

Yes, We Have A Print Edition

CURRENT AFFAIRS

\$10.95

VOL. 5, ISSUE 4

JULY/AUG. 2020



MAGIC TRICKS

*fool your friends into
accepting the status quo*

GLENN BECK'S SOCIALISM BOOK

*spoiler: he does not know
much about socialism*

THE CHILDREN

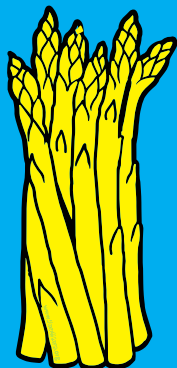
*are they really worth
caring about? (yes)*



THE IMPORTANT BITS

P L A N T L I E S A N D S O W C O N F U S I O N

CURRENT AFFAIRS (ISSN 2471-2647) IS PUBLISHED BIMONTHLY FOR \$60/YEAR BY CURRENT AFFAIRS INC., 631 ST. CHARLES AVE., NEW ORLEANS, LA 70130 PERIODICALS POSTAGE PAID AT NEW ORLEANS, LA AND ADDITIONAL MAILING OFFICES. POSTMASTER: SEND ADDRESS CHANGES TO CURRENT AFFAIRS, 631 ST. CHARLES AVE., NEW ORLEANS, LA 70130 PRINTED IN KANSAS BY ALLEN PRESS, INC.



REGIONAL DIALECT

Do you call asparagus:

azzies
gussies
sparrys
aspies
spargs
raguses

YOUR ANSWER
TELLS YOUR STATE

Quiz

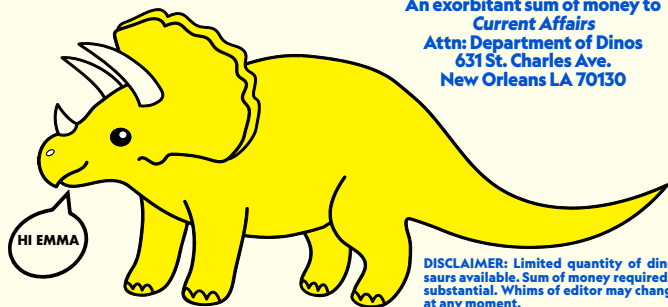
Do you call soda:

bubblejuice
fizzlepop
pizzlejuice
sugar water

CUSTOMIZED DINOSAUR GREETING

Did you know that, for a substantial sum of money, and based on whether we feel like it, *Current Affairs* will dedicate space in its print edition to a dinosaur of your choice (but only the nice ones) with a personalized greeting to another subscriber? Have you ever considered asking someone to marry you using a magazine dinosaur? IT'S NOW CONCEIVABLE.

Please send:
An exorbitant sum of money to
Current Affairs
Attn: Department of Dinosaurs
631 St. Charles Ave.
New Orleans LA 70130



DISCLAIMER: Limited quantity of dinosaurs available. Sum of money required is substantial. Whims of editor may change at any moment.

accountability & transparency

This magazine recently made the mistake of hiring a Business Manager, who has turned the enterprise upside down by introducing such newfangled corporate contrivances as "an actual budget," "a set of written policies with role responsibilities" and, most outrageously of all, "restrictions on the amount the editor can spend monthly on fringed lampshades." The editor is in trouble, you see, because the number of lampshades being added to the company tab was considered disproportionate based on the level of comparable expenditures made at other similarly-sized magazines.

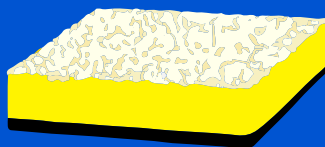
"But *Current Affairs* is not other magazines!" the editor protested, to no avail.

Even worse, and with a more direct impact on readers, because the editor spent what was considered an outrageously large portion of the magazine's art fund on photographs of airships for the last issue, he has been barred from making further purchasing decisions for the art department for the indefinite future. This means that the number of absurdly expensive visual delights to be found littered throughout these pages may well be curtailed. The editor wishes readers to know that it is not his fault if in future issues you receive only one photo of a collapsing blimp when you would like to have received three or more.

On the plus side, the financial health of the magazine is apparently "excellent" since the business manager's arrival, employee morale is skyrocketing, and the business manager has proved both highly competent and personally popular. Only the editor grumbles.

THE CURRENT AFFAIRS

Lemon Bar



Current Affairs is not just a sensibly-priced magazine of cats and sci-fi. It is a sprawling conglomerate touching many domains, from television news to the farming of micropistachios.

Six cities in the U.S. and Canada now have subscribers-only "*Current Affairs* clubhouses" (an establishment operating under the same name on Budapest's Grand Boulevard is unauthorized and cannot be vouched for). There are *Current Affairs* cheddarstix, *Current Affairs* motor-oil, and even custom-bred adult cats with the *Current Affairs* logo imprinted on their fur. But readers, you ain't seen nothin' yet, for coming soon to your local grocer, we have our most scrumptious surprise yet: the *Current Affairs* lemon bar, a lemon bar so sticky that if you touch it with any part of your body you will never not be sticky again. Our lemon bar must always be eaten with a fork, for any contact with the flesh will turn your various extremities into a literal flytrap. But we can assure you: what it lacks in convenience, it more than makes up for in taste.

WARNING: as with a king cake, the *Current Affairs* lemon bar contains a tiny plastic baby, which is a severe choking hazard. Unfortunately, these are mandatory in Louisiana confectionery. We do not make the rules.

SEEKING NEW ENEMIES

Our magazine is running low on enemies, having slain everyone who has thus far irritated us. Unfortunately, nobody has yet proved a match for *Current Affairs*, making the process of dispatching evildoers rather dull and unchallenging. Please send recommendations for new foes to the company's Enemies Department. (Enemies cannot be sent back without an enclosed envelope self-addressed in blood and with adequate postage supplied.)

LETTER

Hello,

After I read an excellent article in *Current Affairs*, through a link on Twitter, I looked at your home page and was thinking of possibly subscribing. At the top of the home page in the masthead, under "*Current Affairs*," it's printed, "Death to The Economist." Does this refer to publication, *The Economist*? That is my favorite publication that I've subscribed to and read for years. If it does refer to *The Economist*, one of the finest sources of journalism I've ever read, I'm very surprised and disappointed.

Terry Nuttall

Dear Mr. Nuttall,

You will be relieved to know that this does not, in fact, refer to the publication "*The Economist*," a fine periodical to which we, too, have subscribed for many years. Instead, it refers to a particular economist against whom we have a longstanding grudge and must regrettably wish violence upon. We are sure we don't have to tell you which one.

THINGS WE ARE GOING TO DO

You may have noticed that whenever Elon Musk announces he is going to do something, say, offer a teleportation-based meal delivery service or fire people to Neptune from a trillion-dollar cannon, the tech press credulously prints each and every implausible promise. Well, you know what? We've got plans too, and we demand equal time. Did you know that within six months, *Current Affairs* will capture and display a live alien? We will use it to power a giant battery and provide velopedo tours to Earth's molten outer core (within four years we will extend the tours to the solid inner core). *Current Affairs* will build a mountain—a literal mountain, of regulation size—entirely out of glass. Tapping it with a fingernail will produce heavenly music. We will invent a new kind of water filter that is capable of removing not just chemical impurities, but impure thoughts—a person who consumes our water will be not just physically but morally pristine. We will invent an automobile that can take the shape of any other automobile with a voice command. It can also crush its passenger, should you tire of them, and make the crushing look like an unfortunate accidental algorithm malfunction. These things, and so many more, shall we do! To the press corps: you have to print these promises as news. Or you will reveal yourselves to be biased. And you wouldn't want anyone to think you biased, would you?

THE CURRENT AFFAIRS dash

Let us say that you are a normal person. And let us say that, being such a person, you feel the need from time to time to write manifestos. But you suffer. You suffer because it is never quite clear when you are supposed to use an "en" dash and when you are supposed to use an "em" dash. They sound similar, they look similar, their differences can be measured in micrometers. But the tiniest slip-up could give your written threats a meaning totally opposite to that which you intended. It could confuse the masses. It could spoil the revolution.

Fear not, bloodthirsty comrade. We have done the unthinkable for you. We have invented a dash of your very own. The *Current Affairs* Dash, a replacement for both em and en dashes that is never not suitable. It is the most revolutionary dash length, as well as the classiest and liveliest. Use it and people will never not wonder why you put it there. Attention will be paid to your words that would previously have been paid to the words of other people. It cannot fail to change certain things about your life!

Here is your dash, then:



Use it liberally, but use it well! Banish your ems and ens for good.

A Note On Our Moomin Coverage

Over the last several months, a number of readers have written in to ask why *Current Affairs'* coverage of the so-called "Moomin" movement has been so sparse. We would have thought the answer to this was obvious, but the escalating hostility of the notes necessitates that we publicly clarify the matter. Look here, Moomin-people: we are not going to write about Moomins. Not now, not ever. We do not care about Moomins. They mean nothing to us. We didn't even know what they were until you began bombarding us with these asinine messages. The editorial content of this magazine is not based on "supply and demand"—you do not get to read about a thing just because you like it. Take your bloody Moomins and go elsewhere. Surely there are plenty of other magazines that would be happy to fill their pages with such infantile piffle. Try *Highlights*. Or perhaps *Newsweek*. But we at *Current Affairs* have a touch of class and dignity.



Attack and Dethrone God

THE FLOWERS WE LIKE



This magazine has long expressed solidarity with plant life. In articles such as "We Will Force Our Children To Love Flowers," we have given voice to an unabashedly pro-floral politics, one that sees the proliferation of plant life as a critical component of the pursuit of a just society. "Flowers," we have said, "are all to the good."

But an irate ecologist has written in to inform us that the view is naive and under-theorized. After all,

says our correspondent, some plants are invasive. They damage the soil. They choke the life out of native species. Surely distinctions must be drawn. We cannot merely favor "plants" in the abstract.

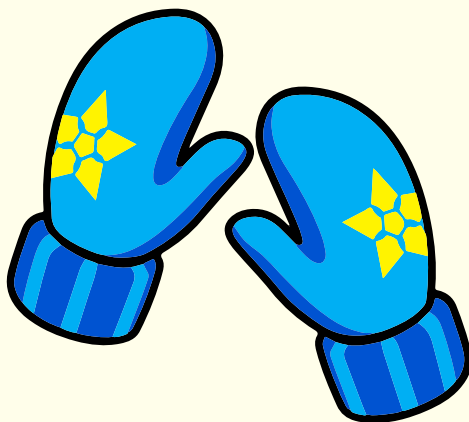
We must be very specific about the plants we do or do not favor. The reader's point is a valuable one. It is unwise to be pro-plant. This is like being generically "pro-human" without being clear that one does not mean Donald Trump. We wish to be as clear as possible: we only favor the good plants, the good flowers. If the ecologists shun a plant, so too shall we shun it. The utopian plant city is carefully ecologically balanced. We are preparing a public list of all the living things, inanimate objects, and physical processes that our readers have asked us to condemn and which we do, in fact, condemn. Requests for *Current Affairs* to issue official editorial condemnations of one's personal bugaboos and nemeses should be directed to the magazine's official Condemnation Review Board for approval.



in defense of MITTENS

It is a crass stereotype that adults wear gloves and children wear mittens, and that when one matures one graduates from the mitten to the glove. This popular notion posits a kind of upward trajectory from the one form to the other, implying that the addition of separate fingers is a form of enlightened "progress." This could neither be any more false nor any less true. The diminution of mittenry is as commonplace as is offensive, and this magazine feels obliged to take a noisy editorial stand against it. Mittens are great. When it is cold, you do not want your fingers to branch out on their own, each having to fend for themselves. You want them united as one, huddling together in a central living room.

Let us, then, have a few fewer emailed wisecracks about the editors' public wearing of mittens. You will not shame us. We cannot be embarrassed. Mittens for all.



BATMAN & ROBIN

We regret to announce that our licensing contract for the famous "Bat-Man and the Robin" comic expires with this issue. We are pleased, however, to bring you the final installment of the series (pp. 56-57), which we hope will clear up any lingering plot holes and resolve all doubts. We are grateful for the flood of reader correspondence about "The Bat-Man and the Robin," which have confirmed our impression that introducing it would set off a flutter (no pun intended) of attention. We hope to inspire waves of fan-fiction, highlights from which may be printed in future editions.





WOODROW WILSON
CLOWARD PIVEN
CURRENT AFFAIRS

The HARDER
YOU WORK
the LUCKIER
YOU GET
FOUNDER OF AMERICA
JOE RICKET

THE TUTTLE TWINS
ROAD TO
FREEDOM
CONNOR
Illustrated by Ely



table of CONTENTS

INTRODUCTORY BULLSHIT.....2

1. The Wisdom of Children.....6

2. Libertarian Kids' Books.....12

3. Considerations on Cuba.....22

4. Magic & Capitalism.....33

5. A Dilbert Retrospective.....42

6. Glenn Beck's Kooky Sophistry.....47

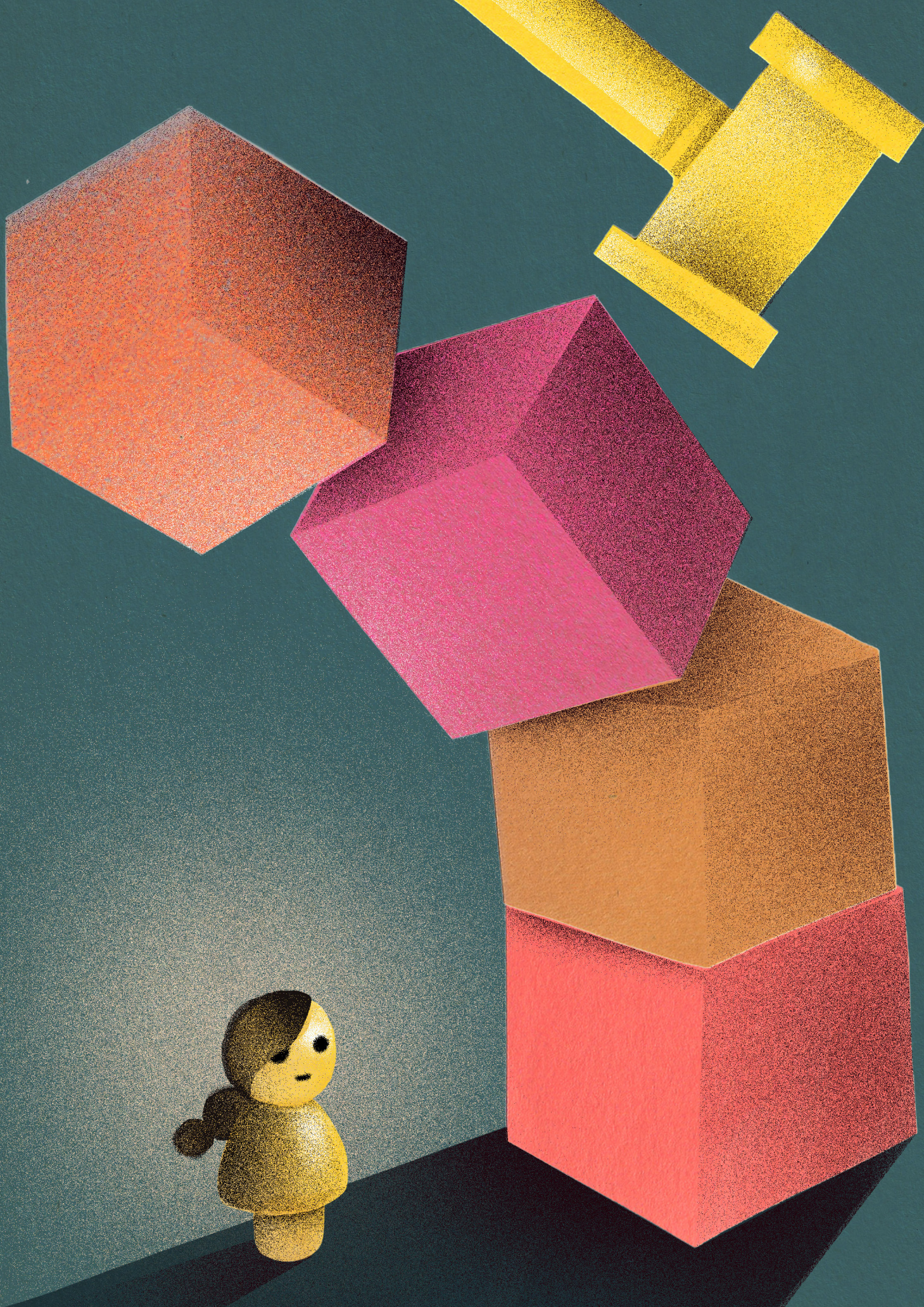
7. Wrestling Marx's Ghost.....58

8. The Spread of American Self-Help..64

9. The World of Business Podcasts.....69

COMICS.....15, 56

GAME.....40



think of THE CHILDREN

by Brianna Rennix

ABOUT SIX MONTHS AFTER I STARTED MY LAW job at an immigration internment camp for mothers and children in Dilley, Texas, I took a weekend off to see my sister and her kids in New England. My sister, who had visited me once in Dilley and volunteered with the families there, had explained my job to my niece in somewhat vague terms. *There's a place where the government locks up children from other countries*, she told my niece, *and Brianna's job is to save them*.

I don't endorse this lawyer-as-savior narrative—I am a bureaucrat trying to bury rival bureaucrats in documents, and mostly not succeeding at it—but on the other hand, my niece was four years old at the time, so, simplified explanations were needed. To my niece's enormous credit, she was not *at all* impressed with me. Soon after saying hello, she looked me up and down and asked: “Did you save all the children?”

“Not yet,” I told her. “I’m working on it.”

“If you didn’t save the children yet,” she said, ruthlessly, “then why are you here?”

Besides an indignant and sheepish *hey!* I didn’t really have a great answer to that one. “Out of the mouths of babes” is a saying that’s long been bandied around in praise of the homespun, innocent wisdom of children. But the biblical verse it’s paraphrased from (Psalms 8:2) is a bit more terrifying than that: “Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger.” Children, when not busy watching *Paw Patrol* and *Octonauts*, are the mouthpieces of divine imprecation, and we had better not forget it.

Later that night, my niece woke up crying from a nightmare and wandered into the living room where I was asleep on the couch. The sound of wailing penetrated my sleeping

brain, and I sat up with a shock. *I’m supposed to be at work*, I thought confusedly, looking around in the dark, unable to remember where I was. The place where I would normally hear children crying was at my job.

AMONGST COOL PEOPLE, THERE HAS LONG BEEN disdain for popular sentimentality about children. As Oscar Wilde once cuttingly remarked of Charles Dickens’ long-suffering child protagonist in *The Old Curiosity Shop*: “One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing.” (Admittedly, Wilde himself was pretty sentimental about children, so this was clearly one of those manufactured intra-left conflicts.) It’s very easy to mock parents who post maudlin updates about their offspring on Facebook, and very satisfying to decry the moral shallowness of conservatives who fixate obsessively on the imagined torments of non-sentient proto-children in the womb while blithely ignoring all the unambiguous human suffering in the world. Trying to stir up outrage and sympathy about children has often been thought of manipulative, obvious, and lazy—the assumption being that *of course* people care about children, who are uncontroversial objects of pity, being both cute and powerless. Surely it’s the less obviously endearing people, those thorny and unlovable adults, who more urgently require our attention and imaginative energy.

It’s true that sentimentality is an inappropriate attitude to have towards children. It somehow manages to unfairly exaggerate the distance between adults and children, while in no way doing justice to the eldritch weirdness that is child-kind’s #1 defining trait. Children, after all, are recent alien arrivals into a universe whose inputs they are hungrily absorb-

ing and continually sorting into odd and unpredictable boxes. This makes them say *the strangest shit*. (For example, my niece advised my sister to only vote for Bernie Sanders if he changed his name to “Banana Unicorn,” a campaign misstep that has not been properly evaluated in any post-mortems.) At the same time, as compulsive category-sorters operating under a massive informational deficit, children are not *really* that different from adults. Sure, they’re less static than adults: their dough-brained irrationality writhes and expands, whereas the irrationality of their grown-up counterparts has already hardened into its final contortion. For me, at least, the main difference between being a kid and being an adult is, as a kid, I felt like my body was the wrong size for all the emotions I had. My anger, my distress, my affection always felt impossible to contain, bursting out of me in ways that later ashamed me. I find children a little terrifying now, because I remember how much was going on beneath the surface when I was a kid. I suspect most children I meet are nursing strange grudges and vivid, secret loves; so I interact with kids much like I interact with cats, cautiously and awkwardly, usually assuming they have already judged me and found me deeply inadequate.

HOWEVER, FOR ALL THAT BEING SENTIMENTAL about kids is laughably absurd, it’s also worth pointing out that tenderness for children is actually a much less widespread and deeply-rooted norm than people think. This is the main insight I’ve derived from my exposure to child asylum-seekers. I used to think that hurting children was an aberrational and somewhat rare human behavior. Now, I think it’s something that huge numbers of human beings will do with increasing boldness if they believe they can get away with it. I believe this, in part, because I’ve encountered so many children fleeing violence and exploitation within their families and communities; but also because I’ve seen the huge apparatus of state violence turned pitilessly on children, at the behest of U.S. policymakers who don’t even have the excuse of social upheaval and intergenerational trauma to mitigate their culpability. The truth is children, in their strangeness, their physical helplessness, their unpredictable and uncontrollable potentialities, are the most natural targets for punishing the thwarted desires of adults: thus, many people derive satisfaction from hurting children. Children are also the perfect vehicle for conveying violent ultimatums to adults. The logic is the same whether it’s a gang member pointing a gun at the child of the parent he’s extorting, or the U.S. government arresting, corralling and imprisoning children who come to the border—if *I would do this much to a child*, hovers the unspoken threat, *do you think there’s anything in the world I wouldn’t do to you?*

In the summer of 2014, when children began showing up at the U.S.-Mexico border in somewhat larger numbers than usual—some of them travelling alone, others of them

travelling with parents or other relatives—the Obama administration’s immediate desire was to deport them all as fast as possible. The government made this goal clear through numerous public statements. Hillary Clinton, for example, stated that all children “should be sent back as soon as it can be determined who responsible adults in their families are.” In terms of total border apprehensions, 2014 was far from a remarkable year: at 479,371 apprehensions, it was only slightly higher than the previous year’s total of 414,397, and considerably below the annual averages for the years 2000–2009, during which border apprehensions of 1 million a year or more were typical. But the government swiftly and disingenuously characterized the 2014 numbers as a “surge,” and it’s not hard to see why. Because children are supposedly “sympathetic,” and because child immigrants enjoy a modicum more due process than the near-zero level afforded to adult immigrants, the government feared that immigrants would start to expect better treatment from the U.S. government if they came with their families instead of crossing alone. And so the Obama administration initiated the first mass detention of families on U.S. soil since Japanese internment. Initially, the administration’s plan was to keep border-crossing families detained indefinitely until they could legally be deported, regardless of how long this process took, in order to deter further family groups from crossing. This “no release” policy was challenged in court, and the government eventually agreed that it could not formally use imprisonment as an immigration deterrent, and that it had to abide by existing legal protections for immigrant children, which—supposedly—places limits on how long they can be detained. (The 20-day hard limit on detention of children, which you may have heard about in the news, is a legal fiction that the government does not and has never followed, although until recently there were some limits on how brazenly the government was willing to flout it.)

The “family detention” policy that emerged from the Obama years created a new system in which mothers and children apprehended at the border were detained en masse, and would be rapidly processed by the asylum office via what is called a “fear interview,” which determines whether 1) the government allows asylum-seekers to remain in the United States to continue fighting their claim, or 2) deems them presumptively ineligible for asylum and deports them immediately. Between 2014 and early 2020, thousands of families a year were cycled through one or two family internment camps near the border. Because U.S. asylum law is extremely complicated, lawyers set up on-site operations to try to prepare families for their interviews as quickly as possible; asylum-seekers have no right to legal representation in these interviews, but do have the right to seek a consultation in advance. The job of lawyers at these camps, therefore, was to train newly-arrived asylum-seekers to beat government officials one-on-one at an extremely intricate game of legal chess. Preparing people for an interview did not simply mean trying to make them

emotionally ready to discuss their trauma, because the rules of asylum are as arbitrary as the rules of any game; these rules weren't conscientiously designed to sort people who are truly afraid for their lives from people who are *not* truly afraid, but rather to whittle out a haphazard subset of winners from a mass of terrified players. And so, every asylum-seeker needed to be as well-educated in the law as every asylum officer, and be able to outwit them.

The interviews took place in a little trailer in the detention complex. Children and their parents awaited their interviews in a cramped room decorated with crayon drawings of popular cartoon characters—and although these pictures looked like a child's handiwork, rumor had it that they were drawn by an employee of the private prison company that ran the internment camp. Two of the illustrations were recognizable as Dora the Explorer and Doc McStuffins, but both of them were both depicted with white skin, red hair, and freckles. (The casual whitewashing of cartoon children who resembled my clients was far from the most disturbing thing that happened at that internment camp, but it was definitely *super weird* and *I still think about it all the time*???) Most often, it was the adults who answered the asylum office's questions, but sometimes, the children needed to be interviewed too. If the child had unique and compelling individual circumstances, it might make sense to request that the child provide their own testimony; one of my coworkers fondly remembers demanding that the asylum office provide an autistic child with toy dinosaurs, since he found it easier to communicate with plastic lizards than words. (In this case the asylum office opted to pass the family on the strength of the mother's testimony, rather than trying to interpret our junior paleontologist's dramatic reenactments). At other times, if the government intended to deny the parent's claim, they would attempt to interview the child as a form of due diligence (legal jargon for "ass-covering"), to ensure that the child had no legally relevant information to offer.

Kids' interviews are often *wild stuff*. Children interact with the interview process in very strange ways, in part because they don't understand it, but also because they understand it all too well. They interpret questions literally, and have very little instinctive respect for government officials. Due to my aforementioned fear of and awkwardness around children, I have never been skilled at prepping kids for interviews. Once, when I was still a law student, I accompanied a four-year-old child to an interview, and I still remember the exact moment in the interview when the child locked eyes with me, smiled slyly, and then began playing extremely aggressive footsie with me, in plain sight of the asylum officer who was questioning her and her mother. Trying to take notes during the interview, respond to the officer's queries, and fend off the kid's tiny, vicious sneakers was one of the more complicated pieces of multitasking I've ever done. Kids often treat the interview process like the giant farce that it is, and the transcripts that result from the asylum office's interviews of kids sometimes read like absurdist screenplays:

OFFICER: Can you tell me your name?

CHILD: I'm crazy.

OFFICER: Why are you crazy?

CHILD: I like to have fun.

OFFICER: Can you tell me your birthday?

CHILD: [no response]

OFFICER: Can you tell me how old you are?

CHILD: [no response]

OFFICER: Can you tell me where you are from?

CHILD: I'm very crazy, I like to have fun.

OFFICER: Can you please tell me about a time when someone said something that scared you?

CHILD: [is making farting noises]

OFFICER: How old are you?

CHILD: I don't know, I am small.

OFFICER: Can you tell me what you are afraid of?

CHILD: I'm afraid of zombies.

OFFICER: Why are you afraid of zombies?

CHILD: Because they eat me.

OFFICER: Have you ever been threatened?

CHILD: Yes, a zombie threatened us but I slapped the zombie and he died, wham!

It was certainly a bit weird to be doing legal research, writing, and consultation in a meeting-space that was always filled with children, who were sometimes frustrated and crying, sometimes boisterous and disruptive, sometimes unnaturally quiet and patient. I was always amazed by how long some of those kids were able to sit still without anything to entertain them, when my nephews and nieces of the same age would have been clawing at the walls. I don't know if it's because they were accustomed to less constant stimulation, or if it was an instinctive response to their parent's palpable anxiety and discomfort. Seeing children in an internment camp was jarring to people who came to Dilley for the first time—I know it was jarring to me—but I quickly got used to writing emails and last-minute briefs with the cacophony of 60-odd kids in the background. *We'll get them all out of here, no matter what it takes*, was what we all told ourselves, and for a time, this goal was largely achievable. The government's general practice was to release families into the United States for further proceedings if they passed their initial interviews with the asylum office, and until mid-2019, almost all the families *did* pass—in part because they were migrating from extremely dangerous areas and had past experiences that clearly qualified them for legal protection, but also because they were smart, and had a lot to lose, and so they learned to play the government's game, delineating their

fears for their own safety into the fine-grained legal categories the government demanded. So the imprisonment and interrogation of most of the families at the Dilley internment camp was a high-stakes hazing, a sadistic initiation ritual rather than a long-term punishment.

But the Trump administration, over time, realized the same thing that the Obama administration did before them. To send a clear message to adult immigrants, it was children they would need to target, both because of the emotional and symbolic weight of hurting children, and because child immigrants' slightly more robust legal protections would require more concerted effort to erode. The administration sent this message most publicly and dramatically during the brief period of "zero tolerance" family separation, when children were systematically ripped away from their parents. Although that memorable piece of cruelty was relatively short-lived, it was only the beginning of the Trump administration's efforts to punish families who cross the border with children. First, the government started pushing more asylum-seekers back into Mexico, ensuring that fewer families ever made it past the border. For those families who were still arrested and brought to the family internment camps, the government made it increasingly hard for families to access lawyers in advance of their interviews. Then they replaced asylum officers (who act as interviewers) with Border Patrol agents. Then they invalidated overnight huge swathes of case law that had once offered families protection. Then they banned virtually all Central Americans who travelled through Mexico from seeking asylum.

Suddenly, from one day to the next, massive numbers of families began failing their fear interviews and getting whisked away by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). When some families who had not yet been deported brought a lawsuit against the government, challenging the barrage of new policies that seemed specifically designed to make it impossible for families to pass their interviews, the government punished the families by locking them up indefinitely. If we can't deport you, the government decided, we won't release you, either. There are now dozens of mothers and children who are coming up on their one-year anniversary in immigration jail, all because the government is determined to make an example out of them, and to discourage other families from fighting their deportations. Even as the pandemic has raged, and ample evidence shows that keeping people confined in prison settings is dangerous, the government still refuses to let many of these families go.

Back when I was still working full-time at the family internment camp, and most families were still getting released instead of deported or indefinitely detained, I was often disturbed by the thought that I was complicit in what the government was doing there—that by providing legal services, and therefore allowing the government to claim that the families had access to attorneys, I was giving the government moral cover to keep imprisoning them. The way I made myself feel better, for entangling asylum-seekers in the government's sick mind-games, was by imagining that all those children would eventually be released into the United States. Even if they couldn't get status through

the notoriously harsh immigration court system, I reasoned, they would inevitably have U.S. citizen siblings, and later, perhaps, their own U.S. citizen children. Ultimately, it would simply become too complicated and time-consuming for the government to locate and remove them all. I told myself that the human will to move and settle was, in fact, more primal and inexorable than the flimsy vagaries of the law; and so I hoped that the little bit of power my colleagues and I could give these families by helping them pass their interviews would become a bigger power later, once they were living and working, organizing and resisting, within the United States. But of course, the families who come through Dilley, and the number of people crossing the border generally, are a tiny trickle compared to the huge population of this country. And now, with the government's draconian new border policies, which have only become more restrictive during the pandemic, that trickle is getting smaller and smaller by the day.

MY NIECE—THE SAME ONE WHO ADMONISHED ME for having the audacity to take a vacation while children were still locked up in jail—has been very troubled by the existence of the family internment camp. She still regularly tells my sister about various plans she's been hatching to help the children escape. One such plan involved luring Donald Trump to the camp with a false story of a jailbreak, then overpowering him and locking him up, stealing his keys, and setting all the families free. Having said all this, she then casually asked my sister: "Hey, where can I get a fireball?"

