if he will be allowed, then, to enter later. 'It is possible,' answers the doorkeeper, 'but not at this moment.' Since the door leading into the Law stands open as usual and the doorkeeper steps to one side, the man bends down to peer through the entrance. When the doorkeeper sees that, he laughs and says: 'If you are so strongly tempted, try to get in without my permission. But note that I am powerful. And I am only the lowest doorkeeper. From hall to hall keepers stand at every door, one more powerful than the other. Even the third of these has an aspect that even I cannot bear to look at."

—Franz Kafka, *The Trial*

I FREELY ADMIT THAT I AM A BAD DRIVER. I HAVE THAT exact combination of distractibility and lack of spatial awareness that makes someone a complete disaster on the road. I try to drive carefully, but Texas highways are a demolition derby, and it's hard not to get carried away. And so, given how many times I likely *should* have been pulled over, and wasn't, I probably had no real reason to feel affronted that day when a cop flagged me down a little outside San Antonio. I still managed to muster a sense of righteous indignation, because on this particular occasion, I was barely going seven miles above the speed limit.

The cop pointed out that I was speeding, and I gave him a faintly incredulous look. People regularly did 90mph on this stretch of highway, and we both knew it. The cop wrote me a ticket with no dollar amount. "How much is it, though?" I asked. *I don't know*, the cop told me, *you have to call the phone number listed on the back*. I dragged myself home, posted the ticket on my fridge, and forgot about it until a week before the payment was due.

That I would eat the cost of the ticket, rather than fighting it out in court, was a foregone conclusion. I told myself that this was because of my overweening pride and haughtiness, refusing to prostrate myself before The Man, and not because I'm lazy, impatient, and intermittently terrified of strangers. Nonetheless, I was still pretty shocked when I called the number as instructed, and a voice on the phone told me that I owed the city of Von Ormy a whopping $430 dollars. "I was seven miles above the speed limit!"

I exclaimed. Yes, and that was $230, the voice told me patiently, plus an extra $200 for an expired registration. Still on the phone, I angrily googled Von Ormy and immediately found a number of news articles dubbing it a "libertarian experiment," where residents aren't charged taxes and which, consequently, seems to be in a constant state of economic freefall. That certainly explained why they have traffic cops stationed right on the part of the highway where the speed limit changes from 75 to 70, looking for passing cars to shake down. I asked if I could pay the ticket online, and was told no—the only way to pay was by money order.

One day before the deadline, I called the court in Von Ormy to confirm that they received the money order I'd mailed them. "Where did you mail it to?" the voice on the phone asked me. "The courthouse," I said. The voice told me, pityingly, that I shouldn't have mailed it to the courthouse. I was supposed to mail it to a mysterious P.O. box, obviously. At this point, it fully dawned on me that a money order is not like a check, where the funds won't be drawn if they don't reach their intended recipient—I had basically just sent a $430 wad of cash off into some kind of postal abyss. And now the deadline for paying by mail had passed, the voice on the phone told me, so I would have to come settle my ticket in person.

I said something incoherent about how libertarianism was literally highway robbery, and hung up.

In the end, I got my ticket paid, leapfrogging an entire roomful of fellow-miscreants at the courthouse who were all anxiously waiting to try to bargain down their tickets with the prosecutor. My ability to circumvent that specific, time-consuming part of the process was purely a privilege of wealth: I had enough money in my bank account to cover the sticker price of the ticket, notwithstanding my earlier fuck-up with the money order, and so I bought my way out of the room as quickly as possible.

This anecdote, apart from being a classic showpiece of my unremitting administrative incompetence, is, I think, a pretty good example of how we mortals usually interface with bureaucracies, both the government and private bureaucracies which exercise control over important parts of our lives. Bureaucratic processes have lots of rules; some of those rules are unwritten; some are written down, but not consistently followed; some are written down, but not in a place you have access to; random officials determine which rules will be invoked at which times; and, usually,

there are a series of escape-valves where, if you have enough money, you can just bribe yourself out of the remaining hassle.

Bureaucracy, of course, looks very different when viewed from the perspective of those who govern (or those who sympathize with those who govern), as opposed to those who are governed. For political scientists, bureaucracy is a normal and unavoidable feature of large states. No executive can single-handedly administrate a large polity, and so the development of systematized decision-making procedures that can be delegated downwards is the inevitable outcome. (That bureaucratic systems would develop within private enterprises seems even less surprising, since there's no pretense of drawing authority from any kind of public mandate.) And in many polities present and historical—from imperial China to the Carolingian Empire to 19th-century Britain—bureaucracies have been imagined as a meritocratic alternative to pure nepotism, the idea being that individuals without significant wealth or family power could enter a bureaucratic system and advance within it, based solely on talent.

In the United States, where our political consciousness is mostly limited to elections, and few of us have any cognizance of how bureaucrats are chosen and elevated, this rosy view of bureaucracy isn't nearly as widely-held, but some recent media has romanticized bureaucrats and civil servants. Think of *The West Wing*, dramatizing the behind-the-scenes labors of White House administrators, or *Parks and Recreation*, where main character Leslie Knope is presented as the quintessential virtuous bureaucrat: eccentrically delighted by regulations and procedures, tirelessly hard-working, and ambitious in the service of the public good. Bureaucrats are, in these shows, imagined to be the epitome of responsible, effective governance, separate from and more high-minded than the rat-race of electoral politics.

This, however, is a vision of bureaucracy from the perspective of bureaucrats themselves. The vision of bureaucracy from the perspective of those who are *subjects* of bureaucracy is simply: paperwork. There is a thing I need, and I cannot get it unless I fill out a million incomprehensible forms. There is something I have

done wrong, in the eyes of the state, and in order to correct it, I must perform a series of bizarre tasks, like a rat in an experiment. Miniscule irregularities in my compliance with these administrative rituals confer immense power on the bureaucrat tasked with evaluating me: such an error gives that bureaucrat untrammeled license to reject my request if they so choose. If the fictional face of the bureaucrat is Leslie Knope, the fictional face of the bureaucratic subject is Josef K., the protagonist of Kafka's *The Trial*, who finds himself trapped between a nebulous court and a shadowy Committee of Affairs as he struggles to navigate something he knows only as "the process."

My most nightmarish encounters with bureaucratic systems, unsurprisingly, have occurred in connection with my work as an immigration lawyer. When people think about why our immigration system is bad, they often think about armed patrolmen at the border, prison guards at detention centers, ICE agents conducting workplace raids, etc. But our immigration system is also, at its core, an extremely large and intricate bureaucracy, and many of the bad decisions that affect people's lives within this system are not made by, say, racist immigration cops going rogue in the field, but by immigration bureaucrats calmly reviewing paperwork in an office. It's hard to convey the extent to which the rules of this system are deliberately set up to ensure that *most immigrants are unable to follow the law, no matter how hard they try*. This, in turn, gives the government handy anecdotes and statistics to trot out in order to suggest that immigrants, much like Josef K., are not Complying With The Process.

Let me give you an example of a problem that I encounter frequently. I work primarily with immigrant mothers and children who are imprisoned at a family detention center in Dilley, Texas. One of the ways that moms and kids end up in that detention center is because they were picked up by ICE for having an order of deportation that was entered against them automatically when they failed to show up for their scheduled hearing in immigration court.

Now, you might well suspect that people who miss their immigration court hearings are skipping them *on purpose*, knowing that our court system is incredibly hostile, and fearing that they'll lose their case. I certainly wouldn't blame any immigrant for doing this, since it's exactly what I would do in their shoes, without hesitation. However, this is not why the vast majority of the families I've worked with have missed their hearings. In fact, the #1 reason that people miss their hearings is because *they never knew they had a hearing*. How do I know that these families are telling the truth? Because most of them were arrested at their required check-ins with ICE, to which they continued to faithfully report even after their deportation orders had been entered. Why the hell would you keep attending your scheduled meetings with immigration officials if your intention was to go into hiding?

In fact, the story I hear from families detained at their check-ins is almost always the same: "I did everything I was supposed to do. I checked my mail every day. I went to all my meetings with immigration. I answered all of immigration's phone calls. I always complied with the law. I don't understand why my children and I were arrested." When I would dig further into their history, I would usually find out that the family, at some point, moved to a different address than the one they registered with immigration

when they arrived in the United States. They had, of course, dutifully informed ICE of their new address at their check-in, and an ICE officer had written it down on an official-looking form right there in front of them, and the family had believed, quite reasonably, that they had successfully updated their address with "the government." Little did they know, of course, that "immigration" (a.k.a. ICE) is housed under a completely different department than the immigration *court* system, which is responsible for mailing their hearing notices. To change their address with the *court,* there is a completely different piece of paper they have to fill out and mail to several specific locations within five days of relocating. ICE, with whom these families meet every month, doesn't give a shit whether the families get their hearing notice at the correct address, so they don't go out of their way to let the families know that there are additional steps they need to take. And so then, of course, the family shows up at their scheduled check-in one day, never having known that they even *had* a court hearing scheduled, only for immigration to gleefully inform the family that they've lost their case and take them into custody. (Other times, the family's registered address is entirely up-to-date, and the government just fucks up sending the notice in the mail—this happens with some frequency, too.)

So let's suppose you've missed your hearing in immigration court, and you've automatically been issued an order of deportation—what can you do next? Many immigrants in this situation, I assume, simply get carted off and deported without fanfare, because most detention centers are remote and it's hard to get legal services. If you happen to be detained at a center where there are lawyers on hand to help you, you could perhaps get assistance in filing a special motion to reopen your case with the immigration court. Courts are generally pretty stingy about granting these, but if you were prevented from attending your hearing for reasons that a particular judge views as sufficiently credible and legally compelling, they might decide to give you another chance.

Now, you might think: okay, sure, a very poor, recently-arrived, non-English-speaking family can't reasonably be expected to navigate the immigration bureaucracy on their own. But if a *trained immigration lawyer* were right there, guiding them through each step of the process, surely everything would go fine! Well, not so much. We'll leave aside the substance of the lawyer's arguments, and how absurd the judge's ultimate decision can be: I've had motions to reopen denied for families who were *literally kidnapped by drug cartels* on the date of their scheduled hearing. Let's just focus on the bureaucratic considerations: can the lawyer even manage to get the damn motion filed in the right immigration court? When an immigrant you're trying to help has been shipped to a detention center for processing prior to deportation, there's a very good chance that the court in which their proceedings took place is located clear on the other side of the country, and also that you're looking at a same-day window of time to get the documents filed with that specific court before your client is put on a plane. Can you file documents electronically with an immigration court, in This Year Of Our Lord 2020? OBVIOUSLY FUCKING NOT. You need to file in hard copy, which means either mailing the thing overnight—very expensive, and possibly not fast enough—or finding an actual human in the city where the court is located, who can drop everything they're doing and run to deliver documents for you.

Okay, let's suppose you manage to find someone who's available to file the motion. *You may still be screwed.* Everything depends on the government clerk at the court filing window. The clerk can choose to accept your filing—thus temporarily pausing the immigrant's deportation, and possibly giving you a chance to reverse their deportation order (which again, I can't stress enough, was probably entered against them for *the most bullshit reasons imaginable)*—or reject your filing, thus ensuring their immediate removal. A lot is riding on this decision! Surely, a clerk wouldn't reject a filing for *some reason that makes no goddamn sense!* Reader: they *would*. I've seen clerks reject emergency filings because they didn't contain "wet" ink signatures, when, again, the person was detained thousands of miles from the court and couldn't have transmitted an original signature to the court in time with anything other than actual wizardry. I've seen clerks reject filings because they weren't hole-punched at the top, when a hole-punch was sitting right at the clerk's elbow at the moment of the rejection. I've endured agonizing phone calls with clerks who rejected filings for reasons they were entirely unable to explain, or who pretended to accept filings at the window and then quietly rejected them later without telling anyone.

The consequences for these administrative decisions can be huge. We are talking about people getting deported because the government never told them they had a hearing, imprisoned them so far from the courthouse that they couldn't send their documents in time, and rejected the documents that strangers rushed to file on their behalf. Lots of individual actors within the system had to make lots of little decisions, based on mysterious rules, for this insane result to be possible.

W HAT KIND OF A PERSON BECOMES a bureaucrat? Honestly, part of the reason that I dislike bureaucrats so intensely, I think, is because I have certain personality traits in common with them. I prefer rote, repetitive, predictable work tasks to complicated, highly context-dependent work-tasks. I don't really like having direct authority over others, nor do I enjoy subjecting myself to the personal whims of an individual boss, so making decisions independently but based off a tree, so to speak, is comfortable for me. I'd like to have a job that I didn't have to think about very hard, where I felt like my responsibilities were pretty clear-cut, and where my mind would be freed up for my own imaginative and creative pursuits. In the right setting, I would probably be a reasonably contented pencil-pusher.

I also have some of the characteristic flaws of bureaucrats. When someone asks me a question I don't know how to answer, or wants something from me that I don't know how to give them, I have a tendency to bluster, shut down, or try whatever else I can to prod the problem away from me. When I was in high school, I worked as a cashier at a toy store, and I dimly recall that there were many times where I couldn't figure out how to find some item, and I sort of just... played dumb until the customer gave up.

BEAT THE BUREAUCRACY?

Y ou're a **legal aid attorney** with an **important filing!** If your paperwork isn't accepted by 5:00 p.m. EST, your client will be murdered.

"Murdered?? How??"

Well, technically, your client will only be neglected to death by the state. Materially, that's the same thing as murder, but in the land of **legal bureaucracy** the truth is meaningless and only **technicalities** matter, which means you've already made your first mistake.
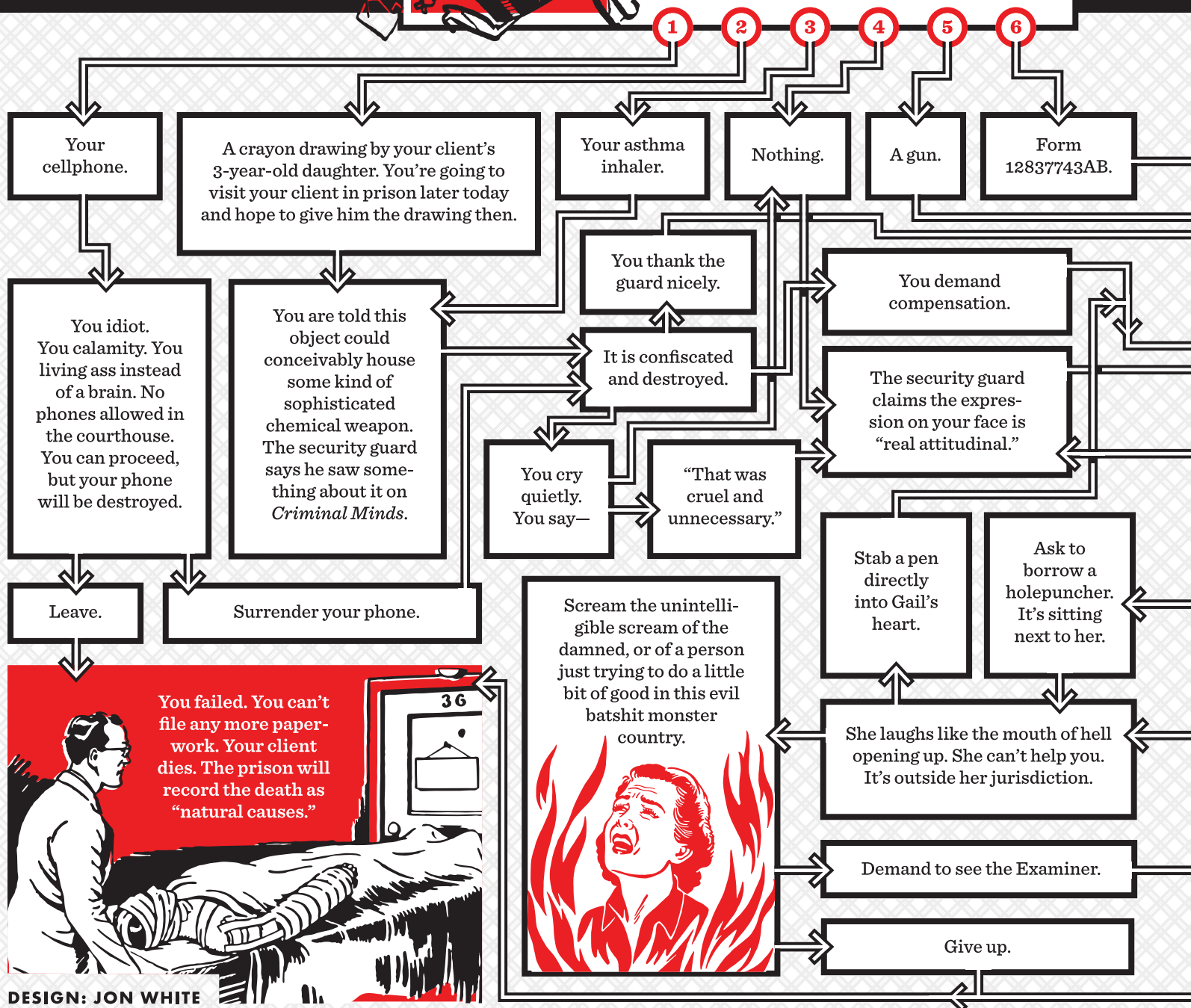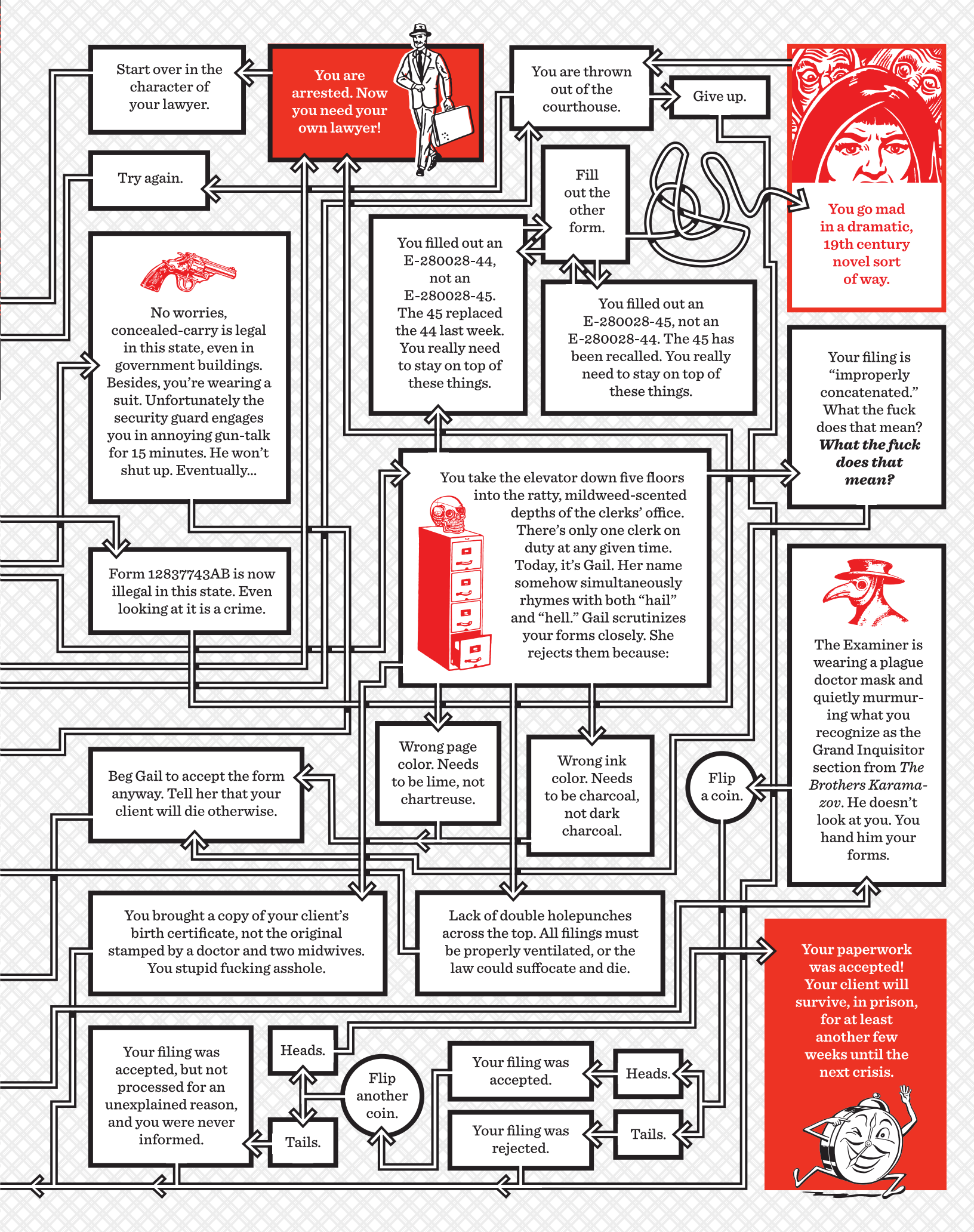
Can you recover? Can you...

You've made it through the magnificent neo-classical entrance to the courthouse building! Wow, the law sure is imposing, and white. Inside, a security guard inspects your bag.
He finds ....

1 **2** **3** **4** **5** **6**

Your cellphone.

A crayon drawing by your client's 3-year-old daughter. You're going to visit your client in prison later today and hope to give him the drawing then.

Your asthma inhaler.

Nothing.

A gun.

Form 12837743AB.

You thank the guard nicely.

You demand compensation.

You idiot. You calamity. You living ass instead of a brain. No phones allowed in the courthouse. You can proceed, but your phone will be destroyed.

You are told this object could conceivably house some kind of sophisticated chemical weapon. The security guard says he saw something about it on *Criminal Minds*.

It is confiscated and destroyed.

The security guard claims the expression on your face is "real attitudinal."

You cry quietly. You say—

"That was cruel and unnecessary."

Leave.

Surrender your phone.

Stab a pen directly into Gail's heart.

Ask to borrow a holepuncher. It's sitting next to her.

You failed. You can't file any more paperwork. Your client dies. The prison will record the death as "natural causes."

Scream the unintelligible scream of the damned, or of a person just trying to do a little bit of good in this evil batshit monster country.

She laughs like the mouth of hell opening up. She can't help you. It's outside her jurisdiction.

Demand to see the Examiner.

Give up.

Start over in the character of your lawyer.

You are arrested. Now you need your own lawyer!

You are thrown out of the courthouse.

Give up.

You go mad in a dramatic, 19th century novel sort of way.

Fill out the other form.

Try again.

You filled out an E-280028-44, not an E-280028-45. The 45 replaced the 44 last week. You really need to stay on top of these things.

You filled out an E-280028-45, not an E-280028-44. The 45 has been recalled. You really need to stay on top of these things.

Your filing is "improperly concatenated." What the fuck does that mean? *What the fuck does that mean?*

No worries, concealed-carry is legal in this state, even in government buildings. Besides, you're wearing a suit. Unfortunately the security guard engages you in annoying gun-talk for 15 minutes. He won't shut up. Eventually...

You take the elevator down five floors into the ratty, mildweed-scented depths of the clerks' office. There's only one clerk on duty at any given time. Today, it's Gail. Her name somehow simultaneously rhymes with both "hail" and "hell." Gail scrutinizes your forms closely. She rejects them because:

The Examiner is wearing a plague doctor mask and quietly murmuring what you recognize as the Grand Inquisitor section from *The Brothers Karamazov*. He doesn't look at you. You hand him your forms.

Form 12837743AB is now illegal in this state. Even looking at it is a crime.

Beg Gail to accept the form anyway. Tell her that your client will die otherwise.

Wrong page color. Needs to be lime, not chartreuse.

Wrong ink color. Needs to be charcoal, not dark charcoal.

Flip a coin.

You brought a copy of your client's birth certificate, not the original stamped by a doctor and two midwives. You stupid fucking asshole.

Lack of double holepunches across the top. All filings must be properly ventilated, or the law could suffocate and die.

Your paperwork was accepted! Your client will survive, in prison, for at least another few weeks until the next crisis.

Your filing was accepted, but not processed for an unexplained reason, and you were never informed.

Heads.

Flip another coin.

Tails.

Your filing was accepted.

Heads.

Your filing was rejected.

Tails.

Those were low stakes, of course: other than a modicum of lost revenue for my employers, and I don't know, the tears of disappointed children, there were no negative consequences. There are some bureaucracies that are like this, too, where the work is low-stakes, and incompetence and lack of problem-solving initiative has limited consequences (or it seems that way, because the consequences are attenuated or invisible). Then there are other kinds of bureaucracies, where the bureaucrats who work within them are constantly exposed to the suffering, despair, pain, and anger of the people who are subject to these bureaucracies. I think I share some of the flaws of these bureaucrats, too. I know how it is to feel like the system you're working in is monstrously large, and your hands are tied; to feel irrationally angry at suffering people, who presume to think you have the power to do something for them when you simply don't; how it feels when a person becomes a problem for you, and you want the problem to go away, and you experience a certain psychological relief when that happens, regardless of whether it went away because you solved it, or because you failed to solve it, so long as you don't have to hear about it again. I know all these feelings intimately, and I think they're evidence that these kinds of rule-governed systems warp the minds and empathetic faculties of the people who are forced into contact with them.

Of course, it's hard to get around the need to have something *like* a bureaucracy in many areas of life. After all, if our goal is to have something approaching a world where resources are justly apportioned, that entails some sort of system for tracking how many resources are going where, and what uses they'll be put to. Misuse of resources, whether from human error or calculated graft, feels inevitable if there are no systems for tracking what's going where. Keeping things efficient is impossible without set procedures on set issues that lower-level functionaries of the system can implement without needing to do a complicated moral and logistical calculus every single time. "Efficiency" is, of course, an overused term, and valueless when it describes—as it so often does—means without reference to ends. But a healthcare system, a food distribution system, a sewage system, or any other complex system that carries life and death consequences for those who rely on it, ought to be efficient. A multitude of small calculations must be made in such a system, and it's hard to imagine how anything like direct democracy could accomplish it, or how you'd get around the need to have decisions made primarily by people with expertise in the subject area. And so I am not quite proposing that the whole notion of bureaucracy—in the sense of systems whose day-to-day functioning is largely determined by procedures—should or could be eliminated in their entirety.

But I think there are a few things that need to be considered when it comes to bureaucracies. One is that no bureaucracies should exist that are not absolutely necessary. To me, the immigration bureaucracy is—not shockingly—a prime example of a bureaucracy that has absolutely no justifying purpose and should be ripped up by the roots and replaced with precisely nothing. There is no good reason to be tracking and evaluating and fining and imprisoning and exiling a subset of the population that happens to be living in a different place than the one where they were born. Many bureaucracies are merely fronts for resource extraction (such as the DMV and traffic courts) or data-mining and

public surveillance (such as the National Security Agency), and could be eliminated with no ill effects, and many benefits. But other bureaucracies are harder to imagine away. For example, even if you get rid of the health *insurance* bureaucracy, some kind of healthcare bureaucracy must necessarily exist, since a healthcare system must involve extensive decisions about and tracking of the diversion of critical resources, lest we run out of something we need.

So what about necessary bureaucracies—what do we do with them? Firstly, it seems important that any bureaucracy that retains a significant level of power should have its officials directly elected by the people whom the bureaucracy exists to serve. The president's ability, for example, to wield direct power through opaque executive agencies is one of the chief reasons why our nominally democratic government is forever spiraling into various forms of executive tyranny. Sure, there's a slight check in the form of congressional approval for the heads of agencies, but presidents, including Trump, have gotten around this requirement without much trouble. Bureaucrats should not be allowed to be invisible. Any person who holds significant power should have direct accountability to—which effectively means some direct mechanism for removability by—the people whose lives are affected by their decisions. Secondly, interjecting more direct public participation into bureaucracies that theoretically serve public interests is probably the only means of ensuring that these systems remain remotely intelligible and functional. Tools like public referenda, for example, could be required to endorse significant policy shifts within bureaucracies, and help ensure that their functions are optimally useful to the public, not optimally useful to unseen administrators.

THE REALITY IS THAT IT IS UNWISE TO SIMPLY trust bureaucrats, as it's unwise to simply trust anyone with unaccountable power. While civic-minded, virtuous bureaucrats do sometimes exist in real life, they are not the norm, and are more often characterized by their willingness to bend or break procedural rules than their commitment to following them. (Think of Chiune Sugihara or Raoul Wallenberg, diplomats during World War II who, at personal and professional risk, issued thousands of unorthodox travel documents to European Jews so that they could escape transportation to concentration camps.) Most bureaucrats you encounter in day-to-day life obey the rules, and they are awful. When right-wingers invoke the specter of Big Government Bureaucrats Coming Between You and Your Doctor (or Children, Guns, Soda, etc.), their rhetoric is frequently effective, and that's because it reminds people of their actual, painful interactions with bureaucracies. Rather than trying to convince people that government bureaucrats are actually great, and that people are stupid for not appreciating public service—as *The West Wing* and *Parks and Recreation* attempt to do—the left should concede that 1) bureaucracies are bad; 2) at their best, they are necessary evils; 3) they will always be comprised of ordinary humans clumsily implementing best-fit rules; and 4) that constant public collaboration is necessary to prevent them from becoming burdensome and exploitative. Otherwise, bureaucracies won't facilitate service to the public. They will instead continue to impose impossible obstacles between the public and what it needs. ✢

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THE PAST AND FUTURE OF THE
Socialist Sunday School

by ERICA X EISEN

WHEN THE WINTER HOLIDAYS WOULD roll around in the late 1910s, the students of Milwaukee teacher Kenneth Shedd treated their peers to a very different kind of Christmas pageant. Instead of putting on a nativity play or singing "Silent Night," the children mounted a performance of *The Strike of Santa Claus*, in which Santa announces that Christmas is cancelled because he has decided to strike in solidarity with their parents, who are being worked so hard by the ruling class that they did not have adequate time to prepare for the holidays. In a rousing end to the performance, the children of the world persuade Santa to go back to delivering presents by all vowing to vote socialist.

The students in question were able to perform *The Strike of Santa Claus* without so much as raising an eyebrow (never mind being banished to the principal's office) because they were not at a run-of-the-mill public school, or even a private one—they were attending one of the many Socialist Sunday Schools active in America at that time. First rising to prominence in Britain and the United States in the late 19th century, the movement was eventually championed in countries around the world by radicals who felt that education was a key part of building a more equitable future, and believed that the values imparted to children in the course of conventional schooling stood in direct opposition to that goal. Today, they are largely forgotten as a small movement that eventually fizzled out, but the rebellious spirit they encouraged in students is no less necessary today than it was a century ago.

When labor activist Mary Gray set up a soup kitchen for workers and their families during the 1892 dock strike in London, she was profoundly moved by the poverty and lack of education of the children she saw there, many of whom had little access to school. A former Sunday school teacher herself, Gray had since abandoned her faith and become involved in leftist organizing, befriending Eleanor Marx and other prominent figures of the workers' movement of the day. Now, however, an opportunity presented itself for Gray to use her former experience for a new purpose—to teach not only reading and writing but solidarity and compassion, how to hold a strike and why not to break one. It's recorded that her first improvised class had just two pupils.

Two decades later, an article in the newspaper *Young Socialist* recorded over 100 socialist Sunday Schools across Great Britain, collectively reaching over 10,000 students ranging in age from children to adults.

