

*Sounds Like A Magazine You Ought To Have Heard Of*

# CURRENT AFFAIRS

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SEPT./OCT 2020

**NUDE  
LEFTISTS**  
*of the month*

**MEMOIRS  
OF THE  
SUPER  
RICH**  
*They're very bad.*

SHOULD YOU  
**BUY  
BITCOIN**  
*No, are you crazy?*

COULD ANTS BE  
**SOCIALIST?**  
*Turns out, yes.*

**SECRETS  
OF THE  
DNC**  
*Exclusive Memos!*



BUZELLI



# Front Stuff

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## "AESTHETICALLY

The Democratic candidate for president, Mr. Joseph R. Biden, Jr., recently commented during a debate that "the Green New Deal will pay for itself." This clearly slipped out unintentionally and Biden almost immediately distanced himself from the plan, but it was too late. He said it and he can't unsay it. Biden also said during the debate that "I am the Democratic Party," meaning that the Democratic Party officially says the Green New Deal pays for itself. In politics, the #1 rule is "no takesies backsies." On the playground, the children now run round him taunting: "Joe supports the Green New Deal! Joe supports the Green New Deal! Na-na-nah-na-nah!" Joe sits in the corner and cries. But don't cry, Joe. It's a good thing!

## debate

Last year, the Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) fast-food chain launched a new cross-over product: the Cheeto Chicken Sandwich, a "crispy chicken filet smothered in Cheetos sauce and wedged inside a standard KFC bun with mayo and a layer of regular Cheetos." Reviews were mixed. The *Washington Post* said it "looks toxic and tastes like a missed opportunity." *Business Insider*, on the other hand, called it "shockingly good." The question before the house is: is the concept revolting or delicious, and correspondingly, does the KFC Cheeto Sandwich serve as an indictment of capitalism or proof of its spectacular powers of innovation?



These are the voyages of the starship *Current Affairs*. Its endless mission: to postulate strange new ideas. To propose new ways of life and envision alternate civilizations. To boldly publish what nobody has been willing to publish before! Subscriptions are \$60 annually and nobody has ever regretted purchasing one, except the graduate student who recently emailed to complain that our magazine has told him "nothing he didn't already know before" and had rudely dissed Lacan and Žižek. (In fact, we have stayed silent on Lacan, though we have indeed occasionally showered Žižek in rhetorical piss.)

## OUR FRIEND MR. MARX

We have been accused of disliking the 19th century philosopher Dr. Karl Heinrich Marx. The very opposite is true. This magazine is a friend to all, even 19th century philosophers. We bear Marx no ill-will. We do not wish to pilfer his pen or upset his inkpot. We have never declared ourselves Marxists (see "Our Promise," Issue 1) but confess to feeling a bit Marxish from time to time, especially when we are grumpy. If we went to a *biergarten* with Dr. M, we believe we'd find ourselves nodding right along with him as he thundered about the need to annihilate capitalism root and branch. Hear hear! Who among us does not dream of destroying the foundations of the contemporary economic system? And yet we cannot fully sign on to Marx's program, because we strongly suspect he would not appreciate the aesthetics of this magazine page.

Numerous readers have lately asked us to clarify our editorial stance on "human-cephalopod" relations. It is as follows: Please have an intentional discussion about your respective boundaries and desires with the octopus.

## letters

Hi *Current Affairs* team,  
Was just listening to your latest mailbag podcast episode (which, like all of your magazine is a bright, silly, just-the-right-amount-of-pessimistically hopeful spot in my life—thank you for that) and the statuesque butt talk of needing more public butts brought to mind this delightful set of animated illustrations by Pablo Stanley: <https://www.buttsss.com/> They're no marble sculptures, but they do bounce! I hope you get some joy out of them. It's the least I can do for you (besides tell all my friends to listen and subscribe to the magazine)!  
Thanks and stay healthy,  
Amy

CA: Amy, thank you. Our editors are always on the lookout for new butts and appreciate reader suggestions in this department.

RE: Aug. Issue Released In Aug. Hello, I do not recall paying for timeliness. Will this be an extra expense on my card?  
Kind regards,  
John

CA: Sarcastic subscribers can expect to see future magazines suffer unexpected mailing delays.

## ask a manatee

DEAR MANATEE: Who do you want to win the presidential election? — Elvira, age 13, Saratoga Springs, NY

Elvira, I am not sure if you know who you are writing to. Do you know what a manatee is? We are also known as "sea potatoes," because of our physical resemblance to yams. We float, bob, and occasionally chew. We do not concern ourselves with electoral politics, especially those of the deranged omniscient family known as the hominids. Our "politics," such as they are, are pure participant syndicalism. I expect, as the classical anarchist tendencies are no longer taught in the public education system (unless the schoolteachers of Saratoga Springs have become enlightened, which I doubt), you do not know what I am talking about. Sigh. But the lack of interest is mutual. I do not know what a president is, and you do not know how other species organize their internal affairs. Kindly leave me in peace.





# Tribute to the Finnish Seafarers Union

A report from the News: "The Finnish Seafarers Union has imposed a blockade on a merchant ship in the port of Rauma, taking action to support the sailors on board who are claiming around 70,000 euros in unpaid wages... According to the Finnish Seafarers Union, Burmese workers have been oppressed on board." Current Affairs fully supports unions that impose naval blockades over wage theft. More of this, please.

## RETROGRADE & POLITICALLY MYOPIC



You can't have a Green New Deal but you can have a...

*Green Nude Eel*

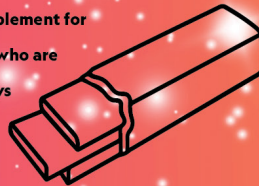
IF YOU'RE A GIRL, IT'S A MARDI GRAS  
IF YOU'RE A BOY IT'S A MARDI GRAZZLE

### Not Bourgeois: A Game

"Not Bourgeois" is a multi-person game in which people have to come up with reasons why they're not bourgeois. (my dad was a union carpenter, etc.) whoever runs out of reasons first **LOSES** and is bourgeois and must be **KILLED**. It can be played anywhere!

### STRATAGUM

the chewable wellness supplement for disrupters and innovators who are always looking for new ways to run their e-commerce platforms into the ground



### Small Whale Pizza

**"It's Just The Name!"**

1405 S. North Hudson St, Plano, TX  
Small Whale Pizza does not sell pizza containing small whales. Nor do we sell small pizzas containing large whales. We do, however, sell a small version of "Whale Pizza," our signature dish. It is just the name. The pizza is pepperoni and cucumber. The pepperonis are not made of whale. Nor are the cucumbers. They are, however, shaped like whales. (large whales, not small ones. It's the pizza that is "small.") They, the cucumbers, are shaped like large whales, that is. Only the cucumbers are shaped like large whales. Not the pepperonis. Those are shaped like small whales.



### Von Mises Pieces

PEANUT BUTTER CHOCOLATE CANDY



*"Absolutely not for sharing."*

### GOOD SHAPES



OVALS



BUBBLES



BLOBS



GLOOPS



LOOPS

### BAD SHAPES



RECTANGLES



SPIKEYS



TRIANGLES



RHOMBOIDS



POKEYS



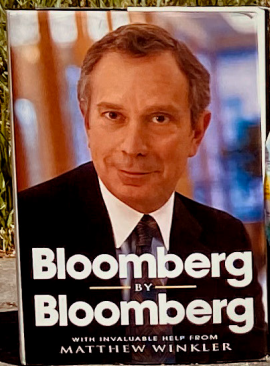
### Our Eiffel Stance

In 1887, 40 prominent French artists and writers signed a statement against the Eiffel Tower, asking: "Will the city of Paris continue to associate itself with the baroque and mercantile fancies of a builder of machines thereby making itself irreparably ugly and bringing dishonor to itself? They called it 'a gigantic black factory chimney,' an 'odious column of bolted metal.'" In the eighth issue of this magazine, we co-signed this statement. In this, our 27th issue, we would like to reaffirm our stance: we have still not accepted the Eiffel Tower, and will continue to officially oppose its continuing to stand, whether in Paris or elsewhere.

## NAUSEATING

Several readers have lately commented that this magazine (*Current Affairs*) occasionally lapses into what is referred to derisively as "nauseating bourgeois sentimentalism." Can we deny the charge? Only in part. Sentimental, we freely admit, and feel no shame about. A human lacking sentiment is unworthy of membership in the Great Community of Virtue. Bourgeois? This, too, we admit, though it is not something we are proud of. Our love of waistcoats and velvet can be called nothing else, though. Nauseating, however? NO! This magazine alleviates civilizational seasickness. It does not and shall not exacerbate it. Those "nauseated" by our work are clearly suffering from some kind of impairment of good taste that predated their exposure to our fine and important work.







The background of the page is a photograph of a park. In the foreground, there is a concrete path that curves from the bottom left towards the center. The path is bordered by a low concrete wall on the left. Beyond the path, there is a grassy area with some dry, brownish vegetation. In the background, there are several trees, some of which are bare and have white, peeling bark, while others are green. The sky is a clear, deep blue.

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# THE SOCIALIST ANT

*by Benjamin Blanchard, PhD*

**A**T FIRST, YOU ONLY SEE ONE. YOU KNEEL DOWN, look closer: an ant. It is scurrying along your driveway in pursuit of some invisible goal. Then you see another. And another. Each one tap-tap-tapping its antennae on the cement, following a chemical trail laid by its sisters. Fascinated and amused, you observe these tiny workers with minute lives that seem so different from your own. Then, shifting your view a little further along towards their apparent destination, right at the edge of the pavement and your well-manicured lawn, you come upon it. A mass of undulating, swarming insect bodies. One on top of the other, legs gripping bodies, bodies gripping legs. Moving together as if controlled by the mind of a single organism—or some mindless Borgian will—the pile of ants is voraciously deconstructing what formerly resembled three double-stuffed Oreo cookies. The writhing insect horde consumes them rapidly, working in sync. Working to sustain the colony. Working, working, working.

The image of the ant primarily as a worker has persisted for millennia and repeatedly appears in disparate cultures across the world. The Hebrew scripture Proverbs 6:6 compels the reader to “go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise!” Greek storyteller Aesop’s antsiest fable, *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, derives from the working ant the moral that, “it is best to prepare for the days of necessity.” A Mexican proverb cautions that, “an ant on the move does more than a dozing ox.” Above all else, ants *work*.

What can we, as humans, learn from the most proletarian of all animals? I propose that the beauty of a truly socialist society is to be found in the ways of the ant, when properly understood. But first, in light of the apparently mindless insect horde you may find occupying your driveway, we must confront the leading alternative. Are ants in fact a terrifying representation of authoritarianism? Are ants... *fascists*?

They say that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, and myrmecology (the study of ants) is no exception. Superficial observations of ant colonies may indeed suggest more fascistic tendencies. As far as ant scientists—myrmecologists—can surmise, ant workers do not get to choose the work they do for their colony. Dissent, such as it might occur among ants, is simply not tolerated. The individual spirit, any individual will, appears suppressed, with work unto death the fate of colony members. A soldier ant is born a soldier and must die a soldier. A worker ant is born a worker and must die a worker. A queen ant is born a queen and must die a queen.

Such societal regimentation and perceived lack of any individual spirit—under a monarch no less!—not unreasonably leads some to conclude that ants are our fascistic cousins in the insect world. Intellectual heavyweight and rightwing heartthrob Ronald Reagan, in his infamous 1964 speech “A Time for Choosing,” paints ant societies in the dull colors of authoritarian misery:

*“You and I are told increasingly we have to choose between a left or right. Well I’d like to suggest there is no such thing as a left or right. There’s only an up or down—[up] man’s old—old-aged dream, the ultimate in individual freedom consistent with law and order, or down to the **ant heap of totalitarianism**. And regardless of their sincerity, their humanitarian motives, those who would trade our freedom for security have embarked on this downward course.”* (emphasis added)

The ant heap of totalitarianism! That certainly does seem ominous. Reagan shares this view with English author T.H. White who, in *The Book of Merlyn*, describes the ant thusly: *Formica est exemplo magni laboris* (“The ant is an example of great industry”). Sounds good, right? Wait until you hear what happens next: Merlyn turns Arthur into an ant in order to instruct him through lived experience. All of his fellow ants—along with Arthur himself—are known only by a number, language is largely reduced to “done” or “not



done,” and the entrance to the colony is marked with a sign that reads “EVERYTHING NOT FORBIDDEN IS COMPULSORY.” At the head of the mindless working colony is an authoritarian queen, and work commands are dictated to Ant-Arthur directly via a “voice in his head” (presumably communicated via antennae). Just when his ant colony is on the precipice of total war with another colony, Ant-Arthur is, to his relief, returned to the human realm.

Propagandists like Reagan and White would have you believe that the life of the ant is terrible. Monotonous, drab, and, worst of all, lacking in individual freedom. Consigned to a life of endless work, the collective will of an ant colony is portrayed as monstrous as it is relentless and powerful—easy pickings for films like *Them!*, *Phase IV*, and *Empire of the Ants*. Perhaps some of our horror derives from an uncomfortable perceived similarity between an ant’s life and ours. The British writer Gerald Brenan could very well have been on to something when he wrote that “[w]e are closer to the ants than to the butterflies. Very few people can endure much leisure.” Most of us immersed in U.S. culture proclaim a love for individual freedom and exhibit a disgust towards allegedly mindless creatures like ants. Meanwhile, indoctrinated into a Protestant work ethic and the pursuit of the illusory American Dream of hierarchical social advancement—a 2017 Harvard study found that the chances of “moving on up” from the bottom quintile of earners to the top quintile is 50 percent lower than Americans think—we sacrifice most of our waking hours to behemoth corporations. We have replaced fulfilling work that serves the common good with exploited labor that serves only a bleak set of corporate interests.

To be sure, the ways of the ant can be jarring, and it may be unwise to import into human society everything that we find among ant societies. In some species, a worker that contracts a disease will be forcibly removed from the colony to protect the wellbeing of the whole society. In weaver ants, even larvae are put to work in a form of child labor, with the adult workers using larval silk to bind leaves together and form nest structures in trees. Ant societies’ decisions are determined through chemical pseudo-communication, rather than anything at all resembling reasoned debate.

But let us not put the “ant” in “ignorant.” It would come as a shock to the propagandists surveyed above—but not, of course, to *Current Affairs* subscribers—that the image of *Formica est exemplo magni laboris* is rather overstated.

It turns out that according to the Protestant-capitalist work ethic, many members of ant societies are abject sloths. Recent work on *Temnothorax rugatulus* ants, by Daniel Charbonneau and colleagues, has established that many so-called workers do not actually do much work. Colony activity is instead characterized by cycles of labor, with variation in how often any given worker is committed to any laborious task. Some “workers” may simply be a reserve force whose only purpose is to fill in any gaps should overall worker numbers fall below a certain level. At most other times, they are inactive, doing close to nothing. It is in fact believed to be common across colonies of different social insects that as many as 50 percent of workers are inactive at any one time. Historians of human work life before the Industrial Revolution—when eight hours of labor a day was considered a lot, and even peasants enjoyed several months’ worth of holidays—should find something familiar in these insect societies characterized by frequent breaks and periods of inactivity across large swathes of the workforce.



HIS UNEXPECTED FACT ABOUT ant colonies echoes the Marxist slogan, “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.” The colony does not require constant activity from all workers at all times. The average person growing up in the United States, acculturated to a system of ceaseless alienated labor, might consider such inactivity the most, well, alien feature of ant colonies. Even people in more enlightened societies

may be inclined to agree. Spanish essayist and novelist Miguel de Unamuno is certainly in this camp, as shown by his spiteful eruption of interspecies aggression in *Mist: A Tragicomic Novel*: “The ant, bah! The most hypocritical of all animals. All that he does is to walk about and make us believe that he is working.” Similarly, a century before the publication of research on “lazy” ants, the Canadian-American actor and comedian Marie Dressler presciently, if unintentionally, previewed a better world when she mused, “If ants are such busy workers, how come they find the time to go to all the picnics?”

Then again, who *wouldn’t* like to devote less of their life to brain-numbing toil, and more of it to attending picnics in the park? By investigating ants’ lives in their totality, we begin to see the ant as socialist—and ant colonies as positive images of what human societies may become (and in some ways once were, prior to industrialization). Ironically, the Jewish proverb’s command to “go to the ant, O sluggard” commends an enlightened conception of human work as a more limited feature of our fundamental identity.

What about the authoritarian ant queen, oppressively ruling over Her subjects with an iron tarsus? While in some species the queen may exert a degree of chemical control over reproduction by suppressing egg-laying behavior in the worker caste, the label “queen” is largely a monarchic misnomer. Ant “queens” are, for the most part, simply the reproductive unit of the colony, with day-to-day decision-making (where to forage for food, as one important example) instead driven by emergent processes that arise from both the individual choices and collective will of the workers. Each worker that emerges from her colony to forage initially seeks food on her own, laying a chemical trail to alert her sisters to the location of a discovered food source. Over time, through the relative strengthening of trails to food sources that are both more abundant and nearer to the colony than others, the collective “chooses” to forage at better food sources (occasionally making mistakes along the way, of course). Contrary to the images conjured up by Reagan and T.H. White, the ant society functions far more like a grassroots democracy than a totalitarian dictatorship.

Ant sociality, organized through bottom-up decision-making, is as anti-patriarchal as you should now be expecting. To the extent that patriarchy fundamentally relies on the maintenance of hierarchies (sorry, lobsters!), this may not be very surprising. But it is also the case that all workers in ant colonies—that is, all members of the decision-making body of the colony—are female. Gender differentiation, even if ants could theoretically conceive of such a concept, would be highly unlikely to exist in any ant society, as males are generally produced only once a year, live for about a day, mate, and then die. Notably, while ant colonies are not patriarchal, neither are they matriar-



chal: no female ant, even the “queen,” serves as a true organizational head. Driven by neither a leader nor a commitment to a hierarchy, ant sociality is instead characterized by a dedication to community needs, whatever they may be and by whomever they are needed.

The positive, healthy sociality that binds ant colonies together has received attention from human luminaries over generations. Aristotle, in *The History of Animals*, links ants to humanity via shared sociality, both as “social creatures” that “have some one common object in view,” a feature that is unique even among “all creatures that are gregarious.” In Plato’s *Phaedo*, Socrates instructs Cebes that the happiest people are those who model the ants, bees, and wasps as “social and disciplined creature[s]” and thus become “decent citizens.” Like Aristotle and Plato, the philosopher Kanye West—before he ever donned a MAGA hat—spoke favorably of ant sociality in a lecture at Oxford University, observing that “people say it takes a village to raise a child. People ask me how my daughter is doing. She’s only doing good if your daughter’s doing good. We’re all one family. We have the ability to approach our race like ants, or we have the ability to approach our race like crabs.” (Two related ant-eccotes: Both Khloé and Kourtney Kardashian once took to Twitter to ask if ants have dicks [they do], and the *Daily News* reported that fire ants could be used to help Kim Kardashian’s psoriasis. It is best to keep up with the Kardashians if only to learn more about ants!).

**C**OULD THE SPIRIT OF THE ANT, RATHER THAN instilling in us a sense of disgusted horror, instead propel us toward a more beautiful, socialist state of international solidarity and flourishing existence? The opportunity we have to learn from the ant was not lost on Tenzin Gyatso, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, as expressed in his book on living a meaningful life:

*“In fact ants, to cite just one example, work unselfishly for the community; we humans sometimes do not look good by comparison. We are supposed to be higher beings, so we must act according to our higher selves.”*

The extreme individualism promoted as a fundamental virtue in the United States warps our perceptions of collective goods and communal goodness, manufacturing a misguided national revulsion at socialism and ant societies alike. Both are unfortunately perceived as destructive forces that limit societal goods, whether that be technological development or the wooden rafters in a suburban home. Yet ants have proven that an integrated, communal existence can be highly successful—there are over 13,000 ant species that are currently known to science, and ants are dominant or conspicuously present across nearly every continent on the planet (Antarctica, despite its name, is the one exception). Ants, which are technically a subset of wasps, likely evolved over 120 million years ago, and have survived and thrived up to and through the modern day. We humans do not look good by comparison, indeed!

Two of the most influential myrmecologists of this generation, E.O. Wilson and Bert Hölldobler, highlighted that the “competitive edge” that has led to the worldwide success of the ants is their “highly developed, self-sacrificial colonial existence.” Following this observation, they opined that “[i]t would appear that socialism

really works under some circumstances. Karl Marx just had the wrong species.” In my view, the first sentence is a deep insight, but the second fails to capture the potential of human societies to move beyond a constricting capitalist framework. If ants are seen solely in terms of their identity as “workers,” which we have already discovered is something of an oversimplification, then perhaps Wilson and Hölldobler are correct. But it is a capitalist myth that human worth is reducible to economic productivity, and so too is it a myth that human inspiration from ant life is limited to their productive work ethic.

South African singer and civil rights activist Miriam Makeba sees the power of the ant in spiritual rather than utilitarian terms, writing that “I look at an ant and I see myself: A native South African, endowed by nature with a strength

much greater  
than my size so I might  
cope with the weight of a racism that  
crushes my spirit.” Uyghur civil rights activist Rebiya Kadeer derives similar inspiration from individual ant persistence, motivated by a fable her father used to tell her about a tenacious little ant and an egregiously skeptical bird. Individual strength, not simply communal success, is found among the ants. And what Wilson and Hölldobler term “self-sacrificial colonial existence” could also be termed “mutual care” or simply “love.” Why should we confine such behaviors and social structures to the anthill? The ant colony is an image not of fascism or authoritarianism, but rather of communal, socialist living where individuals are born with the innate belief—one that is highly attuned to reality—that all in a society rely on each other to some degree.

Is it a fool’s errand to try and build more ant-like, socialist human societies? While we can derive both individual and collective inspiration from a holistic understanding of ants, it is of course true that humans are not ants, and do not share as deeply an ant’s innate sense of mutual reliance and community. Ants may not even have any kind of “sense” that we would recognize, but rather pure non-conscious instinct. For us humans, with our freedom of choice, it is *always* a “time for choosing.” But it is no coincidence that ants keep cropping up, over thousands of years, as a source of knowledge and inspiration in various cultures around the globe. Miniconjou-Lakota holy man John (Fire) Lame Deer speaks about an “ant power” that exists despite the smallness of the ant. Ants foreshadow the great wealth of Midas in Greek mythology (when he was a child, a stream of ants paid tribute to the future king by feeding him grains of wheat). According to Hopi legend, the “Ant People” brought the Hopi into their tunnels to protect them during global cataclysms.





Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, favorably compares “an ant filled with the love of God” to “kings and emperors with heaps of wealth and vast dominion.” Aboriginal people in modern-day Australia include honey ants in traditional paintings. A Korean saying translates to “an ant hole could break your precious tower down,” indicating that a tiny mistake could ruin everything. A community in Ecuador named itself “Añangu,” a Kichwa term for “leaf-cutter ant.” The Brazilian footballer Miraildes Maciel Mota, known as “Formiga” (“Ant”), is praised for her athletic prowess. A proverb of the Mossi people in Burkina Faso states that “when the ants unite their mouths, they can carry an elephant.” The near-universal presence of ants cohabiting with humans provides an opportunity for shared metaphors, shared symbols, and shared imagination. Any movement dedicated to international solidarity and human progress would be foolish not to appreciate an animal with such potential for global inspiration.

greener pastures) to nomadic mushroom harvesting. Leaf-cutter ants gather leaves to feed to fungi which they maintain via fungal gardening in their underground nests. Several *Pseudomyrmex* species rely on mutualistic relationships with plants, which produce hollow thorns for housing and fatty Beltian bodies for food in exchange for the ants’ aggressive defense of the plants against herbivores. This is but a small sample of the stunning array of behavioral variation that has evolved within these communal insect societies.

**A**NTS ALSO ENRICH THE WORLD SIMPLY BY EXISTING in it. Far from monotonous and drab, the diversity of ant life is marvelously odd and ingenious. Turtle ant soldiers, in the genus *Cephalotes*, use their flat heads as doors to protect the circular openings of their arboreal twig nests. The bullet ant *Paraponera clavata* carries a stinger that delivers such painful venom that a person can be in pain for a

## "ANTS ARE SOCIALISTS, A TRUTH AS BEAUTIFUL AS ANTS THEMSELVES."


I am reminded of a Chinese fable that a fellow researcher shared with me while I was conducting research on spiny ants at the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Garden in Yunnan, China. In “The Wisdom of the Ants,” a colony of one thousand ants are living on a mountaintop when, one day, a forest fire surrounds them and threatens to wipe out the entire colony. Without hesitation, the ants realize what must be done. All one thousand ants group together into a ball, roll down the mountainside towards the fire, pass through the fire, and arrive on the other side, where the ball of ants disassembles. While many ants died from this approach, it was a communal decision that was necessary to ensure the survival of the colony, and the fable refers to this as “the wisdom of the ants.” Movingly, the story was once told in 1995 by Chai Ling, a survivor of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests.

I believe that this “self-sacrificial” nature of ants—true in reality as it is in this fable—is attainable even in the human species. Contrary to Wilson and Hölldobler, collectivist ideologies do not “have the wrong species,” as demonstrated whenever protestors, as a collective, risk their bodily safety (and sometimes their lives) for any noble aim. Even rightwing figures sometimes issue calls to self-sacrifice, such as pressuring workers, for the sake of “the economy” or to “save America,” to resume labor despite a higher personal risk of serious illness or death from the current coronavirus pandemic. While a vibrant economy indeed carries some positive connection to human wellbeing, self-sacrifice is better justified when in service of goods that more directly promote human flourishing like physical and mental health, family cohesion, spiritual development, or fulfilling leisure.

It is important to remember, too, the remarkable biological diversity that real-life ants protect with their collective efforts. The over 13,000 known species exhibit behaviors that range from tending to aphids as cattle (including defending them from predators, milking them for the sugary “honeydew” they excrete, and moving them to

full 24 hours from just a single sting. Fire ants can form giant living rafts out of their bodies in order to survive floods, while army ants do the same in order to build living bridges and “bivouacs.” Trap-jaw ants can close their mandibles so fast that if they hit a surface, their bodies go flying into the air up to 50 times their body length. Spiny ants in the genus *Polyrhachis* host ginormous defensive thorn-like spines that can nearly exceed the length of their entire thorax.

As it is, or should be, with human diversity, the variation across ant life is worth preserving for its own sake. To be sure, ants form mutualisms that benefit other species and also provide ecosystem services through soil aeration and significant nutrient cycling. But the intrinsic value of preserving an array of ant species is not rooted in the external services that they provide. Ant societies, much like human ones, are both richer and more remarkable for all of the evolutionary variations on a simple myrmecological theme.

Ants are socialists, a truth as beautiful as ants themselves. Confronting a pulsating mass of uncountably many living creatures piled atop each other while they work to consume every crumb of a cookie may, as when first grappling with a radically new idea, initially elicit revulsion. Yet when properly considered as an instance of a non-hierarchical, democratic society working toward a noble communal goal (feeding their ant babies and providing mutual aid), that which was formerly unsettling is transformed into an inspiration. Incorporating more ant-like perspectives into our political decision-making is sure to come with challenges. But our human capacity to draw inspiration from diverse sources and use it to imagine or re-imagine our future sets us apart as a species. With no shortage of domestic and global challenges to confront—including wars, malnourishment and starvation, inadequate healthcare, racist and classist justice systems, climate change, union busting, corporate exploitation, underemployment, corruption, destruction of natural resources, and so many other pressing issues—we would be unwise to waste any good tool at our disposal. Let us not waste the wisdom of the ants. 



# SLEEP IT OFF!

Plague, wildfire, the president—2020 is universally agreed-upon to be a completely garbage year, possibly the most garbage yet (and human history has had some pretty godawful epochs). You hate 2020, everyone around you hates 2020. Why can't this fucking thing be over? How many times have you asked: "Why can't you just wake me up when it's 2021?" Well, that's exactly what we can do. SlumberAway 2020 is a powerful sedative that will knock you out for months at a time. You won't need to read the news, you won't even need to have conscious experiences at all! While your comrades are doom-scrolling Twitter, you'll be in a blissful dreamless coma, technically alive but without the slightest awareness of your surroundings or even your identity. So long, world! This planet thought it could make you miserable. Well, you showed the planet. It's not going to get you down anymore, because you're in bed and being fed through a tube. There's no better way to pass the remainder of the year, and when you finally awaken on New Year's Day and catch up on recent events—oh, great, Ben Shapiro is on the Supreme Court and every duck in America is dead—your colleagues will wish they'd stayed in bed too. Of course, 2021 will probably be worse, but the good news for you is: we'll have a pill for that, too!

Side effects include death and nightmares. Do not take SlumberAway if you are nursing, pregnant, or believe political quietism is indefensible and that one must take action in the face of impending doom rather than resigning oneself and becoming numb.



## SLUMBER AWAY 2020





Ye Olde Trial



# the LEGAL ORDEAL

*by Brianna Rennix and Sparky Abraham*

**I**N BURGUNDY, IN THE YEAR 590, THE ROYAL chamberlain was accused of killing one of the king's prized buffalo—which, at the time, was a capital offense. With his life on the line, the chamberlain opted for trial by battle, designating his nephew to fight for him. The counterparty, the royal forester, fought on his own behalf. Although the chamberlain's nephew managed to fatally wound the forester, the injured forester killed the nephew outright. By the rule of the day, therefore, the chamberlain was judged to have been guilty of killing the buffalo in the first place, and was executed. This was one of the earliest recorded instances of trial by battle, a legal procedure for resolving disputes that persisted in western Europe for nearly a thousand years.

Trial by battle, and related procedures such as trial by ordeal, tend to be popularly characterized today as the depraved, superstitious, barbaric practices of simpletons in the distant past, who just weren't rational enough to devise a legal system based on things like "evidence" and "statutory interpretation." In 1454, also in Burgundy, a man named Plouvier accused a man named Coquel of murdering one of Plouvier's relatives. Coquel claimed self defense. Plouvier had no way to prove his claim, but wasn't willing to drop the matter, so he opted for combat, and the accused Coquel agreed. The battle ended with Plouvier, the larger man, kneeling on Coquel's chest and gouging out his eyes. Having been thus found guilty of unjustified murder, the eyeless Coquel was hanged. What sort of society, we might ask, would resolve disputes using such base, might-makes-right procedures? For trial by battle in particular, what sort of backwards system would allow whichever party could hire the strongest champion to prevail in legal disputes?

But these unfavorable comparisons of trial by battle and trial by ordeal with our current legal practices miss the mark on two counts. First, the past was not as simple as we imagine it. Battle and ordeal existed not as entire standalone systems, but largely as *methods of proof* within sophisticated legal systems. One could still prove their case by sworn testimony, by documentary evidence, or by appeal to a jury. But in some cases, particularly where there was reason to doubt the reliability of these more familiar methods, battle and ordeal existed as alternatives.

Second, we are not nearly advanced as we think we are. The power dynamics laid bare in battle and ordeal will be familiar to any American trial attorney today, or simply any American who has ever been caught up in our justice system. The practice of American civil litigation—*i.e.*, a dispute between two parties—far from being a noble quest toward truth, is largely an exercise in misery imposition. Whichever party can use the procedural rules to cost the other side more than they can afford (in legal fees, time expense, and reputational harm) is normally the victor. In trial by battle, it was considered completely fair to hire an expensive champion. Likewise, in our current legal system, the wealthy can retain very expensive law firms with armies of investigators and specialized software capable of processing millions of pages of documents, and a less wealthy party will retain... whatever schmuck with a law degree they can afford. In the end, might still makes right.

Meanwhile, criminal defendants undergo their own torturous ordeal, in which they often face the choice between pleading guilty and taking their lumps, or undergoing gruelling public trials, during which an agent of the state will endeavor to vilify, humiliate, excoriate, and do everything within their power to ensure the maximum number of years are taken off the defendant's life. As with much of history, the wide gulf separating the brutality of the past from the enlightenment today is, upon closer inspection, something more of a puddle.

**T**RIAL BY ORDEAL AND TRIAL BY BATTLE EXISTED as judicial procedures in western Europe within a pretty circumscribed period of time: although there were regional variations, and early examples like the Buffalo Case cited above, the heyday of the ordeal trial was from the ninth to eleventh centuries, while trial by battle seems to have been in formal judicial use from about the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. (More recent attempts to revive trial by battle have been made: last year, a divorced man in Iowa sought permission to formally challenge his ex-wife and her lawyer to a katanabattle, asking the court for 12 weeks to locate a suitable forge. His request was not granted.)



Trials by battle were not commonly fought with swords; they generally involved blunt weapons like clubs and staves, or other methods including the very popular eye-gouging. In a miracle attributed to Saint Wulfstan, an adulterer was accused of attacking his lover's husband. During the trial by battle, the husband managed to gouge out the adulterer's eyes and testicles, which the husband threw into the crowd. (In what sounds like the medieval equivalent of a One Weird Trick ad, the mutilated adulterer subsequently prayed diligently to Saint Wulfstan for forgiveness, and his eyes and testicles grew back. Hooray!) England's last recorded trial by battle, meanwhile, ended with a bitten nose and a thumb in the eye. Far from being considered foul play, gouging and biting were often essential tools in trials by battle. One prominent chronicler considered a man unable to fight if he was missing his front teeth, since "they help him greatly to victory." Regardless of *how* someone won, if you slew their opponent or forced them to cry "mercy" after you popped both their eyeballs, you were deemed to have proven your case.

Medieval ordeal trials were similarly brutal, taking the form of "ordeal by iron" or "ordeal by water." In the iron ordeal, a person would grab hold of a red-hot piece of metal, and then, three days later, their bandaged hand would be unwrapped and the burned skin examined. If the skin had healed, the person was innocent, having carried their burden of proof; if it was festering, infected, or otherwise still visibly wounded, they failed. Ordeal by water involved tossing a person into water to see if their body sunk or floated: an honest or innocent person would sink, whereas a guilty or malingering person would float. There were a handful of alternate variations, like walking on hot plowshares or thrusting a hand into a hot cauldron, but the theory of each trial was the same: the person under inquiry was subjected to a painful experience, and the outcome of the test was contingent on some generally uncontrollable physiological reaction to the ordeal.