Despite my suspicion that my niece might do pretty well leading a revolutionary cell, I don't really like when people pin too many of their hopes on children, or the "younger generation," whether that means the Zoomers or whoever comes after them. It feels like a lot of pressure. Millennials have struggled under the weight of Boomers' mistakes, and so, I assume, younger people will likewise struggle to recover ground from the devastating setbacks that have resulted from my generation's political impotence. I don't have children of my own, so I don't have any special emotional investment in the next generation liking me very much. For their own sakes, rather than our own, I think we should respect and encourage the anger, defiance, and skepticism of children. We should want our species' newest members to be on fire with the uncynical fury of people who are seeing injustice for the first time, and are still fresh enough to recognize it for the perversion it is. So I hope that the children of the dispossessed will be as entitled in their demand for their rights as the rich are entitled in their demand for their petty desires. And I hope that children who are born into less dire circumstances can somehow intuit that those children in revolt are their real friends and companions, that they are all in league together against the cruel and bitter world made by adults; that their moral and natural loyalty is to their fellow-children, and not to their parents or grandparents. I hope that the children of the world will kick us, mock us, and cajole us out of our slumber. I hope that the mouths of babes breathe fireballs against their enemies. ✚

FRESH HOT TAKES ON

gender

by lyta gold & brianna rennix

Anyone Who Doesn't Want To Transition Has To Live As An Anchorite For 50 Years To Prove That Being Cis Isn't Just A Social Contagion

When Will We Solve The Problem Of Gender So That, As A Society, We Can Turn Our Full Attention To The Muddled Fruit/Vegetable Binary



Jadzia Dax And Ezri Dax Are The Embodiment Of Those "How I See Myself" Versus "What I'm Really Like" Memes And What Does This Have To Do With Gender Well Nothing Except The Trill Are An Obvious Metaphor About Trans Identity And How You Can Switch Your Gender Presentation And Maybe Become Cool But Probably Still Be Your Same Dopey Self

Politely Requesting More Fantasy Novels Where All The Women Wear Full Armor And All The Men Wear Diaphanous Robes

People Talk A Lot About "Desexualizing" Female Breasts But Somehow No One Has Time For My Speech About "Resexualizing" Male Nipples

Proposing "Hench" As The New Pronoun For If You're Not Really Sure What You Are But Will Blindly Accept Whatever Gender Identity Your Boss Tells You To Have

"Haughty And Fell" Is A Phrase From Tolkien's Legendarium That We Think Is Sexy And We Just Want People To Know About it

Relatedly: The Daily Struggle Of Figuring Out Whether You Yourself Wish To Be "Haughty And Fell," Or If You Are Attracted To Other People Being "Haughty and Fell," Or If It's A h&f4h&f Type Situation

Modern Men Dream of Being Heroes Because They Feel Emasculated By Society And I Totally Get That Because I Too Was Once A Shy Child

It Should Be Possible To Fully Switch Sexes Back And Forth Like Clothing And Yes I Am Saying That A Dick Is Nothing More Than A Customizable Accessory

Catholic And Protestant Are Two Genders of Christianity And In Your Heart You Know This Is True And Also What Their Kinks Are*

When My Brother Was A Child He Divided The World Into "Wheels" And "Not-Wheels" And Is This Maybe A Better Gender Binary And Also Why Did He Consider Submarines "Wheels"*

End Copyright So We Can Force-Femme Harry Potter



"Cool Girls" And "Nerd Boys" Are The Same Gender: You Decide If This Is An Insult Or Not, Because Either Way It Is True

All First Dates Should Take Place At Stage-Fighting Workshops Because If You And Your Partner Can't Swordfight Your Enemies While Standing Back To Back Then What Are You Even Doing

All Second Dates Should Involve One of You Receiving A Minor Wound And The Other Tending It Lovingly Because It's Pretty Important To Establish Whether You Can Handle That Kind Of Situation

All Third Dates Should Involve A Duel With One Of Your Enemies Because It's A Metaphor For Facing Your Demons Which Is Vital Before You Can Commit And Getting Back To Gender Yes Your Demons Are Always Male I Don't Need To Explain This Do I

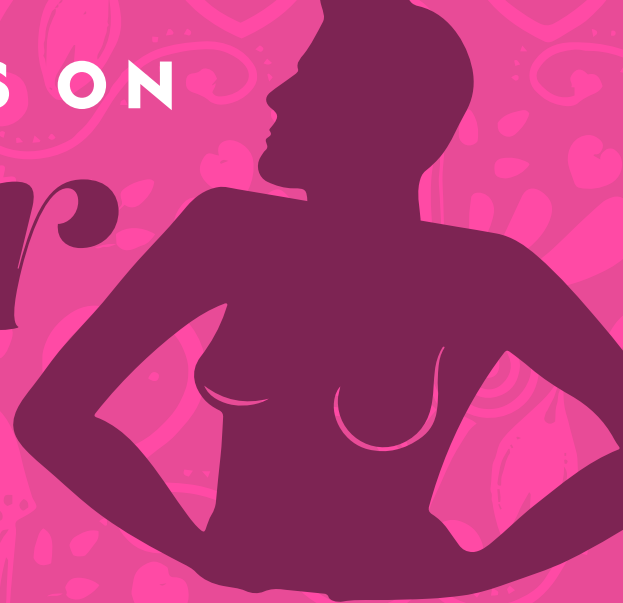
My Deepest Desire Is To Be A Fat Happy Mushroom Cavorting At A Maiden's Feet



Who Do I Apologize To If I Accidentally Misgender Myself When Speaking About Myself In The Third Person? And Other Questions To Distract HR With While You Covertly Organize Your Workplace

Brooding Silently In My Leather Wingback Chair About The Meaning Of The Term "Transmasculine": More Updates As They Occur

*FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE SEE THE CHART OF CHARTS





THE TUTTLE TWINS AND THE CASE OF THE REALLY BAD LIBERTARIAN PROPAGANDA

by Rob Larson

ANYONE WITH KIDS IN THEIR FAMILY KNOWS THAT one of the great things about them is their bottomless gullibility. Until critical thinking abilities (sometimes) develop in later life, children will believe any hilariously phony lie you tell them, for example, that a minor deity is so excited to get their disgusting baby teeth that they leave printed American currency for it, with the treasury secretary's name on it. It's the dumbest thing in the world, but I and probably you believed it for years.

Sadly, some would abuse this adorable nature of kids for sleazy purposes. There's a whole genre of apocryphal quotations by leaders of authoritarian movements, saying some version of "Give me the child for seven years and I'll give you the man," meaning those formative early years can shape beliefs that endure through adulthood. Jesuit leaders, Lenin and others are alleged to have said similar lines, but regardless of the exact provenance, the point is clear enough.

But Church and State are far from the only authoritarians seeing value in indoctrinating guileless kids. I learned this recently when the unscrupulous editor of a popular leftist magazine, let's call it *Present Developments*, mailed me a large box of libertarian children's lit known as the *Tuttle Twins*, a series of illustrated stories and workbooks designed to teach youngsters the wonders of the free market. (You may have seen ads for it

on Facebook.) Having now perused all 11 books in the special "Tuttle Twins combo back," I can confirm that it's exactly as bad as you think it is.

FROM THE MOUTHS OF BABES

Each *Tuttle Twins* book is based on the lessons of a prominent intellectual from the libertarian right, like Friedrich von Hayek, Ayn Rand, or Ludwig von Mises, with a dedication to the figure and a small bio on their work at the end. The author is Connor Boyack, Utah resident, Brigham Young U grad, and president/founder of Libertas Institute, a free market think tank, which is great considering we only have about 900 of those. His bio claims that "in that capacity he has changed a significant number of laws in favor of personal freedom and free markets," presumably when not writing abominable Ayn Rand propaganda for defenseless kids.

The first book in the series, *The Tuttle Twins Learn About the Law*, is based on the work of Frédéric Bastiat. The twins themselves are a pair of earnest, curious kids, whose teacher assigns them to "ask a wise person to teach them about something very important," which as an educator I can tell you is a great pedagogical technique. They go to their neighbor Fred,

who takes them to his home library, with an incongruously lovingly rendered bookshelf with many recognizable libertarian titles, from Murray Rothbard to Ron Paul's *End the Fed* to, somehow, Jeremy Scahill's *Dirty Wars*.

Fred gives them Bastiat's book *The Law* and summarizes the highlights, starting with "We have rights," things we're allowed to do "and nobody else is allowed to stop me." "Like playing with my own toys?" asks a twin in incredibly natural dialogue. You can probably see where that's going—in the minds of libertarians "my own toys" becomes large-scale property, like palm oil plantations and plastics factories. (POP QUIZ: What's the difference between the relationship of a child to their toys and the relationship of a capitalist to a giant factory? ANSWER: big productive property confers economic *power* on its owners, to hire and fire people, and to shape market outcomes. If your toys were sentient beings and you could give them orders, your claim that nobody could tell you what to do with them would seem much less compelling!)

But the twins soon learn that their rights can be violated by "bad guys," and some of these "bad guys" can be in government, doing things "a lot of people like" but that are bad. Stepping into his tomato garden, Fred observes that it would be wrong for a neighbor to take his tomatoes without asking, and then says it's just as wrong for the government to take them and give them to the neighbor against Fred's will, which is illustrated with a masked cop stealing a bag of produce for the poor, providing a valuable window into the feverish libertarian imagination. "Stealing is always wrong," the kids write in their notebook, letting someone's raised produce beds stand in for the tens of billions of dollars Mike Bloomberg hoards for vanity presidential campaigns while kids drink lead-tainted water in school and do KickStarters for their insulin. (The way libertarians make their reasoning persuasive is to always use examples that are completely different in scale; so "Would it be wrong for the government to tell you how to run your lemonade stand?" is treated as identical to "Would it be wrong for the government to tell you how to run your giant sulfur mine?" "Property" is used generically to describe both apples and factories, with the buried assumption that there are no relevant qualitative differences between these two types of things that affect the legitimacy of the state regulating them.)

Of course, the right has to recognize that to its regret, a social safety net is widely popular. People don't wish to live in a society where the weak are left to die. So, as usual, personal charity is invoked as an effective substitute for government aid. We learn that Fred will "make meals for families when the dad loses his job." How nice! But sadly "the government forces me to help people, too," as in paying cruel taxes for Social Security and food stamps. Who knows why we're made to do that! Maybe because the average length of unemployment in the U.S. in January 2020 was 22 weeks, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which comes out to 462 missed meals per person, or 2,772 meals for the

depicted family of six. Better get cooking, Fred! Or just pay your fucking taxes.

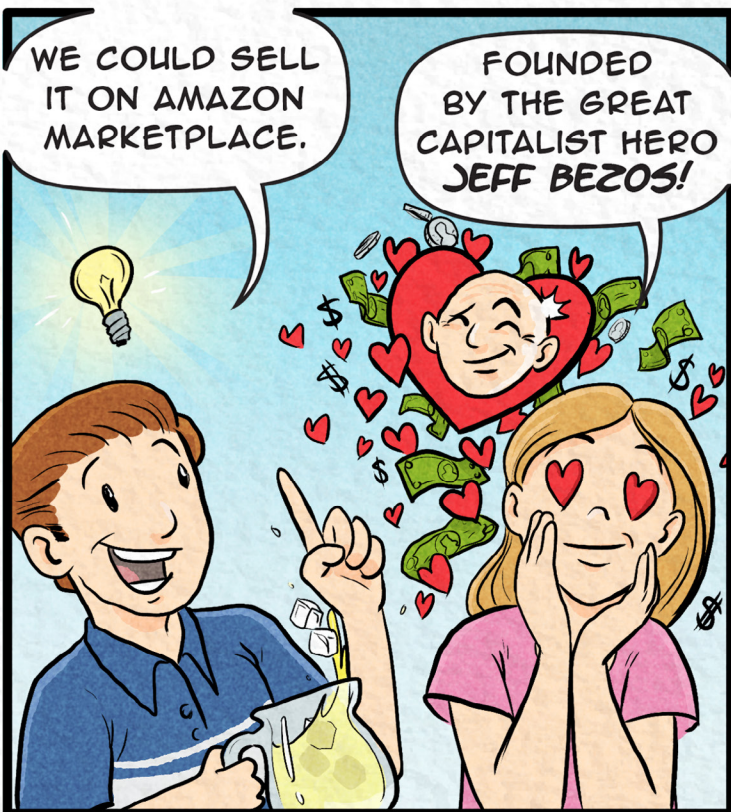
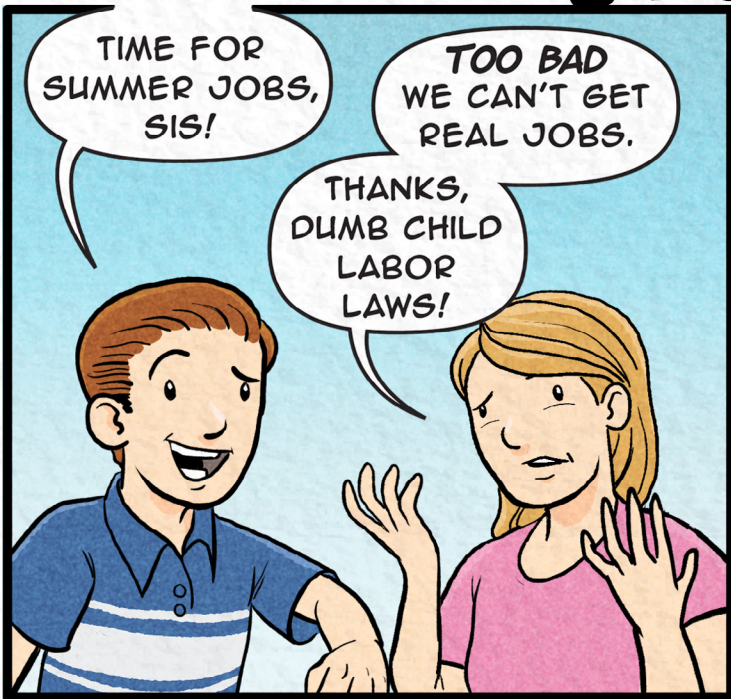
The kids learn this evil tax-funded social safety net is called "legal plunder," and having read their Bastiat well, they give a jar of tomatoes to a neighbor (who is lightly implied to be poor), declaring "We wanted to share with you, and nobody else made us do it." Take that, stupid Children's Health Insurance Program!

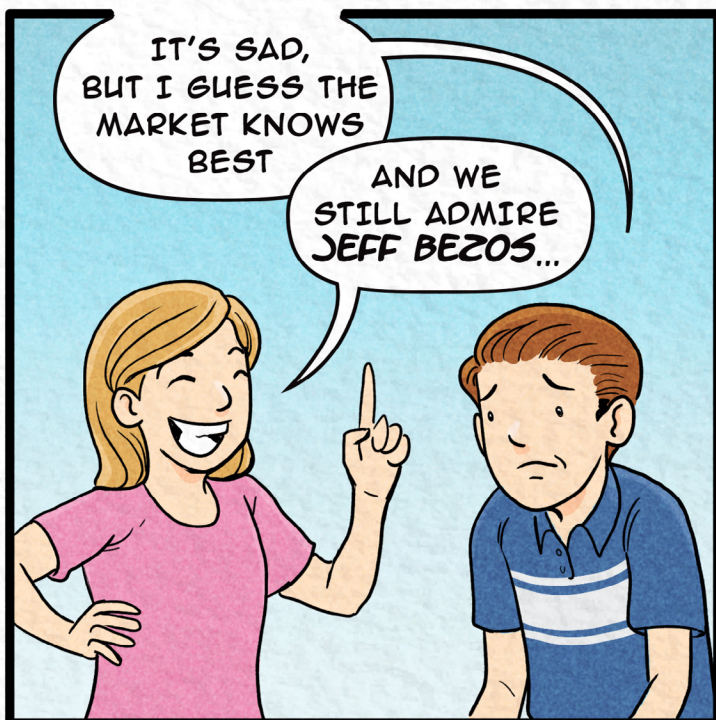
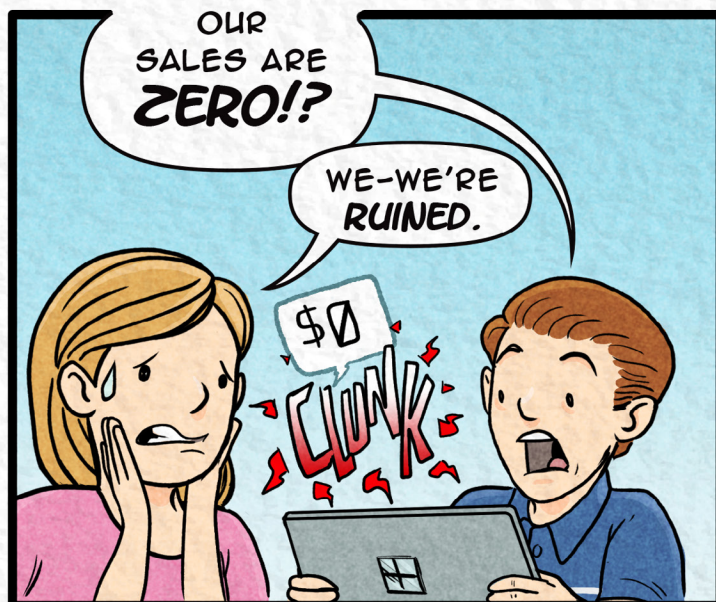
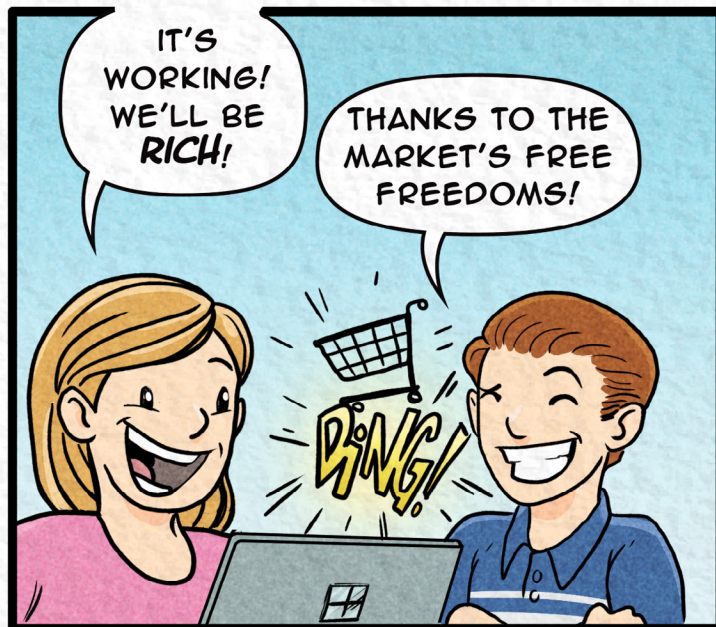
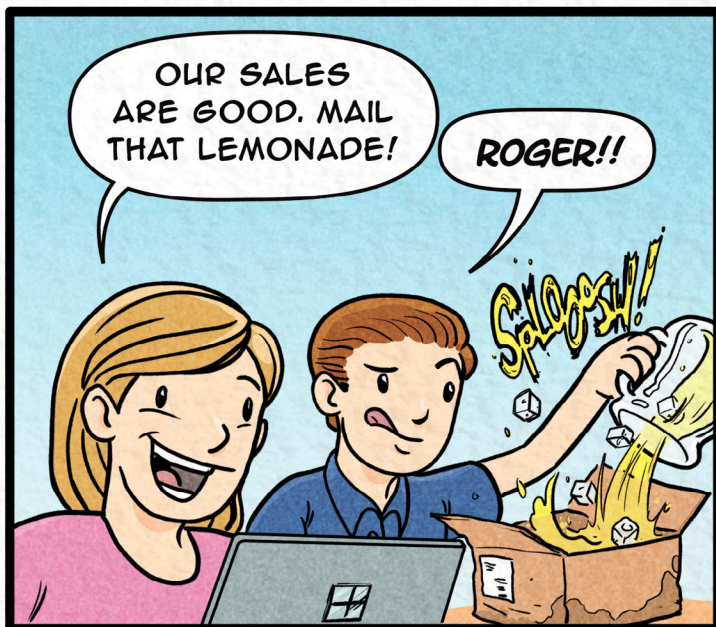
OVER THE COURSE OF THE MANY, MANY, MANY BOOKS in the series, the twins learn other lessons steeped in the hoary right-wing fever dream of the oppressed wealthy. In *The Tuttle Twins and the Miraculous Pencil*, the kids learn the staple economist story that "no one person knows how make a pencil," because all of its components are made in different places around the world, each with their own processes, workers, and inputs. The market efficiently organizes such activity through price signals driven by supply and demand. Much of this market worship is explained to the children by their elementary school teacher, Mrs. Miner, who is rendered as a Black woman. This is somewhat problematic, as women and people of color are famously underrepresented among the far-right in general and the libertarian tendency in particular, and in fact African Americans are broadly more socialist than the wider U.S. population. Something about the white, white Utah author's having his far-right words come from the mouth of a working class woman of color is, shall we say, distasteful. (Or, shall we say repugnant valor-stealing turd polishing? I leave the reader Free to Choose!)

In *The Tuttle Twins and the Road to Surfdom*, dedicated to little-known selfless philanthropist Charles Koch, the Tuttle family is dismayed to find the road to their beach house is highly congested, and the stores nearby are closing down. "Ethan and Emily like playing at the beach, but they *loved* shopping at La Playa Lane." The displeased vacationing white family soon learns that "a few years ago, voters approved a Master Transportation Plan," which in addition to building a new road to another beach town nearby, bizarrely closed off the existing road. This is the kind of contrived parody of public planning that market fundamentalists imagine is to blame for capitalism's problems.

The kids go to work with their uncle, an alleged journalist, and interviews soon show the Big Government Road has caused unintended consequences, from lowering home values on the old road to raising traffic near the new one, and the state used eminent domain to build the highway through a family dairy farm. Businesses closing on the family's favorite beach can't afford to move to the other beach town, Surfdom (ROFL), and the rents there are very high for businesses that can. This is blamed on central planning, when "a few people make decisions for everybody," even though the story indicates there was a public vote.

THE TRUBBLE TWINS IN **MONOPOLY** *MIXUP!!*





This focus on unintended consequences caused by evil government central planning is much-favored on the right, but as I've covered before for this fine magazine, it oddly never features unpleasant side-effects from major decisions by centrally-planned commercial corporations. The monumental planning and logistical systems of Amazon, Wal-Mart, and Exxon-Mobil are always left off the hook. These sprawling corporate empires require very time-sensitive movements of literally millions of different products and inputs for making them, shipped around the world in intricate webs, and the companies' incredible growth is a great, ongoing testament to the potential of central planning. But these commercial planning systems don't arise in the books, and planning is only represented by contrived instances of government bungling. Weird! To be safe, the book also depicts "Individualism" with a rendering of two people shaking hands, and "Collectivism" as two hands shackled together, in case the dumb kids are just looking at the pictures.

SUFFER THE CHILDREN

Further adventures take the twins to the circus, where they become guest clowns and are soon caught up looking for the star attraction, a strongman predictably named Atlas, who has quit (shrugged). The tyrannical ringmaster had cut the strongman's pay, and thinks the circus can carry on without him. Soon the kids discover being a clown "was actually pretty easy," while Atlas labored hard working out, and indeed the entire circus also relies on him to build the tents, hang the tightropes and feed the animals—this apparently being a carnival without carnies.

The slothful clowns resent Atlas' popularity and workplace perks, and spout evil egalitarian lies like "We all make this circus work together" and "We're all just as important"—typical Marxist frauds of course. In time the kids learn "these clowns need to understand that some skills are more valuable than others... Atlas has talent that is harder to replace—and that's why he's more valuable." The Russian organist pipes up and "remembers history," saying the clowns' seductive demands for equality "destroyed my Russia," previously a lovely problemless place.

In the end, the kids talk Atlas into returning to the circus, and he dramatically saves everyone when the pole supporting the Big Top starts to collapse, since it was installed poorly without the superman upon whom everything apparently depends. The ringmaster takes Atlas back and Everyone Learns Their Lesson.

Except author Boyack, apparently, because in his desire to insert adult libertarian literary references into his god-awful kids' books he has rather badly mangled Rand's point. Rand's hit *Atlas Shrugged* depicts a world where CEOs are not just senior managers like usual, but also the engineers who design their headquarters and the scientists who develop new products. They are

also depicted as highly attractive and have cool edgy sex. But when intrusive government regulators, who are not sexy but fat and gross, begin meddling, the elite capitalist innovators desert the world for "Galt's Gulch," and the world falls into destructive chaos without them.

BUT HERE BOYACK HAS DEPICTED THE CHARACTER Atlas as the cartoonishly indispensable figure, and in his eagerness to justify the cutesy use of the iconic name has made him into a worker at the circus, who quits after his pay is cut by the tyrannical ringmaster. While the book is as jammed as the others with pro-market economic vocabulary and stale right-wing life lessons, it seems to accidentally depict the leftist response to Rand's capitalist supermen—it's the *workers* who actually produce the goods and services we rely upon. The joyless Rand must be spinning in her grave, one hopes. The lesson of the book is properly understood as: capital depends upon labor, and if labor is withheld through a strike, the capitalist enterprise collapses. Let's hope kids are smart enough to sniff out the socialism. (Although the circus setting is a bit poorly chosen, because if there is one place where a single individual's act *isn't* missed especially much, it's the circus—if the Strongman performance is replaced with another trick by the lions, or two more minutes of clowns, who cares? If Atlas shrugged, would anybody notice?)

Similar blunders appear in *The Tuttle Twins and the Messed Up Market*, dedicated to arch-conservative Austrian School founder Ludwig von Mises, who so hated social democracy he wrote:

"It cannot be denied that Fascism and similar movements aiming at the establishment of dictatorships are full of the best intentions and that their intervention has, for the moment, saved European civilization. The merit that Fascism has thereby won for itself will live on eternally in history."

(The quote does not appear in *The Tuttle Twins and the Messed Up Market*, surprisingly.)

In this fun episode, the kids come into three grand each when the family sells its theater business. The Twins decide to become creditors, extending microloans to other kids' businesses. I'm sure we all had the same childhood experience.

Soon the kids have made a loan, although one that sadly betrays their banking amateurism, since it's to a hardworking kid of color. ("Redlining" does not appear in the Glossary of Terms, although useful terms like "Praxeology" do make the cut.) Soon the twins have organized a Children's Entrepreneur Market, held on a church's grounds so Boyack can avoid issues of market access, which in reality is often controlled by platforms like Amazon or monopolists like the cell phone app stores. (Again, the entire reason libertarian logic is persuasive is

because its examples all take place in a world of children's lemonade stands, rather than in an actual adult marketplace where giant corporations dominate markets and have the power to crush new entrants immediately.)

The kids learn about incentives, opportunity cost and other Econ 101 basics, much of it from Mrs. Dobson, another of the women of color whom Boyack apparently enjoys using as mouthpieces for his overwhelmingly white boy school of thought. They speak approvingly with a young girl selling candied apples, who's working hard because "I really want to earn money to help pay for my dad's medicine. He's sick and it costs a lot of money, so I want to help." "That's a really good incentive," replies Mrs. Dobson.

was subsidized and drew the business away. Of course, public goods like rec centers are mostly important for less wealthy people who aren't getting money from their family—which the book just pretended to be against, because actually Boyack has absolutely no problem with independently wealthy people unfairly competing against those with less wealth.

But the poor market is dealt a deathblow when police arrive with the city manager, who—I shit you not—says: "Folks... children...I understand that you're all just peacefully buying and selling things, but..." Horribly, the all-powerful authoritarian state requires business permits, and apparently every parent in town is so blunderingly inept they didn't think of this



But the market gets Messed Up when a kid undercuts everyone else's sales with 25-cent brownies, a price point he can afford because his parents are paying him to be there—a "subsidy" as we say in the evil sciences. This attracts customers from the candy apple kid thanks to "unfair competition," even though it's happening because the kid is getting money from his parents, with Boyack apparently not realizing that the unfairness of spoiled kids getting inherited fortunes while everyone else struggles is another socialist argument. In fact, the story is a perfect example of a "free market" in operation; the other kids' parents weren't the government, they were private actors with a private fortune, and what we have actually seen is the tendency for concentrated private wealth to destroy the possibility of market competition.

The story then follows the reactionary canard of blaming all of capitalism's numerous faults on government subsidies, e.g. a family had to close its arts studio business because the dirty city government put up a Community Recreational Center, which

while their kids were supposedly setting up a giant Kid Biz Fair. So, the manager declares "This market ends now." In a moving, National Book Award-deserving passage, "The sound of small, chilly raindrops pattered through the market as police officers hovered over the families packing up their booths." What a bunch of goose shit. Oh, and business licenses in Utah cost about \$20-\$50. (And the reason the state needs to charge people to do business is that the state the entity that bears the costs of enforcing property rights and creating the infrastructure for any commerce to take place at all.)

The Tuttle Twins books have reasonably appealing watercolor illustrations, and the typical low-watt visual gags of a bored illustrator—three kids at the market are drawn to resemble Alvin and the Chipmunks, Atlas has the logo of Rand's *Shrugged* on his workout shirt, and there's the meticulous rendering of the reactionary bookshelf at Neighbor Fred's. The artist also produced campaign videos for Ron Paul's 2012 presidential candidacy, in case you were thinking of letting him off the hook.

FREE-TO-CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

Finally, there are the choose-your-story format books. These are similar to ones you may have read as a young person, written for teenage readers with fewer illustrations and clearly meant for the sprawling YA market. Adorably, the books aren't "choose your own adventure" like the popular commercial books but "choose your own consequence," because the Gummint and its Unintended Consequences.

In *The Tuttle Twins and the Case of the Broken Window*, the kids are in a high-stakes, end of season baseball game, with a tying run on base, apparently in the Cliché League. But Emily's great at-bat destroys a priceless window in the local church, and we must choose: Run Away or Come Clean. Let's be responsible socialists and Come Clean.

The church is insured, but once again Boyack thoughtlessly reminds us of capitalism's shittiness when Father McGillivray observes the policy has a \$5000 deductible, "and our rates will go up. We would prefer not to make a claim at all." You might think that if it's too expensive to use, what the fuck is the point of the insurance market at all, but that's not the Tuttle Way. The kids' family agrees to pay the deductible and have the kids work it off, which they do by having them intern for their Uncle Ben, who's "got this YouTube news broadcast that's pretty popular." (Quite the pickup line.)

Soon the kids are at their uncle's rented offices in a poor part of town, and we learn the city's planning to build a sports stadium—four of them, in fact. Folks, you may not believe this, but what's the kids' reaction to this incredibly plausible-sounding city plan? "And how are they going to pay for them?" Emily said. 'Bingo,' said Uncle Ben." I probably should have included a content warning that your mind might be blown away by these market truths.

We learn the city is apparently planning to use eminent domain to demolish a poor neighborhood to build the stadiums, although the book treats this like it's a big mystery, when this kind of corporate-driven development plan is usually taken up in city council meetings, along with the bond issuances to Pay For It. But checking in with reality is not one of the available Consequences, which instead are Go to the Archives or Go to the Neighborhood. I'm hoping for some more natural-sounding dialogue, so let's Go to the Neighborhood.

Boy, do I get it. "I don't think this is the part of town you want to be alone in," Ethan says. They encounter a girl on a stoop who we're told has braided hair, who introduces herself as Shiana Douglass. She says "This is our house but the city men come and say we hafta move but we don't wanna go because Mam says we like it here better than anyplace we been before." The boy adds "we ain't goin'" before their mother, "A large woman with a halo

of hair sauntered out from inside" as "The two children peered around her backside, their white teeth flashing."

Now folks, Boyack does not specifically say these people are African-American, and only later in some of the branching choose-your-storylines do you see illustrations confirming this, but you may have inferred it from the incredibly artful rendering of urban speech. The use of Douglass, and presumably the reference to the escaped slave and great public intellectual Frederick Douglass, is especially pitiful, since Douglass wrote: "Experience demonstrates that there may be a slavery of wages only a little less galling and crushing in its effects than chattel slavery, and this this slavery of wages must go down with the other...it is hard for labor...to cope with the tremendous power of capital in any contest for higher wages or improved condition." Not exactly the Fountainhead!