In the United States, too, the idea of schools for radical thought caught on among families in the labor movement. Historian J. Donald Wilson writes that the United States had roughly 100 English-language Socialist Sunday Schools between the years 1900 and 1920, not to mention an unrecorded number of schools that conducted their classes in a foreign language. Though heterogeneous in nature—there was no national curriculum or collection of standards to be enforced—the schools coalesced around the same core values. For teachers, many of whom had themselves grown up poor and been forced to work from a young age, these schools became an opportunity to give the new generation the kind of joyful childhood experiences they themselves hadn't had, and to help build a world where no child would be deprived of their education because of poverty. For parents, these schools provided a chance to instill socialist ethical values in their children, values that they felt were being eroded by the regular educational environment.

The Socialist Sunday School movement was born around the same time that Taylorist ideas of scientific management—which transformed humans into machines via its singular focus on output and optimum productivity—were coming into vogue not only on the factory floor (where many child laborers still toiled despite the best efforts of reformers) but in the classroom, with education authorities calling for the elimination of "waste" and the precise documentation of students' activities and the speed at which they were executed. Meanwhile, structural changes to how school boards were composed made it increasingly difficult for ethnic minorities and labor activists to win seats.

The Socialist Sunday School shared certain resonances with the Labor Church, a religious tendency that blended Christian ethical teachings with socialist values and rose to prominence at around the same time. What set the Socialist Sunday Schools apart, however, was that they adopted the trappings of Christianity but not the content. They weren't a place for children to learn Bible stories: their hymnals contained "The Internationale" and "Solidarity Forever." Their Ten Commandments in-

structed children to "honour good men, be courteous to all men, bow down to none" and to not "think that he who loves his own country must hate and despise other nations, or wish for war, which is a remnant of barbarism." Though differing on questions of theology, both the Socialist Sunday School movement and the Labor Church movement were united in a desire to teach socialism as a moral philosophy, and in their deeply held belief in the possibility of earthly paradise.

In many senses, classes in a Socialist Sunday School would be familiar to students of conventional schools. A 1918 record of Socialist Sunday School curricula, for instance, includes literature by classic writers such as Rabindranath Tagore, Nikolai Gogol, Oscar Wilde, and Upton Sinclair. But lessons also stressed themes such as class struggle, consciousness-raising, and the meaning of the word "scab." Even beyond the curriculum's inclusion of Marxist ideas, these schools were a radical departure from educational norms both at the time and today. In a 1910 newspaper article, Socialist Sunday School teacher Kenneth Thompson wrote that "the children select their own officers… and they are given instruction in conducting business meetings. This is one of the practical lessons that is not taught in any other school." Students were able to create and enforce their own rules, even overruling the proposals of teachers and administrators. An account of a school in Rochester, NY stated that while there were tests, students could elect not to take them if they so desired.

When you read historical accounts of these schools, they sound, quite simply, like a lot of fun. Being asked to capture the attention of a roomful of children on a weekend morning meant that teachers had to be inventive with their curricula and depart from the typical rote learning model. Students sang and drew; they wrote and starred in their own plays; they went out into nature. In the same 1910 article, Thompson recalled: "The League had a picnic for the school at Piedmont Park in April, and we all had an enjoyable time. Some of us had a lively time caring for the young revolutionists."

Phrases like "young revolutionists" and "good little rebels" come up again and again with reference to the children who attended these schools. Teachers and community members viewed the young pupils of these schools with deep seriousness—they were not just bodies to be disciplined, rabble-rousers to be brought to order. They were fellow thinkers whose needs had to be addressed, whose thoughts had to be heard, whose opinions had to be acted on. They were, as some referred to them, "little comrades."

SOCIALIST SUNDAY SCHOOLS WERE ALSO explicitly internationalist in their outlook, and anti-war at a time when such views could be labeled as dangerously seditious. In contrast to English-only, assimilation-minded mainstream schools, children of immigrants could receive instruction at Socialist Sunday Schools in a language they were more accustomed to speaking, and students of any ethnic or religious background (or professing any leftist tendency) were welcome. Socialist Sunday Schools were also coed, and some fostered discussion about issues such as women's suffrage. The schools' leftist spirit continued onto the playground as well: they explicitly opposed the competitiveness that undergirded so many of the activities in conventional schools, seeing it as a value inextricably linked to capitalism and ultimately to human suffering. Many schools taught children games in which there was no winner but everyone took turns. Above all else, students were taught to understand the power structures that undergirded the world around them and to question their necessity rather than accepting them as given. In the hands of radical teachers, simple biology lessons on flowers and birds became entry points for discussions of gender roles, the division of labor, and the abolition of private property.

Undoubtedly, one of the main goals of Socialist Sunday Schools was to educate students in the history and values of the left in the hopes that they would grow up to join the struggle. But another key goal promoted by supporters of the movement—one often missed by reactionary critics who attempted to have the schools shut down for fears of indoctrination—was their emphasis on freedom of thought. For those who ran these schools or sent their children there, it was the *weekday* schools, not their weekend counterparts, that were dangerously doctrinaire, teaching respect for private property, instilling nationalism, and tacitly presenting class hierarchies as natural. Praising the Socialist Sunday School movement in a 1915 newspaper article, Eugene V. Debs lamented that "the child of the worker is taught to revere the institutions of capitalism." The goal of these schools, as he saw it, was to push back against the pro-capital messaging that children received from mass culture: "Every child is a potential revolutionist. Whether he becomes one in fact will depend upon his intellectual environment and training during the formative period of his career." For Debs and the Socialist Sunday School reformers, teaching children about socialism wasn't enslaving them to dogma—it was setting them free from the dogma that they were already being bombarded with from all sides.

Unsurprisingly, these schools often came up against fierce opposition from anti-leftists, for whom the prospect of a group of children learning about class struggle was a nightmare come true. The schools' emphasis on internationalism over patriotism riled many who saw such a position as an attack on America. Others claimed that the schools' textbooks taught such "scandalous" concepts as free love and presented a moral danger to impressionable children. (The curricula of these schools weren't standardized, so it's possible that some textbooks at the time did teach free love, but these kinds of claims were also a standard attack made by conservatives of the period. At least one Socialist Sunday School textbook, written in 1912 by Wobbly and birth control campaigner Caroline Nelson, did contain some sex ed lessons, which would have been very scandalous for the time.)

In a 1907 letter to the editor entitled "Wicked Socialist Sunday School" published in the *New York Times*, Edward F. Dutton suggested that a judge who had recently jailed someone for displaying a red flag should exercise the same harsh judgment against Socialist Sunday School teachers. He wrote, "It is certainly the duty of the authorities to locate this Sunday school and forever put an end to the instilling of the pernicious doctrines of Socialism into the minds of the youth in this great and glorious country." A year later, another article in the *Times* carried the pearl-clutching headline "Socialist Sunday School at Brighton Beach Propagating Class Hatred." In the United Kingdom, the fact that many Socialist Sunday Schools gathered in council-owned buildings meant that they were at the mercy of local politicians and could be evicted if Conservatives won a majority. Though Socialist Sunday Schools continued to function in Great Britain into the 1970s, the movement petered out in the United States after the 1920s, their existence made increasingly tenuous by the Red Scare.

I N 2016, DSA member Hae-Lin Choi, wanting to recreate the positive atmosphere of her own (Christian) Sunday school upbringing while teaching leftist values, met with a group of like-minded families and decided to create a modern-day Socialist Sunday School in New York. The twice-monthly classes she and the community put together covered topics such as corporate greed, the need to organize, and environmentalism. The students sang "Solidarity Forever" together; they colored and drew. There were field trips to parks and to protests. In both content and in spirit, Choi's program closely mirrored the efforts that had preceded it a century before.

Could the school created by Choi and her comrades become a movement, particularly now that changes necessitated by coronavirus invite a broader consideration of our post-pandemic education system? If so, what would a Socialist Sunday School reimagined for today look like? Today's "little rebels" might help tend a community garden or cook community dinners as part of mutual aid networks or lessons about food security; they might have a mini-drag pageant to learn about queer history and explore the idea of gender; they might go on radical walking tours of their communities and design monuments to commemorate the stories that the urban fabric currently leaves out; they might videocall classrooms in other parts of the country and the world to foster international friendships and solidarity. At the same time, I would hope that such a movement could also include programming for older learners, forming part of a broader socialist project to make education something that doesn't stop at one's teens or twenties (barring the infinity of grad school). A new Socialist Sunday School movement should embrace the idea that education is not a phase of one's life to be slogged through, summarily completed, and packed away. Rather, it should be something that people of all ages not only have access to but may look forward to with sincere excitement and joy.

Yet in thinking through the idea of a modern Socialist Sunday School, what strikes me is less what would be adapted for the times as much as what could stay the same, what is still necessary, so many years on, to teach.

It is not hard to imagine, of course, that modern Socialist Sunday Schools would face the same opposition as their predecessors. Inevitably, right-wing and centrist detractors will raise the objection: doesn't this constitute indoctrination? The assumption implicit in such a question is that "more acceptable" schools—conventional schools—contain no such element of value-inculcation. Yet just as there is no truly neutral media source—no newspaper or broadcasting service perfectly shorn of positionality—nor is there education that is devoid of values. This is present in the stories textbooks tell and leave out, in the books teachers choose for the classrooms and the ones they leave on the library shelves, in the morals they tease out of literature, in why and how they discipline students, in the degree of autonomy students have in making decisions about their own learning, in how and why children are praised. Indeed, for all that "critical thinking" was given lip service in syllabi and curricula when I was in high school, my own memories of those years is of a painful lack of control over what I learned, of an inability to question what I was taught, of a sense that my duty as a student was to memorize the contents of my textbook and not to interrogate the process behind its composition. And all of this occurred in an environment where our movements, behaviors, and speech were strictly monitored and subject to punishment if deemed inappropriate, where the military held yearly on-campus recruitment drives, and where the threat of random police checks was constantly held above our heads to keep us in line. To those who would reject the idea of a modern Socialist Sunday School movement as ideological indoctrination—a sentiment shared by critics a century before—my question is this: are the conventional schools you would prefer not equally ideological?

Whereas the laborers of 150 years ago were confronted with the introduction of Taylorism, we are faced with a kind of "neo-Taylorism" enabled by surveillance technologies that enable ever more tracking of worker productivity, whether through movement-monitoring watches or employee microchips. The widely-used term "human capital" assigns values to human skills and knowledge based solely upon economic worth. These are ideas that we are learning implicitly in our schools: in the never-ending cuts made to "unnecessary" arts programs, in what is deemed a requirement and what is classified as an elective, in standardized testing's flattening of learning into percentage points and students into products. And these are ideas that are brought to cruel and explicit fruition in the violence directed at students of color by school police, in a school-to-prison pipeline that decides beforehand who is an expendable part of society. If this is what traditional schools are teaching us, perhaps a nontraditional school is necessary to teach new values—and to equip us to create a more just world for all. ✤
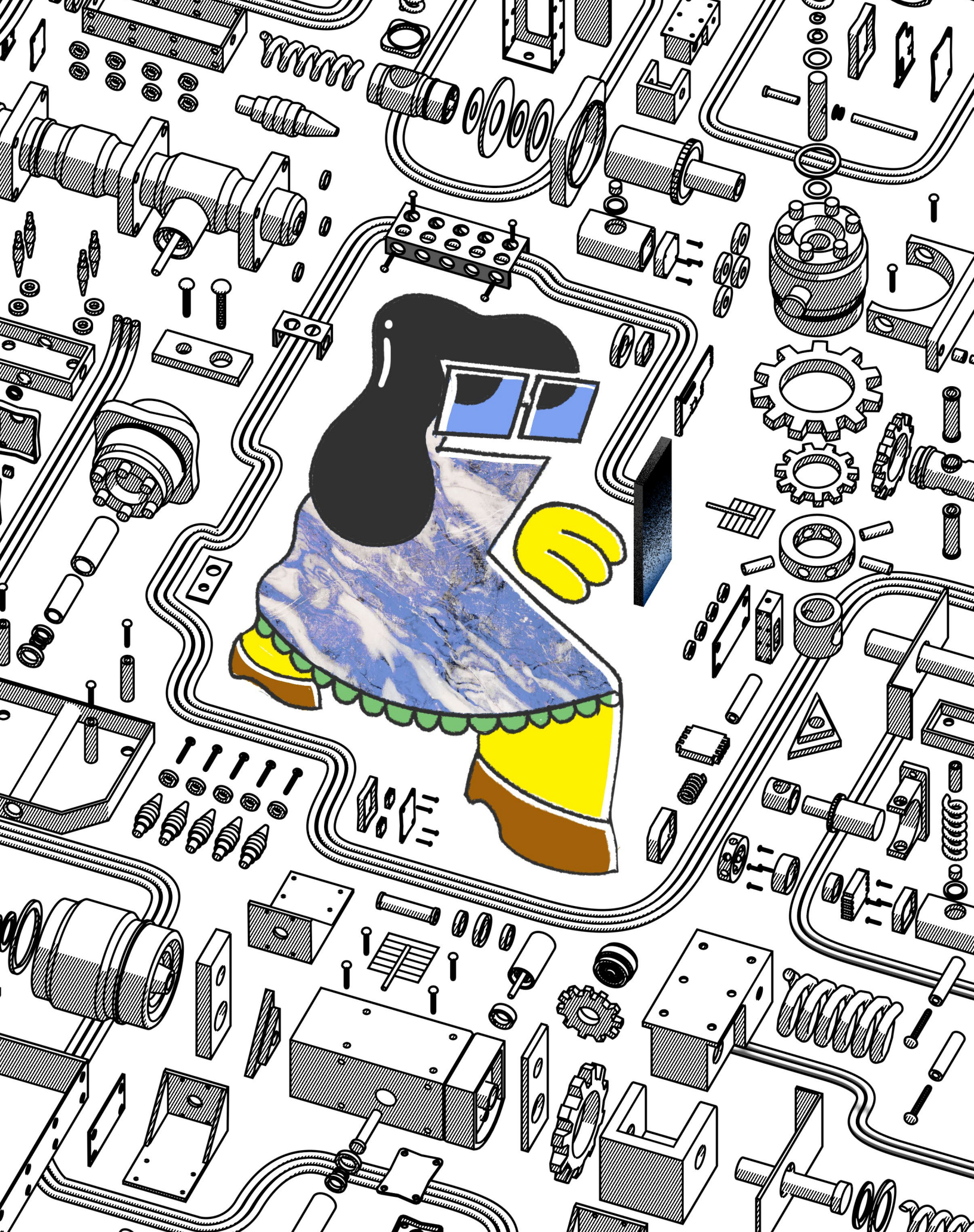
SERIES OF TUBES

Reclaiming the Physical Internet

by Sparky Abraham

I F YOU'RE LIKE ME, YOU ARE LARGELY OBLIVIOUS TO the world around you. The knowledge of the entire world, along with a direct line to everyone you know and love, lives in your phone or your computer and you carry those around with you. Occasionally you plug them into some magical holes in your wall so they keep running. And of course you need wifi or cell service, which floats around in the air as long as you're in the right sort of place with the right password. If you can grab it, then there you are. Plugged in. Connected, networked, *inter*networked, webbed to the wide world. The internet is in the air. It's a cloud. We're all connected, somehow, by technology or something. The magic lives in our computers and phones and in the apps they run.

There's this anecdote in Michael Lewis's *Flash Boys*: After most of its trading goes online, a hedge fund decides it might as well move from Manhattan to the midwest. Physical location has ceased to matter because business lives in cyberspace now. What a boon! What a time to save on rent. Of course, this turns out to be exactly wrong. As this firm is trying to save money by moving west, the high frequency traders on whom the book is focused are spending hundreds of millions of dollars to get closer to the market, to put their computers as close as possible to the market computers.

If you're a hedge fund and you think about the internet like I usually do, you move to Oklahoma where the rent is cheap.

* You know about energy use and climate change in an abstract sense but it does not occur to you every night when you plug your phone in that each little rectangle that appears in the battery icon reflects the actual use of electricity created by burning fossil fuels, or by using falling water or wind to spin a turbine (how did the water get up there? where would that wind have gone otherwise?), or by soaking up some sunbeams before they are absorbed into the ground or reflected back up into the atmosphere. You know that energy and mass in the universe are a closed system, and that nothing is created or destroyed, but it still feels a bit like magic, doesn't it? Like you're getting something from nothing? Like energy, and especially "renewable" energy, is conjured rather than redirected?

If you think about the internet the way it actually is, you pay huge sums of money to put your computers inside New Jersey warehouses directly next to the market servers, and even more money to get them a few feet closer than your competitors' computers. If you think about the internet the way it actually is, you spend untold millions to lay a few strands of glass, no thicker than human hairs, in the straightest possible line from Chicago to New Jersey. If you think about the internet the way it actually is, you worry about mountains and rivers and oceans, about electricity generation and signal interference. And you might also worry about ownership, control, power, and coordination.

The internet, after all, is simply a *communications network*. Its job is to get information from one physical place to another physical place. It serves the same function as telephones, telegraphs, radios, smoke signals, and semaphore. It happens to operate through a complicated system of physical tubes. When you send a packet of information in the form of a letter, a federal government agency takes your letter and carries it across an intricate nationwide network of federally-, state-, and locally-owned and managed roads. When you send a packet of information in the form of bits, it is usually carried by a privately-owned internet service provider (or "ISP," usually the local cable monopoly) along an intricate nationwide network of pathways owned by that company and a myriad of other private companies. It's like if you could only send a letter with either UPS or FedEx (depending on where you live), and the letter had to travel on nothing but toll roads owned by a few dozen private corporations to get to anywhere from down the street to across the continent.

This presents both a problem and an opportunity. The prob-

lem is that as more of our lives move online (whether in the normal course or all at once thanks to a global pandemic), we become ever more at the mercy of the private entities that control the internet. In normal times we have to use roads to get to work and to school, but at least we *own* the roads and exercise some control over them in the form of local government. We don't *own* the internet. There are no city council meetings where we can go to complain about potholes *and* service interruptions, or about local tax raises *and* data rates. The way that our public institutions tend to get more people connected to the internet is to give private internet companies grants to build more wires. But those companies still *own* the wires, and at the end of the day they tend to do only what is most profitable.
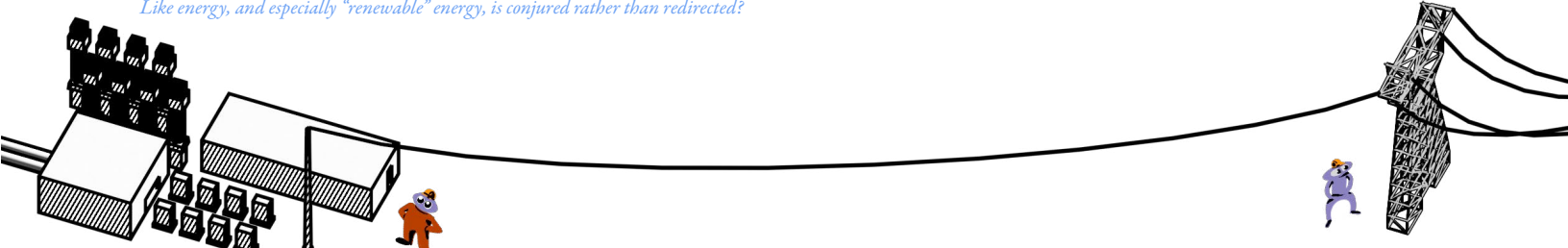
The opportunity is to flip this dynamic. But we must go deeper than the calls for municipal internet service providers that were in heavy rotation around 2017. Municipal ISPs are good, but they are only local. Every city in the country could have its own locally owned and democratically controlled ISP and the internet would still be at the mercy of private profit. Someone still has to connect all those cities to each other. Someone still has to carry the bits from Los Angeles through Las Vegas, Salt Lake City, Denver, and Omaha to the servers in Council Bluffs. Owning local tubes is great, but what we need is public *national* internet infrastructure. To stay with the road analogy, owning local roads only gets you so far—we need democratic ownership and control over the highways and interstates, too. To see why, let's talk a little more about what the internet is and where it came from.

The physical internet is a lot more like a road system than you might think. Information superhighway clichés aside, a functional internet requires physical pathways reaching every home and business in the country (and, increasingly, in the world). Like road systems, the physical internet is very expensive to build but confers massive benefits once it is built. Like roads, the physical pathways of the internet are neither very technologically complicated nor likely to change much over time. The ways of packaging and transmitting information are always improving, just like the ways of packaging and transmitting things along roads, but the glass wires that internet information travels through have been in place for decades and will not become overloaded for many more decades.

WHEN THE TELEPHONE SYSTEM WAS FIRST being built, its challenges were far less technological than logistical. The technology was relatively simple: every household with a telephone had one pair of continuous copper wires connecting it to a local switching center. The phone itself was two devices—one near the mouth that converted the sound waves of a person's voice to a corresponding electrical signal, and the other near the ear that converted an electrical signal back to a sound wave. Picking up the phone closed that wire's circuit, *i.e.* connected the wires together, creating an unbroken loop back to the switching center, where an operator was on the other end of the line. You told the operator which house you wanted to talk to, and they plugged your two wires into the two wires going from the switching center to that house, creating a continuous loop between you and the person you were calling.

The logistics of this are mind-boggling. Every single home with a telephone had its own unique pair of wires. Those wires had to make it safely from the home to the switching center. Hundreds or thousands of wire pairs had to be color-coded, tagged, and bundled in such a way that they could be discerned, organized, and repaired at any point along miles and miles of physical distance, strung from pole to pole or running underground. The organization and maintenance of those wires was a monumental task for the telecom industry. And its most significant innovations came not in the form of new types of phones (though there were those), but in ways to cram together multiple conversations into the same sets of wires and to automate the task of the operators at the switching centers.

The internet feels more distant from this past than it actually is. To exist online is to send and receive information. To be sent and received, that information must take some physical form. It could be a patterned flow of electrons, a patterned electromagnetic wave, or a patterned series of flashes from one or multiple lasers. In any case, it has to *exist somewhere*. It has to be sent and then received, and it has to traverse physical distance between where it is sent and where it is received. For the vast majority of information and the vast majority of the distances it travels, it lives as signals in long strands of metal or glass. Unlike the early telephone system, many households and devices can share space on the same strands of metal or glass, but that metal and glass *is* the internet.

The glass—optical fiber line—is a thing of wonder. Fiber has been in widespread use for decades and we haven't come close to reaching its bandwidth potential. The thing about fiber is that it is simply a medium for signalling with light. And, because the signals themselves are merely light flashes, and because light travels so fast (though somewhat slower in glass
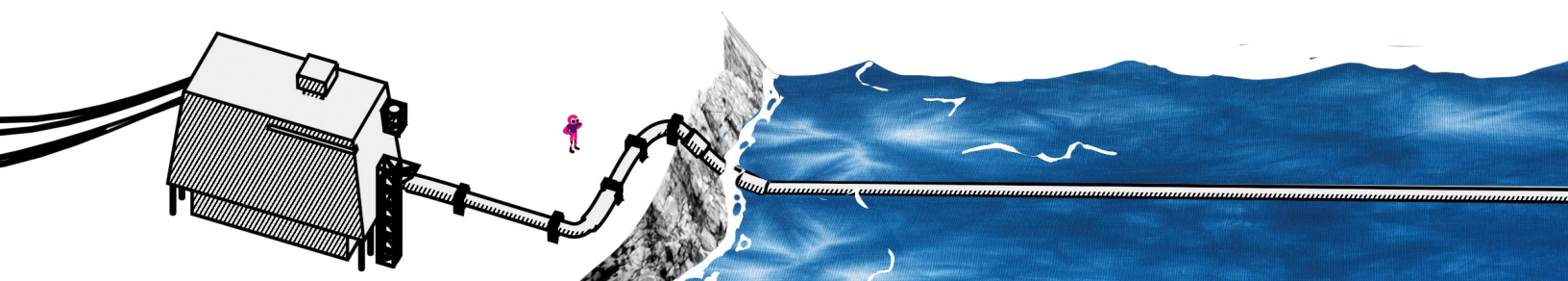
than in space), the number of signals that are theoretically possible is very, very large. The only constraint on how much data can travel through fiber right now is how fast we can make a laser flash. As we continue to develop faster sending and receiving equipment, the data capacity of the very same fiber that has been in use for ten plus years will continue to expand.

The internet is not a metaphorical world wide web of connection, it is a *physical* world wide web of connection. If I want to video chat with *Current Affairs* editor Eli Massey using a service like Zoom while he's in Cairo, my computer has to send waves to my router, which converts those waves to patterns of electrons in my home coaxial cable, which heads up to the utility pole behind my building and along utility poles or in trenches to the routers at my local Comcast switching center—sometimes the same switching center the old phone company used, but with the windows bricked in and full of servers and routers instead of human operators—and from there likely along fiber-optic strands of glass to a major regional switching center, maybe in downtown Los Angeles or Las Vegas, and onward still until it hits a switching center where Zoom has some co-located servers (maybe down the street, maybe across the country). Then Zoom sends that data on through more switching centers into an undersea cable (yes! my face converted to 0s and 1s encoded into laser flashes whizzing by beneath the sharks and flounders and whales and jellyfish), up under an Egyptian beach and through some Egyptian switching centers until it hits Eli's router and gets beamed to his computer. Meanwhile his face is making the reverse journey.

HO IS INVOLVED IN THIS WORLD wide web of strands of metal and glass carrying bits of ourselves over mountains and under oceans? Your ISP provides connection to your router, so they are the first custodians of everything you do online. But once your signal has passed through your router and into a cable that leaves your home, others are suddenly involved. That cable might be owned by your ISP, or it might be owned by a telephone company, or by your city or state. Your ISP might just be a tenant, leasing out some space (*i.e.* bandwidth) on someone else's physical network. Whoever owns the cable, they probably do not own the poles it is strung along—those are often owned by the local telephone company or the local power company, and the owner of your cable probably has to lease space on the pole for your cable. (If your cable goes underground, the cable owner might be leasing space in an underground pipeline with a lot of cables, or the cable might simply lie in a tiny, permit-required trench in the dirt in city-, county-, or

state-owned land.) Your ISP might own the whole switching center your data hits first, or it might rent space for its physical routers in someone else's switching center, or it might rent capacity on *someone else*'s router in *yet another* party's switching center. Then onto the next switching center, on yet more cables, with yet different owners and lessees using yet different poles and/or trenches.

Even if your ISP owns the physical cable in your area and is in full control of the signal and medium from your house to its switching center and beyond, it will have to hand your signal off to some other company at some point. The largest of the glass and metal strand owners are called Tier 1 networks. Roughly, this means they have enough physical reach to leverage free transfer agreements with the other Tier 1 networks. That is, if signals traveling on AT&T fiber need to pass through some CenturyLink fiber to get where they're going, CenturyLink does not charge AT&T, and vice versa. They both own so much fiber (750,000 miles for CenturyLink, 410,000 for AT&T) that they consider each other "peers" and freely grant access to each others' networks. Comcast, on the other hand, although the ISP for about 40% of all U.S. internet subscriptions as of 2011, is not a Tier 1 network. It might have free peering agreements with most fiber owners, but there are still places on the internet (remember, *physical places*) where it can't send data without paying someone to use their fiber.

This setup presents a serious challenge for the idea of municipal internet promoted by many progressives. The desire to focus on local control, local infrastructure, and local accountability makes perfect sense when you think of your ISP as connecting you to a magical and disembodied internet. But the fact of the matter is that your city cannot provide you with the internet. It will need to link up with someone else at some point. When you try to access a website whose data live on a server in Council Bluffs, your signal needs to get to Iowa and back. Unless you live in Council Bluffs, your city network is not going to get you there.*

So, without some larger democratic structure in place, municipal networks are somewhat at the mercy of the existing internet giants. Even if your local government manages to install a fiber optic connection in every home in town, it will still have to pay at some point down the line to access others' networks and switching centers. It may have to pay *its competitors* like Comcast for access to those networks and switching centers, and Comcast will have little incentive to offer access on any reasonable terms to a government entity trying to cut into its profits. This is similar to the classic net neutrality problem, which is as follows: since Comcast is a private company with theoretically no obligations to the public, why can't Comcast

Even if you live in Council Bluffs it still might not get you there. Thanks to the scale and complexity of the internet, an attempt to send a few bits to your next door neighbor will likely involve hundreds of miles' transit.
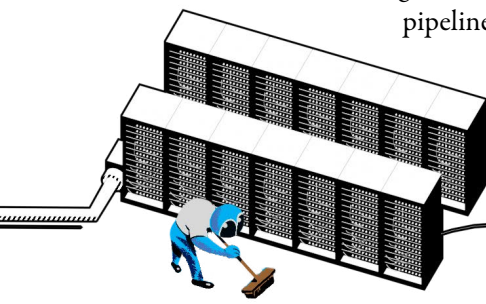
charge people extra to access high-demand websites like Netflix? What if Comcast decided it doesn't like *Current Affairs,* and simply stopped providing access to our website at all? And since the companies that own the wires have largely acquired the companies that produce the content that travels along the wires (Comcast owns NBC, AT&T owns Time Warner, etc.), what if internet providers started making their own content much easier to access than the content of their competitors? You can see how this net neutrality problem could translate to physical networks: what's to stop Comcast (or CenturyLink or AT&T) from charging entire cities more to send signals on the nation- and world-wide networks of wires, or not providing access at all to cities with the temerity to shoulder in on private ISPs' market share? Own the wires, own the internet.

THERE ARE A FEW DIFFERENT WAYS we might confront this problem. One would be simply to build hundreds of thousands of miles of *public* cable and fiber, creating a large enough network to replace the current major players, or at least to achieve Tier 1 status and leverage a free data exchange. No public project has attempted this yet, but this has been the go-to move for tech companies seeking complete internet dominance and control. Google Fiber is an ongoing attempt to build a nationwide fiber optic network, to literally string Google-owned fiber alongside CenturyLink-owned fiber across the continent, thereby capturing a large chunk of the physical space internet for Google alongside its increasing control over the cyber space of the internet. If Google ever succeeds with this project, traffic via Gmail or Youtube could travel from Google's servers to your computer without ever passing out of Google's control.

Google isn't alone in this ambition. Many of the big tech companies that dominate the cyber space of the internet have been trying to find ways to take over its physical space as well. Beyond the prospect of domestic control and profit, expanding internet access to offline parts of the world carries the potential for untold profits. Google had a short-lived project called Loon that attempted to float wireless routers on massive balloons in the high atmosphere to enable connection in remote areas without the infrastructure for physical cables. Facebook attempted a similar project using a giant solar-powered plane, essentially a flying cell tower. Eventually these two projects learned the same lessons as Motorola's Iridium satellite network and AT&T's microwave relay tower project: it's very hard to transmit signals quickly, cheaply, and reliably through the air. Long strands of glass are the way to go.

That's not to say the air isn't still in play. Both Tesla and Amazon are in the process of attempting to build networks of hundreds or thousands of low-orbit satellites to replace the strands of metal and glass on the Earth's surface. The traditional problem with satellite internet is that you have to be able to send and receive signals from a satellite, meaning it has to be somewhere in the sky above you, and not on the other side of the earth. There are only two ways to make sure there is always a satellite above you. First, you could put the satellite in geostationary orbit, meaning it stays above the same spot on the surface of the Earth at all times. The problem with this strategy is that to maintain geostationary orbit, satellites have to be *very high*—approximately 22,000 miles above sea level. That is far enough away that, even travelling at the speed of light, there is a noticeable lag for data to reach the satellite and then get back down to its destination on the ground. The other way to make satellites work is to have *a lot* of them in lower orbits. In lower orbits the satellites move much faster, so no single satellite will be over the same spot for very long. But if you have enough of them, you could get a signal to the closest one and have it relay the signal between a few more before beaming it down to its destination. Up until now, the main challenge for creating such a system has been the expense. Launching satellites, until recently, has been *very* expensive. You have to build a whole rocket for each launch. But with the Tesla/SpaceX creation of reusable rockets, building a network of a few thousand low-orbit satellites has become more feasible. Elon Musk may have cheered the successful rocket reentry for its potential in supplying the space station, but he was probably thinking instead about owning the entire internet.*

Assuming that Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos will not encase the world in more than 10,000 satellites to own the internet, and, as nearly all the experts seem to think, that ground fiber is still the way to go, what can we do to coordinate democratic municipal ISPs? How can we free them from the grip of giant national fiber owners? Could we accomplish what Google is attempting, but make it public? Could we lay a democratically controlled and accountable public physical internet alongside the private physical internet currently connecting most homes on the continent?