Trials by battle or ordeal were basically treated as forms of *proof*—which might be used to dispose of an entire case, or a specific issue within a case. There were various other forms of proof considered acceptable (and sometimes strongly preferred) in legal proceedings. Compurgation, or oath-taking, was one of the most common forms of proof: a person would swear before God that their word was true, and then put forward a specified number of people from the community (somewhat like character or reputation witnesses) who would back up their oath. Alternatively, a person could submit documentary or material evidence to be considered; could "put themselves on the country" and agree to a determination of their case by a jury; or an adjudicator might conduct an inquest and interview witnesses according to their own discretion. But if these forms of proof were unavailable—some people, for example, were categorically or situationally unable to offer proof by compurgation—or if the previously-offered proofs were disputed by the parties, then the issue might be decided by ordeal or by battle.

Ordeal was often used for—among other things—crimes where oaths were deemed inherently untrustworthy and third-party witnesses were nonexistent. This covered cases like murders committed in secret, or sexual offenses such as adultery, rape, or bestiality. ("If a man is charged with having carnal dealings with cattle of *any* sort," reads one Norwegian provincial law, "which is forbidden to *all* Christians [btw], the bailiff shall bring action against him with witnesses to the fact of common rumour; and let him carry the hot iron or go into outlawry." History, alas, is silent as to how many unrepentant

cowboys lived in outlawry in medieval Norway.) In some times and places, it seems to have been more common for criminal matters to be decided by ordeal, and civil matters by battle, although this was far from a hard-and-fast rule.

The ordeal was sometimes imagined as a way of getting God's input into difficult cases, by letting divine intervention settle a legal question. This premise, however, was subject to considerable theological ambiguity and debate. For one thing, the ordeal wasn't used *exclusively* in high-stakes cases where the truth seemed fundamentally unknowable, like unsolvable murders; under some circumstances, it might also be used in comparatively mundane criminal proceedings or property disputes. Some theological commentators felt that the ordeal was inherently blasphemous because it involved "putting God to the test," while others felt that it was unreliable because it could be manipulated by sorcery, or by the motivated interpretation of the clerics who administered the ordeal. Use of the ordeal required cooperation from the church, because only a priest was considered qualified to interpret the burn wounds, or the buoyancy of the flailing person in the river. Priests were sometimes even paid a fee for their services, and so for several centuries the practice was quite popular, despite skepticism from higher-ups in the church hierarchy.

Proof by battle, meanwhile, always existed largely outside the ambit of church sanction and didn't require direct clerical involvement—although some clerics and monasteries battled as litigants themselves in cases affecting their own property interests. Like the ordeal, trial by battle was sometimes conceptualized as a way of leaving a case up to divine rather than human judgment. However, unlike the ordeal, which generally put one particular party's word up to the inscrutable judgment of providence, battle was a bilateral endeavor pitting two parties against each other, and the martial strengths of these respective parties were easier to gauge in advance by ordinary human observation. As noted by Ariella Elema, who has studied trial by battle in France and England extensively, trial by battle was fundamentally a matter of honor and reputation, and as such, could usually only be waged between social equals. Someone of lower social status generally could not wager battle against someone of higher status, although free men of equal status could battle each other regardless of rank.

In theory, it was also possible to bring combat "appeals" against judges or jurors (individually, or as an entire body), if they refused to hear your case when it was clearly in their jurisdiction, or if they rendered a false verdict. Apparently, this kind of appeal rarely, if ever, occurred in practice. We can only hope that some Wat of Watsfield once challenged the entire county magistrate to trial by battle, shouting "THIS WHOLE COURT IS OUT OF ORDER"—but if so, his saga has been lost to the mists of time.

**W**HEN YOU READ ABOUT TRIAL BY ORDEAL and trial by battle, you might think, not unjustly, that they were barbaric rituals that put people in painful, horrifying situations for no good reason, and left the outcome of cases up to irrelevant and mostly uncontrollable factors, like "physical strength" and "having naturally flame-retardant hands." But in times and places where records exist, the rates of acquittal by ordeal trial are actually quite high—which is not at all what you'd



expect, given the nature of the trials themselves. Based on these rather perplexing figures, scholars speculate that the administration of ordeals was perhaps manipulated by the priests, or that the results of the ordeal were leniently interpreted on purpose to acquit defendants, in a manner similar to jury nullification. (Thirteenth- and fourteenth-century court records in England also show extremely high rates of acquittal at jury trials, possibly suggesting that juries were motivated to find ways to avoid imposing capital punishments.) The right to wager trial by battle, meanwhile, was sometimes imagined as a privilege to be jealously guarded, and at other times as a nightmare scenario that people were eager to avoid. Some towns negotiated for mass immunity for their citizens from being subjected to proof by battle. On the other end of the spectrum, when trial by battle was officially outlawed in France by royal decree in the thirteenth century, a popular song lamented: "I say to all those who were born on fiefs: by God you are no longer free; you

are well separated from your liberty, for you are judged by inquest."

In practice, it appears that lots of legal proceedings in which either ordeal or battle were proposed never actually progressed to that stage, but rather ended in mutual settlement. Actual combat, in particular, appears to have been pretty rare, and fatalities on the dueling pitch were rarer still (although if you forfeited a battle after being charged with a capital crime, you still got executed afterwards, so this was not the *preferred* form of arbitrated settlement). Proposing to submit oneself to ordeal or go to battle seems to have sometimes been a rhetorical manner of emphasizing or substantiating the value of one's proof by oath, since a person who wasn't willing to lay their bodily integrity on the line for their oath was presumed to be more likely to be a perjurer. On the other hand, some people might be ineligible to offer up proof by oath in the first place, because they had a prior bad reputation or lacked community ties, and ordeal or combat might then be their only resort. Women could be subject-



1. Peter Kropotkin

2. Che Guevara

3. Frida Kahlo

4. Diogenes the Cynic

5. Michel Foucault



ed to the ordeal, but could not usually directly participate in trial by battle, although they could wager it against their ranked equals and then put forward a champion on their behalf; as could people with physical disabilities. (Jews, meanwhile, were held immune from the ordeal because Christians considered it theologically and juridically meaningless for Jews to make oaths on doctrines they did not believe, and it seems that Jews were only rarely required to wage trial by battle because of their marginal social status.)

Because it was generally possible, for litigants that could afford it, to wager trial by battle through a champion, serving as a legal “champion” was a viable occupation for the duel-inclined, and in some places, it seems that the government actually funded public champions. Scholar Robert Bartlett notes that in Italy, “professional champions were organized, regulated, and provided for litigants by the communes.” (This seems significantly cooler than being a state-funded legal aid attorney.) In England, the crown also funded a cadre of jailhouse snitches called “approvers”—this was, essentially, a kind of plea deal where a defendant could escape a capital sentence by ratting out their accomplices, and then, as necessary, prove their case against these accomplices through trial by battle. Successful approvers might then be kept around by the government and trained to do battle in other cases. Private mercenary champions were also sometimes used to intimidate opponents in property disputes—for example, a wealthier person might steal the land of his poorer neighbors by wagering trial by battle and then bringing forward a paid professional champion; the neighbor, unable to afford a champion and knowing that he’d be forced to participate in the battle personally, would then cede his claim to save his life.

That these systems of proof were of dubious merit and subject to all kinds of interference did not go unnoticed upon by contemporary commentators. Agobard, a ninth-century archbishop of Lyons, wrote that “God’s judgments are secret and impenetrable... if all future events are uncertain, what astonishing fatuousness it is to try to make uncertain things certain through detestable combats,” and argued that, if the ordeal “worked,” it would render the entire judicial system superfluous: if God’s will could be known simply through the condition of a burned hand, why would anyone need “judges and magistrates... those who deny a charge to be convicted by witnesses, or, in the absence of witnesses, the case to be brought to an end by an oath”? Peter the Chanter, a twelfth-century critic of the ordeal, wrote that “no one should tempt God when the resources of human reason are not yet exhausted” and suggested that clerics debased themselves by accepting money to perform such questionable rituals. Some accounts of ordeals and battles that supposedly produced a “wrong” outcome—condemning or sparing a party against popular opinion—are riddled with a sense of theological unease, and hagiographies sometimes featured saints intervening to “correct” ordeals and battles that had initially doomed the wrong person. Ultimately, clerics were forbidden from participating in ordeals at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, as part of a general prohibition on clerical involvement in rituals and legal procedures that involved bloodshed: “No cleric may decree or pronounce a sentence involving the shedding of blood, or carry out a punishment involving the same, or be present when such punishment is carried out. ... nor may anyone confer a rite of blessing or consecration on a purgation by ordeal of boiling or cold water or of the red-hot iron.” Trial by battle was interdicted by the church even earlier, and was periodically outlawed by royal

decree within kingdoms, although that procedure proved harder to regulate because it generally took place at the level of noble or manorial courts, without requiring either clerical or royal involvement.



LIKE ALL LEGAL METHODS THAT PRETEND TO OFFER “proof,” trial by battle and trial by ordeal were undergirded by an inherent futility: much of what must be “proved” in a legal proceeding is simply unknowable. Sworn testimony, documentary evidence, witness corroboration—all of these methods of “proof” can lend credulity to one version of events or another, but none can ascribe absolute certainty. In many situations, it is simply impossible to know what happened, and dispute resolution systems have to account for that uncertainty. In a formal legal sense, our modern system purports to account for this uncertainty by imposing different “burdens of proof.” In civil matters, the burden is “low”: one side need only win by a preponderance of the evidence, which is often translated as 51 percent on their side. In criminal matters, the formal burden is “high”: the evidence must illuminate the unknowable past “beyond a reasonable doubt.” But these “burdens of proof” are simply system design choices. We could just as easily solve close cases with a coin flip, or by the relative wealth of those in the dispute (in whichever direction we choose). We could solve them by duking it out with clubs or carrying some hot metal.

And of course, the idea that “burdens of proof” have any kind of independent, objective meaning is a legal fiction. The burdens and standards of proof form the walls of the legal octagon, so to speak, but the matches themselves are won and lost on the mat. The legal “tactics” used by high-powered lawyers have little to do with wobbly legal concepts or law in the abstract, much less the events in dispute. Top tier firm Boies Shiller did not sit around agonizing about the standard of proof in the case of its client Harvey Weinstein: instead, they hired ex-Mossad operatives to spy on and intimidate the women their client had assaulted. When Arnold & Porter sought to defend Chevron after they poisoned a bunch of indigenous Ecuadorians, they didn’t worry about *what actually happened*. Instead, they ran a public relations smear campaign against the Ecuadorians’ lawyer, Steven Donziger, and filed a racketeering lawsuit against him.

Somehow, the myth that the American legal system operates according to Enlightened Rationality persists. Popular legal shows like *Law and Order* treat the investigation of crime as discovery of Truth; in the much more accurate *Better Call Saul*, a corporate retirement home attempts to overwhelm the lawyer investigating them with hundreds of bankers’ boxes, each containing thousands of pages of files. This is a very real and very common tactic—hide the evidence in mountains of trash. Robert Frost, meanwhile, famously quipped that “a jury consists of twelve persons chosen to decide who has the better lawyer.” Even this joke now feels quaint and anachronistic: after all, more than 90 percent of litigants today never make it before a jury, because the relative strength of the parties’ resources pre-determines the outcome, without need for pesky trifles like “evidence.”

This holds true in the criminal context as well. Something like 97 percent of criminal defendants accept a plea deal when a prosecutor threatens them with the ordeal of a lengthy trial which includes a trial detention period, and whose uncontrollable outcome may then lead to a further crushing years-long prison sentence. In



## THE VIRTUES OF TRIAL BY COMBAT

immigration courts—which are similar to criminal courts, in that they carry life-or-death consequences, but in which people enjoy even *fewer* due process rights—asylum-seekers are forced to undergo the ordeal of reliving their worst traumas to an audience of hostile strangers, and then having these traumas interpreted by an adjudicator according to completely arbitrary and subjective standards. An immigration judge in Atlanta will find that only two percent of the asylum-seekers who come before him have proven their cases, whereas a judge in New York will find that 80 percent of them have—just as an evil priest would say that every man thrown into the river floats, every time, while a slightly more humane and God-fearing one might look at a struggling, visibly drowning person and say—eh, I’m pretty sure he’s sinking.

Just as in trial by battle and trial by ordeal, our system encourages parties—including prosecutors—to flex their strength mainly as a *deterrent* to the ultimate showdown. In earlier centuries, the willingness to fight or suffer an ordeal demonstrated a litigant’s seriousness, lent credulity to their claims, and often resulted in a pre-battle or pre-ordeal resolution. In civil cases today, litigants jockey to prove to each other during the pretrial period that they are willing to spend huge amounts of time, energy, and money, to give their opponent a (hopefully discouraging) taste of how much a trial will ultimately cost them. Battles and ordeals were highly ritualized formalities that calibrated the parties’ incentives to settle, and mostly they settled. Discovery, motion practice, and trial costs are the same—highly ritualized, very risky. Their actual

occurrence is rare because the threat of them alone is so effective in forcing settlements. The structure of the system dictates what terms the settlements will have. One expects that for trial by battle, where the richer party could hire the most skilled champion, most settlements favored the wealthy. In this regard, our system is almost identical.

ULTIMATELY, THERE MAY BE SOME VALUE IN finding final resolution through procedures that are clearly and obviously decoupled from the facts of the particular case. The level of certainty that our culture reposes in legal outcomes is a bit baffling: when a judge or jury declares that something happened, its certainty is taken as gospel, never mind the fact that the finding might have been based on a 51 percent likelihood. A person who is convicted of a crime is considered *to have done it*, even if they just pled guilty to avoid an unfair trial and a worse sentence. The notion that an adjudicator can always look at available evidence and come to a correct conclusion, and that this is indeed how our legal procedures operate, may breed undue faith and confidence in the infallibility of some of our most deeply flawed institutions. One imagines that, a few true-believers aside, it was probably quite obvious to medieval Europeans that the results of battles and ordeals were somewhat arbitrary. But these people likely understood that sometimes you just have to make a call and live with it. These procedures didn’t find Truth, and they weren’t meant to find Truth; only resolution. This is no less true of our current system, but it’s considered uncouth to say so. If outcomes are going to be arbitrary, maybe it would be better for them to be *obviously* arbitrary.

At the very least, we all probably know some attorneys we would really like to fight. ♣





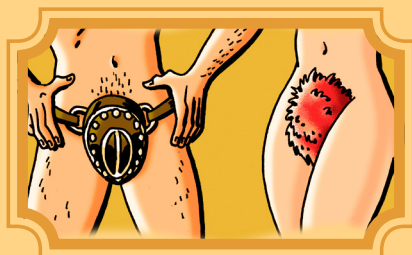
# European History

# QUIZ

for proud defenders of

# Western

Welcome, o brave warrior of Western Civilization! We've seen you online, posting nobly about the glories of the West, captioning pictures of Rivendell with "we need to return to this." But how much do you really know about your beloved "Western Civilization"? You heroically defend it, but do you *understand* it, like even a little bit? Not sure? Take the following quiz.



## Questions

1. Which culture first invented the following?

- a. Paper and printing
- b. The compass
- c. The seismograph
- d. Gunpowder
- e. Fireworks
- f. The codpiece
- g. The merkin

2. Which of the following Roman Emperors were born in Rome?

- a. Septimius Severus
- b. Macrinus
- c. Elagabalus
- d. Severus Alexander
- e. Phillip I
- f. Aemilian

3. **True or False:** a Muslim visited Texas before a Protestant crossed the Atlantic.

4. **True or False:** a Muslim visited Texas before Protestantism existed.

5. **True or False:** during the French Revolution, most people in France spoke French.

6. **True or False:** by World War II, the majority of people in Italy spoke Italian.

7. Greece is part of:

- a. The manly, austere, logic-chopping West.
- b. The mysterious, decadent, homoerotic East.



8. Identify "the West." Show your work.

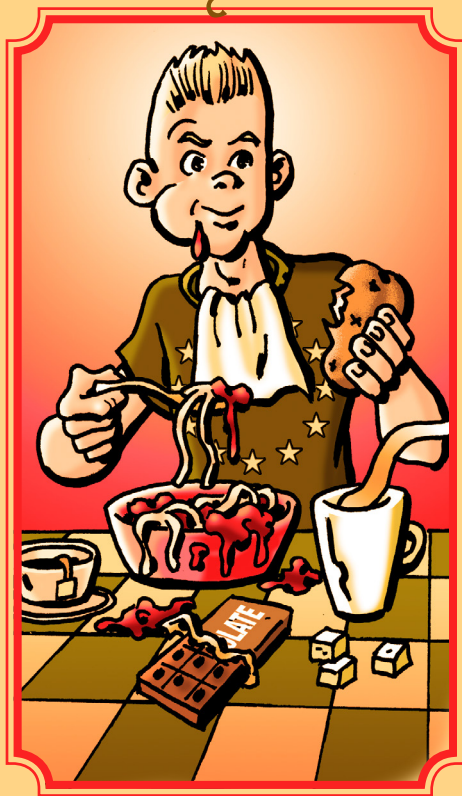


9. Match the city with its population in 1500:

Beijing	40,000
Cairo	45,000
Tabriz	50,000
Seoul	80,000
Fes	100,000
Mexico City	130,000
Rome	150,000
London	250,000
Paris	400,000
Cusco	672,000



# Civilization



**10. CAN YOU TELL THE DIFFERENCE** between Anglo-Saxon runes (home-grown from honest Germanic soil) and Hungarian runes (the bastard children of the Turkic alphabet)??? What kind of Westerner even are you if you can't do that??

**11. Which of the following foods best demonstrates the culinary superiority of Western Civilization?**

- a. Noodles
- b. Tomato sauce
- c. Potatoes
- d. Sugar
- e. Chocolate
- f. Coffee
- g. Tea

**12. Most non-Native Americans in the Americas from 1500 to 1850 came or descended from:**

- a. Asia
- b. Europe
- c. Africa



**13. What are your favorite numerals?**

- a. Roman
- b. Arabic

**14. Upon which precedent was the U.S. national government most closely based?**

- a. Athenian democracy
- b. Roman republic
- c. Iroquois confederacy

**15. Justify the Crusades. Show your work.**

## Answer Key

1. a. Paper and printing (China)  
b. The compass (likely China, but the Olmecs may have invented it even earlier)  
c. The seismograph (China)  
d. Gunpowder (China)  
e. Fireworks (China)  
f. The codpiece (Europe)  
g. The merkin (Europe)

(What Europeans may have lacked in useful, original inventions, they made up for in decorations for your junk.)

2. a. Septimius Severus (Leptis Magna, Libya)  
b. Macrinus (Caesarea, Mauretania)  
c. Elagabalus (Emesa, Syria)  
d. Severus Alexander (Arca Caesarea, Syria)  
e. Phillip I (Shahba, Syria)  
f. Aemilian (Girba, Tunisia)

(Some emperors were indeed born in Rome. Many were not.)

3. True! His name was Mustafa Azemmouri, aka Estevanico, aka Esteban the Moor.

4. This is a close question and depends on what "Protestantism" is. Azemmouri reached Texas around 1528, ~11 years after the posting of the 95 Theses.

5. False. At the time of the Revolution, most people in France still spoke regional dialects, such as Breton and Occitan. The gentleman in the picture is speaking a Breton phrase which means "I'll come over to the threshold and I'll shit in your mouth!"

6. THIS IS ALSO FALSE, CAN YOU BELIEVE IT.

7. You're right, gender IS a false binary.

8. "The West" is an incoherent construct!

9. Beijing (672,000)  
Cairo (400,000)  
Tabriz (250,000)  
Seoul (150,000)  
Fes (130,000)  
Mexico City (80,000)  
Rome (50,000)  
London (40,000)  
Paris (100,000)  
Cusco (45,000)  
(Check out London, barely the size of a mediocre Midwestern university.)

10. Be honest.

11. Fun fact: none of these foods originate from the European continent.  
a. Noodles (East Asia)  
b. Tomato sauce (Andes)  
c. Potatoes (Andes)  
d. Sugar (Southeast Asia)  
e. Chocolate (Mexico)  
f. Coffee (Ethiopia)  
g. Tea (basically everywhere except Europe)

12. It was Africa and you know why.

13. We're just embarrassed by you at this point.

14. You could argue B, Roman republic, but except for the pillared architecture, endorsement of slavery, and lack of real representation, you would be wrong. The correct answer is C, Iroquois confederacy. A U.S. Senate resolution from 1988 acknowledged that "the confederation of the original 13 colonies into one republic was influenced by the political system developed by the Iroquois Confederacy, as were many of the democratic principles which were incorporated into the constitution itself." From the Iroquois confederacy, the Founding Fathers borrowed ideas such as bicameral legislature and impeachment. (Oh, and if you thought the answer was A, Athenian democracy, then the joke's on you: the Founders thought participatory democracy was little better than anarchy.)

15. If you do manage to justify the Crusades, send your work over to *The Federalist*. Those assholes will print anything.

Me zo 'hont war an treuzoù hag a foero 'n ho kenot!





# YOU WILL BE THE QUEEN OF THE SEA

Not everybody can be  
an ocean goddess, in  
command of the fishes,  
whales, and waves.

But everyone can  
subscribe to  
**CURRENT AFFAIRS.**





## Building an Anti-Corporate Left Internationalism...

**I**N A 2008 INTERVIEW, THE HISTORIAN PERRY ANDERSON diagnosed the tragic predicament of the 20<sup>th</sup> century left in words which I haven't quite managed to get out of my head since I first heard them. He said,

*At least for a century between the 1840s and 1940s, the capacity to transcend one's national limitations and interests for a wider set of interests and to translate this transcendence into organized action...belonged on the whole to the labor movement, to the left. It didn't belong to businessmen, capitalists, and others. Since the 1950s, that has very dramatically changed. We have seen in the postwar order a high degree of coordination, an ability to take a more than national viewpoint on/for the interests of the system on the part of the privileged. Whereas those who are less privileged become more and more confined to local, regional, and at best national frameworks of actions.*

Things are, of course, not all bad for the global left. Our ideas and organizations have enjoyed a recent resurgence in the industrialized world. Local, regional, and national scales of action increasingly seem available in ways that they haven't been for the past few decades, and many thousands of people are participating. This is certainly cause for celebration. However, my own experiences within this left resurgence—organizing with my labor union, making Zoom calls to town halls, protesting for abolition in nearby cities, chipping in to DSA National campaigns, and virtually supporting comrades globally—all still suggest the truth of Anderson's observation. Although meaningful, the sum total of these efforts still does not add up to the kind of globally coordinated *movement* that once existed.

But even as the left strives to find new footholds, businessmen and capitalists are continuing to wield their “high degree of coordination” which Anderson describes as “an ability to take a more than national viewpoint” of their own interests—that is, the ability to make global common cause in pursuit of their goals. Not only have U.S. billionaires sailed through this recession over half a trillion dollars richer as a result of coordinated lobbying, they've also been working together with their foreign counterparts. In mid-2020, India's richest man, Mukesh Ambani, and America's richest man, Jeff Bezos—two people routinely cast by the media as being in constant competition—announced that they're in talks to team up for a “mega deal” in Indian e-commerce, which is predicted to be a “win-win” for both of their monopolistic, anti-worker, public-subsidy guzzling companies.

At a time when the portents of doom—crushing inequality, a raging pandemic, an economic collapse, growing fascism, a dying planet—are being produced in every part of the world all at once, can we really afford to only fight doom piece by piece? In a recent interview, left intellectual and organizing titan Mike Davis said, “What I find missing in the left as a whole, is the solidarity for the poor, ex-colonial world that was so defining for my generation.” Davis, Anderson, and others might disagree on exactly *when* the U.S. left lost its capacity to transcend the national frame and act in global solidarity, but they agree that the left did once exercise true internationalist capacity. So



# TAKING



# CLASS



# WAR



# GLOBAL



by Aparna Gopalan





why can't we do it once more? How can we build back the capacity to tackle injustice, not only on the local scale that's most easily available to us right now, but on the global scale at which it's so often produced—on the scale where our greatest adversaries operate?

## Internationalism Isn't About Foreign Policy, It's About Making Common Cause

**T**HE WORD “INTERNATIONALISM” IS OCCASIONALLY thrown around on the U.S. left, but true internationalism—as a project of making common cause globally to act together against *one* system of power—is currently not part of mainstream left discourse. Political theorist Michael Walzer's 2018 book *A Foreign Policy for the Left* is a good example of the shallow uses the concept of “internationalism” is now put to. Walzer discusses the left's internationalist dilemmas, but only in relation to official diplomatic or military relations between bounded nation states. The questions he attempts to tackle include: is the military necessary in diplomacy? Are there ever just wars? Should there be internationalist organizations like the UN, or is a completely isolationist approach better? Although Walzer is certainly not its best representative, the American left, by and large, does tend to see the global whole as no more the sum of its many national parts. From this standpoint, left “internationalism” means securing better interactions between different countries, and especially for better U.S. interaction with other countries. Insofar as any political action is actually taking place around this vision, its preferred target tends to be *foreign policy*—i.e., formal political relations between sovereign governments.

The rise of the global far right (especially since 2016) has infused quite a bit of enthusiasm into the quest for a progressive foreign policy: no war with Iran, no coup in Bolivia, no sanctions on Cuba, no deportations to Central America, no weapons for Israel, no trade war with China, etc. But although anti-imperialist foreign policy is undoubtedly important, not bombing other countries is a far cry from a global movement where one transcends one's specific position to identify with the wider interests of the world's working

class. In addition to framing itself around the boundaries between an imperial “us” and an oppressed “them” suffering elsewhere (the opposite of making common cause), a foreign policy focus actually narrows “internationalism” into a vague commitment to respecting national sovereignties and avoiding military conflicts, paradoxically hemming all global action into nationalist imaginaries.

The foreign policy approach also fails to take account of the enormous *economic* system of injustice—global capitalism—which is not governed by foreign policy as such but dictates conditions of life in every part of the world. Sure, imperialist foreign policy is often directly tied to corporate profit, as was evident in the 2019 lithium coup in Bolivia where Silicon Valley tycoons and U.S. diplomats colluded to oust a democratically elected president in order to simultaneously open up access to lithium ore *and* depose a ‘dangerous socialist regime.’ However, even though all imperialist foreign policy is tied to global capitalism, global capitalism also operates far outside of imperialist foreign policy. In approaching all international injustice *only* from the vantage point of foreign policy imperialism, we lose track of the much more widespread and diffuse *capitalist* imperialism—which, after all, does not have specific government ministries devoted to it, is not discussed as a burning bilateral concern in presidential foreign visits, is not brought up in global summits as an urgent shared threat, and is not reported on in the “Foreign” section of newspapers. As a result, the global capitalist order—the very thing which should constitute the main target of the global *left*—is rarely addressed by left social movements and left politicians.

And yet it is precisely this corporate internationalism that has shifted the world's political axis towards the right since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Wages have gone down in *all* countries, as have tax rates for the ultra-rich, as have barriers to accumulation, as have public protections and social safety nets within countries. This startling global shift did not begin with any *formal* foreign policy agenda in any single country, but was the product of “private” corporate machinations, implemented and enforced by intellectuals, think tanks, lobbyists, and institutions. All these entities operated in class collaboration across the world, but well outside the public consciousness. As a result, while each of America's wars abroad has been generation-defining, the late-20<sup>th</sup> century global war on the poor—and its perpetrators—has been much less visible. To the extent that most people even believe that there *is* a “war on the poor,” they tend to think of this as a domestic problem caused by domestic policy, rather than a global assault perpetrated by actors who operate internationally.

Clearly, the problem isn't merely that “international issues” or “U.S. imperialism” aren't discussed, but that certain *kinds* of international issues and U.S. imperialisms are discussed and others are not. While presidential candidates may have to answer questions about their thoughts on NATO, they are never asked about the World Bank. Politicians are expected to have opinions on foreign policy hotspots like Iran and Cuba, but never about Equatorial Guinea or Indonesia, where American capital reigns supreme. The Paris Agreement is discussed as a matter of international concern, but rarely the Investor Dispute Settlement Mechanism, which allows corporations to sue governments for any loss in profits.





## Globalizing Worker Power

**B**ERNIE SANDERS' TWO PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS MADE some effort to move away from this singular focus on internationalism as a military and diplomatic issue. In 2017 Sanders noted that the United States seems to have only one foreign policy platform—indistinguishably shared between the two major parties—and tried to articulate an alternative. Strikingly, he argued that the continuing expansion of corporate power across the world needed to be treated as a foreign policy concern, thus including the *economics* of international injustice into the domain of foreign policy. This begins to approach Anderson's description of left internationalism, where the American worker is able to actually make common cause with workers elsewhere in the world, advancing shared goals and recognizing shared enemies. But still, the technocratic, top-down domain of foreign policy is not an ideal vehicle for worker solidarity. Clearly realizing this, Sanders went on to state that "the task is to build an *international movement of our own against capitalist elites*." This is much more like it: an international movement of our own against an international movement of theirs, targeting not just U.S. military and diplomatic levers, but production and distribution worldwide.

So far, so good. But if "left internationalism is the solidarity of leftists," as Walzer puts it, what does this really mean? To reimagine left internationalism as more than military foreign policy or ephemeral calls for solidarity, the global origins of people's day-to-day problems need to be made clear. Aziza Rana has cogently argued that we must counter the false dichotomy between "domestic" issues, which are characterized as "bread-and-butter issues of jobs, health care, and social provision" and "international" issues, which are characterized as highly remote and "not really about the material interests of working people," and thus often left to experts. This is a false separation. Corporations cheapen labor, avoid taxes, and lobby governments *globally*; investors borrow cheap and lend dear *globally*; thus, workers toil for low wages *globally*. Bread and butter issues exist globally, and more importantly, have causes that are global in scale. They require solidarity, defined not as support for parallel yet disconnected struggles, but as an identification of truly shared interests: solidarity as making global common cause.

What this brings us to, of course, is global worker organizing in the form of powerful international unions. Global union activity has a rich history which needs to re-enter public discussion. As Jedediah Purdy notes, there has been a long and rich legacy of international union activity such as "the International Workingmen's Associations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century [which] were alliances of unions fighting for factory safety and shortened work-days in national parliaments and coordination of labor strength toward the possibility of international actions, such as solidarity strikes." But 19<sup>th</sup> century union struggles were, of course, never fully global, excluding as they did the world's enslaved and colonized majority. Today's global unionism must transcend the Western worker much more fully if it means to aim for real success. As anti-WTO protestors in Seattle realized in 1999, including other places in our social justice movements isn't about "diversifying" the struggle: it's actually essential. How well workers in the Global South are paid actually determines the

horizons for union activity in the North, which means that minimum wages in Mexico *are* already a bread-and-butter issue for factory workers in Washington state.

The Global South's poor need to be brought into socialist narratives of change not as objects of charity (e.g. poverty relief) who need "us" to "speak on their behalf," but as fellow organizers against corporate rule. This is not just a change in language; it's a change in strategy. It's a pivot away from the high politics of foreign policy advocacy and towards the grounded terrain of labor action. Solidarity organizing is one example, and it's already happening: the Communications Workers of America are fighting alongside call center employees in the Dominican Republic and Philippines, just as the United Electrical Workers are working alongside Mexican and Canadian unionists to resist NAFTA 2.0. But as successful actions targeting logistics infrastructures (e.g. indigenous people's early 2020 blockades of Canadian rail networks) have reminded us, we can do even more.

Profit today is produced in delicately balanced global supply chains. What if there were coordinated strikes up and down the iPhone supply chain, including salespeople in Paris, component assemblers in China, and cobalt miners in Bolivia? In addition to international labor strikes targeting specific companies or sectors, there could also be general strikes which target global circulation writ large. Many of us don't know this, but capitalists are terrified that people might realize that they could start making big, audacious global demands—such as a worldwide minimum wage, or a free-of-cost universal COVID-19 vaccine—by organizing to target key bottlenecks in global supply chains where circulation is uniquely vulnerable, such as ports, coal and gas supply, and electric companies. The labor strike is just one tool of global leverage we can use here: with enough organizing capacity, we can also throw in boycotts, disruptive civil disobedience, mass street action, people's moratoria on interest payments to big banks, and much more.

Yes, right now this is a pipe dream; to turn it into a real possibility requires its own kind of organizing. It requires pushing unions to talk to each other globally. It requires exchanging notes on strategy with people elsewhere in the world who are working to enrich the same people you are working to enrich. It requires training leaders in globally networked organizing. It requires joining and boosting current left organizations who are doing this work, such as Global Labor Justice, Asian Floor Wage Alliance, Manquila Solidarity Network, and others. It means making common cause between grassroots demands across Global North and South. It can be done. We just have to really accept that we need to do it.

### PHOTOS FROM PAGE 21

- Indian members of various trade unions shout slogans as they participate in a protest rally during a nationwide strike in Ahmedabad, Tuesday, Feb. 28, 2012. (AP)
- Thousands of workers protest against the Moroccan government in Casablanca, Morocco, Sunday, April 6, 2014. Thousands of workers, teachers and civil servants marched through downtown Casablanca on Sunday to protest austerity plans put in place by the Moroccan government to control runaway spending. (AP)
- Protesters hold banners and chant slogans during a demonstration called by the "SOS Retraites" collective, gathering lawyers, doctors, nurses, pilots and other independent workers, to protest the French government's reform of the pension system, on February 3, 2020. (AP)
- Members of the Workers Without a Roof Movement (MTST) protest to demand housing in Sao Paulo, Wednesday, Oct. 29, 2008. About 300 members of the MTST marched outside government buildings to demand housing. (AP)
- A general strike by the South African Federation of Trade Unions, 2018. (Libcom)



## Domesticating Corporate Power

**C**LEARLY, REVIVING GLOBAL UNION MILITANCY IS THE first and foremost challenge for creating a true left internationalism. But if Anderson's analysis is correct—if we haven't merely *forgotten* our global solidarities but actually *ceded* them to the capitalist class—then reclaiming internationalism for the left involves a second urgent task: that of directly targeting the institutions that allow corporate power to consolidate. Efforts to strengthen labor globally at least have some history in the form of transnational unions, but there is hardly any similar history of organized efforts to attack corporate consolidation globally. Here, we really would be attempting the unprecedented.