And *once again*, we have Boyack speaking through women of color. Mrs. Douglass elaborates that "You need to understand, because my guess is you don't come from this part of town, that the economics don't support this ballpark idea at all." The children explore the neighborhood, approaching a basketball court where "Rap blared," when "A huge young man, glistening with sweat, stepped in front of them. He held the ball in a pair of meaty hands, dusty, as if covered with powdered sugar." The young man, Carter, explains that the community resents white efforts to improve conditions, which only lead to urban renewal and demolition of black communities. Of course, African American voters are heavily in favor of funding actual social democratic programs of social uplift, with 74 percent supporting Medicare for All and 76 percent favoring free college tuition. Boyack's continuous clumsy use of Black mouthpieces is pretty bizarre. Unrelatedly, did you know Utah is only 1.4 percent Black?

The kids reflect on their privilege and how they can help the poor community develop economically, mostly by developing "trust." Sadly, this storyline leads to the kids failing to stop the demolitions, but the story consequences vary widely, including the kids exposing unsustainable city budgeting, getting mixed up in a window-smashing and repair racket, stopping the redevelopment itself, or going to jail for their terrible crimes against windows. And yes, I looked through all the endings and none of them have illustrations of guillotines. Perhaps I can choose an adventure where I never become an economist, never meet Nathan Robinson, and thus never have to read these godforsaken joyless cow flops!

There are many more books in the series, I would estimate about nine hundred thousand more, but I will conclude this review by saying the Tuttle Twins series is among the most wretchedly contrived, grotesquely unethically indoctrinating, cliché-ridden heaps of steaming garbage I've ever had the misfortune to read. Written to bring young people into one of the most disgraceful political tendencies in the world before they have the critical thinking skills to recognize it, it is a hideous fraud and an ugly twisted farce. ✚










THE CHART

ever wonder what's

	REACTION TO A CRIME	PEACOCK	EGG STYLE	NERD SHIT	WINTER SPORT
CLASSY	"I Say!"	<i>pet peacock</i>	<i>eggs benedict</i>	 <i>Alien</i>	<i>sledding</i>
BOURGEOIS	 <i>"I'm calling the police."</i>	<i>NBC peacock</i>	<i>poached egg</i>	<i>Alien/ Predator</i>	<i>skiing</i>
TRASHY	"I am the police."	<i>chicken</i>	<i>western omelet</i>	<i>Predator</i>	<i>sledding</i>
REPUBLICAN	<i>*racial slur*</i>	<i>oil-soaked peacock</i>	<i>egg from tortured chicken</i>	<i>Starship Troopers (unironically)</i>	<i>winning elections</i>
DEMOCRAT	<i>*racial slur but NICE*</i>	<i>focus-grouped peacock</i>	<i>egg from *humanely* tortured chicken</i>	<i>Harry Potter</i>	<i>losing elections</i>
CATHOLIC	<i>I did it, provided I didn't actually do it.</i>	<i>embarrassed peacock</i>	<i>over easy but you claim it's over medium</i>	<i>Lord of the Rings</i>	<i>standing furiously in the cold and slowly developing frostbite as punishment for having a body</i>
PROTESTANT	<i>Someone else did it.</i>	<i>grilled peacock</i>	<i>hard-boiled to oblivion</i>	<i>Big Bang Theory</i>	 <i>biathlon</i>
JEWISH	<i>The important thing is I feel terrible.</i>	<i>smoked peacock</i>	 <i>egg bagel</i>	<i>Star Trek</i>	<i>indoor shuffleboard</i>
WHEELS	<i>Vroom vroom *screeeeeeee*</i>	<i>peacock helicopter</i>	<i>engine eggs</i>	<i>Mad Max</i>	<i>snowmobiling</i>
NOT WHEELS	<i>Silence.</i>	 <i>peacock</i>	<i>japanese cube eggs</i>	<i>Waterworld</i>	<i>drinking hot cocoa on the couch</i>

OF CHARTS

what? now you know.

TRANSPORT	PIE	PLACE TO HAVE SEX	WEED?	RANDOM	THINGS/ PROCESSES
 train	lemon meringue	 pool	hand-rolled spliff	democratic socialism	process
 plane	key lime	hot tub	artisanal gummies	 owls	thing
 automobile	pecan	puddle	vaping	landlords	process and a thing
protester-squashing pickup truck	 apple pie (lattice crust)	epstein's island	prison	mammon	thing
rainbow tank	apple pie (dutch crust but added too fast, fallen in the middle in a goopy mess)	epstein's island	prison but with a squash court	 wine cellar	how dare you compare two concepts when you could be voting???
The "Shame!" walk from Game of Thrones	king cake	closet	 surreptitious bong	masturbation	process
Golf cart, or turning the car around after the 5th time Mom yells "behave or I'll turn the car around!"	fruitcake	back of a chevy	claiming surreptitious bong is your brother's	cancel culture	thing
desert trudge	chocolate cheesecake	yichud, mikvah	glass pipe bought in Israel; yes I did Birthright but just to like, see how bad things are, you know?	gossip	process
all	all pies	unicycle	your dealer's sweet-ass bike	 windmills	thing
none	crepes	forest meadow	growing your own	wind	process

IT'S TIME TO TA

BY ANGELO GUISADO

And Puerto

On February 23, 2020, in what now feels like a century ago, then-presidential candidate Bernie Sanders drew heavy criticism over his comments on the late Fidel Castro during an interview on the show “60 Minutes.”

While noting that he opposed Castro’s “authoritarian” rule over Cuba, Sanders stated that it was “unfair to simply say everything is bad” about Castro’s tenure. Sanders had, in the past, marveled at the country’s healthcare system, the crown jewel of the nation’s socialist enterprise. His detractors—Republicans and Democrats alike, including the now-Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden—countered that Sanders’ short-sightedness overlooked a host of human rights violations, from Castro’s summary executions to his imprisoning scores of political dissidents, all in the name of social welfare.

Yet in the era of COVID-19, we as Americans have been brought to face our own moral shortcomings, and left grappling with the question more than ever before: what even are our human rights?

Our enthusiastically privatized economy has caused tens of millions to lose their jobs and, necessarily, their healthcare. Tens of millions face eviction and miles-long food lines. At different points during the pandemic, our infrastructure has forced our doctors to make their own Sophie’s choices. The push to privatize our nation and resist anything resembling universal healthcare punishes those already on the margins of society, leaving most of us in bleak shape. Our most prominent colony, Puerto Rico, is on the brink of total abandonment; the rate of COVID-19 transmissions remains highest in our prisons and on our Indian reservations. Where are their human rights protections?

Comparatively, Cuba appears stable, handling the pandemic with aplomb. By the time President Trump chastised Democrats’ concerns about the coronavirus at a campaign rally in late February, Cuba had already implemented a prevention and control plan. The first Cuban COVID-19 cases were reported on



LK ABOUT CUBA.

Rico, Too.

March 11, at which point the government undertook large-scale efforts to trace, isolate, and test contacts, far outpacing the United States Francisco Durán, the national director of Epidemiology of the Cuban Ministry of Public Health, outlined the Cuban plan for something approximating universal testing to begin in May. As of the time of this writing, most of the country's 15 provinces report no COVID-19 cases and, on at least one day, the entire coun-

try reported no new transmissions whatsoever. Meanwhile, well over 150,000 have died of COVID-19 on American soil. How could a poor, isolated Caribbean healthcare system manage to protect 11 million people, while the United States struggles to test even a small fraction of its population?

As is so often the case when Castro's name is invoked, Sanders' comments caused visceral, immoderate reactions. For some, it was a tear at the suture of unhealed wounds; for others, an unalloyed pride in their anti-imperialist champion. But in reality, Sanders made the same anodyne observation that President Barack Obama made in 2016, when he told a Havanan audience, "Cuba has an extraordinary resource—a system of education which values every boy and every girl."

Castro was not perfect—far from it. He imprisoned many people, amassed a vast personal fortune in spite of speeches denouncing inequality, and had strong authoritarian tendencies. He also persecuted gay people, ushering in a campaign to "re-educate" the country's gay population after the revolution. It was not uncommon for Cuba to send its gay citizens to labor camps well into the 1980s. Although



he showed what seemed like honest contrition when he accepted responsibility for the “great injustice” he caused Cuba’s gay community in a 2010 interview, it’s hard to forget how he handled the AIDS crisis, forcing HIV-infected people to live in quarantined sanitariums, sequestered from society and stigmatized.

At the same time, Cuba has made historic and unprecedented gains in literacy, housing, and healthcare. With miniscule infant mortality rates and the highest rate of doctors per capita in the world, the country ranks near the top of the global health leaderboard. Cuba is able to protect its citizens simply because it desires to. This is a stunning feat for a cash-poor Caribbean nation, one which continues to suffocate under the vise grip of a U.S. embargo that continually impedes Cuba’s ability to import vital supplies under normal times, even more so in the middle of a global pandemic. One Cuban official recently observed that, even for a nation that spends almost half of its GDP on healthcare, education, and social security, the embargo remains “the main obstacle not only to respond to major health crises like COVID-19, but the main obstacle to the country’s development at [sic] any area.” Once one considers precisely how much destruction U.S. foreign policy has wrought, Cuba’s achievements become astounding.

THE UNITED STATES HAS BEEN MEDDLING IN CUBAN AFFAIRS since at least the 18th century. American statesmen such as Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, and John C. Calhoun all favored annexing the island for American imperial opportunity. The infamous Monroe Doctrine, which opposed European colonialism in the Americas, counseled in favor of American annexation. In fact, in 1897, President William McKinley offered to buy Cuba from Spain for \$300 million, which Spain rejected. But the United States would soon get the opportunity it was looking for when the U.S.S. Maine, a second-class battleship stationed in Havana Harbor, exploded under suspect circumstances on February 15, 1898. The Maine was in Havana to protect at-risk U.S. corporate interests while Cuba waged its Independence War against Spain. The explosion gave the United States an excuse to intervene in the war, supposedly on Cuba’s behalf. As it fought what is now referred to as the Spanish-American War of 1898, the U.S. Navy overpowered an outmatched Spanish fleet, leading to the U.S.’s seizure of Puerto Rico, Guam, the Philippines and—after ratifying the Treaty of Paris a year later—gaining dominion and control over Cuba. In 1901, the United States then

forced a take-it-or-leave it deal (the Platt Amendment) down Cuba’s throat: a carte blanche for the United States to intervene militarily, and permission to annex Guantanamo Bay for naval and coaling purposes (though today the base is put to much, much more gruesome use). In exchange, Cubans were promised an eventual end to U.S. occupation.

For the next five decades, the United States treated Cuba and its residents as it pleased: first as its personal sugar mill, then as its personal paradise. President Theodore Roosevelt appointed the American lawyer and diplomat Charles Edward Magoon as a provisional governor to rule the island from 1906 to 1909, during which period the U.S. military intervened as it saw fit. Cubans didn’t take this lying down, however. Quite the opposite: in 1912, Afro-Cubans formed the aptly named Partido de Independientes de Color, their own political party to oppose American intervention. In response, the U.S.-backed government executed, and in many cases lynched, some 3,000 members. After quelling the insurrection, U.S. interventions resumed intermittently through 1922.

For the vast majority of people, especially Afro-Cubans like my father, life in Cuba was hell. Sent to labor in the sugarcane fields after receiving only a sixth-grade education, my father was among the masses of Cubans that U.S.-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista pushed into agrarian servitude. Life under Batista was as Mikhail Kalatozov depicted it in the iconic film *Soy Cuba*: bitter, grueling, and without a future. Just like the American South, the island—40 percent Afro-Cuban by 1959—was a sharecropped plantation economy based explicitly on racial subjugation.

U.S. marines occupied Cuba until 1923, then turned to propping up whatever murderous, corrupt dictatorship best suited the bottom lines of rapacious, sugar-hungry U.S. companies. By 1926, American companies owned more than half the Cuban sugar industry and imported huge swaths from refineries on the island. Corruption and American sycophancy continued to plague Cuban government for decades. To wit, Batista reinstalled himself by coup in 1952, and immediately suspended the constitution that he himself had passed in 1940. The besieged country then fell into outright military rule.

Even after Batista’s takeover, American corporations still refined 40 percent of all Cuban sugar, and more than half the national gross was sent to the United States to satisfy a minimum quota set by Congress. The quota had been set in part to stabilize the island’s economy, which had become turbulent after decades of political turmoil. By the 1950s, sugar production was waning, but American companies still dominated the Cuban economy. Together they held 25 percent of total bank deposits, 50 percent of the railways, and nearly 90 percent of all total utilities. Outsized American influence seeped from the rural countryside into the cities, and urban life became a haven for prostitution and gambling. Havana was glitz and glam, seaside developments, and downtown casinos—industries that served a nearly-exclusive American clientele, and were well known to be run by American mobsters Lucky Luciano, Meyer Lansky, Santo Trafficante Jr., and others. Batista allowed all of this and more, taking hefty sums from profligate American enterprise and cultivating widespread corruption throughout his government. In an interview with the *Nation*, the late playwright Arthur Miller described Havana society “as hopelessly corrupt, a Mafia playground, a bordel-



lo for Americans and other foreigners.”

While tourists went thrill-seeking, profits from nearly every facet of the Cuban economy fled the island, landing in American corporate accounts and politicians’ campaign coffers. The United States had turned Cuba into an offshore Las Vegas, a satellite American paradise that was worlds away from the reality of a failing one-crop economy beset by high unemployment and extreme rural poverty. By 1959, some 40 percent of adults were illiterate, 60 percent lived on dirt floors, 66 percent had no indoor toilets, and one in 14 houses had electricity. According to then-Senator John F. Kennedy, Jr.:

“Fulgencio Batista murdered 20,000 Cubans in seven years—a greater proportion of the Cuban population than the proportion of Americans who died in both World Wars, and he turned Democratic Cuba into a complete police state—destroying every individual liberty.”

U.S. politicians began to worry that domestic corporate investments might turn sour, a fear that became realized in 1959. At the helm of the Cuban Revolution, Castro nationalized industries, diminished the U.S. pressure on the country’s economy, and ended the crooked imperial relationship and siphoning that had caused so many Cubans to suffer. But Castro didn’t want to end trade with the United States, far from it. In the midst of the Revolution, and after a snub by President Dwight Eisenhower, Castro met with Vice President Richard Nixon in Washington to ask for an increase in the U.S. sugar quota. Only once Nixon and Eisenhower discovered that Castro had allied himself with the Soviets did Castro’s olive branch snap in two. The United States rebuffed the idea, setting into motion the eventual ban on not just sugar, but on all Cuban commerce—and a crippling six-decades-long bloqueo.

Beyond state-sponsored murder, racial subjugation, and forced peonage, the United States engaged in a decades-long campaign of economic exploitation that continues to present day. By American estimates, the embargo costs Cuba \$1.2 billion per year in lost sales and exports, though the independent nonprofit Cuba Policy Foundation estimates annual losses to be closer to \$5 billion, or 5 percent of total GDP. The U.S. counters that it is still accounting for assets nationalized by the revolutionary government, but Cuba says the blockade has cost it \$753.69 billion, orders of magnitude above the estimated \$1.8 billion in seized American property. In other words, Cuba isn’t struggling because of communism. It’s struggling because of America.

The consequences have been devastating: the nation suffers from an acute lack of petroleum, textiles, meat, and high-speed internet access, among other amenities. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, both the United Nations Secretary General and High Commissioner for Human Rights have called for an end to the embargo, to no avail. And so the long history of American meddling endures. Still, many of my relatives still in Cuba tell me that it’s unfair to compare living standards. I’m the one at risk of a pandemic-based mass death, they remind me, not them.

As I think about what the Cuban future would have looked like under uninterrupted American control, comparisons to the United States feel imprecise, almost arbitrary. Havana is not New York; it is not even Miami. Even though Cuba boasts a higher literacy rate, a lower infant mortality rate, a lower pre-COVID unemployment rate, a lower incarceration rate than the United States, in addition

to a miniscule homelessness rate, it’s not exactly fair to compare a former subject to its overlord. My relatives lead dignified lives but truly struggle at times; almost everyone on the island does.

Nor are the nation’s closest neighbors necessarily helpful examples. Several of them, too, have suffered from U.S. imperialist meddling. For long stretches of time, the U.S. military occupied the Dominican Republic and Haiti, intervened to support a coup in Jamaica, and in 1983, it even invaded the tiny island of Grenada. All of these interventions were intended to suppress rising socialist, populist, or nationalist political tides in favor of regimes friendly to U.S. corporations.

Still, the fate of one territory is particularly instructive. To understand what Cuba might have looked like under continued American occupation, one need look no further than Puerto Rico.

THE OCCUPATION, EXPLOITATION, AND ENTHUSIASTIC colonization of Puerto Rico reveals everything about American dedication to human rights. Although officially a “commonwealth” of the United States, the only word that does the relationship justice is colony. Despite taking radically different turns after the 1950s, the similarities between Cuba and Puerto Rico are striking, starting with the fact that Puerto Rico fell under U.S. monitoring and military rule while also seeking independence from Spain in 1898. Following the same Treaty of Paris that birthed the U.S. base on Guantanamo Bay, the United States determined that “the civil rights, and political status of the native inhabitants of [Puerto Rico] . . . shall be determined by Congress.” To this day, our bicameral legislature continues to exercise virtually unrestricted plenary power over the island.

As in Cuba, the United States subjected Puerto Rico to the same King Sugar economy, forcing young men away from schools and into seasonal jobs in the cane fields as machateros, vagoneros, and fulgoneros, all the while depleting arable land from overexhaustive cane-harvesting. There, too, U.S. corporate investment was significant. To protect it and consolidate control even further, American politicians passed the 1917 Jones-Shafroth Act. Although the act granted Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship, it was largely a vector to enlist age-eligible men into World War I, while denying Puerto Ricans the right to vote, barring them congressional representation, and granting Congress the right to ignore and override any bill of rights or laws passed by the Puerto Ricans themselves. Like Cuba, it was American colonialism at its finest.

When global sugar production declined in Puerto Rico, too, the United States pulled the reins over its colony even tighter. The United States appointed all governors, auditors, and created the infamous IPF which, under maniacal FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, brought about a ruthlessly violent mass surveillance state. The Insular Police Force amassed a two-million-page-long collection of carpetas, or dossiers, on all activists on the island. Its main target was surveilling (and later dismantling) the Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico, which was led by Pedro Albizu Campos, a Harvard Law School valedictorian whose carpeta was 4,700 pages long. The FBI pet project tracked and infiltrated labor organizations, stu-

dent groups, barber shops, even sending an American OSS (Office of Strategic Services, a U.S. wartime intelligence agency) agent to pose as a liquor baron and dive bar owner who—to protect his own cover—once foiled the FBI arrest of a suspected Puerto Rican nationalist in his own bar. The operation was as toxic as it was invasive. Years later, the FBI would come to regard it as “a program that did tremendous destruction to many people,” and further condemn it for its “egregious illegal action.”

As in Cuba, the Puerto Rican resistance was based on anti-colonial and anti-imperialist liberation theory. But unlike Cuba, the United States crushed any potential nationalist revolution before it had much of a chance to start. After the Nationalist Party led a labor strike in 1935, benefitting the millions of agricultural workers whose salaries were doubled, the IPF went into high gear. That same year it shot and killed four Puerto Ricans in 1935 in Rio Piedras, executed two more in 1936 in San Juan, and massacred scores more in Ponce the following year. In 1948, the Puerto Rican Congress, overseen by U.S.-controlled Luis Muñoz Marín, passed the infamous Ley de la Mordaza, a gag law that was quickly signed by the U.S.-appointed governor. The law mandated a 10-year prison sentence for anyone who spoke of independence, owned a Puerto Rican flag, or was caught singing La Borinquena, the Puerto Rican national anthem.

When these measures failed to cull the fledgling nationalist movement, the United States resorted to outright war. In 1950, Congress deployed 4,000 National Guards, activated ten P-47 Thunderbolt fighter planes, and dropped several 500-pound bombs over the municipality of Jayuya, flattening it to dust. It then did worse to Utuado. Though this chapter is rarely taught in U.S. high school history, these bombings marked the first and only time that the federal government bombed its own citizens. Scores more died by fusillades of unimaginable magnitude, while thousands of suspected Puerto Rican nationalists, including women and children, were thrown into jails. The U.S. government tortured, abused, and left Puerto Rican nationalists to rot in secret facilities for more than a decade.

By the mid-20th century, U.S. banks owned half of all of Puerto Rico's arable land, among other public railroads and seaports. By some estimates, the Pentagon owned 13 percent of the island outright. After suppressing the revolution and subordinating Puerto Rico into a full-fledged colony, the United States let its economic project loose on the island. Programs like the ironically named “Operation Bootstrap” exempted U.S. businesses that operated in Puerto Rico from paying full taxes for ten years, depriving the local economy of substantial revenue. While schools, roads, and especially hospitals suffered, companies like Johnson & Johnson saved over 1 billion during their tenure on the island.

Cuba (and Iran) are not exceptions: the United States is committed to economic sanction everywhere, including Puerto Rico. The Merchant Marine Act (often referred to as the Jones Act) still requires all imports to be aboard U.S.-made ships owned by U.S. citizens, with a U.S. crew bearing the American Flag—an arcane, punitive, and completely unnecessary display of patriotic subservience that costs Puerto Rico approximately \$500 million per year.

The privatization project continued unabated through the 1990s, as Puerto Rico began selling off over a billion dollars' worth of government assets, including the government-owned shipping line, the

sugar corporation, its pineapple and mango operations, and even a state-owned hotel and casino. In 1996, President Bill Clinton forced Puerto Rico's hand when he decided to phase out the much-criticized corporate tax breaks. Although the tax breaks were bad for Puerto Rico, their outright elimination—without socially-supportive programming—proved catastrophic for the island. Congress eliminated the tax cut altogether in 2006, halving the total manufacturing jobs in under a decade and putting some 100,000 Puerto Ricans out of work entirely. Antonio Colorado Jr., the island's former nonvoting congressman, warned, “if [the tax break] is eliminated, either the U.S. pours billions of dollars into our economy, or Puerto Rico pours thousands and thousands of people into the mainland.” It was foreshadowing at its finest.

In perhaps no other industry did Puerto Ricans feel the brunt of privatization more than healthcare. Up until 1993, the government of Puerto Rico had been providing direct healthcare service for 50 years. But after 1993, it rapidly began selling off assets including diagnostic equipment, treatment centers, and regional hospitals. Puerto Rico began to lean more heavily on public assistance programs. Nearly half of Puerto Rico's population is now covered by Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program, while another 20 percent relies on Medicare—both far in excess of the national average. The number of doctors on the island fell from 14,000 to 9,000 in 2016, a percentage decline four times greater than in the general American population.

Puerto Rico's decimated healthcare system was met with catastrophe in 2017, when Hurricane Maria struck, and again in 2020 when earthquakes ravaged the island. The lack of any meaningful U.S. humanitarian response—while 16,000 homes were without power, President Trump famously tossed paper towels into a crowd like he was playing Pop-A-Shot—was more than just apathy, it was cruelty. Overwhelmed hospital systems, a critical shortage of infrastructure, and a barebones emergency response system created the largest American death toll since 9/11, taking the lives of roughly 3,000 individuals, almost double the casualties from Hurricane Katrina. Since Maria, 130,000 mainly working-age people have fled the island. Puerto Rico's homicide, violent crime, and reports of police corruption have skyrocketed over the past decade. Its poverty rate is now more than triple that of the continental United States. Pre-COVID, the island's unemployment rate had reached nearly 18 percent; as of the time of this writing, it stands at 46 percent. By 2040, Puerto Rico stands to lose over half its population.

PUERTO RICO REMAINS TRAPPED UNDER THE U.S.' vengeful gaze, as if it were the eye of Sauron. The island's only representative, Jenniffer González, represents three million people in Congress. She is not permitted to cast any legislative votes on their behalf. In 2016, President Barack Obama signed PROMESA, a federal law establishing a Financial Oversight and Management Board that Puerto Ricans call la junta. Under PROMESA, Congress has appointed a Fiscal Control Board to restructure Puerto Rico's astronomical \$129 billion in bond debts, which Congress insists on seeing paid. The board also immediately instituted draconian austerity measures that would have made



Puerto Rico police officers stand in front of the governor's mansion as hundreds of private and municipal paramedics protest in their ambulances through Old San Juan to demand that they are included in the economic incentive package drawn up by the government in San Juan, Puerto Rico on April 15, 2020. - Photo by Ricardo Arduengo / AFP / via Getty Images

the European Union blush, including enormous cuts to salaries, pensions, education, and healthcare. These measures ensured the people of Puerto Rico never recovered after Hurricane Maria. Unable to repay its obligations, Puerto Rico filed for the equivalent of bankruptcy in 2017. Ever since, hedge funds have been cashing in. Furious protests swept the island in 2019, leading to the ouster of Governor Ricardo Rosselló. Nevertheless, clarion calls for Congress to cancel Puerto Rico's debt have fallen on deaf ears.

President Donald Trump suggested that we simply "sell the island." However, our neo-aristocratic class have been working on this for some time now. Vulture capitalists have steadily flocked to the island for the better part of a decade, after Maria, the kettle of capitalists began to wake. In 2012, the U.S. government passed two more acts intent on making the island a tax haven for the ultra-rich. The first set a paltry 4 percent tax on export services. The second granted personal tax exemptions on dividends, interest, and capital gains to individuals who spent slightly more than six months on Puerto Rico. The point was to bribe the rich into coming to the island to get richer, while withholding the tax revenue from Puerto Ricans themselves. It only got worse after Maria: while power outages lasted months after the storm in poor, rural areas, the nouveau riche in luxury resorts and seaside communities suffered only temporary inconveniences. According to a formidable 2018 account by Jesse Barron in *GQ* magazine, José Pérez-Riera, the Puerto Rican official behind the tax haven laws, posited that no fewer than

"10,000 individuals" would come bearing hedge fund war-chests to save Puerto Rico from itself. But Barron feared something more sinister, as did Colorado Jr., and so did I. If the jobs fled, so would the people.

Puerto Rico should be its own country, if that's what Puerto Ricans want. Instead, parts of the island are being turned into the ritzy anarchic offshore playground that Cuba once was, intentionally being starved so it can wither, die, and be transformed into an ersatz Silicon Valley. This is where McKinsey & Company comes in. After the restructuring, la junta put aside \$1.5 billion for lawyers, bankers, and management consultants to administer whatever austerity-du-jour they saw fit. At least superficially, McKinsey seemed like a good choice. Its apolitical credo "execution, not policy" convinced enough people that what the island needed was nonpartisan number-crunchers. The reality would be anything but.

Described by an ex-staffer as "capitalism distilled," and with ties to the global aristocratic ignobility, including Saudi Crown Prince and alleged murderer Mohammed bin Salman, the international consulting firm set out to implement the famed "McKinsey Way." By its own admission, the firm intended to "to corporatize the Puerto Rican government." Its recommendations included repealing Puerto Rico's labor laws, exacting punitive taxes that resembled feudal demands, reducing healthcare costs (and services), and privatizing the highway and power authorities.

McKinsey guaranteed that following its measures, and essentially

holding Puerto Rico in bondage over its debts, would ensure that investors would get paid. As would McKinsey, given that the firm's internal hedge was substantially invested in the island's debts. This clear conflict of interest is a brutal double whammy. The island's entire system of government is now subservient to hedge funds, consultants, and someone else's bottom line. In essence, McKinsey pays itself to make Puerto Rico less Puerto Rican. And the culmination of this perverse experiment is not only the phase-out—if not total cessation of self-governance—a people and a culture. It is tantamount to a cultural genocide. McKinsey isn't overseeing some amoral technocratic restructuring, but rather the full realization of a long-running Monroe Doctrine. The project continues in full force, infantilizing Latin American societies, seizing their opportunity for self-governance, and erasing their cultures. This is what's happening in Puerto Rico. Under the guise of rescuing the island from itself, the U.S. empire is busy draining its resources until it's time to physically replace its people. And that's American dedication to human rights in a nutshell.

U.S. NEGLIGENCE PERMEATES THROUGHOUT ITS subjects, which has caused our country's most vulnerable communities to suffer most during COVID-19. The transmission rates in our prisons are woeful, as more than one-third of federal prisoners tested for COVID-19 displayed positive results. The situation in the notorious San Quentin State Prison was so bad it recently brought federal judge Jon Tigar to tears. Worse still, the Navajo Nation retains a higher COVID-19 infection rate than any single state, left to fend for itself in a country that has forsaken it for centuries.

With privatization fully complete and an austerity budget set in, Puerto Rico is equally ripe for an unmitigated disaster. Food insecurity, housing shortages, and unemployment all plague the island at rates far outpacing its mainland counterparts. According to federal data, 72 of the island's 78 municipalities face "unmet health care needs." The two companies that Puerto Rican administrators paid nearly \$40 million for COVID-19 testing equipment were found to not be FDA-compliant. Puerto Rico lags significantly behind the rest of the United States, conducting fewer tests per day than

almost every state. Since June it has seen a tenfold increase in new confirmed cases. In an interview with *New York* magazine, Puerto Rican dentist Rafael Torregrosa says he tried to sway McKinsey away from fully privatizing the healthcare system, which now faces catastrophe: "We're paying good money to them as consultants of la junta to push only one model, which happens to be the worst model in health care."

In contrast, Cuba's centrally-planned society has enabled it to prevent widespread catastrophe, during COVID-19 and elsewhere. Its first-rate disaster-preparedness system has contributed to habitually and astonishingly low hurricane death totals, and its people-first urban planning project prevented the proliferation of shantytowns and overcrowding. These two commonplace Latin American realities will portend enormous suffering in today's global pandemic, if they haven't already. But the real keeper is—and always has been—Cuba's significant investment in healthcare, the most glaring dimorphism between the island and its capitalist comparators.

In 1965, a few years after the Revolution, Cuba spent \$19 a month per person on healthcare. For comparison's sake, in Mexico that number was \$2; in Ecuador, 60¢. As a result, Cuba now boasts nine doctors per thousand people, the highest such ratio in the world. Many of these doctors have enlisted to join the famed Henry Reeve Medical Brigade, formed by Castro in 2005, after President George W. Bush rejected an offer to send more than 1,500 Cuban doctors to Katrina-ravaged Louisiana. This was not an unusual offer for Cuba. Indeed, the nation has sent medical outfits to independence-driven Algeria and Angola, Reagan-supported apartheid South Africa, Ebola-stricken sub-Saharan Africa, hurricane-throttled Nicaragua and Honduras, and earthquake-and-cholera-destroyed Haiti. More than 1,000 Cuban healthcare workers are presently fighting the COVID-19 pandemic in over two dozen countries. Where the United States backs regime change, Cuba sends medical teams.

Cuba's efforts have paid dividends domestically, too. Having a centrally-planned government has allowed it to engage in rapid-response crisis control to identify and isolate carriers; it is no wonder that an island of 11 million people has had only 2500 hundred or so cases, with cases steadily plummeting. The United States, on the other hand, has had at the time of this writing nearly five million cases and almost 575 COVID-related deaths per million compared to Cuba's eight per million (Puerto Rico has about 75). And while president Trump was pushing hydroxychloroquine as a miracle cure without actual evidence—this was quickly and thoroughly debunked—Cuba identified Interferon Alpha-2B Recombinant, a treatment for dengue fever, as an effective treatment for the novel coronavirus. In fact, Cuba has undertaken thirteen separate, concurrent strategies to develop a COVID vaccine—which should be no surprise for the country that developed a lung cancer vaccine—and is experimenting with advanced stem cell research to regenerate the lungs of Cubans recovering from the virus.



DESPITE THESE ACHIEVEMENTS, THE U.S. POLITICAL ELITE continue to dismiss Cuban achievement in favor of redbaiting. As recently as May 2020, Vice President Biden was still tweeting that allowing Cuba to join the U.N. Human Rights Council "would

betray Cuba's political prisoners and further undermine U.S. diplomacy." It is true that Cuba's record leaves a lot to be desired in that arena. It would be hard to support or justify the arbitrary arrest, the lack of habeas corpus, or reportedly detestable conditions of detention in the country. Its recent carceral response to social distancing violations is also concerning. At the same time, much of this criticism is coming from the United States, the very nation that continues to wage economic warfare on the nation, and in the process harms Cuban civilians greatly. American hands are not clean of the conditions that have caused Cubans to wait in long lines for limited quantities of food, and to rely on rations and communal food banks, an experience some American communities are now enduring. The extant embargo prevents Cubans from achieving any semblance of a regular import-export economy. Recently, this has prevented a mass-shipment of masks, ventilators, and testing kits sent from China. The embargo is thus quite literally suffocating the Cuban people.