*For all the hype, most industry insiders seem less worried about satellite internet owned by Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos. Launching thousands of satellites will take a long time, be very expensive, and will require continuous regulatory approval. They will also get increasing opposition from the astronomers, all of whom they have managed to annoy by proposing to fill the sky with satellites that will interfere with every kind of telescope. Once the satellites are in the air, they will require far more regular maintenance than fiber networks on the ground—satellites need to be adjusted and repaired and replaced, whereas a line of fiber can last for decades with no intervention. Should the scheme get up and running, its first several stages will only provide enough coverage to bring some internet to places with little or no internet—not until it gets 10,000 or more satellites into orbit will it be able to compete with the speed and coverage of land-based fiber.
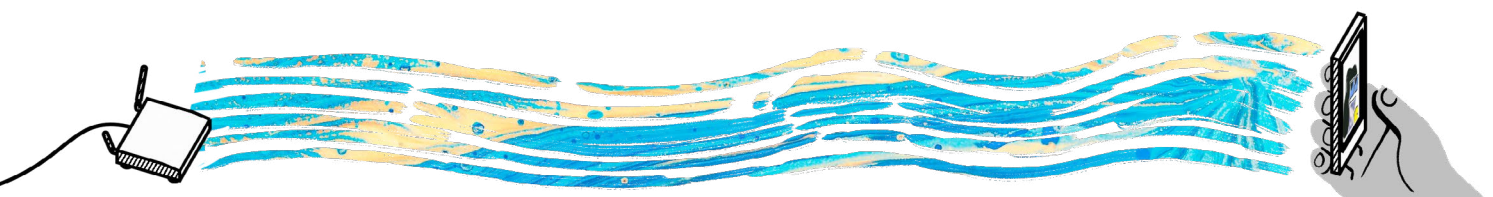
It would be tough, but there are some regional examples worth examining. In Utah, the Utah Telecommunication Open Infrastructure Agency, or UTOPIA, is a consortium of sixteen cities working to build a fiber optic network that would reach every home and business across a significant swathe of the state. UTOPIA is a public enterprise, funded through government bonds, that is directly competing with the private owners of the physical internet. It makes use of peering agreements with other public and academic networks, thereby expanding its fee-free reach to internet locations around the country. But that reach is still very limited. UTOPIA owns the fiber in its area, but leases fiber to get to the major data centers outside its immediate area, data centers owned by yet more parties. And though UTOPIA peers with other publicly-minded networks, those networks themselves must pay to reach the privately-controlled bits of the internet. Maybe most interestingly, UTOPIA itself is not an ISP. That is, it provides people with the glass strands, but doesn't code and carry their internet traffic along those strands. It doesn't run the laser flashes that constitute the signals. Rather, approved private ISPs operate on UTOPIA's physical network. UTOPIA calls itself an "open source" model, meaning that its physical network is available for use by any qualifying ISP, public or private.

The idea of UTOPIA is encouraging. That a public agency can viably fundraise and execute construction of a door-to-door fiber optic network, even if only regionally, is a small proof of concept. It could conceivably serve as a model for a national UTOPIA, a publicly-funded national network of fiber connecting local, regional, and state systems across the country. But UTOPIA's history calls for some caution. The *reason* UTOPIA is not an ISP is that public entities in Utah are not *allowed* to be ISPs. And the reason they're not allowed to be ISPs is that, after public internet efforts including UTOPIA initially got off the ground in Utah, the internet giants descended with near unlimited resources to fund lawsuits and lobbying efforts. They succeeded in effectively outlawing public internet service providers in Utah with legislation thanks to the American Legislative Exchange Council (yes, ALEC, the conservative legislative advocacy group responsible for a large percentage of the most private-profit-driven, scourge-of-the-left state laws across the country).

The mere possibility of a public option for the internet in Utah led to a massive legal and lobbying effort that ended with a law banning public ISPs. The public broadband advocacy organization Community Networks offers an interactive map showing the country's public internet networks, and notes that at least eighteen states have put up barriers to public internet. The millions of dollars spent by the likes of Comcast and AT&T to block net neutrality will be a drop in the bucket compared to the effort they will launch at every level of government to prevent any kind of nationwide network to shift power and leverage to local ISPs.
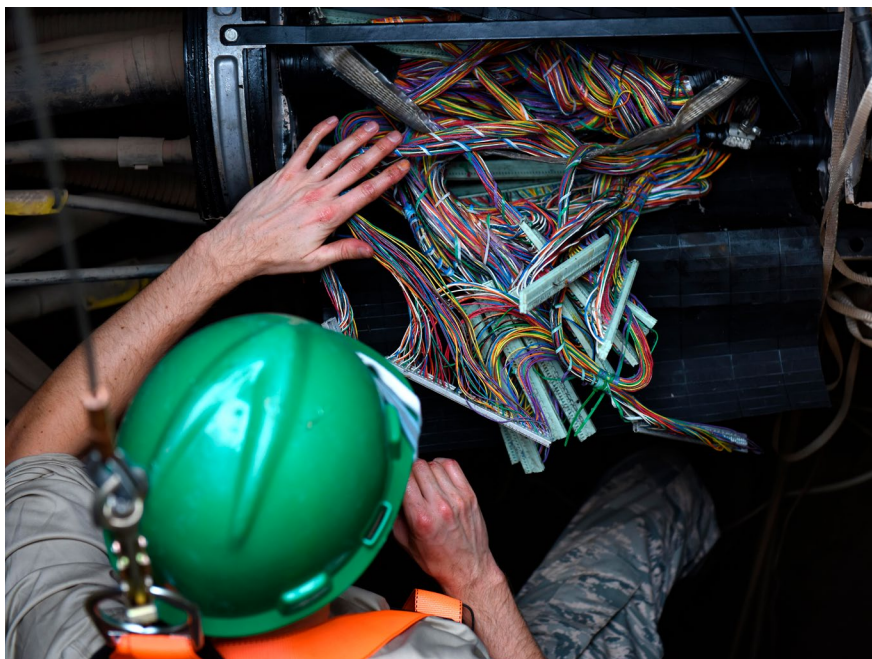
If we can't build our own public, national, physical internet, is there a way we can force the current owners of the internet to act in the public's interest? Can they be prevented from hamstringing local internet networks? This sort of move would have historical precedent. The railroads were notoriously built with public money for private profit, often involving sweetheart deals with associated or co-owned industries at the expense of everyone else. Much like Comcast carrying its own content for free but charging others, railroads would provide cheap or free transport to their subsidiaries but would charge others exorbitantly. Once the scandals reached a fever pitch in the 1880s, Congress designated the railroads as "common carriers," meaning that, given their status as essential services, they were legally required to offer their services on a fair and equitable basis, and were to be closely scrutinized by regulators to ensure that was the case.

Congress did the same to the telecom industry in 1934. Rather than breaking up AT&T's monopoly, or nationalizing the phone lines, Congress enacted a law to force AT&T to carry telephone transmissions from all customers on a fair and equal basis. Congress enacted a smaller but similar rule in the

control over telephone poles. AT&T saw cable as a potential competitor both in terms of telecommunications and for its own plans to offer video delivery in the future. It also saw that the cable companies would have to spend a ton of money to run networks of wires if they couldn't use the existing poles. So the cable companies found themselves being charged exorbitantly to hang cables on poles. The Pole Attachment Act directed the FCC to determine reasonable rates for pole owners to charge and thus set prices for pole leases.

The internet seems a natural choice for "common carrier" status. But, through decades of regulatory capture, lawsuits, and savvy lobbying, internet providers—both ISPs and large networks—have evaded designation as common carriers and maintained an almost wholly deregulated existence. Is now a moment for revisiting this situation? Nearly the entire American economy is wholly dependent on the internet right now. Those of us who are lucky enough to be working are doing so online, due to the global pandemic. Public schools are holding Zoom classes and public officials are suggesting that children locked out of the internet at home (whether due to geography or poverty) go attend class in McDonald's parking lots. The canard that broadband internet access is a luxury rather than a necessity, although long false, is growing more obviously ludicrous every day. These wires are our highways now. They are the paths we travel to get to work and school all day every day. Surely they are common carriers.

Of course, the viability of this argument looks no better today than it did during the net neutrality fight in 2017. The White House, Congress, and the FCC are aligned in the strongest possible opposition to any internet regulation. And at the point we have the power to impose common carrier status, we should use that power to do better.

I t would seem ridiculous to countenance a completely privatized system of roads and highways. Even with common carrier rules in place, imagine having to choose and pay for the use of various paths depending on where you're going, what you're carrying, what your means of transit are, etc. And imagine having to erect an entire bureaucracy to monitor the maintenance and conduct of the private companies in charge of the roads and highways. Maybe there are some libertarian readers salivating at this possibility, but I doubt it will appeal to most.

Is there a good reason to treat the internet differently? Sure, we built it in a different way, but that was due more to historical accident than any logical reason. Roads have always been recognized as essential for commerce, and their rights of way set aside for public use. The advent and prominence of cars came while the depredations of the privatized railroad system were still fresh, and federal and state governments were all too willing during the Great Depression and in the glut after World War Two to make massive public investments in direct road building (even while they would only subsidize private ownership of telephone lines). Politicians looking for rural support pushed through the United States Postal Service's Rural Free Delivery program starting in the 1890s, which spurred the building of public postal roads reaching nearly every home in the country, at great public expense but to immeasurable long term benefit, so that people could get their mail delivered to their doors.

One potential rationale for public roads but private telecom is that the telecom system is more susceptible to innovation, and can benefit more from private competition. But this hasn't borne out for a whole host of reasons. AT&T operated as a government-sanctioned "natural monopoly" for decades, and after being forcefully broken up in the 1980s consolidated

nearly all of its former holdings back into itself. And, in fact, there hasn't been *that* much innovation in telecom or internet hardware in the recent past. Fiber has been in wide use for decades and we haven't come close to reaching its potential for bandwidth. There might be innovation to be had in the sending and transmitting equipment, which *might* be a colorable argument for private ISPs on a public fiber backbone, similar to the UTOPIA model. But even this might concede too much. As Vanessa A. Bee has written in *Current Affairs* and *In These Times,* there is little evidence that market competition is or has ever been necessary for technological innovation. The internet itself, after all, is a creation of public institutions.

What am I suggesting? Nationalize the wires. Rather than attempting to erect a whole new set of fibers to run alongside the existing fibers as a "public option" of sorts, we need to seize our soonest opportunity to take public ownership over the nationwide network of cables that is destined to continue serving as essential public infrastructure for the foreseeable future. And just as the federal government provided grants to improve and expand public infrastructure during the New Deal and post-war period, we need to provide funds for local and regional democratically accountable ISPs. This need not involve dismantling the existing ISPs. But a handful of private companies should not own the physical wires, *and* the means of access to those wires, *and* the content that flows along them all at once.

(A note on privacy and security: A sane person may balk at the idea of government owning and controlling the internet. "The internet should be a *radically democratic and subversive* technology. They can already see too much. Do we really want to hand Stephen Miller and Palantir the skeleton key to every bit that travels the wires?" First, don't kid yourself, the NSA is already in the private switching centers. Second, there is nothing more inherently trustworthy about Bank of America, Facebook, Google, AT&T, and Comcast than the government. But this is a legitimate concern. It is, however, a concern that can be dealt with using the right encryption protocols. Just in the past five years huge swaths of the internet have moved from HTTP to HTTPS, and end-to-end encryption has gone from the stuff of paranoid conspiracy theorists to an expected feature in communication apps. No security is perfect, and government-owned wires could still carry a risk of increased government surveillance, but Peter Thiel and Palantir will end up with your data as things stand now, and they will happily sell it to any government that will pay.)
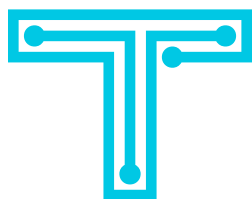
T HE HISTORY OF NATIONALIZING resources and industries in the United States is complicated. The official story is often that "we don't do that." But, of course, we do do that. We nationalized the paper currency industry with the creation of the Federal Reserve. We attempted to nationalize steel to break a strike in 1952. We nationalized passenger railroads in the 1970s. We nationalized most of the mortgage market in 2008 when the Department of Treasury took conservatorship over Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. We also nationalized General Motors Acceptance Corporation in 2008-09, rebranded it as Ally Financial, and sold it back to private owners in pieces up until 2014. The common thread among these precedents is that we stepped in with public money when things were going very badly in order to subsidize private owners. Then, when things improved, we handed the assets back over so they could continue generating private profits.

These past examples are helpful precedents but they have things backwards. We should not have waited for a complete collapse of the banking system to nationalize paper currency. We should not have waited for a collapse in the housing market to take democratic control over Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. So long as we use public money only to bail out private industry, we will forever be responding to suffering rather than preventing it. How many public school children are we going to send to the McDonald's parking lot before we understand that internet access is a public good? In a better world, universal public internet access would be a political tool even more effective than the Rural Free Delivery Program. Politicians of all stripes and in all levels of government would see the golden opportunity presented by record dissatisfaction with private ISPs like Comcast, and would jump at the chance to institute a popular, useful program that would expand the economy and provide public works jobs. A champion of community internet would emerge, driving federal grants for municipal ISPs alongside federal and state programs to buy, build, or co-opt long distance transmission lines and switching centers.

If we have a strong understanding of what it means for something to be a public good, we will see the need to reach beyond defending those we already have—public education, the mail, the roads—and toward the public goods currently in private hands. The wires are a public good, necessary for education and governance and commerce. Whoever controls the physical internet controls a great deal of our lives, and our lives should be up to *us*. Freedom, as the saying goes, is participation in power. As the power of the internet grows, so must our participation grow. Isn't that exactly what democracy is for? ✦

For further reading on the physical internet and its ownership and control, check out the following books:

1. **Infrastructure** by Brian Hayes (2014 ed.)

2. **Captive Audience** by Susan Crawford

3. **Bit Tyrants** by Rob Larson

4. **Mother Earth Mother Board** by Neal Stephenson

5. **The Master Switch** by Tim Wu

6. **Tubes** by Andrew Blum

GREAT CHAIN OF HIERARCHY

NICK SIROTICH

Can Hierarchy Be Justified?

by BRIANNA RENNIX & NATHAN J. ROBINSON

THE HISTORY OF ALL HITHERTO EXISTING societies is the history of some assholes telling everyone else what to do. There are people "at the top," who rule, and there are people "at the bottom" who have to clean up those people's shit. The people at the top always come up with some reason why they deserve to be at the top. Their powers were bestowed by a divinity. They have the correct blood. They worked the hardest. They are Great Innovators whose wisdom and creativity is the source of all wealth. They are Atlas carrying the whole world on their backs, and if they disappeared, society would fall apart.

All of these justifications, needless to say, are myths. They are exactly what you *would* say if you were a person in charge who didn't want to feel any guilt. And nobody wants to feel like a bad person, even the assholes giving the orders, so they need to come up with some picture of reality in which they are right for reasons beyond their might. As Max Weber put it,

"The fortunate man is seldom satisfied with the fact of being fortunate. Beyond this he needs to know that he has a right *to his good fortune. He wants to be convinced he 'deserves' it and above all that he deserves it in comparison with others... Good fortune thus wants to be legitimate fortune."*

There are a million stories you can tell to legitimize your status, using everything from cranial science to graphs showing a strong statistical correlation between "you having all the power" and some imaginary measure of social well-being (e.g. "GDP"). The explanations don't have to be very convincing, because one of the nice things about being in charge is that few people in your circle will dare to call you out when you are talking rubbish. Some people will be afraid to get on your bad side, while others will be looking to flatter you into dispensing favor. But hardly anyone is going to rudely pop the sycophancy bubble by pointing out that your rationalizations for having more than everybody else are blatantly fallacious.

For instance, King James, of Bible fame, anonymously published a book in 1598 called the *True Law of Free Monarchies* which laid out what seemed to him like a sound argument for the Divine Right of Kings. He argued that "the state of monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth" because kings are "God's lieutenants upon earth and sit upon God's throne," and thus,

Daniel Bell and Wang Pei, *Just Hierarchy: Why Social Hierarchies Matter in China and the Rest of the World,* Princeton University Press, 288pp, $28.95

while "a good king will frame all his actions to be according to the Law; yet is he not bound thereto but of his good will." The relationship of the king to the people was, James thought, like that of the head to the body, and he pointed out that while sometimes we cut off a limb here and there if gets gangrenous and unruly, few diseases lead us to cut off our heads:

And for the similitude of the head and the body, it may very well fall out that the head will be forced to garre cut off some rotten members (as I haue already said) to keep the rest of the body in integritie: but what state the body can be in, if the head, for any infirmitie that can fall to it, be cut off, I leaue it to the readers iudgement. [sic]

The phrase "motivated reasoning" comes to mind when considering James' treatise arguing in favor of his own absolute power and exemption from the law. The British people were evidently not persuaded, as James' successor Charles I was indeed treated as an infirmity curable by the removal of the head.

But the king was not the only one with a fixed position in the hierarchy. A Great Chain of Being ordered all matter, living and nonliving, from top to bottom. God, of course, was the Supreme Being. Next came angels, but all angels were not created equal, and there was a hierarchy of sub-angels; St. Thomas Aquinas divides them into 9 "choirs": "angels, archangels, virtues, powers, principalities, dominations, ophanim [alias thrones], cherubim, and seraphim." After the angelic choirs came the humans, where kings stood highest, followed by princes, nobles, etc., with peasants taking their place at the bottom. The other animals followed us, and had their own rankings of greatest to least, with immobile do-nothing creatures like oysters at the bottom. (There were sub-categories within sub-categories, with worm-eating birds the superior of seed-eating birds, possibly due to winning a worm-eating bet.) Plants and vegetables followed animals, in a descending order from oak trees to moss. Lowest of all were the minerals, which had their own ranking from gemstones down to soil, dust, and sand.

All of this may sound rather risible, but before we laugh, we should reflect on just how much of this mindset we have retained into the present day. Animals are still considered lesser beings, most of whom can simply be slaughtered at will, without any moral calculus whatsoever. Factory farming, despite the scale of suffering it inflicts, does not trouble most people's consciences (at least not to the point of turning them vegetarian). And the hierarchical orderings of human societies are still so accepted as to seem like natural law. 44 countries are still outright monar-

chies, but even the Chief Executive of the supposedly democratic United States is endowed with such huge power that most of our politics revolve around a single person's conduct. Workplaces are often strict hierarchies, the justice and propriety of which cannot be questioned by those at the bottom, even though the justifications for the difference in power between Jeff Bezos and Amazon fulfillment center workers are little more persuasive than appeals to the Great Chain of Being.

Anarchist thinkers have always put "hierarchy" at the center of their diagnosis of what's wrong with everything, because so much of what is unjust about every society does seem to boil down to this one simple fact: there are some people who give the orders, and some people who have to take the orders, and the people who give the orders are generally cruel, stupid, and/or greedy. Sometimes they got their position by birth, but even when they got it by "merit," the main "merit" that usually distinguishes them is that they were more willing to trample on everybody else. Noam Chomsky describes the core of anarchist thinking as being based around a "presumption of illegitimacy" toward hierarchies, a principle that says if a hierarchy is based on tradition rather than reason, it needs to be gotten rid of:

[Anarchist thinking is] generally based on the idea that hierarchic and authoritarian structures are not self-justifying. They have to have a justification. So if there is a relation of subordination and domination, maybe you can justify it, but there's a strong burden of proof on anybody who tries to justify it. Quite commonly, the justification can't be given. It's a relationship that is maintained by obedience, by force, by tradition, by one or another form of sometimes physical, sometimes intellectual or moral coercion. If so, it ought to be dismantled. People ought to become liberated and discover that they are under a form of oppression which is illegitimate, and move to dismantle it.

Peter Kropotkin, too, put hierarchy at the center of his analysis, saying that anarchism meant "refusing hierarchical organization" and authority, while embracing cooperative social customs:

Anarchy, when it works to destroy authority in all its aspects, when it demands the abrogation of laws and the abolition of the mechanism that serves to impose them, when it refuses all hier-

archical organization and preaches free agreement—at the same time strives to maintain and enlarge the precious kernel of social customs without which no human or animal society can exist. Only, instead of demanding that those social customs should be maintained through the authority of a few, it demands it from the continued action of all.

Hierarchy is common to bad governments, bad workplaces, bad relationships, and bad schools. When we look at societies throughout history and feel disturbed, the reason is usually something to do with hierarchy: some people were priests doing human sacrifices, while other people had to *be* the sacrifices. In our own country, some people have been slaves, others masters. Some people have been prisoners, others cops. Some are "non-citizens," without basic rights, others are "citizens" who are Legitimate People. (Yes, the distinction between the citizens and noncitizens should be thought of as a formal caste system, whereby some people are more entitled to rights than others. It is only because we are used to it that we don't comprehend how appalling it is to divide society into a hierarchy of "non-people" and "people" based solely on where they happened to be born.)

Wherever you find distinctive ranked orders of social status, and some people with vastly more power and liberty than others, you find a situation that should be revolting to anyone who cares about universal justice. (That is, revolting to the sort of person who wants *everyone* to be served by our social arrangements, rather than having categories of "winners" and "losers.") A truly just world has to be a democratic and egalitarian one, where hierarchies are minimized.

B UT IS THERE A CASE *FOR* HIERARCHY? According to a new book from the Princeton University Press (which previously brought you such elitist classics as *Against Democracy*), there is indeed. *Just Hierarchy* by Daniel A. Bell and Wang Pei argues that while explicit racial and gender hierarchies may be bad, some hierarchies are Actually Good and worth preserving. Bell and Pei believe that hierarchy as a concept has been unfairly maligned, and they seek to show that there are circumstances in which it is not only morally unobjectionable, but "can and should govern different spheres of our social lives... including our relations with loved ones."

Bell and Wang list five kinds of hierarchies they seek to defend: hierarchies within intimate social circles, hierarchies amongst citizens, hierarchies of nations, hierarchies amongst animals, and hierarchies between human beings and robots. (We'll note the curious absence of workplace hierarchies from this list: beyond a brief discussion of the relationship between employers and their nannies and housekeepers, the book does not discuss this topic at all, even though the workplace, for many people, is where petty tyranny is most keenly experienced.)

Each subset of hierarchies is defended with different arguments. Hierarchies amongst "intimate persons"—that is, in relationships between partners, between parents and children, and between employers and domestics—are viewed as morally acceptable by Bell and Wang so long as there is some changing of roles over time. This would suggest something quite radical in the case of domestic workers—namely that the rich would have to take care of their nannies' children sometimes—but Bell and Wang wriggle out of this by saying that this reciprocity "may be asking too much of the employer." Instead, the only actual "changing of roles over time" they envision is generational: perhaps the housekeepers' children will be rich and the rich people's children will end up housekeepers. (Extremely unlikely, but a good way for the rich to reassure themselves that the hierarchy is fair.) Their ultimate conclusion is that it's fine to have a full-time housekeeper—who, notably, doesn't get to keep their children in the same house with your children—so long as you pay them well.

Bell and Wang have a difficult time explaining why hierarchies within households are actually *desirable,* compared to the alternative of rough social equality. In the sphere of "intimate persons," the justification for "hierarchy between partners" seems to boil down, laughably, to "it's cool to periodically switch who's on top during sex" (which sure, fine, maybe that's the kind of entry-level sex advice that people who read political science textbooks desperately need to hear), while the justification for the hierarchy between parents and children is based on the observation that elderly people are more appreciated in societies where elders are owed deference within the family structure. The authors seem unable to grapple with the fact that "hierarchy," fundamentally, is about the right to command obedience from others by simple virtue of one's social role. That family members should appreciate each other, listen to each other, and divide difficult tasks fairly amongst themselves is an obvious good, but why these characteristics should be optimally actuated by "hierarchy"—by investing certain people with some specific right of command, even a temporary one, over their loved ones—is not really explained. At best, hierarchy seems like a very roundabout manner of promoting warm familial feeling, and, at worst, a great way to keep people guiltily obligated to family members who do *not* respect them.

Meanwhile, although their examination of "hierarchy amongst citizens" emanates (by the admission of the authors, who are both professors at universities in China) from a specifically Chinese context—drawing on the "Confucian" principles of imperial Chinese bureaucracy and modern Chinese administration—it's nonetheless pretty much indistinguishable from the arguments in favor of meritocracy that are made by centrist commentators in the United States. The authors argue explicitly against democracy and in favor of governance by unelected experts. (Bell has written a separate book called *The China Model* defending the enlightened despotism of

the Communist Party as superior to liberal democracy.) Too much democracy leads to populism, which is bad (cf. Donald Trump), hierarchical meritocracies are better because—once you get past pesky little problems like "nepotism" and "corruption"—they elevate people with talent and expertise, who are temperamentally suited for public life.

Bell and Wang concede that this framework does exclude most human beings from formal political participation in decisions that affect them. But since the decisions that will be made on their behalf will be good ones, because wise rulers naturally know what they are doing, this will not matter. The authors suggest that people's resulting sense of disenfranchisement can be combated through a) grassroots efforts to influence policymakers through suasion, and b) encouraging people to feel fulfilled by "non-political" things, such as pictures of cute dogs exchanged on social media. (We shit you not, this was the actual example they used. There is even a photograph of a cute dog reprinted in the book, as an example of the sort of thing we can look at to distract ourselves from our political powerlessness.) Here, as opposed to Bell and Wang's flimsy justifications for hierarchy in the home, it's a little bit more obvious why the idea of hierarchy amongst citizens is at least *attractive*, in a patronizing sort of way. Who *wouldn't* want to sit around looking at pictures of animals all day while a group of highly virtuous public servants ingeniously and invisibly disposes of all boring policy matters? The only problem, of course, is that it is ludicrous: these Virtuous Policy Fairies do not exist in reality, and so what is in fact being proposed is not even a hierarchy between "good bureaucrats" and "indulged masses," but fundamentally unchecked power in the hands of the sort of people who excel at standardized tests and subtle self-promotion.

Hierarchy amongst nations—the third of the supposedly justified hierarchies—evidently involves major world powers politely paying "lip-service" to the sovereignty of smaller nations, while gradually drawing those smaller nations into their direct sphere of influence and control through the use of diplomacy and social ritual. This, Bell and Wang argue, is morally justified so long as there is some meaningful reciprocity and fellow-feeling in the relationship between the stronger and weaker nations. There's of course a strong element of "might makes right" here—big, powerful countries may justly rule because they are big and powerful. The recurring pattern we begin to see, in these justifications of hierarchy, is that the "morality" of these hierarchies relies heavily on the notion that the person or decision-making entity in the higher hierarchical position will not be incompetent, thoughtless, or sociopathic, but suggests no actual mechanisms for ensuring that this is the case. Like King James, they say that these hierarchical arrangements will be good for the least well-off, but also like King James the argument is less based on appeals to evidence than appeals to tradition and religious text (in his case, Biblical authority, in their case, frequently Confucian ethics).

The sections of the book on animals and robots are significantly weirder, which is saying something for a book that has already used sex positions as a philosophical justification for social dominance. The animals chapter aims to show that animals and humans are not moral equals and that there is a hierarchy of concern for different animals:

...[I]t is morally justifiable to care more for humans than for animals, as well as to distinguish between different levels of moral concern for different kinds of animals, depending on their capacity to suffer and their relations with human beings. Ugly insects such as mosquitoes and cockroaches that reproduce in the billions and carry diseases that harm human well-being should be at the bottom of the hierarchy.

It is not clear with whom Bell and Wang are arguing here, since few people (even among radical animal rights advocates) see killing a mosquito as equivalent to killing a human being, and distinguishing between animals on the basis of their capacity to suffer is broadly uncontroversial (though the deprioritization of "ugly" animals is obviously more questionable). Bell and Wang present a multi-page anecdote about the time Bell adopted a cat that ended up jumping out of a 22nd story window, after which he subsequently replaced the dead cat with another, which had diabetes, as part of an argument that people are morally permitted to regulate their pets' activities so long as they treat them well—which is, again, a fairly widely-held position. But there's a reason Bell and Wang include this strange chapter: by offering rigorous argumentation for a widely-accepted kind of "hierarchy," they want readers to think that a general principle of hierarchy is justified. In other words, if we can show that people accept the "humans over animals" part of the Great Chain of Being, it will be easier to get them to accept the "humans over other humans" part.

The robots chapter, similarly, argues for a hierarchy most people would agree with: that of humans over machines. Bell and Wang make the case that artificial intelligence should be made to serve human ends, rather than human beings being made to serve artificial intelligence. Then things take a turn: they suggest that the Chinese government alone is correct in its understanding of the purposes of artificial intelligence, that it is building a post-scarcity kind of communism in which robots will do all the labor. By contrast, Silicon Valley capitalists are reckless in their development of new technology: "the libertarian culture of Silicon Valley militates against any serious attempt to curb research that threatens to develop... malevolent AI." The final sentence of the book (it has no formal "conclusion") is: "If we are unlucky, the last war involving humans will be a clash between the Chinese Communist Party and Google's unfriendly creation, and for the sake of humanity we need to pray for the victory of the CCP."

Thus, the book *Just Hierarchy* does not necessarily offer the best material for inquiring into the question of when hierarchies are just, for there are parts that make one suspect it is mainly intended as an elaborate apologia for the Chinese Communist Party, published, again, by the Princeton University Press. (Possibly, we should have abandoned our review of this book once we realized how bizarre it was, but by that point we simply couldn't tear ourselves away.) Many of the hierarchies the book defends are China-specific, and the writing can be digressive and the examples off-the-wall. Most of the evidence provided is laughably unsound. For instance, the authors note that in a study, "an abstract diagram representing hierarchy was memorized more quickly than a diagram representing equality, and the faster processing led the participants to prefer the hierarchy diagram." This might be a compelling case for the aesthetic superiority of pyramids over lines, but it has very little to do with justice, ostensibly the subject of the book. Bell and Wang also say that "the populist backlashes against elites empower strongmen such as Donald Trump" thus showing that "the effort to combat all forms of hierarchy will not only fail; it may lead to something worse from a moral point of view." But surely if the backlash is against "elites," what we have is an argument *against* hierarchy; without a division into elite/non-elite, there is no grounds for a populist backlash to begin with. If people are resentful of "elites" who are above them and control them, then a more egalitarian society would be a way to these reduce resentments.

If we're evaluating the main question, though, which is "have these five hierarchies been justified?" the answers would seem to be: 1) hierarchy between intimates—no, not at all, because sex positions don't legitimize the giving of commands to family and domestics; 2) hierarchy between citizens—also no, seems like a recipe for an unjust dictatorship; 3) hierarchy between nations—no, seems like proof by assertion; 4) hierarchy between humans and animals—sure, bugs are not people; 5) hierarchy between humans and robots—sure, but not so sure we can sign onto VICTORY TO THE GREAT CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY as a valid ultimate conclusion.