In the United States, we have seen domestic demands for limiting corporate power, such as a wealth tax or decommodifying public goods through Medicare for All and free public college. But while these sorts of ideas are well and good, they remain limited by the national frame. Claims like “this is the richest country in the history of the world, so we should guarantee healthcare” or “free public education is needed so that Americans can get ahead in a global labor market” serve to undercut internationalist visions of de-commodified public goods and a common social democratic floor for all workers as the key way to challenge the stranglehold of global capital. These kinds of left versions of “America First” are not new: they have long bedeviled efforts at global solidarity. Indeed, even today labor unions sometimes explicitly align with Trumpian protectionism, as if it were possible to protect workers at home while exporting unregulated capitalism abroad (it is not!).

Corporations do not operate exclusively within one country's national borders, and their actions do not have ramifications only for one country's electorate. Once you close down the U.S. health insurance industry, where do you think those companies will go next to extract profit? Similarly, if there's a huge wealth tax in America, where will corporations set up shop and bank accounts? Always the Global South, the perennial backyard. And as we already know from COVID-19 and much more besides, exporting injustice—apart from being a morally bad thing in and of itself—isn't even a long-term solution for the general population of wealthier countries, because sooner or later, the consequences of injustice will find ways back home. No border can stop the quest for profit: jobs will always escape back to the unregulated South, and poor wages there will always depress worker power back in the United States. Depressed worker power in the United States will further push the floor down for everyone. The cycle will continue.

Unless: we learn to meaningfully challenge corporate power on a global scale. To do this, we need to know three things first: 1) How does global corporate power actually operate? 2) Which institutions maintain it? and 3) How do we organize against those institutions?

**T**O ANSWER THE FIRST QUESTION, LET'S LOOK AT THE actual mechanisms which have amplified corporate power *globally* in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. For starters, there is the simple fact of massive wealth transfers from public coffers (of poor nations) to private wallets (in

rich ones). Anthropologist Jason Hickel points out that between 1980 and 2012, developing countries have sent “an eye-popping total of \$26.5 trillion” back to the developed world, much of it as interest payments on foreign debts which have already been repaid many times over. Crucially, this is not just a story of nation-state imperialism but of private corporate might. Most of the Northern creditors collecting money from Southern taxpayers are private individuals, corporations, and banks.

In addition to making exorbitant interest payments to Wall Street at the cost of providing for their own citizens, indebted governments also have to gut their economic and social protections *and* their public spending budgets *to become eligible for these loans in the first place*. When public budgets shrink, public utilities and services are sold off and placed in corporate hands: these corporations then promptly begin to extract profits from citizens. For example, when post-Apartheid South Africa began borrowing from the World Bank, it had to make itself “creditworthy” by selling its public water utility to companies like the French multinational Suez. Naturally, upon taking over Cape Town's water provision, Suez hiked up prices for basic water services by 600 percent.

Privatizations of public utilities are also accomplished outside of loans, through what are called “development projects.” For example, the World Bank carries out development projects in Africa which aim to privatize the education system piece by piece and bring profit-seeking companies in to provide an essential service to extremely poor people. In addition to profiting from privatization, corporations also profit from each and every worker or resource protection law repealed as a result of corporate lobbying or loan conditionalities. Evading taxes on this money (whether through tax havens or mis-invoicing or reporting in low-tax countries) is another perpetual way corporations get richer. There is also speculative profit, stock and bond profit, and profit from patent fees on all sorts of intellectual property from pharmaceuticals to seeds. Multilateral and bilateral free trade agreements are another mechanism of corporate profit, since they undo worker and environmental protections in the signatory countries, *and* get rid of tariffs on imports and other costs of selling abroad.

Importantly, these ways of extracting workers' life and labor for corporate profit are not always “forced” upon Global South governments at gunpoint. Many institutional conditions make Southern governments actually keen to adopt these conditions. In addition to lobbying by domestic capitalists who perpetually want to cheapen labor, Southern governments cut back their labor laws and sell off their energy grids in the hope that, if they do so, they can get better rankings on the World Bank's “Doing Business” indicator. This, in turn, can help them get cheaper credit and more investment, which can fund more shiny and useless megaprojects, which can then boost the government's profile at home in time for crucial elections.

That's the carrot. But there's also the stick. Capitalists enjoy international legal protections as well—such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s legal immunity under U.S. law, and even more egregiously, under the Investor State Dispute Settlement Mechanism which enables investors to sue governments for intervening in their profiteering (rather than the other way around). For example, when an Enron-Bechtel-GE electricity plant was shut down in India due to concerns about human rights viola-



tions, *nine* lawsuits were launched against India by the companies involved, citing lost profits caused by the closure. Surprise, surprise: the companies won \$160 million in compensation.

This jargon-laden, head-hurting story matters. It *really* matters. However much we may cry out against U.S. military and diplomatic interference around the world, however much we may stand in solidarity with pro-democracy protests or even worker unionism and social movements in other countries, these global mechanisms are already one step ahead. They are a manifestation of a *global* class solidarity at the very top of the wealth hierarchy. They operate stealthily, out of view, largely uneventfully. They work as machinery to systematically unbuild all the things *we* painstakingly try to build piece by piece. Our strikes, marches, protests, and candidates for office appear haphazardly, one by one: they are combated systematically in invisible debt payments and tax evasions, in deals to privatize public hospital systems, in court settlements in favor of companies. To beat this machine, our resistance needs to scale back up and become as systematic and institutionalized as the violence we seek to undo.

## New Targets

**I**n this story of the dizzying array of global arrangements which have enhanced the wealth and power of corporations over the past half century, some institutions come up over and over again. One is the World Bank, which facilitates the entry of poor countries into debt-traps and then gives them the economic knowledge and metrics to follow in order to repay the loans and screw over their citizens. Another is the IMF, an economic Weapon of Mass Destruction which proudly declares that it has privatized “well over a trillion dollars’ worth of state-owned firms” since 1980, in the process increasing the numbers of the global poor by one billion. Together, the Bank and the Fund—lovingly nicknamed the “Bretton Woods institutions” after their New Hampshire origins—have managed to reduce crucial social systems such as health, nutrition, education, and housing to tatters across the postcolonial world, just in time to generate a pandemic and a Depression amidst climate catastrophe. Naturally, both institutions follow a “one dollar one vote” model, meaning that the United States alone holds more power within them than the entire Global South combined. And these two organizations aren’t the only culprits. In the United Nations, power was literally moved from the General Assembly (one member, one vote) to the Security Council (where five superpowers hold veto power) after the Algerian socialist president Houari Boumediene started talking about building a just world economy. The World Trade Organization was set up to ensure that corporations get their fair share of intellectual property extortion from the world’s poor. All these institutions were established after the Second World War specifically to entrench U.S. military and corporate power, and all have dutifully followed their mandate.

No amount of “progressive” foreign policy can help us nullify these organizations’ pro-corporate agendas. Rather, as Yanis Varoufakis and David Adler have clearly outlined, they need to be taken over and reclaimed by an internationalist left. This means seizing the IMF and using it to rectify global trade imbalances; tasking the

World Bank with enacting a Global Green New Deal; directing the International Labour Organization to fight corporate lobbying; creating a people’s United Nations that builds consensus on ecological transition; and setting up a new Tax Justice Authority to shut down tax evasion. In addition to taking over these global organizations, the left could also use trade deals to institute mandatory worker and environmental protections worldwide; global accords to institutionalize a commitment to increasing global union density; an international court to step in when workers’ and elected governments’ rights are violated by corporations; and so forth. Organizations like the Public Services International, Jubilee South, Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt, UNI Global Union, and International Trade Union Confederation are already leading this fight, pushing the upper branches of IMF, World Bank, ILO, UN and G20 from the left. What we need to do is grow grassroots energy which can support and extend that fight.

## New Strategies

**N**ow I know how this reads: as another one of those “the left *must*” arguments addressed to no one in particular and charging the reader with nothing concrete at all. For us as organizers and everyday people, changing anything about these massive, invisible global systems can feel daunting, if not impossible. Because they are neither domestic nor foreign, and because they have the illusion of being unconnected to the day-to-day experiences of working people, global corporatist organizations have always operated outside of scrutiny. There are no simple tactics with which to oppose them: we can’t vote our way out of corporate lobbying, we can’t knock on doors to end IMF loans, we can’t hold the streets protesting the Doing Business indicator.

So how *do* we do something? It seems that to even begin working against these organizations, we will need to bring them into the realm of public deliberation and democratic control in the first place. Left movements have succeeded in directing public debate towards these institutions in the past, such as in the aftermath of Seattle 1999. This can happen again, but only with people power. “Unless alternative goals have the power of mass democratic pressure,” writes Aziz Rana, “it is hard to imagine that new ideas on their own will miraculously win the day.”

The left’s base needs to return to agitation around global economic injustices. For this, we need broad-based programming from organizations like Progressive International, the DSA’s International Committee, Global Justice Now and others aimed at convincing unions, social justice organizations, and socialists at large that local and global economic problems are not separate. Austerity is everywhere, wage theft is everywhere, the race to the bottom is everywhere, and so our organizing should be everywhere. In concrete terms, this means:

- A.** Coordinated global labor militancy, as mentioned earlier.
- B.** Anti-corporate actions on all scales. No action is too small if it’s part of a larger strategy: boycotts, public shaming campaigns, consumer activism against shady corporate practices, shareholder activism (e.g. pension funds refusing to invest in sovereign debt),



- pushing for institutional divestment from sovereign debt, etc.
- C.** Coordinated electoral pressure across countries for common goals like a global minimum wage and a global corporate tax floor.
  - D.** Better global thinking in local actions. The recent wave of abolitionist protest across the United States has been absolutely heartening, but its internationalist dimensions can be strengthened. For example, when fighting for a local police department to be disbanded, few think of the question of where all that military-grade equipment might then go (hint: abroad, either in the hands of the U.S. military or through sales to foreign warlords). Keeping those questions in mind from the get-go could help formulate demands which do no harm to other places (e.g. destroy, not sell, the equipment). It can also help U.S. organizers make common cause with abolitionists elsewhere by, for example, including defunding military bases abroad as a *key* demand of the broader abolitionist movement.
  - E.** Be as ready to act in public solidarity with struggles taking place outside the United States as activists in many other parts of the world were ready to demonstrate in solidarity with the most recent wave of BLM protests here.

THIS LIST OF ACTIONS OBVIOUSLY NEEDS TO GROW IN conversation with comrades in the global left, but an internationalist U.S. left, with all its experiences and resources, could be well poised to begin intensifying those connections.

Another strategic advantage an internationalist U.S. left could bring to the table is the possibility of wielding electoral power. Socialists here have gained elected office in ways that are hard to fathom in many other countries. This provides an immense opportunity. Seeing as most institutions of global governance are headquartered in Washington D.C. and operate in explicit service of American strategic and corporate interests, U.S. leftists in office are ideally positioned to target them.

Let's remember that there was a time, not that long ago, when global organizations were under scrutiny, not only in the streets of Seattle but also in the halls of the United States Congress. In the late 1990s, Bernie Sanders himself lambasted the IMF for loan sharking and asked, "who does the IMF represent?" The question has remained relevant, but few in high office are still asking it. Continuing to elect progressive Congresspeople is critical, but pushing them to raise these issues in legislative debate is equally important. Ilhan Omar has argued that poor countries' IMF debts should be forgiven during the pandemic; this is an example that needs to be built on. Leveraging public funds to make international institutions (most of which are funded in part by U.S. taxpayers) behave themselves is one simple option. If Trump can cut funding for the World Health Organization during a pandemic, progressive lawmakers can push to cut funding for the IMF during a Depression, and make World Bank money contingent on pursuing a Global Green New Deal. Legislators can also think of ways to make U.S. corporations to pay *all their workers* fairly and pay *all their taxes* worldwide, regardless of jurisdiction. If Woodrow Wilson was able to find creative ways to use U.S. producers as examples in raising worker protections worldwide, AOC certainly should be able to do as much or more.

**S**O LET'S BRING THIS ISSUE BACK INTO THE ELECTED left's agenda. Let's push the next progressive Democratic candidates for office to answer town hall questions, not just about Iraq and Afghanistan, but also about Bolivia and Chad; not just about NATO, but also the IMF; not just ICE, but also the CIA, not just the Iran deal and NAFTA, but also SAPs (Structural Adjustment Programs). Aziz Rana again says it best: "As new centers of power develop within the party, whether Our Revolution or Reverend Barber's Poor People's Campaign, the resurgent DSA or the many offshoots of BLM, they must make clear that they cannot back national politicians without non-imperial and genuinely left answers to [international economic] questions."

During this global pandemic, when it is clear that even those living under well-funded universal healthcare systems are not safe unless all countries provide the same social protections, there really are no national solutions to global problems. There never have been, of course. The coronavirus has spread across the world in 2020 because comorbidities like poverty and unaffordable healthcare spread across it first; the virus has gone global with ease in 2020 because low wages went global first. Even though there are efforts to nationalize this crisis (e.g. closing borders, blaming specific countries, trying to privatize the vaccine), international connections keep manifesting themselves. Neoliberals have used the insistent globality of the crisis to highlight the need for strong internationalist institutions and partnerships. But in truth, that low bar of "international" collaboration—listening to the WHO, aiding ally governments—will not actually save us from the coronavirus, since the crisis itself is a reaping of what liberals and conservatives, globalization-gurus and isolationists, have together sowed for decades: cuts to people's power, wages, public healthcare, and social protections worldwide. The left must instead fight for a truly global social democratic floor, worker control and the nationalization of key enterprises, transnational union activity such as solidarity strikes, as well as an effort to immobilize capital by overtaking the very institutions which have for so long secured its mobility. COVID-19 starkly showcases what was always true: working people worldwide are all on the same sinking ship. It's time for left internationalists to once again build power in recognition of that common cause. ✚



*"Hey, wanna get barbecue after this?"*



# the crypto CASINO

*by Andrew Ancheta*

**O**N A SWELTERINGLY HOT DAY IN JULY 2019, I tagged along behind several dozen businessmen and women as they filed into the marbled passages of the Capitol dome. Some were lawyers, others tax specialists or technologists or marketers, but all of them came from companies in the new world of cryptocurrency. Although less than a decade old, the blockchain industry has already begun to engage in one of the most American of business practices: entreating Congress for favorable regulations.

This may surprise anyone who started using bitcoin in 2012, when cryptocurrency felt like a subversive or anti-authoritarian alternative to finance. After credit cards severed WikiLeaks from the financial system, cryptocurrency donations helped keep the whistles blowing. “Bitcoin is the real Occupy Wall Street,” tweeted Julian Assange in 2017 from his refuge in the Ecuadorian embassy. In a 2019 interview, Snowden revealed that when he leaked the NSA’s secrets, “the servers I used were paid for in bitcoin.” Snowden has also spoken favorably about the privacy coins Zcash and Monero.

Bitcoin has come a long way from the heroin dealers on the Dark Web. The crypto industry now has its own influence groups, as well as the ears of a handful of friendly Representatives and at least one commissioner of the SEC. Blockchain companies are signing up for government bailouts, and over 75 have accepted PPP loans.

None of the executives I met on Capitol Hill last July would have been mistaken for Edward Snowden. “Ban privacy coins,” said one C-suite officer, whose company specializes in tracing blockchain transactions. Others were asking for lower regulatory barriers, or more exemptions for digital securities.

A few days earlier, David Marcus, the head of Facebook’s experimental blockchain group, had appeared before both houses of Congress, which received Facebook’s proposal for a digital currency (called Libra) with a mix of horror and fascination. But at least some lawmakers were open to the idea. “What you need to tell them about is the benefits,” said Representative David Schweikert (D-AZ), a member of the Congressional Blockchain Caucus, explaining to blockchain advocates how best to persuade his colleagues. “It is the revolution, we just have to sell it.”

At the time, I had been reporting on the cryptocurrency world for over a year. The blockchain seemed to have something for everyone—it was supposed to turn capitalism into a more level playing field, but also somehow make you insanely rich. The space was full of oddballs and cranks, from the real-life Bond villain John McAfee (who spent the windfall from his antivirus software becoming a drug kingpin in Belize, and fled the country after one of his neighbors was mysteriously murdered) to child star Brock Pierce (who led an exodus of Silicon Valley tech bros to build a crypto-utopia in post-Hurricane Puerto Rico, and is now running for President). This is not to mention cryptocurrency’s elaborate scams, automated pyramid schemes, faked deaths, and other hilarious devices to separate fools and their money.

At first, cryptocurrency arose as a fascinating experiment in free markets, without any of the bailouts, influence peddling and regulatory capture that have become the neoliberal norm. “It was like watching the history of derivatives and financial fraud on fast-forward,” says David Gerard, a long-time Bitcoin watcher who has become one of the industry’s top critics. “It was amazing to watch.”

And it really didn’t take long before the results of the experiment started to look familiar. Crypto-capitalists have reinvented the finance industry’s fractional reserves and derivatives, private interests began trading votes and carving out monopolies, and rent-seekers found ways to extract surplus value, all while trashing the environment and finding new ways to concentrate wealth at the top.

## *The “Real” Occupy Wall Street*

IT’S WORTH TAKING A MOMENT TO EXPLAIN THE TERMINOLOGY. A blockchain is a kind of collective record or database, in which multiple parties share their computing resources. None of the participants can unilaterally change the ledger, so blockchains are useful to record ownership of valuable assets.

Bitcoin is the most well-known example, but there are dozens of other blockchains, some tracking hundreds of different assets. Some are open networks where anyone can contribute to the







bookkeeping; others resemble oligarchies or monopolies, with important roles restricted to just a few entities. Most older blockchains are secured by mining, a computationally-intensive process that rewards accountants on the ledger with new crypto; newer distributed ledgers have done away with mining entirely.

The comic-book style origin story of cryptocurrency begins with economic collapse. The first Bitcoin block contained a newspaper headline from the day it was created: “*The Times* 03/Jan/2009 Chancellor on brink of second bailout for banks.” The message was a virtual middle digit to the financiers who had caused the crash, and the regulators which permitted them to do so.

“The root problem with conventional currency is all the trust that’s required to make it work,” explained Satoshi Nakamoto, Bitcoin’s secretive and likely pseudonymous inventor, in his early release notes. “The central bank must be trusted not to debase the currency, but the history of fiat currencies is full of breaches of that trust. Banks must be trusted to hold our money and transfer it electronically, but they lend it out in waves of credit bubbles with barely a fraction in reserve.”

Satoshi’s message had an obvious appeal to the Ron Paul brand of libertarians, many of whom have never forgiven Franklin Roosevelt for ditching the gold standard. With a hard limit of 21 million bitcoins, it was also immune to inflation, and could not be taxed or confiscated. It was like a Swiss bank in your pocket.

But it also scored a few sympathy points on the disenchanted left: financial speculators had nearly shipwrecked the economy, before begging for a public rescue. After sharing the losses of the auto and financial industries, American capitalism looked less like a free market than a kind of “socialism for the rich”—with JPMorgan and Goldman Sachs in the role of welfare queens.

As much as conservatives complain about regulations, few of them realize that capital is arguably the biggest beneficiary of government intervention. The rules are different for the rich: capital gains taxes allow investors to pay significantly lower taxes, not to mention the generous breaks for the Amazons and Trumps of the world. Federal Reserve Banks are not wholly public institutions: two-thirds of their directors are chosen by commercial banks. When the coronavirus pandemic hit, the central banking system acted quickly to save...the stock market. “Why are stocks soaring as the economy melts down?” asked *Business Insider* rhetorically last April. The answer: “Thank the Fed” for slashing interest rates and buying up corporate debt.

And of course, the dollar and Federal banking regulations are regularly deployed in the interests of foreign policy. While free trade and globalization have been the mottoes of neoliberalism, that freedom does not apply to anyone trying to do business from Iran, or Cuba, or Venezuela, or any other country which defies U.S. hegemony. President Trump has been “unusually pugnacious” in weaponizing the dollar, reports the *Financial Times*, using the currency’s dominant status to sever America’s rivals from global markets. “Normal U.S. sanctions aim to prevent American citizens from dealing with a given country or party,” the *Financial Times* explains, “but secondary measures allow the government to penalize third parties that do business with a sanctioned country.” So much for “free markets.”

## *How To Make Money Online. No, Really.*

THE SOLUTION, AT LEAST FOR SATOSHI, WAS TO CREATE A payments system that does not rely on the integrity of central banks or national governments. “Centralization” is one of the curse words of crypto-speak. A centralized payments system like Venmo or PayPal relies on a handful of intermediaries, any one of which can choose or be forced to stop a transaction.

At a time when bank transfers required high fees and days to settle, bitcoin transactions could move almost instantly. Even if you don’t have a bank account (which 1.7 billion adults don’t, according to the World Bank) you can send bitcoin anywhere, without an intermediary, and in any quantity. You could even send a few cents—bitcoin tipping used to be popular on Reddit, and some of those forgotten tips have appreciated to thousands of dollars. After learning a few arcane security procedures, it’s as easy as sending an email—and just as hard to stop. In a distributed system like the Bitcoin network, everyone keeps their coins and transactions are processed by thousands of independent miners, so it’s nearly impossible to confiscate coins or stop them from moving.

At least, that’s the way it’s *supposed* to work. In reality, Bitcoin (and the wider cryptocurrency space in general) requires a lot of trust. First of all, you have to trust the programmers who code the software—unlike PayPal, there’s no number to call when your payment goes missing. The network itself is also heavily localized; some 65 percent of the Bitcoin network’s miners are concentrated in a handful of energy-rich Chinese provinces, and the top four mining pools together account for 56 percent of the network’s processing power. A malicious actor, seeking to censor or reverse Bitcoin transactions, would need to control or co-opt 51 percent of the network.

“Cryptocurrency has solved no problem that it set for itself,” says David Gerard, who authored a biting critique of the 2017 crypto bubble. He quickly recites the problems outlined in Satoshi’s original white paper—cross border transactions, micropayments, and monetary sovereignty, almost all of which are still as remote as they were in 2009. Bitcoin transactions are too expensive for micropayments, too slow for daily use, and the technology is too complicated for anyone but an expert. “Bitcoin failed at every one of those [goals,]” he adds. “Every middleman that crypto said it would get rid of, they’ve replaced with a new middleman, except worse.”

To be fair, there are still things you can do with crypto that can’t be done with regular money. There’s a neat crypto browser that rewards its users with a tiny sliver of their ad revenue (although its founder is less admirable.) I have a good friend in Tehran who uses bitcoin as a lifeline to the world economy, thereby circumventing the sanctions which the Trump administration re-established in contravention of international law. Dash, a competitor to bitcoin, has acquired a limited success in Venezuela, where inflation and sanctions have made the local fiat currency useless.

But the main users of cryptocurrency are speculators. Hedge funds are among the biggest traders, and their total assets more than doubled last year. Exchanges serve double duty as safe deposits and trading floors,



and sometimes manipulate prices through practices which are banned in regular markets. During the 1920s, margin traders could borrow ten times as much money as they put in, fueling wild speculation on stock prices. Today, on platforms like BitMex, derivatives traders regularly borrow a hundred times their collateral. Many speculators have been liquidated by suspiciously well-timed price movements, leading at least one economist to accuse the exchange of trading against its own clients.

The second biggest blockchain, Ethereum, opened a floodgate of new cryptocurrencies, which could be minted in only a few minutes. These tokens were usually sold through initial coin offerings (ICOs), which pumped most of the air into the 2017 bubble. (Marx, who regarded stock trading as “fictitious capital,” would have had a field day with ICOs.)

In an ICO, companies sell tokens to raise money for future ventures—sort of like selling discount tickets for a theater that has not yet been built. But, much like the debt obligations that inflated the housing bubble, very few investors bothered to learn what they were buying. Dentacoin, an aspiring cryptocurrency for oral hygiene, somehow reached over a billion dollars of market capitalization; less famous was “Bitcoiin,” a rather shameless cash grab by action hero Steven Seagal, and SpankCoin, whose use-case is best left to the imagination. Most of them were as silly as they sound, and almost all were illegal securities.

The real success stories from the ICO bubble were exchanges, which made huge profits both from traders and listing fees. One company agreed to pay \$250,000 in crypto to get listed on the Binance exchange, an annual payment which was to recur over the next four years. And that was a bargain—industry sources have told me about exchanges charging up to \$10 million for a listing, as well as *ten percent* of the token’s total supply.

The latest fad is “DeFi,” or decentralized finance, a system of automated lending facilities which could have been dreamed up at the Lehman Brothers’ subprime mortgage desk. DeFi allows traders to mortgage bitcoins or other cryptocurrencies as collateral for a loan, which they typically reinvest or leverage for more speculation. Over the past year, the annualized yields for some of the new DeFi protocols exceeded 100 percent. In some cases, the same coins have been lent and re-borrowed so many times that the total debt is greater than the number of tokens in existence.

At the time of writing, the current DeFi bubble appeared to have popped, with average losses of 50 percent in the first ten days of September.

## Occupied (By) Wall Street

WHILE ORIGINALLY PITCHED AS A FORM OF “DIGITAL CASH,” by 2017 most serious bitcoin owners considered it a better version of gold—a long-term store of value which you could sit on forever. The distinction is important, at least to bitcoin users. “Digital cash” requires attracting merchant adoption and new users, improving user experience and transaction speed, and creating easy-to-use wallet software. For “digital gold” that’s less important—one need only *hold*, in the illiterate argot of the crypto world, and wait for inevitably higher prices.

This quality was highlighted by a Bear Stearns alumnus, who later became famous for different reasons. “If we learn tomorrow that half of Montana contained a secret cache of gold, the value of gold would decrease instantly,” Jeffrey Epstein told *The Next Web* in 2017. “Bitcoin doesn’t have this problem.” Epstein gave generously to the Digital Currency Initiative, a research community at MIT’s Media Lab.

As bitcoin became the new gold, the rest of the mission seemed a lot less important. Bitcoiners are enjoined to “be your own bank,” but most prefer to leave that hassle to someone else. Sixty percent of all bitcoins are currently kept with third-party custodians, like the Grayscale Bitcoin Trust, which controls 2.5 percent of the total supply.

Grayscale is open only to investors with a proven net worth of over a million dollars. The minimum investment is \$50,000, of which the trust charges 2 percent per year to manage the funds. Nonetheless, Grayscale has been a rousing success among high rollers, who poured a record half-billion dollars into the company’s digital vaults over the first three months of this year. The vast majority, Grayscale says, came from hedge funds and other institutional investors.

Crypto has even made it to Wall Street, and bitcoin futures are now available to traders at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange and the Chicago Board Options Exchange. The latest entrant is Bakkt, a derivatives trading platform owned by the same parent company as the New York Stock Exchange. Under the leadership of its CEO, Kelly Loeffler, Bakkt was the first exchange to offer physically-delivered bitcoin futures and options contracts. Mrs. Loeffler has since found a more lucrative trading floor at the U.S. Senate, where she sold millions in stock before the pandemic hit the market.

“It’s professional gambling,” says Gerard, explaining why institutional investors took an interest in cryptocurrency. “One of the side effects of inequality is that if normal people get poorer, the real economy goes down. With not much wealth circulating there’s not much wealth being generated, and (investors) are just not going to find high interest rates. They ran out of sane investments, and started looking for insane investments.”

Despite their supposed antipathy to mainstream finance, the crypto-world was secretly thrilled to be at the center of attention. “Institutions are coming for your crypto,” reported the industry-leading *CoinDesk* in 2018, and it seemed like mass adoption had suddenly arrived.

At least one participant could appreciate the irony. “For a movement previously described as ‘the real Occupy Wall Street,’” wrote Jackson Palmer, the creator of the satirical meme Dogecoin, “cryptocurrency now sadly resembles a community that instead wants to be occupied by Wall Street itself.”

## Enter Facebook

IF WALL STREET TRADING BITCOIN WAS A BAD OMEN, it was nothing like the shock when Facebook announced its crypto plans. Finally, there would be a virtual currency which could combine the responsibility of corporate bankers with the high privacy standards which brought you Cambridge Analytica.

The original Libra white paper hit many of the same notes as bitcoin—global payments, financial freedom, cross-border transactions



and so on. Unlike bitcoin, Libra would be backed by a basket of actual currencies and securities. Corporations would take the role of miners, paying \$10 million each for the privilege of processing transactions (as well as interest from Libra's currency reserves, though this part of the plan has since been scrapped). And with 2.6 billion potential users already on Facebook, Libra could reach a larger audience than a bitcoiner's wildest dreams.

"Facebook is big enough to break the system," says Gerard, whose second book covers Libra's struggles in legal purgatory. "A lot of the ambitions of Libra were for rich men [i.e., Facebook's founders and partners] to start their own money without those annoying governments getting in the way. Even if they were sincere and customer-focused, I don't think they understood what they were doing."

The problem, according to Gerard, is that the only way to support a Facebook-sized currency is with an enormous reserve of regular currency, in quantities which could destabilize entire economies if it were released. "Even if the reserve for Libras is one-to-one, the size of that reserve would be enough to affect whole markets for government paper," he says. "Is there enough money of that quality for Libra to use it? Would they need to issue more just for Libra? That might be a problem."

There's also the threat that the Libra might be weaponized, in the same way that the Treasury wields the dollar. The companies running Libra "would have the power to allow or deny people the right to transact," *Wired* warned, and could even "punish a recalcitrant government by denying its citizens access to the transaction services enjoyed by a third of the world's people."

So far, Libra has been stymied by skeptical financial regulators, who began sounding alarms within hours of the first announcement. On the same day that Facebook announced the project, France's finance minister declared it "out of the question" — and that was one of the nicer reactions. After many regulatory rejections, the Libra white paper now calls for a multitude of single-currency tokens, pegged to national currencies— a Facebook version of PayPal, instead of a Facebook currency. But there are still distant hopes for global, multi-currency Libra token. "They really want to do that plan," Gerard says. "Nobody wants to let them do that plan."

## *The Bitcoin Takeover*

ALL THIS DOESN'T MEAN THAT YOU *CAN'T* USE CRYPTOCURRENCY the way it was intended. In 2018, I reported on the growing trend of microdonations, in which generous-minded donors would send small amounts of crypto to needy strangers on the other side of the world. Since the fees for those currencies are negligible, the entire contribution arrives without the overhead costs of a normal charity. You can even send contributions to sanctioned countries like Iran or Venezuela.

But no one in their right mind would use bitcoin itself for this purpose. The ledger is only capable of seven trades per second, and fees soar when the blockchain is congested. At the peak of the 2017 bubble, the average transaction cost *50 dollars*—and Satoshi help





you if you needed the money quickly. Fees are now more reasonable—they're about a dollar—but that's still too high for everyday transactions. The Lightning Network, which is supposed to route micropayments through a Rube Goldberg-contraption of payments channels, has been "eighteen months away" since 2015.

There were two proposals to fix the congestion problem: either raise the maximum number of transactions in each block, or find clever ways to settle them outside of the main ledger. There were merits to both sides, but the argument was not decided by merits. After many accusations and dirty tricks, the bitcoin community went to war. The "small block" side, which opposed raising transaction limits, won.

One of the main players in that war was Blockstream, a venture-funded private company and one of the largest employers of Bitcoin core contributors. Blockstream stubbornly opposed raising transaction limits, which would have reduced congestion and made Bitcoin more usable as an ordinary currency. By surprising coincidence, this also happened to align with Blockstream's business model. As CEO Adam Back explained to *Forbes*, Blockstream makes money by selling access to private "side chains" for enterprise clients.

A sidechain is a separate, members-only network attached to the regular blockchain. For a monthly fee, Blockstream clients can move bitcoins cheaply on the Liquid sidechain, without the wait and high fees of the public network. It's a bit like a for-profit, high-speed railway that operates alongside public roads. The problem, as Blockstream critics pointed out, is when the same company is involved in building both networks.

"Blockstream doesn't make profit on what Bitcoin can do," critics said as the rift began to widen. "Blockstream makes money on what Bitcoin can *not* do." Put the railway company in charge of public roads, and you may start finding a lot more pot-holes in your morning commute.



*"Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow."*

Funding development is a "classic blind spot" according to Amaury Séchet, the lead developer for Bitcoin ABC. Bitcoin—and its offshoots—does not have any mechanism to fund developers, who contribute on a voluntary basis. As a result, "one well-funded actor can buy most of the developers," he explains. "This is probably cheaper than taking control with a 51 percent attack."

Bitcoin ABC develops the node software for Bitcoin Cash, which seceded from the original protocol in 2017 before splintering into increasingly irrelevant fragments. Séchet is currently pushing to establish a "miner tax" to fund development for the new currency—although the proposal now seems more likely to cause another split.

## Socialism On The World Computer?

IN 2014, VITALIK BUTERIN DREAMED UP A LEDGER THAT could run applications as well as keep accounts, and Ethereum was born. Through the wizardry of smart contracts and digital oracles, the "world computer" could conjure up a business with no boss, or a market with no middlemen. "Imagine Airbnb without Airbnb," said one early pitch. "Imagine Uber without Uber."

Whereas traditional businesses make money from their capital, companies like Airbnb make money from *your* capital—and with clever marketing, they can create a multi-billion dollar hospitality business without owning a single room. The promise of the blockchain, at least for believers, would be to replace corporate intermediaries with a peer-to-peer marketplace—thereby allowing homeowners or drivers to keep their surplus value. You could rent out your own extra room, or drive passengers in your car, without having to pay for the privilege.

"A blockchain is not really a technological solution so much as a political solution," says Adrian, a self-described 'blockchain socialist' and the author of a blog and podcast of the same name. "For the Left, that's really interesting for imagining how to build infrastructure to reflect the type of society we want to live in." For professional reasons, he prefers not to use his real name, but the Blockchain Socialist blog provides a rare Marxist viewpoint on the ways technology can facilitate new forms of economic organization.