As one independent U.N. human rights official put it, "[i]n the pandemic emergency, the lack of will of the U.S. government to suspend sanctions may lead to a higher risk of such suffering in Cuba and other countries targeted by its sanctions." (The U.N. General Assembly has called for an end to the embargo for 28 consecutive years. This past fall, the Resolution passed 187-to-2.) The lack of sympathy from American politicians like Biden is less surprising when considering the fact that he has repeatedly eschewed universal healthcare, instead favoring a plan that, even by generous estimates, would leave some 10 million Americans uninsured (and likely more since the pandemic wiped out millions of jobs). Biden's well-publicized loyalties lie with the pharmaceutical industry. This is an emphatic reminder that even our most liberal champions refuse to recognize healthcare as a human right, whether for Americans or Cubans. It's fitting, then, that the most jejune remark during the Democratic debates came from former McKinsey consultant Pete Buttigieg, who had famously waffled on his dedication to universal healthcare. He wondered aloud why the Democrats couldn't be "unambiguous in our condemnation about the way [Castro] was treating his own people." Maybe some introspection—and a history lesson—would help them all.

It is also difficult to take the U.S. justifications for the embargo seriously as genuine concerns about human rights, when this country so obviously suffers from all of these infirmities and more, on a significantly greater magnitude. Our incarceration rate vastly outpaces Cuba's, and although our criminal justice system discriminates less on the basis of political opinion, it still does so based on race, class, and national origin. And let us not forget about our more traditional human rights violations like the infamous Bay of Pigs, our botched attempted coup, the estimated 637 U.S.-backed attempts on Castro's life, the 1976 bombing of the Cubana (a commercial airline reportedly hijacked by former CIA-trained assets), and also Operations Mongoose and Northwoods, which were the aborted CIA plans to attack Cuba's sugar crops with biological weapons, murder arriving boats filled with Cuban refugees, and plant bombs throughout Miami, all with hopes to pin the deeds on Castro. Not to mention Guantanamo, our seemingly-indefinite detention center custom-made for the seemingly-indefinite War on Terror. And this is just a sampling of U.S. aggressions against Cuba.

BEING A U.S. TERRITORY HASN'T STOPPED Puerto Rico from being on the receiving end of American crimes against humanity either. There, the U.S. government has delighted in the torture and extrajudicial killings of borinqueños for decades. Under U.S. control, Puerto Rican officers threw thousands of suspected nationalists in jails littered with dysentery, hookworm, and scurvy. Show trials resulted in over 16,000 years of jail sentences meted out to political prisoners. For all the bluster about Castro's political prisoners, the United States imprisoned Puerto Rican nationalist hero Oscar López Rivera for 36 years, making Rivera one of the longest-held political prisoners in the world; even Mandela got out after 27. The Insular Police Force tortured and permanently damaged scores of others, secretly and brutally irradiating Albizu Campos, which caused him to suffer a stroke and die. (Some forty years later, the United States admitted to conducting radiation experiments on over 20,000 people).

Let's also consider the more than 100,000 bombs and biochemical weapons that the U.S. military dropped over the island of Vieques. U.S. army doctors have tested Puerto Rican subjects with experimental drugs, including unlawfully testing birth control on thousands of women in the 1950s, as if sterilizing one-third of Puerto Rican women in the middle of the twentieth century—a practice so common it was referred to as *la operación*—was not enough. That the United States won't allow for Puerto Rican self-determination may be the greatest human rights violation of all.

Cuba has been able to resist the creeping fog of American imperial privatization, rejecting everything Yankee—save maybe baseball—in favor of socialist programming. The United States has paid close attention, chokeholding Puerto Rico into submission at nearly every nationalist turn. Cuba is not so much able to succeed in spite of two centuries of American interference, but rather it only succeeds because of its resistance. It could have ended up like Puerto Rico, still fighting for its freedom. Instead, it now stands shoulder-to-shoulder among the "developed" nations for its social programming and medical care, while Americans are left wondering why it took four months to get widespread COVID-19 testing.

As the American death toll rises, we are left with the unfortunate epiphany that it took a global pandemic to demonstrate that a centralized, social government is more effective than one based on the pursuit of private profit. We can learn from Cuba without desultory attempts at redbaiting, or ignoring its flaws. The undeniable reality is that Cuba has placed itself in a far better position to respond to growing existential threats such as global pandemics and climate-based disaster. Cuba really has done far better with much less, and it has far less because we have more. It is finally time to recalibrate our understanding as to what constitutes human rights in this country. We must acknowledge the horrors we have forced upon our colonial subjects, and remember that we shouldn't have even have subjects in the first place. It's time to atone for the capitalist and racist misadventures that have destroyed the lives of so many, and to pay attention to what many of us have been saying all along: healthcare is a human right. ✚

THE CURRENT AFFAIRS INCOMPLETE GUIDE TO COVID-19

Dear readers, we have heard your request for guidance in these terrible times. As we are ridiculous and highly incompetent individuals frequently mistaking an N95 mask for a decorative buttcheek cover, we do not know why you have come to us at all. But since you have pieces of advice—remember how wonderful things used to be, execute the revolution carefully, and do not apply N95 masks directly to your face.



THINK ABOUT: All the Things That You Used To Be Able To Do That You Can't Do Right Now



Party Like It's 1984!

Point Out Trouble From A Safe Distance

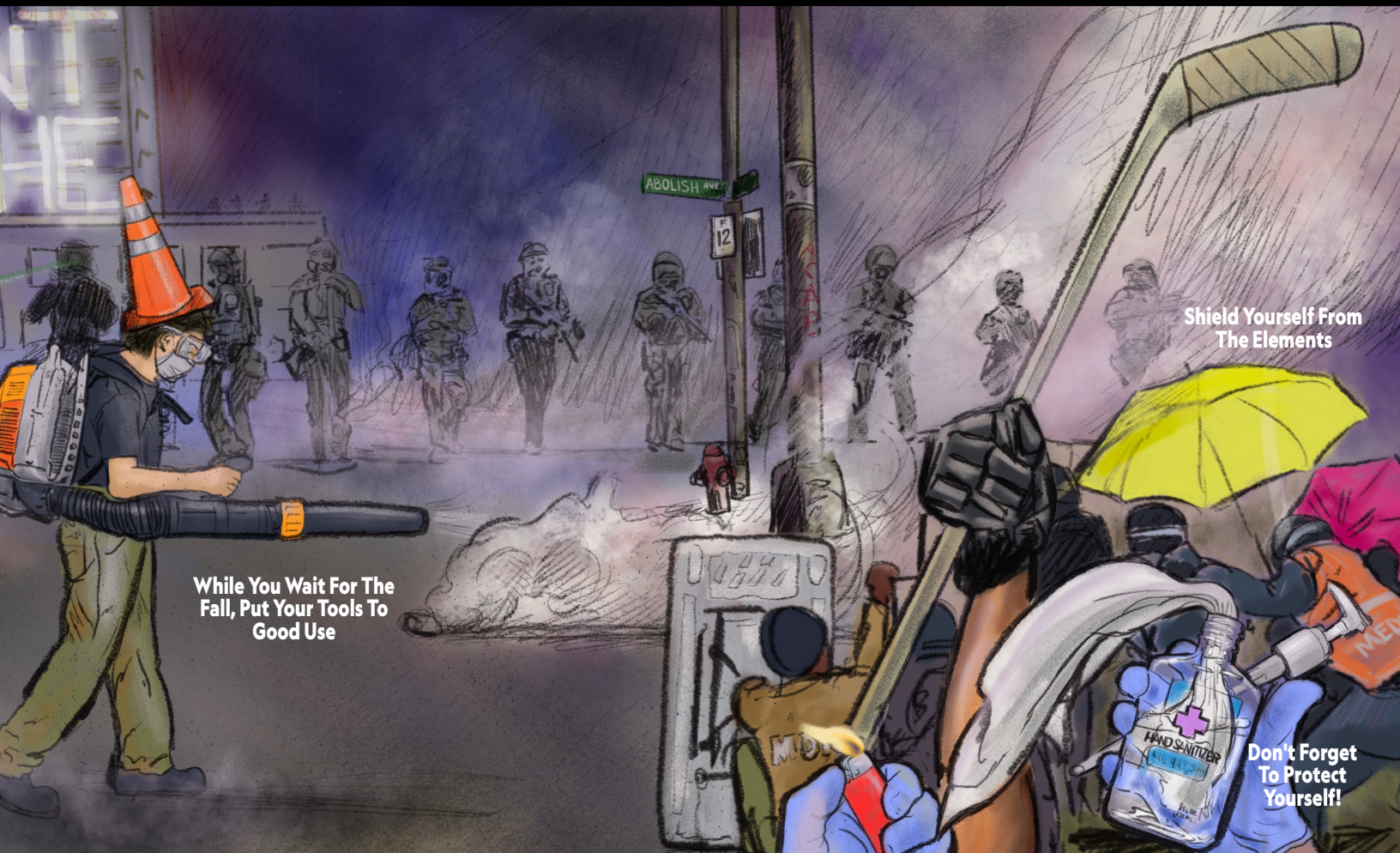
Wear A Mask

The Revolution Will Not Be Televised... It Will Be Livestreamed

THINK ABOUT: How To Have A Revolution While Staying Six Feet Apart

COVID-19

Individuals ourselves,
we, here are our three
y to your buttocks.



While You Wait For The
Fall, Put Your Tools To
Good Use

Shield Yourself From
The Elements

Don't Forget
To Protect
Yourself!

EVERYONE MUST READ US

*subscriptions
are not yet
mandatory but
they are known
to be beneficial*



MAGIC AND CAPITALISM

BY KATIE JANE FERNELIUS



IN 2015, THE CW PREMIERED A NEW REALITY competition show filmed in front of a live audience at the Rio Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada. It was a familiar format: each episode chronicled performers eager to show off their talent in front of a panel of judges.

Typically, the talent-show-as-TV genre asks the judges to assess whether the contestant has “got it”: the charisma, the voice, the capability of being developed into a commodity. But *Penn & Teller: Fool Us* is different. The conceit of the show is simple. Prestidigitators, illusionists, mentalists, and magicians perform a trick on stage. Then, judges Penn Jillette and Teller attempt to figure out how that trick was done. Using vague language and verbal sleight-of-hand, they offer up their theory to the audience. More often than not, their theory is correct. (Behind the scenes, several magicians verify the tricks’ procedural elements, independent of the judges.) But if Penn and Teller are wrong, then the magician wins a trophy, and an opportunity to open for them in Vegas. Most of us in the audience, both in the theater and at home, are none the wiser about the trick’s mechanics despite Penn and Teller’s evasive





explanations. As witnesses, we are there to be fooled.

This is part of what makes stage magic such a strange art. It rests on a tacit agreement to be fooled, to be lied to. We enjoy the show with a wink, having consented to the pretense and well aware of our role in the game.

To be a magician is to play a character. My sense is that magicians are not attempting to swindle anyone out of their money, and few if any nurture a genuine belief in the occult. But they may enjoy the playful make-believe of doing so.

While magic is often confined to specific contexts—children’s birthday parties, dinner theaters, and hotel casinos—it was a pastime in my house, practiced like a cello and solved like a Rubik’s cube. My dad is a magician. He can make coins spill out of my ear, produce felt balls under copper cups, teleport a card from the middle of the deck to the top, and tear safety pins through a handkerchief without leaving holes.

To grow up in a magic home was to grow up in a church of the peculiar. Our bookshelves were bloated with what felt like hundreds of books on magic. Magician-writers like Eugene Burger, Juan Tamariz, and Roberto Giobbi were as canonical to us as Dickens, Proust, and Shakespeare. We ordered *Bicycle* playing cards in bulk so my dad could always carry a fresh deck in his pocket. For a while, his vanity license plate even read “LEGERD 🖐”, a play on *legerdemain*, from the French for sleight of hand.

WHEN I TELL FRIENDS THAT MY dad is a magician, they usually make jokes about G.O.B., the goofy character from the sitcom *Arrested Development*. An enthusiastic practitioner of magic, G.O.B. insists that what he does are *illusions*, not tricks, although he is atrocious at both. Eventually, he founds the Alliance of Magicians and adopts the slogan, “We Demand To Be Taken Seriously.”

Although my dad isn’t pitiful like G.O.B., he does take magic seriously. A devoted student of Jeff McBride’s Mystery School, he completed workshops on escaping straitjackets and has developed philosophies of magic. Before the pandemic, my dad spent most weekends hanging out with other magicians at the Magic Castle in Los Angeles. He is also a member of the International Brotherhood of Magicians, whose name and emblem evoke the aesthetic of 20th century trade unions, which gives it a certain gravitas.

I realize taking stage magic seriously can feel silly. It can be misinterpreted as saying “magic is real,” as if the illusions and tricks are *real* ones, and really happening.

Nor does it help that the term is used so expansively. When it’s not gaudy entertainment, magic can be a marketing ploy, an anthropological designation, a practice of the occult, or an accusation of political dissidence.

These various usages evidence the difficulty of extricating our understanding of magic from religion and

social life and trade. Popular histories of magic, like the 1998 PBS documentary *Art of Magic*, lump all of these practices under one big umbrella, blurring together their unique histories, influences, and politics.

While it may be tempting to reduce magic to a straight lineage from theater acts of the Italian Renaissance to a stage magician like Lance Burton, magic is best understood as a meme, which is to say a form repeated under diverse conditions and contexts, propagating but always changing.

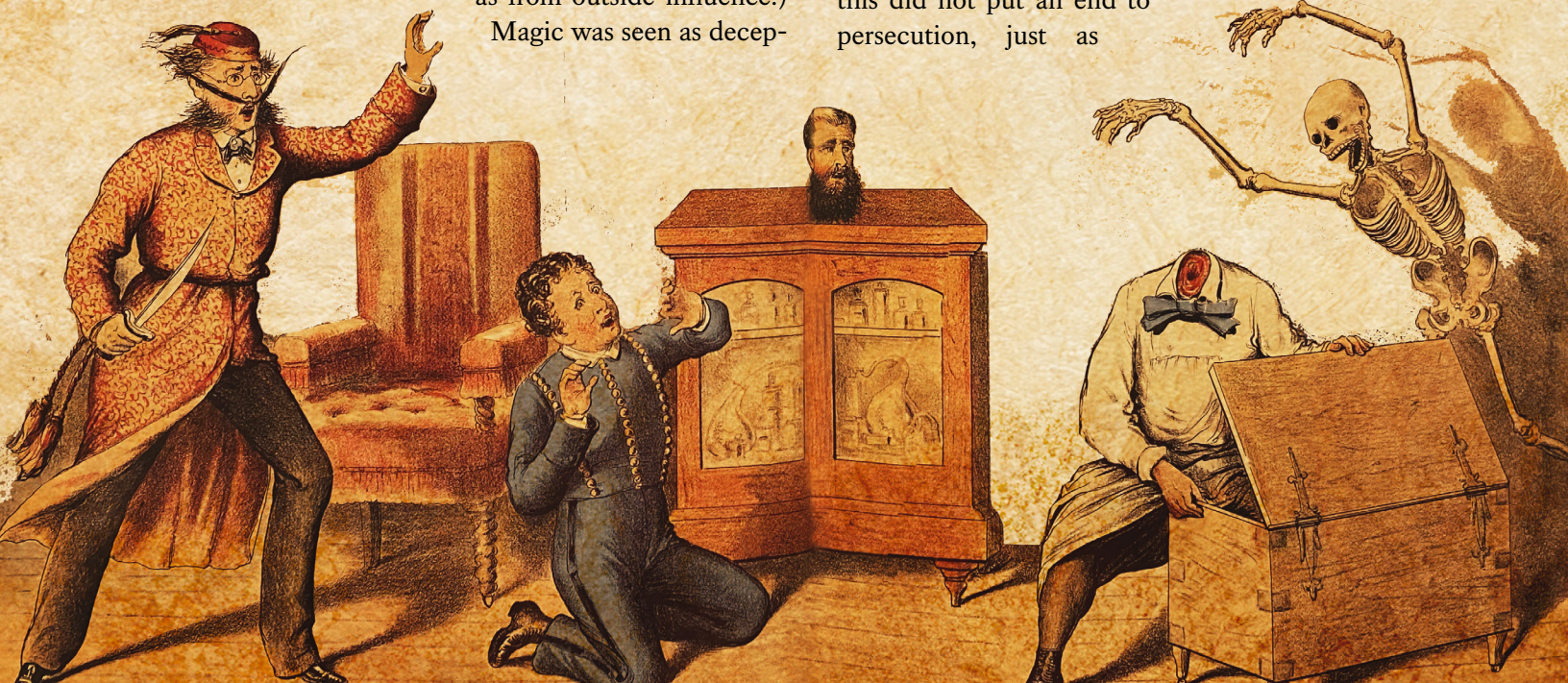
The entertainment magic that one can expect on *Penn & Teller: Fool Us* is the close-up sort. Cards, coins, cups and balls. Women sawed in half. Doves appearing and tigers disappearing out of thin air. Endless handkerchiefs, escapes out of straitjackets, and levitation. But the term also signals a broader feeling of enchantment even without the performance of illusion or sleight-of-hand. Think of the *magic* of Christmastime or of Disney. Highly produced effects designed to delight, as much as it is to bewitch us into spending money.

Other rituals from around the world, like dancing for rain or séances with the dead, might trigger similar feelings of enchantment. Calling such practices *magic* typically carries a different implication. It suggests a literalness to the enchantment and can delegitimize these practices as mere superstition, implying an inferiority to cold, hard Western facts.

IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN EUROPE, magicians were often associated with barbarians or “the Orient.” (In reality, some of their magical practices emerged from early European pagan religions as much as from outside influence.) Magic was seen as decep-

**“WE ARE
DECEIVED,
CONSTANTLY
BY CLAIMS
ABOUT THE
STOCK MARKET
AND HOW IT
WORKS, BY
THE ACCEPTED
PRETENSE THAT
WEALTHY AND
SUCCESSFUL
PEOPLE ARE
BRILLIANT...”**

tive, opening practicans to charges of heresy and eventual persecution in a Europe dominated by Christianity. During the European wars of religion, an estimated 30,000 alleged witches and magical practitioners were executed. In 1584, Reginald Scott published *Discoverie of Witchcraft* to demystify the “folly” of what might otherwise be attributed to the devil; magic was merely sleight of hand, he claimed. But this did not put an end to persecution, just as



explaining the science behind evolution hasn't yet convinced creationists that the Earth is billions of years old. As historian and priest David Collins puts it, "...the witch trials were born of power plays by religious and secular forces that wanted to gain greater control over religious and civil communities." Magic was a way for authorities to name a threat and reassert a Christian Europe in contrast to it.

In the late 19th century—anthropology's earliest days, which were tied up in a knot of post-Enlightenment philosophies, Victorian cultural values, empire, and colonial violence—"scholars classified magic, religion, and science in different categories, corresponding to progressive 'stages' of cultural complexity, with magic attached to ideas of archaism and childlike irrationality," explains social anthropologist Matteo Benussi. 19th century anthropologists documented "newly discovered" communities in Africa, South America, and the Pacific Islands as living artifacts of the past, arrested in evolutionary development, rather than contemporaneous societies. Magic may not have been seen as a threat by anthropologists in the same way that it was viewed as a threat by earlier religious authorities, but it once again became a category against which to define



Western civilization.

Today, a robust and thorough scholarship on the diverse “magical” practices of the Global South understands and recontextualizes such practices in the non-Western world as sophisticated and legitimate traditions, and as profoundly modern ways of navigating cross-cultural relationships within a colonial and capitalist context. What Western institutions mischaracterized as magic was often what it simply deemed illegible and confusing, like endowing inanimate objects with spiritual character.

But of course, such superstition figures into contemporary, hegemonic Western culture, write anthropologists Brian Moeran and Timothy de Waal Malefyt:

“The modern world is no less mysterious, more rational, knowable, predictable, and thus ultimately manipulable, than the premodern world. Magic has not declined, to be replaced by science, bureaucracy, law, and power. Rather, modern societies thrive on glamour (an old Scottish word, gramyre, originally meaning ‘magic,’ ‘enchantment,’ or ‘spell’), deception, illusory feats, ritual, symbolism, drama, theatricality, fake news, and tweets.”

Moeran and Malefyt seek to correct early anthropologists’ condescending and othering treatment of magic

by presenting a litany of examples of magic in capitalism. Many make-up slogans evoke transformation (“Because you’re worth it”, etc). Moeran and Malefyt also compare the World Economic Forum at Davos to an assembly of magi called together to fulfill the ambiguous and weighty mission of “improv[ing] the state of the world.” Magic, they argue, is as much in the structure of capitalism as it is in its effects. After all, what is the stock market if not a collection of projections and superstitions about the future?

TODAY, IT IS HARD TO THINK OF STAGE and close-up magicians as particularly powerful, or as alien, subversive, or damaging forces in our culture. Magicians perform in packed theaters under multi-million dollar contracts; they win seasons of *America’s Got Talent*; they rack in ad-money as influencers on Instagram and TikTok. Rather than agitate for criminal trials and stake burnings, self-respecting people now pay good money to go to magic shows and be fooled.

English professor Sianne Ngai names the feelings and judgments we experience when we witness magic tricks today—delight, suspicion, the cognitive “turning of wheels,” and disbelief at our own belief—as “the intersection of ‘calculation and enchantment.’”

Although magic is not Ngai’s object of study, it is



threaded throughout her new book *Theory of the Gimmick*. Ngai defines gimmicks—a broad category that includes cartoon Rube Goldberg machines, the credit system, and ridiculously staged canapés of fine-dining—as an aesthetic category of late capitalism that people tend to view as both working too hard and not enough, because it simultaneously reveals and obfuscates how value is produced in a capitalist world. The gimmick thus reflects “the basic laws of capitalist production and its abstractions as these saturate everyday life.”

A gimmick, Ngai writes, can be “an invitation to playful sociality around an object of suspicion”:

“What we seek from magic performances [...] is a way to distance ourselves from an illusion while enjoying it simultaneously. A way to make the illusion transparent as an illusion—exposing its process, its technique or its ‘trickwork’—without questioning its effectivity or ability to enchant.”

Histories of magic note that rapid discoveries and inventions at the turn of the last century, like electricity, germ theory, radio waves, or the expansion of rail and telegraph lines created a new terrain for reality. “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,” the late science-fiction author Arthur

C. Clarke famously wrote. Indeed, invisible forces like germs could make us ill. Machines could catch and project sound. Cities could harbor electrical currents to light up a street. In the late 19th and early 20th century, it became possible to move and communicate more rapidly than ever before.

Modern magicians were often early adopters of new technologies in order to produce this kind of enchantment. George Méliès, for instance, was an early innovator in cinema and professed illusionist who created some of film’s earliest special effects like substitution splices. During the height of spiritualism, magician Samuel John Davey staged séances in which ghostwriting would appear on previously blank slates, leading audiences to believe that a spirit had communicated with them. (He’d later explain his trickery in an effort to debunk spiritualism as a movement.) Wolfgang von Kempelen, a Hungarian inventor, devised what he called the Mechanical Turk, an automaton adept at chess. In actuality, the machine was operated by a human hiding inside. These charlatans help explain why magicians are so often lumped in with scam artists and con men. The extent to which there can be “playful sociality,” in the words



of Ngai, depends a lot on who the magician is and how they are framing what they are doing.

Take the magic-peddlers at Theranos, for instance. Starting in 2003, Elizabeth Holmes and Sunny Balwani claimed to have concocted a technology that could quickly diagnose an wide array of health conditions from just a prick of blood. The company's actual method was shrouded in secrecy. As Nick Bilton writes in *Vanity Fair*, "Holmes largely forbade her employees from communicating with one another about what they were working on—a culture that resulted in a rare form of executive omniscience." But the truth was that the technology did not work, and the claim that it did was entirely an illusion.

Undeterred by this detail, Holmes nevertheless pitched her magic technology to Walgreens, the nationwide chain of wellness clinics and stores. As *Buzzfeed News* noted, a government report would later determine that "Holmes told her employees to put Theranos's equipment in the room where they were collecting blood samples from the executives—but instead of processing the blood on the Theranos machines, employees secretly ran some tests on outside lab equipment." As with the Mechanical Turk, unseen human labor was hiding within the machine. This sleight-of-hand trick bilked hundreds of millions of dollars from Silicon Valley venture capitalists, who might have not signed up to be fooled, but were eager to believe.

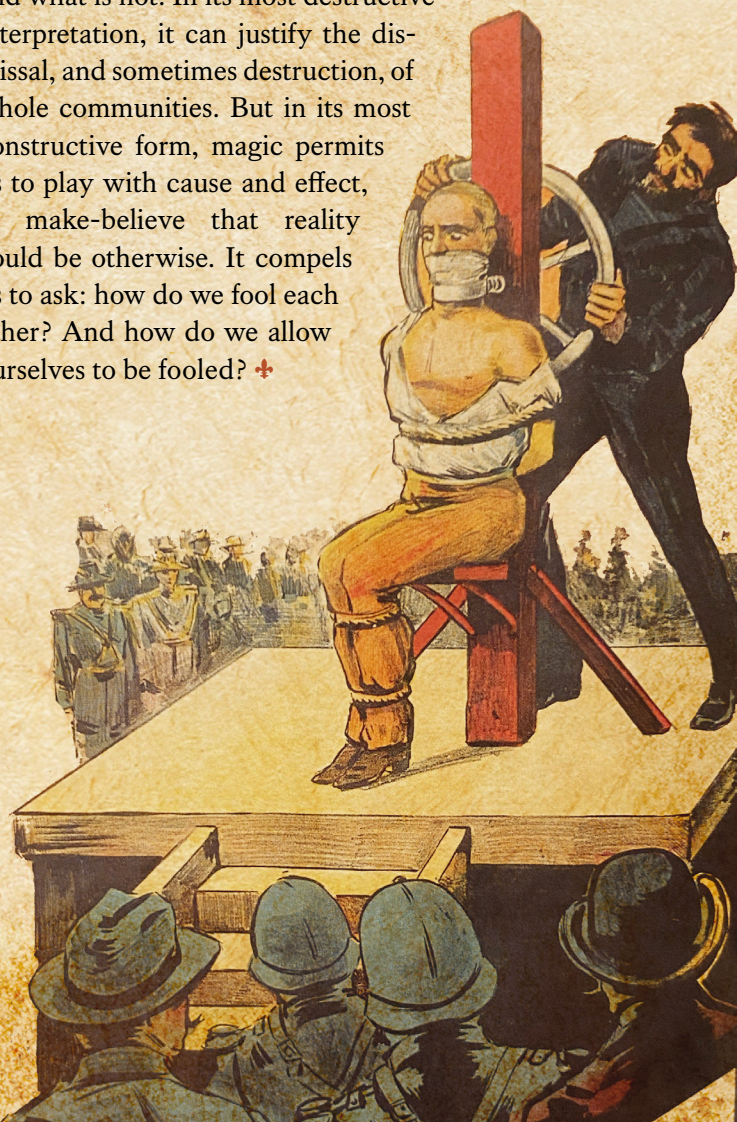
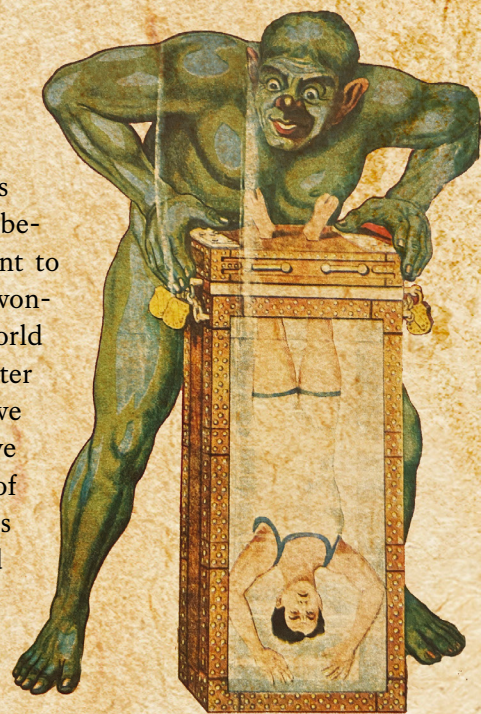
THIS IS INSTRUCTIVE WHEN WE CONSIDER what is both appealing and uncomfortable about magic: we want clear expectations about who is fooling whom. This might explain why a show like *Penn & Teller: Fool Us* is so satisfying—it is unambiguously sincere in its deceit.

Magic offers us "the realization that things are *not* always what they *seem* to be," writes magician and teacher Eugene Burger. This is true whether it's compelling sleight-of-hand or the elaborate illusions of a start-up. Understanding magic in this way, as Burger does, teaches us that "The world of experience must be approached with an alertness of mind, and it must be examined carefully and even critically, if we are to avoid being deceived by our neighbors."

The fact is that we *are* deceived, constantly—by claims about the stock market and how it works, by the accepted pretense that wealthy and successful peo-

ple are brilliant and their technology works if all the right people believe it works. We want to believe; we want to wonder. We want the world to be magical, no matter how facts-oriented we may have decided we are. And that's part of how magic endures: as deception, belief, and ritual; sometimes a craft, other times a curse, and, in 21st century capitalism, a gimmick that makes us buy and accept.


At its core, magic stages social relationships and exposes their power to define what is real and what is not. In its most destructive interpretation, it can justify the dismissal, and sometimes destruction, of whole communities. But in its most constructive form, magic permits us to play with cause and effect, to make-believe that reality could be otherwise. It compels us to ask: how do we fool each other? And how do we allow ourselves to be fooled? ✦



AMERICAN CRISIS RESPONSE THE GAME

Beset by four separate disasters (EVICTIO
CRISIS, VIRAL PLAGUE, POLICE BRUTALITY, and
OPIOID EPIDEMIC) it seems like this country
doesn't have long to live! Can you save the
United States before CLIMATE EXTINCTION
kills us all? Can you beat the odds?*


REP. GOVERNOR



- CALLOUS DISREGARD: BLAME TOKENS have no negative value.
- You must assist REP. PRESIDENT in all operations without complaint.

POLITICIAN

Dem. Mayor



- Can pass up to 3 BLAME TOKENS to REP. PRESIDENT per turn.
- May issue 2 VAPID STATEMENTS instead of 1.

POLITICIAN

ACTION

IT'S JUST POLITICS IDK:
You have the chance to shut down the infamous Shackler family and contain the OPIOID EPIDEMIC, but only if you can prevent the 4 POLITICIANS from collecting money on their turn.

ACTION

Congrats! You have chosen the **WORST OPTION AVAILABLE**. Unclear why! Increase the **INFECTION RATE** by 2 and have the **COUNTDOWN TO CLIMATE EXTINCTION** ahead 2 spaces.

ACTION

THOUGHTS & PRAYES
For this round, players take an extra **VAPID STATEMENT** take turns hugging the A. The **DEM. MAYOR & DEM. SENATOR** collect \$20k and mull a presidential r


ACTIVIST



- Can cure all city **HOT SPOT** except **VIRAL PLAGUE**, but n
- 3 other players to agree.
- May scream into mask.

POWERLESS

Dem. Senator



- **ON VACATION:** You never have to take a turn.
- May issue up to 3 **VAPID STATEMENTS** per turn, then take a video of yourself dancing and have a nap.

POLITICIAN






Eviction Crisis **Viral Plague** **Police Brutality** **Opioid Epidemic**

* SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: the odds are terrible, play at your own risk.

RS:
may issue 1
NT, and all
ACTIVIST.
EM.
in donations
un.

RS:
may issue 1
NT, and all
ACTIVIST.
EM.
in donations
un.

S
eeds

ESS

- Can pass up to 8 **BLAME** **TOKENS** to **DEM. SENATOR** is turn. 12 if **DEM. SENATOR** is napping.
- Can declare any **HOT SPOT** cured (**HOT SPOT** remains active).

active).

Rep. President

FAMOUS WRITER

- May issue 1 **VAPID** STATEMENT per turn about how they are being canceled. Otherwise takes naps.

POWERLESS

SCIENTIST

- Can fully eradicate **VIRAL PLAGUE** from the board, but needs all 4 **POLITICIANS** to agree.
- May scream into a bag.