So how *should* we evaluate what the legitimate and illegitimate hierarchies are? It seems easy to say that there should be no "intimate hierarchies": friends, partners, and family members should meet each other on equal footing, and should give and expect mutual respect as individuals. Trying to treat other people well is a dynamic struggle, and one always littered with daily failures. Hierarchical relationships and pre-assigned roles within households are not a realistic shortcut for avoiding these inevitable difficulties. That's not to say that people don't fall into patterns or roles in their close relationships, but this seems like something that people should figure out one-on-one with their loved ones, according to their needs and temperaments. (To the extent that "respectfully figuring out relationship roles on a case-by-case basis" is what Wang and Bell mean by "intimate hierarchy," this doesn't really seem like a hierarchy at all, in the way the term's conventionally understood.) As leftists, we can also say with

some confidence that global hierarchies in which wealthier states exercise authority over poorer client states are normatively bad, although it's much less clear how to stop that from happening (short of a revolution for disarmament and global labor reform, of course).

But when thinking about smaller political units—workplaces, neighborhoods, municipalities, states and provinces, perhaps countries—the question of whether hierarchies are "good" or "bad" does start to feel more muddled. Certainly, there should be a high burden to justify the existence of hierarchies, which inherently involve one person having power over another, or over many others; certainly, bland appeals to tradition are not sufficient justification. But even if you are an absolute egalitarian, practically speaking, there's a lot of shit going on in the world at any given time, and it simply isn't possible to hold referenda on absolutely *everything*.

The idea of a hierarchical system that elevates the most talented and trustworthy people to decision-making positions is one that many people find deeply attractive, and in the United States, we've often conceived of electoral democracy as the best way to achieve this end. In the U.S. conception of political "meritocracy," the general theory is to elect political leaders with the right "vision" or "values," whom we then trust to surround themselves with people of appropriate "expertise." Of course, as we all know, this frequently goes horribly wrong: the pool of candidates that voters choose amongst, and the pool of experts from which those candidates then choose their advisors, staff, and other appointees, are both shaped by a whole host of factors that have nothing to do with goodness or talent, and a lot more to do with things like wealth, ambition, and luck. Elections produce better results on average than pure nepotism because they contain some limited element of randomness—the system undergoes a shake-up at fixed periods during which new people, potentially, can enter. But in this country, elections still haven't managed to produce governments on the national or state level that resemble the composition of the general population in any way: lawmakers and executives are mostly rich (as well as mostly white, and mostly male), and their choice of expert staff reflects their own interests and biases. In this way, our governing hierarchies are static in form and also frequently static in content.

Some people, admittedly, think that this is a feature, not a bug: the "steady hand at the wheel." But if climate change, vast economic inequality, mass incarceration, and a precarious, unfranchised immigrant population sound like a bad status quo, then these stable hierarchies in which power is always concentrated in the hands of the same *type* of person, over and over, are clearly harmful. One way around this problem is to dismantle the hierarchy itself as much as possible, and create processes for participatory decision-making that involve the people affected by a given problem. However, there's always a problem of scale: as the number of people affected by a single policy or decision becomes larger, direct participation becomes more and more unwieldy. In that case, to the extent we think that some decisions do need to be made at such a scale, it may be hard to get around having *some* hierarchy of decision-makers.

Staffing these arguably necessary hierarchies through non-electoral "meritocracies," as Bell and Wang suggest, means reposing a naïve level of trust in the goodness of unaccountable bureaucrats; but we also concede that elections (of nominal decision-makers, who then choose bureaucrats that are accountable only to them) tend to not produce brilliant results, either. A third option, which we submit to be the least of these three evils, is to make the appointment of decision-makers as random as possible, with a strictly fixed term limit. We've previously written about "sortition"—random selection by lot—from the general population as being the best conceivable way to create a demographically representative senate, one that's slightly less susceptible to monied interests than previous elected senates. In the same way, sortition could be used to fill a variety of decision-making positions.

But one reason hierarchy is so enduringly appealing is that the creation of effective non-hierarchical institutions is incredibly difficult, and even institutions that start off being egalitarian have a tendency to turn hierarchical over time (the sociological concept of the "iron law of oligarchy" is that an oligarchy always emerges no matter how much you try to do to prevent an oligarchy emerging). Occupy Wall Street, which operated on an anti-hierarchical structure, was in many ways phenomenally successful in the face of extraordinary state challenges and repression, but also struggled with the difficulty of trying to organize without leadership. Many of the internal disputes that have riven the left, like the conflict between Marxists and anarchists, have involved arguments over the legitimacy of hierarchy, and whether it is possible or desirable to pursue the socialist project without it.

Yet while hierarchy is an enduring feature of societies, and it is not yet possible to envision a perfectly non-hierarchical world, a fair starting point is to treat social hierarchies as presumptively illegitimate. If we now recognize that King James was full of shit when he claimed a divine right to be exempt from the law, we should suspect that there are plenty of justifications for hierarchy in our own time that might fall apart under scrutiny. Bell and Wang's weird-ass book shows how empty many of the justifications for hierarchy are; they often come down to "the boss is the boss because he's the boss, do you think you could do a better job than the boss?" Hierarchical social orders are asserted to be superior without any examination of what the non-hierarchical alternative would look like, or much evidence (beyond anecdotes and a generalized terror of "the mob") that such an alternative would be less functional. The hypothesis we should work under is that hierarchies tend to be great for people endowed with the power to give the commands, and less great for those whose job is to obey. The elimination of hierarchy would tend to improve the lot of the vast majority of us, but especially the millions of human "minerals" at the bottom of our present-day Great Chain of Being. ⚜
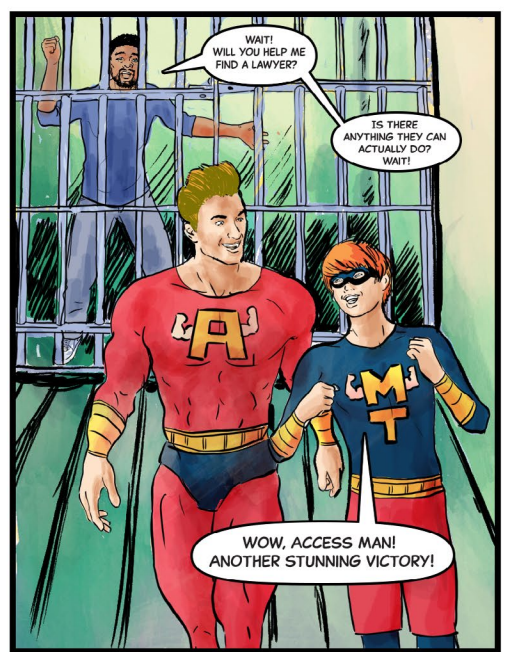
Empire of Same

by Samuel Miller McDonald

VER A FEW DAYS IN THE summer of 2007, I made a leisurely ascent along the side of a Swiss mountain, sleeping in fields under stars. On the way, I rambled through the kind of idyllic villages you imagine in the Swiss Alps: chalet-style buildings, perfectly green pastures billowing, sharp snowy peaks flashing in the background, far blue sky. Though I saw none of them, I shared the mountains with ibex, deer, owls, golden eagles, and possibly a brown bear or two. Then one day I came to a lonely forest. The trail I was following into the green-dappled wood curved abruptly to the left, and just past its elbow, there stood a big black cavern. No road or tracks led to this mouth in the mountainside, and though the cave looked man-made, it had no discernable reason to be there. I felt pulled in.

But before we get to the tunnel, let's go back a bit. Prior to finding the hole in the mountain, I'd spent the summer working in medieval Europe. Or, at least what I imagine medieval Europe sort of looked and felt like. I lived on a small farm nestled in the mountain chain that was also home to a town where Leonardo da Vinci is rumored to have completed the Mona Lisa. Wild dogs and wild boars haunted the dark forest fringing the farm's pasturelands. One of the sheep apparently received a mortal bite from a wild dog (I say "apparently" because it happened just before I arrived and I am skeptical of the dodgy farm owners). For a few weeks, I slept out in an idle meadow and was awakened by snorts and grunts of many beasts rooting around my tent. The wild animals' enigmatic presence lent suspense to my occasional late-night hikes up and down the mountain, which could take hours winding through dark patches of wood. A spooked boar can gore you to death easily. It's a kind of suspense that seems more at home in the Middle Ages than today.

Materially speaking, this farm probably did look similar to an equivalent farm in medieval Italy. At that time, of course, the farm wouldn't have been in "Italy," which didn't exist yet. Instead it was located in a territory called Liguria, which passed between the rule of various nations, kingdoms, and city-states through the Middle Ages. There would have almost certainly been far more wild animals then, and different crops. But the farmers who lived on that land would likely have had similar livestock, used similar tools, lived in similar (maybe even the very same) stone buildings, spoken a similar language, waking and resting to similar rhythms. The little lightbulbs and the communal flush toilet with dubious plumbing were probably the only major differences between the medieval version of the farm and the modern one I briefly inhabited. It was a very different kind of life from the one I was used to living in the industrialized 21st century United States, with its daily showers, ubiquitous screens, and very different sorts of rhythms, pleasures, and fears. These days, finding ways of life beyond the homogenizing force—or extractive grip—of imperialism is about as rare as stumbling on a brown bear in the Alps. We seem only able to find it in small pockets like that farm, hiding between the borders of today's massive empires.

American Empire

OST OF US LIVE TODAY AS subjects under the rule of a fossil fuel-based liberal empire. The United States and its offspring industries, with some of the richer Group of Twenty countries joining as jolly sidekicks, administers a sprawling hegemony, animated by dead carbon, whose many arms touch both the material and intangible in every country on the planet. These tentacles have the effect of homogenizing and flattening many kinds of otherwise abundant diversity (environmental, cultural, political), like an octopus sweeping away a puffer fish's intricate designs in underwater sand to leave only a blank beige behind. (Of course this is merely a metaphor; we know the intelligent, socialistic octopus would never do such a thing in real life.)

Just to pick one example on the less tangible side of things, the U.S. entertainment industry rules global media production. As Indrajit Banerjee, Director of Knowledge Societies Division at UNESCO, has written for the *International Journal for Communications Studies*, the United States "clearly dominates the world's cultural industries....Whether it be in the remote villages in India or in the Kampongs of Malaysia, American and Western cultural icons and content make their overbearing presence felt." University of Pennsylvania sociologist Diana Crane pointed out in a study on cultural globalization that the upper echelon of the World Box Office "consists of American films and a few U.S. co-productions," and nothing else.

And you can be sure the U.S. entertainment industry isn't just benevolently handing out nice movies. What the United States exports to screens across the world is more than just programming: it's also *modes* of programming. With entertainment infrastructure like Netflix, news show formats, storyline formulas, franchise characters, and remarkably consistent rules for what nonfiction documentaries will cover, the United States shapes and confines the world's cultural production with an eye toward dominating the market and maximizing profit. It may be the Golden Age of television, in that the only color is gold.

Beyond narrowing content and structural expectations, the dominating impact of U.S. entertainment on ideology can hardly be overstated. Glenn Greenwald has made the point in *The Guardian*, arguing that one movie in particular (*Zero Dark Thirty*) illustrates the bigger pattern of propaganda packaged as entertainment, condemning the fact that "Liberal Hollywood has produced the ultimate hagiography of the most secretive arm of America's National Security State, while liberal film critics lead the parade of praise and line up to bestow it with every imaginable accolade." It certainly isn't the only movie selling slick entertainment wrapped around a nougaty center of mar-

tial propaganda. Consider *Jack Ryan, Black Hawk Down, Sicario 2, American Sniper,* the *Avengers* franchise, *Act of Valor, Top Gun, 12 Strong, Green Zone,* and countless indistinguishable cop shows starring heavily armed and outrageously sympathetic police officers.

In addition to the ubiquity of American propaganda pumped into screens in virtually every country on the planet to do the dirty, tedious job of manufacturing support for rapacious foreign policy and bootstraps economics, it's also just dull as shit. The result of all this—the remakes, the franchises, the narrow boundaries of acceptable stories—is to produce a painful sameness. A uniformity of thought, ideology, and ideas. All this sameness conspires to flatten mass media, and with it the world that it depicts. The sameness limits what sorts of tales get told, what kind of acts are depicted as justified and what ones are not, and compresses how viewers see the world and their place in it.

But entertainment isn't the only, or even the most damaging, realm of sameness that imperial tedium has imposed on the world. There's an ever-growing list of areas in which uniformity ensnares our lives.

Some examples:

✤ Beyond confining the shape of media, the publishing and entertainment industries and many others have helped to homogenize language use, too. English makes up by far the world's largest second language. With 753 million English-as-a-second-language speakers, the next largest second language, Hindi, has barely a third as many (and in many cases is only a second language because, thanks to colonialism, it was displaced by English as the first!) Language loss is very real. According to UNESCO, today languages are lost at a rate of roughly one every two weeks; 600 have disappeared in the last century, while up to 90 percent are unlikely to survive this century at current rates of decline. Without overstating the role of language in shaping reality, we can at least acknowledge that the conventions of a language help to shape the contours of thought, impact the concepts that we draw on day to day, and create frames through which to understand reality.

✤ The European academy has shaped the standard of what universities should look like and how they operate all over the world. The corporatization of university management in the Global North has accompanied the neoliberalization of business, government, and civil society everywhere else. Some of the world's most elite universities have seen their endowments balloon into the tens of billions of dollars under sprawling teams of professional portfolio managers. Administrative bloat has resulted in an explosion of superfluous, high-paid, and powerful management positions, with at least fifteen university presidents taking million-dollar salaries in 2019. To pay for it, tuition fees have skyrocketed with universities repositioning themselves from accessible places of learning for students to degree factories for in-

debted customers. Many researchers, too, have internalized such neoliberal ethics, openly taking money from large corporations like the fossil fuel industry, while tenured faculty often fail to show solidarity with striking colleagues.

✤ American-style intensive agriculture has standardized food production globally, with a narrow set of practices, chemicals, species, and supply chains squeezing much of the world's productive arable land through a bottleneck that constrains the ways in which farmers interact with the land and the kinds of food they produce, and even impacts *how and where* we eat the food that's grown. American fast-food chains are ubiquitous globally.

✤ A few fast fashion brands have consolidated the clothing industry, which means that a handful of companies have a huge impact on how millions of people present themselves in the world, homogenizing how people physically look. Zara has 1,600 stores in 58 countries. And this is not to mention the harmful impact this industry has on both workers and ecologies.

✤ Monopolized retail markets determine what products are available. The four largest retailers in the world are U.S. companies, and they have tremendous power in deciding what kinds of products get sold, and therefore, what products get made in the first place. They are *shapers* of demand every bit as much as they are suppliers of demand.

✤ Silicon Valley moulds the Internet in its cornflower-blue-hoodie-grey-cargo-shorts-clad image. Two computer giants, Microsoft and Apple, dominate global market share, meaning those two companies determine the contours of hardware, software, and the basic philosophy of how computers are used in the first place. Meanwhile, a handful of companies, mostly U.S.-based, dominate global web traffic. Alphabet, Inc, parent company of Google and YouTube, alone nets 85 billion visits *per month*. The next highest visited is Facebook with a mere (*mere*) 19.9 billion visits per month. Google manipulates search results with a right-wing and big business bias; YouTube, inadvertently or otherwise, funnels viewers to extreme right-wing propaganda; while Facebook decides who or what to censor based on seventh-richest-person-in-the-world Mark Zuckerberg's whim. If you're keeping track, that means the three most visited websites in the world, with over 100 billion monthly views, are controlled by **two (2!!)** extremely rich men.

✤ Speaking of rich people making decisions: concentrated American venture capital decides which start-up ventures launch and which don't. In the United States, 77 percent of capital that goes to starting new companies is concentrated in ten cities from a handful of funders. Such highly-concentrated venture capital is a big part of why so many new companies

are developing useless smartphone apps, dystopian AI, and ever-more addictive videogames that can net a quick return on investment with low upfront capital, instead of creating actually useful technology such as innovative renewable energy.

Even the structures by which we measure things to be morally good or bad have been streamlined and boxed in by the fossil fuel-based liberal empire. The trans-Atlantic revival of laissez-faire liberalism intensified in the 1970s, while Reagan and Thatcher delivered the neoliberal consensus from right-wing think tanks into the mainstream, carrying with it very specific moral tenets. The doctrine that came out of the Mont Pelerin Society and Heritage Foundation, and then the wrinkly mouths of the Gipper and Iron Lady, made very clear what they considered virtues, and what were vices:

> **VIRTUES:** corporate management hierarchies, privatization, marketization, monopoly, atomizing competitive individuals, concentrating wealth, the nuclear family.
>
> **VICES:** unions, economic equality, commons, welfare states, democracy, wealth taxes, distributing value, "society."

I saw this simple set of values personally on vivid display when I visited a friend in Sweden. Two of my friend's university buddies, one from India, the other from Singapore, joined us for a night of cards. As the evening wore on, the cards slipped to the side as an argument about politics erupted. In aggressive declaratives, the two international students reminded us that only people who are successful in the free market deserve life and prosperity; that only economic freedom matters and government intrusion is the highest form of tyranny; that only markets can efficiently allocate resources; that people are inherently selfish and should be treated as such. Despite these students' culturally and geographically disparate backgrounds, they used identical language pulled straight from *Road to Serfdom* or *Atlas Shrugged* or the American Enterprise Institute. The fact that the two of them were living in a democratic socialist country, enjoying its free healthcare, cheap or free higher education, subsidized housing, and many other perks of a partially socialized economy, did not appear to register.

The homogeneity of these values is remarkable. Any evangelical religion would be proud of their uniform spread through virtually every culture in the world. They have been violently institutionalized not only by imperial powers like the United States, but also by global NGOs such as the World Bank, World Trade Organization, and International Monetary Fund. These values are also baked into programming in the increasingly consolidated media. Six companies control 90 percent of U.S. media, and have global reach. One company, Sinclair Broad-

cast Group, owns 191 television stations that reach 40 percent of Americans. AT&T owns CNN, Warner Bros., HBO and many others. Comcast owns MSNBC, NBC, Telemundo, and many others. Fox Corporation owns Fox Broadcasting Company, Fox Entertainment, Fox Television Stations, Fox News, and many others. Owned by billionaires or run by multi-millionaires, these companies maintain a rigid conformity, promoting the virtues of economic liberalism and condemning what it considers vices, spreading ever more right-wing bias. The praise for "globalization" hides the darker flattening of life and possibility that comes with it. Global trade and cultural exchange aren't, of course, inherently bad. But this globalized system often looks less like "exchange" and more like a classical empire imposing a narrow set of norms and rules onto other cultures, standardizing acceptable ways of living, and extracting resources and labor from that regimented sameness. To draw from a pop culture example currently controlled by Disney, whose products accounted for nearly 40 percent of the 2019 U.S. box office: it looks like rows of white-armored Stormtroopers patrolling and subjugating the diverse life of the universe by order of imperial bureaucrats. The result is one style of life, one way of being and thinking, that dominates expansive areas of land, swallowing peoples of many backgrounds, and imposing stale blandness across a global empire of sameness.

Roman Empire

HERE'S A FAMOUS SCENE IN *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* that's relevant here. King Arthur of the Britons approaches a local filth-hauling peasant, asking him who owns a nearby castle. The peasant, whose name is Dennis, objects to what he considers the King's disrespectful treatment of him. When Arthur asserts his kingly authority, Dennis replies, "And how d'you get that, eh? By exploiting the workers! By 'anging on to outdated imperialist dogma which perpetuates the economic and social differences in our society."

When Arthur reaffirms that he is in fact "King of the Britons," a nearby peasant woman replies, "King of the who?...I didn't know we had a king. I thought we were an autonomous collective."

Confused, Arthur continues his attempt to learn which lord resides in the nearby castle. The woman informs him that no one lives there. "We don't 'ave a lord," she says. Dennis interjects: "We're an anarcho-syndicalist commune. We take it in turns to act as a sort of executive officer for the week." It's a really funny scene: the very idea of a filth-hauling cockney peasant named Dennis in Arthurian Britain using 20th century political terminology to describe his leftist commune! But,

as it happens, an anarchic commune in post-imperial Roman Britain is not that far-fetched.

In 117 C.E., the Roman Empire reached its height, covering much of continental Europe, Britain, and stretching even into North Africa and Southwest Asia. For some of its history, the Roman Empire's cultural imperialism may have been in some ways even less "overbearing" than American fossil fueled-liberalism today, regularly allowing subjects and migrants to continue practicing their own traditions and religions, and to speak local languages outside the official Latin and Greek. But it still imposed a certain sameness on its territories, whether through currencies, engineering technology, architecture, urban planning, intensive agriculture, laws and customs, or military structure. (Not to mention often enslaving and conscripting local populations.)

This Roman hegemony persisted for several hundred years before the empire fractured in two and the Western half began its long plunge. The fall of Roman rule in the West opened the door for alternative kinds of government and economy. In the power vacuum left by a deteriorating Roman state, literal space was opened for new settlements to form, while new governments arose in existing cities. Some of those post-Roman settlements remained under control of the Roman elite who managed to hold onto their wealth and power in the region. But others enabled people to build their own governments and elect their own leaders. In Britain, where Caledonians, Picts, and Britons had resisted Roman rule for centuries, the locals certainly took the opportunity to resume or expand more egalitarian ways of life. Someone like "Dennis" and his crew starting up something resembling an autonomous collective anarchic commune in the countryside certainly would not have been impossible. Although Anglo-Saxon invaders likely brought their hierarchical system with them, there were many years before they established a strong state in southern England, and centuries before Normans and Vikings would conquer much of the rest of the island.

Many communities, some mutualistic and variably egalitarian, grew out of post-Roman Europe across the continent, and not just in the countryside but even in cities. Free cities in Germany stood outside the feudal control of lords, while Flanders, Italy, and France enjoyed urban communes. Peter Kropotkin pointed to such medieval communes as examples of collective self-defense sharing features with modern communism and socialism. This diversity of governments only became broadly possible when the threat and presence of a huge, organized empire was removed. In addition to the greater variety of governments, "Dennis" and his crew may have even lived longer and enjoyed more leisure time after the Roman collapse. Some research has suggested that life expectancy increased by a couple of years when the empire stopped extracting surplus food from Britain.

Medieval Europe, for all of its many flaws and undesirable qualities, offers one opening for thinking about how many

possibilities exist that we don't get to experience: different ways of living, of relating to one another, of understanding our place in the cosmos, discovering meaning in the world, of hauling filth, of doing music and arts. The collapse of omnipotent imperial systems may not necessarily open the door for glorious utopias, given the already-existing confines of history, psychology, and geography, but it does offer the hope of building something else in the expanses opened up. And although we are always confined by such material realities, the exciting thing about the wake of a fallen empire or a collapsed order is that collective and individual human choices suddenly become vital: whether building a future of violent tyrants, or one of solidarity and mutual aid, becomes a matter of our decisions.

* * * *

I ENTERED THE CAVERN, shining a small headlamp whose light soon flashed onto spindly white fingers of a dead branch, sending a shiver through my body. Standing at the edge of the sunlight and the darkness ahead, buzzing, I looked into the perfect void beyond the thin fingers of the branch and slowly backed away, into the forest. Consulting my map, I saw that there was a small village nearby. I had no idea what this cavern was or where it went, so I decided I would do the prudent thing and ask a villager about this mystery before plunging in.

The "village" turned out to be little more than a single tavern. I entered the darkened pub to find what I assumed was the entire population of the town seated around a long table. A man got up to see what I wanted. When he found I spoke little German he beckoned another townsperson over who generously attempted to communicate with me in halting English. I pulled out the map showing her the path I was following and where I wished to go. I asked her if the cave was a tunnel that would provide a short-cut, which seemed the only reasonable, "productive," explanation for my desire to go through it. As I had been taking my time on my journey, spending hours beside rivers washing my clothes and generally enjoying the sun, my food was dwindling, and I wanted to make it to the next sizable town, preferably before dark. It wasn't clear she understood my question. Finally, after miming a big tunnel the best I could, she said, "Ah yes. Don't go in without light..."

Before Empire

irates of the Caribbean 3: At World's End, disregarded by critics while simultaneously shoveling in nearly $1 billion internationally, was created and financed by Disney—and yet, despite that, the writers managed to sneak in a subversive plot. While the movie may seem like nothing more than popcorn pablum, complete with a tentacle-faced Bill Nighy and millions of magical crabs, the story is about a monopolistic corporation attempting to impose the uniformity of empire on the high seas by co-opting the mythological forces of the last "free" way of life—piracy—and turning them to business ends. Essentially, it's a story about the villainy of Disney, a fact which appears to have passed unnoticed by the company's executives. The movie presents the specter of a world disenchanted and monetized by large companies, retaining no dark corners and no wild spaces, as something hideous and tragic. In a quiet, critical, and easily overlooked scene, Captains Jack Sparrow and Hector Barbossa are standing off to the side on a beach together, and Barbossa, lamenting the dwindling space for the pirate in the new world, says to Sparrow, "The world used to be a bigger place."

Sparrow replies morosely: "*World's* still the same, there's just...less in it."

The wilderness of the oceans, forests, and deserts is the last free space, and the modern fossil fuel empire imposes sameness even there. When it comes to wilderness and wildlife today, there's just less of it. Much, much less. Perhaps the most vivid example of this is the replacement of lush, biodiverse rainforests with straight rows of uniform oil palm plantations. These plantations are essentially dead chemical deserts. Aside from the species *Elaeis guineensis*, virtually nothing else can live there. The plantations are constantly sprayed with intense herbicide and pesticide poisons, and protected from animals that may try to inhabit the area.

This kind of sameness is not exactly new. All intensive agriculture, even the kind that predates potent pesticides, seeks to exclude wildlife from an area of domesticated food production, whether grazing lands or croplands. The very definition of intensive agriculture entails taking a piece of land in which many different species thrive and fencing it off, removing the many species of non-useful plant and animal there, and allowing only a few *profitable* species to live on it. My whole job on the medieval Italian farm, after all, was to keep the wild dogs and boars away from the sheep and gardens. And this was an organic farm that relied little on modern synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. The ancient Roman farms, too, would have plowed over wild areas and displaced much or all of the wildlife inhabiting them.

But while intensive agriculture itself is not new, what *is* new is the scope and intensity of this kind of imperial agrarian sameness imposed on the world's ecologies. The kind of homogenizing flatness we see with cultural imperialism happens at the cellular level with agrarian imperialism. DNA diversity gets hewn down to a narrow range of life, and then those few profitable species see their numbers explode in vast, unbalanced quantities. A huge Marvel Cinematic Universe

of shitty tomatoes, flavorless apples, 72 billion land animals slaughtered per year, and a staggering 1 trillion or more sea creatures killed for food annually.

Agrarian empires of the past were limited regionally and temporally; they conquered a small patch of the world's land, and only a (relatively) brief period of time. Even the Mongolian Empire, the largest land empire in history, covered only about 16 percent of the earth's land mass and only lasted about 160 years. Such empires always burst into flame and fizzled out within a few centuries or millennia, with an average lifespan of just under 300 years. Today's fossil-augmented empire threatens to cover every inch of the globe before it burns itself (and everything else) out. In the sense that it is contained in the carbon dioxide particles in the atmosphere, or the microplastics in the ocean, it *already has* covered every inch of the globe.

The efficiency with which empire is able to transform biodiverse life into homogenous rows of economically productive life has never been matched. The supercharging of agriculture and development with fossil fueled-machines allows a few people to grind whole forests into sawdust in a few days, strip the ground, artificially re-fertilize it, and plant it while barely lifting a hand. Through its millennia of rulership by intensive agrarian empires, Italy has retained some admirable

biodiversity with such ecologically important megafauna as wolves, bears, lynx, ibex, and many raptors still roaming tiny pockets of the peninsula, if in severely diminished numbers and, again, typically in the alpine regions that are difficult to bring under the rule of imperial uniformity or productive mass agriculture. Whether such creatures will survive the fossil fuel empire remains to be seen, but given the critically endangered status of most of Italy's megafauna, it's not looking good.

When it comes to agriculture, there are present-day alternatives practiced by small pockets of (often indigenous) people, such as agroecological food production in which domesticated crops are interspersed with wild endemic plants, and pests are kept at bay through natural predation or by including species that pest insects find distasteful. These tactics, alongside indigenous foraging land and other areas not totally fenced off to wildlife and phytodiversity, rely far less on injections of fertilizers and pesticides, and frequently none at all. But they still only inhabit narrow strips between big industrial farms and it's hard to imagine, short of a total imperial collapse, how they could compete in productive capacity without a complete dismantling and replacement of global supply chains and government incentives.

We can find hints of what may come after agrarian empires

by glimpsing what came before. A couple years ago, *The Atlantic* reported on an exciting geological find in New Mexico from a time long before empire: the fossilized footprints of a giant ground sloth. These creatures were less like the ridiculous, adorable tree hobbits most contemporary sloths bring to mind and more like huge woolly bears, some even growing to the size of modern elephants. What was so interesting about these particular fossils was that nestled inside the twenty-inch pawprints were little human footprints. This means some people were following this sloth around, leaping from print to print. Why? The researchers couldn't be sure, but their theories ranged from hunting or stalking practice to a band of teenagers just harassing the local sloth.

What this find vividly illustrates is the close proximity that prehistoric people had with all kinds of fantastical beasts we can barely imagine, all over the world. Today when we think of megafauna, we typically think of sub-Saharan varieties like giraffes, hippos, lions, Indian tigers, or Indonesian orangutans. The world's largest nonhuman animals have been crushed into the tropics, areas historically difficult to reach by ruthless saws and handaxes, and thereby escaping many of the most anthropocentric ambitions of historic empires. Britain, too, was once covered in forests, filled with lynx, bears, wolves, beavers, polecats, wolverines, wooly rhinoceros, wooly mammoths, elk, wild boar, reindeer, and many others. Almost all these species are now extinct or extirpated. But with fossil fuels and extractive imperial economies, the tropics are newly accessible, which is why they're being destroyed so intensely today, and why without immense, immediate change, they'll soon look like the deadlands of Europe.

 O THERE WAS A TIME WHEN THE whole world was covered in such megafauna, and the relationships humans built with these animals were intimate and varied. This fact is captured in the almost universal animism that shaped prehistoric peoples' conception of divinity, imputing (observing?) gods and goddesses into the many creatures that surrounded them. It can also be found in cave art. As Barbara Ehrenreich observed in *The Baffler*, prehistoric cave paintings often seem to place humans at the fringes of the animal world, if they include people at all. Instead of the drama's central protagonists, humans appear to take the role of a rather absurd little jester in the court of the animal kings and queens.

What changed? Part of the answer is the climate. The earth warmed between 12,000 and 13,000 years ago, ushering in the new Holocene epoch, accelerating a major extinction event that was already underway. This Quaternary extinction killed off nearly two hundred species of large mammals, such as woolly mammoths and saber-toothed cats, and of course the giant sloths. Dozens of other species of reptiles and birds also died off. There are many theories behind what caused the extinction, but there can be little doubt that human overhunting and competition played a part, even if by accident. While there is evidence of foraging human groups acting deliberately to avoid overhunting prey, they could have easily misjudged the replacement rate of the species they hunted (this can be difficult to calculate even with sophisticated tools today). The new climate was good for human reproduction; it allowed foragers to more intensely control their ecologies, extract ever more caloric energy from the land, and eventually, over many generations, slowly become intensive farmers and herders, pushing out the wildlife that competed for nutritious biomass.