If major economies were to pivot towards socialist-style planning, they would require a mechanism for collective decisions. A shared ledger is not required for this purpose—but it might help. "It's a big IT infrastructural problem to create a platform for economic democracy," Adrian says. "You can do a central database, where the government or some sort of authorizing body has to give you permission. Or you can do a shared database where everyone can access publicly and give their feedback on what goods to be produced and how to produce them." A virtual voting system could also facilitate more elaborate schemes, like quadratic voting (in which votes are weighted according to the strength of individual preferences) or conviction voting (in which participants vote continuously, and votes are weighted by duration).

In the more immediate term, a shared, public ledger could also



provide the backbone for cooperative enterprises and leaderless organizations. One of the unique inventions of the blockchain space are Decentralized Autonomous Organizations, or DAOs—virtual bodies in which human managers are replaced by code. If a corporation were structured as a DAO, its shareholders would be able to vote directly on business decisions, without going through a board of directors. Workers in a DAO cooperative could democratically set their own budgets, allocate resources, or even vote on their own salaries, with their funds distributed by blockchain-dwelling programs. And with no central point of control, a DAO-based body would be theoretically impossible for a hostile government to shut down.

“Those democratic structures and blockchain can create novel ways to interact within an organization,” Adrian says. “The DAO world and the cooperative world are starting to mingle.” On his podcast, *The Blockchain Socialist* podcast has interviewed some leading figures from the digital cooperative movement, like Resonate, a user-owned streaming service, and democracy.earth, a tech nonprofit.

Another is the Eva Coop, a Montreal-based ridesharing app which is owned by its riders and drivers. Aspiring to be a “socially acceptable” ridesharing platform, the cooperative allows its members to vote on key decisions and take a share in any eventual profits. Eva takes a 15 percent share of each ride, which can be changed by a vote of its members. Voting is still done the old fashioned way, but the blockchain is used to secure data privacy.

That’s a pretty stark contrast to that *other* rideshare app, which pockets 25 percent of the revenue, accepts no input from the drivers, and spends millions to persuade politicians that its drivers are not employees. While it may be some time before Eva has any profits to share with its members, it’s not alone. After spending 11 years and \$20 billion to corner the market, Uber has yet to earn a quarterly profit.

“We had the idea in late 2017, when Uber was bullying the Government of Quebec,” explains Chief Operating Officer Dardan Isufi, who hopes to create a “global empire of community-led cooperatives.” Eva Coop now has 30,000 rider members and a thousand drivers, Isufi says, as well as a larger share of the Montreal market than Lyft. Most users “don’t even know it’s based on blockchain,” he adds. “We worked really hard to remove all barriers, like wallet creation.”

But very few crypto companies have managed to gain any real-world presence, a problem which the Blockchain Socialist attributes to the tendency to concentrate power among narrow insider groups. “Founders give themselves a lot of power,” Adrian says, and companies which raise money from venture capital or coin offerings are rarely interested in being egalitarian. “Blockchain only benefits at scale,” he explains. “It only benefits when people want to join and collaborate with you. No one would join an Amazon DAO, knowing that Jeff Bezos owns that much stock.”

## Tilling The Commons?

WHILE MOST BLOCKCHAIN THOUGHT REMAINS DOMINATED by Austrian-type market fundamentalism, Adrian says, there is also a growing contingent who are interested in using the distributed

ledger as a tool for “the commons”—public goods and shared resources, from which everyone has a right to benefit.

“The commons” is a weighty term. Most know it from the Tragedy of the Commons—a parable about mismanaged resources in pursuit of short-term gains. And when you think about the contemporary blockchain space, an overgrazed meadow full of cow shit is a pretty good analogy.

For critics, that shitty meadow looks a lot like a dead end. “Computers don’t work,” Gerard warned me emphatically. “Programs are *shit*. If you trust software, you’re an idiot.” That may seem like a strong statement, but for anyone who voted in the Iowa Caucus, or has applied for unemployment insurance, it’s easy to see his point.

At least some of the problems in the crypto world can be solved, with effort. Ethereum is expected to replace mining—which will not fix all its problems, but will at least improve throughput and reduce the embarrassing carbon footprint of the second-largest blockchain. Some newer cryptocurrencies have functional DAOs to invest in infrastructure and resolve the kinds of hard questions which caused bitcoin to split.

If blockchain technology is part of the internet ‘commons,’ then it seems to be disappearing into the digital equivalent of the Enclosures. Instead of open networks, private interests are constructing their own walled-off or centralized systems. “What we’re seeing is the co-option of blockchain and cryptocurrencies into the corporate space,” Adrian says, noting a growing tendency towards “enterprise”-oriented ledgers. When companies like Facebook or IBM build blockchain-type infrastructure they’re typically not interested in the type of open, public network which Satoshi Nakamoto designed. Several national banks are devising their own digital currencies, which will most likely be under centralized control.

The alternative is to use the technology for new economic structures, rather than simply rebuilding traditional companies. Besides DAOs and cooperatives, there are also ways to improve on market-based solutions. Once in a while I encounter interesting use-cases, like carbon offsets, or peer-to-peer energy trading, which almost sound like they could make a dent in the appalling externalities of proof-of-work mining. And if socialists ever come into meaningful power in the United States or Europe, they could benefit from a transparent way to allocate public resources.

One of the few socialists to give serious attention to cryptocurrency is Yanis Varoufakis, a former finance minister who led the Greek negotiations against the European Central Bank. In a recent exchange with bitcoin advocates, Varoufakis addressed the currency’s merits as part of a post-capitalist economy. “Bitcoin’s great appeal is that it breaks the cronyist chain linking central banks and private bankers,” Varoufakis wrote. “However, it does not undermine the cronyism of the network of bosses, politicians and private bankers.”

This is about what you’d expect to hear from a Marxian economist, but Varoufakis went a step further, predicting that “something like Bitcoin” would probably play a role in any future socialist transition. “Once (and, of course, if) socialism dawns,” he said, “money will have to be founded on a distributed-ledger, monetary commons enabling technology.” If he’s right, one can only hope that this version of the “monetary commons” will be cleaner than its predecessor. ♣







# WHEN HISTORY HAPPENS

by Lyta Gold

*"There are some things one shouldn't have to endure, even in an epidemic."*

—Connie Willis, *Doomsday Book*

**"I**N MARCH," ERIC LEVITZ WRITES IN *NEW York Magazine*, "history broke into our house, and ever since, we've been cowering in panic rooms, wondering what our home will look like when the mad thief is finally through." He immediately adds: "at least this is how living in the COVID era can feel." Many people I know have said something similar to me, that the COVID era and the Trump presidency have felt *historic*, as though we have been living through history, a thing we do not ordinarily do. In the *Atlantic*, historian Joanne Freeman said of her profession, "it's one thing to reckon with the past and quite another to make sense of transparently historical events as we live through them." We are, of course, always alive in history, which, as Freeman emphasizes "doesn't stop." The idea that it *might* stop, that there could be times that fall *outside* history, is really very weird. Whether a situation feels "historic" is just a function of whether or not dramatic things are happening around you personally. History is always present, whether its workings are transparent or opaque.

Growing up in the Midwest in the 1990s, in the so-called "end of history" after the fall of the Soviet Union, there was indeed a sense of stasis, what Samuel Miller McDonald has called in this magazine "an empire of same." History was over, I was told: the good guys had won, and there would be just a general, slow upward trend toward progress, forever. This was a total lie, but an interesting one. Why insist that everything is over, that nothing can ever change? There are obvious political reasons for liberal capitalism to insist on its permanent dominance, of course, much like the Borg catchphrase "resistance is futile"—if it were actually true, you wouldn't need to keep repeating it to the people you're trying to subjugate.

But there's also a psychological reason why so many people have been eager to insist that history is over, and why so many of us find ourselves unprepared for the shock of living through dramatic events. It's because history is fucking terrifying. We don't know what will happen. We have no idea if it'll all turn out okay. We don't know if what we're suffering is a temporary blip, the prelude to a revolution, or a fast slide into apocalypse. We are, in Walter Benjamin's famous image, blown backwards through history, seeing only the wreckage that comes before.

*"I know what I like in books and movies, which is characters who are in over their heads and trying to do their best in impossible circumstances; mysteries that need to be solved; no-win situations; people who care about each other and about the world more than they do about themselves; revelations (both good and bad) that hit you right in the stomach and knock you off your feet; and irony."*

—Connie Willis,

interview with Science Fiction Writers of America (2012)

**C**ONNIE WILLIS, WHO WRITES ABOUT HISTORY and what living through history feels like, is the most famous science fiction novelist you've never heard of. With more major awards in the field than anyone else—eleven Hugos, seven Nebulas, and four Locus awards—she's been inducted as a "Grand Master" by the Science Fiction Writers of America. Distressingly, although perhaps not unexpectedly, women science fiction writers have a way of being quickly forgotten, as Joanna Russ explains in her ironic guidebook *How To Suppress Women's Writing*. (Russ herself, in a bitter proof of her own point, has been largely but not entirely suppressed and forgotten.) In a 2001 interview, Willis laughed at being called "the definitive contemporary American SF writer," saying: "...everyone I meet either A) has never heard of me, or B) thinks what I write isn't science fiction."



Some of Willis' lack of mainstream recognition may have to do with her subject matter: Willis' novels and short stories have plenty of drama and speculative technology, but few fight scenes and badass heroes. There are no chosen ones with superpowers; there is nothing you can destroy or kill to save the world. Callous cynicism and the murder of innocents is never, ever, substituted for plot. Willis' fiction mostly consists of what Ursula K. Le Guin would call "bag stories" not "spear stories"—that is to say, written about how people live, not about how they kill each other. This is despite the fact that Willis' most famous novels are set during World War II and the Black Death. Willis doesn't exploit death and violence for thrills, but she's nevertheless very interested in how ordinary people grapple with horrible, frightening situations.

Willis explores these ideas in a loosely grouped set of time travel stories, partly set in Oxford between 2050 and 2060, and partly set in England's past. The Oxford of the future remains curiously undescribed—it doesn't seem to be especially utopian, or dystopian. Little has changed in terms of politics or technology; everyone's beset by many of the same problems as now (future Oxford, for example, is just as rife with bureaucratic absurdity and academic sniping as a contemporary university). Cats and cold viruses have disappeared from the Earth, but people still go Christmas shopping, and the National Health Service still exists. The aristocra-

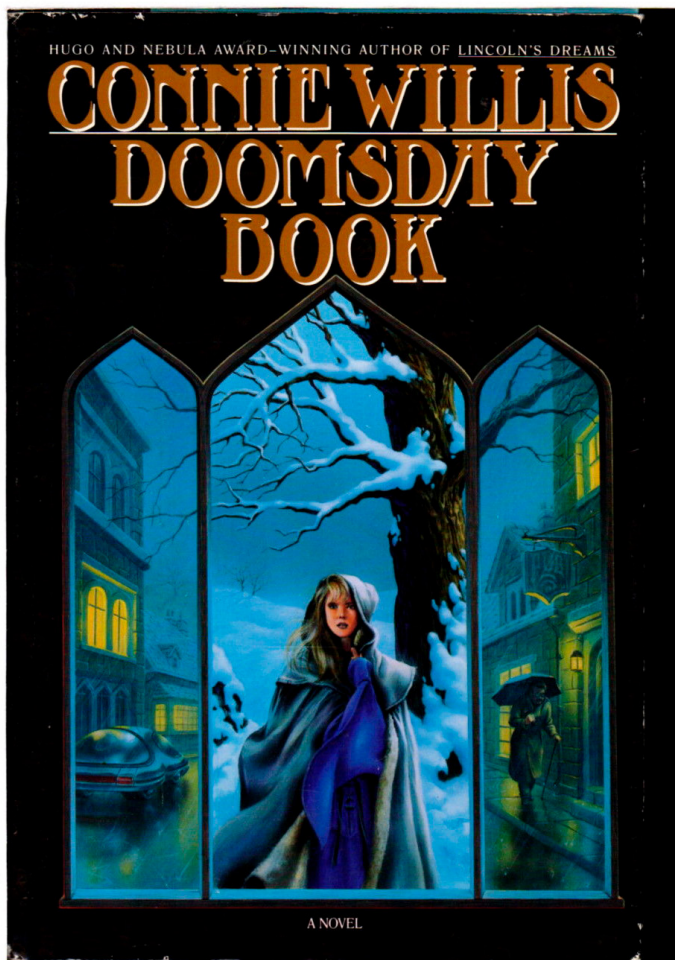
cy hasn't gone anywhere, and neither have wealthy, demanding Americans or nationalist bigots. Climate change and the geopolitics of the world beyond Oxford doesn't really come up at all. Willis' future seems to be more or less the liberal "empire of same" at the promised end of history.

And because history is more or less over, Willis' characters get to muck about in the past and have adventures. Historians at her future Oxford have access to time travel technology which allows them to visit the past, dressing up like "contemps" (short for "contemporary people") blending in to see what their lives were really like. Academic historians are, in fact, the only people in Willis' books who use time travel: historical observation is the only practical application of the technology, since changing the past or bringing objects back through time is considered to be impossible. The scientific consensus in Willis' novels is that going back in time to kill Hitler, for example, wouldn't work—the continuum would stop you, spitting you out halfway around the world at a different time. History protects itself.

Just to be on the safe side, historians are supposed to be careful about not interfering and changing the timeline. Travelling to the past is a risky business, even if the historians *don't* change anything; once they've gone to the past, they're just as vulnerable to injury and death as the contemps, especially if they end up in a time period that's considered a "ten." (The danger and chaos of past epochs is measured on a scale of one through ten; we learn that the entire medieval period has been labeled by the History Faculty as a ten, even though the Middle Ages were pretty interesting, actually.) Whether the historians find themselves in a "ten" or in some less terrifying time, "not interfering" proves to be impossible for all of Willis' characters. In the two-part novel *Blackout* and *All Clear* (2010), three historians (Mike, Eileen, and Polly) visit England during the Blitz and find it almost impossible to stop helping people. Mike, who is trying especially hard not to change history, accidentally winds up on a rescue boat at Dunkirk and saves several lives; Eileen keeps a pair of brash, hilarious kids alive despite what seems like the universe's best efforts to get them killed; and several times, a chance remark from Polly causes someone to make a different decision than they otherwise would have made, inadvertently changing their fate. *Blackout/All Clear* is a very anxious story—are the historians' actions, no matter how well-intentioned, and no matter what they think they understand about the physics of time travel, altering the timeline irrevocably? Have they, as Polly worries, "undone the future out of a desire to help"? Or would it be worse to live through an event like the Blitz callously, only observing and not "doing their bit"?

*"WORSE THAN THE BLITZ" — London recorded 21 percent of the total number of Covid-19 deaths in England and Wales until 1 May, despite having 15 percent of the population. In fact, in the four weeks to 24 April, more people were killed by coronavirus in London than died during the worst four-week period of aerial bombing of the city during the Blitz in World War Two.*

—BBC, June 9th, 2020.





WHEN NEWS LEAKED THAT DONALD Trump had deliberately downplayed the coronavirus threat back in March, he defended himself by comparing his response to that of the British government during, you guessed it, the Blitz.

“As the British government advised the British people in the face of World War II, ‘keep calm and carry on.’ That’s what I did.” Many historians and journalists rushed to fact-check him, pointing out that “keep calm and carry on” was not actually a slogan used during the war, and claiming that Churchill was “blunt” about the danger the British faced. As is usual with fact-checks, these corrections are both true and not true. That exact slogan was not used, but reasonably similar ones were; Churchill was blunt sometimes, and misleading at other times. For example, in 1944 during what could be called the second phase of the Blitz, Churchill’s government initially withheld information about the V-1 bombs and outright lied about the V-2s, claiming that the damage from the supersonic bombs was due to “exploding gas mains” so as not to cause panic. In the early days of the first phase of the Blitz, the British government failed to provide adequate shelter for citizens, even though they had known for some time that catastrophic air raids by the Luftwaffe were likely. The medical journal *The Lancet* (in a recent article titled, “The psychology of protecting the U.K. public against external threat: COVID-19 and the Blitz compared”) explains that the Committee of Imperial Defence was worried about citizens developing a “shelter mentality,” where workers would become accustomed to safety underground and become too anxious to return to their aboveground factories, a problem which would “undermine national production.”

Much as we’ve seen in the U.S. and the U.K. response to the coronavirus, Churchill’s government viewed a functional economy as more important than the health and sanity of citizens—a calculation somewhat more understandable in WWII, where keeping the factories churning actually made a difference when it came to winning the war. In lieu of building large-scale underground shelters, the Committee of Imperial Defence “identified stoicism (mental resilience) as the core defence against the stress of aerial bombardment, and sought ways to strengthen people’s inherent resolve to withstand bomb attacks.”

The so-called “blitz spirit”—the plucky determination of the British people in the face of continual deadly bombings—is nothing more than a “cruel myth,” historians such as Richard Overy warn us. This myth was encouraged by government propaganda, such as the famed (and faked) photograph of the milkman in the ruins. “The public face of the ‘blitz spirit,’” Overy writes, “concealed the awful reality of being bombed.” The Blitz is best understood, in his view, as a traumatizing event rather than any sort of heroic one. “The sight of destroyed buildings, corpses and body parts was utterly alien to daily life. The trauma this produced was largely unrecorded, and certainly untreated.”

Nonetheless, the “blitz spirit” lives on in the time of coronavirus, especially in advertising. I recently saw “Stay Resilient, New York” on the side of a city bus, printed not courtesy of the government, but

by Essentia (“overachieving H2O”). On my socially-distanced walks, I’ve seen several people wearing shirts that read “New York tougher than ever,” and the sign outside a home goods store in Long Island City bragged that they were “doing [their] part” and donating more than 2,000 masks to “law enforcement, first responders, and people in need.” The market research company Kantar has run a study of consumer preference during the COVID-19 crisis which concludes that “people prefer that brands talk about what they can do to help society and provide reassurance to communities.” Anecdotally, I’ve noticed an uptick in cheerful TV ads—there seems to be a concerted effort to get people to pull through, stick together, wear a mask, paint their walls, utilize technology to productively communicate, and above all, keep working and spending.

IT’S EASY TO REGARD ALL THIS CHEERINESS CYNICALLY. It’s *meant* cynically, as a means to sell products. But it’s also fairly effective, much like Blitz-era propaganda, because it gives people a feeling of agency, community, and a vision of life beyond the crisis. According to “a study of lockdown adherence in ten U.K. cities” cited in the *Lancet* report, “the most important belief driving compliance was the Blitz phrase, ‘we are all in it together and we all need to come out of it together,’ a sense of common fate, and a shared identity.” It’s very true to say that the Blitz was a traumatizing event, and the government’s response was, at certain times and in certain respects, nearly as bad as the response to the coronavirus in both the United Kingdom and the United States. But what that framing misses is any sense of what *does* keep people going during hard times. Human beings, after all, have successfully lived through many traumatizing events; trauma is part of being alive. How do we manage it?

One important tactic is solidarity, which can come about organically in times of trouble, even without a government coldly seeking to engineer it, and often in the face of actual government *indifference*. When the British government failed to provide adequate shelters in 1940, many Londoners bought tube tickets and, in a show of collective action, simply refused to leave the train platforms until the raids were over. “The weight of numbers,” Edgar Jones writes in *The Lancet*, “prevented the authorities from removing people from the underground stations and forced a re-evaluation of the deep shelter policy.” In Willis’ novel *Blackout*, Polly describes the scene in Holborn station, which was one of the first to be taken over by the people against the government’s wishes. Polly goes in expecting horrible conditions: she tells us that historians—not the time-traveling kind—“had described the shelters as ‘nightmarish’ and ‘like one of the lower circles of hell.’” However, she finds that while Holborn is indeed crowded and has the expected sanitation problems, “the shelterers seemed more like people on a holiday than doomed souls, picnicking and gossiping and reading the comic papers.”

*Blackout* is a novel, of course, but Willis is a meticulous researcher, and she’s able to accomplish what historical fiction does best: to give us a sense of what things might have actually *felt* like. Reading her novels often feels like being dropped into real history, into the running stream of actual time. The “contemps” that Willis’ histo-



rian-heroes meet during their time-travels are cranky, drunk, rude, weird, cheerful, selfish, thoughtless, demanding, self-sacrificing, kind, and cruel; they are, in short, a lot like actual people. As they endure the Blitz, they are subject to frequent false alarms, propaganda, and wild rumors; they never have perfect information. Meanwhile, our three historians, increasingly concerned that their actions have affected the continuum despite what they think they know about time travel, start to fall into the contemps' mindset. If the historians *have* changed events, and accidentally created an alternate past, then they, like their subjects, do not know what is going to happen. They are every bit as lost and helpless in history.

*"One never gets used to the idea that there is nothing one can do."  
—Doomsday Book*

**C**ONNIE WILLIS' FUTURE OXFORD IS NOT completely bereft of "history," that is to say, dramatic and tragic events. Around a decade or so ago in her timeline, a pinpoint bomb is supposed to have destroyed St. Paul's Cathedral and much of London, killing half a million people. (The bomb, we learn in the 1982 short story "Fire Watch," was supposedly detonated by "dispossessed communists"—some parts of Willis' oeuvre have aged better than others.) There's also an event referred to as "the Pandemic," which is supposed to take place around about, uh, approximately now. Later, in 2054-2055, a smaller-scale but nonetheless terrifying influenza epidemic breaks out in Oxford, with no known vaccine. The 21st-century flu epidemic is the setting for half of Willis' novel *Doomsday Book*; the other half is set during the Black Death, in 1348.

Kivrin, the heroine of *Doomsday Book*, is supposed to arrive a few decades earlier in the past, but ends up in 1348 due to the careless actions of Gilchrist, the pompous, snotty head of the Mediaeval department. "Attitudes toward death in the 1300s differed greatly from ours," Gilchrist insists. "Death was a common and accepted part of life, and the contemps were incapable of feeling loss or grief." But when she actually visits the fourteenth century, Kivrin finds that this isn't remotely true. The contemps she meets have some different cultural expectations, but they're just people: selfish and kind and cruel and stupid and mostly trying their best. Then the Black Death hits, and they all die around her, every single one. Kivrin, who was inoculated against the plague before she left as a safety precaution, ends up taking care of the dying as best she can. "I wanted to come [to this time]," she says, "and if I hadn't, they would have been all alone, and nobody would have ever known how frightened and brave and irreplaceable they all were."

Despite the occasional heaviness of her settings, Willis' style is light and witty and sprightly. I'm half-convinced she makes you laugh just in order to lower your guard, and stab you in the heart with the tremendous grief of the past. Everyone who has ever lived and died was a *person*, and Willis makes you feel it; they all lived, they were all frightened and brave and irreplaceable.

The ones who survive, in Kivrin's 1348, are the ones who run away. As another character reminds us, this is "how the plague was spread during the Black Death... They kept trying to run away from it, but they just took it along with them." In a moment of despair, Kivrin says, "Perhaps that's what's wrong with our time... it was founded by [the ones who fled.] And all the people who stayed and tried to help... caught the plague and died."

During the portion of the novel set during the winter influenza epidemic of 2054-2055, it sometimes seems like Kivrin's hypothesis might be true; that over the centuries that followed the catastrophe of the Black Death, human beings have become more selfish and less interested in helping others. Mr. Dunworthy—Kivrin's mentor, who is desperately trying desperately to pull her out of 1348—witnesses a flyer that reads:

"FIGHT INFLUENZA. VOTE TO SECEDE FROM THE EC.' Underneath was a paragraph: 'Why will you be separated from your loved ones this Christmas? Why are you forced to stay in Oxford? Why are you in danger of getting ill and *dying*? Because the EC allows infected foreigners to enter England, and England doesn't have a thing to say about it.'"

If this seems depressingly familiar, you'll love Dunworthy's encounter with a visiting American who becomes trapped in Oxford due to the quarantine. "I'm not used to having my civil liberties taken away like this," she complains. "In America, nobody would dream of telling you where you can or can't go." Dunworthy thinks, but doesn't say: "And over thirty million Americans died during the Pandemic as a result of that sort of thinking."

At the time of this writing during our own eerily-timed pandemic, we've reached just over 200,000 American deaths. It feels like anything could happen now, and all of it bad. In fact, our world feels like all of Connie Willis' time travel novels crammed together: pandemic and looming fascist conquest and incredibly funny jokes all at the same time, in (as a doctor in *Doomsday Book* puts it) "a [21st] century that's rapidly becoming a ten." In *Black-out*, one of Polly's nurse friends discusses the idiocy of falling in love during uncertain times: "How can anyone plan for the future when we don't know if we'll have one?"

Pandemics in particular feel apocalyptic. Willis quotes Agniola Di Tura, writing in Siena in 1347. "Buried with my own hands five of my children in a single grave... No bells. No tears. This is the end of the world." The Black Death killed somewhere between a third to a half of Europe; 150 years later, Europeans would arrive in the Americas, bringing waves of infectious disease that may have killed as much as 90 to 95 percent of the Native population, or a fifth of the entire human species at the time. As the Native writer Rebecca Roanhorse put it, "we've already survived an apocalypse." The coronavirus, for all its horror and frustration, is not a pandemic on the scale of those pandemics, or even of the 1918 Spanish flu. Pandemics do not happen as solo events, of course; they're followed by social upheaval, as was seen in Europe after the Black Death, and the collapse of indigenous societies in the Americas. What is specifically terrible about coronavirus is that it's happening concurrently with something that human beings have never faced before: not just disease or the Re-



publican party's brand of apple-pie fascism, but anthropocentric climate change. The world has faced existential threats before, of course: nuclear weapons still pose an even faster and more destructive apocalyptic scenario than climate change. But avoiding nuclear winter mostly requires inaction, whereas mitigating climate change requires enormous mobilization and a transformation of the global economy. If it doesn't happen, and soon, then this time the world really *could* end, for just about everyone.

*"Some wait alone, some share their invisible rooms with others. Invisible, yes, what do the furnishings matter, at this stage of things? Underfoot crunches the oldest of city dirt, last crystallizations of all the city had denied, threatened, lied to its children. Each has been hearing a voice, one he thought was talking only to him, say, 'You didn't really believe you'd been saved. Come, we all know who we are by now. No one was ever going to take the trouble to save you, old fellow...'"*

—Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*

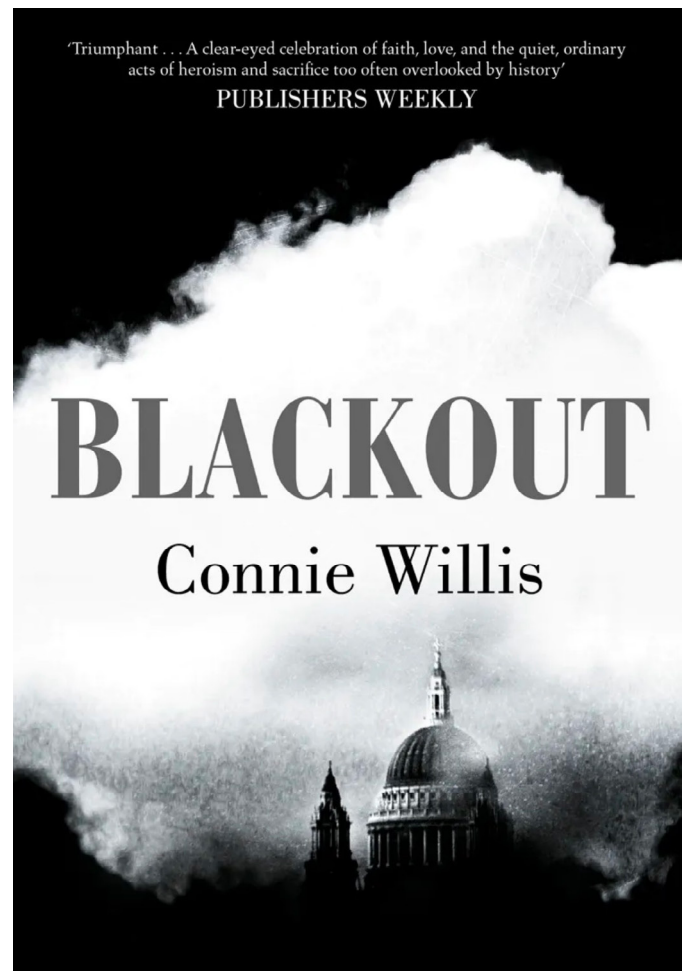
**A**BOUT HALFWAY THROUGH THE BLITZ NOVEL *All Clear*, it becomes evident that something indeed has gone very wrong with time travel, and our three historians are trapped in the past. Is it because of their actions? Could it be that the lives they inadvertently saved, the destinies they changed, have had a ripple effect on reality? Is it possible they've caused the Allies to lose the war?

Alternate history scenarios where the Nazis won are a hugely popular topic for fiction; the Wikipedia page for the topic links to seven subcategory pages alone. Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* and Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* may be the most famous of these stories, but there are plenty of others. A cynical appraisal of their popularity might note that World War II was perhaps the only time when the British and Americans could credibly claim they were on the right side of history, and there's a certain thrill in imagining oneself as heroic underdogs battling an evil empire. "The Allies were the good guys" is, of course, a wild oversimplification: it is true and necessary to point out that the Nazis took inspiration from certain U.S. policies, and that Churchill was a racist imperialist whose policies led to famine in India. However, there's a growing tendency on the left to go one step further and declare that the Allies and the Axis were more or less equally evil; as historian David Parsons recently claimed on Twitter, "America didn't defeat fascism in WWII; its version of fascism triumphed." If that's true, and both sides were more or less the same, then an alternate history where the Nazis won would hardly matter.

Those kinds of takes tend to leave me cold, possibly because I'm Jewish. One piece of evidence that the historians in *Blackout/All Clear* hold up as possible proof that history *hasn't* been altered is that the historians themselves are still in the past, ergo time travel itself must still exist—in Willis' novels, time travel technology was invented by a Jewish scientist, and if the Nazis had won, then the scientist would never have been born. There are many people to whom the outcome of the war mattered a lot;

there was no "both sides are basically the same" scenario for Jews and people of color under a Nazi regime.

The less self-congratulatory reason why alternate World War II novels exist, and why Jewish writers like Philip Roth have written them in particular, is that it was a tense historical moment that could have gone any number of ways. Such moments are fascinating, and terrifying. "There were dozens of times," Polly says in *All Clear*, "when the outcome balanced on a knife's edge." Today, there's considerable scholarly debate about what exactly won the war for the Allies; Richard Overy locates factors such as the recalibration of the Soviet military and economy; the vast American production machine set in motion by the New Deal; Allied air power and German military mistakes. Polly, speaking from a rather Anglo-centric perspective, cites "Ultra [the code-breaking program] or the evacuation from Dunkirk or Churchill's leadership." But, she concludes, "it wasn't any one of them. It was all of them and a thousand, a million, other things and people. And not just soldiers and pilots and Wrens, but air-raid wardens and planespotters and debutantes and mathematicians and weekend sailors and vicars." That is to say, it was a series of small actions by ordinary people, all taking place across a much broader swath of the world than Polly cites. That's all it took, and everything it took. That's what won the war.





“...no one can be in a chaotic system and not affect events.”  
—*All Clear*

**I**N *DOOMSDAY BOOK*, WHEN IT'S CLEAR THAT THE Black Death is spreading uncontrollably, the local priest asks Kivrin if this is the apocalypse: “the end of the world that God’s apostles have foretold.” Since he’s already decided that Kivrin is a saint sent by God, she tells him: “No. It’s only a bad time. A terrible time, but not everyone will die. And there will be wonderful times after this. The Renaissance and class reforms and music. Wonderful times. There will be new medicines, and people won’t have to die from this or smallpox or pneumonia. And everyone will have enough to eat, and their houses will be warm even in the winter.” Kivrin is, of course, compressing a rather long timescale—after the Renaissance, Native populations died from smallpox and other plagues, due to accidental spread, lack of vaccines, and deliberate genocidal practices by the American government. People will continue to die, as they’re dying now, from awful diseases, as they are also in the year 2054 that Kivrin comes from. Some “class reforms” did indeed happen after the Black Death, but we still live in a world of mass inequality and crushing poverty. It seems like what Kivrin is really talking about is the whole sweep of human history; the “wonderful times” are not the incomplete world of 2054, but what might yet come in the future, hers and ours, where everyone has enough to eat, and the houses are warm even in winter.

How are we supposed to get to this future? Willis doesn’t say, or at least, she doesn’t say it directly. The historians in *Blackout/All Clear* don’t know if the continuum is “collapsing or correcting itself.” They don’t know anything about what’s going to happen. They have zero evidence that their efforts to help haven’t just made things worse, maybe even changing the outcome of the war. “Except,” Polly thinks, “so many lives saved and so many sacrificed—so much courage, kindness, endurance, love—must count for something even in a chaotic system.” But she admits, “I haven’t any proof.”

This is what it’s like to be alive in history—we never have any proof that our actions matter, that we’re making any difference. The left tends to focus on fixing structural problems; this makes sense, as many problems are indeed structural rather than the fault of individuals. But it’s very easy to get lost in “the structural” and “the systemic” and forget that even the structural and the systemic are a series of choices made by individuals, and those choices have power and meaning when made collectively. Throwing up our hands in despair at systemic injustice is, as our own Nathan J. Robinson puts it, the result of “paralysis” which comes “because there is so much going on around you at any one time, and everything feels beyond our control, that we just feel we are barely staying afloat while being carried by a gigantic tidal wave, and it is as futile to try to turn the course of history as it is to try to stop a tsunami. But the most unsettling thing is that this is the *reassuring lie*. Being certain of your powerlessness lets you get away with quietism; I can do nothing so I do not need to try.

The truth is far worse: *there might be a way to stop the wave, and it might be our job to figure it out.*”

It’s very easy to despair right now, when everything feels like an unfolding catalog of horrors. But there are people taking bold action all the same, such as the BLM protesters across the country, displaying absolute courage in cities like Louisville, Portland, Kenosha, and St. Louis. They’re going out to protests knowing they could lose an eye to a policeman’s rubber bullet, or get mowed down by a fascist in a giant truck, or catch coronavirus in some freezing cell. But they’re still going. Mutual aid societies have been springing up and connecting everywhere; in Michigan, as Eli Day writes for this magazine, many of these efforts have been happening, unheralded, in “communities across the state where they’ve spent years doing the thankless, grinding work of fighting for a better world.” This work has been going on for years, everywhere; the tube stations get occupied despite what the government may think. Some people will run away, or try to capitalize on suffering, or otherwise behave selfishly. But many will continue to do what they always do: take care of each other as best they can, quietly and unrewarded, in the most terrifying of circumstances.