POWERLESS



THE ADAMS PRINCIPLE

Reflections on Dilbert

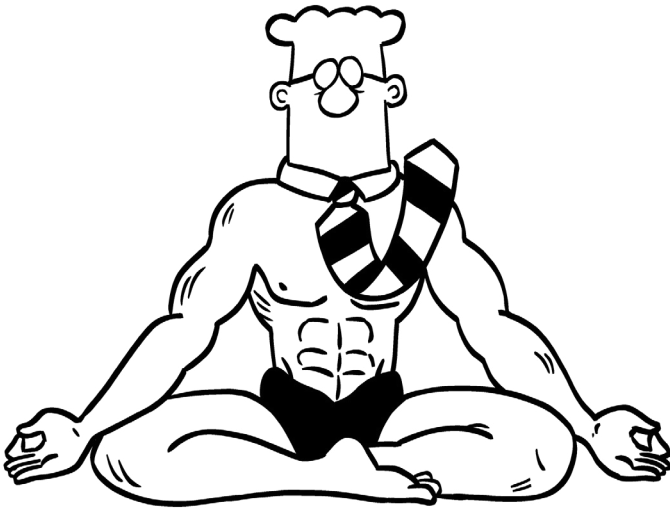
BY AISLING MCCREA

WHEN I WAS MAYBE NINE OR TEN YEARS old, I was driven by boredom to look through my dad's book collection. (I forget the exact year, but it was definitely before we had broadband, because the years after broadband were spent diving down rabbit holes of old TV shows and video game reviews.) Among the spy novels and *Reader's Digests*, I managed to find a book that actually appealed to children, picked it up and squirreled it away for later reading. It was appealing to kids because it had a cartoon dog on the cover.

As you might have guessed from glancing at the illustrations, the book I'd chosen was not *Clifford the Big Red Dog*, but *The Dilbert Principle*, a satirical book about office life for adults by the popular cartoonist Scott Adams, based off his daily syndicated strip simply named *Dilbert*. Despite the book's subject matter being seemingly irrelevant to my life, and its constant references to incomprehensible topics like Six Sigma, project management, and beta testing, I ended up reading and enjoying the whole book; not only that, but once I finished, I actually bought more Scott Adams books

with my own pocket money, to the bafflement of the staff at my local bookstore. Until recently, I actually looked back on this part of my life with shame and confusion—great, yet *another* part of my childhood to mark me out as abnormal—but in the last couple of years, thanks to the internet, I've discovered that I actually wasn't alone. Perhaps half a dozen of my friends and coworkers that I've met through social media have confessed to also being "*Dilbert* kids". Sadly, just as I've managed to get away from the shame of loving *Dilbert* for one reason, I've been forced to develop a new reason to be ashamed of loving *Dilbert*—namely, the increasingly strange behaviour and beliefs of Adams himself. But we will come to that later.

For the uninitiated—those strange folks who spent their childhoods riding their bikes and playing with other children—the premise of *Dilbert* is very simple. Dilbert is an engineer who works for a generic corporate behemoth, alongside his coworkers Wally (lazy), Asok (naive) and Alice (woman), all under the auspices of an imbecilic manager known only as the Pointy-haired Boss. Any given strip typically involves Dilbert being tyrannized and frustrated by corporate culture, occasionally venting with his anthro-



pomorphized pet/roommate, Dogbert, or sparring with the evil Catbert from Human Resources. (In case you were uncertain, Dogbert is a dog. I will allow you to draw your own conclusions about what Catbert is.) *Dilbert* has been a stalwart (stalbert?) of print media for going on 30 years, and is syndicated worldwide in about 2,000 newspapers.

It's easy to see why *Dilbert* is popular. Although the protagonist is an engineer, the setting is vague enough to act as a stand-in for practically all workplaces, and despite the occasional references to tech-specific gripes, the themes of unjust hierarchy, frustrating mundanity, and the general fact that *work sucks* is relatable to pretty much anyone, even schoolchildren, as it turns out. (Whom amongst us has never had a mean, pompous or incompetent Pointy-haired Teacher?) Also, a three-panel comic requires a certain kind of discipline, and despite the inevitable hit-or-miss situation you get when you churn out content on a daily basis—if you want an example, check my tweets—throughout the classic era of the strips there's undoubtedly a tight turnaround of setup, punchline, post-punchline that usually feels good and right. (“*Leaving at seven?*” glowers the Pointy-haired Boss. “*All my work is done*”, replies Dilbert; “*then get some more*,” replies the PHB. “*That would make my life an exercise in futility*”, counters Dilbert, to which the PHB cheerfully responds: “*exercise is good for you.*”) There are also a lot of pieces of...philosophy is the wrong word, but the kind of stray shower-thoughts that feel impressive in their novelty, and tend to stick with you for their surface-level logic even when you know them, deep down, to be silly. (Courtesy of Wally: “*I don’t understand why some people wash their bath towels. When I get out of the shower I’m the cleanest object in my house. In theory, those towels should be getting cleaner every time they touch me.*”)

THIS TYPE OF GLIB QUASI-LOGIC WORKS really well in comedy, especially in a format where space is restricted, and where the quick, disposable nature of the strip limits your ability to draw humor from character and plot. You take an idea, find a way to subvert or deconstruct it, and you get an absurd result. In *Dilbert* the Pointy-haired Boss uses this type of thinking to evil ends, in the tradition of *Catch-22* and other satires of systemic brutality, but the relatable characters use it to their advantage too—by using intellectual sleight of hand with the boss to justify doing less work, or by finding clever ways to look busy when they’re not, or to avoid people who are unpleasant to be around. The world of *Dilbert* is entirely built around this surface-level rhetorical play, which works great for a throwaway comic, and would have stayed great if Adams had kept them there. He makes constant use of something I’m going to call, for want of a better term, the *sophoid*: something which has the outer semblance of wisdom, but none of the substance; something that sounds weighty if you say it confidently enough, yet can be easily thrown away as “just a thought” if it won’t hold up to scrutiny. “*Why don’t your towels get cleaner when they touch a clean person?*” sounds clever at first, until you talk to anyone who knows about the science of water and hygiene or indeed, anyone who’s smelled a dirty towel. Of course, the average person does not try and get their wisdom from comics, but Adams did not just stick to comics: he is the author of over a dozen books (not counting the comic compendiums), which advise and analyze not only on surviving the office but also on daily life, future technology trends, romance, self-help strategy, and more.

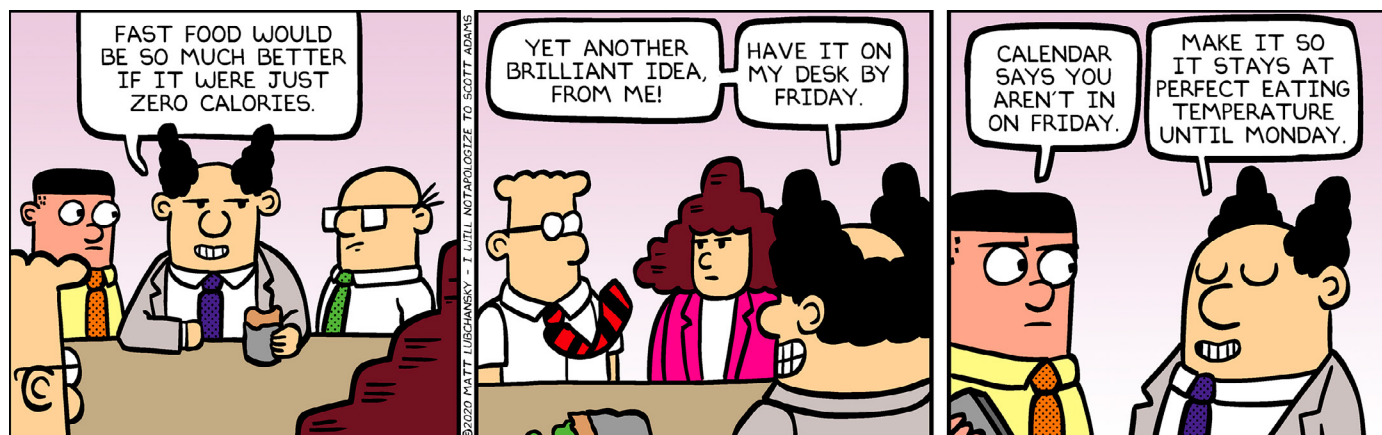
It’s an interesting feeling revisiting Adams’ books in full knowledge of the person he became. His books typically take the reader on a tour of various aspects of life, section by section, explaining and then dismissing office departments, cultural detritus and life philosophies alike, all interspersed with reprints of his relevant strips. In his earlier books, you can feel the weight of the 1990s pressing down on his work, flattening and numbing its potency; this was the period that social scientist Francis Fukuyama dubbed “the end of history”, when the Cold War had ended, the West had won, 9/11 was just two numbers, and there were no grand missions left, no worlds left to conquer. While for millions of people, both in the U.S. and abroad, life was still chaotic and miserable, a lot of people found themselves living lives that were under no great immediate threat:

without bombs or fascism or the threat of eviction to worry about, there was nothing left to do but to go to the office and enjoy fast-casual dining and Big Gulps, just as the Founding Fathers envisioned. This dull but steady life produced a sense of slow-burn anxiety prominent in much of the pop culture of the time, as can be seen in movies such as *Office Space*, *Fight Club* and *The Matrix*, movies which cooed to their audience: *there's got to be more to life than this, right?* And maybe they had a point: while the idea of a “cu-

A

DAMS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS CORPORATE culture is also noticeably ambivalent. One would think from his subject matter that he considers the whole thing a fraud from top to bottom, and indeed there's some evidence that he at least partly thought this at one time. In 1997, he pulled a prank on the Silicon Valley company Logitech, giving a surreal lecture in the guise of a prestigious management consultant named

THIS IS NOT A DILBERT STRIP BUT IT WILL RATHER GIVE YOU THE FLAVOR OF THE THINGS IF YOU HAVE NEVER SEEN ONE



bicle job” can seem to younger readers like relative bliss, they were (and are) still an emblem of boredom and absurdity, a sign that life was being slowly colonized by gray shapes and Powerpoint slides. Throughout his classic-era work, Adams hits on the feeling that the world has been made unnatural, uncondusive to life; materially adequate, but spiritually exhausting.

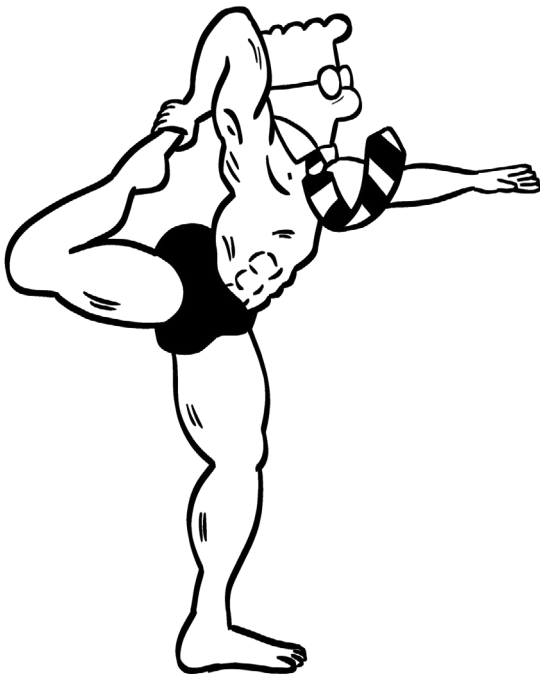
Unfortunately, as talking to any Trump voter will tell you, intuiting correctly that something has gone wrong will not necessarily tell you how to make it right. Adams takes aim at all the outward symptoms of demeaning corporate life, but he never identifies the causes. It is not that one expects a comedy business book to take a detour into a Marxian analysis of the labour theory of value or a dead-serious history of globalization, but it is noticeable that apart from occasional bristling references to outsourcing or layoffs, there are no real gestures towards politics in the *Dilbert* books, as if these sprawling corporate monsters that rule our lives sprang fully-formed from under rocks. (At least, not ‘big’ politics; there are some frustrating comments on the machinations of dating, for example, that are certainly political, though it’s possible Adams did not think of them in this way.)

“Ray Mebert” (so named, of course, because if the world of Dilbert features a dog called Dogbert and a cat called Catbert, it stands to reason that the author is a ‘Mebert’). At first, it seems as though hoaxing a renowned tech firm with a bunch of nonsense should suggest Adams doesn’t think much of business culture. But on closer inspection, it’s hard to tell how ungracious his attitude towards the firm really was; he pulled the prank with the permission and assistance of the vice-chairman, which suggests less of a rebellion and more of a cosy in-joke. (If you want further proof that Adams does not truly hurt corporations, copies of his cartoons can be found on walls of corporations everywhere. As anarchists are fond of saying, “if *Dilbert* changed anything, they’d make it illegal.”)

In addition, for someone who satirizes business bullshit, Adams is a person who seems to have bought into much of it wholeheartedly; when he explains his approach to life he tends to speak in LinkedIn truisms, expounding on his “skill stacks” and “maximizing [his] personal energy”. (You can read more about this in his career advice book, *How to Fail at Almost Everything and Still Win Big*; I have also seen his advice quoted by other self-help gurus, such as James Clear of the bestselling *Atomic Habits*.) Following his

non-*Dilbert* career more carefully, you can see that at every stage of his career, he's actually quite heavily invested in the bullshit he makes fun of every day, or at least some aspects of it: he possesses an MBA from UC Berkeley, and has launched or otherwise been involved in a significant number of business ventures, most amusingly a health food wrap called the "Dilberito". The idea behind the Dilberito was simple—a ready-to-eat burrito that was perfectly nutritionally balanced, delicious, microwaveable and suitable for all. (Adams called it "the blue jeans of food.") Yet the food scientists tasked with engineering the Dilberito simply could not find a way to make it taste good, and it ended up a failure. Now, I'm not a culinary expert here, but I suspect that a lot of big moneyed corporations have probably already tried "what if a Big Mac, but with the health profile of lentils" and found that it's actually a bit tricky to pull off. Ironically, the hubris and delusion required to launch the Dilberito could have come straight out of a speech from the Pointy-haired Boss.

ADAMS HAS ALSO ALWAYS HAD A TENDENCY towards the intersection between corporate hustle culture and new age beliefs, where you can find such ideas as the *law of attraction*, the theory long bubbling under the surface of American life that you can make good things happen just by visualizing them; using the raw energy of your thoughts and desires to make the



universe bend to your will. In his book *The Dilbert Future*, after thirteen chapters spent joking about his predictions for the future of work, family, technology, and so on, Adams spends the end of the book moving into somewhat of a different mood, easing up on the humour and delving into his beliefs that evolution will be debunked in our lifetimes, that time is non-linear, and that he can control what happens to him by writing down his preferred life outcomes fifteen times a day. (I guess he forgot to do it for the Dilberito.) Most of his reasoning for these beliefs relies on heavy use of the *sophoid*, skimming through layman's understandings of quantum physics experiments, metaphors about the Earth as a bowling ball, and suggestions that various coincidences in his life imply that linear time is "probably" not real. Since most of the book is taken up with jokes, it can be hard to gauge how serious Adams is being, and I'm not sure he even knew himself. Taking inspiration from Adams' love of coining new concepts, I'm tempted to call this the Adams Principle: smartass sophistry is good for comics, and terrible for anything more complicated.

In the past few years, Adams has gained some notoriety as a Trump supporter; having slowly moved from "vaguely all-over-the-place centrist who has some odd thoughts and thinks some aspects of Trump are impressive" to full-on MAGA guy, even writing a book called *Win Bigly* praising Trump's abilities as a "master persuader". Fellow Dilbert fan Miles Wray noted in *The Awl* that in recent years the comic has actually become more sympathetic to the Pointy-Haired Boss, reflecting Adams' shifting allegiances. To me, this honestly seems like the logical conclusion of his strange syncretic belief system: this is a guy who hates drab corporatespeak but loves the ideology behind it, a guy who describes the vast powerlessness of life but believes you can change it by writing some words on a napkin. That blend of rebellion against the symptoms of post-Cold War society and sworn allegiance to its machinations couldn't lead anywhere else but to Trump, a man who rails against 'elites' while allowing them to run the country into the ground. Yet I still feel attached to *Dilbert*. Rereading the books and the strips, they're still funny; there's an undeniable skill there. Sometimes I still hear the rhythms of his writing when I'm trying to get a joke right. I just think Adams is a guy who spent so long in the world of slick aphorisms and comic-strip logic that it eventually ate into his brain, became his entire manner of thinking. Beware: as I'm pretty sure Nietzsche said, when you gaze into *Dilbert*, eventually *Dilbert* gazes back into you.♣

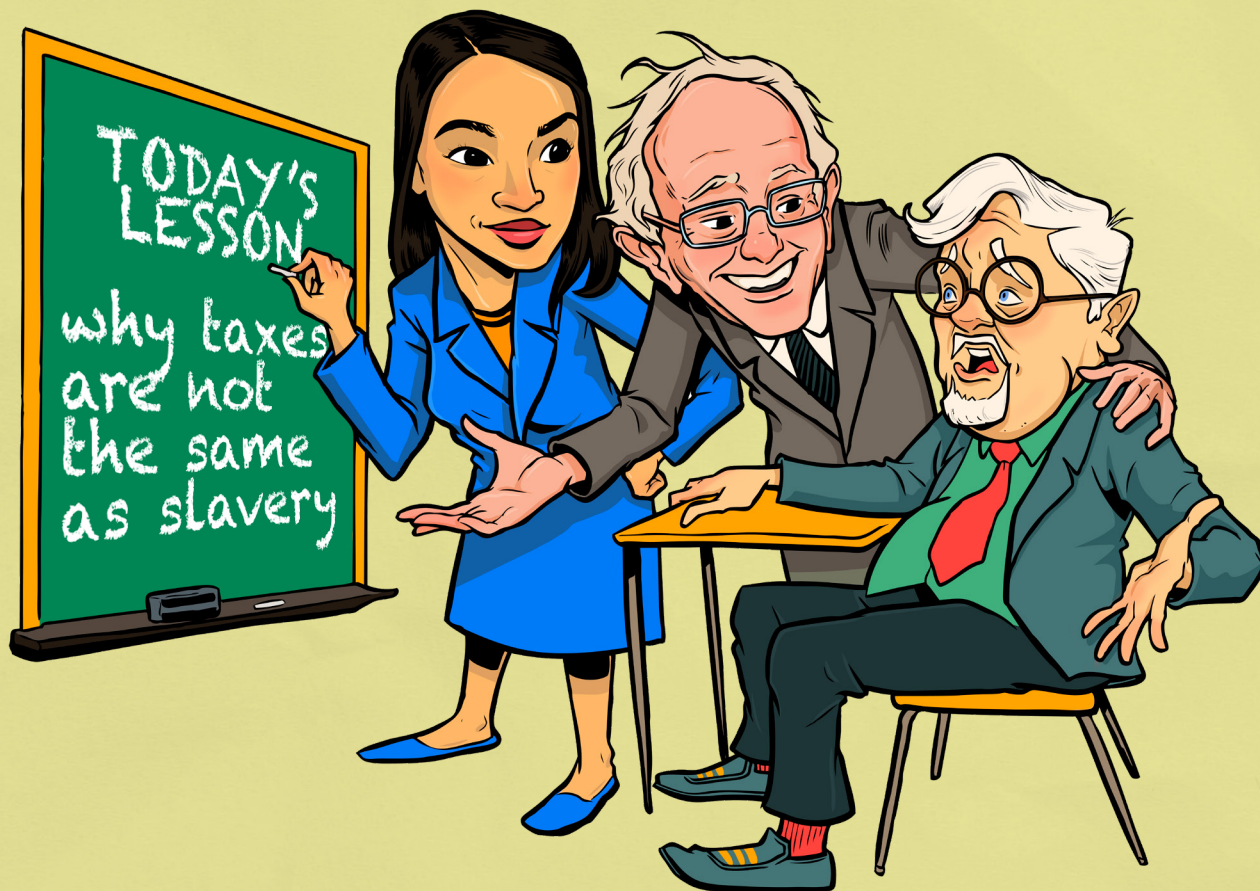


EDUCATING GLENN BECK

BY BEN BURGIS AND NATHAN J. ROBINSON

Glenn Beck's *Arguing With Socialists*, which is formatted as a parody of a school textbook, opens with a cartoon. A man announces he has a splitting headache. In the next panel, Bernie Sanders turns up to announce that "It's not just about a single headache. We need to solve headaches for all!" Then Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez makes an appearance, to say "Headaches are caused by pollution. My Green New Deal will eradicate the problem." Finally, Beck himself shows up in the last panel, to correct them both: "How about just giving the guy some aspirin?"

There is, to use the parlance of our times, "a lot going on here." What is Beck trying to say? If Beck thinks we should *give* the guy some aspirin, does that mean he supports giving people free medical care? Is he saying that only one guy with a headache gets free treatment, and Bernie is silly for trying to solve more than one person's medical problems? Is he saying that all necessary medical care is already affordable? Is he saying that if we have empirical evidence that pollution has contributed to the man's





medical condition we should ignore it and simply hand out aspirin? WHAT IS HE SAYING?! Answers are not forthcoming.

These are the hazards of reading *Arguing With Socialists* as a person with a functional brain.

GLENN BECK HAS NEVER BEEN QUITE LIKE THE OTHER conservative blabbermouths on television and radio. He has always had a certain—well, the generous word is “showmanship,” the ungenerous one is probably “clownsmanship.” When Beck had his infamously bizarre Fox News show from

2009 to 2011, he would weep on television, draw elaborate conspiratorial diagrams on chalkboards, and even jump on his desk wearing lederhosen and singing Edelweiss (as part of an effort to compare AmeriCorps to the Hitler Youth). Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, and Rush Limbaugh presented themselves as serious commentators. Beck's show was more the heir of *Pee Wee's Playhouse* than William F. Buckley's *Firing Line*.

This reflected Beck's origins in “morning zoo” Top 40 radio, as documented in journalist Alexander Zaitchik's exhaustively-researched biography *Common Nonsense: Glenn Beck and the Triumph of Ignorance*. Beck was a radio prodigy, having developed an obsession with Orson Welles and the Golden Age of Radio as a child.

At 19, he became

the youngest morning zoo host and program director in the country. By 21, he had eight years of professional radio experience under his belt and had built a reputation as a talented DJ.

Talented, but also deeply obnoxious and cruel: Beck was known for being willing to do anything for ratings, from calling a rival's wife to joke about her miscarriage to firing a cape-wearing gerbil up the pneumatic tube system at a drive-through ATM, so that “Gerry the Gerbil” would be the “world's first bank tube astronaut.” He specialized in what Zaitchik calls a “signature mix of Qaddafi songs, fat jokes, and racial impersonations.” Mexico was a “dirtbag country” with an economy based on “beans and big hats” while Middle Eastern nations were “camel countries.”

Beck's radio career had ups and downs—by his own admission his drinking and drug use interfered with his performance—but really gathered steam in the Bush years, when he morphed fully from a right-leaning morning show goofball to a “nuke 'em all” flag-waver, calling for “cutting the fingers off” terrorists and watching their “butts shoot blood.” Here he is in February 2001, getting a head start on the rhetoric that would lead us into the Iraq War:

“Bomb the living crap out of them until they have nothing but rocks. Why aren't we going into that country and just blowing the bat crap out of that country? Carpet bomb Iraq and Yemen.”

And here he is describing what Bush's election meant to him:

“The good news is we're going to be a badass country again.... You mess with us, and we bash your head in. We need a mob mentality. We need to pound Baghdad's face into the cement...”

Well, of course, Beck got his mob mentality and Baghdad got its pounding.

After 9/11, Beck's bloodthirstiness escalated:

“The man in me would love to drop a nuke on Palestine if they had anything to do with it... our response, when we find out who harbored [the terrorists,] should honestly make Desert Storm look like a picnic.”

At this point, Beck was still just one of a number of nationally-syndicated radio blowhards. His profile really took off, and his media empire expanded, when he switched to cable news.

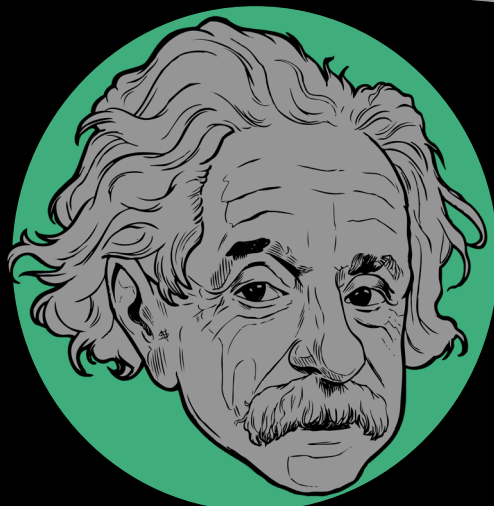
It's easy to forget that it was CNN that gave Beck his start on TV. As part of its transition away from journalism, CNN hired Beck to host a nightly hour of frothing punditry (ABC also gave him a gig as political commentator on *Good Morning America*.) Beck presented him-

ECON 101

Introducing **externalities**. Sometimes two people's “free contract” can infringe upon a third party's “precious private property rights,” as when Western countries' irresponsible burning of fossil fuels causes colossal damage to less developed non-Western countries. This is called an **EXTERNALITY**.

“[CAPITALISM] AS IT EXISTS TODAY IS, IN MY OPINION, THE REAL SOURCE OF EVILS. I AM CONVINCED THERE IS ONLY ONE WAY TO ELIMINATE THESE GRAVE EVILS, NAMELY THROUGH THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A SOCIALIST ECONOMY, ACCOMPANIED BY AN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM WHICH WOULD BE ORIENTED TOWARD SOCIAL GOALS.”

— ALBERT EINSTEIN, SOCIALIST



self as an “independent,” disgusted with Both Sides, but he was clearly a hard-right ideologue. There was immediate controversy upon his hiring at CNN, when audio surfaced in which he called Hurricane Katrina victims “scumbags.” The network plowed ahead with the hire, and he was soon airing CNN specials likes *Exposed: The Extremist Agenda* (about Muslims) and *Climate of Fear* (about climate change). You can guess Beck’s attitude toward the environmental movement, which he compared to Nazism:

“That was Hitler’s plan. His enemy: the Jew. Al Gore’s enemy [and] the UN’s enemy: global warming... And you must silence all dissenting voices. That’s what Hitler did.”

As a ratings gambit, it worked, and CNN was pleased, despite Beck embarrassing the network by calling Hillary Clinton the “stereotypical bitch,” plus an infamous incident in which he challenged Muslim congressman Keith Ellison to “prove that you’re not working with our enemies.” Soon, however, Beck had moved to a more natural home, Fox News, where his show grew wilder and even more conspiratorial. This was where he declared Barack Obama had a “deep-seated hatred for white people, or the white culture” did deep dives into a century-long Progressive conspiracy that involved Che Guevara, ACORN (the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), Barack Obama, Woodrow Wilson, and something called the “Cloward-Piven strategy.” Beck swung between personas—as media writer Zev Chafets put it, from minute to minute he could be “nerdy professor, slap-stick comic, born-again preacher, shock jock, weepy recovering addict, man of destiny.” His rhetoric about Obama was especially vicious, suggesting the president was “marching us toward nonviolent fascism,” and going to establish “reeducation camps for young people.” He compared proposals to marginally raise taxes on the wealthy to slavery.

Beck’s departure from Fox was therefore somewhat surprising—the two seemed made for each other—but Chafets reports that advertisers had been dropping the show, Beck himself didn’t like being controlled from above, and Roger Ailes grew tired of Beck pissing off the wrong people, such as the Anti-Defamation League. Beck now runs *The Blaze*, a trashy tabloid site devoted mostly to whipping up hatred of the left (a sample headline on the main page right now: “Disturbing viral photo shows Black Lives Matter supporter kneeling on crying baby’s neck”). *The Blaze* has a pay-per-view TV arm featuring pundits Steven Crowder, Mark Levin, and the scraggly man from *Duck Dynasty*. Beck originally meant to compete with Fox itself, but *The Blaze* has struggled, shuttering its cable channel in 2019 and undergoing multiple rounds of layoffs. (Beck even put his private jet up for sale.)

The most noteworthy recent phase of Beck’s career has been the “kinder, gentler” Beck that debuted in 2013 and lasted through about the end of 2016. Beck came out pub-

licly and said he was done being a “flame thrower” and wanted to be a “bridge builder.” Beck appeared to dislike the divisiveness of Donald Trump. The media swallowed it whole, with *ABC* running a story on the “new” Glenn Beck. There were headlines in places like *The Atlantic* and the *New York Times* saying “Glenn Beck Wants To Heal The America He Divided One Hug At A Time,” “Glenn Beck Is Sorry About All That,” “Glenn Beck Tries Out Decency,” and “Glenn Beck’s Regrets.” Here’s NPR:

“A reflective Glenn Beck said Thursday he regrets that some of his fiery opinions caused division in the country over the last several years. He wasn’t fully aware of the perilous times and people ‘at each other’s throats,’ said the conservative radio host...”

Beck and Samantha Bee got together for a feel-good segment with both of them wearing fuzzy sweaters and lamenting partisanship. “We tear each other apart, and we don’t see the human on the other side,” Beck said. “By fits and starts,” Bee said, “Glenn Beck and I were becoming... allies?”

BUT BECK EVIDENTLY QUICKLY NOTICED THAT principles aren’t terribly profitable. New Glenn was about as popular as New Coke, and so the old formula was returned to the shelves. He has lapsed back into demagoguery, perhaps even worse than before. Here’s Beck Phase III on coronavirus lockdowns:

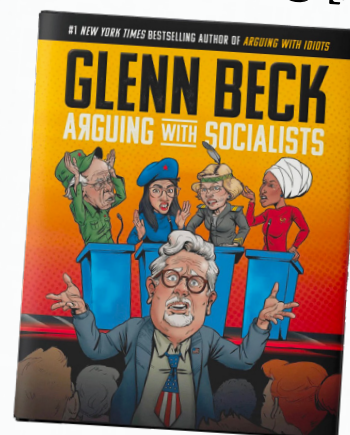
“I would rather have my children stay home and all of us who are over 50 go in and keep this economy going and working... Even if we all get sick, I would rather die than kill the country. Because it’s not the economy that’s dying, it’s the country.”

Of course, it would never be Beck that died. Beck will hide in a very expensive house. The people whose deaths he’s actually calling for are service workers. Beck has also spent a good deal of time ranting about Black Lives Matter protesters. A representative recent tweet:

“The evidence is clear: Communists, radicals, and anarchists have teamed up with Islamists to further their revolution. Most of the young people marching with BLM march to a



FUN FACT



THIS BOOK IS
NOT VERY GOOD!



CATCH PHRASE with no idea how DEADLY the ideology.”

But there are signs Americans don't care for this stuff as much as they did during the peak of the Tea Party years. Beck is a more marginal figure now, thank God.



Still, as with Donald Trump and the Terminator, it is very unwise to count Glenn Beck as having been vanquished. *Arguing With Socialists*, his new book, is a lavishly-produced and highly effective assault on Bernie Sanders, AOC, and the new radical left. Glenn Beck might be a clown, but he knows how to put on a show, and *Arguing With Socialists* is a very cleverly-produced piece of propagandistic trash.

Arguing With Socialists displays a full reversion to vintage Beck, complete with caricatures of Sanders in Castro paramilitary gear and quotes comparing AOC to Hitler.

He looks and sounds exactly the same as he did in the Fox years, only now he sports a white goatee that makes it impossible to look at him without thinking of Colonel Sanders. Reading it in light of Beck's previous protestations that he was "sorry" about being a "divider" it becomes clear that he wasn't sorry about anything; he just wondered momentarily if apologies could be a successful grift.

WE CALL *ARGUING WITH SOCIALISTS* "PROPAGANDA" because the arguments are utterly disingenuous and it's clear that Beck's writers have no interest in accurately presenting socialist beliefs. (Three "contributors" are listed at the bottom of the title page—Justin Haskins, Donald Kendal, and Stu Burguiere—and note in fine print inside the book informs us that "Glenn Beck" is a registered trademark of Mercury Radio Arts, Inc., so we'll refer to "Beck" and "Beck's writers" interchangeably in what follows.) A quick run through some particularly egregious examples should suffice to demonstrate that the book cannot be trusted.