But even after so many species became extinct, there was *still* a great abundance of diverse life all over the globe for thousands of years. Some of the steepest declines have only occurred since the beginning of industrialization two hundred years ago. Today's empire is simply much more effective and efficient when it comes to killing off life and homogenizing ecologies for future use in markets. We are living in the midst of an extinction far greater even than the Quaternary event. It's hard to imagine, in this dying world, the abundance of life that was with us only a couple centuries ago. These days, outside of the rare seams between empire, like that Italian farm, many of us only ever really get to interact with species that have adapted to urban environments, like pigeons, corvids, and seagulls, and *interact* is not even close to the right word. If they regard our presence at all, the pigeons seem to consider us an obstacle to their treasured crumbs, the lazy sauntering corvids look petulantly inconvenienced, and the seagulls surly and contemptuous. (Reasonably so!) My last intimate experience with wildlife occurred nearly a year ago tending a sick hedgehog who had likely been poisoned by pesticides put out by suburban slug-phobes. And yet, standing face-to-face with a giraffe (from a platform) in a wildlife park, being charged by a bear in the woods, glimpsing a Canadian lynx by a lonely Ontario highway, or catching the lope of a wild wolverine in northern Michigan, have been some of my life's most awe-(and fear-)evoking experiences. It's no wonder that mulleted tiger-ranchers can get by hawking even a sad simulation of contact with wondrous megafauna.

In even the wildest parts of the United States today—itself one of the wilder countries in the Global North—one struggles to imagine the more abundant life of even the recent past. Roy Scranton illustrates this problem in *The Baffler*:

It's highly unlikely that more than a few people, for example, are aware in a vivid, day-to-day way that enormous reptilian monsters once roamed the land we inhabit, though every schoolchild has been apprised of this awesome fact. Even fewer people, perhaps no one at all, walk around grieving Ainsworth's salamander, the Alvord cutthroat trout, the blue pike, the Califor-

nia grizzly bear, the Carolina parakeet, the Cascade Mountain wolf, the deepwater cisco, the dusky seaside sparrow, the Eastern elk, the Eastern cougar, the eelgrass limpet, Goff's pocket gopher, the green-blossom pearly mussel, the heath hen, the New Mexico sharp-tailed grouse, the Pasadena freshwater shrimp, the passenger pigeon, the Rocky Mountain locust, the silver trout, the Southern California kit fox, the Xerces blue butterfly, or the umbilicate pebblesnail, just a few of the North American species that have gone extinct due to human activity since the late nineteenth century.

The absence of such creatures makes their habitation in a place currently occupied by a Denny's seem unbelievable. But there was a time, before industry, before intensive agriculture, before the Quaternary extinctions, when humans would have lived side by side with abundantly diverse wildlife. I hear crickets now only in 1990s movies.

*   *   *   *

It wasn't hard to find the tunnel again. The sun was on its way down, but it didn't matter. The tunnel was darker than the night. I flicked on the headlamp again and stood staring as the small ray dissolved in the dark. My insides quivered, my fingers trembled, and I had to force myself to walk forward. I was entirely alone in the woods. I hadn't seen any other hikers in days. No one was watching me. No one knew I was there. I could have turned back in fear, without embarrassment.

As I trudged into the dark the air grew cooler. I stayed to the right-hand side where I could keep the wall within my tiny pool of light. The left wall disappeared. The tunnel curved, and the edge of daylight at the entrance snapped out of view. Only my crunching footsteps broke the hard, close silence. I looked around trying to orient myself to the size of the space or whatever might be in the cave, but my headlamp's weak diodes didn't reach far. Every now and again, the wall to my right yawned into open black space that I restrained myself from pointing the light into, letting my imagination invent the terrors that might or might not lurk in the pits. A line of horrific Schrödinger's hallways.

After a while, something broke the monotony of the flat, gravelly ground. Some object lay directly ahead of my path; I couldn't make it out in the weak lamplight. It was a pale, flesh-colored lump. A number of possibilities flashed through my mind, each more gruesome than the last: a limb, a head, a corpse. My adrenaline accelerated. I approached the object and caught it with my light.

It was a teddy bear. A little wet, ratty teddy bear. I wondered how long it had lain there, or how or why it ended up in the cave. Since there was no other debris around, I doubted that it had simply washed in from outside with a flood. The boring Occam's razor answer was that local kids knew

the tunnel well and one had once left their teddy bear behind when playing in it, but my mind wasn't in a state to settle on a reassuring logical conclusion and instead flitted around more sinister explanations. I stepped over the toy and quickened my pace. Again I felt a tingle in my skin and considered turning back. I had no idea how long the tunnel stretched on or where it led, what it was for, whether mineshaft or abandoned road or something else, or what else I'd find. But before I could give in to that more reasonable voice, a light appeared up ahead. I've rarely been so relieved. It was not lost on me that characters in movies tend to get caught right before the end of the tunnel. But Hollywood's hegemony did not reach this place. I stepped into the evening light safely and left the darkness behind me under the clear sky in the gorgeous evening air.
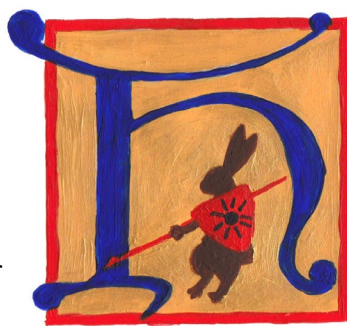
ow do we transform it? many are pondering what could come after the global lockdowns and economic shocks of COVID-19, and the widespread protests that have followed in the wake of the latest murders by police in the heart of the empire. These crises are an opportunity—and a necessity—when it comes to imagining new ways of ordering life and governing economies. But there is only likely to be an opening of possibility if this pandemic and these demonstrations totally fracture the global fossil-fueled liberal order, and dismantle the cultural and martial forces that rule the world, which may or may not happen. This empire and its forebears have withstood far greater shocks than the coronavirus and civil unrest. More human agency will need to be involved in dismantling it today. If anything, far from breaking fossil fueled liberal imperialism, this pandemic and uprising could increase its hold on power, solidify its dominance, or send it into a long, authoritarian death spiral.

While it may not follow from our present crises, it is certain that eventually this empire will fall. Every single empire that has existed has crumbled, and this one must, too, if only by destroying itself. Whatever comes after it will necessarily come into a denuded world; "the lone and level sands stretch far away." As soon as the fossil fuel empire is gone, some wildlife may quickly rebound. Some of the wild and mysterious places may come back, filled this time with real bears and tigers. Much that once thrived will stay dead. But even in a deadened world, with the collapse of this order there will follow more diverse kinds of human life and government. It will be necessary as socialists to hold onto the values that we hold sacred—diversity, egalitarianism, solidarity, and liberty—and we'll have to keep them at the heart of our project. ✤
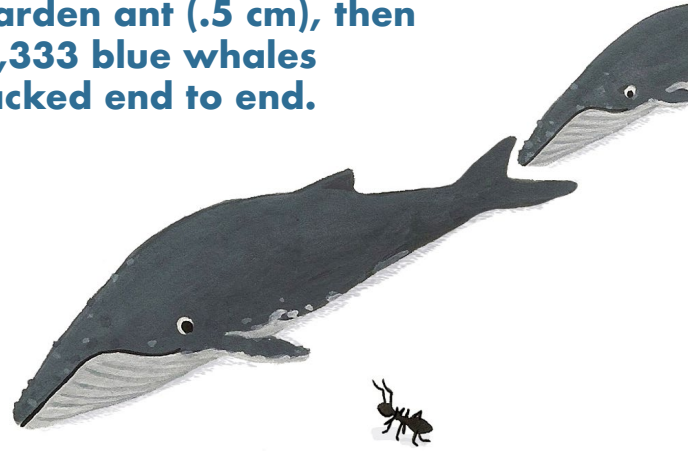
One B

If $1 is half an inch, a billion dollars is the diameter of the Earth.

If $1 is a common garden ant (.5 cm), then a billion is 208,333 blue whales (24 meters) stacked end to end.

If $1 is 17 inches, a billion dollars is the circumference of Jupiter.

If you were strapped to a chair and forced to listen to all nine Beethoven symphonies, on loop, how many times would you have to hear all nine symphonies before a billion seconds had passed? 47,214.35 times. You would be strapped to that chair for 31.7 years.

With his current fortune, Jeff Bezos could buy 13 Lamborghinis every single day for a hundred years.

illion

Let's say you were immortal, and had always made a very comfortable salary equivalent to 100,000 a year (relative to inflation, local currency etc). Let's say you never spent a dime of it, and it never earned any interest. To possess a billion dollars by the year 2020, you would have to have started earning that salary approximately 10,000 years ago, before the invention of currency and around the time of the extinction of the mammoths.

If a six foot tall man represents a very comfortable salary of 100,000 a year, a billion is 1,667 six foot tall men standing on each other's shoulders.
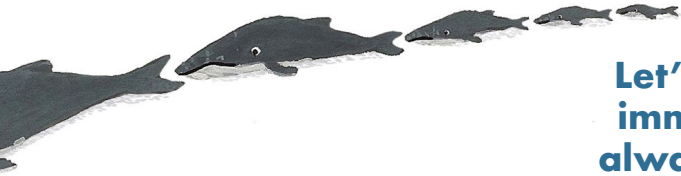
Let's say you wanted to fire a billion men into space. Loading them onto ships built to hold 1,000 men each, you would need 1 million ships. If you fired one ship of 1,000 men into the sun every day, it would take you 2,740 years before you finished. The population of men would likely replenish itself before you were finished. We're gonna need a bigger boat.

The Egalitarian Ethic

& The Spirit of Socialism

by Yong Kwon

AS HE LAY DYING FROM THE SPANISH FLU in 1920, Max Weber, the father of modern sociology, was preoccupied with the specter of communism. From Mexico to Russia, the whole world seemed to be in the grips of revolutionary fervor. In his own native Germany, Marxists had nearly occupied Berlin in an armed uprising. Even Munich, where Weber finally succumbed to the pandemic, was briefly governed by a workers' council.

Weber rejected the left's call to establish a society of shared prosperity through redistribution. In his magnum opus *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, he argued that a country's economic success was a byproduct of culture. Weber believed that Northern Europe was wealthy because adherents of Calvinism—the austere branch of Protestant Christianity that had come to dominate the region—saw vocational success as a sign of divine blessing. This "moralization of labor" was the chief driver of prosperity, and, because it was a moral and ideological disposition with deep social roots, could not be spontaneously created by simply conferring resources upon the disenfranchised. Therefore, in Weber's view, efforts to generate prosperity through redistribution were futile at best, destructive at worst.

But Weber's reading of history was wrong. Protestant societies did not become richer on the merit of their values. In fact, Protestants were more affluent because wealth redistribution on a revolutionary scale happened to occur around the same time as their religious conversion in the 16th century. Throughout history, other societies that embraced egalitarianism—regardless of religion—have enjoyed similar economic dividends. And although industrial output is not the end-all and be-all of true societal well-being, it's still a striking fact that economic prosperity—measured in terms of agricultural yields, adoption of technological innovations, income per household—actually *increases* when large blocks of resources held by the few are divvied out to more people. This is exactly contrary to the accepted wisdom of many free-market devotees, who proclaim that redistributing society's resources through robust public services and welfare programs will encourage indolence and ultimately lead to economic collapse.

As governments today look warily at the prospect of increasing civil discontent amid rapidly growing economic insecurity, they must discard the long-standing belief that redistribution will eventually lead to degradations in the quality of life, and embrace egalitarian solutions to persistent socio-economic challenges. Historic examples of successful redistributive reforms provide valuable evidence that can be deployed in policy discussions today. Although these historic examples were not fully egalitarian or devoid of adverse consequences—points addressed later on in this article—they show that redistribution has been a net good for the societies that have undertaken it, and that similarly-situated societies who failed to engage in reforms experienced greater levels of stagnation and drudgery.

Consider England

Economic historians have long debated why an island on the edge of the European continent achieved industrialization before other nations. Scholars like Robert Allen identified the high cost of human labor in England as the principal impetus for mechanization, while Douglas North and Barry Weingast saw the government's commitment to property rights as the foundation of increased capital investments. Other hypotheses placed a spotlight on the availability of cheap fuel (coal).

But these factors all rely on the abundance of actors who had access to economic resources and could take advantage of England's various endowments. These were not conditions that existed in feudal England or elsewhere in medieval Europe, where society's resources were perpetually held in the hands of a small and privileged class.

According to research by economists Leander Heldring, James Robinson, and Sebastian Vollmer, the common people of England in 1436 held less than half of the cultivated land in the country. Independent peasants before the English Reformation controlled about one-fifth of the farmland while knights owned about a quarter. The remaining property was controlled by the upper nobility and the church—despite approximately 85 percent of the population belonging to the peasantry.

This unequal distribution of wealth left little room for the vast majority of working people to improve their lives or meaningfully participate in the economy. Surveys from medieval England showed that even peasant households who did own some land possessed so little that they could not be self-sustaining: they could only achieve subsistence by supplementing their harvest with wages from other work. Moreover, the growing practice of "enclosures," which began as early as the late 13th century, increasingly restricted people's access to communal properties that had once helped complement their meager income.

King Henry VIII's break with the Catholic Church in 1534 became the inadvertent catalyst for change. Between 1536 and 1540, parliament transferred the ownership of all 825 monasteries and their lands in England and Wales to the Crown. Desperate to generate cash for the royal treasury, the Tudor monarchy made one-third of the expropriated land available for purchase on the market. The resulting redistribution was the economic legacy of the Reformation in England.

The shift in land ownership over the next century was extraordinary. While the share of the agricultural land held by the upper aristocracy did not change between 1436 and 1688, the portion of total cultivated land owned by knights and middling social classes grew from 25 percent to somewhere between 45 and 50 percent. Simultaneously, research by agricultural historian Mark Overton suggests free peasants were also able to increase their landholdings from 20 percent to somewhere between 25 and 33 percent. England still remained a highly unequal society, and enclosures continued to constrict public access to common resources, making life difficult for landless peasants. Nonetheless, the dissolution of ecclesiastical properties produced a more inclusive economy than what would have existed otherwise.

A wider share of society having access to land corresponded with growth in agricultural output. Estimates suggest that between 1500 and 1700, the yield of wheat per acre increased from 14 bushels to 19. The surplus allowed people to shift resources to industrial production. Reflecting the rise of manufacturing during this time period, The Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure estimates that nearly half of the English labor force worked outside agriculture by 1700. These were the early stages of the Industrial Revolution.

Contrary to Weber's view, the tenets of Protestantism that Tudor England adopted were incidental to the creation of new wealth. It was Henry VIII's breakup of ecclesiastical property that preceded growth.

Notably, Catholic countries that challenged traditional socio-economic privileges—such as France in the late 18th century—experienced similar transformations. Traveling through France just before the Revolution, English agriculturalist Arthur Young described the country's rural economy as a "miserable system." 23 million farmers—about 80 percent of the total population—toiled in the field. A significant share of these workers were tenant farmers who relied on their landlords for seed and cattle, leaving them constantly indebted with little resources to escape poverty. Just as in England before the Reformation, even *paysans* who owned their own land often possessed so little that they barely eked out a living as subsistence farmers.

There were other burdens that the French peasantry assumed as a subservient class. The local aristocracy had the right to collect payments for people crossing rivers, digging wells, selling goods, and other activities vital to commerce. These feudal obligations acted as further barriers to growth. The privileges of the largest landowning class per capita in the country—the Roman Catholic Church—exemplified the rampant inequality in the country. The institution held between 6 and 10 percent of the total cultivated land, but paid no taxes and collected a tithe from the general population.

Then in 1789, representatives of the working class and the bourgeoisie took control of the state. One of their first actions

was to place all land owned by the Church at the disposal of the new National Assembly. As the Revolution wore on, a significant share of the property owned by the former nobility was also expropriated and redistributed. In French Flanders (newly reorganized as the department Nord), the share of land held by the clergy and nobility decreased from 42 percent in 1788 to 12 percent in 1802. Concurrently, peasant share of the land grew from 30 percent to 42. The remaining land went to the bourgeoisie.

As was the case in England, the redistribution was done through an auction, thus excluding the poorest members of society from the process and massively enriching some members of the bourgeoisie class. Despite the revolutionary government's failure to live up to its egalitarian ideals, research by economists Theresa Finley, Raphaël Franck, and Noel D. Johnson showed that regions of the country where greater share of Church property was confiscated by the state enjoyed greater agricultural output over the next half-century.

Building on this economic foundation, France too experienced rapid industrialization in the 19th century. What made France different from other countries such as Portugal or Austria-Hungary that did not achieve intensive economic growth during this period was not their creed, but their politics. Far from handicapping economic growth, as many modern free market doctrinaires claim, redistribution helped lift Western Europe from a subsistence economy.

THIS WAS NOT A UNIQUELY EUROPEAN phenomenon. The current economic engine of the world, East Asia, perhaps best exemplified the triumph of egalitarianism. East Asia's success has often been attributed, in Weberian fashion, to its cultural mores and belief system. This time, however, the focus is not on Protestantism, but on Confucianism. Former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew provided the most well-known endorsement of this view:

"Confucian societies believe that the individual exists in the context of the family, extended family, friends, and wider society, and that the government cannot and should not take over the role of the family... [a country] depends on the strength and influence of the family to keep society orderly and maintain a culture of thrift, hard work, filial piety, and respect for elders and for scholarship and for learning... These values make for a productive people and help economic growth."

It was a twist on the Weberian worldview, but an outlook that still emphasized the supremacy of culture in determining a country's economic success. Lee's message also implied that economic misfortune could be attributed to moral failure at an individual or familial level—diverting attention from potential structural barriers to a person's fulfilment of their vocational aspirations.

And yet, Lee left a key question unanswered. If Confucianism was the reason for East Asia's modern prosperity, then why were Confucian societies like Korea so poor in pre-modern times? Again, case studies show that redistribution—not culture—acted as a precursor for prosperity.

At the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945, Korea was a highly unequal agrarian society. The richest 2.7 percent of rural households owned two-thirds of all cultivated lands, while over half of the population owned no land at all. According to Political Scientist Jong-sung You, U.S. military authorities distributed about 240,000 hectares of land that was previously owned by Japanese interests during their brief governance of the country between 1945 and 1948. But this only represented approximately one-tenth of the arable land. Further efforts to redistribute the means of production ran into opposition, particularly from South Korean President Syngman Rhee, who saw landowners as a staunchly anti-communist constituency who would support his efforts to repress leftists who challenged his authoritarian administration.

The Korean War changed this political calculation. After being driven from the capital twice by communist forces, Rhee's government woke up to the realization that rural poverty fostered domestic sympathies for the rival regime in Pyongyang.

This national security imperative rallied political support behind a substantial and earnest redistribution of resources. The government restricted land ownership to three hectares and 330,000 hectares of farmland was reallocated to previously landless farmers. Furthermore, landlords directly sold 500,000 hectares to their tenants by 1952. In total, economists Sung Hwan Ban, Pal Yong Moon, and Dwight Perkins estimate that 52 percent of total cultivated land changed hands. As a result, the share of farming households that worked on borrowed land fell from 49 percent to 7 percent.

The scope of the redistribution in Korea was far larger than what had occurred in Tudor England or Revolutionary France. Consequently, the economic impact was also felt more immediately. Author Joe Studwell notes that annual rice yields rose from 3 tons/hectare in the mid-1950s to 5.3 by the 1970s. The resulting increase in rural income allowed families to invest in education—creating the workforce that staffed the enterprises
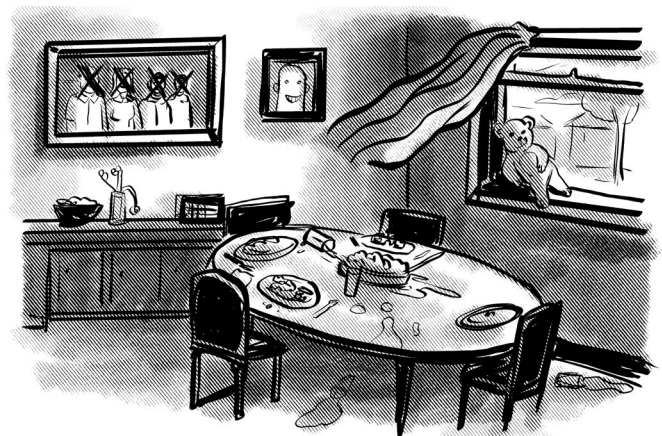
behind the explosive industrialization of South Korea. The new wealth also formed the basis for domestic savings that financed the acquisition of machinery and technology, pushing industries to compete in more valuable sectors of the global economy.

South Korea's economic breakout validated the transformative potential of redistribution. And it was not alone: Japan and Taiwan also pursued this path to prosperity.

The opposite was true in countries where land redistribution did not take place. Hungary serves as a stark counter example. As a share of the population, the Hungarian aristocracy in the 19th century was the smallest in Europe. Nonetheless, historian Gyorgy Szabad estimates that a quarter of all arable land in the country belonged to these approximately 600 families.

Guatemala is a more recent example. In 1950, approximately 2 percent of the population controlled 72 percent of the country's arable land while 88 percent held a mere 14 percent. With two-thirds of the population working in the agricultural sector, the gross inequality made it nearly impossible for people to break the cycle of poverty. Moreover, the resources were ineffectively used: while the vast majority of rural families lived in poverty, less than 12 percent of the total privately-held land was cultivated.

To address this misallocation, Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz Guzman introduced measures in 1952 to split over 600,000 hectares of land among 100,000 families. There are critics today who point out that these reforms extended fewer

Protestant societies did not become richer on the merit of their values. In fact, Protestants were more affluent because wealth redistribution on a revolutionary scale happened to occur around the same time as their religious conversion...

The imperial government in Vienna safeguarded these hereditary privileges and ensured their continued socio-economic dominance. In a time of burgeoning nationalist sentiments, the Austrian Habsburg dynasty saw the Hungarian nobility as a counterweight to the people's demands for an independent Hungarian nation-state.

When the Esterhazy family—one of the country's largest landowners—faced imminent insolvency in the 1860s, Emperor Franz-Joseph personally intervened to shield their assets from creditors. When the import of cheap American cereal imperiled the Hungarian nobility's dominance in the domestic flour market, the imperial government levied tariffs to protect their market share. Taxes on imported wheat increased by 429 percent between 1882 and 1906.

These measures led to the continued monopoly of land by the aristocracy. The result was the exact opposite of what had occurred in England, France, and South Korea. Investment in land improvements stagnated. By the start of the 20th century, Hungary's per hectare wheat yield was below that of Romania and nearly one-third of Denmark's.

This backwardness in the agricultural sector also affected the country's industrialization. As late as 1906, only 12 percent of the mills in the country had adopted steampower. Economic historian John Komlos described Hungary on the eve of the First World War as "essentially an agricultural country in which the primary sector still employed two-thirds of the labor force and produced the same share of the national product."

benefits to farmers of Maya descent and their communities: like the other examples I've cited, the proposed redistribution was not fully egalitarian. However, economic historians are unfortunately in no position to analyze the long-term impact of land reform in Guatemala, because Arbenz was accused of harboring communist sympathies and a U.S.-backed coup d'etat removed him from power in 1954. Much of the redistribution he had spearheaded was reversed thereafter.

The U.S. Agency for International Development today notes that "the health status of poor and indigenous Guatemalans, who comprise close to half of the total population, continues to be among the worst in the Western Hemisphere." The poverty rate is estimated to be somewhere between 50 and 60 percent. Almost half of Guatemalan children under the age of 5 suffer from malnutrition and 23 percent from severe malnutrition. With a population that is fighting to put food on the table and very few gainful employment opportunities, the rate of reported extortion by criminals is 43 per 100,000 inhabitants. In this environment, it is not surprising that many people are choosing to take refuge in the United States.

THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO ENSURE equitable access to a society's economic resources. While this was accomplished through the distribution of private property in England, France, and South Korea, this is not the only path to building an in-

clusive economy, and we should pay attention to counter-examples where privatized "redistribution" of *collectively*-held resources resulted in a more exclusive economy that concentrated resources in the hands of a privileged few. In El Salvador, land reforms in the late 19th century harmed the livelihood of many rural workers because they expropriated land that was utilized collectively by local communities. The government then allowed the newly privatized plots to be acquired by a handful of oligarchs who consolidated them into large coffee plantations. This dispossession prevented agricultural communities from meaningfully participating in the economy, ensuring that these "reforms" would not deliver improvements to the people's general standard of living. Similarly, the central government's forced privatization of shared resources catalyzed Emiliano Zapata's insurrection during the Mexican Revolution.

The oppression of *campesinos* in El Salvador is analogous to what many rural workers experienced in communist bloc nations. Political authorities in places like the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China expropriated and then consolidated land into collective farms, which were run by central planners in Moscow and Beijing without input from local communities. The absence of worker autonomy had severe consequences, most notably in the form of famines that struck Ukraine during the 1930s and in China during the 1950s.

These cases show how redistribution is less effective when it does not consider the local context. Accordingly, Joe Studwell points out in his examination of successful (South Korea and Taiwan) and unsuccessful (Philippines and Indonesia) cases of land reforms in East Asia that the most successful cases of redistribution were ones that relied more heavily on community participation. Conversely, he observed that state-led transformation of the rural economy invariably failed when people in positions of privilege were allowed to dictate the process.

TODAY, THERE IS RENEWED SUPPORT for redistributive policies. Proposals for more equitable access to public services and restraints on corporate power have entered the political discourse. This is a unique moment because political leaders are putting forward policies that consciously aim to enhance the wellbeing of all citizens. In many of the historic examples cited above, the positive consequences for the majority of the population were unforeseen or incidental side-effects of a totally different political project. In Tudor England, the economic rewards of the Reformation were the unintended consequences of the monarchy's attempt to fill its treasury. In Revolutionary France, the Republican government was primarily attacking and dismantling institutions that had legitimized the *Ancien Regime*, as opposed to acting upon a consistent goal of democratizing resources.

In these historic examples, the most vulnerable members of society often bore the cost of these transformations because welfare had not been the states' principal aim. For instance, King Henry VIII's land grab led to the closure of hospitals that were funded by monastic orders—these had been the only humanitarian institutions in medieval England that provided medical care for the poor. In addition, a steady erosion of common lands accompanied the expansion of private property, which disproportionately affected poorer farmers. Similarly, the redistribution of land via auctions in revolutionary France privileged farmers with more means, exacerbating inequality in some parts of the country.

More disturbingly, according to economic historian Gavin Wright, financial institutions that were established to facilitate the trans-Atlantic slave trade between the 17th and 19th century further accelerated England's economic growth. While European economies that did not experience a similar economic take-off also participated in this heinous crime (ex. Portugal), the wealth created by and violently expropriated from human bondage must be recognized as part of England's legacy. When societies engage in redistributive policies today, their efforts must be more conscious about avoiding the dislocation of vulnerable peoples and the exploitation of people outside national borders.

Furthermore, policymakers must make a clear effort to deliver real improvements to people's lives—and the measure of these gains cannot be limited to traditional indices like industrial output. In pre-modern England and France, increased land productivity resulting from the breakup of ecclesiastical land helped many people escape from the drudgery of subsistence farming. In South Korea's case, the astonishing rate of industrialization pushed the average life span up from around 41 at the end of the Korean War in 1953 to 83 in 2020. But unmitigated Gross Domestic Product growth in the United States since the 2008 financial crash has not translated into improvements in the quality of life—in fact, life expectancy has been in decline for three successive years. This shows that economic growth does not automatically yield tangible changes in the lives of people. Redistributive policies today must look to affect a wider set of conditions, including health, education, and leisure.

There are still many detractors who repeat Max Weber's dictum that redistributive policies cannot improve economic conditions. They emphatically argue that individuals succeed and fail based on their moral outlook. As evidence, they point to Venezuela and the Soviet Union, claiming that greater public investments in housing and healthcare are slippery slopes to privation.

Yet history says otherwise. In Tudor England, revolutionary France, and post-war Korea, political decisions that widened people's access to productive resources fostered shared prosperity. Despite their contingencies and limitations—which modern, equality-minded political actors should aim to correct and improve upon—these and other historical cases ought to be examined as proof of the economic merits of a more equal society.