**B**Y THE END OF *ALL CLEAR*, IT SEEMS THAT POLLY’S unprovable guess is right: that good actions matter, even in a chaotic system, and the historians have not changed the timeline, but maybe even helped to fix it. Polly, Mike, and Eileen—who are all flawed but fundamentally good, kind, and heroic people—have to do nothing except be good, kind, heroic (and even flawed), and the continuum will be righted, and all in the aggregate will be well, or at least not as horrible as it could have been. What’s lovely about this is that it’s *true*, or at least close to true. “Doing your bit” doesn’t have to be imbued with any kind of patriotic, empire-blind fervor or propagandistic “Blitz spirit.” It can simply mean that everyone is engaged in acts of bravery and mutual aid; that together we are trying to overthrow an evil system. It may work. In fact, it’s the only thing that could possibly work; the only thing that has ever worked in human history.

The mass mobilization necessary to mitigate climate change is possible—after all, the New Deal and World War II saw similar mass mobilizations. Defeating the rising wave of fascism across the globe seems daunting, but fascists have been beaten before. Surviving this pandemic and reconfiguring our health care system and our relationship with the animal world to avoid novel zoonotic diseases in the future is also possible, if difficult and the results likely imperfect. Everything worth doing is difficult, and the results likely imperfect. As the vicar says during his eulogy for a beloved character in *All Clear*, “We hope that right and goodness will triumph, and that when the war is won, we shall have a better world. And we work toward that end.” Hope is important, but it isn’t enough; the *work* is essential, and everyone really has to do their part. We have to plan for the future, even though there’s no proof we’ll have one, so that despite the fact that we’re living through a ten, people will someday look back and marvel: “how did they get through it?” ✚



# LIBERATED COSMOPOLITAN

## SEX

Secrets the  
Corporate  
Overlords Don't  
Want You to  
Know About

How to Stay  
**GLAMOROUS**  
on the  
Front Lines:

**Antifa**  
**TikTok Stars**  
**TELL**  
**ALL**

8 Killer Billionaire **Barbecue** Recipes

**MY SHAMEFUL SECRET:**

"Before they  
were abolished,  
I dated...a cop!!"

**BEST**  
**BEACH**  
**LOOKS**  
**FOR YOUR**  
**FIGURE:**  
Anything you want!  
It's YOUR figure.

Seize the means of  
reproduction with these

**5** **SIZZLING**  
**SLOGANS**

**LEFTIST MEN**  
**REVEAL:**

The 5  
Sexiest  
Phrases  
They Want  
to Hear

**PLUS:**  
How To End  
Hierarchy  
In Your  
Workplace  
Today!

Don't Capitulate,  
**OBLITERATE!**

Our Guide to  
Dealing With Men

**COSMO GOES**  
**UNDERCOVER:**  
Inside the Last Days  
on Jeff Bezos'  
Doomed Moonbase







by Benjamin Fong

*art by the Industry*



CIGARETTES DIFFER FROM MOST COMMODITIES in two important ways. First, they cause cancer. It is worth noting that the use of the word “cause” in this last sentence was made possible by the invention of meta-analysis in statistics and epidemiology that the scientific pursuit of the carcinogenic effects of cigarette smoking spurred. Second, as a result of decades of litigation over their deadliness, we happen to know more about the inner workings of the corporations that produce cigarettes than we do about any other capitalist industry. We have internal records revealing exactly what the companies knew and when they knew it.

Its critics are fond of calling the tobacco giants “rogue” corporations. But there is nothing surprising or out of the ordinary about their methods or their excesses. Yes, they publicly denied and actively obscured the harmfulness of their product. They marketed to kids. They paid scientists to create fake controversies. But this was not because they were uniquely malevolent. It was because they were ordinary corporations that meticulously maximized their profits. All of their behavior was simply what a “responsible” corporation would do in trying to serve its shareholders. That tobacco companies are responsible for a massive, global public health crisis is a result of the lethal force of their product in combination with the very typical practices of capitalist firms, which includes an indifference to “incidental” considerations unless they hamper or bolster profits.

The cigarette thus provides a privileged window to the world of profit-making. The history of the cigarette is as horrifying as Jim Mouth’s eyes while breaking his own world record for most cigarettes smoked at the same time. It is a maddening and revolting tale that brings grimaces and shivers alike. But what is most disturbing is the generalizability of its lessons: this is not the story of an exception but of a rule.

TOBACCO CAME TO EUROPE IN THE SEVENTEENTH century, around the same time as coffee, tea, chocolate, and other new exotica, and as with these other new pleasure goods, people took it in the form of “drink.” They were in reality smoking it, but the term “smoking” wouldn’t appear until later on in the seventeenth century. Until then Europeans had to get along with the awkward phrases “drinking smoke” and “drinking tobacco.”

The preferred vehicle of tobacco consumption then was the pipe, which would be supplanted in the early nineteenth century by the cigar, in turn overcome by the cigarette in the later nineteenth. Two technical developments paved the way for the dominance of the cigarette: first, the invention of “flue curing,” or drying tobacco at higher temperatures, which produced a golden yellow leaf with much milder smoke. Before flue curing, tobacco was air dried, and its smoke was typically too harsh to be inhaled. After flue curing, tobacco *had to be* inhaled to get



*Jim Mouth smoking 155 cigarettes in 1993*

the same nicotine satisfaction, and inhalation is the difference between a recreational activity and an addiction. As Gary Cross and Robert Proctor explain, “the shift from air-cured to flue-cured tobacco was something like the shift from opium to heroin or from eating to injecting drugs by means of a hypodermic needle: a new form of ‘consumption’ based on a new and intensified form of packaged delivery.” It was curiously in being made more mild that tobacco became lethal.

The second innovation was the mechanization of cigarette production: before the 1880s, cigarettes were all rolled by hand, typically at a rate of five a minute. Though many sought ways to speed up production, it was James Albert Bonsack who invented the machine that would revolutionize cigarette production in 1881. Bonsack’s machine, which could churn out 20,000 cigarettes in ten hours, was obtained on an exclusive contract by James B. Duke’s American Tobacco Company. With technological superiority ATC dominated global production until 1911, when it was broken up into four companies by the exercise of the Sherman Antitrust Act. These four firms—ATC, Liggett & Myers, R.J. Reynolds, P. Lorillard—along with Philip Morris, formed the oligopoly that would oversee the twentieth-century boom in cigarette smoking.

They would be aided in their efforts by World War I: not only did wartime seriousness mute the comparatively more trivial concerns of anti-tobacco advocates (still not yet armed with scientific proof), but cigarettes were an easily “realizable desire” at a time when desires were not easily realized. Soldiers returning home after the war further found their new habit perfectly suited to routinized labor time. Whatever you think of them, cigars are an *experience*, not something you fit in between shifts. Cigarettes, by contrast, are an anywhere, anytime pleasure, something that can be done *now* to break up the monotony of the day. In the 1920s and 30s, the cigarette “was frequently cited as respite and solace in an increasingly bureaucratized and industrialized world.” Though no one would make this glowing claim



## THE CASE OF CIGARETTES



today, the uncomfortable truth is that there's still nothing quite like the cigarette—save for its recently-developed electronic versions. The appeal and persistence of smoking is a function of capitalist alienation as much as it is the addictiveness of the nicotine molecule.

**I**F THE RHYTHMS OF CAPITALIST SOCIETY offered the soil for the rapid growth of cigarette consumption, and flue-curing and mechanization fashioned the seed, it was the nascent advertising industry that provided the fertilizer. Advertising was not simply used to sell cigarettes: thanks to unprecedented spending on advertising in proportion to overall expenditures and a willingness to push the boundaries of propriety and truth alike, the tobacco industry *created* modern advertising.

What is most remarkable about the “allure” meticulously shaped by cigarette advertising in the crucial interwar period was its fungibility. Cigarettes were masculine if you wanted to be manly, feminine if you wanted to be womanly, a virtual medicine if you wanted to be healthy, and a mysterious danger if you wanted to throw caution to the wind. Sometimes agencies didn't even mind pursuing contradictory strategies: for instance, while touting the various health-promoting features of smoking (soothing the nerves, aiding digestion, providing a lift, etc.), cigarette advertisements also relied upon doctors' testimonies to quell fears.

The industry was particularly interested in breaking the traditional taboo on women smoking, and their publicity henchmen employed two appalling measures to do so. The first was to ally the cigarette to the cause of suffrage and women's empowerment more generally. Thanks to the machinations of public relations progenitor Edward Bernays, debutantes marched proudly in the 1929 New York City Easter parade lighting up their Lucky Strikes as “torches of freedom.” After this well-crafted stunt, women smokers were seen as “bringing about a new democracy of the road,” and by the late 30s surveys showed that most women at college were smokers.

The second and, of course, contradictory tactic was to raise anxieties about a new modern female body image. In 1928, Lucky Strike got Amelia Earhart in an ad with the tagline:

“For a Slender Figure—Reach for a Lucky Instead of a Sweet.” In addition to offending the National Confectioners Association, the campaign also drew fire from critics who claimed that they were marketing to children, which, of course, they absolutely were. Tobacco companies knew early on that lifelong smokers typically begin smoking before the age of 18, and while they couldn't ever officially market to what the industry called “replacement smokers,” they have crossed about every line there is to cross (see: Joe Camel).

The success of cigarette advertising was resounding: in 1950, 90 percent of consumed tobacco was in the form of cigarettes, up from 5 percent in 1904. The cigarette was sociable even though it stunk; it represented autonomy even though it created dependence. As E. Ruth Pyrtle asked in 1930, “has there ever been in all history so colossal a standardizing process, such a vast demonstration of the sheeplike qualities of the human race as in the spread of the tobacco habit?” There probably hadn't.

To say that the cigarette epidemic was “engineered” would, however, not be quite right, for even its creators were surprised by the dramatic cultural shift they were able to enact. New sociological and psychological tactics were in play, tactics now cynically accepted as the norm in the media world but which were baffling and terrifying at the time. Advertisers themselves “were concerned that extravagant claims, paid testimonials, and aggressive competitiveness” were threatening the legitimacy of advertising itself and sought to create internal norms to rein in certain excesses.

**B**Y 1950, HOWEVER, THEY HAD to change up their strategy, and in such a way that assured that even the smallest twinge of moral feeling was repressed. Damning studies of the link between cigarettes and lung cancer had been published, and doctors were quitting smoking in droves. Tobacco advertisers finally sobered up after the no-holds-barred romp of the 30s and 40s and now turned their attention to a more somber, and in fact more sinister task: creating scientific controversy. The industry had to be seen



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as taking the purported risk seriously, while persistently upholding the position, “More research needed.” In 1953 Hill & Knowlton released their “Frank Statement to Cigarette Smokers,” accepting “an interest in people’s health as a basic responsibility, paramount to every other consideration in our business” and announcing the formation of the Tobacco Industry Research Committee (TIRC) to study the problem.

The TIRC was, of course, no research committee, and its director, C.C. Little, was an industry shill. But under the close guidance of Hill & Knowlton, it succeeded in keeping cigarette sales rising through the 50s and 60s through the dissemination of “scientific” counter-information. As Allan Brandt writes in his masterful *The Cigarette Century* (a core source of information for this article):

*Hill & Knowlton had served its tobacco clients with commitment and fidelity, and with great success. But the firm had also taken its clients across a critical moral barrier.... By making science fair game in the battle of public relations, the tobacco industry set a destructive precedent that would affect the future debate on subjects ranging from global warming to intelligent design. And by insinuating itself so significantly in the practice of journalism, Hill & Knowlton would compromise the legitimacy and authority of the very instruments upon which they depended.*

But maintaining a position of public agnosticism on the dangers of smoking was more than just a marketing strategy. By the 60s industry lawyers saw no other choice than to maintain this position or else incur legal risk. Big tobacco thus found itself in quite a pickle when the Federal Trade Commission, on the heels of a scathing Surgeon General's report in 1964, demanded warning labels on all cigarette packages.

The tobacco industry proved as cunning in avoiding regulation as it had in advertising. When the FTC finally acted, the industry proposed its own favorable legislation to avoid the possibility of stricter regulations. Thus when the Federal Cigarette Labeling and Advertising Act was passed in 1965, it prohibited states from requiring their own warning labels and imposed an ambiguous standardized warning:

“Caution: Cigarette Smoking May Be Hazardous to Your Health.” (To this day, cigarette warning labels remain far weaker in the United States than in many other places: FDA initiatives to include terrifying pictures of corpses and cancerous lungs, which some evidence does suggest reduces people’s likelihood of picking up a cigarette, have been stymied by the industry.) This was more than just a successful watering-down of a known fact: by including a warning label on their product, a label that saddled them with no culpability, the tobacco industry created the cornerstone of a powerful legal argument to use in its own defense.

**I**N 1983, ATTORNEY MARC EDELL FILED a complaint against four major tobacco companies on behalf of Rose Cipollone. Cipollone had been a smoker since the age of sixteen, and she would die of lung cancer less than a year into her suit. When the jury finally rendered a verdict on June 3rd, 1988, they awarded \$400,000 to Rose's husband Antonio Cipollone, marking the first successful judgment against Big Tobacco.

But the jury also ruled that Rose Cipollone was primarily responsible for her own death, and that the tobacco companies were not guilty of fraud and conspiracy. Edell had tried to demonstrate that Cipollone was *addicted* to cigarettes, but Americans weren't yet ready to burden smokers with the heavily stigmatized term "addict." Cipollone was no addict, said the industry lawyers: she knew very well the risks involved in smoking, and thus was ultimately responsible for her own death. She smoked for over forty years: what did she expect?

This “assumption-of-risk” defense, used in all similar suits, was a carefully crafted one. The industry could not of course come out and admit that cigarettes were actually dangerous. Instead, they “contended that the ‘controversy’ regarding smoking and health was well-known and highly publicized; as a result, plaintiffs were well-informed of any ‘alleged’ risks.” The introduction of federally-mandated warning labels on all cigarette packs had finally shored up this defense. While deterring few smokers, these labels allowed industry lawyers to point

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Buy MODEL in the bright new silver-color pocket can—sturdy—with smooth finger-guard top.

Compare MODEL with any tobacco in your pipe or hand-rolled cigarette. See why in flavor and aroma make more and more friends among steady smokers.

Oh, how MODEL is a flavor and pocket pouch that opens up a 15¢ thrill in every puff. In present 15¢ tin—new and still...

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Either way you prefer MODEL packed, it's made of the same select Burley tobacco—blended, flavored, and cut just right.

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## here's a New Cigarette

*that's made*

## DEFINITELY Milder!

... because 1 out of every 3 smokers interviewed wanted a milder smoke!

We questioned smokers from coast to coast. 346 asked for a cigarette that's definitely milder—milder than their present brand. So we made All Americans of definitely milder tobacco!

If you are one of the millions who wants a definitely milder cigarette—you've probably wondered why your present brand wasn't made milder. Here's the answer. It can be done. But there's a risk in changing an established brand—many people may like it the way it is. So only a new cigarette dares bring you the extra mildness that comes from definitely milder tobacco!

### Not Just a "Claim"—but Definitely Milder!

As you know, the milder tobaccos are the better tobaccos—they're grainer, longer and milder smokers. Because so many smokers asked for it, All Americans are made of these definitely milder tobaccos. Includes portions of rich red and Turkish and Maryland tobaccos for mildness with flavor!

You be the judge! Why not see if this definitely milder cigarette isn't just what you've wanted? All Americans demonstrate themselves with the first puff—no blindfold test needed—so try them—and see!

The American Filter Tobacco Co., Inc.  
Louisville, Kentucky



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to the package itself: who but a willful risk taker would look at this product and actually use it?

It's worth meditating on the nature of this argument, because it is common across many domains. "No one knows for sure that X is dangerous. There is a debate about the harmfulness of X, but it's important to remember that there are two sides to every debate, and we ought to consider both to be fair. That being said, since knowledge of the *possible* harms of X is widespread, any individual who engages in X must be held responsible for any harms that X causes." This is not just an argument about smoking. It is an argument about the general responsibility of individuals for social ills, and it is pervasive under capitalism. It shifts blame onto victims even when we know for a fact that a powerful entity has spent giant sums of money trying to influence people's choices, manipulating their perceptions of reality, and throwing doubt on scientific findings that might give people pause.

**D**ISAPPOINTING AS THE outcome of the *Cipollone* case was, Edell at least scored one lasting victory: he had gotten his hands on some 300,000 internal tobacco industry documents, which the judge accepted, to the loud protest of the defense attorneys, into public record. These documents were the first breach of the industry's defenses. They would be further weakened in 1990, when paralegal Merrell Williams released what would come to be known as the "Cigarette Papers," some 4000 pages of damning evidence on tobacco giant Brown & Williamson. Unsurprisingly, these documents demonstrated a radical discrepancy between industry statements and industry activity. Despite the 1980s insistence that nicotine had not proven to be addictive, companies had admitted internally for decades that it was. In 1963, the vice president and general counsel of Brown & Williamson had noted that "we are... in the business of selling nicotine, an addictive drug."

To many critics, the end of Big Tobacco seemed to be assured by the flood of damning information being made public, but the limits

of the impact of this knowledge soon became clear in two stunning failures of corporate journalism. In 1994, when ABC's broadcast news-magazine *Day One* released a story about how cigarette companies artificially "spike" their product with extra nicotine to keep people addicted, the network was promptly sued by Philip Morris. Despite the great likelihood of ABC's exoneration, given the difficulty of proving libel, ABC settled its suit with Philip Morris and issued a public apology. Walt Disney Company was on the verge of buying ABC, and they wanted the suit settled before the deal went through.

Around the same time that ABC was settling, *60 Minutes* was preparing to run its interview with Jeffrey Wigand, an industry whistleblower whose travails would later be depicted in the film, *The Insider*. With the *Day One* suit fresh in their minds, and in the final stages of a \$5.4 billion merger with Westinghouse, CBS executives chose to kill the story. Thus were two of the most important public health stories of the twentieth century squashed under the weight of giant corporations growing even bigger.

Having reached the limits of individual litigation and mainstream media reporting, anti-tobacco forces finally turned to mass litigation, where tobacco lawyers couldn't as easily pin the blame on reckless individuals. Particularly effective were the battles of state attorney generals to recover Medicaid costs for tobacco-related diseases. Mississippi was the first to file such a suit in 1994. In an appeal to the rights of the taxpayers, a member of the team that filed the suit aptly noted, "the State of Mississippi has never smoked a cigarette." Similar suits soon followed from Minnesota, West Virginia, Florida, and Massachusetts, and in 1997 tobacco executives agreed to a proposed "global settlement," which would reimburse states to the tune of \$365 billion.

Celebrations over the global settlement proved premature, as its enactment required congressional legislation. John McCain's aggressive attempt to make good on the global settlement was tanked by millions spent on industry lobbying and advertising. The watered-down Master Settlement Agreement, functionally a new excise tax on cigarettes that inadvertently

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**VICEROYS FILTER**  
**THE SMOKE!**

THE NICOTINE AND TAR TRAPPED\* BY THE VICEROY FILTER CAN NEVER STAIN YOUR TEETH!

1. Each puff of smoke passes through scores of tiny passages of this absorbent filter paper.  
 2. The nicotine and tar thus trapped cannot stain your teeth—smoke is cooler, cleaner.  
 3. No tobacco crumbs can get in your mouth.  
 4. This filter is exclusive as is Viceroy's luxurious blend of fine domestic and imported tobaccos. Get Viceroy at your dealer's. You'll be glad you did.

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 50? 100? 200?

IF YOU'RE AN AVERAGE SMOKER  
 THE RIGHT ANSWER IS **OVER 200!**

Yes, 200 times every day your nose and throat are exposed to irritation . . .

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Buy the CARTON and save!

**NO CIGARETTE HANGOVER**  
 means MORE SMOKING PLEASURE!

Yes, you'll be glad tomorrow . . . you smoked PHILIP MORRIS today!

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made states dependent on tobacco revenue, was finally passed in November 1998. As Richard Scruggs, a key player in the genesis of the global settlement, noted, “the perverse result of what we did was essentially put the states in bed with the tobacco companies.”

**C**IGARETTE CONSUMPTION reached a high in the United States in the late 70s at about 4000 cigarettes consumed annually per capita, and has dropped steadily since, with no precipitous drop after 1998 (the year the Master Settlement Agreement passed). By 2016, that number had dropped to 1016. The key turning point was not some new discovery about the harms of smoking but rather one about the harms of *not* smoking. The industry was able to blame the effects of smoking on individual smokers, but it couldn't do the same for the victims of secondhand smoke. Anti-tobacco advocates quickly assumed this line of attack, and bans on smoking in public places proliferated. Despite some last ditch distraction efforts—including a planned publicity campaign to shift public health advocates' attention away from smoking and toward AIDS—big tobacco knew that the good times were over. Knowing all it took to bring smoking *into* public spaces, the industry understood well the significance of its banishment *from* public spaces. As health consciousness took over American society—or more precisely, as health became a marker of class in America—cigarette smokers quickly became reviled, asocial creatures, unhealthy members of a backward working class. Cigarettes finally gained the stigma anti-tobacco advocates hoped for, and sales plummeted.

That being said, cigarettes are far and away the deadliest drug in existence, not in the *Mad Men* 50s but today and for the foreseeable future. According to a recent Health and Human Services report, smoking kills 480,000 people in the United States every year. For reference, that's “more than AIDS, alcohol, car accidents, illegal drugs, murders and suicides *combined*.” This means that cigarettes are still *the leading cause of preventable deaths* in the United States. Even more disturbingly, the American epidemic has been exported worldwide: the

slow decrease in cigarette consumption in the developed world has been complemented by a sharp increase in the developing world. Today the fastest machines can produce 20,000 cigarettes *in one minute*, and regulations in rich countries certainly aren't turning them off.

This is not simply a case of the “glamour” of American consumption practices being aped by third-world teenagers but rather one of very pointed efforts to crush foreign, state-run tobacco monopolies—which generally helped keep smoking prevalence down—in the name of “open markets.” While reducing cigarette consumption at home, the Reagan and Bush administrations both pushed for a liberalization of tobacco trade, a move rightly compared to the opium wars of the nineteenth century. Thanks to their successful efforts, it became clear early in the 1990s that growing cigarette consumption was undermining the marked gains in international public health—especially in China's newly opened market—and the WHO developed the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) in 1999 to deal with the problem.

The FCTC finally came into effect in 2005, obligating all participating countries to “implement strong evidence-based policies, including five key measures: high tobacco taxes, smoke-free public spaces, warning labels, comprehensive advertising bans, and support for stop smoking services.” The FCTC was ultimately silent on the problem of trade liberalization, but that didn't stop British American Tobacco from calling the attempt to “foist” developed world health standards on the developing world a new “form of moral and cultural imperialism, based on assumptions that ‘west is best.’” Out of “respect for cultural diversity,” BAT opposed “calls for global regulation and standards” as a “one size fits all” approach.

A recent study on the effectiveness of the FCTC comes to predictable conclusions: while reducing tobacco use in countries that have adopted the key demand-reduction measures (the developed world), it has not done much to reduce tobacco use in countries that have not adopted such measures (low- and middle-income countries preyed on by the tobacco industry). However, even in developed nations, smoking prevalence rates are drawn

## NEW CIGARETTE



Do you sometimes say to yourself "I've gotta cut down on my cigarettes"? Well... something marvelous has happened! A new cigarette has been created which enables you to smoke all you want! It's called Julep. And it is sold with this guarantee: Your money back if Juleps give you any of the 5 usual symptoms of over-smoking... smoke-weary taste, parched throat, unpleasant tobacco-breath. What makes Juleps so different? They contain a hint of mint—so little that even you don't taste it at all (except for the keener flavor of the tobacco), but enough to work wonders in keeping your mouth and throat at ease, your breath clean. So take this tip—switch to Julep.



## Throat Sore?

Time to give it a Rest!



## Change to Spuds

Enjoy Their Soothing Coolness!

Whenever smoking irritates your throat, change to Spud Imperials—the mildly mentholated cigarette! They're specially designed to prevent your throat from irritation caused by ordinary cigarettes. Spud Imperials give you:

**MILDER MENTHOL**—Because just enough soothing menthol is distributed evenly throughout the cigarette for an exclusive patented process. No menthol overdoing!

**GREATER SAFETY**—Because the special moisture-retaining agent used in Spuds does not produce the common throat irritant present in the smoke of nearly all other cigarettes. And, because Spuds are 25% longer, you get a still cooler and better filtered smoke.

**EXTRA QUALITY**—Because only finest vintage tobaccos—aged to perfect mellowness—are used in Spud Imperials. No cheapies—just fine tobacco.

Try the improved Spud Imperials for a few days. Or smoke them regularly, as thousands have purely for pleasure. But be all means change to Spuds whenever your throat is irritated. The Axton-Fisher Tobacco Co., Inc.





# THE CASE OF CIGARETTES

## PERSONALS

**FIERCE POC ACADEMIC** looking for roommate. Qualifications: 1) must be comfortable with the smell of self-tanner 2) must not ask uncomfortable questions about that photo of my parents on the golf course

**Hedge Fund Analyst.** Age 36, 6'2", works out daily, no pets, no smoking, no drugs, occasional whiskey, never married, 4 cars, 3 houses, 1 spreadsheet enumerating all your flaws

**Software Engineer.** Age 27, 5'10<sup>3/8</sup>. Looking for a strong woman who appreciates all the same things I do without deviation

**Single & sexy. CALL ME IF YOU:** passionately oppose injustice but think the office of the presidency must be respected

**Proud Boy Looking For Proud Girl**

**WANTED: GIRLFRIEND, NO ROACHES.** My last girlfriend was constantly coated in a thin film of roaches, and while I respected her lifestyle it made intimacy difficult. We finally broke up after eight mostly wonderful years

**GLAMOROUS WIDOW.** 49 (but I look 29 ☺), no children. My rambling Victorian house feels so empty and lonely ☹ ever since my most recent husband died in a mysterious accident ☹

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**LOOKING FOR:** Hugo Boss uniform, c. 1944

**HOUSE FOR SALE:** Good bones. Plenty of bones. ☹☹☹☹☹☹☹

along class lines: in 2010, the overall smoking rate in China (28.1 percent), which houses 1/3 of the world's smokers, was less than that in West Virginia (28.6 percent).

**B**RANDT APTLY ILLUSTRATES the paradox at the heart of the cigarette tragedy:

*It has been conservatively estimated that 100 million people around the world died from tobacco-related diseases in the twentieth century. Through the first half of that century, the health risks of smoking had yet to be scientifically demonstrated. In this century, in which we have known tobacco's health effects from the first day, the death toll is predicted to be one billion.*

This projection is largely predicated on the lack of regulatory structure in the developing world, but part of the problem here must be that a good number of people today are taking up smoking in full awareness of its destructive consequences. How do we make sense of this fatal insufficiency of knowledge?

As we have seen, the story of the cigarette is the story of the blurring of the line between advertising and reality, of the shaping of innermost desires by corporate memoranda, of the intentional obfuscation of the truth in scientific inquiry and in journalism, of the growing responsibility of individuals for social ills, of the breaking down of barriers by crises of overproduction, and, above all, of a pleasure perfectly suited to capitalism. Short and contained like the pop song; a meaning-giving ritual in the absence of meaningful structures; "an ersatz act which absorbs the increasing nervousness of civilized man."

In *Cigarettes are Sublime*, Richard Klein argues that we ought to appreciate this attractiveness of the cigarette if we are to truly overcome it. He fears that the straightforward discouragement of anti-tobacco advocates, in ignoring the "sublime" aspect of smoking, does not actually discourage, and in fact:

*"...often accomplishes the opposite of what it intends, sometimes inures the habit, and perhaps initiates it. For many, where cigarettes are concerned, discouraging is a form of ensuring their continuing to smoke. For some, it may cause them to start."*

Klein argues that "the moment of taking a cigarette allows one to open a parenthesis in the time of ordinary experience, a space and a time of heightened attention that give rise to a feeling of transcendence, evoked through the ritual of fire, smoke, cinder connecting hand, lungs, breath, and MOUTH." He calls this experience "l'air du temps," the meditative remembrance of situatedness and embodiment that punctuates the day through ritual exit.

Klein tends to focus on the *meaning* that is acquired through smoking, though many of his examples offer a darker view: an important point of reference for Klein, Jean-Paul Sartre also finds great meaning in the act of smoking, but describes this meaning in terms of "appropriate, destructive action":

*Tobacco is a symbol of "appropriated" being, since it is destroyed in the rhythm of my breathing, in a mode of "continuous destruction," since it passes into me and its change in myself is manifested symbolically by the transformation of the consumed solid into smoke. The connection between the landscape seen while I was smoking and this little crematory sacrifice was such that as we have just seen, the tobacco symbolized the landscape. This means then that the act of destructively appropriating the tobacco was the symbolic equivalent of destructively appropriating the entire world. Across the tobacco which I was smoking was the world which was burning, which was going up in smoke, which was being reabsorbed into vapor so as to re-enter into me.*

Perhaps beyond calming and meaning-making, it is this straightforwardly destructive element of cigarette smoking that is ultimately the source of its appeal. Following Klein's logic, we should assume that people start smoking today not in spite of the health risks but *because of them*. Every cigarette puff is a daring "Fuck You" to the neoliberal ethic of self-care, at the same time that it is an internalization of the burning earth in miniature. "L'air du temps," as Klein seems to know, is also "la suffocation du temps," the open parenthesis followed soon, with short breath in constricted lungs, by a closed parenthesis. People today smoke because they are nervous, and they smoke to lend sense to the day. But they also smoke because they are at the end. ✚





# *How to Be a* BILLIONAIRE

EXAMINING THE MEMOIRS OF THE ULTRA-RICH

by Nathan J. Robinson

**M**OST BILLIONAIRES STAY OUT OF THE PUBLIC EYE. This makes sense, because according to polls, far more people distrust billionaires than admire them, and the overwhelming majority of the public want the government to seize a portion of billionaires' wealth. It's easy for anyone in possession of a billion dollars to make their name widely known, but evidently wealth without fame is preferred to fame without wealth (or the possibility of losing a small chunk of wealth).

Some billionaires, however, write books. These are some of the only documents that the ruling class has produced for the consumption of the masses. What is it they wish us to know?

I have on my desk a stack of "billionaire books," mostly memoirs. They include: Sam Zell's *Am I Being Too Subtle*, Richard Branson's *Losing My Virginity*, Richard DeVos' *Compassionate Capitalism*, Charles Koch's *Good Profit*, Ken Langone's *I Love Capitalism!*, Stephen Schwarzman's *What It Takes*, Peter Thiel's *Zero to One*, Marc Benioff's *Trailblazer*, Sam Walton's *Made in America*, Joe Ricketts' *The Harder You Work, The Luckier You Get*, and Michael Bloomberg's *Bloomberg by Bloomberg*. (What a title. Bloomberg, whose company is Bloomberg L.P., also made his fortune on a device he invented called "the Bloomberg," so it is clear he likes saying "Bloomberg.")

What you may have noticed even from the *titles* of these books is that many billionaires are slightly defensive. Koch Industries, for instance, is significantly invested in fossil fuels and has been fined hundreds of millions of dollars for violations of environmental regulations. Koch, however, wants us to know that he makes "good profit," by which he means that he creates "value for others" rather than just enriching himself.

DeVos (Amway) and Benioff (Salesforce) have actually both written books called *Compassionate Capitalism*. John Mackey (Whole Foods) called his *Conscious Capitalism*. "I am good," they are saying. "I am not what you think. Please don't hate me." (The plea falls on deaf ears; to me, all of these books might as well be titled *Expropriate Me*.)

Some, like Langone (Home Depot), are a little less concerned with appearances. Titling a book *I Love Capitalism!* is bold for a billionaire, since it invites the obvious reaction: "Yes, well, of course you do. It gave you a fucking *billion dollars*. If you were the king you would probably write a book called *I Love Monarchy!* but it wouldn't tell us much about whether monarchy is good for anyone else."

Langone, for his part, is refreshingly unabashed in his defense of having far more than the rest of us:

*Should I follow the Bible? I'll be honest: I'm not giving everything away. Why? Because I love this life! I love having nice houses and good people to help me. I love getting on my airplane instead of having to take my shoes off and wait in line to take a commercial flight. You want to accuse me of living well? I plead guilty... I don't know if I would have done what I did or sacrificed the time I've sacrificed if I didn't see something in it for me. If that's greed, let the chips fall where they may... As I said, I've been rich and I've been poor, and rich is better.*

Even Langone, however, insists that what he does is not *about* the money, and that money is last on his list of priorities. In fact, if there is a central recurring theme to billionaire literature, it is this: an insistence that what has made the billionaire rich is helping other people rather than helping themselves. The billionaire wants to explain to us that what might *look* like the steady hoarding of wealth and a feudalistic



imbalance of power is, in fact, the product of defensible moral choices and a fair system. As Max Weber noted, “the fortunate is seldom satisfied with the fact of being fortunate” but wants to know that “he has a right to his good fortune,” and that it is “legitimate fortune.” Hence Joe Ricketts’ (Ameritrade) “the harder you work, the luckier you get.” It’s manifestly untrue, but it helps Ricketts avoid guilt over his luck and privilege.

Christianity has elaborate “theodicies:” attempts to account for the “problem of evil,” a.k.a. reconciling the existence of God with the fact the world is clearly unfair, since the most obvious other option is atheism. The rich have their own theodicies: attempts to account for the obvious unfairness of their own position and to find some explanation for the world being the way it is, because the most obvious other option is socialism.

No billionaire, as far as I’ve read, claims to have been enriched unjustly. They each acknowledge the role of luck in success, but they do not believe the game they won is fundamentally unfair. Each wants to tell us the story of how hard they worked, how it delivered benefits for people, and how obtaining a billion dollars was simply a pleasant side effect of their pursuits rather than the ultimate aim.