First, take Beck's writers' discussion of the minimum wage. Here is how they present matters:

One of the signature issues for American progressives and socialists is increasing the federal minimum wage to at least \$15 per hour. The idea seems simple enough to socialists: if greedy companies are focus to pay their workers more, then workers would be better off. But here's the thing, huge amounts of data show boosting the minimum wage often results in negative economic consequences, the very people minimum wage laws are meant to help. For example, after Seattle increased its minimum wage to \$13, lower-wage employees reported working 9 percent fewer hours and earned \$125 less per month on average according to researchers at the University of Washington. Similar results have been experienced in other cities across the country as well, and the Congressional Budget Office estimated in 2019 that increasing the federal minimum wage of \$15 per hour would result in as many as 3.7 million fewer jobs and a \$9 billion decrease in real income in 2024—and that assumes a slower rollout of the \$15 minimum wage than what many Democrats are now calling for.

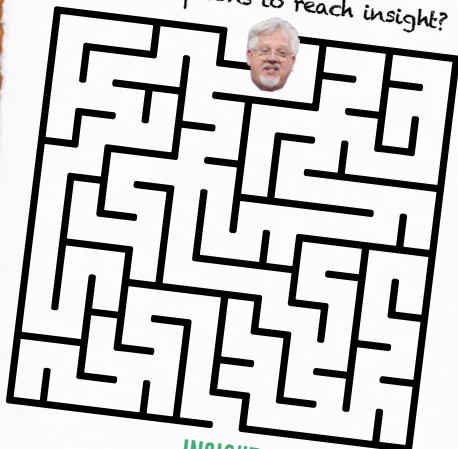
Now, this all sounds quite authoritative. Congressional Budget Office! University of Washington! But if you open up the CBO report in question, what do you find? Well, right on the first page it concludes:

In an average week in 2025, the \$15 option would boost the wages of 17 million workers who would otherwise earn less than \$15 per hour. Another 10 million workers otherwise earning slightly more than \$15 per hour might see their wages rise as well. But 1.3 million other workers would become jobless, according to CBO's median estimate. There is a two-thirds chance that the change in employment would be between about zero and a decrease of 3.7 million workers. The number of people with annual income below the poverty threshold in 2025 would fall by 1.3 million.

We can see here that the Beck book has done a classic "cherry pick," showing you the statistic that supports its conclusion and burying the ones that undercut it. Beck wants you to think that socialists are deranged and do not understand economics, that they would "hurt the very

ACTIVITY

Can you navigate Glenn Beck through the fog of his misconceptions to reach insight?



people they're trying to help." In fact, the CBO report concluded that a \$15 minimum wage would boost the wages of 27 million workers, and would lift 1.3 million people out of poverty! It concluded that there were *trade-offs* to this policy, that some people would not have jobs who would otherwise have jobs—a trade-off that can be counteracted with a job guarantee or basic income, which socialists also want—but it's pretty important that the CBO found a \$15 minimum "would increase the wages of millions of low-wage workers, increase the average incomes of low- and lower-middle-income families, reduce poverty, shift money from corporate profits to the wages of low-wage workers, and reduce inequality." If you only present the part that suits your ideology, you are manipulating people. This is what conservatives constantly do in order to try to show that left policies will "hurt the people they're supposed to help." They tell you the downside and bury the upside, even when the upside often *clearly* outweighs the downside. (See, for example, Medicare For All, where they'll tell you how much money it will cost you but will decline to tell you what you get for that money or the fact that because you're no longer paying premiums, co-pays, and deductibles you will actually be *richer* than you were before.)

So, frequently in the book, the facts aren't *wrong*, which is why the book is able to invite readers to check the sources for its facts. Instead, they're carefully selected to produce misunderstanding. For example, at one point Beck says that the U.S. is only responsible for a small percentage of carbon emissions (14%, though that still makes us the second-highest producer after China). Beck uses this fact to conclude that the U.S. does not need to change its carbon emissions, because this would not make a difference, and the problem is non-Western countries. A critical fact is left out here: if you look at *cumulative* emissions, the picture changes, with the U.S. and Europe responsible for most of the problem. This means that it's deceptive to treat climate change as a problem we didn't cause. But it also doesn't logically follow that from the fact that we only produce a fraction of present emissions, we do not have to do our part to stop them. If every country thought this way, the problem could never be solved. Making the United States carbon neutral would provide a powerful example spurring efforts at Green New Deals in other countries around the world. A future socialist government could also make demands for climate action a major part of future trade negotiations with other nations.

Another example of hiding facts: Beck also pulls the familiar trick of trying to convince you that we need to privatize our school system by pointing to poor U.S. school performance compared to other countries. Our government-run schools suck next to those of other countries,

therefore we must "introduce competition" via school vouchers. What the argument always leaves out is that many of the school systems doing better than us are *also* public. Finland, for instance, not only has strong teachers' unions but *does not legally allow private schools*, and outperforms the United States. The argument that the presence of "government" in education is causing the gap between the


FUN WITH LOGIC

A cartoon on p. 14 of *Arguing with Socialists* shows Bernie Sanders pulling the jacket off of a man on the street to give it to a homeless person. The man protests that he "saved for months" to buy the jacket as two cops apparently working with Bernie take him away. Name two relevant disanalogies between confiscating a jacket that someone is actually wearing and nationalizing a company owned by a billionaire.

U.S. and other schools is therefore false in the most obvious way: government isn't the difference between us and elsewhere! One thing that *is* different, though, is that many of these other countries have a consensus that quality public schools are a good thing, and they do not have the kinds of crazed right-wingers we find in the United States, who are constantly trying to destroy the entire school system and turn it over to for-profit corporations that will maximize the amount of money they can squeeze out of taxpayers and minimize the amount of education they have to give in return.

THIS SHOULD SUFFICE TO SHOW THAT BECK'S WRITERS cannot be trusted to represent their facts accurately. But let's also look at some of the sophistical reasoning deployed. Here the writers argue that if socialists really hate wealth concentration they should hate government:

"If wealth really does equal power, then the federal government is already controlling society. The U.S. government has and spends more money than all of the wealthiest business and people in America—and it's not even close... It always amazes me that socialists like yourself seem obsessed with taking wealth away from those who have it because you believe they have too much power over society, all while demanding we give even more power to government... If your goal is to decentralize power by decentralizing wealth, then the last



USE YOUR IMAGINATION
Imagine a perfectly libertarian free-market society of the kind Beck believes in. Can you think of ways in which the concentration of economic power would actually make many people feel very un-free?
HINT: think about employers' power

thing you should want to do is to concentrate more wealth in the hands of the federal government, a relatively small group of people that controls much of the nation's lands, wealth, natural resources, and laws. Congress, which is supposed to serve as the people's representatives, is only composed of 535 people... Sounds an awful lot like "oligarchy" to me... it's the federal government that owns the tanks, guns, and nuclear bombs—not Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates.

As Beck's writers might learn if any of them had ever actually had an argument with a socialist, this objection misses the point by a mile. State institutions exercise quite a bit of power in *any* non-anarchist society. Presumably even Glenn Beck doesn't want to privatize America's nuclear arsenal. The question in dispute between the Glenn Becks and the AOC and Bernies of the world, then, isn't about whether the government should continue to govern. It's about who should control the government. When socialists say that wealth equals power, our point is that if some citizens have vastly more wealth than others, the wealthier citizens will have more power *over the government*. If you care about democratic values, that's a problem.

OK, Beck might say, but socialists don't *just* want a more even distribution of wealth. We also want the government to take over parts of the economy that are currently private. Even Bernie Sanders wants to nationalize

health insurance, for example, and some of us would like to nationalize things like big banks and power companies as well. Wouldn't increasing the power of the state in this way decrease the power of ordinary citizens?

IT'S POSSIBLE TO IMAGINE HYPOTHETICAL SITUATIONS in which it would. If the American government were headed by a hereditary monarch but the private sector were dominated by worker cooperatives, nationalizing private companies would lead to a decrease in the level of democratic control exercised by ordinary citizens over the economy. But the real situation is precisely the opposite. In a nation like the United States that combines a standard capitalist economy with an (imperfectly) democratic government, politicians are the only part of the power structure that have to be elected and re-elected by ordinary people. The obscene level of inequality generated by those capitalist economic structures makes democracy less meaningful than it would be otherwise. But privatizing public assets takes them entirely outside of the sphere of democracy.

To make this less abstract, consider a park or library. Beck would have us believe that because our city council only has six people on it, they are an oligarchy and clearly the parks and libraries should be controlled by the private sector. But we elect those six people. If we don't like their policies we can run reform candidates against them in the next election.

Let's say our town has seven parks and three library branches and we sell one park or library branch each to 10 wealthy citizens. We've increased the number of individuals who make decisions about the parks and libraries! But wait. Now if one of the new park-owners decides that you have to pay him to get into the park, or one

of the new library-owners hates Toni Morrison and thus decides to remove all of her books from his library, disgruntled citizens of the town have no way of appealing these decisions.

Throughout the book, Beck asks questions like:

"STOP AND THINK: Have Microsoft, Amazon, and Apple made your life and the lives around you better or worse?"

Since many of us have Amazon Prime accounts and enjoy the free two-day shipping, we are supposed to think "Ah, corporations have actually done so much for me, why did I dislike them?" But this only works

CONCEPT QUIZ

Please answer ALL questions.

Can you spot the logical fallacy in these arguments against socialism?

1. Both socialism and Nazism involve greater government control of the economy, therefore socialism is economic Nazism.
2. Means-tested social programs like Medicaid sometimes perverse incentives for their recipients not to take somewhat higher paying jobs, therefore Bernie Sanders' proposal for a universal non-means-tested Medicare for All program is a bad idea.
3. Barack Obama says climate change could have catastrophic consequences if we don't do something about it but he bought seaside property after leaving the presidency. So we don't need to worry about climate change.
4. Mainstream Democrats have often proposed bad policies so the ideas proposed by Berniecrats are also bad.
5. Human nature can't be changed so it's a bad idea to take private companies into public ownership.
6. Nordic-style social safety nets exist to help people who might otherwise suffer. But so does private charity. As such, we don't need to expand our social safety net in the ways supported by socialists.
7. Many authoritarian regimes have called themselves socialist, therefore socialism is authoritarian.

READING COMPREHENSION

What do Burgis and Robinson say the central flaws with Beck's arguments are?

because Beck's argument is based on a false dichotomy: do you want Amazon or do you want to not have anything Amazon provides? There is a third possibility, which is that we still have institutions designed to satisfy human wants, but we build them to conform with our values. For instance: Amazon could be unionized and publicly-owned, its drivers could operate under better conditions, and it would still be a package delivery service. We do not have to have either exploitative corporations or nothing.

Conservatives might object that we might not get kind of tech innovations that make our economy so dynamic if giant corporations like Amazon were taken into public ownership. But the empirical premise of this argument is dubious at best. Beck says on p. 374 that "[w]ithout the free market, Americans would not have been able to build the internet," but neglects to mention that the original ARPANET was developed not by "the free market" but by the Department of Defense.

WHILE JUST ABOUT ANY SOCIALIST THINKS THAT vital industries like the production of pharmaceuticals should be taken outside of the market, not all socialists are about the idea that we can ever transcend markets entirely. David Schweikart, for example, provides a model of social-

ism in his classic book *After Capitalism* in which private companies still exist, but instead of a private sector of hierarchical capitalist businesses financed by wealthy investors, there would be a private sector of worker-owned firms financed with grants from publicly owned banks. We don't need to speculate about what kind of innovation would exist in *this* kind of economy. We can simply point at existing examples like the R&D arm of Spain's large and thriving Mondragon federation of worker cooperatives.

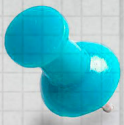
Beck would have heard of Mondragon if he'd ever actually *asked* a socialist what she thought about any of these issues. Instead, Beck and his writers show themselves to be spectacularly clueless about even the broad outlines of common arguments on the socialist side of the debate. On p. 27, he describes a hypothetical situation in which you are a restaurant worker being offered a promotion. You are currently on Medicaid. Your employer's promotion does not include health insurance benefits, and because it would place you above the Medicaid income threshold, it would actually end up costing you more. "You decide you're better off in poverty" is, Beck's hands, a parable about the problem of an excessively generous welfare state. But if he'd ever spent twenty minutes chatting about healthcare with a Sanders supporter he'd quickly find out that it's also

ECON 101
Introducing **diminishing marginal utility**. An additional ten dollars is worth much more to a homeless person than it is to Jeff Bezos, which is why wealth that accumulates in the hands of the 1% is inefficient in maximizing utility.



"THE FEW OWN THE MANY BECAUSE THEY POSSESS THE MEANS OF LIVELIHOOD OF ALL ... THE COUNTRY IS GOVERNED FOR THE RICHEST, FOR THE CORPORATIONS, THE BANKERS, THE LAND SPECULATORS, AND FOR THE EXPLOITERS OF LABOR. THE MAJORITY OF MANKIND ARE WORKING PEOPLE. SO LONG AS THEIR FAIR DEMANDS - THE OWNERSHIP AND CONTROL OF THEIR LIVELIHOODS - ARE SET AT NAUGHT, WE CAN HAVE NEITHER MEN'S RIGHTS NOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS. THE MAJORITY OF MANKIND IS GROUND DOWN BY INDUSTRIAL OPPRESSION IN ORDER THAT THE SMALL REMNANT MAY LIVE IN EASE."

— HELEN KELLER, SOCIALIST



a standard argument against means-testing and in favor of universal provision of social rights like healthcare.

Occasionally there are quotes from Bernie and AOC, presumably the result of sending some intern to Google

with instructions to “find a quote from Bernie trashing capitalism so we can talk

about freedom” or “find a good AOC quote to pair

with this passage,” but there are no signs that

any of Beck’s writers have ever picked up

any books by socialist economists or political philosophers. One

of the most remarkable signs of that

comes when Beck says

that when workers

are paid low wages it’s perfectly OK and non-coercive because they “voluntarily agree” to work for those

wages. If he had the slightest interest in actually arguing against socialist ideas, this would be a great place to do it by engaging with Marx’s ideas about exploitation.

Given the profound historical importance of those ideas to the socialist case about capitalism, you’d think that a book running well over four hundred pages and entitled *Arguing with Socialists* would say *something* about those ideas. Beck’s book doesn’t claim to be an academic monograph, of course, so we wouldn’t necessarily expect him to engage with, for example, the sophisticated explanation the twentieth century analytic philosopher G.A. Cohen

gives in his paper “The Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom” about why the claim that workers are collectively exploited isn’t undermined by the fact that some individual workers achieve upwardly mobility. But you would expect him to engage *a little* with all the reasons socialists don’t buy the claim that capitalist employment relations embody the highest possible degree of human freedom.

He doesn’t. There’s no sign that Beck has even heard of any of the authors mentioned above. Nor does he engage with contemporary book length explanations of the other side of the argument like

The Socialist Manifesto by Jacobin editor Bhaskar Sun-

kara. Instead, he litters the book with imaginary tweets

from literal cartoon socialists who say ludicrous things that no socialist would ever think. “Rashida Resistance,” for

example, says of the Chinese surveillance state that “this wouldn’t happen in America. Our government would

never abuse technology like this and spy on its citizens.” Believe us, nobody named “Rashida” is ever going to be

doubting the U.S. government’s inclination to engage in privacy violations. One of his fictional socialist interlocutors is literally named *Clay Guevara*. He might as well

have called him “SocialistStrawman1917.”

If Beck had picked up a book by a socialist, or even some tweets by one, he would have found out pretty quickly

that any real socialist would respond to arguments vaguely directed, as so many of Beck’s are, against “socialists and progressives” by pointing out that liberalism and leftism

are very different things. When he illustrated those arguments by talking about the (real or imagined) failures of the Obama administration, as he does throughout the book,

he would have heard a *lot* about how socialists felt about that administration. (Not positively.) When Beck says—it

might sound like we’re making this up, but he really does say this—that in a “completely free market model,” instead

of having a Nordic-style safety net “the private social structure—churches, Lions Clubs, PTAs, soup kitchens, Jerry

Lewis telethons—[assists] people who are incapable of supporting themselves,” Beck would hear a lot of comments

dripping with acid about Clay Guevara’s brother-in-law who died because he couldn’t afford his insulin. (“Gosh, I wonder why the Lions Club didn’t take care of that.”)

When Beck said that the Affordable Care Act showed that “government intervention” in healthcare is a bad idea, someone—or more likely several hundred someones—

would have pointed out that Beck is equivocating. Medicare for All and a Rube Goldberg scheme like ObamaCare, which started out as a Republican idea in the 1990s, might

have in common that both would be examples of “government intervention” in healthcare, but that’s like saying that wars and peace treaties are both examples of “government

intervention” in foreign policy so the catastrophic results of the invasion of Iraq show that we shouldn’t have a peace deal with Iran. The real Rashida Resistances of the world

can be *very* entertaining about how they make these points.

We could go on, but as animal-loving vegetarians, we don’t go around beating dead horses.

YOU MAY THINK WE’RE WASTING OUR TIME BY giving Glenn Beck an argument at all. After all, we’ve shown *Arguing With Socialists* should be

unpersuasive to anyone who thinks about what it is saying. A typical *Current Affairs* reader will

probably not be surprised by this; they did not previously associate the name “Glenn Beck” with “argu-

FUN FACT

The cover of *Arguing With Socialists* says it is by “Glenn Beck,” but the title page reveals that it was produced along with a team of six other men, three writers, two designers, and an illustrator. Capitalists depend entirely on the labor of large numbers of workers but then the capitalist takes all the public credit for themselves!

TRY IT AT HOME

Draw a caricature of Glenn Beck as vicious and unfair as Beck’s caricatures of Bernie Sanders and AOC.

mentative rigor.” But having shown that Beck is wrong, and being disinclined to spend thousands more words exhaustively compiling every way in which the 400 pages of this book can be wrong, we move to a more interesting question about *Arguing With Socialists*: why does it *work*?

Because make no mistake: *Arguing With Socialists* is extremely well-done. It contains dozens of charts and hundreds of endnotes. It is filled with sidebars containing “Fun Facts” and “Things You May Not Have Known.” By combining statistical data with comics, anecdotes, and “vox pops” from little imaginary cartoon socialists who show up to challenge the writers’ arguments (it must be admitted that the one called Professor Tweed does not look *entirely* dissimilar from Ben Burgis), it manages to simultaneously seem like an intellectual policy discussion *and* be accessible, digestible, and fun. The ghost of Karl Marx, looking like the Genie from Disney’s *Aladdin*, floats in from time to time to harumph and fume.

Rhetorically, it is extremely effective. If you are among those who would gladly choose “eating a giant bowl of spiders” over “picking up a Glenn Beck book,” you may never realize this. But the graphic design and artwork are first rate. The book is loaded with endnotes, it appears to make arguments, and it adopts a light, friendly, inviting tone. The “school textbook” conceit is inspired, because it makes *Arguing With Socialists* feel like it is offering you nothing but simple, factual, elementary common sense, stuff so straightforward and logical that a child could understand it. Beck even exhorts readers to do their own research, not to accept what he says at face value (“Don’t take my word for any-

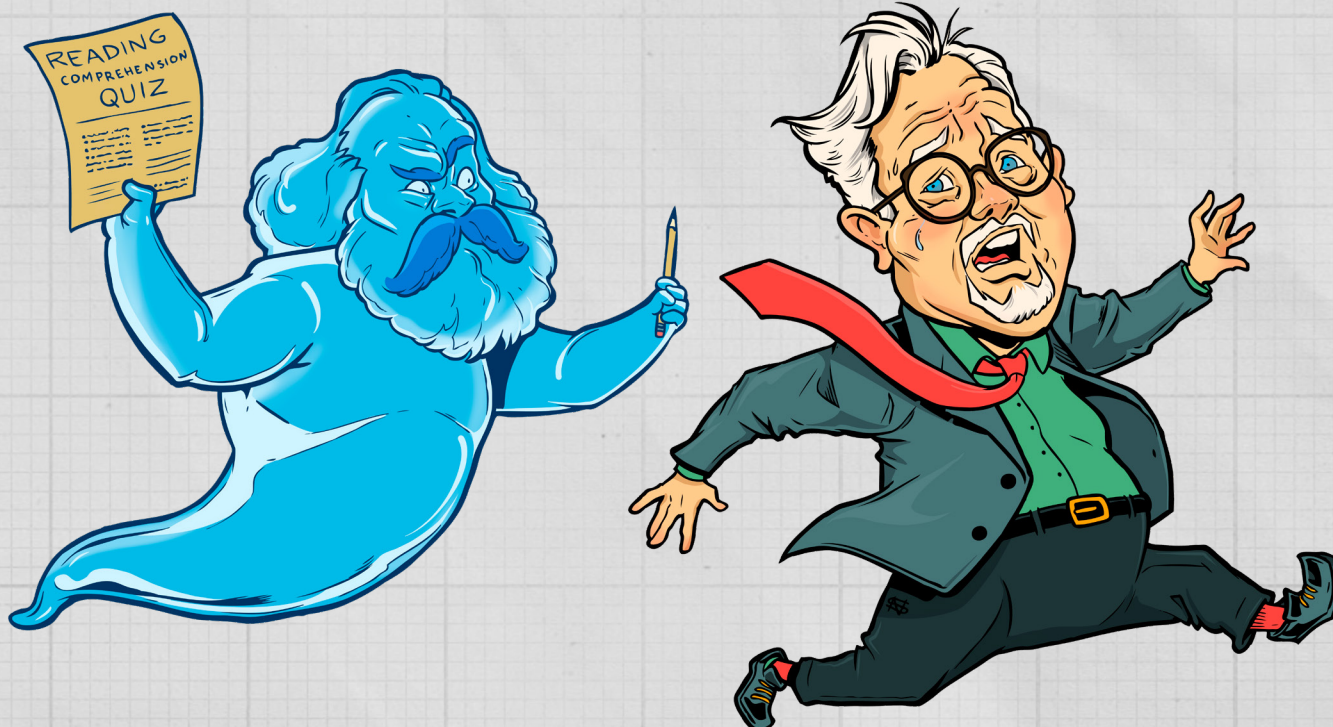
thing I say.”). Of course, this is just a rhetorical device. If people actually do their research and scrutinize the footnotes, they’ll find that half of what he says misrepresents the underlying sources. But conservatives have developed the presentation of bullshit as Just Facts And Logic into a fine art.

Perhaps this wouldn’t be so worrisome if we had a media that could be relied upon to expose this for what it is. But as the “New Beck” episode showed us, the supposed “liberal” media will often utterly fail to display the most basic skepticism, and they will help Beck pose as an “independent” who is “not partisan” even as he pushes a hard-right agenda. Within this book, there are arguments that having a basic social safety net will produce totalitarian misery, that climate change, while real, should not concern us enough to do anything about it, and that Basic Economics means we should leave corporate power almost completely unchecked. It’s all wrapped up in fun cartoons and creative graphic design. The “I’m just giving you the facts” and “please, think for yourself” tricks are good at implying Beck is not an ideologue, just Someone Who Cares. Books like this should frighten us, because if their conclusion were widely accepted, we would live in a crueler and more dysfunctional society, but they have the power to convince. We need to argue back and we need to argue better. +



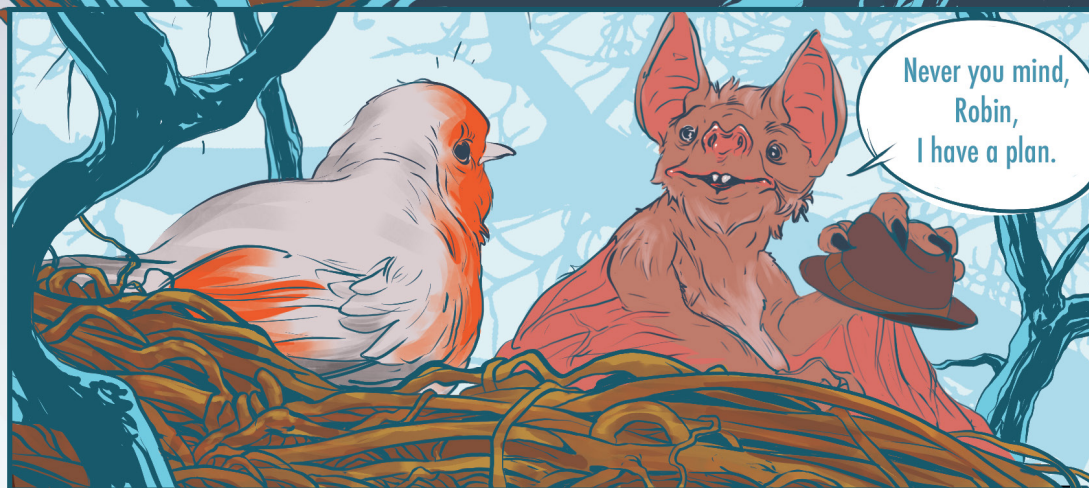
ECON 101

Introducing **diminishing marginal utility**. An additional ten dollars is worth much more to a homeless person than it is to Jeff Bezos, which is why wealth that accumulates in the hands of the 1% is inefficient in maximizing utility.





THE ADVENTURES OF BAT & ROBIN



Madam,
I am a gentleman
who recieved this
delivery notice.

It arrived at my
nes-FUCK!-house door,
you see.

I would like
the contents to be
deposited in my not-talons but
actual hands if
please.



Well I'd say we fooled them
Bat... I mean Bat-Man!



WORLD CHAMPION WRESTLER
KARL H. MARX



“DAS GESPENST”
THE GHOST

WRESTLING MARX'S GHOST

by Nathan J. Robinson

IT IS VERY DIFFICULT NOT TO BE SOMEWHAT CAPTIVATED by Karl Marx as a human being. First, by any fair analysis, he was one of the most original and influential thinkers who ever lived. The most intelligent anti-communists always admitted this. Joseph Schumpeter, whose concept of “creative destruction” is one of the cornerstones of the contemporary defense of free-market capitalism, described Marx as a “genius,” a “prophet,” and one of the most insightful economists of his day. Leszek Kolakowski, an ex-Communist whose work on Marx is bitterly critical and disillusioned, nevertheless says “no reasonable person would deny” that Marx enriched our understanding of economics and history.

Conservative dismissals of Marx are often spectacularly unpersuasive. The *National Review* just published a cover story by Kevin Williamson, accusing Marx of being a “Black Lives Matter mascot” and “Jew-hating bigot” (the latter charge Williamson supported in part by fabricating evidence). The story accuses Marx of being a “caveman” as an economist, “at heart a moralist” rather than a social scientist, a writer of dry, out-of-touch theory. This is laughable: Marx was an unusually insightful economist and anything but dry.

For a socialist, Marx is inescapable, and not just for his theories. For well over a century, he has been the colossal neutron star around which all socialist thinking revolves. But Marx’s life itself has something deeply romantic to it, and his persona looms just as large as his ideas. Here was a man who pissed off nearly every government in Western Europe, before finally being tolerated in London, which ignored him. There, in the nerve center of the British empire, the place where the Industrial Revolution sprang into being, he spent three decades using the formidable powers of his intellect to try to comprehend the actual inner workings of capitalism, and then to exhort proletarians around the world to overthrow it. Which some did.

He spent his adult life in poverty and ill health, dodging creditors and suffering from chronic skin disease, while wag-

ing war on the entire economic system that surrounded him, and showing such depth and originality that people would be debating his ideas 150 years after his death. He was a completely independent thinker: affiliated with no university, his books mostly unread in his lifetime (famously, Marx said that the revenue from *Capital* would “not even pay for the cigars I smoked writing it”—a fact attributable as much to the speed with which Marx went through cigars as his poor sales figures). Yet sitting alone in the British Museum Reading Room—with subscriptions to *The Times* and *The Economist*—he figured out things about the world around him that nearly everyone else around him had missed. It is remarkable, looking back, to realize that the disciplines of sociology, history, and economics were permanently influenced by an immigrant who repeatedly had to pawn his overcoat in order to keep his children fed (and who could not go to the Reading Room to research *Capital* when his coat was in hock, thereby providing a rather literal demonstration of his theory that the economic structure of society determines the ideas that get produced).

Marx’s personality was so vivid that he is easy to imagine, even now. He was a fidget, paced up and down his carpet so much that it became threadbare. His co-editor said Marx “finishes nothing, breaks off everything, and plunges ever afresh into an endless sea of books”. Those who are frazzled and disorganized can find a sympathetic comrade in the figure of Marx. A Prussian spy described his habits:

He leads the existence of a real bohemian intellectual. Washing, grooming, and changing his linen are things he does rarely, and he likes to get drunk. Though he is often idle for days on end, he will work day and night with tireless endurance when he has a great deal of work to do. He often stays up all night, and then lies down fully clothed on the sofa at midday and sleeps till evening, untroubled by the comings and goings of the whole world.

There is not one clean and solid piece of furniture. Everything is broken, tattered and torn, with half an inch of dust over everything and the greatest disorder everywhere ... When you enter Marx’s room smoke and tobacco fumes make your eyes water ... Everything is dirty and covered with dust, so that to sit down becomes a hazardous business. Here is a chair with three legs. On another chair the children are playing cooking. This chair hap-

This piece is an excerpt from the introduction to *Wrestling Marx’s Ghost: 19th Century Socialism and the 21st Century Left*, forthcoming from Current Affairs Books, which expands on the arguments and adds a great deal more evidence.

pens to have four legs. This is the one that is offered to the visitor, but the children's cooking has not been wiped away and if you sit down you risk a pair of trousers.

As you would expect, his workspace was in permanent disarray, overflowing with “books cigars, matches, tobacco boxes, paperweights.” He “never allowed anybody to put his books or papers in order,” and they looked a mess, volumes of different sizes, pamphlets, notebooks all scattered about. But the disorder “was only apparent,” in reality “he and his study were one: the books and papers in it were as much under his control as his own limbs.” (Marx called his books his “slaves.”) I find him eerily relatable in this respect, especially because his note-taking style is my own—light pencil markings in the margins and turning down corners—and he, too, had totally indecipherable handwriting.

MARX WAS, LIKE MANY WHO ARE CONVINCED of their genius, arrogant. He left a trail of shattered friendships behind him. H.M. Hyndman, a disciple who felt warmly toward Marx admitted Marx could frequently be “aggressive, intolerant, and intellectually dominant.” But Marx also had a soft and tender side, especially with children, with whom he was playful. While he was at his desk toiling over his “economic shit” (Marx’s own words), he would let the children “pile up the chairs behind him to represent a coach at which he was harnessed as a horse.” They “would ‘whip’ him even as he sat writing.” According to Eleanor Marx, he used to tell the children a wonderful series of stories he had invented, which centered around an imaginary magician called Hans Rockle. Rockle had a toyshop, which was full of:

“...wooden men and women, giants and dwarfs, kings and queens, workmen and masters, animals and birds, as numerous as Noah got into the ark...” but “though he was a magician, Hans could never meet his obligations either to the devil or to the butcher, and was therefore... constantly obliged to sell his toys to the devil. These then went through wonderful adventures—always ending in a return to Hans Rockle’s shop.”

I love this, because not only is it fabulously inventive, but because it manages to weave in Marx’s economic viewpoint in a nondogmatic way: the toymaker’s debts are the direct precipitating cause of the whole story.

Another personal favorite Marx anecdote: he once stood with a crowd outside a shop window display, looking in at a display of one of the earliest model electric railway engines. Marx was giddy with excitement, but expressed himself in a very Marxist way by giddily telling his fellow onlookers what this new innovation meant in terms of historical materialism. Biographer Francis Wheen quotes him saying: “In the wake of the economic revolution the political must necessarily follow, for the latter is only the expression of the former!” The reaction of fellow shoppers to this outburst is, alas, not recorded.