Because, in Weber's own dying words, the truth is the truth. ✥
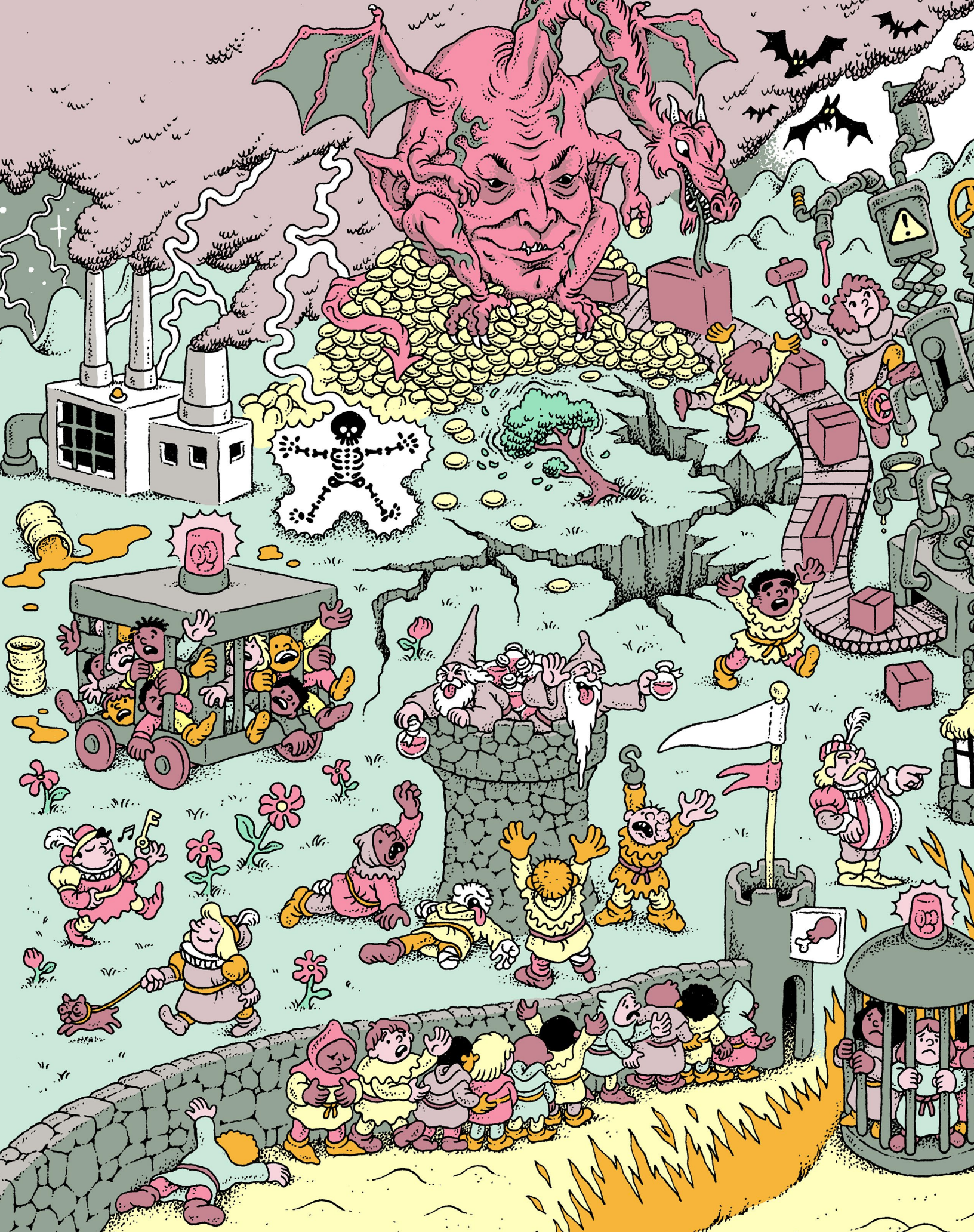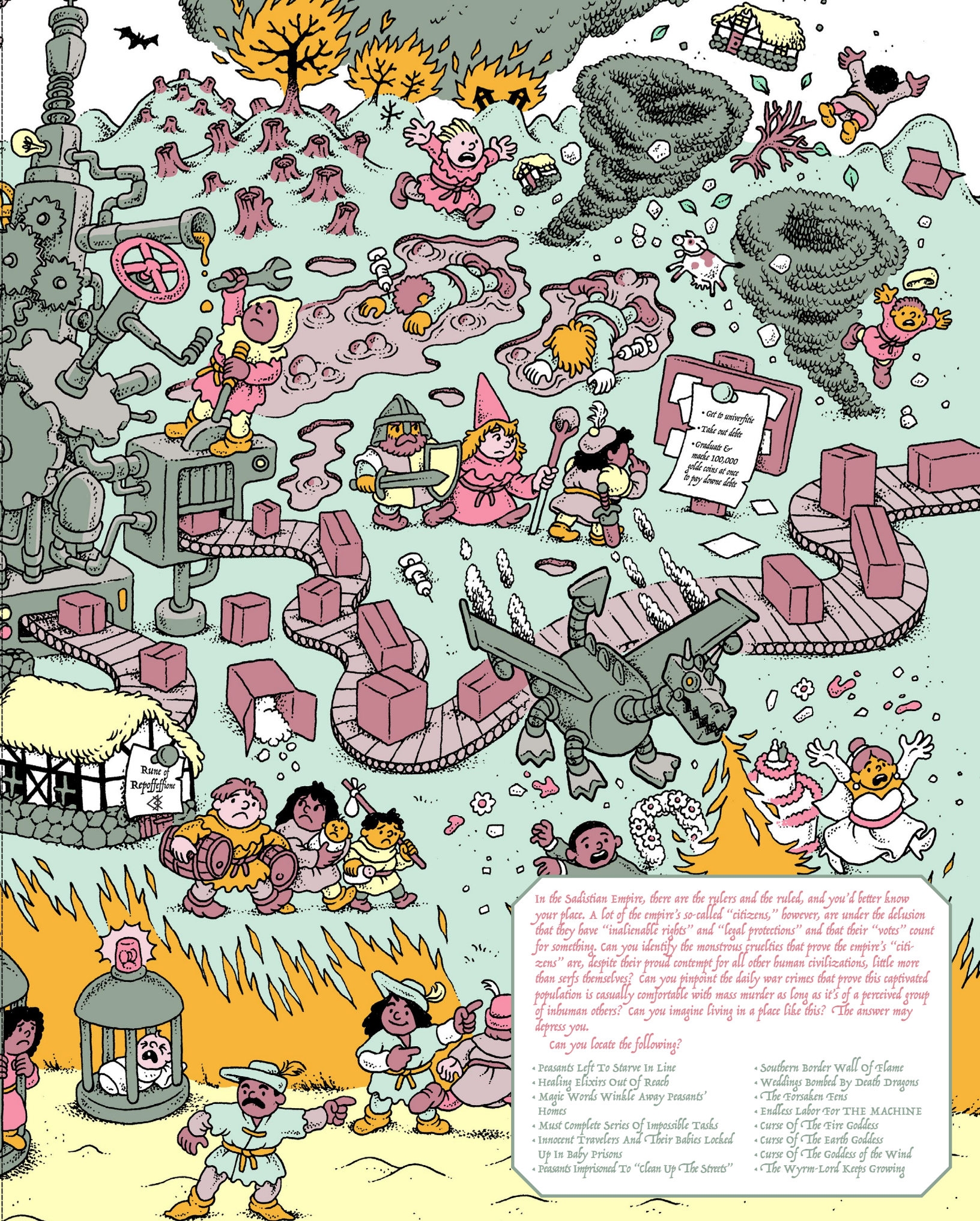
In the Sadistian Empire, there are the rulers and the ruled, and you'd better know your place. A lot of the empire's so-called "citizens," however, are under the delusion that they have "inalienable rights" and "legal protections" and that their "votes" count for something. Can you identify the monstrous cruelties that prove the empire's "citizens" are, despite their proud contempt for all other human civilizations, little more than serfs themselves? Can you pinpoint the daily war crimes that prove this captivated population is casually comfortable with mass murder as long as it's of a perceived group of inhuman others? Can you imagine living in a place like this? The answer may depress you.

Can you locate the following?

- Peasants Left To Starve In Line
- Healing Elixirs Out Of Reach
- Magic Words Winkle Away Peasants' Homes
- Must Complete Series Of Impossible Tasks
- Innocent Travelers And Their Babies Locked Up In Baby Prisons
- Peasants Imprisoned To "Clean Up The Streets"
- Southern Border Wall Of Flame
- Weddings Bombed By Death Dragons
- The Forsaken Fens
- Endless Labor For THE MACHINE
- Curse Of The Fire Goddess
- Curse Of The Earth Goddess
- Curse Of The Goddess of the Wind
- The Wyrm-Lord Keeps Growing

Rune of Repoffeffione

- Get to univerfitie
- Take out debte
- Graduate & make 100,000 golde coins at once to pay downe debte

Commerce and the World of

TOYS

by GREG BELVEDERE

NO TOY ENTERTAINS MY KIDS AS MUCH AS THE contents of our recycling bin. With the help of some tape, glue, string, and markers they can turn an assortment of containers and cardboard boxes into anything they can imagine. They have plenty of toys. But as many parents will tell you, most toys only hold their attention for so long before they wind up on the shelf, or in many cases smashed to pieces and scattered across the house for me to clean up or step on. Such is the contrived durability that manufacturers bake into their products in the hopes we will buy more of them.

This fascinates me. For all the wonders of industrial capitalist production, it has a hard time competing with its own garbage when it comes to creating toys that hold kids' attention. Of course the novelty of the objects that appear in our recycling bin every week give it an advantage over individual toys. Still, trash can stimulate creativity in ways that many toys simply don't. Why can't toy companies do a better job of engaging the imagination of children even with their massive marketing and manufacturing capabilities?

Well, because toy companies are in the business of selling toys, not the business of making them fun. Depending on your perspective this might sound either completely obvious, or far too cynical. I don't wish to suggest the people working at these companies simply want to rob children and their parents of their money by selling them a bunch of toys that kids will forget about in a few days. But they do have to work within a capitalist system. If they can make a great toy that entertains kids for years they will, but only if it helps their bottom line. These people have jobs they want to hold onto and companies they want to keep out of the red. If a toy holds a child's attention beyond a year, what will their parents have to buy at the holi-days? The toy economy depends on the constant exhaustion of attention and pursuit of fresh toys.

This becomes very clear watching the Netflix documentary series *The Toys That Made Us*. Though many of the toy designers showcased in this series seem to have a genuine passion for their work, a lot of their decisions are economic ones that have to do with production costs and marketing, not stimulating creativity in children. For example, there is a team of Power Rangers because it let Bandai sell five action figures instead of just one. He-Man rode a strange oversized green tiger called Battle Cat because Mattel ran out of money for new tooling equipment to make vehicles, so they used the equipment from another toy line and just changed the color. Hasbro painted the G.I. Joe character Snake Eyes entirely black because eliminating the detail on one figure kept costs down. More broadly, the highly gendered nature of many modern toys comes not just from ingrained social norms, but from the way companies like to sell toys. They reason that by fragmenting the market into "girls toys" and "boys toys" they can make more sales than sticking with gender neutral toys.

When it comes to toy marketing, the way companies use TV shows to sell action figures looks particularly transparent and ripe for parody. Sometimes the cartoon comes first, but often it is an afterthought that only gets developed in order to sell the toy. The *Transformers*, *He-Man*, and *G.I. Joe* cartoons all came about after manufacturers had designed the toys and needed a way to sell them. If this has gotten less blatant since I was a kid, it is only because the marketing and manufacturing of action figures has become a more integrated whole. These shows give toys a context. Without that context kids might not want them and parents would not buy them. Children spend a lot of their time creating and living in fantasy worlds. These cartoons

provide those worlds and the toys let the kids hold a piece of them in their hands. In this way they do capture the imagination of children.

Capture is the key word here. Stories and mythologies are an important part of the human experience. Not just for entertainment, but to orient our values. Stories put together in order to sell kids a piece of molded plastic will not reflect the kind of values I want my children to have. They will at best punt to the lowest common denominator and at worst reinforce all the worst values and gender stereotypes floating around in our society. I can think of nothing more mind numbingly stupid than the different incarnations of Power Rangers, but I suspect I would have loved the battling robots and such if I had been a few years younger when it first aired. Not that I think the stories are always what draw kids into these shows and toys. I could not tell you the plot or even the names of most of the shows I watched as a kid, but I remember what the characters and toys looked like. Their design plays a huge part in their appeal, just like any other product. For me these toys felt like they either came from the future, or some magical world. Since I grew up, manufacturers have gotten even more savvy about creating toys with the shapes and colors that lure kids in.

We could leverage children's need for stories more effectively, giving them better scenarios to play out instead of the same old smash the bad guy script or by developing toys with less prescribed ways of playing with them. To some extent a franchise like *How To Train Your Dragon* does the former, with many plots in the show and movies revolving around rescuing, nurturing, learning, building, and finding non-violent solutions even as it has plenty of action and fighting. However, for the most part we see the same formula that doesn't even entertain kids that well repeated endlessly.

When I was a kid toys were... actually they were a lot like they are today. As much as the old man in me wants to launch into a nostalgic recollection of how much toys have changed since I was a kid, toys have changed surprisingly little since I grew up in the 80s. It's not just that kids play with the same kinds of toys today as they did back then, action figures for in-

stance. In many cases they play with toys that are almost identical to the ones me and my brothers played with as kids. Franchises like *Transformers*, *Star Wars*, and *Power Rangers* are not only still around and quite popular, their product lines have changed little in the past few decades. Just as we see the same movies endlessly rebooted, manufacturers like betting on toys that have sold well before. It feels stagnant to most of us, but it presents less of a risk than trying something new. This goes not just for action figures, or the different kinds of transforming robots marketed to different age groups, but for all the other toys that were new when I was a kid like laser tag and remote control cars.

THAT'S NOT TO SAY A TOY NEEDS TO BE NEW TO be good, fun, or imaginative. I still have a soft spot for *Star Wars* and though it gets repeated endlessly I find the *Transformers* design concept makes for engaging toys even if I wish they would stop making movies and TV shows. The robust simplicity of toy trucks means they are probably as engaging now as they were a century ago. Children have played with dolls for as long as our species has existed. Even our primate relatives play with objects in a way that resembles a child caring for a doll. A lot of the toys that occupy my kids the best are simple and time-tested. Play-Doh, art supplies, and puzzles pack a lot of bang for their buck if you want to keep your kids occupied.

Manufacturers sell lots of "skills-based" toys, especially for babies and toddlers. Toys made by companies like Baby Einstein have some kind of marketing which claims educational benefits. This takes advantage of the anxiety of first-time parents by convincing them that a toy can give their kids some kind of special developmental advantage. But experienced parents and those a bit more skeptical about marketing know that interacting with most physical objects will help a child develop the kinds of spatial skills these toys tout. My son's love for mechanical things and problem solving first manifested as a baby, taking apart and reassembling an old pepper mill. Most parents have also gotten a lot of mileage out of different kitchen gadgets.

Due to the fact that adults, not children, actually buy the toys, manufacturers aim a lot of their marketing at grown-ups. This causes me a small amount of dread on the occasions where people buy my kids presents. The social pressure to purchase a present for a child can cause adults to buy a toy just for the sake of buying a toy. This often makes for bad gifts that kids don't play with or break into a million pieces. The worst culprit is not birthday or holiday presents, but the favors, trinkets, and other little baubles handed out to kids on what seems like an increasing number of occasions. The little bits of plastic that barely qualify as toys don't function to entertain kids, but for parents putting together goody bags to have something, anything, to give children attending a birthday party, or any number of functions. It seems like I can't take my kids anywhere without somebody unloading this stuff on us. Like so many products of a capitalist system, these so-called toys bring to mind the excrement that the protagonist of Ursula LeGuin's masterpiece *The Dispossessed* lamented, because they feel depressingly wasteful from start to finish. The kids usually forget about them after the car ride home. The people handing them out only do so because they feel obligated. I get a little sad having to send them off to the landfill when I find them broken in half behind the couch. And I doubt that anyone involved in their production or sale gets excited about them except to the degree which they let them pay their bills.

Although I have heaped a lot of criticism on capitalism for producing such lame toys I have to admit that it also produces some really excellent toys. I absolutely love LEGO and magnetic tiles. My kids like them too. When done right I find building toys amongst some of my favorite, not only because they entertain my kids, but because they do encourage them to

create. Depending on the day, LEGO occupy them as much as their recycling bin projects.

But here I will go into old man mode and say that when I was a boy LEGO was different. You had fewer special pieces and no branded sets or movie tie-ins. (The special pieces are oddly-shaped bricks that fit very specifically into a particular place.) While a young Greg would have loved a *Star Wars* X-Wing LEGO set, I'm glad I only had the old space sets. This forced me to create my own star fighters which came entirely out of my head. The shift towards branded sets and the specialized pieces push kids into making the model as it exists on the box. The boxes of the old sets often showed several projects you could make with them. This let you know the pieces held more potential than what the manufacturers laid out in the single set of instructions provided. Corporate tie-ins won't stop kids from smashing their creations to bits and building something original, and there is a broader range of LEGO available today than ever before, but it's a clear example of purely marketing-based design choices.

Despite the continued success of the cartoon marketing model, it has an expiration date built into it. As my generation cuts the cord and moves from live TV to streaming services, children don't see advertisements for toys along with their cartoons. We don't have cable in my home, so my kids almost never see commercials. On the occasions when we travel somewhere that has only live TV they get quite indignant that they have to sit through so many commercials. Some of their favorite Netflix shows have toys, but they only know this because Santa or some other adult came through with them. I don't doubt that marketers have already considered this issue, but I don't know if their new approaches can make up for the fact that the old model can't penetrate through streaming services that don't have ads.

I N FACT, THE WAY THAT TOYS GET SOLD HAS changed significantly. Since Toys R Us filed for bankruptcy we no longer have a nationwide toy store chain—thank you, private equity firms—and very few smaller independent shops. Because of hyper-capitalism run amok we now live in a world without toy stores. Places like Target have a few toy aisles, but it's not the same. Like so much of our world today the way kids interact with toys has lost an important in-person quality. People buy toys online or grab them in a cramped aisle in a big box store that has lots of other things for sale.

The stagnation in the toy market might have something to do with the fact that much of the innovation that once went into physical toys has now gone into video games. With the power to create and interact in such detailed worlds that video games provide, small plastic figurines seem rather boring and limited. I must admit that although I grew up with video games I feel rather resistant to letting my kids play them and plan on holding this off as long as I can. I have enough trouble pulling myself away

from screens and I blame this partially on spending so much time playing video games. I would like to see toys that engage kids in the physical world at least for the time being.

T O THAT END I STOPPED PLAYING VIDEO games about a decade ago. When I want to play around with electronics I make electronic music. I find this a more creative outlet that still lets me get my fix of pressing buttons and manipulating electric devices. I don't even need to look at a screen to do it. A modest synthesizer setup will cost as much as a gaming console and a handful of games. A number of small independent companies have even seen the potential for parents sharing a passion for synthesizers with children and produced products that straddle the line between toy and instrument. Kids love to turn knobs and press buttons at least as much as adults. These synths are fun toys on their own, but also connect with more adult gear so that parents and kids can jam together. Given the independent nature of these companies some of the kid synthesizers on offer are a bit expensive. I would like to see more large manufacturers step in and make some at a lower price. Though arguably some already make synths that kids can play.

I bring this up not just because it gives an alternative to video games that I include my kids in. The world of electronic music also gives a lesson on interoperability that toy companies could learn a great deal from. The story of MIDI (musical instrument digital interface) really shows how cooperation can expand horizons and spur innovations. In the early 80s there was no standard way to synchronize electronic instruments or for them to transmit information between them. Some manufacturers had their own proprietary standards for communicating between their own synths and drum machines, but these could not be used by other manufacturers. Then engineers from different companies came together and created MIDI as a way for electronic instruments to communicate things like notes and clock data (tempo). This worked so well that the MIDI language went almost 30 years without getting an update. I can't think of another piece of software that has gone that long without a tweak. Because of the implementation of MIDI I can own a drum machine from one manufacturer, a synth from another, a sequencer (a device that plays patterns) from a third, and they can all synchronize together. I could not do this if Roland and other companies each created their own proprietary way for instruments to communicate the way Apple and Microsoft created their own operating systems and software. Along with the increased popularity of modular synthesizers that let musicians combine different aspects of sound synthesis to create their own unique instrument, standards like MIDI and CV (control voltage) have helped expand the possibilities of what you can do with electronic instruments.

Imagine for a moment if we did something similar with building toys. Imagine if all, or at least most of them, worked together. LEGO has arguably created the best building system, so it should probably form the core of this new paradigm. But like any system it has its limits. If instead of competing with other building toys LEGO encouraged cooperation this would expand the possibilities of what you can create with LEGO. Imagine building something with LEGO, magnetic tiles, and your favorite lesser known building system. You could leverage the strengths of each and make some truly amazing things. Maybe one system lets you build bigger structures, another works better for building moving things, and a third lets you create things with more detail.

In the same way that MIDI expanded beyond the intentions of its creators to become an entire musical language applied for uses its designers probably never thought of, this new approach would inspire many new innovations. We would see not only the ability of LEGO to connect with other existing building systems, but new building systems would pop up. Just as MIDI has benefitted electronic instrument manufacturers, cooperating with other companies would benefit LEGO. We could conceivably apply this principle of interoperability to other kinds of toys as well. Children already play with different lines of toys all at once. But if we designed them with this in mind we could make them even more fun. We want kids to play nicely together, so shouldn't we design their toys to do the same?

Electronic instruments provide another way forward for toys. Although many of the synthesizer modules I mentioned earlier do things that someone can already do on a computer (and do much more cheaply, so long as you already have a computer) the modules have the advantage of being physical objects that you can manipulate more directly with both hands. They have a real tactile quality you don't get when awkwardly using a mouse to tweak one virtual knob at a time. Many of these modules came about as a way of doing with a piece of hardware what you can do with software. For those of us who spend a lot of time looking at screens for work, this kind of interface provides an escape where software synths and DAWs (digital audio workstations) can make us feel like we are stuck at the computer again. I don't know exactly how, but I would like to see manufacturers of physical toys draw inspiration from video games in the same way that musical hardware creators have drawn inspiration from musical software.

EVEN WITH THESE CHANGES, TOYS ARE STILL commodities. They are objects that companies market to children as fun and to parents as a way to keep kids out of their hair. But is that all they are for? I started writing this piece as everyone went into social isolation and at first it felt like a very trivial thing to think about during a crisis. But it did not take me long to understand the importance of reassessing how we think about toys. On a practical level I now have my kids home all the time instead of getting a break during school hours. So toys and keeping my son and daughter entertained became more important, not less. Beyond that this crisis has given a lot of people the time and opportunity to think about what our society deems essential and why. It has forced many to step back and rethink how we live.

So besides just making them more fun, what about toys do we need to reconsider? As I touched on earlier, imaginative play is a very integral part of children's lives. Sometimes this takes the form of creating or acting out fantastical scenarios. Sometimes it involves imitating the behavior of adults in an attempt to grapple with, participate in, prepare for, or better understand that world. When kids mimic their parents and other adults by pretending to cook, build, parent, and so on they model future behavior. But they also model future behavior when we purchase a toy for them. This socializes them into a consumer mindset where they passively accept the items being given to them by large corporations. Whatever other values we might try to give our children, either by teaching them, playing with them, or purchasing toys that align with our own views, when we purchase any toy we can't help but show them the world as a place to buy solutions.

What can we do about this? As is so often the case when trying to fix a problem, we look for ways to democratize the process. What would that look like? Instead of having kids merely choose

"Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow."

from all the different toys available, we should have them involved in the design process. I don't mean just having them sit in focus groups to help grown-ups refine their own ideas, or dream up creations that might sell well because they hit all the right buttons in kids' heads but don't actually hold their attention. This too closely resembles the way that our political parties focus group candidates to find the one that polls the best, so that voters can give their rubber stamp on election day. I mean actually incorporating them in a democratic process of toy design. We don't want to manufacture consent, we want to manufacture fun toys. Obviously kids can't see the whole process through anymore than every citizen can get involved in every aspect of government. Just as we delegate representatives, this democratic toy design system would involve kids having input at various stages in the process mediated by adults. We see this on an infinitesimal scale at stores like Build a Bear. Having realized the difficulty of selling toys in the current market this company "sells an experience". But again, kids merely choose amongst variations of an end product. Do you want a blue bear or a red bear? Do you want a woman of color centrist democrat or a gay white male centrist democrat?

This might seem like a crazy idea, but try to remember back to when you were a kid. I like to think I can do this better than most people, but I still see the world primarily through the eyes of a parent not a child. Do you remember wishing that certain toys existed when you were a child? What if they did and what if this happened because of you? How would this change your perception of how you could influence the world? I increasingly see adults of my generation disillusioned with our political system and the possibility of changing the world. Would they see things differently if everyone learned from a young age that they could participate in a creative process that bore real fruit? This approach could teach democracy to kids instead of teaching them passive consumerism. At least to a point. We are still talking about manufacturing commodities here. I don't know to what extent this process would take place online or in a physical space, but it has real potential to change how kids and adults think about not just toys but also production and democracy. I could see some kind of network of toy design and building collectives popping up, but I will leave that to someone with a better understanding of the manufacturing and design process to work out.

If we could create some kind of toy co-op, what kind of amazing toys would it produce? Adults inherently will never understand what kids want to play with as much as kids. Kids can be *weird*, and incredibly imaginative. No matter how much I see myself as a kid at heart, I'm a parent who probably gives off the same vibe to children as a stuffy adult in a 90s toy commercial. That might explain why I have essentially proposed going to meetings and learning democracy as a way to fix toys. Even most adults I know find those things boring. But is this because it's inherently boring to participate in decision-making, or because we haven't begun it at a young age? I don't know. But perhaps in this moment what we need to reform our system is not just hard work, but play. Sound fun? ✦

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AGAINST PREVAILING WINDS

by ANDREW MESSICK

I

T'S EARLY OCTOBER 1930. RAIN THUNDERS DOWN on open umbrellas. Strong winds and ever-increasing gusts send autumn leaves tearing through the air as waves crash on rocky shores. Through the deafening rain, a gentle hum arises, getting louder and louder until it becomes a steady drone, and finally the roar of huge engines passing overhead. Travelers stop and look up, and through the rain and dimly lit sky they see a silver behemoth, gliding slowly through the storm as if the wind and rain are, if anything, a mere inconvenience. The flying giant pushes against the headwind, not without effort, but within minutes it's passed, the roar reduced to a faint murmur as it fades into the darkness over the English Channel.

Should you, by some strange fortune, find yourself catapulted back to such a dismal evening to see this strange sight, you would be one of the final witnesses to Britain's last airship, the *R.101*. The grace and strength that the airship seemed to possess that night would prove to be an illusion. In reality, the ship's crew struggled the whole time to keep it level and flying through the gale. The *R.101* carried on until shortly after 2:00 a.m. on the morning of October 5th, 1930, when it crashed on a French hillside, exploding and killing all but six people onboard. From that fateful night began a decade of airship disasters that would culminate in the *Hindenburg*.

The question that naturally arises is simple: Why did the airship crash? What brought the *R.101* down on her maiden voyage from Britain to India? A court of inquiry held afterward suggested that the combination of high winds and a fault in the airship's outer canvas cover created a long tear in the ship, which forced the *R.101* into a sudden dive from which it could not recover. The subsequent sudden contact with the ground broke a water ballast pipe in the control car, spraying water onto phosphorus navigation flares which ignited, and with them the hydrogen lifting gas.

This is, in a very literal sense, what brought down the *R.101,* but

it's not what *actually* caused the airship to crash. The disaster was not solely due to some technical fault, or the predictable result of a large, hydrogen-filled, lighter-than-air vessel losing control in the middle of an autumn storm. It was, in fact, the culmination of over ten years of political compromise, ignorance of facts, and the weaponization of the entire project—both literally and figuratively—by Britain's Conservative and Labour parties. It was the result of acquiescence to the pressure to do something quick and dangerous in the hopes of a modicum of success. And, as the government-designed *R.101* came to be nicknamed "the Socialist airship" (and its privately-designed rival *R.100* "the Capitalist airship") the *R.101* came to serve in the 1920s as a referendum on the perceived viability of British socialism itself. It was felt that if the airship could rise to the occasion, so to speak, then it was proof that socialist principles could succeed; and if it crashed, then socialism would invariably do the same.

T

HE IMPERIAL AIRSHIP SCHEME, OF WHICH THE *R.101* would be the ultimate product, began as an attempt to physically link the spreading, bloated British Empire. In an era where steamships couldn't reach the farthest corners of the empire fast enough, and airplanes couldn't yet reliably cover any significant distance, the airship concept filled a specific niche allowing for relatively rapid transit from the London metropole to Egypt, India, Australia, and every other conceivable colony, protectorate, or commonwealth. With the benefit of hindsight, it may seem clear that having a large quantity of flammable hydrogen floating perilously above passengers' heads as a means of transporting them a mile above the earth was maybe not the smartest idea in the world, but it's important to remember that this was ground-breaking technology for the time and place. The ability to fly commercially to North America was unprecedented, and the Imperial Airship Scheme's ultimate goal of flights to Australia was revolutionary. In spite of our cur-

rent sentiments on the merits of lighter-than-air travel, in the 1920s the airship appeared to be an untapped source of industry, profit, job creation, and a means toward increased globalization.

It was within this framework that Britain's first Labour government under Ramsay MacDonald began experimenting with military airships shortly after the First World War. The emphasis on "military" cannot be stressed enough: these airships were not meant to carry passengers. They were built to reach the extremes of humanity's flying capabilities in speed, altitude, and bomb-carrying capacity—and yet, they resulted in a series of light, fragile, delicate objects. During a training exercise, the *R.38* cracked in half and exploded mid-air because the captain tried turning the ship a little too rapidly and a little too sharply.

After this devastating 1921 event, the founding principles of the Imperial Airship Scheme became focused on building something vastly more solid and capable. Yet between 1921 and 1924, testing continued on outdated and rotting airships. Before work on new development and construction could really proceed, Ramsay MacDonald's Labour government gave way to Stanley Baldwin's Conservative Party.

This transition caused enormous setbacks. The original testing fleet of five (already dilapidated) airships had dwindled to two largely experimental ones; the *R.36 (*a failed and forgotten first attempt at a British passenger airship), and the *R.80* (a small and unique design whose characteristics would be emulated in World War II bombers). The facilities required to construct, house, and maintain newer models had not been built. Even the new experimental airship designs themselves were still in the most preliminary stages of planning, with no significant work done on any of their component pieces. From this chaos, these new iterations of airship development were eventually granted names: the *R.100* and the *R.101.*

These ships were intended to be the most advanced flying objects ever built, each reflective of different aspects of aeronautical engineering. The *R.100* was designed with traditional, proven, conservative elements, while the *R.101* was, from the outset, a testbed for all possible forms of innovation in flight control and passenger comfort. Reflecting these varying approaches to development, the design processes for both ships were assigned

to two different groups respectively: a private engineering firm for the *R.100*, and a specially created government airship organization for the *R.101*. This was, again, the source of their popular nicknames: the Capitalist and Socialist airships respectively. Since the creation of a fleet of airships to encircle the globe had initially been the project of the Labour Secretary of State for Air, Christopher Thomson (and he was the only member of Parliament for whom it was ever a top priority), it was always considered a Labour Party project, and any failures were naturally set upon by the Conservatives. Likewise, the successes—few though they were—and (more importantly) the promise of successes were often thrown in the faces of Conservative critics.

The stakes were high. Sir Phillip Sassoon, the Conservative Under-Secretary of State for Air under Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, in discussing the Government's commitment to the two-fold scheme of private versus state enterprise, said ironically on the floor of the House of Commons: "In fact, I think if the Government had wanted to demonstrate to the country the superior advantages of Socialism over private enterprise (that is to say, whereby the greatest sum of money is spent with the least possible result), I think they could not possibly hit upon a more convincing instance."

Construction of what was to become known as *R.101* was slated to begin in 1925, with trial flights to India in 1927. But neither the *R.101* nor the *R.100* would begin construction in 1925, let alone to fly to India in 1927 due to delays in funding, a lack of attention by the Conservative Secretary of State for Air Sir Samuel Hoare, and a generally apathetic approach to the airship concept. In fact, neither would fly until 1929, just in time for the second MacDonald ministry and the return of Christopher Thomson as Labour Secretary of State for Air.

Facing a program that was approaching its
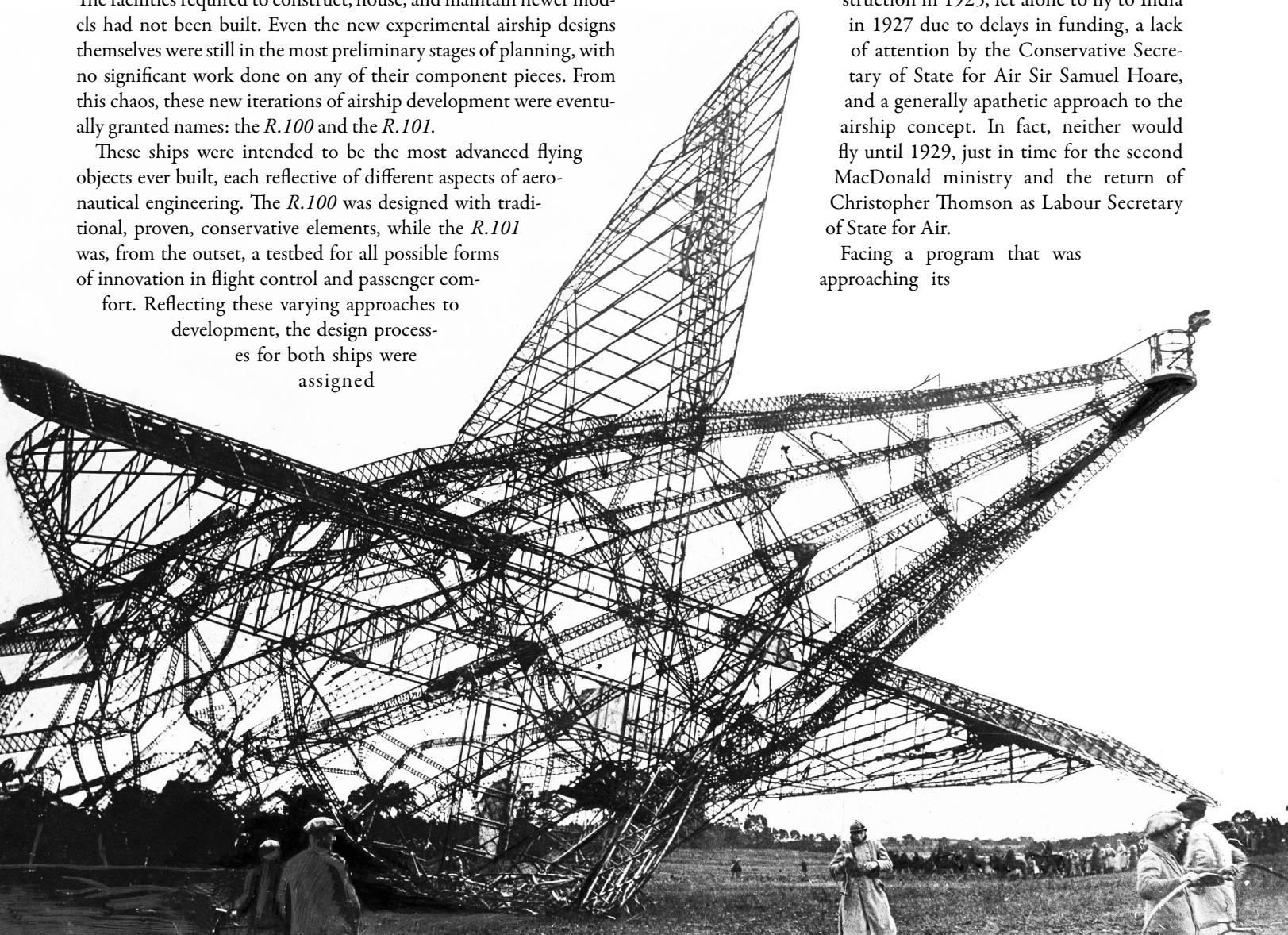
third year over schedule, several million pounds over budget, and potentially symbolic of the success or failure of the entire socialist project, Thomson was pressured to produce results, which is when his fatal errors and devastating compromises began in earnest. Elements of this appear in the parliamentary record. There are questions directed at Lord Thomson seeking information on what the new airships would be used for, whether they were really necessary, or, as one member asked of the *R.101* specifically, if "she would ever fly at all?" Thomson, generally considered unflappable and charismatic, batted away most of these questions, but he had a tendency to do so by making rather impossible rhetorical concessions. The *R.101* itself was really intended as an experimental testbed, a functioning proof of concept rather than a commercially viable product. Yet throughout many debates in parliament, the airship's capabilities evolved into an actual commercially-operating air liner, a sometimes freighter, an as-needed troop transport, and an occasional aircraft carrier, a commitment that Lord Thomson never detracted from.