Interestingly, what’s implicit in this is that greed is not, in fact, good. A billionaire has to make the case that they did not simply want money (even if, as Langone says, it is nice to have money), because they recognize that pure selfishness is almost universally frowned upon. (Even Trump’s *The Art of the Deal* opens with the sentence: “I don’t do it for the money.”) In these books, each billionaire presents themselves as a moral person who cares about people other than themselves. The writing overflows with false modesty, as the billionaires tediously detail their philanthropic contributions so as to prove that they “give back.” They tell us that while the money is *nice*, it is not why they do what they do. If we take them at their word, this means that the usual argument that high taxes reduce incentives is false. After all, every rich person says they don’t do it for the money, so presumably they would keep doing exactly the same thing if we took most of that money away.



ANOTHER WAY TO LEGITIMIZE THEIR WEALTH is to justify the system by which it is accumulated in the first place. There is an underlying deep conviction that financial gain must be distributed according to some rational formula, that the Invisible Hand of Market Justice gives each his due:

*“Society rewards those who give it what it wants.*

*That is why how much money people have earned is a rough measure of how much they gave society what it wanted—NOT how much they desired to make money. Look at what caused people to make a lot of money and you will see that usually it is in proportion to their production of what the society wanted and largely unrelated to their desire to make money. There are many people who have made a lot of money who never made making a lot of money their primary goal. Instead, they simply engaged in the work that they were doing, produced what society wanted, and got rich doing it” — Ray Dalio (Bridgewater)*

*“In a truly free economy, for a business to survive and prosper in the long term it must develop and use its capabilities to create real, sustainable, su-*

*perior value for its customers, for society, and for itself... The role of business in society is to help people improve their lives.... Profits are a measure of the value it creates for society.” — Charles Koch*

*“This is what we know to be true: business is good because it creates value, it is ethical because it is based on voluntary exchange, it is noble because it can elevate our existence, and it is heroic because it lifts people out of poverty and creates prosperity.” — John Mackey*

This last passage could serve as a kind of “capitalist catechism,” a statement of the core ideology that the billionaire “knows to be true.” Business creates value for society, and thus it is good. This has radical implications: it means not only that it is legitimate to make as much money as you can, but it could even mean that *the more money you make, the better a person you are*. If, as Dalio says, fortunes are distributed in proportion to the degree someone “gives society what it wants,” then the person with the most money has done the most to satisfy other people. Price is equal to value.

Even other billionaires, however, question the theory that the most socially beneficial people earn the most money. Thiel confessed to business students that innovators do not actually tend to get rich. The people who get rich are monopolists: those who see an opportunity to control something that very large numbers of other people need, and who can eliminate competition. In fact, while Langone presents himself as the “co-founder of Home Depot,” which gives people a sense that he created something real from which they benefit, elsewhere in the book he reveals that one way he made a giant pile of money was simply by finding a way to gain control over an important patent for a widely-used laser component. The man who actually invented the component was unable to enforce his patent, so Langone set him up with a lawyer—in exchange for a piece of the rewards, which turned out to be substantial. The end result of this for “society” was that every time anyone purchased a device containing this laser component, it was more expensive, so that Langone could reap indefinite benefits from a government-enforced monopoly on a piece of knowledge that he did not create.

Many billionaires do not seem to *produce* anything at all. Ray Dalio, for instance, runs a hedge fund, meaning he makes bets. Branson is known for Virgin Mobile and Virgin Atlantic, but *Losing My Virginity* reveals how little Branson actually contributed to the ventures that were making him his fortune. For instance, when Branson was running Virgin Records, the label was constantly trying to scout out a hit artist. They found a gold mine in multi-instrumentalist Mike Oldfield, whose *Tubular Bells* was one of the best-selling albums of the 1970s. Branson did not write or produce *Tubular Bells*. He simply owned the company that put out the album.

Now your first instinct may be to think: “Well, but this is an important contribution. Branson connected the artist to the listeners. The record label doesn’t do *nothing*. The actual music is only one of the inputs into the ultimate product, an album.” But this theory wobbles a bit as we witness more of what Branson’s company was actually *doing*. For instance, in the early 1990s there was a bidding war for Janet Jackson, whose next album was widely expected to be a sure-fire hit. Branson wanted to win that war, because he believed having Jackson on the label would not only make them a bunch of money, but would also enhance Virgin’s reputation as a place for cool and trendy artists.



Branson won the war, put out Jackson's album, and it was a huge hit. But note something: if Branson and Virgin had not existed, *nothing* would have changed from the public's perspective. Jackson was hugely popular and someone was going to put out her next album. Branson did not actually add any value. Nothing happened because of him, except that (1) Jackson's albums said Virgin on them instead of another label and (2) the marketing strategy was possibly different than it would have been under a different label, but the consensus was that given Jackson's popularity whichever label got the next album would have a hit on its hands no matter what (3) Jackson got slightly more money than she would have if the bidding war had one fewer participant.

This latter factor might make it seem like Branson helped Jackson. But that's only the case if we assume the legitimacy of the capitalist system. In fact, the reason Jackson needed to go to a billionaire record label owner in the first place is that the billionaire record label owner controls the "means of production and distribution." Having several record labels bid for her work allows the laborer (Jackson) to sell her labor at a higher price, but the whole reason she has to sell it at all is that she doesn't have ownership of the means of production and distribution. Let us imagine an alternate situation in which those means were socialized; let's say we have public recording studios like we have public libraries, and a public means of distribution (like, for example, an artist-owned Spotify). Here, the artist would benefit far *more* from a successful album, because there would be no Branson taking a cut.

In the book, it is not obvious that Branson cares at all about music. In fact, he happens to know a guy named Simon who has taste in music, and that guy does the recruitment and discovery. When Branson talks, it is solely about how he can reap the fruit of other people's talents: how can they find an artist that will make the label a lot of money? Often, these are artists that the label is almost certain will make it big eventually, but if the company can be the first to sign them, they will get the slice that would otherwise go to someone else. They are not lifting up unappreciated geniuses who would otherwise never get opportunities.

**F**OR A LOOK AT WHAT "ENTREPRENEURS" ACTUALLY "innovate," look at Nike founder Phil Knight. Nike is, first and foremost, a brand: a world-famous name and swoosh. But the woman who designed the swoosh logo, graphic artist Carolyn Davidson, was paid \$35 for it (Knight later lied and said it was \$75.) Knight didn't even like the design when he saw it. In *Shoe Dog*, he says that when she showed him her proposed logos, "the theme seemed to be... fat lightning bolts? Chubby check marks? Morbidly obese squiggles? Her designs did evoke motion, of a kind, but also motion sickness. None spoke to me." Eventually he accepted the swoosh because there were no alternatives. Likewise with the name: Knight wanted to call the company "Dimension Six," but "Nike" came to one of his employees in a dream. When Knight heard it, he commented: "It'll have to do... I don't love it. Maybe it will grow on me."

We might say, of course, that the Nike brand is *not* the core of Nike, that the shoes matter as well. But Knight did not invent a new kind of shoe. Instead, he simply noticed that Japanese shoes were high-quality and could be obtained cheaply. By being the first to import these superior foreign shoes, he was able to wring giant piles of money out





of Americans for goods made by the Japanese. It was as if he was the first American to go to Mexico and “discover” the taco, and realized he could make a fortune because Mexicans hadn’t yet tried selling tacos to Americans.

Being “first” is a big part of how successful billionaires make their fortune. Mark Zuckerberg did not create the “best” social network. He just made one at the very moment when such a thing was possible but hadn’t happened yet. By being first, it’s possible to get large enough where “network effects” keep other entrants out of the market. It’s almost impossible to launch a competitor to Facebook or Twitter now, because they were the first to scoop everybody up. PayPal was not the most brilliant payment processor imaginable. But they came along when an online payment processor happened to be a thing people needed. Sam Zell talks in his memoir about the importance of the “first mover advantage.” When the 1996 Telecommunications Act eliminated restrictions on the number of radio stations that any one person

could own, Zell started snapping up distressed radio stations around the country at bargain prices. Eventually he had a giant network of them that he sold to Clear Channel for \$4.4 billion. Zell doesn’t indicate that he did anything to improve the radio stations, or even that he had any interest in radio. He just knew that radio stations could be sold for more than their existing prices. In other words, absolutely nothing might change about a company or an industry, but someone like Zell can swoop in and make a giant load of money from it.

The radio station case is an example of trying to control as much of something scarce as you can. There are a limited number of licensed radio stations, so Zell just tried to buy up what he knew other people would soon need and have to pay him for. There was no innovation. Just seeking power. Thiel’s *Zero to One* openly offers straightforward guidance to the smart capitalist: get a monopoly on something rather than invent something extremely socially useful that can be copied easily. Zell agrees, and has said that “the best thing to have in the world is a monopoly, and if you can’t have a monopoly, you want an oligarchy.”

Zell recalls another example of a time he cornered a market and made a fortune. He discovered that a small, troubled company named American Hawaii Cruises had a monopoly on cruise travel to Hawai’i, because U.S. law prohibited foreign-made ships from doing intra-U.S. travel. (Remember, “free trade” rhetoric is all a sham, the United States is a deeply protectionist country.) By buying the company, Zell was able to make sure that he was the one who profited, rather than someone else, but it wasn’t because he was so good at running the company. He calls himself the “chairman of everything and CEO of nothing,” and says he doesn’t “involve [himself] in the day to day.” His job is to simply figure out what to buy and then make somebody else run it. (This makes it somewhat funny that he has also said that “the 1 percent work harder” than everyone else and “should be emulated.”)

Zell infamously bought the *Los Angeles Times*, and demanded that journalists’ work should generate more revenue. “Fuck you,” he said to an *Orlando Sentinel* photographer who publicly confronted him about his belief that reporters needed to focus more on turning a profit than reporting the news. Did Zell’s increased focus on revenue end up creating more of it? No—after a year, the *Los Angeles Times* was plunged into bankruptcy, in one of the more well-known cases of a rich guy buying up a venerable newspaper and destroying it.

Bankrupting a popular newspaper hardly “fills a social need.” Some economic activity is nothing more than “rent seeking”—simply trying to collect money without increasing production or value. For example, if you put a fence along a river, and charge people entrance to swim in the river, you’ve contributed nothing to anyone. All you’ve done is extract wealth from people who could previously have used the river for free. A rich person is not necessarily rich because they created value. They might simply, as Marx suggested, have found a way to extract value from the labor of others. As in the case of Zell, they might even *lessen* the overall value of the labor itself. When we analyze what these men actually *do*, their social function begins to seem far more questionable.

**W**E CAN ALSO GET SOME INSIGHT INTO HOW “privilege” works by looking at the ways that these men got their start. Most of them had happy upbringings, or at least did not experience devastating trauma or tragedy. They also had

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family support. When young Branson wanted to buy a country manor house to start a recording studio, his parents gave him £2,500, and his Auntie Joyce gave him £7,500, the equivalent of over \$200,000 today, with which he's able to get Virgin Records going. In 1945, Sam Walton's father-in-law loaned him \$20,000 to buy a store. That's equal to nearly \$300,000 in today's money. Walton ran the store successfully, bought another store, and slowly built the chain that would become Walmart. His children are now some of the richest people in the world. Walton, of course, calls his a "story about entrepreneurship, risk, and hard work," the American dream fulfilled. But how likely was a Black person in 1940s Arkansas to have been able to get a giant loan from a rich in-law and sell to a white clientele? Walton won a rigged game. Walmart could not have been created by Black people no matter how hard they worked, and because "first mover" advantage is so important, the first superstore chain was always going to be run by a white person. We can see here a very clear example of how the racial wealth gap is passed down intergenerationally. Because no Black family had accumulated wealth in 1945, no Black person could compete with Sam Walton. Today, Sam Walton's billionaire children sit on vast fortunes that were created under completely illegitimate conditions—and they think of it as an example of virtue being rewarded!

**Y**OU CAN ALSO SEE WHY IT'S IRRELEVANT TO SAY that billionaires have "worked" for their money. In fact, it's absolutely true that many of the super-rich work, and work hard. They come into the office early, leave late, neglect their families, and have few interests outside their business. In fact, one notable feature of these memoirs is that the billionaires seem to be utterly "uncultured." I'm no snob, but you get the sense with many of them that the first time they ever read a book was when the ghostwriter handed them their own memoirs for proofreading. There's a shocking lack of interest in literature, drama, art, music, dance, history, or anything aside from entrepreneurship. They are bores. I admit, however, that they pour themselves into their work.

But Marx once noted that it doesn't matter how much a slave-driver works at being a slave-driver when it comes to assessing their function. Walton's fortune was unearned no matter how hard he worked for it, because he built it under a set of unjust conditions that made his success possible. Likewise, those who stole and "developed" Native American land might have worked quite hard at it, but it doesn't tell us whether their resulting gains are ill-gotten. (Thieves, too, can put in long hours.)

Another myth of the super-rich is that their rewards come because they have been willing to "take risks." The capitalist, it is said, earns high returns because they have risked the possibility that they will not. But when you read their memoirs, you actually find that much of what capitalists do consists of trying to find propositions that are all upside, without any risk at all. Zell, for instance, talks about how he noticed before anyone else that mobile home parks were a fantastic investment. People who were in them were generally stuck in them and rarely left, you didn't have to put much money into maintaining or improving them, and competition was limited by the fact that nobody in a house wanted a new mobile home park near them. So if you bought them,

you gained the power to squeeze a great deal of money indefinitely out of residents. The "risk" was trivial.

I often hear defenders of capitalism say things like "well, if you socialists had ever had to meet a payroll you'd think differently" or "a socialist couldn't run a taco truck." (In my case this is true, as I do not know anything about making tacos.) But in taking *Current Affairs* from a tiny project operating out of my living room to a successful company with an office and a full-time staff, I've been able to see first-hand why capitalist talking points are false. Certainly, I understand that "founding" a company does not mean that you actually *make* the thing it produces by yourself. This is always done by a team of people who perform a lot of labor for little public credit.

Take risk, for example. I took no risk. Really, none. If the company ever failed, I wouldn't be on the hook. I could just walk away and do something else. I didn't put any money into it that I could lose; we funded ourselves at the start through Kickstarter. The only risk was that the first subscribers wouldn't get their magazines. But there was no actual risk of that, because it was easy to make sure they did (my cofounder Oren Nimni and I bagged and labeled each and every magazine ourselves, by hand). Now, I made sure that I don't own *Current Affairs* myself, that it is a collective enterprise. But if I *had* retained ownership, then after we hired staff I could have squeezed profits out of it without ever putting anything at risk, simply because I was the person who initially set it up. The reason billionaires make more money than everyone else at their company is that they have the power to demand it, not because they deserve it or worked the hardest or even (in most cases) did the innovating that made the company successful.

They also possess a different mindset than other people. Stephen Schwarzman (Blackstone) recalls a recurring disagreement he had with his father, who owned a small Philadelphia drug store called Schwarzman's. Schwarzman the younger was constantly telling Schwarzman the elder that he should take the store regional or national. His dad simply couldn't understand what the point would be.

"We could be huge," the son says.

"I'm very happy and have a nice house. Have two cars. I have enough money to send you and your brothers to college. What more do I need?"

"It isn't about what you need. It's about wants," says the son.

"I don't want it. I don't need it. That will not make me happy."

In his book, Schwarzman says he shook his head, and couldn't understand why his father turned down a "sure thing." Later, he says he came to understand that you "can't learn to be an entrepreneur." Dad simply didn't have the mindset.

Of course, Schwarzman's dad comes out of this exchange looking perfectly reasonable, and his son still doesn't grasp the point, even many decades later. It's not just that money can't buy happiness. It's that once you *have* happiness, the further pursuit of money only detracts from it. But perhaps that's not true for Stephen Schwarzman, whose lifestyle *Vanity Fair* describes as follows:

*In 2007, he became synonymous with Wall Street excess when, on the eve of the financial crisis, he threw himself a 60th birthday party that featured Martin Short as the master of ceremonies; performances by Patti LaBelle and Rod Stewart; a meal of "lobster, filet mignon, and baked Alaska," along with "an array of expensive wines"; "replicas of Schwarzman's art*



collection” on the walls, “a full-length portrait of him by Andrew Festing, the president of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters”; around 350 guests, including Barbara Walters, Maria Bartiromo, Tina Brown, and Melania and Donald Trump; and a “large-scale replica of . . . Schwarzman’s Manhattan apartment.” Later that year, his culinary preferences—stone crabs that run \$400, or \$40 per claw—and low tolerance for noise pollution (“while sunning by the pool at his 11,000-square-foot home in Palm Beach, Fla., he complained . . . that an employee wasn’t wearing the proper black shoes with his uniform . . . [explaining] that he found the squeak of the rubber soles distracting”)—were revealed. . . . For decades, Schwarzman, who’s worth an estimated \$12.4 billion, has had to suffer through the ignorant public’s hurtful attacks on the private-equity industry and total lack of understanding about what a great public service it provides. Presumably, he wanted to throw himself a lavish 65th birthday party but had to consider the optics of it all, instead waiting until his 70th to celebrate himself at a soiree that included trapeze artists, live camels, acrobats, Mongolian soldiers, “a giant birthday cake in the shape of a Chinese temple,” and Gwen Stefani singing “Happy Birthday.”

Schwarzman, incidentally, is the one who compared Barack Obama’s attempt to slightly raise the top marginal tax rate to Hitler’s invasion of Poland.

The vast difference between the way billionaires think about the world and the way normal people do is one of the more fascinating aspects of these books. Michael Bloomberg begins *Bloomberg by Bloomberg* with the story of how he was fired by Salomon Brothers in the 1980s, and felt devastated. With his mere \$10 million severance package, he says, “I was worried that Sue might be ashamed of my new, less visible status and concerned I couldn’t support the family.” Daniel Abraham (Slim-Fast) says of his childhood home: “When I say the house had fourteen rooms, it probably sounds as if we were rich. But we weren’t. Not at all. Houses were cheap then.” Sometimes it seems like they have been flattered for so long by those around them that they don’t notice how bizarre they sound, and how unusual and unnatural their greed and their aspirations really are.

This is even true in the case of Branson, the “fun” billionaire who people like. (Blurbs from the back of *Losing My Virginity*, include *Newsweek*: “He wears his fame and money exceedingly well... he isn’t interested in power [and] just wants to have fun.” *GQ*: “he embodies America’s cherished mythology of the iconoclastic, swashbuckling entrepreneur.” Ivana Trump: “Richard is good-looking and very smart.”) In a jaw-dropping anecdote about his early days editing and publishing a magazine called *Student*, Branson relates how he discovered that his co-founder wanted to turn the business into a worker cooperative, and

Branson saved the situation by lying and making his friend think the workers hated him:

[H]e had left a draft of a memo, which he was writing to the staff. It was a plan to get rid of me as publisher and editor, to take editorial and financial control of *Student*, and to turn it into a cooperative. I would become just part of the team, and everyone would share equally in the editorial direction of the magazine. I was shocked. I felt that Nik, my closest friend, was betraying me... I decided to bluff my way through the crisis... [If the staff were] undecided, then I could drive a wedge between Nik and the rest of them and cut Nik out.

[...] “Nik,” I said as we walked down the street, “a number of people have come up to me and said they’re unhappy with what you’re planning. [note: a lie] They don’t like the idea, but they’re too scared to tell you to your face.” Nik looked horrified.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to stay here,” I went on. “You’re trying to undermine me and the whole of *Student*.”... Nik looked down at his feet.

“I’m sorry, Ricky,” he said. “It just seemed a better way to organize ourselves...” He trailed off.

“I’m sorry too, Nik.” ... Nik left that day... I hate criticizing people who work with me... Ever since then I have always tried to avoid the issue by asking someone else to wield the ax.

Beyond telling glimpses like this one, outright psychopathic tendencies do not show up very often in these books. Most, after all, were produced with the aid of skilled ghostwriters whose job is to bury the nasty stuff. The only real way to get past the propaganda is to look beyond the primary sources and examine the facts. Marc Benioff fills his book with page after page about his values and how much his company cares about *stakeholders* rather than just making money, but shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic began, Salesforce announced that it was laying off a thousand staff despite having just reported their strongest annual performance ever. Schwarzman talks proudly about a company he owns called Invitation Homes, which he presents as having given poor people access to good housing after the financial crisis. “I bet if I look up this company it will actually turn out that it does a bunch of shady shit and Schwarzman is an evil slumlord,” I thought as I read the passage. Sure enough, *Reuters* reported that “in interviews with scores of the company’s tenants in neighborhoods across the United States, the picture that emerges isn’t as much one of exceptional service as it is one of leaky pipes, vermin, toxic mold, nonfunctioning appliances and months-long waits for repairs.” A U.N. working group on human rights and transnational corporations even sent Schwarzman an angry letter denouncing the practices of his company:

*Tenants told us that when they ask Invitation Homes to undertake*





ordinary repairs or maintenance, such as to address plumbing household insect problems, they are charged directly for any undertakings on top of their rent. They also reported that Invitation Homes—through an automated system—is quick to threaten eviction or file eviction notices due to late payment of rent or late of payment of fees (95 USD per incident), no matter the circumstances. If a tenant cannot pay the late fee and if Invitation Homes does not evict, that fee is added to the tenant's rent. If in the following month the tenant can pay their rent but not the additional charge, the tenant may be evicted for partial payment of rent. When tenants choose to challenge the eviction with Invitation Homes they incur additional fees and penalties.

It is difficult to award a prize for “most evil billionaire” out of the group of 21st century robber barons whose literary output I sampled, but Schwarzman probably gets it for financing a life of utterly obscene luxury by jacking up poor people's rent and throwing them out onto the street the moment they get behind (and throwing in some fees and penalties for good measure). Just utterly heinous. As the newspaper owner said to the photojournalist: fuck you.

MUCH OF THE BEHAVIOR WE SEE FROM billionaires comes from what I've come to call “the bifurcated philosophy of accumulation and distribution.” Or, less obnoxiously: it's okay to be a sociopath when you're getting the stuff so long as you're a saint after you've got it. The idea is that the world of *business* is dog-eat-dog and you can be as Machiavellian as you like and don't need to think about the consequences for anybody's lives. But then you have to do philanthropy afterwards, because greed is bad. Andrew Carnegie, the O.G. robber baron, laid out the template in his popular *Gospel of Wealth*. Carnegie begins by justifying every kind of horrific inequality as being the natural order of things, which should be completely beyond question:

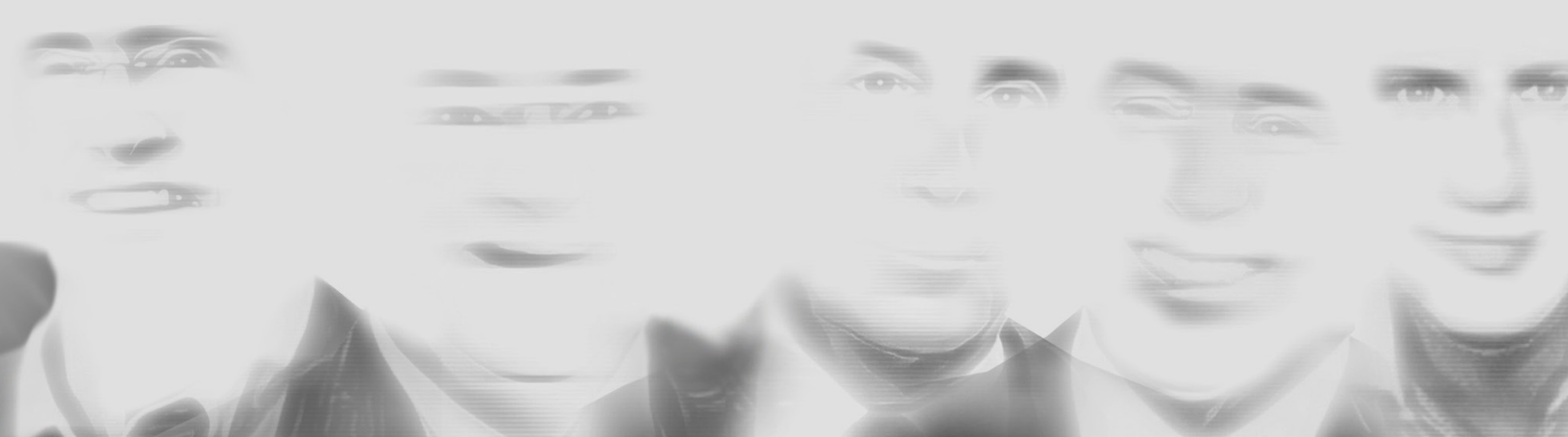
*The contrast between the palace of the millionaire and the cottage of the laborer with us today measures the change which has come with civilization. This change, however, is not to be deplored, but welcomed.... Much better this great irregularity than universal squalor. It is beyond our power to alter, and, therefore, to be accepted and made the best of. It is a waste of time to criticize the inevitable... We accept and welcome, as conditions to which we must accommodate ourselves, great inequality of environment: the concentration of business, industrial and commercial, in the hands of a few essential to the future progress of the race. The Socialist or Anarchist who seeks to overturn present conditions is to be regarded attacking the*

*foundation upon which civilization itself rests, for for civilization took its start from the day when capable, industrious workman said to his incompetent and lazy fellow, “If thou dost not sow, thou shalt not reap,” and thus ended primitive Communism by separating the drones from the bees.*

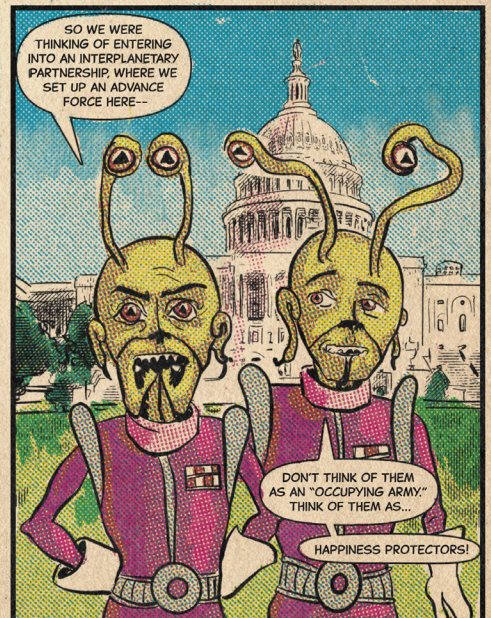
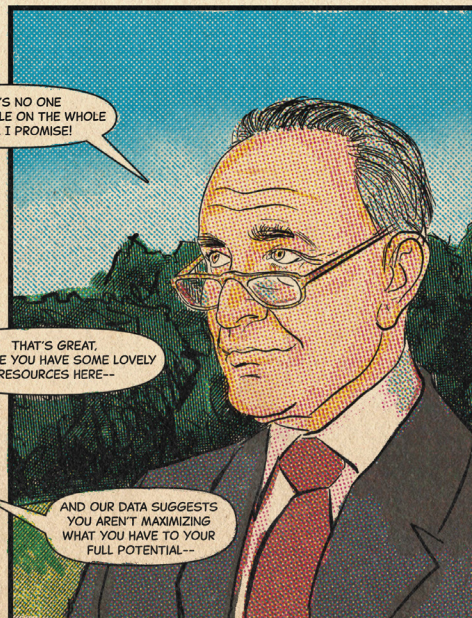
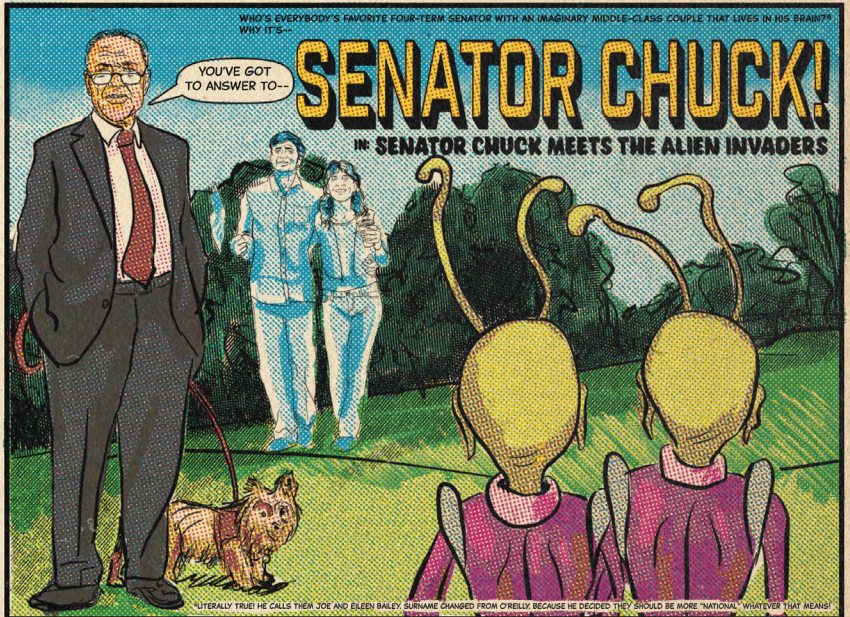
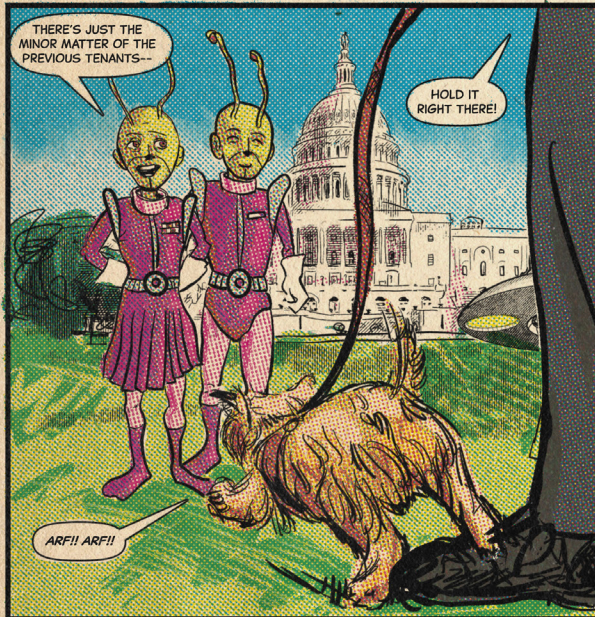
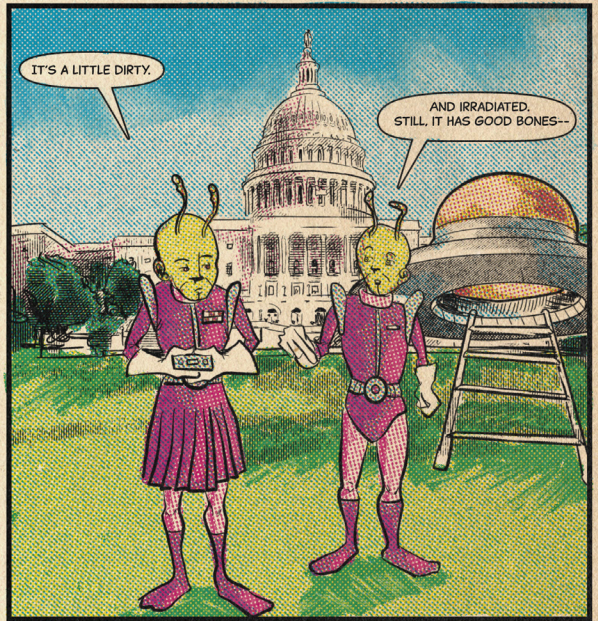
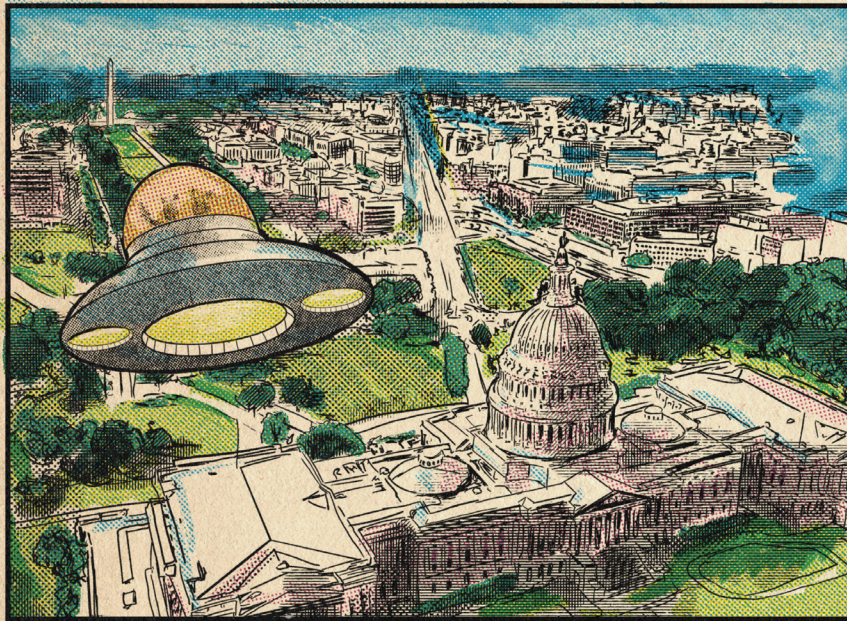
But Carnegie then lays out a theory of *noblesse oblige*: in return for benefiting from this system, “the duty of the man of wealth” is to “organiz[e] benefactions from which the masses of their fellows will derive benefit.” He will thus be “the mere trustee and agent for his poorer brethren, bringing to their service his superior wisdom, [doing better for them] than they would or could do for themselves.” Now, Carnegie is very particular about *who* he helps, condemning “indiscriminate charity” and saying that “it were better for mankind that the millions of the rich were thrown into the sea than so spent as to encourage the slothful, the drunken, and the unworthy,” and he is one of those people who says giving to panhandlers actually *hurts* them and is thus selfish and immoral. But Carnegie's overall message is: it doesn't matter how you enrich yourself so long as you are a “steward” of the public good afterward. Accumulate as you like, so long as you distribute according to the principles of justice.

Except, of course: philanthropy is just as selfish as endless wealth accumulation. A true benefactor of humankind sheds their wealth rather than handing it out in little drops to their pet causes. The philanthropist is no different from a feudal lord who doled out favors. The “unjust accumulation/just distribution” formula is just more ludicrous theodicy, with philanthropy a means of helping these guys rationalize having vastly more luxury and power than everyone else.