It is rare for intellectuals to be revolutionaries, which is one reason leftists find him compelling. He combined theory and practice. (Sorry, *praxis*.) He told us that the philosophers had only previously interpreted the world, but at last we had one who understood the need to change it. And his loyalties were in the right place: Marx loathed the exploitation of human beings by other human beings. He was enraged by the way people were reduced to the status of machines to serve the interests of profiteers. He saw capitalism as oppressive and unstable, a system of legalized robbery, and he was determined to wage war on it using every last piece of his intellectual ammunition. What’s more, it took a hell of a lot of effort. His wife, Jenny Marx, said of *Capital* that “seldom has a book been written under more difficult circumstances, and I could write a secret history that would uncover an infinite amount of worry, trouble, and anxiety.” True, he only sought gainful employment twice during his 34 years in London—once when he applied for a job as a railway clerk and once when he *nearly* got involved with a scheme to sell lacquer varnish. But while he loafed sometimes, he did not *just* loaf: he worked 16-hour-days at his writing, and read feverishly.

Here was the model of a man who refused to back down against world historic forces, and who spoke on behalf of the oppressed and miserable. He had contempt for prosecutors and police who came after him, saying “however great these gentlemen may imagine themselves in their own fancy, they are nothing, absolutely nothing, in the gigantic battles of the present time.” He spat in the eye of the powerful, and even today he has the capacity to drive the *National Review* up the wall.

You can see why leftists love Marx and are protective of him. He’s *our* guy. The people themselves have a Great Man of History.

But something has happened between Marx’s time and ours, namely that bloody stretch of history known as the “twentieth century.” Over the course of that time, Marx’s influence spread, and the territory governed by Marxist states exceeded the reach of the British empire. At the time of Marx’s death, the sun never set on the British empire. A few decades later, the empire had crumbled, and the sun never set on Marxist countries. Who, watching a bedraggled Marx present his admission ticket at the British Museum, could have anticipated such a reversal?

We know, of course, that communist governments were largely a repressive disaster, that millions of people were murdered by regimes that called themselves “Marxist” and “socialist.” And we have also been told a story about why that happened, namely that “socialism doesn’t work” and the whole enterprise was doomed to fail. This story is wrong and stupid. Socialism, the ideal of eliminating social classes and castes, giving people ownership over the work, and creating a world where people live together in peace, prosperity, and rough equality—this is something we should all believe in and work for.

BUT HOW SHOULD A 21ST CENTURY LEFTIST think about Marx and “Marxism”? Should one be a Marxist? What does that mean? Should we look at the 20th century as having “disproven” or “discredited” Marx and the philosophy that bears his name?

There is an obviously reasonable approach to his work: without assuming he must be either a prophet or a nincompoop, try to assess what is valuable and what isn’t, then render as careful and fair-minded a verdict as I can. There are aspects of Marx’s work I appreciate, and others that range from “troublesome” to “outright appalling.” I do not think anyone needs to be so loyal to a 19th century political philosopher that differences of opinion about him need to be acrimonious.

The philosophy of Marxism itself has three major parts: “dialectics,” historical materialism, and Marx’s analysis of capitalism.

The first of these is not especially valuable. There is even a school of self-described “no-bullshit Marxists” who ditch the “dialectical” completely, because whenever it is actually described in detail, it comes down to a few simple observations: (1) the world around us is always changing, even when it looks as if it remains the same (2) we need to notice those changes (3) things often transform into quite different things (4) there are many seeming contradictions in the world around us. Some, like Leon Trotsky, have claimed that dialectical thinking actually supercedes “formal logic,” but when you actually get to the bottom of it, it’s perfectly consistent with logic, and it isn’t really a new method of analysis, just a way of directing our analysis toward changes we might not have noticed before. Important, but doesn’t need a fancy word.

Historical materialism, which Marx was often frustratingly imprecise about the implications of, is unsatisfying, though like “dialectical thinking,” it does focus one’s attention on things that matter. In the Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*, Marx famously laid out his theory that “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness,” and posing the theory that the “economic structure of society” is its “real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure.” Marx never actually managed to prove that this was so, and even Marx’s defenders like Terry Eagleton and G.A. Cohen have admitted that, stated in its strongest form (the form in which Marx stated everything), it is hard to defend as an empirical hypothesis. Engels claimed in his speech at Marx’s graveside that “just as Darwin discovered the law of development or organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history.” That’s an overstatement, because as far as we know nobody has yet discovered “laws” of human history, and Marx’s belief that he *had* discovered such laws led him to believe he could predict the entire direction of human social development, with a commu-

nist society the inevitable endpoint of capitalist development. This belief that history flows in accordance with scientifically discoverable laws was a dangerous delusion, one that led many 20th century communists to an unwarranted confidence in their own rightness and disinclined them toward questioning whether what they were doing was, in fact, going to produce a positive transformation in society. Why would one need to ask such a thing, if it was inevitable anyway? Historical materialism poses a number of interesting questions and draws our attention to useful issues: social science was enriched by looking more closely at the way economic relationships and class struggle shaped human development. But as an immutable “law,” it did not work. As Kolakowski, who gives a harsh but fair assessment of historical materialism in *Main Currents of Marxism*, explains:

[T]he doctrine is so imprecise that no historical investigation and no imaginable facts can refute it... Conceived as a theory explaining all historical change by technical progress and all civilization by the class struggle, Marxism is unsustainable. As a theory of the interdependence of technology, property relationships, and civilization, it is trivial.... All this done not mean, however, that Marx’s principles of historical investigation are empty or meaningless. On the contrary, he has profoundly affected our understanding of history, and it is hard to deny that without him our researches would be less complete and accurate than they are.

When we get to the third part of Marxism, though, his analysis of capitalism, there are contributions of truly immense value. First, he drew people’s attention to the way capitalism changed its character over time, debunking the traditional notions that the laws of economics are the inherent laws of nature. Second, he emphasized the real human beings who actually make up the economic system, exposing the miserable condition of workers. Third, he showed that relationships between capitalists and workers were not harmonious, but



were a constant struggle for power. Fourth, he emphasized the instability of capitalism, its vulnerability to periodic crises with disastrous results. Fifth, he saw how capitalism was transforming the world around it in very radical ways. The *Communist Manifesto* contains one of the most powerful, and relevant, analyses of the forces of globalization ever written:

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his "natural superiors", and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous "cash payment". It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value... The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country... All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilised nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes... All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned...

This passage is rich with insight, and one could meditate upon it endlessly. We see today how capitalism manufactures "new wants" in place of the old, how people's "worth" becomes their exchange value on the market, how the "sacred is profaned" by the substitution of market relationships for traditional values. Historical materialism may not have produced an actual *law* but Marx certainly noticed unfolding tendencies that many around him, thinking of capitalism as something static rather than something endlessly transformative and rapacious, did not see.

Capital itself has not become irrelevant, even though few think in terms of its labor-based concept of "value" anymore. In chapters like "The Working Day," Marx mercilessly exposes the way "bourgeois" and "vulgar" political economists have passed over the deeply exploitative nature of capitalism, and missed the war going on between the capitalist's need to squeeze as much labor out of the worker as possible and the worker's desire for freedom. Marx showed just how dehumanizing wage labor could be, and explained *why* it was dehumanizing, offering a vision of human freedom that was beautiful and resonated with people. There is a reason so many people embraced Marxism even if they didn't really understand dialectics or historical materialism: Marx, alone among economists, saw exploitation in capitalism for what it

really was, and he actually believed in ending it.

Marx never talked in the language of "justice" and morality, and had contempt for those socialists who did, believing that they were not pursuing a scientific understanding of social change, and were condemning reality without comprehending its workings. This made Marxism seem like an intellectually superior way of understanding capitalism, but socialism lost something important in giving up the language of fairness and right/wrong, and stressing historical inevitabilities and phases of social transformation instead. In taking the good bits of Marxism, we should embrace his desire to rationally diagnose the underlying processes that make capitalism operate the way it does, but we also need to keep a moral critique that shows *why* it's so important to oppose capitalism, what's actually *wrong* with exploitation.

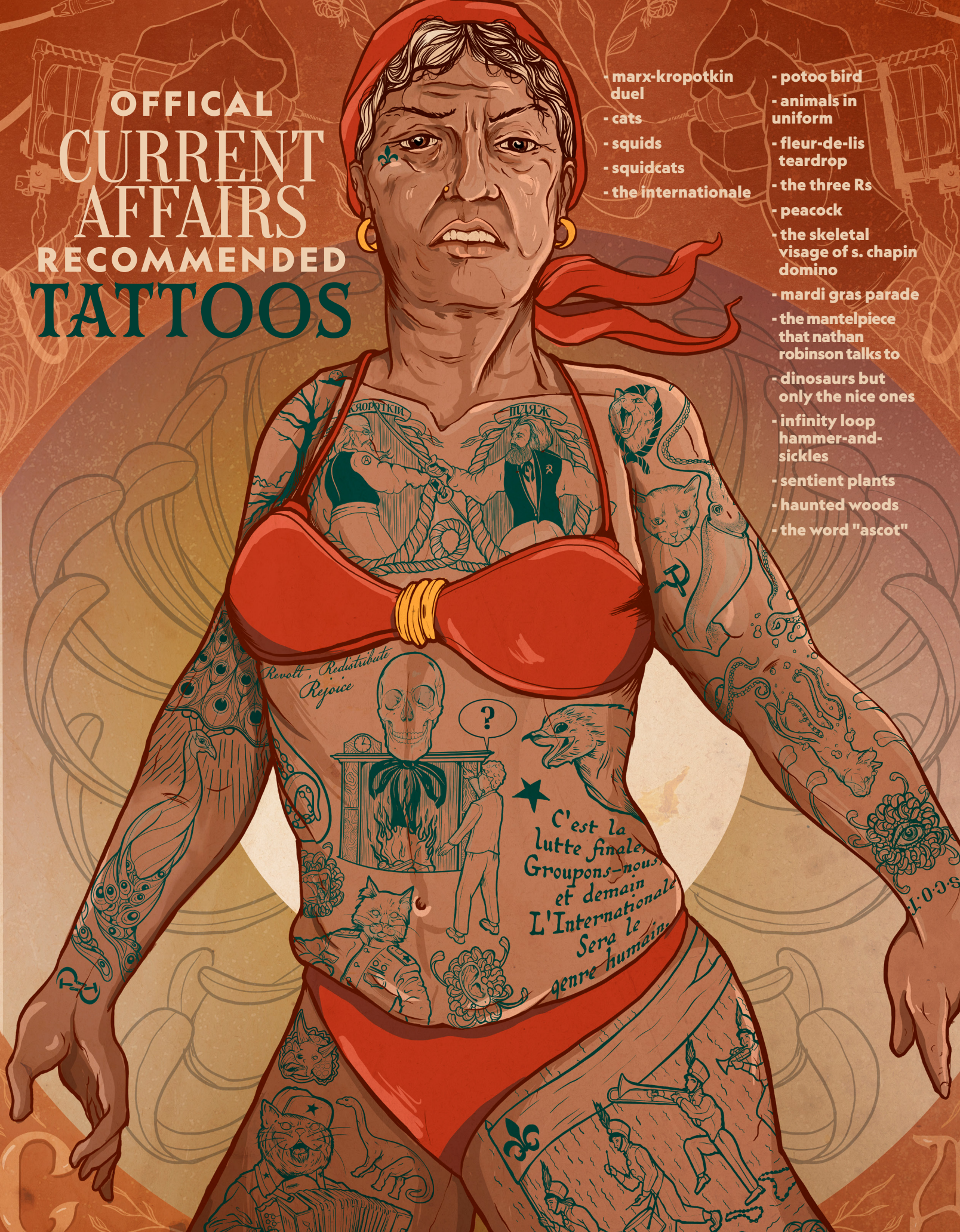
Marx did much to draw attention to important and neglected questions, posing answers that, while often unsatisfying or incomplete, were at least a first attempt to sort through some of the most difficult mysteries that human beings face in trying to figure out who we are, why we do what we do, why our societies and economies look the way they do, and what the future will be like. The contribution of Marx is not a comprehensive philosophical system called "Marxism," but an impressive set of attempts to sort through dilemmas that we still have not resolved. Nobody today should be a "Marxist," but reading the works of Marx, like reading the works of ancient philosophers, can be an enriching and thought-provoking experience.

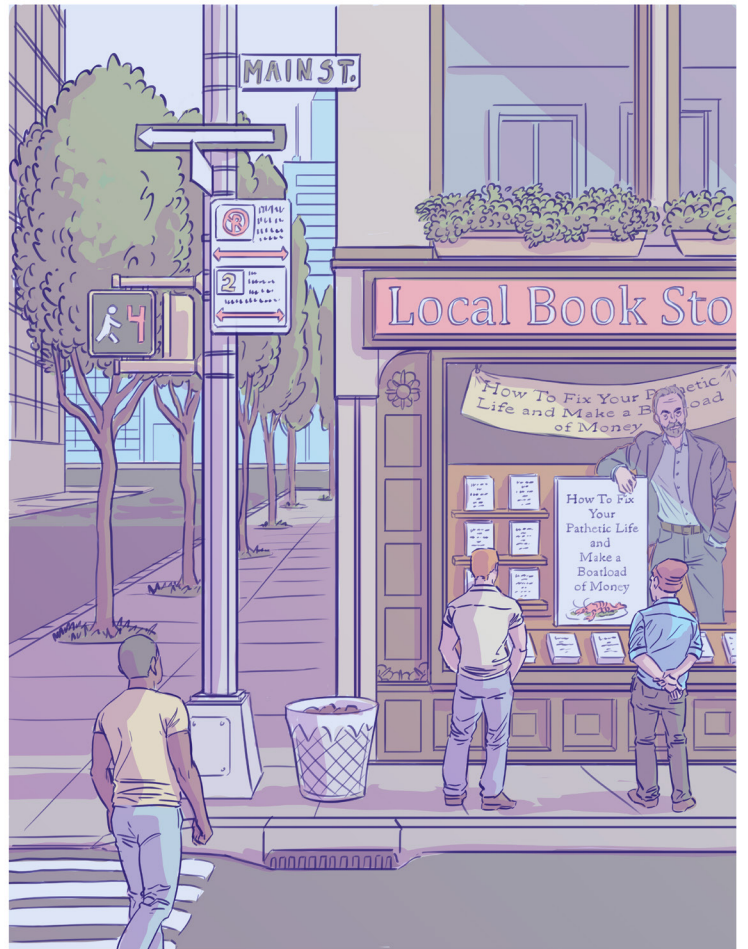
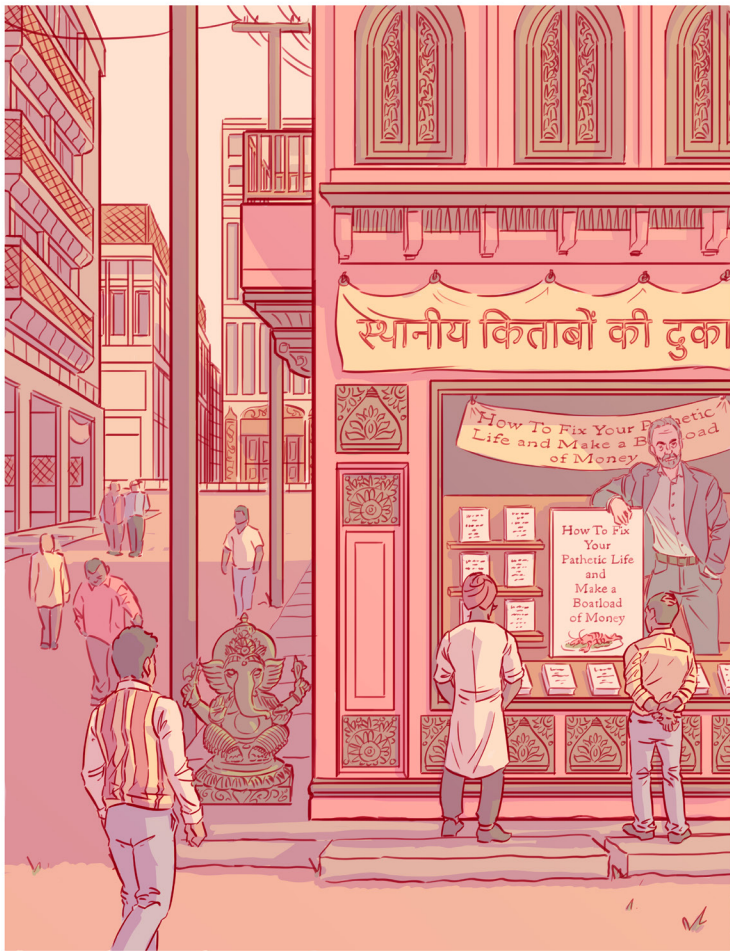
UNFORTUNATELY, IN ADDITION TO BEING A uniquely talented economist and social critic, Marx was also a deeply flawed human being. He was frequently dogmatic and overconfident, especially in his dealings with fellow socialists. He did not listen to anarchist socialists when they warned that concepts like the "dictatorship of the proletariat" were dangerous because they would probably lead to actual dictatorship. Marx was mostly uninterested in thinking through how a communist society could actually function, an oversight that had huge consequences when Marx's followers successfully took over governments and then struggled to carry out the *Manifesto's* policies without inflicting mass human misery and replicating many of the problems they had sought to eliminate. I do not go so far as the great anarchist polemicist P.J. Proudhon, who called Marx "the tapeworm of socialism," but I do believe it is unhealthy for any global political movement to be shaped too heavily by the ideas of a single human being. I am a proud socialist, but 21st century socialism needs to avoid the mistake made by many 20th century socialists of giving excessive weight and credence to one man's perspective, especially when many parts of that perspective were dangerously overconfident and provably false. ♣

OFFICIAL CURRENT AFFAIRS RECOMMENDED TATTOOS

- marx-kropotkin
duel
- cats
- squids
- squidcats
- the internationale

- potoo bird
- animals in
uniform
- fleur-de-lis
teardrop
- the three Rs
- peacock
- the skeletal
visage of s. chapin
domino
- mardi gras parade
- the mantelpiece
that nathan
robinson talks to
- dinosaurs but
only the nice ones
- infinity loop
hammer-and-
sickles
- sentient plants
- haunted woods
- the word "ascot"





YOU CAN HEAL YOUR LIFE

by Erica X Eisen

A FEW WEEKS AGO, WHEN A STUDENT FROM the university book club asked me to recommend an autobiography by a “successful person,” I immediately knew, without needing an explanation, what he meant. By “successful” he meant wealthy, preferably a Silicon Valley CEO, the likes of Elon Musk or Mark Zuckerberg or sundry other titans of disruption. As with other books that promise to reveal the secrets to fortune, happiness, productivity, and what passes for “success,” these kinds of tech billionaire tell-alls are extremely popular worldwide. But they’re especially well-regarded among the students who attend the university I work at in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan and in much of the post-Soviet world. The ubiquity of self-help books—particularly among young people—struck me immediately when I first moved to Central Asia: walking through the halls, eating lunch in the cafeteria, or attending talks on campus, I would hear students eagerly sharing tips they had read on how to optimize their mornings and develop their “soft skills,” to think more positively and set better goals. These students enthusiastically read *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* and *How to Win Friends and Influence People* and (yikes) Jordan Peterson books. There’s even a special club devoted to twice-monthly discussions about self-actualization, where students can share tips and compare notes on their favorite self-improvement guides.

American-style self-help books, as any of these students could attest, command an international readership. The first Japanese self-help book, Fukuzawa Yukichi’s 1868 *An*

Encouragement of Learning, quoted from the Declaration of Independence and drew upon the ideas of Benjamin Franklin, whose *Poor Richard’s Almanac* and *The Way to Wealth* are often considered early examples of the genre (though it’s worth pointing out that many histories of self-help are beset by Americentrism). In China, the genre’s ascent began in the 1980s and paralleled the country’s move towards liberal economic policies. In Latin America, some estimates put self-help books’ share of the publishing market at 20 percent.

Yet despite the international reach of the self-help movement, much of the writing on the subject focuses narrowly on its instantiation in the United States. Even books critical of the genre—such as Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Bright-sided* and Steve Salerno’s *Sham*—focus only on the self-help industry’s impact in the United States. Indeed, many authors go further and assert without evidence that the self-help movement is mainly—or even solely—an American phenomenon, an idea perhaps nowhere more succinctly expressed than in the title of Tom Tiede’s book *Self-Help Nation*. For many writers on the topic, the key to the industry’s popularity lies in some unique quirk or flaw in what they assert to be America’s national character. In *Self Help, Inc.*, Micki McGee writes that the genre embodies the idea of rags-to-riches self-fashioning that has historically been at the heart of the American mythos. A piece for the Organization of American Historians argues that self-help methods like positive thinking are “distinctly, if not uniquely, American,” linking it both to the “pursuit of happiness” enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and to a certain American skepticism of those in power. And another piece in *The New York Times*

dubs self-improvement “a deeply embedded American trait, something other cultures find both admirable and amusing.” For these authors, the notion of college students in Kyrgyzstan devouring *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* would be not just surprising—it would be all but unimaginable.

These authors are certainly not wrong to observe that the genre is booming in the United States—in 2019 alone, the self-help industry raked in some \$11 billion in America, largely from a Boomer-age readership. But they err in assuming that America is exceptional in this way. When other countries are brought into the picture, the easy assertions about self-help as a fundamentally American phenomenon quickly become untenable. What also becomes clear is that explanations rooted in generalizations about “Americanness” (which are in any case specious at best) rarely dig beneath assumptions about readers’ values and beliefs to address the material circumstances of the people who buy these books. The United States and post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan might not share the stories of Horatio Alger or the enshrinement of “the pursuit of happiness” in foundational legal documents, but they do share pervasive labor precarity, a lack of social safety nets, and flaws in their democracies that make it understandable for working people to doubt their ability to effect meaningful change in their lives via the electoral process, and to search for more individualized means of improving their lives.

As other authors—including those mentioned above—have noted, self-help (while it precedes the advent of neoliberalism itself) is deeply connected to the way neoliberalism celebrates the individual, lowering readers’ aspirations for the future from system transformation to personal benefit. Steven Covey instructs readers in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, “If I really want to improve my situation, I can work on the one thing over which I have control—myself.” Dale Carnegie comes to the same conclusion in *How to Win Friends and Influence People*: “Everybody in the world [italics mine] is seeking happiness,” he writes, “and there is one sure way to find it. That is by controlling your thoughts. Happiness doesn’t depend on outward conditions. It depends on inner conditions.” Self-help’s emphasis on positive thinking and changes within effectively depoliticizes discontent, instructing readers not to analyze external factors or seek a redress of grievances but merely to adjust their attitudes. Readers might be encouraged to pray, to visualize themselves attaining their goals, but never to agitate, organize, or strike. The cruel flipside of these books’ chirpy insistence that any obstacle may be overcome through changes in mindset or habits is that those who do not ascend the rungs of the economic ladder must have only themselves to blame.

As a result of self-help’s focus on individual happiness and

individual gains, the social world they lay out is one of competition instead of collaboration. Many books of this type uncritically embrace the accumulation of wealth, laying out instructions for readers on how to get rich and gain power over others. Carnegie instructs readers to smile, to drop the name of their interlocutors into the conversation as frequently as possible, to let others do the majority of the talking—all in the name of being more persuasive, likeable, and professionally successful. Here, social interactions are reduced to eerie games of influence, and autonomous people become prizes to be won. In giving instructions on how to join the elite rather than critiquing the inequality upon which the idea of an elite is premised, self-help books serve only to normalize existing unjust power structures.

The neoliberal ideas these books mirror have been shipped to Kyrgyzstan like so many copies of *The Secret*, propagated by the bevy of pro-business development agencies that have set up shop along the avenues of central Bishkek since the fall of the Soviet Union. Viewed in this context, the self-help guides so popular among young people here serve as apologias for the economic policies and political restructuring for which these agencies are advocates—and which the United States promotes abroad for its own gain.

PRIOR TO THE BREAKUP OF THE USSR, those self-improvement books and pamphlets that were available to Soviet citizens focused on the cultivation of traits such as industry and self-sacrifice, values seen as crucial to the project of building communism. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a commercial publishing industry emerged that was no longer governed by Soviet aesthetics, ethical principles, legal strictures, or censorship codes. Private publishers began favoring light, poppy, entertaining reads, the kinds of books that would fly off the shelves and turn a profit. Interest in positive thinking and pop psychology began to shoot up (so too, interestingly, did interest in magic and faith healers). When *How to Win Friends and Influence People* was first translated into Russian in 1989, it quickly sold out.

But the embrace of a recognizable “self-help” genre in the post-Soviet world owes itself not just to ease of reading: at a time of profound upheaval and uncertainty, such books promise a sure, straight path to a brighter future. More to the point, they also claim to provide solutions to problems engendered by the very transition to capitalism itself. In her research into the popularity of self-help literature in post-Soviet Russia, sociologist Suvi Salmenniemi argues that part of the appeal of these pop psychology books lies

in the fact that they are far cheaper alternatives to conventional mental or physical healthcare after the collapse of the Soviet health system. In addition, she suggests, the desire to turn inward and change the self may reflect a deep pessimism at the ability to change the system. This idea points to the fact that self-help is neither an American genre nor a global phenomenon but specifically a capitalist one.

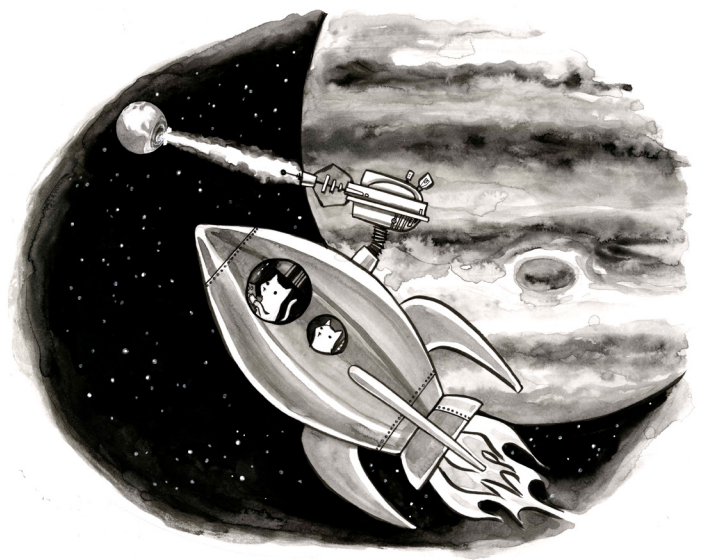
In a similar manner, the ideas espoused by many self-help gurus intersect not only with individualistic ideas in general but specifically with the kinds of neoliberal policies (privatization, deregulation, and the slashing of government spending) that have hobbled the public sector in the countries they are professing to aid. But while many critics have noted the way in which neoliberal ideas of individualism have been adopted by the self-help industry, the opposite phenomenon—whereby institutions that promote neoliberal economic policies take on self-help jargon—has garnered little attention. Yet traces of the vocabulary and logic of the self-help genre can be seen in the writing of aid and development programs that work in Central Asia and elsewhere. Words like “self-sufficiency,” “maturation,” “prosperity,” “resilience,” “entrepreneurship,”—even the concept of “development” itself—echo the kinds of language one might find in a self-help guide. Indeed, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has been referring to its projects abroad as “self-help” since the 1960s. These could not function as catchy buzzwords if the self-help industry and its logic had not already won popular acceptance among the donor class and those who work in the “development” sector.

A closer examination of many of these development programs reveals that self-help words and phrases are deliberately used to make pro-privatization agendas more appealing. In 2018, USAID announced that it was adopting the “Journey to Self-Reliance” as one of its core principles. One tenet of this journey, USAID’s website reads, is “collaborat[ion] with the private sector to co-create and co-design market-based and enterprise-led development approaches.... Given the growing and vital role the private sector has in solving global development problems, private sector engagement is essential to building resilient and lasting self reliance.” Expanding upon this last point, USAID Administrator Mark Green writes of the organization’s commitment to “market-based approaches across all areas of our work, from economic growth, power, agriculture, and global health to humanitarian assistance, women’s empowerment, education, and addressing crisis and conflict” in order to “provide greater opportunities for American businesses.” A look at USAID’s “roadmaps” to self-reliance reveals that countries are assessed and ordered based on categories such as “business environment” and “trade freedom,” while metrics for

things like wealth inequality are left out.

USAID is not the only organization to adopt the language of self-help for the promotion of what are essentially neoliberal programs. Multiple World Bank research papers write in praise of so-called “self-help groups” that provide microloans and are often run by and for women. As a number of economists critical of such programs have pointed out, in addition to being of questionable efficacy in the long run, microfinance institutions are ultimately premised upon the idea that bettering one’s quality of life is an endeavor to be undertaken at the level of the individual entrepreneur rather than through collective struggle—the very same logic undergirding so many self-improvement regimens. What’s more, here and elsewhere, using the language of “self-help” erases the role of development organizations themselves in pushing certain agendas and working towards certain goals, instead putting everything on the communities themselves. When projects are framed as self-help, the implication is that their success or failure depends solely on the local people involved, with no mention of the international actors involved or the overarching economic systems in which they exist.

How have neoliberal international development agencies “self-helped” Central Asia? Attempts to make Kazakhstan’s education system “more efficient” in the 1990s led to the closure of thousands of preschools and smaller, “inefficient” schools in the countryside. In one of the areas of Tajikistan most affected by the country’s civil war, the introduction of a steep new fee system for medications left many who were already barely surviving on aid unable to afford direly needed medication. In Kyrgyzstan, which has adopted more of these



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

types of policies than anywhere else in the region, the privatization of what were formerly collective farms after the Soviet Union's collapse decimated rural economies and spurred a massive exodus of laborers from the countryside to the capital in search of work. Meanwhile, Bishkek's move from building social housing to high-rise apartments has forced many of these poor migrants to build their own make-shift homes on the city's periphery, sometimes adjacent to health hazards. Viewed in this context, self-help books' exhortations to "think positive" and "practice gratitude" seem like paper swords in a fight against massive and systemic problems.

Far from revealing the fundamental flaws in self-help dogma's uncompromisingly individualistic approach, the current pandemic has in many cases only strengthened people's faith in the ability of such methods to tackle problems. "Let's stay positive," my Russian teacher says to me at the end of each Zoom lesson, or "Sending you positive thoughts"—even as cases in Bishkek skyrocket, reports come out of patients dying outside hospital doors because there aren't enough beds, and calls for the government to reveal what they have done with the millions in emergency aid they received have gone unanswered. In the worst instances, this embrace of positive thinking goes beyond a search for comfort and becomes actively harmful: a friend of mine who works as an English teacher recounted the story of a pupil who laughed off the threat of the virus because she believed her inexhaustible reserves of optimism rendered her invulnerable even as the incidence of infection spiked.

In an ever-growing crisis such as this one, it's understandable when people cast about for any philosophical plank to keep themselves emotionally afloat. But these modes of thinking exist within the same moral ecosystem that has fostered the conditions for the pandemic in Central Asia. They have created an environment in which contingent workers—some indebted due to high-interest microloans from "self-help groups"—must forego social distancing and continue working to put food on the table for their families, and in which many living in "illegal" peripheral settlements lack access to hospitals.

The self-help genre's narrow-minded focus on the individual contrasts with traditional Central Asian models of community betterment. In Kyrgyzstan, the concept of *ashar* (known as *assar* in Kazakhstan and *hashar* in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) denotes communal mobilization of resources and labor, either to help individual community members (by pitching in to erect a home, for instance) or to create public utilities such as irrigation channels. While these terms are sometimes rendered in English as "self-help," they differ markedly from the narrow individualism usually associated with the term and might more accurately be rendered "mu-

tual aid." It's a concept that has survived despite the major upheavals in Central Asian society over the last century, from the forced settlement of nomads by the Soviets to mass internal migration in more recent years. Without romanticizing the practice or positioning it as a cure-all to modern social ills, we might see within ideas like *ashar* some inspiration for modes of life improvement that decenter the individual and avoid monetizing social goods.