In addition to quelling naysayers on the floor of Parliament, Thomson also sought to use the new airship as a means of swaying skeptical members who felt that the program was a waste of time and resources. But this involved some risky stunts. To appeal to the skeptics, Thomson proposed a scenic airship flight for 100 members of Parliament. Yet the *R.101* was so enormously overweight that the first officer found it necessary to remove all unneeded crew, all the ship's ballast, and all of the parachutes before the ship could even host a sedate dinner for 100 people. Even then, and perhaps rather ironically, the airship was only able to host the dinner event because the high winds of a stormy day kept the ship upright and unable to leave its mooring mast.

Thomson further endangered the airship when, at his insistence, it took part in an airshow: the RAF Display at the Hendon Airfield north of London. This, in theory, sounds innocent enough. However, feeling the need to create spectacle and prove its capabilities, the order was given for the *R.101* to fly as if bowing to the Royal Box at the airfield, and only after emerging dramatically from a cloudbank. It is unclear if this was Thomson's doing, but the airship's presence at Hendon rather than being employed in training exercises is certainly his responsibility. Perhaps, you may be thinking, this is still not terribly bad. It should be noted at this point, however, that the dinner with 100 members of Parliament (and the days spent preparing for it), and the airshow (and the days spent practicing for it), all came at the expense of actual, verifiable training flights and proving trials. The *R.101*'s first officer observed that "all these window dressing stunts and joy rides during the ship's trials... are quite wrong, but there is no-one in the [Royal Airship Works] executive who has the guts to put their foot down and insist on trials being free of joyriders."

A FTER A YEAR OF SIMILAR STUNTS, IT WAS FINALLY accepted that *R.101,* as it was then constituted, could not possibly make it to India. It was far too overweight, in part due to Thomson's insistence on using the newest technology, such as heavy servo motors, diesel engines, and automatic gas valves, whether they were necessary or not. When it was clear that these heavy technologies would make it impossible for the *R.101* to make it to India, the ship was dramatically reconstructed to such an extent that, in terms of its flying characteristics, it was an entirely new ship. This ship-of-Theseus *R.101* was lengthened, additional hydrogen gas cells were added, the faux-opulent cabins and public spaces were gutted to the most basic necessities, and the ship's fragile outer cover was worked and reworked into something the builders considered passable. In this new form, the *R.101* emerged from its shed on October 1, 1930, and that evening embarked on an intended 24-hour endurance flight which, by some stroke of mathematical genius, lasted less than 17 hours total. As Nevil Shute Norway of the *R.100* design team commented of the *R.101*'s flight, "flying conditions were dead calm and so perfect that it was hardly a trial at all, and in these circumstances nothing in the ship gave trouble but [a burst] oil cooler."

The record suggests that the endurance flight may have been cut short to begin prepping the ship for its maiden voyage to India. Lord Thomson exerted a great deal of pressure on the project prior to the ship's test flight, writing: "So long as *R.101* is ready to go to India by the last week in September, this further delay in getting her altered may pass. I must insist on the programme for the Indian flight being adhered to, as I have made my plans accordingly." In spite of the dangerous, politically-motivated rush, and in spite of the fact that an essentially new ship was pulled from the sheds at Cardington for the trip to India, a Certificate of Airworthiness (which proclaimed that the ship was tested, tried, and ready for any and all flying circumstances) was issued the next day. Three days after emerging from its shed, and two days after its half-attempted endurance flight, the *R.101* slipped from its mast in Cardington and set course for India, with Lord Thomson aboard. The rest of the story is well known to us now.

T HE BLAME FOR THE FAILURE OF THE *R.101* rests almost entirely with Lord Thomson, who was one of the forty-eight killed in the crash. He was from the beginning wholly unsuited for the job, having no understanding of the basic fundamentals of airship operations, and he was pushy with his status and position. As pilot and historian Robin Higham wrote of Lord Thomson in his work *The British Rigid Airship, 1908-1931*, "[He] was one of those disastrous political choices, a professional soldier turned radical politician. He added dangerously to his lack of knowledge of aeronautical matters an unbounded enthusiasm for the new technology. His complete failure to comprehend the nature of experimental work led directly to his death in the flaming wreckage of his greatest ambition, *R.101*'s journey to India." Thomson, rushing the program along for political ends, failed to respect the expertise of his crew. He failed to accept the limitations of the technology as it existed and wait for more favorable innovations; he failed to put trials and training above popular acceptance; and he failed to ask some questions about the wisdom or appropriateness of Britain having imperial possessions at all, not to mention realms that were so far away it was difficult to reach them safely.

Whether Lord Thomson personally viewed the success of the *R.101* as an analogy for the success of British socialism, or was invested in the project as a means of protecting and furthering his own career, is not known. What we do know is that he loved airships themselves; and airships, however fantastic and unrealistic they may seem to us now, were at the time an elegant and beautiful symbol of the impossible made into reality. Thomson's efforts gave the *R.101* life from a void, but by cutting corners, curtailing trials and testing, and cajoling the crew into a dangerous course of action, Thomson gambled the dream of the Imperial Airship Scheme for
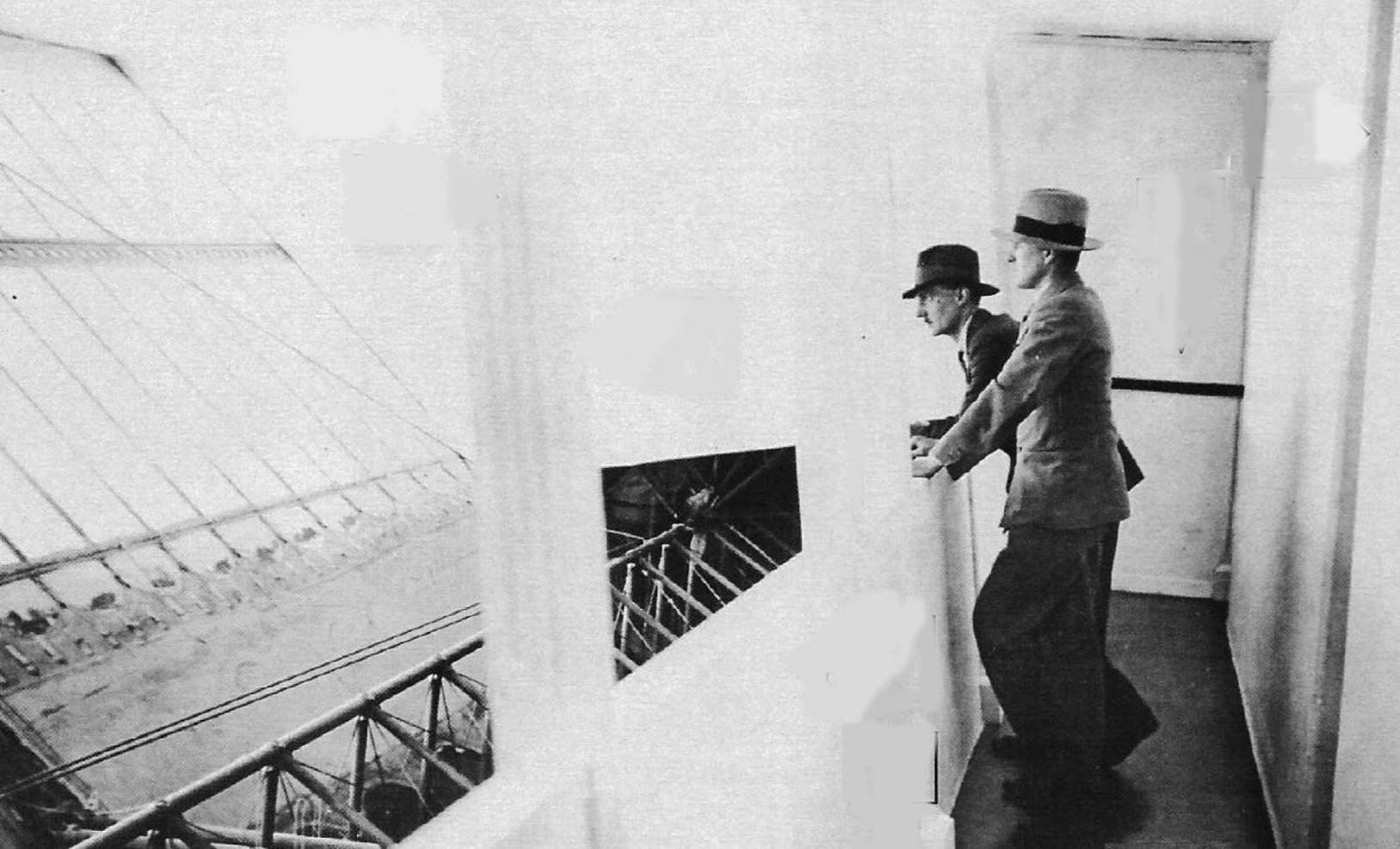
the hopes of a half victory, of the ability to say "we did it" when the dream was still physically out of reach.

Would airship technology have worked if the *R.101* had not crashed? Probably not: lighter-than-air travel had always been a dangerous and potentially impossible business. In the years between the initial conception of the airship in 1900 and the fiery death of the *R.101,* dozens or even hundreds of military airships crashed with significant fatalities, and a dozen or so German passenger airships had crashed with minimal injuries. Germany would end up building the most successful airships, including the *Graf Zeppelin*, which was the first manmade object to circumnavigate the globe by air. But the *Graf Zeppelin* seemed to be the only passenger airship to fly without issue, and her passenger trips were curtailed in May of 1937 when the *Hindenburg* went down in flames over Lakehurst, New Jersey. The *Graf Zeppelin* and her intended replacement, dubbed the *Graf Zeppelin II*, served out the remainder of the 1930s as Nazi propaganda machines, with one attempt at airborne espionage very early in the war, before both were hung up, deflated, and scrapped to make airplanes.

A few other countries tried to use airships. In the United States, airship development was confined to purely military purposes. Two of the three American airships flying in the 1930s crashed in violent storms, and the third—the very small *USS Los Angeles*—did not exist for long before the American program was scrapped, and the *Los Angeles* with it. The French and the Italians each operated one airship, both of them former German liners that had been handed over after World War II, and neither of which crashed.

In Britain, the entire Imperial Airship Scheme was scrapped within a year of the failure of the *R.101*. This included the "capitalist' *R.100*. The loss of the *R.101* and the death of the greatest advocate of British airships, Lord Thomson, left no one willing or able to continue the airship program, no matter their political leanings. The "capitalist" *R.100* was deflated and scrapped, having only made one flight of any significance, and it has remained in the shadow of its better-remembered counterpart.

IT WOULD BE EASY, AND EVEN TEMPTING, TO REGARD the *R.101* and airships more generally as an embarrassing symbol for the socialist project. The crash of the *R.101* is not just the story of a disaster, but the story of an unfortunate end to a concept that could, in theory, have changed the world, but would, in practice, likely never have worked at all. However it's important to understand why the *R.101* failed: not because it was state-made and state-funded, but because it was a project of personal vanity and drive by a single-minded aristocrat who didn't listen to his crewmen and engineers, and who cared more about innovation as a thing in itself than in everyone's safety. The ship, along with its passengers and crew, were victims of political ineptness and of the pressure to produce material success at the expense of principle. And furthermore, the whole Imperial Airship Scheme was a tool of empire for the maintenance of empire, as were the short-lived German and American airships. Despite its branding, the *R.101* was never a "socialist" airship in any sense we would recognize: just a top-down, failed, rushed, undemocratic imperial government project.

Left: Inside the R101, looking out from the promenade deck. Above: R101 victims lie in state. Getty Images

Regardless, after the crash of the *R.101*, the use of the airship as a rhetorical point of comparison for socialism versus capitalism continued. Yet there were still some, including conservatives, who called for a renewal of government efforts toward building viable airships. One of these was a Mr. Wellwood Johnston, a Conservative MP and member of the Scottish Unionist Party. In a speech in the House of Commons, he said:

"I proceed on the footing that airships are not a proved failure. After a failure in an enterprise which is not a proved impossibility the natural instinct, the human instinct, and particularly the British instinct, is not to give up, as we seem rather to have done in connection with airship construction... Mankind has not been deterred from further effort... towards the conquest of the air, by the fate of Icarus who flew too near the sun so that it melt[ed] the wax by which his wings were attached to himself."

Johnston himself had been elected in 1931, part of an absolutely crushing Conservative victory over the Labour Party. The Conservatives had previously held 260 seats to Labour's 287, but when the 1931 election was over their share increased to 470 seats compared to Labour's miserable 32. Nonetheless, Johnston said in the same speech, grudgingly but respectfully, of his opponents:

"Honorable Members of the Opposition [Labor] and their political associates in the country do not appear to have been diverted by what was for them the disaster of the last General Election from a continued advocacy of Socialism in our time, and while I cannot predict their ultimate success, I can at least admire their pertinacity."

This is, perhaps, the more workable *R.101*-based metaphor for socialism: sometimes we fail, either from difficult conditions, individual intransigence, moral compromises, or all of them combined. Sometimes we fly too close to the sun. Sometimes the socialist airship plummets to the ground. But one single, or even multiple failures, does not prove that socialism is impossible: it proves that we need to, and we will, keep trying to fly. ♣

EDITOR'S NOTE

I actually have a small personal connection to the tragedy of the R101. My great-grandfather worked at the plant that made it. In the book "The Millionth Chance," about the disaster, there is an anecdote about engineer Joe Binks, one of the few survivors of the crash: "He climbed up into the ship again to see that his fur-lined sleeping bag was laid out in the crew's sleeping quartyers. There, among the ten pounds of personal kit he was allowed to carry, he had a bouquet of rosebuds wrapped in tissue paper and moistened with moss. His next-door neighbour in Shortstown was a keen gardener with hundreds of rosebuds about to bloom. 'Joe,' he had said that morning, 'I wonder if you'd take a few of these in your case to give to the ladies when you arrive at Ismailia?' In the crew room, heavy with the smell of dope from the fabric covering, the buds still kept their faint fragrance." The neighbor with the roses was my own great-grandfather; in my copy of the book there is a handwritten note in the margin from my grandmother that says 'My father was the neighbor.' My grandmother saw the R101 take off. She was 10 years old. Later, in the 1980s, she described it to a newspaper: "Every day on my way to school I would see the airship either in the sheds or on the mooring mast, and sometimes on a trial flight... [On the day of the launch] I think the whole of the estate was out on that airfield: relatives, friends of those on board, and all who worked on her, and crowds lined the roadsides. All the best wishes in the world went with them that cold, wet evening. I had heard my father say they had many problems during the time it was being built. And although it was declared airworthy, from snatches of conversation I heard as we stood there, there seemed to be some doubt in people's minds. It dipped rather as we watched it go out of sight, going toward Bedford. I woke in the morning to hear my parents distraught after they had heard the news that it had crashed over France. My mother went to comfort friends whose husbands were aboard. No one knew who was alive, if anyone...Mrs. Betty Robinson, Turners Hill, Adeyfield, Hemel Hempstead."
— NATHAN J. ROBINSON

SOME PRESCIENT ANCIENT GREEK
PUNISHMENTS

TEXT BY ELI HOROWITZ, ART BY ANDREW BENINCASA

ARACHNE

In his 2002 book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, economist Richard Florida pronounced the advent of a new group "whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology, and new creative content." He might have been thinking of Arachne, pictured here. When Arachne attempted to bring her beautiful and subversive art into the workplace, Athena assigned her to the social media department, where she was forced to churn out tedious corporate memes for mass consumption. Radiocarbon scanning reveals she is making a minor tweak to a sans serif brand logo.

SISYPHUS

This image depicts Zeus punishing Sisyphus by forcing him to eternally repeat a task he can never finish. What is astonishing about this particular image is that it reveals that Sisyphus, long a byword for labor that's both grueling and disheartening, was contemporaneously regarded as the patron-hero of cleaners and sanitation workers, who manage to make everybody's workplaces just about tidy by the end of their shifts—but then find the same filth and neglect waiting for them the next day.

ACTAEON

When the heroic Actaeon stumbled upon potentially embarrassing secrets, Artemis feared he would expose her. Therefore, she used her powers to threaten and intimidate him into silence: i.e., sicced her lawyers on him. The moral of the story remains universal: if you speak up against the powerful, get ready to run.

Despite reigning long before the advent of modern economics, the Greek gods would hardly be out of place in today's working world. Indeed, a shocking new discovery by archaeologists at the University of Diaskedasi in Greece confirms that the Olympians had considerably more in common with twenty-first century capitalists than archaeologists and classicists had previously thought.

PROMETHEUS

Prometheus, a popular subject of Greek iconography, is here portrayed as the quintessential disruptor. His exceptional achievements changed history and lit a fire under his whole department. Yet his only reward was more work, and endless torment. This is a warning about demonstrating too much aptitude: the price of bringing fire to humanity is to be chained to a desk while rapacious vultures eat your life.

TANTALUS

Here we see Tantalus, the root of the word "tantalize." He is forever tormented by "lifestyle" creep, desiring luxuries that remain permanently out of reach. Would it be cool, you may ask, to have a beach house, a slick watch, and cookware forged from the shards of Narsil? Sure! Will we ever be able to afford any of those things? Just ask Tantalus.

ERYSICHTHON

Erysichthon, seen here, is a lesser-known figure from Greek mythology: a rich man who did not believe he was wealthy. (In modern terms, he would be one of the eighty-seven percent of millionaires who, according to a 2019 survey, just don't feel rich.) In Erysichthon's case, this delusion originated with Demeter, who cursed Erysichthon to feel a greed that no amount of consumption could ease. He was last seen devouring his own flesh in a fit of frustration. Classicists now believe that this is the origin of the contemporary dictum: "eat the rich."

a defense of litmus tests

by Briahna Joy Gray

IMAGINE (PRESUMING YOU DON'T ALREADY) THAT YOU live in a swing state.

Is there a single issue, or an approach to governance, or a character deficit, or a past vote that you would consider to be disqualifying for a Democratic presidential nominee? A commitment to preserving the for-profit healthcare system, perhaps? Waffling on the right to choose? A yes vote for the Iraq War? Would you decline, maybe, to vote for a candidate who had accepted corporate money to fund their campaign? Or one who had been credibly accused of sexual assault? What about a candidate with a record of trying to cut social safety net programs like Medicare? Or one who had eulogized a segregationist?

If your answer is no—that no single issue or "litmus test" is disqualifying—was there once a time, before Trump perhaps, when you would have answered "yes"?

What changed your mind? Was it the Muslim Ban or Trump's record-setting volume of federal court appointments, or the gassing of George Floyd protestors for the sake of a White House photo-op? Has defeating Trump become a goal that, well, trumps all else? Would you, like *Nation* journalist Katha Pollit, "vote for Joe Biden if he boiled babies and ate them"? Would you vote for him even if he shot someone in the middle of 5th Avenue? What if he shot them in the leg?

The idea that most Republicans would vote for Trump, even if he committed murder on one of New York's most iconic streets, was once evoked to illustrate how craven—how lacking in standards—Republicans can be. But since the beginning of the Democratic primary contest, long before it was even clear who, exactly, would be throwing their hat in the ring, Democratic voters and candidates have been repeatedly asked the same question: Will you vote blue no matter who?

"Vote blue no matter who," has become a sort of gospel among moderate Democrats and "Never Trump Republicans." The logic is simple: Trump is so cruel and presents such an enormous threat to, well, nearly everyone, that he must be stopped at all cost. As my former *Intercept* colleague Mehdi Hassan has argued forcefully and often, no matter what Biden's flaws are, Trump is worse.

Certainly, the threat posed by Donald Trump would be difficult to overstate. The Federal judiciary is already lost for at least a generation. His withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accords is but one example of his contempt for the environmental crisis that threatens life on earth as we know it. And his 2020 budget stands poised to cut essential social programs that keep the most vulnerable Americans barely afloat.

But although I agree Trump must be defeated, I don't think it must come at the price of abandoning the values which ostensibly motivate our opposition to him. Unfortunately, that's exactly what this "vote blue no matter who" orthodoxy really promotes.

LAST NOVEMBER, FORMER NEW YORK MAYOR AND 9th richest man in the world Michael Bloomberg made a late entrance into the Democratic primary as a "stop Bernie" candidate. "Senior aides to Bloomberg's campaign have been discussing how they are going to use some of their resources against Sanders," NBC reported. "Already, the campaign has spent over $500 million on media ad buys."

But Bloomberg's effort was quickly hamstrung by damning videos which revealed his racist, authoritarian politics—already familiar to Black and Brown New Yorkers—to all. "Ninety-five percent of your murders and murderers and murder victims fit one M.O." he said in one recording. "You can just take the description, Xerox it, and pass it out to all the cops. They are male minorities, 16 to 21. That's true in New York, it's true in virtually every city in America." On transgender rights, he once opined: "If you wanna know is somebody a good salesman, give them the job of going to the midwest and picking a town and selling to that town the concept that some man wearing a dress should be in the locker room with their daughter."

Yet despite the outcry from civil rights leaders and anti-racist activists, many pundits, politicians, and journalists continued to pressure candidates about their commitment to support Bloomberg if he were to become the nominee. It seemed clear that only one answer was politically viable, Bloomberg's racist, authoritarian, oligarchical, and misogynist tendencies notwithstanding: Yes.

If you're doubtful, recall Elizabeth Warren's memorable attack on Bloomberg during the last debate before Super Tuesday. She said, "I'd like to talk about who we're running against: a billionaire who calls women fat broads and horse-faced lesbians. And no, I'm not talking about Donald Trump. I'm talking about Mayor Bloomberg." It was a sharp and effective volley, but the impact was dimmed somewhat by the disclaimer uttered in the same breath: "I'll support whoever the Democratic nominee is."

The rationale for potentially endorsing a Bloomberg candidacy was murky at best. For one, it was not at all clear that Bloomberg presented a better alternative to Trump. Trump is certainly more obvious in his boorishness, but as the saying goes: the devil you don't know is often more dangerous. Trump is authoritarian but so is Bloomberg: this is a man who lobbied to change New York State law

so he could rule for a third term. Both men are oligarchs who openly use their wealth to wield political power. Neither has any respect for the civil liberties of Blacks or Latinos. And of course, to Warren's point, they're both infamous misogynists.

Moreover, the risk of a Bloomberg win was remote. At the time, Biden and Sanders led in the polls, and a half dozen other, more qualified candidates remained in the race. It's difficult to imagine how declining to endorse Bloomberg on principle would have hurt the party. Quite the opposite: by affirming that Bloomberg—a sexist Republican-until-recently who embraces racial profiling and financial cronyism—is unqualified to top the Democratic ticket, Warren (and the rest of the Democratic field) would have done a rare and important thing: affirm that Democrats stand for *something*. That we have our limits.

To allow that Bloomberg could adequately represent the party was a serious concession of principle. And the thing is, when you set the bar low, you tend to attract things that slither and crawl.

Now that Joe Biden is the nominee, "vote blue no matter whoism" is principally deployed to shield him from personal accountability and calls to move left—where the bulk of American voters are on policy. To criticize him or merely decline to endorse him is to "cast a vote to support Trump," according to prominent pundits.

But, of course, it's possible to defend the choice of Biden over Trump without pretending he's flawless.

If we accept the binary that your vote is either unconditional or pledged to Trump, it removes our ability to affirm the values which will remain important long after the election is over. The establishment reaction to Tara Reade's sexual assault allegations made this clear. Long before any substantive investigation of her claims, #MeToo activists bent over backward to revise their approach to sexual assault claims from "believe women" to the same "due process" arguments Republicans leveraged in defense of Kavanaugh. "I believe that even though we should believe women," explained #MeToo "activist" Alyssa Milano, "that does not mean at the expense of not giving men their due process." She added, "I just don't feel comfortable throwing away a decent man whom I've known for 15 years."

Recall also the cable news commentary following the June 26, 2019 debate, when television personality Donny Deutch argued, early in the primary process, that substantive policy concerns were secondary to beating Trump. "It's not issues, it's not universal healthcare, it's not a woman's reproductive rights—as important as that is," he argued. Just Trump. And while that may be an appropriate descriptive claim, it's not the normative one journalists should have been making. The idea that voters only cared about beating Trump led journalists to assess candidates through that lens almost exclusively, and in doing so, they collapsed important distinctions between candidates that voters might have cared about had they been made clear.

This is a problem inherent to "vote blue no matter who": It can lead us to substitute "pragmatic" or normative arguments for moral ones, and in so doing demote the substantive, ethical considerations that should be driving our decision-making. It blurs the line between accepting a bad outcome and validating an unacceptable one, making bad outcomes more likely to come to pass.

Yet perhaps because of Hillary Clinton's hard-felt loss in 2016, many Democrats' appetite for even the most humble critique is close to nil. *New York Times* journalist Maggie Haberman described Joe Biden as a "flawed candidate" in a recent CNN interview. This mild remark was enough to provoke a fierce establishment backlash. "Joe Biden won the Dem nomination earlier than anyone expected, united the Dem party, assembled a top flight campaign, currently beating an incumbent president by 10 points in polls. But is simply dismissed as flawed," kvetched Center for American Progress President Neera Tanden.

"Flawed? Joe Biden won the nomination earlier than any candidate since 2004," echoed Alyssa Milano.

Former White House press correspondent Tommy Christopher dramatically warned followers to brace themselves before viewing the CNN clip of Haberman's remarks: "It's much worse than you thought it was."

Short of a deity, it's difficult to imagine who could reasonably dispute an accusation of being flawed. The reaction seems especially hyperbolic given that the trait Biden is most known for is his tendency to make "gaffes." (He famously described then-Senator Barack Obama as the first Black presidential candidate who was "clean" and "articulate," he has a long history of plagiarism—including an incident that caused him to drop out of the 1988 presidential race, and most recently, he told radio host Charlamagne Tha God that voters who hadn't committed to vote for him "ain't black." Plus, the accusation of "possessing flaws" certainly pales in comparison to the insults slung about other candidates. After all, unlike Sanders, no one has suggested that a Biden win will result in Central Park executions.)

But the urgent desire to beat Trump—an urgency I share—has given rise to an approach to politics that refuses to admit error, concede flaw, or consider improvement. A world where Trump must lose is also one, according to influential members of the corporate political and media establishment—in which any criticism of the Democratic nominee, no matter how mild or factual, is unwelcome. "No matter who." No matter what.

"We tear each other down so much that by the time it's time for an election—and we've seen this happen obviously with Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders—by the time it's time to go vote, it's like: 'Well, I'm a Bernie supporter but now I can't support Hillary,'" said Breakfast Club co-host Angela Yee in a recent conversation with former *Daily Show* host Jon Stewart. "And I think with the Republicans, whoever their candidate is it doesn't matter, they are behind them 100 percent."

"[Republicans will] switch what they think depending on what

their leader tells them, there's no principle behind it anymore, agreed Stewart. "There is no principle but power."

I'm not sure that Yee's assessment is accurate. The 2016 Republican primary was incredibly "divisive," and yet they won the general election. Trump nicknamed front runner Ted Cruz "Lying Ted," attacked his wife's looks, and implied his father killed JFK. In Utah, right-leaning Independent Evan McMullin won a shocking 21 percent of the vote, and Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson received three times as many votes as Green Party candidate Jill Stein, suggesting a larger number of anti-Trump Republicans than left-wing Hillary defectors.

But look closely at what's happening in The Breakfast Club exchange above: both Yee and Stewart express a sort of envy for the Republican position which, they admit, is lacking in integrity.

In any other context, "there is no principle but power," would be read as a moral indictment. But here it's intoned almost wistfully, as if an absence of principle is something to which Democrats should aspire—as long as it helps us win.

I don't think that's what either Yee or Stewart believe, but their failure to accurately assess what's driving Republican "unity" leads them to the edge of an unacceptable conclusion. And that's a real problem.

W HAT IS IT THAT ACTUALLY DRIVES REPUBLICAN MESSAGE discipline? Too often, liberals cast party differences as a battle between "good guys" and "bad guys"—principles vs. power—but more often than not, the answer is "money." Republicans present a united front because the party leadership is committed to core conservative economic principles shared by both leadership and, sadly, much of their base. The Republican establishment ultimately coalesced around Trump because they believed he would protect the most fundamental conservative economic interests. And they were right. Trump's first major action as an executive was a $1.7 trillion tax cut for the rich. He has stacked the courts with judges who protect corporate interests, and has worked to discourage antitrust litigation. Conservatives don't do anything that fails to advance those ends.

The problem is that corporate Democrats serve the same masters, but must operate under a veil of pretense. Their corporate donors are equally motivated as Republican donors to cut the social safety net, preserve for-profit health insurance, protect private real estate against profit-undermining housing laws, and slow the pace of environmental reforms. The difference between Republicans and Democrats is that Republican messaging aligns straightforwardly with their economic goals: Cut taxes for the rich. Protect "individual freedoms" from government overreach. Encourage "self sufficiency." They've branded austerity so that it's welcomed by their constituents. Meanwhile, Democrats attempt to disguise that they're offering versions of the same wrapped in rainbow flags and kente cloth, but have the clumsy task of rationalizing why they fail to deliver more than tokenism and lip service.

For Republican corporate donors to be happy, Republicans must win, and they do. For Democratic corporate donors to be happy, Democrats must lose. And they do.

Candidates like Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Pramila Jayapal and Jamaal Bowman excite voters and are able to message differently *exactly because* they don't take corporate PAC or lobbyist money. And in the context of the 2016 and 2020 primaries, millions of Americans got a taste for what it felt like to be offered concrete, people-funded plans to advance their lives.

"When I graduated in 2011, I owed $137,000 in student loans. Today I have $175,000 even as I continue making monthly payments. I will never own a home, start a family, or live debt-free. @BernieSanders is the only person running who will cancel ALL student debt." writer David Ian Robin tweeted as part of the Sanders' "#MyBernieStory" campaign.