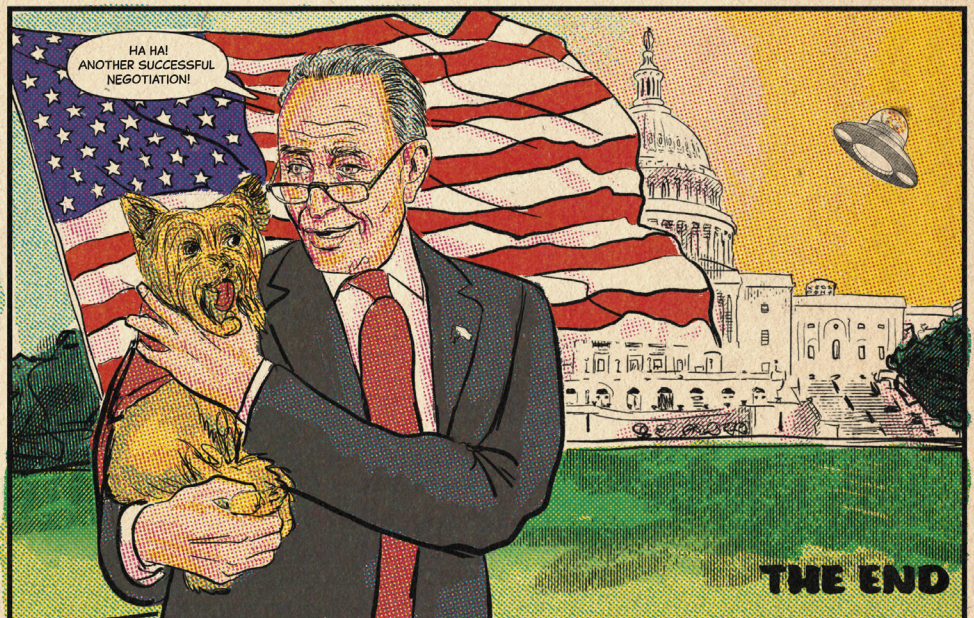
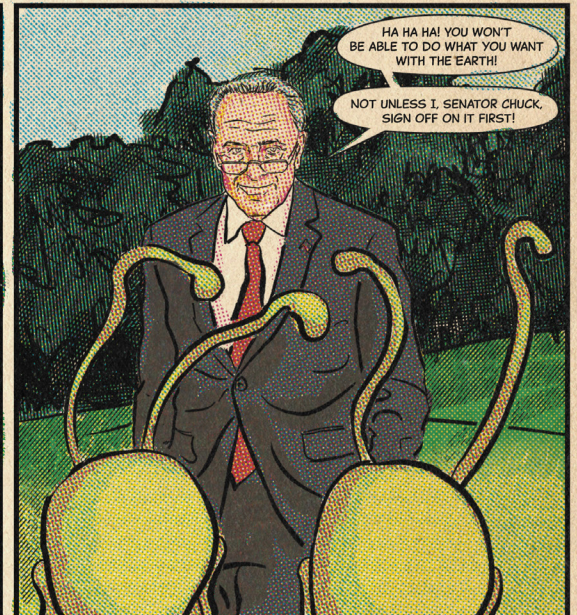
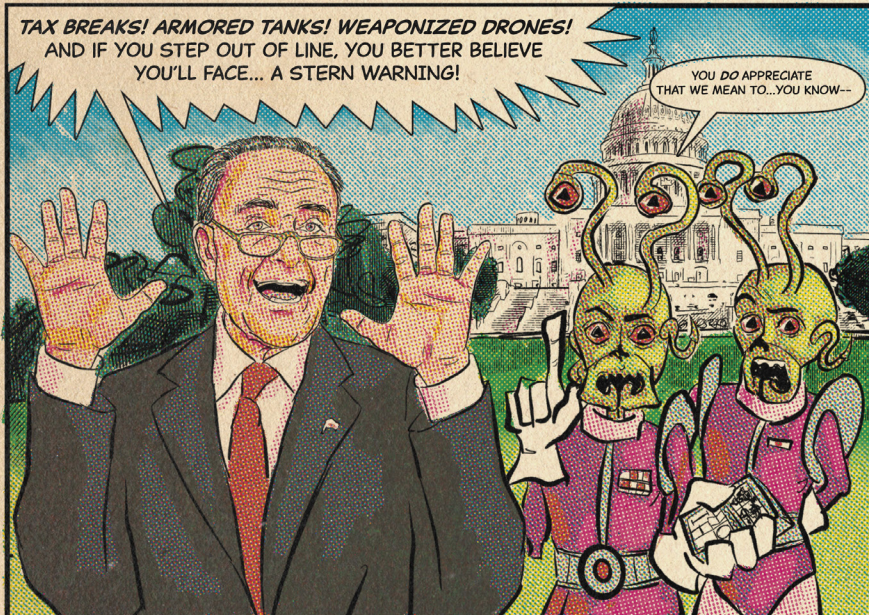
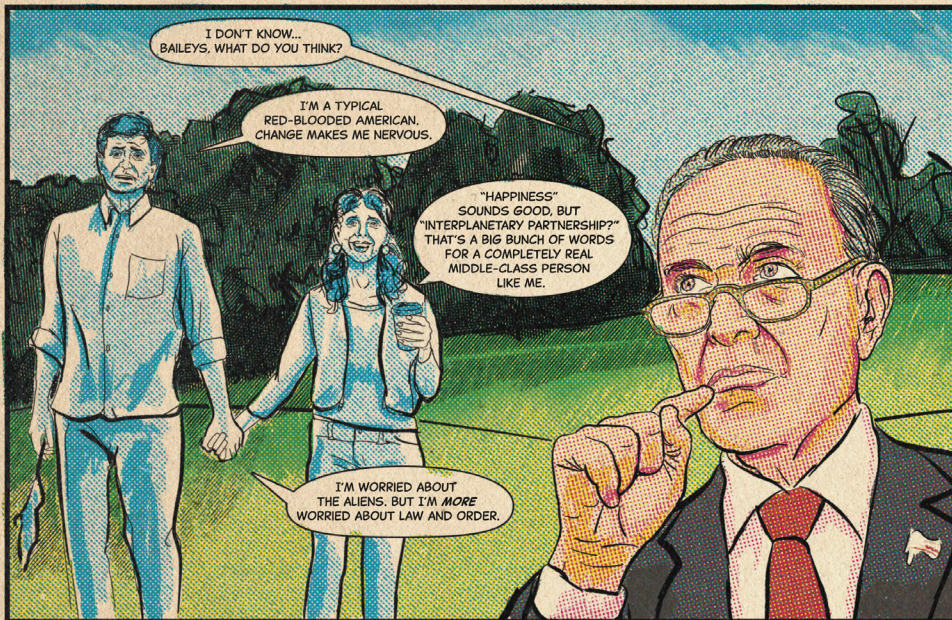
Billionaires tell themselves many things. They say that market price is value, meaning that if you're making money you're helping the world. They say that they are rewarded for risk and hard work, even though they don't risk anything of value and people who work far harder than they do earn pittance. They say that they won a “free” contest, when they won a rigged one whose results have no legitimacy. (Is it mere coincidence that these are all white guys?) They say that they are “compassionate” in their capitalist practices but ultimately let the market determine their morality. They say they innovate and add value when they do nothing of the kind. Their justifications for their success crumble when touched. It's interesting that the ruling class, with all of its resources, cannot mount any kind of persuasive defense of its own position. But to anyone who is secretly insecure, and wonders whether perhaps the people at the top *are* smarter and better and more hard-working, you will be reassured to know that they are not. You don't have to take my word for it. It's right there in their books. ♣

















# *the politics of* THRILLERS

*by Praveen Tummalapalli*

AS A STAPLE OF AIRPORT NEWSSTANDS AND DADS' birthday gifts, thrillers are wildly popular. With \$728.2 million in American book sales, crime and mystery books are second only to romance and erotica, and, when lumped in with mysteries, "50 percent of respondents in a recent [Book Ad Report] survey stated that mystery/thriller books were their favorite genre of e-books." Thriller authors tend to be prolific, with many writing a book a year, and cultivate loyal audiences that will read most, if not all, their books, exposing readers to a frame of thinking over and over. These novels tend toward conservatism but are not exclusively reactionary; nonetheless, popular conservative hosts like Glenn Beck—who has dabbled in writing thrillers himself—and Hugh Hewitt have used their platforms to heavily promote reactionary conservative thrillers that reinforce their own worldview. Thrillers are usually fun adventure romps but, read uncritically, they also have the potential to influence how readers view real-life foreign policy and national security issues.

One of the architects of the thriller as we know it today was Ian Fleming, whose James Bond novels have inspired one of the most famous and enduring film series of all time. In the Bond movies, the handsome British spy is generally a debonair man of action who uncovers a megalomaniacal villain's plot, leading him on an adventure complete with travels to exotic locales, hypermodern gadgets supplied to him by irascible inventor Q, and encounters with two or three women—at least one of whom must be killed. The novels themselves tend to be less formulaic; Fleming, for instance, often exposes Bond's vulnerability and fleshes out his relationships with women in greater detail. And in the early stories, Bond's adversary is generally SMERSH, the USSR's real-life counter-intelligence organization, rather than imaginary or non-state actors. The books were wildly popular: in fact, John F. Kennedy even cited *From Russia With*

*Love* as one of his ten favorite books. Fleming passed away in 1964 but the Bond franchise lives on, in novels written by a slew of (male) authors who have tried to carry on the Bond legacy. Still, none have matched the success of the Fleming originals, which have sold more than 100 million copies worldwide.

Like many spy novelists, Fleming was a former intelligence officer himself. As Ben Macintyre details in his Fleming biography, *For Your Eyes Only*, many British intelligence officers of that era were selected from the ranks of the upper class. Born to a wealthy family and the son of a member of Parliament, Fleming was recruited shortly before the advent of World War II to the role of personal assistant to the Director of Naval Intelligence. In that position, Fleming wrote memos devising possible intelligence operations. Later in his career, he would direct a group of British Commandos that operated near the front lines to steal documents. Bond was, in Fleming's words, "a compound of all the secret agents and commando types I met during the war," though some character elements—from Bond's preferred brand of cigarette to his penchant for scrambled eggs—were more clearly autobiographical.

As author of *Goldeneye: Where Bond Was Born—Ian Fleming's Jamaica*, Matthew Parker, has detailed, the Bond series was Fleming's attempt to grapple with the post-war dissolution of the British Empire. British intelligence agencies like the Secret Intelligence Service were losing prestige, and the United States had overtaken Britain as the preeminent global superpower. The result of this was a fantastical man of action who could roam the world freely, advancing British interests, something Fleming largely frames as positive and stabilizing for the world, while ignoring the crimes and bloodshed perpetuated by the British Crown.

And so, while the Bond novels are more nuanced than the movies in some ways, they are even more reactionary, steeped in an ideology of militarism and imperialism. They are also famously



misogynistic and quite racist. Even for the 1950s and 1960s, Fleming's writing was virulently racist, sexist, and homophobic, much of which was toned down in the movie adaptations. In *Dr. No*, the Colonial Secretary of Jamaica says:

*"The Jamaican is a kindly lazy man with the virtues and vices of a child. He lives on a very rich island but he doesn't get rich from it. He doesn't know how to and he's too lazy. The British come and go and take the easy pickings... It's the Portuguese Jews who make the most. ... Then come the Syrians, very rich too, but not such good businessmen... Then there are the Indians with their usual flashy trade in soft goods and the like. They're not much of a lot. Finally there are the Chinese, solid, compact, discreet—the most powerful clique in Jamaica... They keep to themselves and keep their strain pure... Not that they don't take the black girls when they want them. You can see the result all over Kingston—Chigroes—Chinese Negroes and Negresses. The Chigroes are a tough, forgotten race. They look down on the Negroes and the Chinese look down on them. One day they may become a nuisance. They've got some of the intelligence of the Chinese and most of the vices of the black man."*

It doesn't seem that Fleming (who frequently wintered in Jamaica) means to indicate to the reader that the Colonial Secretary is a racist, out-of-touch imperialistic scourge; rather, the Secretary's racist caricatures are largely treated in the world of the novel as accurate depictions. At the conclusion of one particular chapter, the ominousness of the cliffhanger hangs on the revelation that a certain character is Chinese. The British domination of Jamaica is treated as both a historical given and a morally correct condition; the sun *shouldn't* set on the British empire, the books would seem to claim.

**T**HE POPULARITY OF BOND HAS INFLUENCED A GENERATION of thriller authors, many of whom have happily infused their books with the same reactionary, imperialist ideology that drives the Bond universe. Tom Clancy, Fleming's clearest American counterpart, wrote 20 novels in his lifetime, 17 of which became *New York Times* best sellers. His thrillers have inspired blockbuster movies like *The Hunt for Red October*, video games such as *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon*, and most recently the Jack Ryan television series produced by Amazon. At the time of Clancy's death in 2013, more than 100 million copies of his novels were in print.

Clancy wrote his own Bond-like character: Jack Ryan, a heroic CIA officer. The Jack Ryan novels are somewhat different in approach: they're longer, less rooted to one protagonist, and focus more on institutional operations than the heroics of any singular figure. And Ryan—especially compared to the philandering James Bond—is a sober family man. But there are also key similarities with the Fleming works, particularly when it comes to ideology. Where Fleming dreams, nostalgically, of an empire that never ended, Clancy often provides neoconservative wish-fulfillment fantasies in which the already dominant America gains even more power over its rivals.

In Clancy's 1986 novel *Red Storm Rising*, for instance, Azerbaijani militants destroy an oil production refinery in the USSR. The Soviets respond with a plan to invade the Persian Gulf, but

not before they attack Western Europe. The Soviets' goal is nothing less than neutralizing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the mutual defense pact between the United States and Western European countries, founded after World War II to counter the USSR's growing power. In Clancy's book, NATO proves too strong for the USSR, and when hawkish members of the *Politburo* consider nuclear retaliation, a Soviet military leader stages a coup. NATO's military superiority is asserted over the USSR and the status quo is restored. Every neoconservative would have dreamed of this outcome at the time: a scenario in which the USSR is the aggressor, giving the United States and its Western European allies the moral high ground while resoundingly proving their military superiority, and showing that NATO could successfully contain the USSR, as it was designed to do.

In another extreme fantasy, *The Bear and the Dragon* (set after the fall of the USSR), U.S. intelligence learns that China plans to invade Russia and take control of newly-discovered oil and gold resources to compensate for an economic downturn. To deter China from carrying out this plan, now-President Jack Ryan (yes, he gets to be president, meanwhile poor Bond never gets to be prime minister) convinces NATO to let Russia in, with the hope that China will back off in fear of retaliation from NATO.

Russia in NATO may seem like a wild idea, since again, in reality, NATO's main purpose was to serve as a counterbalance to the USSR. When the USSR dissolved in 1991, the continued relevance of NATO was up for debate. While the international body stayed intact, the U.S. made tremendous efforts to get Russia to embrace neoliberalism and to prevent Communists from taking power in subsequent elections. In the 1996 election, for example, Boris Yeltsin had an approval rating of six percent and a decimated economy on his hands. Bill Clinton lobbied the International Monetary Fund to give Yeltsin a \$10 billion loan, providing Yeltsin a major boost in the election, which he went on to win (there were, however, serious allegations of outright election fraud). Under Clinton's direction, NATO continued to expand into Eastern Europe, with Yeltsin's somewhat confused approval. In *The Bear and the Dragon*, Clancy imagines a Russia that goes beyond embracing America's economic model to become an American military ally. More than that, Clancy frames NATO as a body of the utmost importance. The idea that NATO could someday include Russia itself would've exceeded even Clinton's wildest fantasies.

The dissolution of the USSR also caused the American public and politicians alike to question whether such a massive military budget was necessary. In Clancy's written world, the answer is a resounding yes. At the climax of *The Bear and the Dragon*, the fetishization of American military might and hardware that pervades so much of the Clancy canon is on full display. Defeated by NATO forces, Beijing launches nuclear missiles against America. But the Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense System, a real-life expensive military project designed to shoot down incoming missiles, saves America at the last minute. What brings the enemy down for good, however, is American ingenuity. Towards the end of the book, U.S. intelligence broadcasts CNN reports about the invasion over a CIA website to counteract Chinese Communist Party propaganda. This in turn in-



spires a revolution reminiscent of the real-life Tiananmen Square protests. The Chinese government topples, and here begins China's transition to a capitalism-friendly democracy (as if the real China hasn't been quite capitalism-friendly for a while).

Clancy sells an America that always behaves nobly, and characters whose moral goodness hinges on their patriotism. Meanwhile, her rivals, the USSR and China, are always the aggressors. This is ahistorical to say the least; there are far too many examples of American aggression in the name of anti-Communism to list in this article, but some of the most egregious examples include the Korean War, during which American escalation killed three million civilians, or 20 percent of the country's population. Or consider the 1953 Iranian coup, in which the CIA overthrew Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister to restore authoritarian rule by the Shah, all to stop the nationalization of Iranian oil. Then there's American involvement in the 1973 coup in Chile; there, the Nixon Administration worked to destabilize the Chilean government through economic warfare and election interference, ushering in the brutal rule of Augusto Pinochet. But the truth of these events doesn't exist in Clancy's world, where the American empire can do no wrong.

While the Bond scenarios are more obviously outlandish (from a voodoo cult leader smuggling pirate treasure to fund Soviet spy operations to an allergy clinic brainwashing young women into destroying British agriculture through biological warfare), Clancy's have been praised for their accuracy in portraying the workings of the military. President Reagan famously recommended *Red Storm Rising* to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to understand Soviet intentions and strategy in preparation for nuclear-disarmament talks. "They're not just novels," former Vice President Dan Quayle once said. "They're read as the real thing." This reception, and the use of military-industrial complex jargon throughout the books, has lent them a veneer of authenticity that may let some readers believe they are being educated as well as entertained. This, I suspect, primes readers to accept the ideology underlying their rabidly conservative premises and expectations. Clancy's novels may be entertaining, but they're quite clearly propaganda.

When the Cold War ended, America's conservative thriller authors searched for a new adversary to loom over their plotlines and to justify militarism. The terrorist attacks on 9/11 provided just that. The thriller writer most emblematic of War on Terror conservatism is probably the late Vince Flynn, author of the Mitch Rapp adventures (monosyllabic hero names aren't a genre *requirement*, exactly, but they convey a certain masculine abruptness.) Rapp is a counter-terrorist operative who routinely works in the Middle East, from where he heroically protects the United States from terrorist attacks. Despite the fact that torture tactics such as waterboarding are an illegal violation of human rights, and they have failed to prevent real terrorist attacks while radicalizing people against America, Rapp tends to choke people with his bare hands in exchange for information. As in the Bond and Ryan novels, the only good people among the native population where Rapp finds himself are those allied with America. While President George W. Bush was declaring, "you're either with us, or with the terrorists," Flynn was happy to paint anyone publicly skeptical of the War on Terror as

a traitor. His thriller *The Last Man* contains a subplot involving a U.S. senator critical of American policy in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Rapp is focused on investigating the kidnapping of the head of CIA clandestine operations in Afghanistan. In a plot twist, Flynn reveals that the Senator had been in contact with the Pakistani general behind the kidnapping plot.

In reality, most of our democratically elected leaders enthusiastically supported and voted for the war in Afghanistan. The sole member of either chamber of Congress to oppose the bill authorizing military force in Afghanistan was Congresswoman Barbara Lee. For this vote, Lee was castigated and sent death threats. Her courage and conviction in the face of such opposition is a far cry from the Senator depicted as craven and traitorous in *The Last Man*. While the Iraq War wasn't nearly as unanimously supported, it was still championed by prominent members of the Democratic Party, from the current presidential nominee Joe Biden to John Kerry, the 2004 Democratic presidential candidate who ran against Bush.

Curiously, by the publication of *The Last Man* in 2013, the Iraq War and broader War on Terror, which, by that point, entailed bombing campaigns in Afghanistan and six other Middle Eastern countries, were all widely regarded as a mistake. But that didn't stop Flynn from treating skeptics of the War on Terror with just as much disdain as Barbara Lee's critics did at the time of her lone vote a few days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Following the big reveal, Rapp confronts the Senator with evidence of the uncovered treason and blackmails him into becoming a CIA lapdog. As a parting shot, he tells the scheming politician, "There is a third option... I sneak into your house in the middle of the night and snap your neck." The message is unambiguous. Anyone critical of the War on Terror is a traitor, or as good as one, and only the noble deep state can keep our corrupt representatives in line.

**T**HRILLERS, MORE SO THAN ANY OTHER GENRE, CAN BE a powerful tool to spread political messages. This is in part because they're wildly popular and also, because unlike fantasy or science fiction—much of which is set in a world so dissimilar to ours that it must rely on metaphor or allegory to make political commentary—thrillers tend to unfurl in recognizable surroundings. The starting points of reference require less effort from the reader seeking to decipher the politics that make some characters heroes and others villains. A reader that lacks a grasp of history and geopolitics might be tempted to adopt the politics presented as 'good' as their own. This is especially a concern when the novels are precise and accurate in their portrayal of military hardware and procedure—features that readers might interpret as a sign of expertise in military affairs, leading them to conclude that what Clancy and other conservative thrillers categorize as 'good' and 'evil' is just as trustworthy.

Now, there have long been liberal alternatives to conservative thrillers (le Carré is one good example), but authors who directly and specifically challenge American militarism from a leftist perspective are in shorter supply. The best example of such an author may be Barry Eisler, who made headlines after Elizabeth Warren



listed him as one of her favorite authors during her presidential campaign. Eisler doesn't describe himself as a leftist, preferring to eschew labels, but his books and his blog reveal a commitment against civil liberty violations, warrantless surveillance, torture, and American drone policy, all of which he has addressed in his novels.

In his standalone novel *The God's Eye View*, Eisler builds on the Snowden revelations that the National Security Agency ran an unconstitutional surveillance program for years. In *The God's Eye View*, an NSA employee discovers that one of her coworkers was murdered because he intended to reveal their employer's activities and capabilities. Departing from Bond, Ryan, and Rapp, heroine Evelyn Gallagher is a woman (with a multi-syllabic name) who works for the NSA to make ends meet, rather than out of a deep-seated commitment to its mission and belief that spying is necessary to keep Americans safe. Once she suspects wrongdoing, Gallagher's instinct isn't to defend the state; on the contrary, she quickly seeks to reveal the truth despite the danger involved. At the time *The God's Eye View* was published, whistleblowers who leaked information about questionable national security or military activities were still being ruthlessly targeted by the Obama administration. For giving secret military documents to Wikileaks in 2010, the former U.S. soldier Chelsea Manning was called a traitor who threatened national security and has been detained in conditions deemed torturous by the United Nations. It's a considerable change from both conservative thrillers and mainstream news headlines to portray a whistleblower as the hero.

But Eisler's most innovative protagonist may be Ben Treven, the elite soldier at the center of the novel *Fault Line*. At first glance, Treven is similar to Rapp, Ryan, and other conservative protagonists in the genre. He's committed to American militarism and distrusts foreigners and immigrants from presumed rivals such as Iran. Treven finds American critics of U.S. foreign policy and militarism, especially civilians, weak and naive. But while Rapp and Ryan truly believe the American military behaves with the noblest of intentions, and in the best interests of both Americans and the people they occupy or bomb, Treven is less charitable. As Eisler writes in the early pages of *Fault Line*:

*[Treven] thought about hate. America was hated overseas, true, but was pretty well understood, too ... Americans thought of themselves as a benevolent, peace-loving people. But benevolent, peace-loving peoples don't cross oceans to new continents, exterminate the natives, expel the other foreign powers, conquer sovereign territory, win world wars, and less than two centuries after their birth stand astride the planet ... It was the combination of the gentle self-image and the brutal truth that made Americans so dangerous. Because if you aggressed against such a people, who could see themselves only as innocent... they would react not just with anger, but with Old Testament-style moral wrath. Anyone depraved enough to attack such angels forfeited claims to adjudication, proportionality, even elemental mercy itself. Yeah, foreigners hated that American hypocrisy. That was okay, as long as they also feared it."*

Treven may not share Rapp's naive belief in the nobility of America's intentions, but he too starts out fully committed to America's militarism. In a Clancy or Flynn novel, Treven would be the faultless hero—his worldview and righteousness unchallenged—with the villains consisting of foreigners or critics of American militarism. But

under Eisler's pen, Treven is faced with the inadequacies of his worldview and the true horrors of which the American military-industrial complex and intelligence apparatus is capable, which are worse than he had imagined. Many of the horrors he faces are based on real events. The second novel of the Treven series, for example, prominently features the 92 tapes allegedly destroyed by the CIA, which contained evidence of Americans torturing prisoners. Treven changes as a result of facing villainous forces within the American military-industrial complex, and his prejudices are interrogated as he comes to know and respect an Iranian-American lawyer. Just as *The God's Eye View* upends the tropes in the older generation of thrillers by reframing those trying to warn the public of their own government's misdeeds as heroes, *Fault Line* allows the hero to become enlightened upon exposure to information that challenges his presuppositions. Liberal thriller authors (such as Robert Ludlum, famous for *The Bourne Identity* and its sequels) often set their heroes against people within the American intelligence apparatus, but these villains are usually portrayed as a few bad apples with outlandish schemes, and the heroes safeguard America's noble institutions by defeating them. But Eisler goes further by portraying the institutions *themselves* as flawed, and does so in a literary way by barely exaggerating what these institutions are already doing. As such, he provides a stronger counter-narrative to conservative thrillers than the liberal version.

**T**HE SUCCESS OF EISLER'S NOVELS SHOWS THAT there is an appetite for thrillers critical of American militarism and imperialism, plots for which America's foreign policy provides ample material. Just as conservative thrillers exploded in popularity following the success of the James Bond novels, it's possible that under the right conditions, and with the right promotion, thrillers with a leftist lens would have the potential to become just as popular and influential over the coming decades. In the best of real-life plot developments, they might even influence readers and politicians to seriously question America's foreign policy. Understanding this phenomenon presents an opportunity for the left, not only to pay attention to the most popular conservative thrillers in order to challenge their political messages, but also to buoy thriller authors who offer counternarratives to the standard neoconservative normplot.

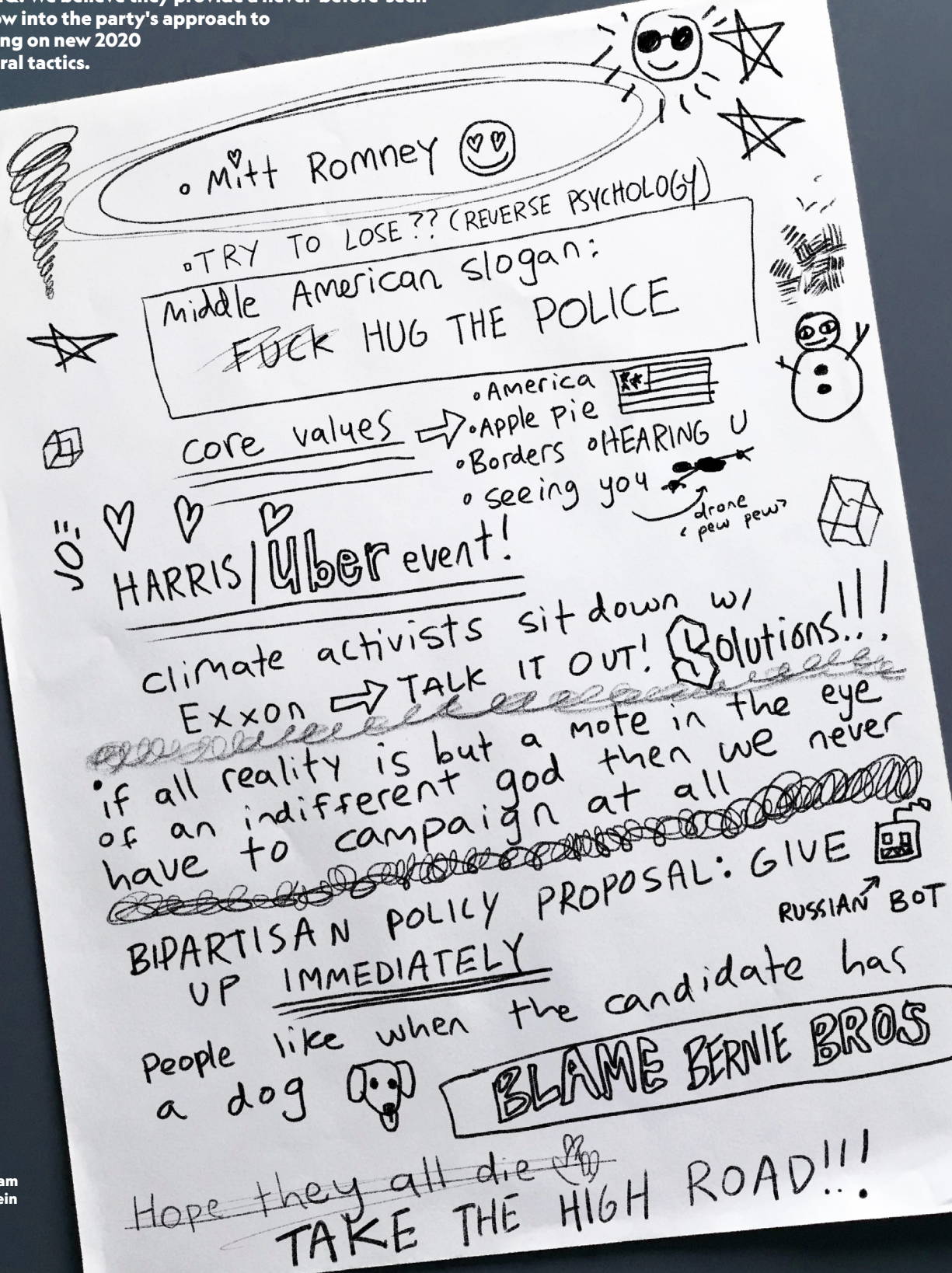
For conservative thrillers to sell their ideology and defend American militarism and aggression, they need to present a simplistic and distorted view of the world. The result can be an entertaining story, as long as you don't ask too many questions about real-world events. But any thriller rooted in a more complete, accurate view of the world will invariably be forced to grapple with the damage and violence caused by the American military-industrial complex and other issues raised by leftists. The result can be stories that are far more complex, thought-provoking, and truthful than any conservative thriller while remaining just as entertaining, if not more so. In the true history of American intelligence operations, there are more than enough twists, turns, unlikely heroes, and powerful villains to put James Bond and Jack Ryan to shame, without apologizing for any empires along the way. ✦



# SECRET NOTES

## FROM DEMOCRATIC PARTY HEADQUARTERS

Thanks to an anonymous tipster, *Current Affairs* is pleased to be able to share these internal strategy notes found on a conference table in DNC HQ. We believe they provide a never-before-seen window into the party's approach to deciding on new 2020 electoral tactics.









# A PLACE LIKE HOME

by Nick Slater

IT'S MIDNIGHT ON THE 27TH TUESDAY OF THE PANDEMIC, and outside the small Portuguese bar beneath my apartment, men are arguing about football again. Their laughter echoes against the dark mountains that hug the valley. I watch them from my balcony, flicking a joint into a pickle jar so the ash won't fall on their heads. A joyous drunkard with a red cap and long black ponytail is flitting from patron to patron. He slaps their backs and hands out cigarettes. Even from a lofty distance you can sense the man has an earnest, almost pathetic need to be there. The past months have been hard on him. He is so happy to be home.

Home has been on my mind a lot this year. Before the springtime lockdowns started, friends asked if I planned on leaving Andorra (the landlocked microstate between France and Spain where I've spent the past four years), and "going home" to Minnesota, the place where my family has lived since I was a small child. The answer was an unequivocal "no" for many reasons. There were the untenable financial costs, the challenges of international travel with two cats, and the fact that returning to the United States in the midst of an uncontrolled pandemic felt like running back into a house with flames bursting out the windows. But most of all, I just didn't consider Minnesota to be "home" anymore.

Then, in May, protests hit the streets of Minneapolis over the police murder of George Floyd. At that point, the burning building analogy took on a rather more literal sense. Like many leftists, I cheered when protestors torched the Third Precinct, which has long been a stronghold for some of Minneapolis' worst cops—in just a decade, it has paid out over \$2 million in settlements for abusing local residents. But as the fires grew, so did my sense of guilt. The Cup Foods where the cops choked the life out of Floyd was just a few blocks from my old house, where my sister now lives. Helicopter surveillance and gunshots were a nightly occurrence for weeks. When we spoke on the phone, I heard the fear and exhaustion in my sister's voice—and understood deep in my gut that, even if I no longer felt at home in Minnesota, it will be "home" as long as my people live there.

This got me thinking: what is home, anyway? Well, it's where the heart is. Or where the cat is, or the coffee, or the wine. Home: there's no place like it. Home is not just a house, but a house can be a home (though not when she goes away). Home is where we're headed. Home is going back, sometimes, and other times home is built anew.

Home is sweet Chicago, home is on the range. Home is whenever I'm with you. Home is a whole bunch of other things too, depending on who's talking about it, but the general consensus seems to be that home is good and desirable in any case.

We need a more tangible definition of home if this story is going to make any sense, though. There must be some binding agent that can congeal all these amorphous concepts together into a digestible mindcookie. To that end, let me suggest that "home" is in essence just a nice warm feeling of being at peace. It's a mental state we all crave, even if we've never known it before. A desire for home seems (gulp) hardwired into our very nature as humans.

I am sure that someone has said this before in much more elegant and eloquent language. There is, probably, a long illustrious lineage of home-centric literature, and I would like to acknowledge both its existence and the fact that I haven't read any of it. My only excuse is pandemic-induced lethargy, though if you said I needed to mount a better defense or risk cancellation I would cite Barbara Ehrenreich's observation that our thoughts are "thoroughly colonized by the thoughts of others through language, culture, and mutual expectations." If you want to say something new and interesting about home, shouldn't you avoid importing more colonists?