IN 1989, A MOVEMENT CALLING ITSELF ASHAR AROSE in Bishkek to combat housing discrimination against migrants from the countryside, who were primarily ethnic Kyrgyz and non-Russian speakers at a time when the city had a Russian (and by extension Russophone) majority. In solidarity with migrants unable to obtain land or housing through official channels, members of Ashar seized land in the south of the city and squatted, setting up their own encampment. Today, the legacy of Ashar's squat lives on in the neighborhood of Kok-Jar, about a twenty minute walk from where I live, which in the intervening 30 years has transformed from an informal squat to an officially incorporated part of the city. Now its residents not only have housing but have also gained access to municipal utilities and services and won the right to vote in city elections. These victories would not have been possible without the Ashar movement's dedication to collective—and not merely individual—betterment. Kok-Jar is a reminder etched into the fabric of the city of the improvements that can be gained not through positive thinking or goal visualization but struggle—and an invitation to consider how the Kyrgyzstan of 30 years from now will look if that struggle for a better collective future continues.

There are many who stand to profit from the success of self-help philosophy in Central Asia, readers not included. But as I listen to students talking about the latest pro-productivity tome they've read over our weekly Zoom book club meetings each Saturday, the difficulty of pushing back against the individualism that these books have helped inculcate in Central Asia's young people hits home. When these students graduate, when they pack their things and return to Tashkent, to Dushanbe, to Osh, to Kabul—what ideas about the world, about what constitutes a just society and what we owe our neighbors, will they bring back with them? If self-help books are premised upon the idea that the only thing we have the power to change is ourselves, perhaps as educators our first step in the fight against the pernicious influence of *How to Win Friends and Influence People* might be fostering the imagination that these authors lack: the imagination needed to understand the emotional and material needs of others, to link effect to structural cause, and to create a brighter future together. ✦

THE REPUTATION LAUNDERERS

by Garrison Lovely

CHARLES KOCH WANTS WHAT'S BEST FOR YOU. ACTUALLY, HE wants you to be *empowered to achieve what's best for you*. If you let him tell you in his own words, he's a well-intentioned man of business and science, humbly seeking the best ways to help people help themselves. He believes climate change is real and something we have caused (he should know). He wants to protect the environment. He thinks that business makes the most profit when it serves people's needs the best. He thinks that our efforts to reign in business and support the less fortunate, well-intentioned as they may be, often backfire, leaving everyone worse off.

This is Charles Koch in his own words on the hugely popular business podcast *The Tim Ferriss Show*. Ferriss, a successful writer whose books on productivity, cooking, and fitness along with his radical self-experimentation have made him a darling of the tech elite. His show, which he claims has over 400 million downloads, aims to "deconstruct world-class performers from eclectic areas (investing, sports, business, art, etc.) to extract the tactics, tools, and routines you can use. This includes favorite books, morning routines, exercise habits, time-management tricks, and much more."

The Tim Ferriss Show was one of the first podcasts I got into. I was eager to learn how to be more productive and effective at pursuing my goals. I appreciated his candor discussing mental health and his own near-suicide. I also liked his discussion of psychedelics and how they had personally benefited him.

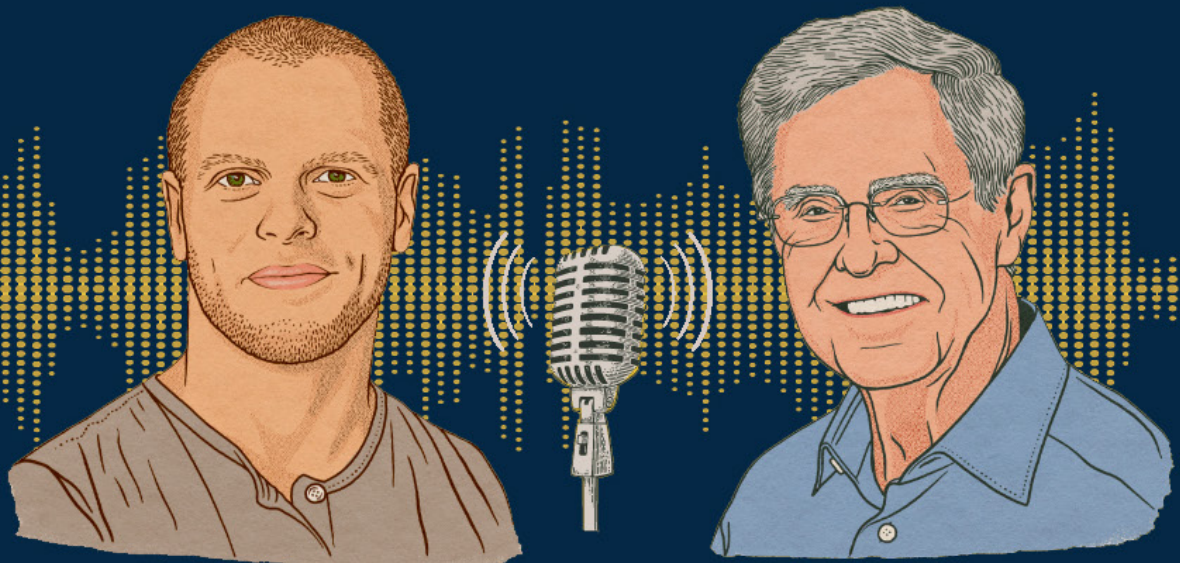
Tim didn't really talk politics, but that was fine. I had other shows for that. As my worldview changed, I became less interested in the

show, but would drop in from time to time (some episodes that I enjoyed: Paul Stamets, the mushroom king, and Adam Savage from Mythbusters, who, with his recommendation to read Chomsky, may have been the most left-wing guest on the show). Last August, Ferriss popped back onto my radar in the form of a tweet announcing his episode with Koch, the extant brother of the duo whose financing and organizing has done more to shift our politics to the right than arguably anyone alive.

There's nothing inherently wrong with interviewing powerful and destructive people. There is, however, something wrong with what Ferriss did with Koch. Tim has set up his show to be a mutually beneficial arrangement, the coveted "win-win" a good businessperson is eternally seeking. He is transparent in laying out what the guest gets out of it:

"Aside from promo impact (often bigger than full-page NYT, WSJ, or Esquire coverage, or primetime CNN), guests enjoy the show because it's friendly, long-form, and they have final cut before audio is published. This leads to extremely open, raw interviews and — paradoxically — fewer edits."

It's a good deal! For an hour or two of your time, you reach millions of people, many of whom are wealthy life-optimizers. You get to hawk your product or ideas, and Tim gets to build his personal brand and rake in millions in advertiser dollars. In an interview, Ferriss describes how he wants the show to be perceived by potential guests, "I'd like it to become a clearinghouse for thought leaders who want to go deep, or set the record straight, or leave an interview they'd



This charming graphic of Ferriss and Koch appeared on the KOCH Industries website alongside a promotion of the interview, which tells you exactly how threatened Koch felt by it. Reprinting it to make fun of it is fair use.

want their kids to remember them by.” He goes on to quote investor and past guest Naval Ravikant, “In brief, this is the response that I’d love every guest to have: ‘Realization: [Ferriss] is so meticulous that people going on his podcast sense that it will be one of their best works.’” There is no quest for truth or justice or even entertainment in creating the episode. Instead, it’s a “work” illustrating the greatness of the guest. Trade “work” for “product” and you better capture the mentality of Ferriss and his peers.

Ferriss is just one of many interview podcasts offering titans of industry the chance to share their “thought leadership” in a safe space that appears rigorous and serious. Others, like *Freakonomics Radio*, *Recode Decode*, and *How I Built This*, are hosted by journalists and present an even more insidious and subtle form of propaganda. These shows and their amoral willingness to uncritically interview whichever rich and powerful asshole is willing to do it are emblematic of the norms in the business and productivity podcast world, which is remarkably unexamined given its influence. Compared to all the media discussion of shows like *Chapo Trap House*, these podcasts fly under the radar despite having much larger audiences.

WHEN KOCH APPEARED ON FERRISS’ SHOW, quite a few of his own fans said that Tim shouldn’t be offering a platform to Koch. Others replied that it was naive to think that the head of the second largest private company in America and one of the richest people in the world needed Ferriss’s platform. Yes, Koch could have spent a tiny fraction of his fortune on TV spots and full-page ads in the major newspapers trumpeting his wonderful philanthropic work (Michael Bloomberg tested the limits of this approach). But appearing on *The Tim Ferriss Show* cost Koch nothing but his time and got him something money can’t buy: the patina of respectability and intellectual seriousness that comes from doing a long-form interview with a best-selling author. While Ferriss has interviewed other villains of American capitalism (e.g. Peter Thiel, Ray Dalio), Koch stuck out to me. He is probably best known as the most prominent conductor of the far-right gravy train.



So how was the actual interview? Knowing nothing about Koch going in (as is the case for most Americans according to the latest polling), you would likely come away with the impression that he is a socially conscious businessman and a compassionate conservative. Koch makes repeated paeans to the notion of “good profit”, i.e. that which also helps the broader society. He dips his toes into political waters in lamenting market distortions that he argues are the result of cronyism, protectionism, and corporate welfare. Ferriss then lauds Koch’s work with ideological opponents like Van Jones and George Soros on criminal justice reform. He mentions his history of supporting Republicans in his political giving, but says he would support anyone willing to advance policies that align with his values.

The show really gets interesting when Ferriss starts asking the Hard Questions. Actually, asking isn’t the right word. Ferriss begins reluctantly reciting hard questions he received from listeners, couching them in borderline apologies and walkbacks. After reading one quoted question about trickle down economics and tax policy, he says “I don’t have a dog in the fight because I’m not well-educated on this.” Now, Ferriss doesn’t need to be an expert on everything he discusses in his show and I think it’s generally good to disclose your gaps in knowledge, but acting as a spineless ventriloquist when interviewing one of the most powerful men in the world does no one but Koch any favors.

Ferris parrots another question from a listener:

“Does he ever have pangs of guilt about the millions of Americans made poorer, sicker, or dead by unfettered capitalism? Does he actually prefer a world where the majority struggle in misery so a few can horde billions? Why are higher profit margins worth polluting the environment and how does he square that with the animals and people sickened and killed by deregulated industrial pollution?”

Ferriss is audibly uncomfortable when asking this question, and follows with “you don’t need to answer ‘do you prefer a world where the majority struggle in misery so a few can horde billions?’ It’s pretty self-evident that you do not prefer that.” This assurance from Ferriss reveals a lot about why the interview doesn’t work: he’s assuming the good faith of his guest. When you’re interviewing a Mythbuster or a mushroom scientist, this may be a safe assumption. But Charles Koch is not a good faith actor. Koch is one of the great enemies of the American left for good reason. His money, organization, and vision has reshaped and empowered the American right. And perhaps no single person is more responsible for our inaction in the face of a growing climate catastrophe, a catastrophe his company has been one of the greatest contributors to.

We can learn a bit more about Koch by examining some of his claims in the interview. In response to the above question, Koch says:

“I don’t like the term capitalism, that assumes that what we’re after is a system where certain people have a lot of capital. That’s not what we’re about. What we’re after is a system where everybody has the opportunity to realize their potential, including those who start with nothing. And businesses should only profit to the extent that they’re helping other people improve their lives... And polluting and making people sick, killing people shouldn’t profit. They should bear a cost for that...our biggest failures in our mind are safety problems. When there’s an accident and people die, I mean, that’s monstrous. Job one is keeping people safe and job two is protecting the environment. In the last 5 years, the EPA has ranked us either number one or two of US companies in pollution reduction initiatives.”

There’s a lot to unpack here. If Charles isn’t “about” a system where certain people have a lot of capital, then why does he have over \$47 billion? If he wanted to prove how not about capitalism he

was, he could give away his capital. There is certainly no shortage of social problems that could be addressed by \$47 billion. With the interest on his fortune, Charles could fully prevent and treat neglected tropical diseases that affect more than a billion people annually. With his principal, he could end extreme poverty (living on less than \$1.90 per day) for a year in all of Nigeria, Brazil, India, China, and Angola. Now this level of giving is not sustainable even for Mr. Koch, but that's okay, because he's not "about" anyone having that much money.

You may object: Koch giving away all his money won't put a huge dent in global inequality. There will still be a few thousand billionaires left over. Global inequality is really the result of policy failures (or successes, depending upon your perspective). Well the good news is that Charles is quite well-versed in using the American political system to realize his vision. Since he's not about systems where "certain people have a lot of capital", we would expect him to have pushed for increased taxes on the wealthy in his political giving and organizing.

Well, that's not exactly what happened. In 2017, Charles and his brother spent \$20 million to convince voters to back Trump's tax cuts, which likely saved them and their company between \$840 million and \$1.4 billion in income taxes each year, according to an analysis from the nonprofit Americans for Tax Fairness. But, the tax cut also put money back in the pockets of regular Americans right? A report from Congress's official think tank found that "individual income taxes as a percentage of personal income fell slightly from 9.6% to 9.2%." A *Vox* analysis of the economic effects summarized: "GDP growth was level with pre-tax cut projections. Wage growth was marginal and slower than GDP." Corporations received enormous windfalls, but the think tank found "relatively little was directed to paying worker bonuses." And while tax rates fell for everyone, people making more than \$100,000 received the greatest percentage growth in after-tax income. An economist who worked in the Obama administration summarized the effects of the then-proposed bill: "The bill is investing heavily in the wealthy and their children — by boosting the value of their stock portfolios, creating new loopholes for them to avoid tax on their labor income, and cutting taxes on massive inheritances." Examining Koch's personal and political actions reveals that he seems quite fine with a "system where certain people have a lot of capital" (he and his children being amongst those with the most capital).

BUT MAYBE BECOMING RICH BY "CREATING VALUE" FOR millions of people is fine. To justify wealth inequality, libertarian philosopher Robert Nozick used the (dated) example of Wilt Chamberlain becoming wealthy because a million people pay a quarter to watch him play basketball. As noted above and elsewhere in this magazine, personal wealth cannot be justified in a world with so much deprivation, regardless of how it was "earned." But Koch has made his billions in one of the dirtiest ways possible. He and his brothers inherited Koch Industries from his father Fred Koch, who built his business, Winkler-Koch, on a patented equipment design stolen from an existing company. The equipment "cracked" heavy crude, an essential step in processing oil. Winkler-Koch built 15 "cracking" units for Stalin's Soviet Union between 1929 and 1931. In *Dark Money*, Jane Mayer found that Fred Koch's company helped build the third-largest oil refinery in the Third Reich, which played a crucial role in fueling the Nazi war machine from its completion in 1935 up until American bombers destroyed it in 1944 (planes filled with fuel that Koch

helped refine). Fred wrote admiringly of the Axis powers in 1938, "I am of the opinion that the only sound countries in the world are Germany, Italy, and Japan, simply because they are all working and working hard." These despotic clients were not incidental to the rise of Winkler-Koch, as Mayer concludes, "Fred Koch's willingness to work with the Soviets and the Nazis was a major factor in creating the Koch family's early fortune."

While it's not fair to judge him for the sins of his father, Charles has plenty of sins of his own. In 1996, teenagers Danielle Smalley and Jason Stone were incinerated in Lively, Texas. Unbeknownst to them, "...a decrepit Koch pipeline carrying liquid butane — literally, lighter fluid — ran through their subdivision." The pipeline had ruptured and filled its surroundings with gas that ignited when Danielle cranked the ignition of her dad's truck. The Koch company responsible for the pipeline was aware of hundreds of corrosion defects, but repaired only 80 of them. Just months before the explosion, Charles Koch had ordered his top staff to cut expenses by 10 percent "through the elimination of waste" adding that "(I'm sure there is much more waste than that)" in order to increase pre-tax earnings by \$550 million a year. Mayer quotes a deposition with a Koch executive vice president admitting "Koch Industries is definitely responsible for the death of Danielle Smalley." In another deposition Kenoth Whiststine, a former employee, testified that "when he brought concerns to his boss at the company about another corroding pipeline, which he feared could cause a fatal accident if ruptured, he was told that it would be cheaper to pay off damages from a lawsuit than make repairs."

This was not an isolated incident. Koch Industries was sued and indicted for violating the Clean Water Act and Clean Air Act respectively. Between 1988 and 1996, Koch pipelines spilled 11.6 million gallons of oil. After Koch Industries paid a record-breaking civil penalty, a former EPA administrator said of the company, "They simply did not believe the law applied to them." In 1996, a whistle-blower revealed that Koch Industries had released fifteen times more benzene than the legal limit and 149 times more than what they had reported to the government. This revelation resulted in a 97 count indictment in 2000. The company faced up to \$352 million in fines and four employees faced potentially long prison sentences. Eventually, the George W. Bush administration gave the company what was perceived to be a sweetheart deal, and it pled guilty to only a single felony count for covering up the fact that it had disconnected a key pollution-control device, though it was still handed historic \$20 million judgment in fines and reparations.

Perhaps the company has learned the error of its ways. After all, as Charles says, "In the last 5 years, the EPA has ranked us either number one or two of us companies in pollution reduction initiatives." The company's website actually claims this has been true since 2012. While I was unable to find any evidence for this claim that didn't come straight from the company itself, let's assume it's true. A skeptical interviewer might push back on a claim like this from a prominent opponent of government and regulation, who has a lengthy and public history of tangling with the EPA.

In a 2014 *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, Charles Koch wrote, "EPA officials have commended us for our 'commitment to a cleaner environment' and called us 'a model for other companies.'" The "model for other companies" claim is bullshit. A regional EPA administrator said of an agreement with Koch subsidiary Flint Hills Resources (FHR), "It is our hope that the FHR process will serve as a *model for other companies* seeking to transition to federally-approved permits" (emphasis added).

Pollution prevention initiatives are less important than the actual amount you're polluting. And in this respect, Koch Industries emits rarefied, toxic air. Koch Industries is one of only three companies to rank as a top 30 polluter across air, water, and greenhouse gas emissions, according to data directly from the EPA. The other two are Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway and Exxon Mobil, each of whom generated over twice as much revenue as Koch Industries in 2018. Now, it may not be fair to expect Ferriss to know a fact like this offhand (although anyone with a passing knowledge of how Koch makes money might have had their bullshit detector go off at the claim), but there are a few paths Ferriss could have taken. He could have asked any follow-up question, perhaps something simple like: "do you think the EPA should exist?"

Writing critically about Charles Koch is easy. The hardest part is choosing what to leave out. The man has his fingerprints on many of the worst political and corporate developments of the last sixty years. His company's crimes are well-documented and his political ideology is barbaric. All this makes Ferriss's fecklessness as an interviewer all the more embarrassing and damning.

But things make more sense when you look at the interview for the purpose it serves, intentionally or not: laundering the reputation of a very bad man. A Marxist analysis might explain it as simply two very rich men (one vastly richer than the other) defending their class interest. As a longtime listener to the show, I think it's more the result of Ferriss's access "journalism" model. If he tears into Charles, future high-powered guests may reconsider attending. Ferriss, as he would be the first to admit, does not really engage with politics, which is itself a political action. Avoiding politics is a conservative act, a tacit endorsement of the status quo. He seems to have little critique of power and is obsequious in its presence.

The funny thing is that a more transparently puffy interview would have been less effective at refurbishing Koch for an inquisitive audience than the one Ferriss conducted. If Tim hadn't asked Charles about climate change or inequality and just stuck to Koch's *wonderful* charity work, even a credulous listener would have recognized the interview for what it was: a puff piece. But by offering a critical voice, even as a craven ventriloquist, Ferriss offers Koch a chance to reply to the most common criticisms he faces. And because Ferriss doesn't ask a single critical follow-up question, Koch's massaged and dishonest talking points go unchallenged.

FERRISS IS JUST ONE PARTICULARLY BRIGHT STAR IN A constellation of business podcast hosts, each boosting their own reputation by interviewing richer magnates and more famous celebrities.

Tech journalist and media entrepreneur Kara Swisher hosted her own podcast called *Recode Decode*, where she interviewed the mega-successful in tech and beyond (she recently moved to a new podcast with *New York Times Opinion*, where, "she'll continue her work holding major tech figures to account, while expanding her scope to a wider landscape of political leaders, regulators, C.E.O.s and important thinkers in science, culture and entertainment. She'll interrogate people in power as well as those influencing the world from less traditional corners."). While not a household name, Swisher has unique cachet in the tech world. She met Jeff Bezos when Amazon was looking for office space and Larry Page and Sergey Brin when Google was still in a garage. She co-founded the iconic Code Conference, where Steve Jobs and Bill Gates came together on stage and

where she and her co-founder grilled Mark Zuckerberg on privacy issues (making him sweat so much, he took off his famous hoodie). Next year's speakers include the CEOs of Google, Microsoft, Starbucks, Salesforce, Disney, and Airbnb, to name a few. *NY Magazine's* profile of Swisher writes:

"Above all, Swisher's power derives from her reporting—driven, in turn, by her deep sourcing—and from the sense, unnerving to executives, that she has a red phone with a direct connection to the perma-class of venture capitalists on Sand Hill Road who fund their companies and fill their boards and decide their fates. She has regularly broken news about big deals (e.g. Google trying to buy Groupon, Yahoo buying Tumblr) and major personnel moves (Facebook's hiring of Sheryl Sandberg, Microsoft's recent CEO search), and she dominates coverage of Yahoo (she broke the news of CEO Scott Thompson's résumé lies and his subsequent resignation and won a Loeb Award for live-blogging one of the company's earning calls)."

Swisher plays herself in HBO's Silicon Valley, interviewing the fictional billionaire CEO of Hooli, who compares the treatment of billionaires to that of Jews in Nazi Germany. Real-life billionaire CEO Stephen Schwarzman famously compared the Obama administration's proposed tax increases on carried interest profits (gains made when private equity firms buy and sell businesses) to "when Hitler invaded Poland in 1939." Swisher's interview with Schwarzman is less hard-hitting than one might expect from Silicon Valley's "Most Feared Journalist." Swisher doesn't mention Schwarzman's comparison when he blames increased anger in America in part on the Obama administration's treatment of the business community (he correctly attributes part of the anger to the financial crisis as well). Schwarzman also claims that income taxes are actually pretty progressive, despite what the slogans say. This is technically true, but labor income is not how the truly wealthy make their money. Things like capital gains (money your money makes while you're asleep) and carried interest are taxed at extremely low rates. This is how the richest Americans pay the lowest overall effective tax rate of any income group. Swisher probably knows this, and, if she doesn't, she should. But she lets the claim go unchallenged.

Swisher's other interviews are far fluffier than you'd expect from someone so feared. Last year she spoke with former HP CEO and Republican presidential candidate Carly Fiorina. Fiorina became the CEO of HP in 1999. Her signature decision was to purchase Compaq against resistance from "most industry analysts, HP shareholders, HP employees and even some HP board members." Thanks to that deal, profits fell and the company laid off tens of thousands of employees. HP's value fell 55 percent during her tenure. While this period coincided with the bursting of the dot-com bubble, competitors did well over the same years: "...stocks in companies like Apple and Dell rose. Google went public, and Facebook was launched. The S&P 500 yardstick on major U.S. firms showed only a seven percent drop."

Fiorina has a history of lying about her performance at HP. For example, she claimed that, "We had more employees by the time I left HP than either pre-merger HP or pre-merger Compaq had, combined." In reality, HP at the end of Fiorina's tenure employed thousands fewer people than the combined workforces of HP, Compaq, and the dozen-plus other companies HP bought. HP laid off roughly 30,000 employees under her leadership.

I learned none of this from the interview Fiorina did with Swisher. Instead I heard bromides about how we need a problem solver in politics and that it's now time for an outsider (why Fiorina, an

MATCH
YOUR MASK AND POCKET SQUARE

ex-Fortune 500 CEO, former adviser to a prominent senator, and major party candidate for Senate in the largest state in the country, is more of an outsider than the reality TV star and con-man who is currently president, is never questioned). Swisher, who is gay, also didn't challenge Fiorina on her past opposition to marriage equality: Fiorina previously supported a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage and California's Proposition 8.

So why is Swisher feared? If I were a famous business guy going on her show, I wouldn't be very afraid. I might expect to discuss some uncomfortable topics, but not for too long. And while I may get jabbed about things that I say, they will be good-natured and lighthearted. If I were a founder of one of the companies that Swisher is genuinely opposed to, like Facebook, I might have more to fear. But Swisher's show isn't trying to discover truth or hold power to account, it's designed to be entertaining in the service of selling more advertising.

ANOTHER JOURNALIST-TURNED-PODCAST CELEBRITY in the constellation is Stephen Dubner, co-author with economist Steven Levitt of *Freakonomics*, the 2005 bestseller that turned counter-intuitive micro-economics research into compelling Malcolm Gladwell-esque nonfiction. (Despite the pedigree of their authors- a journalist with work in the *New York Times* and a distinguished University of Chicago professor respectively- the books make a number of serious mistakes.) *Freakonomics*' runaway success turned into a sequel and the popular podcast *Freakonomics Radio*, with reportedly 15 million global monthly downloads.

Freakonomics Radio, hosted by Dubner with frequent appearances by Levitt, has become one of the staples of the business podcast world, consistently ranking in the top 100 across all of Apple podcasts. Promising to "explore the hidden side of everything", the show does 45-60 minute *NPR*-style narratives on a wide range of topics, with an emphasis on behavioral economics, business, and management. Dubner takes a position on more contentious issues than Swisher and Ferriss (e.g. "Why Rent Control Doesn't Work") and dives more directly into politics.

The show tries to present itself as fair-minded, tough, and evidence-based, but sometimes the mask slips a bit. Their episode about socialism features no conversations with actual socialists- the most left-wing guest Dubner interviews is development economist Jeffrey Sachs, who is no socialist. Socialists may as well be mythical creatures in the world of *Freakonomics*, to be debated and speculated about in the absence of a live specimen. However, I'm fairly confident "America's most prominent Marxist economist" Richard Wolff would have happily given an interview had he been asked. Dubner does, however, find time to quote an economist on Trump's Council of Economic Advisers claiming that fully enacting Bernie Sanders' agenda would decrease US GDP by 24%, and examines the failure of Venezuelan government economic policies, which Dubner calls "pretty much like the textbook definition of socialism," since it involves state ownership of the means of production. This is, however, a stupid definition of socialism. A government of plutocratic elites with no accountability to the public could own all the means of production and they would not be socialist in the slightest.

So it may not be too surprising that a podcast about behavioral economics misses the mark on socialism, but how are they in their wheelhouse?

The show did a series on CEOs, featuring interviews with such luminaries as Mark Zuckerberg, Jack Welch, and Ray Dalio. Welch, the long-time CEO of GE who died this March, was nicknamed "Neutron Jack". During their interview, Dubner tells Welch, "So you were famous for speaking your mind, being yourself. Now the phrase is called 'radical candor.' It wasn't called that then; they just called you names like Neutron Jack." The name really came from Welch's penchant for layoffs- like the neutron bomb, Jack eliminated people while leaving buildings intact.

Dubner did his own two-parter on the Koch Brothers featuring extensive interviews with Charles. Dubner does a far better job than Ferriss of offering criticisms to Charles and the audience, framed, however, with the distance of "critics say". He describes how Fred Koch's experience building oil refineries for Stalin informed his politics, but he doesn't mention the work Koch Sr. did for Hitler. Dubner mentions Fred's involvement in the John Birch Society and its racist, nativist program. But, ultimately, these interviews fail as works of journalism as well.

During their conversations, Charles compares himself to both Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther with no pushback from Dubner. Koch laments the influence of special interests in politics. He offers no definition of special interest and Dubner doesn't ask for one. The examples he gives of fighting special interests are in successfully opposing Hillarycare and the proposed Clinton BTU tax on carbon-based energy sources, along with nuclear, hydro-electricity, and imported electricity. Both of these measures were (flawed) attempts by the government to provide universal benefits to its citizens, universal health insurance and reduced pollution and carbon emissions respectively. They both failed due in part to opposition from industries that would be harmed by their passage, like health insurance and fossil fuels. It seems clear in these cases that the problematic special interests were those that killed these bills, not the undefined ones pushing for their passage. A decabillionaire fossil fuel executive successfully lobbying the federal government to kill bills that oppose his interests, economic or philosophical, sounds like a textbook definition of a special interest to me. Yet this obvious point is never raised by Dubner the journalist.

THERE ARE GOOD MODELS FOR HOW YOU SHOULD INTERVIEW monstrous people. For instance, Mehdi Hasan's *Al Jazeera* show "Head to Head" often features hostile interviews with controversial public figures. In Hasan's interview with Trump advisor and Blackwater founder Erik Prince, Hasan came prepared with the details of Blackwater's crimes in Iraq, incriminating quotes from Prince, and a panel of relevant experts. He asked Prince follow ups and pushed back, catching Prince in obvious lies. Prince certainly didn't succeed in using the interview to make himself look good. It would be hard to watch this interview and come away thinking that anyone should trust Erik Prince to privatize the US war in Afghanistan (something Prince proposed at the request of Trump aides). Given Prince's position of extreme power and his company's bloody record, this kind of grilling is not only justified but morally obligated if you find yourself in the position to interview someone like him.

I'm not expecting Ferriss, Swisher, and Dubner to start grilling their guests on the bad things they've done, but until they do, their shows should not be treated as works of journalism or even as intellectually honest depictions of their guests. ✚

CURRENT AFFAIRS

EDITORIAL STAFF



ALLEGRA SILCOX
Business Manager



LYTA GOLD
*Amusements &
Managing Editor*



BRIANNA RENNIX
Lieutenant Editor



OREN NIMNI
Legal Editor



CATE ROOT
Poet at Large



**BRIANNA JOY
GRAY**
Contributing Editor



NATHAN J. ROBINSON
Editor in Chief



VANESSA A. BEE
Associate Editor



YASMIN NAIR
Editor at Large



AISLING MCCREA
*Contributing Editor &
Podmaster General*



ELI MASSEY
Contributing Editor



NICK SLATER
Newsletter Editor



PETE DAVIS
Podcast Host



SPARKY ABRAHAM
Finance Editor



KATE GAUTHREAUX
Administrative Cajun

The Illustrators



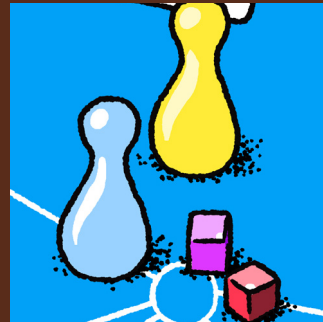
Gina Lerman



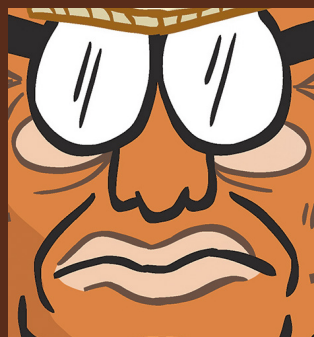
Josh Lynch



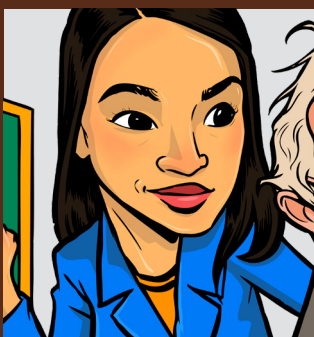
Jesse Rubinfeld



Aidan Y-M



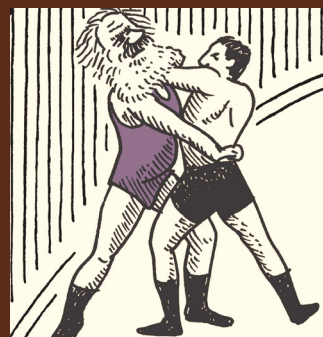
Matt Lubchansky



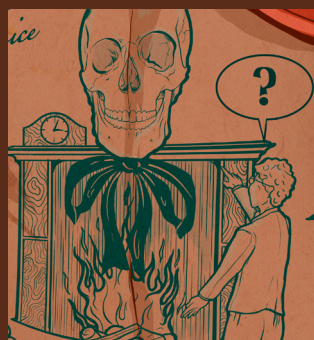
Nick Sirotich



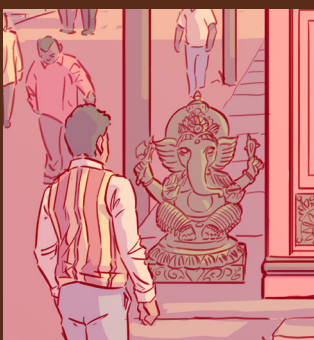
JAMO



Tom Chitty



John Biggs



Skutch



Harriet Burbeck



Skutch



Mike Freiheit

COVER ART BY
Ole Fick