"I got a bill for my miscarriage because my insurance only covered my child as long as the child was 'viable.' What a wonderful country we live in, huh? #whyIamForBernie #MyBernieStory" tweeted a supporter named Georgia, who, like millions, was inspired by Medicare for All. Now, establishment Democrats want the base to put their substantive differences aside and coalesce behind Biden. But for millions of voters, what they're getting for that exchange feels inadequate.

If Democrats want the same party cohesion conservatives enjoy, the answer isn't to become more like Republicans and coalesce behind a flawed candidate. It's to start acting like Democrats. It's time to regain the public trust. And you don't do that by asking them to vote for a "D" before an idea.

Being clear about what you're fighting for matters. Especially in the shadow of the incred-

ible health and economic crises currently facing America, universal healthcare still matters. Abortion rights still matter. Climate change absolutely matters. And backing popular, progressive solutions to the COVID crisis—solutions like monthly relief checks—would certainly go a long way toward proving that the country wouldn't just be *better* under a Biden administration, it could thrive.

"Can we all just admit this," *New York Times* columnist Charles M. Blow recently wrote, "the transformational changes that COVID, the economic crisis, police brutality and racial turbulence will force are precisely some of the things Bernie Sanders was talking about but may have sounded too extreme to some just months ago." Blow is right, but it's not enough to admit that reality has endorsed Bernie. Biden should endorse his policies too. And we shouldn't be sheepish about pushing him to do so.

But despite the obvious benefit of maximizing contrasts with Trump by backing popular progressive policies, Biden refuses.

"Democrats be like 'I hear you, and I understand why you're upset. Here's how we're going to do nothing to address your concerns,'" tweeted NFL player and Sanders supporter Justin Jackson. "The orange man is bad, and you have nowhere else to go. Now, would you like a hug? No free healthcare but we offer free hugs here." With nearly 100,000 "likes," Jackson's is hardly a niche opinion. But rather than respond to voters frustrated by the former Vice President's platitudes, Team Biden seems to have made a sport out of lowering the bar. "I'll read my daily briefings," he tweeted July 1st, a day millions of Americans struggled to pay their rent. This celebration of the bare minimum is what "better than Trump" has wrought.

Adopting ideas that galvanize voters without "vote blue no matter who" shaming shouldn't be difficult for Biden. After all, the progressive platform is a popular one and presents little-to-no electoral risk. Fifty-five percent of voters—including a majority of independents—support Medicare for All. On the subject of a wealth tax, sixty-four percent of Americans, including a majority of Republicans, agree that "the rich should contribute an extra share of their total wealth each year to support public programs." A majority of all Americans favor requiring public companies to let workers elect one-third of corporate board members. Eighty-three percent of Democrats and left-leaning Independents support free college for all, and fifty-nine percent of Americans favor a Green New Deal.

Although the fact that Biden beat Sanders for the nomination is often leveraged as evidence that Americans don't want a progressive platform, both polling and anecdotal evidence confirms that Biden's victory was rooted in his perceived electability—not, say, his plan to double Pell grants.

But Biden declines to support popular progressive policies because, frankly, he, and the people who run his campaign, are paid not to. Biden's senior advisor, Steve Richetti, is a former healthcare lobbyist. The organizers of his super PAC include Larry Rasky, whose lobbying firm works for Raytheon, Harvard Pilgrim Healthcare, and the pharmaceutical company Eli Lilly. More billionaires donated to Joe Biden's campaign than any other—at least forty-four billionaires, in fact, representing the real estate industry, the finance industry, and big tech. Voters may want Medicare for All, but what incentive do these men have to kneecap the for-profit healthcare industry? How will the needs of renters and unemployed gig workers stand up against the interests of real estate and life insurance billionaire Eli Broad, who contributed $25,000 to a Democratic Party PAC?

Biden has openly admitted the influence corporate donors have on politicians. At a 2007 campaign event, he explained: "If you, Lynn, bundle $250,000 for me, all legal, and then you call me after I'm excited & say, 'Joe, I'd like to talk to you about something. You didn't buy me. But it's human nature, you helped me, I'm going to say, 'Sure, Lynn, come on in. The front of the line is always filled with people whose pockets are filled."

"It's human nature," he added.

During those 2007 remarks, Biden advocated for campaign finance reform. But absent those reforms, what incentive does he have to change his staffing so that those who advise him aren't working against the interests of those who will elect him? What incentive does he have to pick a cabinet that isn't vertiginous from the proverbial revolving door?

If we all "vote blue no matter who," what incentive does Biden have to listen to anyone not holding the checkbook?

"Joe Biden needs to pick a black woman as VP. That's it. That's the tweet," averred MSNBC correspondent Zerlina Maxwell recently. But the logical follow up is: *or what?* What are you going to do about it if he doesn't?

"Vote blue no matter who" fundamentally demands that Americans abandon their most essential concerns at the moment at which they have the most leverage. Voting blue may be necessary, but that doesn't mean the vote can't be contingent upon adoption of popular, progressive policies. As Frederick Douglass famously observed, "Power concedes nothing without a demand."

At present, the moral onus for a Trump win is being framed in a way that puts the full burden of a Trump win on voters. *Don't criticize Biden*, we're told, *and vote for him no matter what because Trump is much worse and he cannot be allowed to win.*

Fair enough. But it could be framed differently. For example one could argue: "Biden will be more electable, draw stronger contrasts with Trump, and encourage more voter participation if he moves left. And until he does, I withhold my vote. If he loses, it will be because of his choice to put donors over voters. He alone will be responsible."

Imagine, for a moment, what might be gained by taking that stronger position.

Now, consider what we lose by not doing so.

Recently, after a year of talking about Medicare for All non-stop as Sanders' National Press Secretary, I found myself hesitating before launching a Medicare for All tweet. Suddenly it felt obnoxious—off message somehow—to advocate for a policy that, even before COVID-19, was estimated to save 68,000 lives a year. I asked myself why, and found myself reflecting on the pushback I tend to receive online. *Biden is unlikely to adopt Medicare for All. He has implied he would veto a Medicare for All bill if one were to pass the House and Senate. So why tweet? Who is my audience? What is my goal? Why "attack" Biden when we need him to beat Trump?*

But despite Biden's indifference to them, the ethical, moral, and yes, pragmatic arguments for progressive policies remain. Americans won't stop rationing their insulin simply because Biden is in office. Biden *should* be pushed to back a plan that doesn't leave 10 million people uninsured by design in the middle of a global pandemic. The consequences of global warming exceeding 1.5 C will be cataclysmic, and we only have about a decade to prevent them by limiting carbon emissions. We have a *responsibility* to push Biden to adopt a climate plan that actually stands a chance of meeting the IPCC's guidelines, or our planet may rapidly become uninhabitable for billions of people.

Those who defend "vote blue no matter who" argue that the presidency is too important to allow Trump to have a second term." But that (true) statement is irreconcilable with the notion that it doesn't matter if Biden does a mediocre job of meeting the people's needs. If the presidency is important, it matters that Biden isn't just a relatively "better" president, but a good one. And the presidency has rarely been more important than it is now.

Refusing to push Biden left, and committing to shaming voters with "vote blue no matter who," is not as safe a strategy as it appears. In fact, it might ultimately backfire and make Biden less electable.

Already, anxiety is growing about the lack of grassroots engagement with Biden's campaign. At the end of March, ABC News reported that "[S]trong enthusiasm for Biden among his supporters—at just 24 percent—is the lowest on record for a Democratic presidential candidate in 20 years of ABC/Post polls. More than twice as many of Trump's supporters are highly enthusiastic about supporting him, 53 percent."

The Democratic party's share of the Black vote is declining. (The decline is slight, but so are election margins). Even the Democratic party's anointed "firewall"—Black women—are drifting. According to a 2018 study, twelve percent fewer Black women supported the Democratic party in 2017 as compared to 2018. And only forty-five percent of Black women believe that the Democratic Party best represents our interests.

A 2018 study out of Wisconsin, where nearly 88,000 more African Americans voted in 2012 than in 2016, asked Black Milwaukeeans why they stayed home. The most common answers? "Unhappy with choice of candidates or issues" (33 percent of responses), "not interested" (8.8 percent), and "vote would not have mattered" (6.6 percent). To maximize turnout among historically disenfranchised groups, it seems important that voters feel that something will fundamentally change.

And it's no surprise why. As author and scholar Keeanga-Yahmatta Taylor has recently written, massive world-wide protests are evidence of how the state is failing Black Americans, and not just with respect to police violence. COVID-19 has exposed the network of inequity that threatens Black lives under even the best circumstances. "Young black people must endure the contusions caused by rubber bullets or the acrid burn of tear gas because government has abandoned us," she wrote. "Black Lives Matter only because we will make it so."

But none of that seems to matter in the context of Biden's campaign. Perhaps because Biden is currently polling well against Trump, moderates continue to advise Biden to remain silent on calls from the Black Lives Matter movement and progressives to cancel rent, issue monthly stimulus checks, and, of course, to provide free-at-point-of-service healthcare.

"Shut the hell up and grow up," advised Obama pollster Cornell Belcher when asked to respond to Biden critics who've noted the low level of enthusiasm for the Democratic nominee. "We've got a guy who is an existential threat to everything you believe in. Right? Shut up. Get in line. Lets get rid of this guy. And then we can argue on the other side of this."

2016 should be a lesson in why complacency is a dangerous bedfellow. But I'm afraid it will be a lesson that goes unlearned.

Some pundits and politicos have blamed Sanders for the enthusiasm gap, saying he should do more. He should "direct" young voters to fight for Biden online, and be an "ambassador" for the means-tested half measures Biden has offered, argued CNBC founder Tom Rogers and his daughter in a co-written *Newsweek* op-ed. But curiously, they stopped short of encouraging Biden to adopt the policies which they acknowledged "galvanized young people," suggesting instead that Bernie's supporters will simply follow his direction.

Sanders' influence, despite popular opinion, does not stem from a "cult of personality," but from his commitment to humanistic, populist policy. Without it, his influence wanes. He would never be trusted as an "ambassador" for a program that bucks his long established values. "That's just not the way it works in a democracy," he explained in a recent *New Yorker* interview. "In fact, that's not the way it *should* work."

Most Democratic voters can accept that they need to vote for Biden to prevent a second Trump term. But more voters, particularly new or formerly disaffected voters, would be convinced to turn out (and volunteer and donate) if party leaders truly recognized what's at the root of Sanders' appeal. In his platform, millions of working class and poor Americans felt their most fundamental concerns were genuinely being addressed -- often for the first time in their political lives. They saw in him a candidate with a values-based vision of what this country could be: a belief that the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness was not just a slogan, but a bedrock principle that life shouldn't be contingent on a co-pay, race shouldn't influence liberty, and happiness shouldn't be held hostage by corporate titans too stingy to pay a living wage. I suspect that many can't forget the feeling, cultivated by Sanders' movement, that a better world was possible and that yes, they deserved it. And frankly, they shouldn't ever forget.

The way to put together a massive coalition that will be unstoppable against Trump is not to shame Americans—struggling now more than ever—into a fidelity pledge. The way forward is to put together a platform that so completely meets voters' needs it becomes irresistible.

I am deeply concerned that each time a corporate Democrat attempts to disavow us of our principles by smearing our values as unreasonable "litmus tests"—each time they tell us that a policy implemented the world over is "pie in the sky," that demanding healthcare as a human right is akin to whining for "a pony," that women's rights are conditional on who the woman is and how powerful the man is that she's crossed—we lose our ethical moorings.

And with each election cycle, as progressive candidates are openly thwarted by big monied interests who are deeply invested in the status quo, I'm concerned that we have no strategy to ratchet back the rightward creep that "lesser of two evilism" enables.

"Vote blue no matter who" lowers the floor of what Democrats stand for to a hair's breadth above Trump's scalp. And the effect of repeatedly lowering the standards of the only powerful resistance party is grave. It establishes a slippery and ever inclining slope, a race to the bottom that has skewed American politics such that the "liberal party" is well to the right of American voters on all but certain social issues.

I agree that Donald Trump presents a unique and grievous threat to this country. But it's also true that every four years we're told the same. Republicans *are* becoming more right-wing, more reactionary, more openly white supremacist. But it happens, in part, because Democrats chase them to the right, thinking electoral victory can be found in splitting the difference rather than taking a stand for good. Year after year, Democrats vote to keep Republicans from winning "at any cost." At some point, the conscience coffers will be empty.

Contrary to misleading headlines, Bernie Sanders has never said it is either irresponsible to decline to endorse Joe Biden, or to criticize him. In fact, Sanders has said that we should be "doing everything we can to move Joe and his campaign in a more progressive direction," and that it's "irresponsible for anybody to say 'Well, I disagree with Joe Biden'—I disagree with Joe Biden!—'and therefore I'm not going to be involved.'"

I (unsurprisingly) agree with Sanders in this, and will continue to be "involved" by pushing for Biden to be responsive to the exigent needs of the vulnerable populations he's relying on to put him in office. And humbly, I think you should too. ✚

Current Affairs Educational Bible
TERRIBLES

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CHAPTER 4

The Lord spoke to Noah from the tempest, and foretold a Great Flood. You must build, He said, a vessel to bear yourself and the wild beasts of the world unto deliverance. Secure two of every animal, so they may repopulate the world with just two specimens, which makes sense to me, the Lord.

2 Noah said: why should I change my ways, and gather these beasts, for but a simple spring shower? Thy manner is alarmist, Lord.

3 Said the Lord: the rains hath already not ceased for 26 days.

4 Yeah, spoke Noah, but I heard rain is just a myth.

5 The Lord spoke again in thunder. This is my doing, this is my wrath. And the Royal Palace hath floated away already.

6 But the wise Noah was undaunted. The Great Flood, he said, is but a hoax by liberal scribes. And the expense of building a great craft as you propose, at great cost to the kingdom, is an offense to the Elders. We cannot let the cure, he instructed the Lord, be worse than the disease.

CHAPTER 8

A poor man went to the home of his old friend and succorer the Guarantor, and stood outside his gates. Yea, he said unto the Guarantor, I have fallen ill to the plague upon our society, Cubit-19. Yet our good fortune is to have made a common fund from the land, where a tithing is collected into a pool for those stricken sick, to ensureth their recovery.

2 The Guarantor said to him: as the Lord has given me light to see, I behold your condition is a preexisting pestilence and technically not a part of our holy covenant of health.

3 The poor man fell silent a day and a night. Then he said to the Guarantor: but I have done as you asked. I have made sacrifice of my daily bread and grain that I might receive blessings of care at my time of need.

4 Said the Guarantor: Lo: you entered into a contract, whose sacred bonds may not be broken by any force of earth or heaven, even the Great Invisible Hand Himself; and you should have read the fine print.

CHAPTER 6

Thus wrote Paul to the Ephesians: As our risen Lord has shown us, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God, until they addeth the special VIP entrance with valet service.

2 Celebrate ye not the sacraments of health for all peoples, but instead lay a portion for the GoFundMe of God's children who want for insulin, provided their stories are sad enough, and their faces cute.

And render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, that we may rain down some more fire and brimstone on the Philistines of Palestine, for reasons I guess.

Parable text by Rob Larson and Lyta Gold
Art by Jason Adam Katzenstein

The Duties of a Diligent
BEAVER

by ALLEGRA SILCOX

RODENTS, GENERALLY SPEAKING, GET little respect. But the beaver is an exception. They're notoriously hardworking, acting as tree-cutters, masons, and engineers. They are a keystone species—one so important to an ecosystem that it would be unrecognizable without them—because their dams provide shelter and food for dozens of other species, prevent flooding downstream, and filter and purify tons of water (in stark contrast to human-created dams, which are ecologically destructive and need to be detonated as fast as we can ship the dynamite). Beavers even build their own canals, connecting their food supplies to their ponds. Plus, the bastards are vegetarian, something I despair of ever accomplishing.

Given this impressive résumé, beavers seem like the perfect animal mascot for the Republican conception of Personal Responsibility. If these two words don't send echoes of Fox News segments and dinner table rants through your head, then you are very lucky. To give you a sense for what you're missing, let me introduce you to Dennis Prager, who in 1994 wrote "The American Tradition of Personal Responsibility." This essay is a perfect encapsulation of the conservative mindset on individual agency. Here's a representative excerpt:

No One Is Guilty

Yet another battle against personal accountability/responsibility is the battle against guilt. No one is guilty of behavior: If you steal, you are the product of socioeconomic forces; if you're 15 years old and get pregnant, it is because there weren't enough condoms and you didn't get a good enough sex education in school; if you murder, it is because you had too easy access to a gun and/or because you were raised in a poor neighborhood.

[...] This was an example of another way of undermining per-

sonal responsibility—psychologizing actions rather than judging them. Rather than good and evil, there is healthy and sick. For example, men who rape are often labeled sick. But they are not all necessarily sick. They may be normal—but bad. It comes as sad news to many modern women—men are by nature rapists. "I like woman, I take woman" is male nature. The reason that most men do not rape is because they hold values that forbid them to, not because it is foreign to their nature. There are armies that rape and there are armies that do not rape, and the armies that rape do not do so because they consist almost entirely of sick men. The soldiers of the Red Army were not all sick. But they did have 28 years of nihilism in their country. A generation was raised with no right and wrong, just Communist Party notions of what is "progressive."

[...] We cannot know exactly what normal and sick are, but we can and do know what good and evil are. We have substituted normal and sick for good and evil, and that, again, means no personal responsibility. How can you be held responsible if you did what you did because you are sick?

Throughout the essay, Prager goes on at length about how our wayward youth have been brainwashed into believing that no one should fail, and that feelings matter more than actions. To people on the left, these ideas seem self-evidently reductive. Obviously, there are a whole host of social and economic factors that influence the decisions individual people make, which can't be easily boiled down to any concept as simple as "personal responsibility." Many leftists might also object to the idea that humans are naturally a bunch of murderers and rapists whose tendencies toward evil are just barely restrained by "values." But it's not just Dennis Prager who believes these things. I personally have known many good people who would quickly jump to assume that a thief or a pregnant teen or a homeless person had "poor character," that this "poor character" was the

sole explanation for their misfortune, and that what they really needed was to be taught a lesson in "responsibility." Where does this shockingly pervasive mindset come from? And—if we agree that this way of viewing the world is incorrect, and harmful—what can we do about it?

Growing up, I instinctively disliked the "personal responsibility" mindset. It didn't match with my observations of the world. For example, when I was a preteen, maybe a little younger, I remember discovering my aversion to road rage when my mother was driving the Smurfmobile (our blue Dodge Caravan) down Boxley Boulevard. Suddenly, a car whizzed past and cut us off. My mother was beloved by all the little children at church as the "Beautiful Storyteller" from Bible school. At that moment, however, she leaned on the horn and shouted, "Jackass!" I was upset, and thought it was unfair to call that guy names when we didn't know why he was speeding. What if his wife was in labor? What if he had never, ever sped before and there was some kind of emergency? Isn't it wrong to be so mad and to condemn him? You don't *know*, I said. I won the fight.

Pure, youthful empathy—untainted by years of driving on roads which are indeed often filled with assholes—let me see the speed demon's behavior as subject to *circumstance*, rather than a sole result of "disposition" or "character." (Possibly, it becomes harder to charitably think through these hypothetical explanations for people's actions the more often they inconvenience you, hence my mom's angry reaction.) The tendency to assume that a driver who cuts you off is an asshole, whereas your own speeding ticket last week was *totally* justified—you're not an asshole, you were just late for work that *one* time!—is something that psychologists have dubbed the "fundamental attribution error." It's one of many sneaky mental habits responsible for why we can't seem to cut each other some slack.
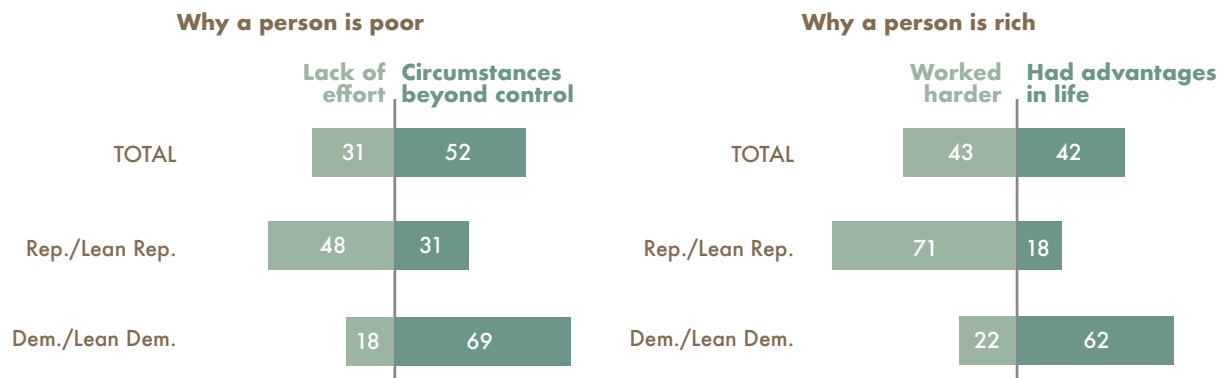
This phenomenon can easily be spotted in society's tendency to blame poverty on poor people's bad choices. See this characteristic remark from Bill O'Reilly in 2004: "You gotta look people in the eye and tell 'em they're irresponsible and lazy. And who's gonna wanna do that? Because that's what poverty is, ladies and gentlemen. In this country, you can succeed if you get educated and work hard. Period. Period." Conservatives like O'Reilly and Prager are fond of acting like their willingness to assign guilt is evidence of their unflinching realism, whereas their lefty opponents are just bleeding hearts who can't accept the truth. But the fact is, the belief that poverty is the result of "choices" is very much not supported by empirical evidence. The best single figure to punch a hole in the "indolent poor" myth is the productivity-wage gap. Nearly half of Americans live paycheck to paycheck, but productivity has outpaced wages by more than 600% since 1979. This means that workers are producing, but they're not earning rewards in proportion to that production. Combine that with the fact that we've had historically low unemployment in recent years (barring the recent catastrophic impacts of coronavirus), and you have a simple conclusion: most of America is working, and their work is creating value, but that value doesn't make it to their paychecks. (Where could it be going???) This problematic and unfounded belief about the "indolent poor" isn't held only by Fox News pundits; almost a third of U.S. adults (largely Republican) believe that poor people are poor because they are lazy, according to the Pew Research Center.

HOW DOES SUCH AN UNFOUNDED narrative become widespread? Obviously, education, corporate news media, and devotion to capital play a role. We can also find some explanations in psychological research. We already talked about the "fundamental attribution error," the seemingly deep-seated human tendency to accept nuanced excuses for our own behavior while harshly condemning the same behavior in others. It turns out that we have a *lot* of blind spots about ourselves, and that these can contribute to not only our day-to-day assessment of individ-

Pew Research Center: Republicans are far more likely than Democrats to say people are rich because they worked harder—and that people are poor due to a lack of effort

In your opinion, which generally has more to do with... (%)

Why a person is poor

	Lack of effort	Circumstances beyond control
TOTAL	31	52
Rep./Lean Rep.	48	31
Dem./Lean Dem.	18	69

Why a person is rich

	Worked harder	Had advantages in life
TOTAL	43	42
Rep./Lean Rep.	71	18
Dem./Lean Dem.	22	62

Note: Don't know responses not shown
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Sept. 18-24, 2018

ual situations, but our entire theory of how the world operates.

In one experiment, researcher Paul Piff rigged a game of Monopoly so that some randomly determined players started the game with more money. When the privileged players inevitably won, Piff asked them why they believed they had been successful. The winners answered with descriptions of their clever property purchases, completely forgetting the initial random coin toss that determined who began the game with an advantage. This phenomenon—believing that those on top deserve to be there, and those on the bottom likewise deserve their place—is called Just-World Fallacy. The conclusions we draw about the world around us are intrinsically flawed by our silent biases, always ready to shield us from the truth that we, too, might be subject to forces outside our control. Attribution error whispers in our ear during the nightly news: those people unable to make rent April 1st were irresponsible—sure, the pandemic is unfortunate, but hey, they could have been thrifty and saved more. Just-World Fallacy tells us to change the channel: why feel guilty holed up in our cozy homes when, after all, we deserve to be safe and comfortable, because of how hard we worked to get here?

CONSERVATIVES AREN'T WRONG FOR FINDING beavers' hard work to be truly impressive. Their dams need to be watertight to provide shelter and protection come winter. If a beaver hears the sound of running water, he is immediately relentless in finding the source and plugging the hole. It doesn't matter whether the beaver is tired and had planned to chill out and nibble on some lilypads rolled up like cigars.

But the conservative worldview fails to take into account that not only is it impossible for many humans to work like beavers, but that people who *do* work like beavers are exhausted and frequently desperate. The "personal responsibility" crowd tends to argue that however hard the circumstances—however big the hole in the dam—you should just work even harder to overcome them. But let's dispense with the narrative that hard work is a virtue, and admit what the beavers know: this extraordinary exertion is simply an absolute necessity to not die. About 13 million U.S. workers have more than one job. 12 million people living below 200% of the poverty line (a more realistic threshold of financial hardship in America) have full-time jobs. A society with an abundance of wealth which still works its citizens to the bone in order to survive is sick. Not only do many people still suffer financially and physically, but the spell we have cast to treat work as a blessing rather than a curse takes an emotional toll. This, in turn, makes us even more prone to that fundamental attribution error: if we're both *required* to work incredibly hard, and *conditioned* to believe that working this way is morally good, then it's very easy to assume that people who don't work like this, or can't, are morally suspect.

Maybe the beavers have endless energy and love to fix their dam holes, but I rather think they're irritated by them (especially when the holes are made by asshole human nature-tourists who want to watch the beavers scramble). I think I know how the beaver feels. Working so tirelessly, creating something to be proud of, but being unable to ignore that faint sound of running water, that ominous clue that maybe something isn't perfect. You tell yourself it can't really be that important, can it? For once, can't "great, just not perfect" be good enough? But it won't ever be. You're conditioned to find that sound at any cost and plug the hole—your life depends on it.

I definitely know how that feels. I know how it feels to go to the doctor because you can't get over a cold, and leave with a note to take a week off work because apparently the problem is that you're so anxious and depressed by the sound of water rushing out of your carefully-constructed dam all the goddamn time. I know what it's like to be so obsessed with taking care of yourself and your loved ones, with always being responsible for everything and working hard, that you see the entire world through that lens. Maybe some days you even resent anyone who seems like they might be having an easier time of it. You might want to say "when I was your age, I had to walk to school uphill both ways—in the snow!" You might hear a news story about those 13 million people with multiple jobs and remember a time that you, too, had to work very hard. You might resent when people imply we should change the world for the better, so future generations do not have to work as hard; after all, those changes weren't around to help you, those people weren't there to sympathize as you scurried to build your dam.

Another fun biological fact about beavers is that they chew constantly not just to reshape their environment, but also to stop their own bodies from violently betraying them. A beaver can chew

through a 5 inch willow tree in 3 minutes because of their strong teeth. While tooth enamel is usually enriched with magnesium for strength, beavers have stronger iron teeth, the red mineral turning their teeth to their distinctive orange. Those incredible teeth that chop down up to 200 trees annually to build dams, that plough through branches for food, that fend off enemies, are constantly being worn down with use. To keep up, the beaver's teeth grow constantly throughout their life, up to 4 feet a year. But if a beaver, like any other rodent, is unable to wear down their teeth, they just keep growing—into their skulls, through the roofs of their mouth, through their eyeballs. That house-building, food-chewing, enemy-biting gift becomes a curse if left unchecked.

I'm attached to my hard-working beaver teeth. I am so embarrassingly attached to them that I let them grow and grow until they turned inward and pierced me. This is how people become "workaholics": they push themselves to cultivate a stronger and stronger work ethic, in the name of survival, but then have to work harder and harder to satisfy their own internal demands. And sometimes, when you're hard on yourself, the fundamental attribution error then just magnifies how hard you're willing to be on others. But this, as the name suggests, is an *error*. I am both proud of my sprint through college to save money, and resentful that I had to do it that way—but that doesn't mean I should oppose student debt cancellation. Why should future generations suffer to avoid debt simply because I had to? Are they *lazy* or *uncommitted* or *entitled* for wanting what I would have wanted for myself, if it had been possible? Or was it cruel to put me in that position in the first place, and therefore cruel to wish the same thing on others?

Understanding some of the reasons why our brains are so quick to latch onto narratives that are unfounded is key to trying to correct our own misconceptions and help others to do the same. In addition to his monopoly experiment, researcher Richard Piff has also found a lot of gross, if unsurprising, evidence that rich people are ruder, less charitable, and more likely to break the law. The hypothesis is that a life of privilege is also a bubble that removes people from their empathy and compassion. But, crucially, he also found that this behav-

ior is malleable. In another experiment, after watching a brief video about childhood poverty, those who saw themselves as rich were just as likely to help someone in distress in the lab as those who saw themselves as poor. These "psychological interventions" take people who are otherwise self-sufficient and remind them of community, cooperation, and other values that engender compassion.

WHILE YOU, DEAR READER, may not be in a position to sit Jeff Bezos down in front of a video about childhood poverty, you can do your best to be responsible for cultivating your own compassion—this is the kind of personal responsibility that is truly important. In the same way that exposure to other people's problems can make us harder and more impatient, it can also make us more compassionate, if we approach these experiences with a more open mind. I was a big reader, thanks to my parents and retired English teacher grandmother. Like many avid readers who smuggled flashlights under their blankets to read late into the night, I viewed novels as transformational and transportive experiences. It turns out that reading—like the short video from the "can rich assholes be reformed" experiment— actually *does* transform us, making us more empathetic. The part of your brain that infers others' thoughts and feelings lights up like a Christmas tree when you read (evidence suggests that this is form agnostic, so don't let people make you feel bad if you prefer watching *Buffy* or playing *Dragon Age* to reading Proust).

To exercise that muscle, you can always try reading about the experiences of real people, like Vanessa Solivan, a home health aide and mother of three who spent years as part of the growing demographic of the "working homeless," people who—astonishingly— have someplace to work but no place to *live*. A *New York Times* piece describes the difficult circumstances of her upbringing, as well as her current job and how she attempts to afford to live. Her job doesn't pay nearly enough to lift her above the poverty line, and additional assistance she might receive from one government program cuts her eligibility for another. The more we can vividly picture the circumstances that might leave someone destitute, the harder we can fight against the instinct to attribute destitution to character rather than, just maybe, circumstance.

When I see a car go speeding by or do something foolish, I still hate it when someone yells at them. What if the driver is just a beaver, desperate to find the sound of running water before their entire world drains away? ⚜

PS—Beavers eat their own excrement to make the most of their extremely fiber-rich and difficult to digest meals. You won't catch a beaver asking for handouts when they can get by with *ass*outs (their asses smell like raspberry and vanilla. Castoreum is extracted from sacs near their tails and used in perfumes and is still (rarely) used as food flavoring. I learned it so you have to learn it, too). Beaver facts!
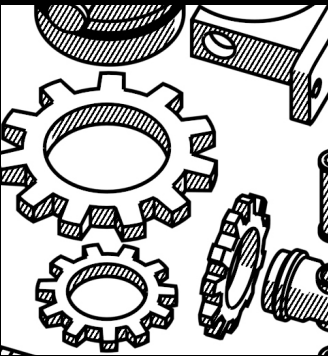
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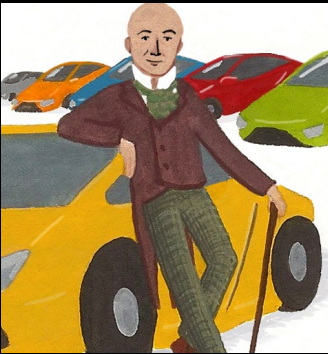

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