But I'm getting off track. We're supposed to be talking about home here. Home, that ephemeral sensation of safety and everything-being-all-right-ness. Home, the thing that feels further away than ever right now. The year 2020 can kiss a goat's asshole for a great number of reasons, but the most unsettling thing about recent events is how they've threatened every conception of home we have in one fell, endlessly stupid swoop. Whatever we take refuge in—people, buildings, places, ideas, identities—it all feels like it could be lost in an instant.

Homes are disappearing in such astonishing numbers, and in such grievously multitudinous ways, that horror seems the only sane response. In the United States alone, cruel men with guns and documents stand ready to remove 40 million human beings from the places where they eat, shit, cry, dream, and wash themselves. Millions of pictures will be taken off walls as millions of garbage bags are stuffed with whatever will fit. The bags will be carried or dragged—who knows where—by people who leave behind stains, dried tears, small objects that slip out from the holes torn by hastily stowed books or forks. The rows of empty homes will loom like



tombstones until the market dictates otherwise.

“Empty houses,” you might say, since it’s the people within those walls and windows that give a given structure its homelike qualities. But those people are being lost as well. As I write this in early October, over 215,000 mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, grandmas, grandpas, cousins, mentors, lovers, and friends have perished from the pandemic in the United States alone (and of course the United States is not alone, much as some might wish otherwise).

Where do we find refuge to process all this grief and loss? Not in the once-peaceful forests, where millions of acres are ablaze from demonic wildfires that blot out the sun. Not by the seaside, where wave after wave of fierce storms batter the land until it is unrecognizable. Certainly not in the streets of our cities, where the police execute people without warning in a hail of bullets. The museums, theaters, bars, parks, and restaurants where we felt like we fit—our second homes—are either gone, or ghostly. Nowhere feels safe. Media outlets like the *National Interest* that pride themselves on their “realism” are running ominous screeds on the possibility of a second Civil War.

Maybe this all sounds a bit melodramatic. Things are bad, to be sure. But life *is* going on, at least for most of us, to some extent. Unless you live on the West Coast, the sky is not on fire and the air is likely quite breathable. If you’re not near the Gulf of Mexico, you’re in little danger of being drowned by a tidal wave or hit by a flying street sign. There’s a good chance that you don’t even have a personal connection to anyone with COVID—according to an August poll from Axios-Ipsos, only 50 percent of Americans know someone who’s contracted the virus. That same month, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 91.6 percent of the country’s “labor force” was still employed. Around 280 million Americans *aren’t* at immediate risk of being evicted. Sports are back (kind of), school is in session (to some extent), and it turns out the asteroid that might hit Earth on Election Day is only six and a half feet wide (it’s almost certain to miss, anyway).

So why does it still feel like we’re fucked? Why do we sense—even if we, personally, are “oh fine, considering the circumstances”—that home is about to slip beyond our reach forever? Why is the nice warm feeling so elusive right now?

**T**HE MEN OUTSIDE THE PORTUGUESE BAR ARE stomping on their cigarette butts. Some head back inside, others to their cars—it’s getting late, and presumably they have work in the morning. I watch the man in the red cap give one of his departing friends a hug. I can’t hear what he says (even if I could, I wouldn’t understand much), but it’s clear that he is expressing some form of love. I’m a little surprised to notice how much sadness, jealousy, and rage this gesture arouses in me.

My reaction is both irrational and mean. I don’t immediately recognize it as such, of course. Instead, my brain starts whirring with excuses. The man is wearing a red cap—the unofficial headwear of monsters and fascists. Never mind that MAGA isn’t a thing in the mountains of Andorra, or that I know for a fact those letters aren’t emblazoned on his cap because on multiple occasions I’ve bummed a light from him and his friends, the friends he’s hugging (no masks, bad social distancing!) and chatting with right now. The friends whose physical presence he’s enjoying while I have only my cats for

company. The man in the red cap waves and shouts *tchau* as his buddy drives off in a small white work truck. Fuck ‘em.

Without anyone to look at or listen to, I’m alone with my thoughts. For me, this has been the worst part of the pandemic. It seems to be a common problem, as a recent report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that 41 percent of American adults are now anxious, depressed, or some foul brew of both. What is there to think about that isn’t bad? Trying to picture any kind of future seems absurd right now—the daydreams that used to provide an escape from the present moment have lost most of their appeal. I’m sure this isn’t the case for everyone: some people can still get excited about the prospect of landing their dream job, buying a new house, having a kid, whatever. I am happy for them, I think.

But my mind is on the past, and the paths that we take without realizing what we’ve done. How we make hundreds and thousands of seemingly insignificant choices that close the doors to different homes. I remember a conversation with a Korean ESL academy recruiter at a job fair many years ago. The feeling of breathing underwater for the first time. Waking up one morning to discover I’d been robbed. Watching my parents get older on a screen from thousands of miles away. Packing the things on my desk into a little cardboard box, just like in the movies, and tearing up the letter from my boss. Drinking a little glass of champagne before getting on an airplane. Reading an email that promised to change everything, forever. Ignoring a phone call from a friend. Getting the “one big break” I’d been waiting for, leaping at the opportunity, failing in quiet and unspectacular fashion.

The more I think about the decisions that have led me further and further away from home, the more disgusted I become. Because no matter how scared or alone I might be, there are many millions of others who have it much, much worse. It’s unsettling to feel, at once, so sad and yet so lucky.

Worried about making rent in the coming months? At least you’re tossing and turning all night in a real bed, under a real roof. Your level of precarity would be a hard-to-fathom luxury for many. “I’m sick of that rock-bottom feeling, where you don’t know where your next move is going to be,” a homeless man named Dennis Barrow told the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* upon being driven from the park where he’d pitched his tent, after getting kicked out of the hotel that had been his temporary refuge during the pandemic. “We have nowhere left to go.” Cutting back on “non-essential” groceries to stretch your savings? A bag of beans and pasta would be a godsend for people like Sheila Ritter and her family. As she said to CNBC, “Most of our conversations are, ‘When are we getting something else to eat?’ and ‘Mom, I’m hungry.’” So lonesome for a kind human touch you cry unprovoked at odd times of day? Some types of longing are more bittersweet than others. When the *Washington Post* asked nursing home resident Cary Johnston how it felt to be locked in the same facility with her husband while being unable to see him because he required special care, this is how she answered:

*“He is in a golden prison, and so am I. I know he is not going to live forever. Neither am I. But I don’t want to lose him this way.”*

I mention these examples not as some tedious exercise in “counting your blessings,” but as an illustration of the sheer scope of suffering that we as a people are experiencing. Our rational brains can’t begin to comprehend it. The numbers, even the pictures, have lost



what little impact they once had. But we can sense that happiness and comfort are being drained from our world. We are realizing, maybe for the first time in our lives, that we could be next. Against our will, we are being forced to acknowledge the pain of others. As we watch them lose their homes it starts to become clear that we are losing something as well.

Home, in whatever form it takes, is usually understood to be an intensely personal thing. Maybe the *most* personal thing, in fact—a home has to belong to someone in order for it to be a home. An apartment isn't a home unless there are people who live in it. A father's hug doesn't feel like home unless there's a son to feel comforted by it. The scents of lilacs and pine trees aren't a reminder of home unless there's a person to smell them and remember.

All these things conjure the nice warm feeling of home. But they don't exist in a vacuum. Like human beings ourselves, they draw their meaning from a web of marvelously intricate connections. Our sense of home depends on others being secure in *their* sense of home—if you feel at home when sitting in a coffee shop with a friend, that good feeling depends (to varying degrees) on your friend's ability to make rent, the barista's relationship with their parents, and all the people at all the tables around you being relaxed enough with the circumstances of their lives to generate the background chatter without which the place would feel empty and lifeless. Home, then, is a collective thing as well; our homes depend on the homes of others. And as those homes vanish, we experience a curious sort of homesickness. The feeling is flavored with empathy and dread, resentment and hope. We want—no, we need—things to be OK for others. We know that the people around us must have homes. But what about *us*? What about the things we ourselves have lost?

This is the dark side of our collective homesickness. On an intellectual level, maybe we know that another person's gain is not necessarily our loss. If the Portuguese man in the red cap gets to be with his friends again, it doesn't follow that this somehow prevents me from being with my friends. I know I should be happy for his happiness. In some sense I am. Still, I can't stop worrying that the world's supply of miracles has run so low that there are none left for me.

**T**HE PORTUGUESE BAR IS CLOSED THE NEXT morning when I go out to buy bread. I peek through the window as I walk past, taking stock of the knickknacks on the walls. There are brightly colored football scarves, trophies from a long-forgotten darts tournament, a notice for this year's Christmas lottery, some advertisements for an amateur singer's CD that look like they were made with Publisher 97. A cozy, homey vibe.

The bar is a stark contrast with my own apartment, where the bare walls are marked by solitary nails and scars of ripped plaster. All my knickknacks—wooden figurines of cats that remind me of my own, Greek Orthodox icons I don't really believe in anymore but are so pretty I keep them around anyway, jars of seashells from a trip to a long ago beach—are stuffed into plastic bags piled in the corner of a cramped room. How things came to be this way is a tedious and embarrassing story. I only mention it because it's a neat (if a bit on-the-nose) illustration of how jealousy now colors the way we think about home.

Here, I'm not talking about being envious of Nancy Pelosi and her \$24,000 refrigerators stuffed with ice cream that costs \$13 a pint, or Chris Cuomo's cavernous living room into which he tearfully emerged after a period of self-imposed isolation in his equally cavernous basement. Jealousy of the ultra-rich has always had a kind of "no shit" quality that makes it uninteresting to talk about (which might explain why millionaire comedian Ricky Gervais attempted to corner that particular market by ranting about celebrities who live "in a mansion with a swimming pool"). Yes, their opulence is grotesque; yes, their hoardings should be seized and redistributed; yes, they are the monstrous product of a racist imperial cisheteronormative patriarchal capitalist regime in its death spiral etcetera, etcetera. It's true, all true. But it also kind of feels beside the point. If you're an adult, you don't even bother dreaming about that idea of home anymore. Not seriously, anyway.

The kind of home-jealousy I'm talking about is much smaller and more mundane. It hits when you're on a video call with a friend and you notice they have a nice bookshelf with some lovely plants on it. Or maybe even before that, when they suggest doing the call and you have to remind them you don't have internet at home, and data is expensive. The jealousy can hit when you see a picture of your sibling with their partner and kids—how nice would it be to have hugs whenever you need them? You can feel this kind of jealousy from the mere knowledge that *someone, somewhere* is picking apples or going swimming or petting a dog. This isn't the just jealousy of the poor toward the wealthy, or the precarious toward the stable. It's the jealousy of you toward anyone and everyone who has some form of comfort that you yourself do not.

It's odd to think that the people you're jealous of are, in all likelihood, jealous of you too. Your sibling would probably love a moment of solitude at this point. Your friend with the nice bookshelf might be longing for a day that goes by without violence in the streets outside their window. For literally anything you can imagine doing, having, or experiencing, there is an enormous number of people for whom your little nothing would be an extravagant treat.

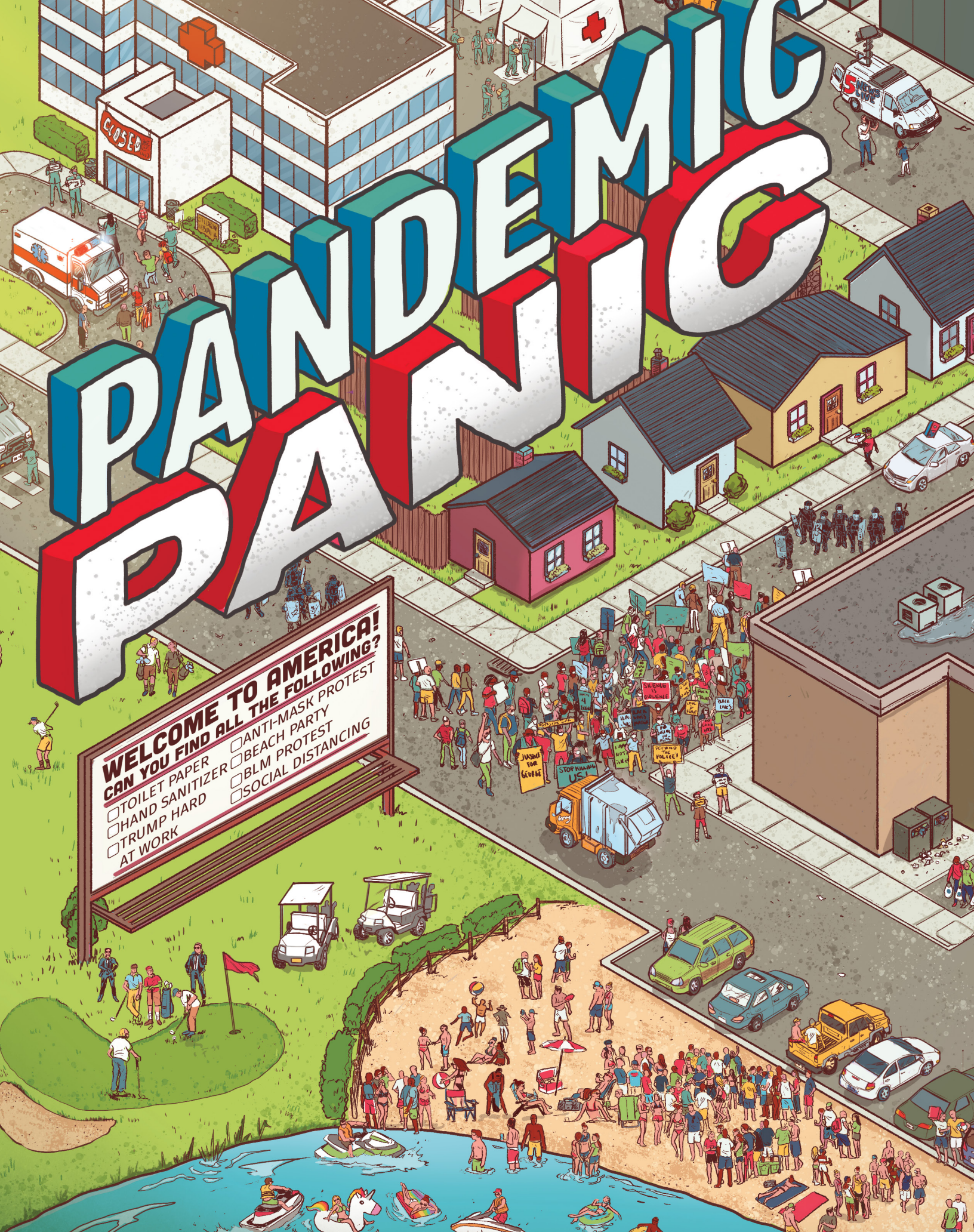
This jealousy is silly, or at least misplaced. It's the expression not of a real grievance against a particular person, but of a general sense of loss at the hands of monstrous unseen powers. Our ideas of home are being taken from us. As they slip away, we lash out with impotent sadness at anything that reminds us of the happiness that was once ours. Such a reaction might not be logical. But it is understandable.

Being alive in this version of the world feels so unstable. Does home even exist anymore? Is there anywhere we can run (our parents' house, an idyllic rural town, maybe New Zealand) where we can feel safe? Can we press our faces to the necks of our loved ones and be calm, knowing what lurks out there in the world? Are we ever going to feel the nice warm feeling the way we did before?

If there's a bright side to all our newfound insecurity about home—dear god, there must be—it's the tenderness that always accompanies pain. Maybe if we aren't driven mad by our own longing we can finally understand, in a visceral way, the longing in the hearts of everyone who goes without peace or comfort or acceptance. We might come to see them as ourselves (they *are* us, we cannot be separated from each other). All homes rely on the survival of other homes. I hope yours will endure; I hope you wish the same for me. ♣



# PANDEMIC



**WELCOME TO AMERICA!**  
**CAN YOU FIND ALL THE FOLLOWING?**

<input type="checkbox"/> TOILET PAPER	<input type="checkbox"/> ANTI-MASK PROTEST
<input type="checkbox"/> HAND SANITIZER	<input type="checkbox"/> BEACH PARTY
<input type="checkbox"/> TRUMP HARD AT WORK	<input type="checkbox"/> BLM PROTEST
	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL DISTANCING













**L**ONG BEFORE THE EVENTS THAT WE CALL HISTORY—before establishing the party, before Dien Bien Phu, before Tonkin, Rolling Thunder, Tet, and long before the capital city came to bear his name—Ho Chi Minh hurried down Mott Street in New York City, late for work. The year was 1917 and Ho suffered from a hangover. Pressure mounted behind his eyes. His mouth tasted as if he'd gargled wet bread. He craved all the water on earth. Ho was twenty-nine years old, and not unaccustomed to hangovers.

In the street, the city workers were repairing a sewer-line, leeching waste down the trash-choked gutter. The grocers hawked produce and an old bum pocketed an orange, using a little dog as distraction. It'd been seven months in the city and Ho felt as if he could finally see it as it was—a glimmering, stinky contradiction he couldn't help but enjoy. The world's best and worst tied together, entangled like the wet knot of conflict in his gut that seemed to tighten when he thought, as he tried not to, of his home.

Ho baked bread at a hotel known for lavish political fund-

raisers and debutante balls. Over the last few months he'd curried favor with an important maître d', Hugo, by helping to hide Hugo's romance with a washingwoman from his powerful wife, who was rumored to beat Hugo with a rolling pin. As Ho walked to work he toyed with the notion of skipping work, reasoning that Hugo would be able to keep him employed. But Ho decided that would not be fair, fairness being increasingly the yardstick of his life.

Ho longed to go to The Battery. It'd been months since he'd been to feed the geese and gawk at the statue across the water. Supposedly, visitors could no longer climb to the statue's top, which made him glad because he'd been too afraid to do so. Nonetheless he loved it, enjoying the statue and the battery for their similarities. The statue had arrived as pieces, built from the pedestal up, and the battery itself was a constructed piece of land, a pillow of rock and trash fluffed up into the bay by men with ideas as large as their means. He wondered whether a man can *actually* make something anew, deciding nothing is made anew because there has always been time, how time was what he lacked, and how time was the true power of wealth.

When he got this way, hungover and solipsistic, he missed home. Last week he'd read of a prison rebellion and wished he could be present to hear the rumors from shopkeepers and street typists. But why go back. Home doesn't take you back in time, Ho told himself.

It was past nine when Ho arrived at the hotel, slipping in the open alley door, past the stockrooms, and slyly into the steaming cave-like kitchen where he donned an apron and began mixing dough. He learned to bake at a hotel in Boston,

*HISTORICAL NOTE: The following is a work of fiction. While there's no reason to think that Ho Chi Minh actually met Leon Trotsky in a New York hotel in 1917, the two revolutionaries were likely in the city for three overlapping months in the beginning of that year. Much has been made of Trotsky's three-month tenure in the Bronx on the eve of the Russian Revolution, but Ho Chi Minh spent considerably more time in the U.S., living in New York and Boston, where he worked in kitchens and attended Marcus Garvey lectures. The historical record is unclear on the name that Ho Chi Minh was using at the time—most likely Nguyen Tat Thanh. Over the course of his life, he went by several names, ultimately adopting Ho Chi Minh around the year 1940. This story uses his most recognizable name for clarity.*



marooned there after losing his job on a steamer due to some missing jewelry. Boston had suited him though. The pace of the people, the contrast of snow on brick. It was in Boston that he'd read Rousseau's quote "childhood is the sleep of reason." Ho believed that he was just beginning to wake.

But still he wouldn't shake his boyish need to keep moving. It was like there was a little dog in his heart and if he refused to let it run it would soil his insides. Lately it had been whining at the door but for now Ho ignored it, kneading and mixing and kneading his days away.

"Ho!" his boss, Robert, wailed, after a while. "Ho, we need your French right this minute." Robert was a squat man who reveled in the authority of his job. He motioned for Ho, and as they walked Robert explained that Hugo had come to work so ill that he'd shat himself and was sent home. Some suspected that his wife had poisoned him.

"And how can I help?" Ho said.

"We have this table, and their English is poor," Robert said, holding up a waiter's jacket as he spoke. "And supposedly they're important. Hugo usually does the translating."

Ho didn't know what to think. He wasn't the serving type. His father had been a servant, a civil servant, and it ultimately led to his ruin.

"I do not feel qualified for this position, Sir," Ho said.

"Well qualify yourself in a hurry," Robert said, sending Ho to the storage room to change.

The pants were too long and the jacket too broad, making Ho appear even slighter than he naturally was. He looked like a boy as he adjusted his awkward white cummerbund in his concave reflection granted by a silver ladle. "Bonjour," he said to the loathsome image of himself. "Je serai ton serveur."

"Bonjour yourself, you turd."

Ho turned to find his communist friend Pepe leaning against the storage room door at such an angle so as to resemble a but-

treff. It was Pepe that first took Ho to the curtained backroom of a market on Mulberry Street where a sympathetic grocer sold communist magazines. Ho had bought penny pamphlets in English and French, languages now nearly as ingrained as his own. Inside he read of agrarian revolt, the general strikes in Spain, and the dethronement of Czar Nikolas.

"This is a promotion, no?" Pepe asked. Pepe was also a waiter, one of the best in the city.

"No. Hugo shat himself. Violently, I heard."

"Which is exactly what will happen to you, friend, when you see your table."

ROUSSEAU WROTE THAT THE FIRST FORTY years of a man's life supply the text while the following thirty supplies the commentary, which Ho thought of as he walked through the dining room with the restaurant patrons craning their necks at him like pompous geese. The majority of the patrons were already supplying their commentary, and supplying it with confidence, chatting and slapping their big clean hands on the tablecloths. Ho never wanted to reach an age where he just sat and told stories.

His table was near the window, usually reserved for important business or romances of note in the city. Two men were seated, each of them smoking filtered cigarettes from an engraved nickel case.

"Hello," Ho said, and they looked at him quizzically.

"Bonjour," he corrected.

One man was tall and slight, professorial in a pair of effeminate wire glasses and an oiled mustache. The other was round and wore a scar on his baldhead like a yam that had been nicked by a spade.

"Well look at you," the professor said in French. "This truly is a utopia, is it not?"

"Indeed," Ho said.

He took their orders for coffee, brandy, and soup, and then Ho bowed egregiously and was dismissed.

"What's he like?" Pepe asked Ho as he struggled to fill the men's drink orders in the buzzing nest of kitchens and stockrooms and preparatory rooms that thrived beyond the ballroom's swinging doors.

"What do you mean?"

"Trotsky. What's he like?"

And with that Ho dropped a snifter of brandy, exploding like an aerial bomb on the marble floor and splashing maroon collateral onto his pants.

Ho delivered their drinks without incident, adding sugar cubes and cream to Trotsky's coffee upon request, and received their orders for roast squab and Waldorf salad. Additionally, the men requested a bowl of green olives and more bread and much more brandy, please.

Back in the kitchen the rumors were spreading. The hotel was no stranger to fame, but when celebrities arrived, they typically did so leading pageants of beautiful women and entourages of associates with big cigars. Once, Harry Houdini came to dinner bringing only his fox terrier, Bobby, which sat in a chair opposite the magician throughout the entire meal. But this was different



"The bones are back!"



in that the truth was unknown. Someone thought it was a coincidence; the man just looked like Trotsky.

Another thought it was a body double.

Another called it a ruse concocted by the U.S. government to root out communist sympathizers.

Or potentially a ruse concocted by the hotel's owner, MP Shuttlecock, who feared of radicals among his staff.

Besides, someone had heard that the Tsar had Trotsky killed in 1914.

Someone had heard that Trotsky commanded a network of Red fanatical assassins.

Someone claimed to be a member.

Someone had heard that Trotsky was secretly French.

Someone had heard that Trotsky and Lenin were actually the same man.

It was Trotsky! No, it wasn't. Yes, but not Leon Trotsky. Just his brother Aleksandr. And who was the man with him? A union leader. No, a military strategist. No, a U.S. Senator. No, the heir to a Canadian timber company secretly funding Lenin's Red Army. Even Pepe, usually too aloof for such banter, had a take. He said it was indeed Leon Trotsky and that Trotsky would likely be gunned down any minute, right there on the dining room floor, along with whoever happened to be near him at the moment.

"It was good to know you," he said to Ho.



WHEN HO RETURNED WITH THE tray's white plates chirping against one another, the trouble began. Ho dribbled coffee onto the olives, which clearly disappointed the associate but made Trotsky laugh and pluck one from the bowl. "Delicious," he said to Ho. "Eat one."

"Oh, I could not," Ho said.

"I very much want you to eat one."

Ho ate one, and it wasn't an awful combination.

"What do you do in this city?" Trotsky asked.

"Usually, Sir, I bake the dinner rolls."

The associate laughed and Trotsky took an olive from the bowl and dropped it straight into his associate's glass of brandy.

"What else do you do?"

"I very much enjoy visiting The Battery, sir."

"The Battery!" Trotsky roared.

"The Battery!" his associate tittered.

Ho took his leave.

Robert was waiting past the silent swinging doors. "The nerve of it," he said, his neck reddening from collar to ears. "The absolute goddamned nerve of it! They walk into the hotel of MP Shuttlecock, of all places, and order an extravagant lunch!"

MP Shuttlecock was a hero of New York, having ridden with Roosevelt's rough riders and now taking every chance to show his patrons his battle scars. Ho had met him once, when Shuttlecock

brought his delinquent son to the kitchen, and made him knead dough for six hours as punishment for canoodling with a teen-aged heiress to a Pennsylvania oil company. As a reward for over-seeing the kneading, Shuttlecock stuck a one-dollar bill into Ho's smock. Watching Shuttlecock as he folded the bill, Ho had felt every inkling of awe for the man slip out of him like flatulence.

Robert had tried unsuccessfully to find Shuttlecock and inform him about Trotsky's presence. But, as a chronic sycophant, Robert thought he knew what Shuttlecock would like done. "Rat poison!" he whispered to Ho. "A little rat poison and we'll be the men that take down Leon Trotsky."

"Are you certain that's the best idea? For the hotel's reputation, I mean."

"Are you certain that you're not a communist?"

Ho stayed silent while Robert rifled through stockroom cabinets, tossing boxes of Borax and lye. He came across a bottle of rat poison and found it bone dry.

"Why not roach poison?" Ho suggested.

"Will that work?"

"It's as deadly as a sword," Ho said, having no clue.

Robert acquired some from a stockroom upstairs and mixed it into two chilled crystal glasses of vodka. "Tell them it's on the house," he said.

Ho delivered the Bolsheviks' soups and set the two crystal glasses onto the white tablecloth. "Our manager would like to offer you these two drinks as a token of our appreciation for your presence."

The associate clapped his fingers together and swirled the glass on the table.

"*Za zdoroviye*," the associate said. He lifted his glass high. "*Za zdoroviye!*"

"Wait!" Ho interjected, surprising himself with the quivering in his own voice. "I am sorry to report that I believe that the vodka has gone sour."

"Sour, is it?" Trotsky asked.

"I am afraid so, Sir. Sour."

"Nonsense," the associate said. "Vodka does not sour."

"No," Trotsky said. "It has gone *sour*." He poured the vodka into the floating candle centerpiece on the table and set the empty glasses in front of Ho. "Sit, little Comrade."

Ho sat.

"Should we be hurrying to the physician?"

"I believe that was all," Ho said. "It was just one man."

Trotsky took a huge uncouth slurp of brandy. "I hope you are correct. Go tell your man that we drank it up, and then return. We need your help settling an argument."

When Ho returned with the empty glasses, he found Robert waiting with another round. "I'm concerned one dose won't do the deed," Robert said.

"Good thinking," Ho said. "You're very crafty, Robert."

"I will make sure that Mr. Shuttlecock knows that you were a good helper in this plot."

"I'll watch them closely for signs of illness."

Ho dumped the vodka into the centerpiece. The sniffers of



brandy had been drunk and both men were smoking. The associate lifted his empty brandy snifter and blew smoke into it, tilting it sideways as if he could pour the smoke out.

"Sit," Trotsky said. "Sit and listen to this story for us."

"So there's this pauper in St. Petersburg," Trotsky said. "And he's mostly blind, and sallow, and gray. And with him, everywhere he goes, is this black sheep dog with fleas that you can see jumping from him like sailors from a sinking ship."

"Okay," Ho said.

"Oh please," the associate said.

"And this pauper, he uses this dog to help him navigate the streets and to beg for food, thinking a dirty old pauper with a dog is sadder than a just dirty old pauper."

"Naturally," Ho said.

"So one day a tycoon comes by and tells the pauper he'd like to buy his dog. And the pauper says the dog is not for sale and explains that he needs the dog to do his begging and to get around the city."

"The tycoon tells the pauper he'll give him 50 kopecks for the dog and the pauper tells him that he is very sorry, good sir, but his dog is beloved to him and is simply not for sale. So the tycoon says he'll give him five rubles, to which the pauper declines. The pauper then tells the tycoon that he got the dog from a farm on the west bank of the Neva up river and the farmer's name was Ivanov."

"The tycoon then says, *But it's not a similar dog that I want. It's your dog. How's twenty rubles?* But the pauper repeats that the dog is not for sale. So the tycoon offers thirty rubles."

"Please, Sir, the pauper says. *Forgive me but my dog is not for sale.*"

"The tycoon then pulls from his waistcoat his billfold and starts rifling through bank notes. Forty, fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty rubles. He waves them in front of the pauper."

"Please, Sir, the pauper says, *This is my dog.* The tycoon waves more money. Please, the pauper says again, tears in his milky eyes. *Please don't. This is my dog. He's my companion.* The tycoon says, *Do you know what I do, old man? I own properties. I have boarding houses, factories, flats. And I'll put you in a fine flat until you die if you just give me that reeking dog of yours.*"

"Why why why would you offer me this? the pauper asks. *Why?* He pats the dog on his ears and some fleas hop off onto the pauper's hand. Then, the pauper hands the dog's rope to the tycoon. The tycoon throws the money in his face and drags off his dog, promising to come back with keys to a new flat."

Trotsky took a drink of coffee, and another of brandy, using different hands for each. No one spoke. He lifted his eyebrows as if to invite an interpretation. He then put a fresh cigarette in his mouth and stared at Ho until Ho lit it for him.

"He didn't come back, did he?" Ho asked.

"He did, in fact. He returned that afternoon with the dog in tow. It had been groomed, and dewormed, and fed, and had a fine leather leash where its rope had been. He gave the pauper the keys to a new flat and, before he left, he returned the dog. *I don't even like dogs,* the tycoon was overheard saying. Now, please go refill my brandy."

He handed Ho his snifter. "And some filtered cigarettes as well."

Ho refilled the snifter, thinking of Trotsky's story. It seemed

like the kind of story Rousseau would deconstruct, one he'd distill into a bite-sized truism. Rousseau's second discourse came to him, memories of reading it in university. Something like "Beware the impostor of possession; you are lost if you forget that the fruits are everyone's." Ho chided himself for this life of his, the baking and loading of luggage. The impostor was in his own mind. He understood the story at once.

"I know the moral," Ho said proudly to Trotsky and the associate. "It's that neither man owns the..."

"Tssk," Trotsky snapped, silencing Ho. "Listen." He tapped on his temple and it became clear to Ho that the two men were drunk. "It's not a fable. There is no moral. It's a thought experiment. The question is whether the pauper would love his dog more or less after it was returned to him?"

They were quiet a second, the three men weighing two imperfect options. Ho believed that the old pauper would well with guilt for giving away his dog, but slowly he would learn to accept it, possibly taking solace in the providence of the situation. But Ho barely got a word out before Trotsky waved away his words like smoke.

"Tssk. If you think you know then there's no point in discussing it further. It's more complicated than you can understand. And you all are poor company. An entire nation of poor company and bad food."

The associate piped up. "Trotsky!" he said in English. "Afraid to lose the bet, are you?"

Trotsky stood, bumping the table with his thighs and spilling soup and brandy and coffee. He pulled from his breast pocket a sterling money clip and counted six fifty-dollar bills, which he slapped onto the tablecloth in front of Ho. "You are appreciated." He took his leave, his associate waddling after him.

THE NEXT DAY, AFTER TROTSKY WAS SEEN strutting about town, Ho was fired for failing to properly assassinate him. Leaving New York, he took only a trunk of clothes and the story with him, gifting his copies of Rousseau to Pepe. The story of the pauper's dog traveled with him to France, and to Germany, and onward to China and Thailand. He took it home to Vietnam and told it to soldiers and farmers and, once, he wrote it in a letter to Chairman Mao that he ultimately never sent. Sometimes late at night, while he lay stiff with the doubt that devastation can bring, he would imagine telling the story to none other than John F. Kennedy. What a great story, he thought. The kind that opened multiple doors, many lines of thought, but each ultimately leading to the same place: how to possibly measure what we owe one another?

As a sick old man in the stilt house that he preferred to the palace, Ho told the story again and again, the details morphing in each telling. Sometimes the story was set in a village in Vietnam and the tycoon was a wealthy French anthropologist who explored the countryside testing the merits of the poor. Other times he set it in Paris or New York City and once, in a re-telling to his great-grandchildren, Ho exclaimed that he was the pauper—a scrappy young man, down and out in some never-dark city—and his grandchildren laughed at the notion that he'd ever been so young. ♣



# BEAR WITH US



**DO YOUR PART: MAKE SURE EVERYONE  
IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD IS MASKED.**

\*Current Affairs does not recommend or condone putting a mask on a Grizzly Bear. It is far easier and safer to just wear a mask over your own face...yes even your nose.



# The Illustrators



*Maxwell Singletary*



*Helen Geiger*



*John Biggs*



*Helen Geiger*



*Mort Todd*



*Mike Freiheit*



*Tom Chitty*



*Jesse Rubenfeld*



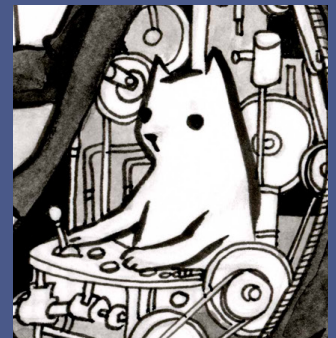
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