

*The Magazine With A Functioning Moral Compass*

# CURRENT AFFAIRS

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## ACTIVE SHOOTER DRILLS

*A horrible dystopian absurdity?*

## IRAQ

*Will anyone ever be punished for the invasion?*

## OUR PHONES

*Are they destroying us?*

## IN THE TWILIGHT ZONE

*Who knows what will happen?*

## FAMILIES

*Are they truly necessary?*





# The Beginning

## Holding it Together

We've got to hold it together, people! We've simply got to! It seems as if things have gotten out of hand lately. The kids who in 2020 were democratic socialists announce they are into fundamentalist Catholicism, or QAnon, or some other such claptrap. Stay focused, people. Eyes on the prize. Don't get distracted by cheap dangly trinkets. We are on a mission here. Do not drift off into madness and conspiracizing. The elevation of the human spirit and the alleviation of material deprivation: these are the goals and we must stick to them. Settle for nothing less than the glorious utopia of your imagination. We will get there. Baby steps. Do not stray from the path.

**THIS MAGAZINE WOULD LIKE TO FORMALLY WISH READER GREY KLECAK A HAPPY BIRTHDAY. CONGRATS ON MAKING ELEVEN!**

## FUN HISTORY FACT

In 1927, Winston Churchill said of Mussolini: "I could not help being charmed, as so many other people have been, by his gentle, simple bearing, and his calm, detached poise. Churchill praised "the Roman genius" as "the greatest law-giver among living men," and commented "Anyone could see he thought of nothing but the lasting good, as he understood it, of the Italian people."



## THE FAMOUS PERIODICAL

We realized recently that after 35 issues, we still haven't told you about the Periodical Oracle. Did you know about the Oracle? The Oracle (pictured above) appears as but a floating face, a mere hologram really. But the Oracle guides the entire publishing industry. When an editor-in-chief wishes to make a decision, such as whether to accept or reject a pitch, it is the Oracle who carries final authority. Many magazines have turned all business decisions over to the Oracle. If you wish to understand 21st century media, you have no choice but to try to understand the ways of the Periodical Oracle, which guides all.

**HAVE YOU BECOME EVERYTHING YOU WERE ORIGINALLY TRYING TO STOP? BEST TO CHECK AT LEAST TWICE MONTHLY. IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU!**

is your doll this  
**SHAPE?**



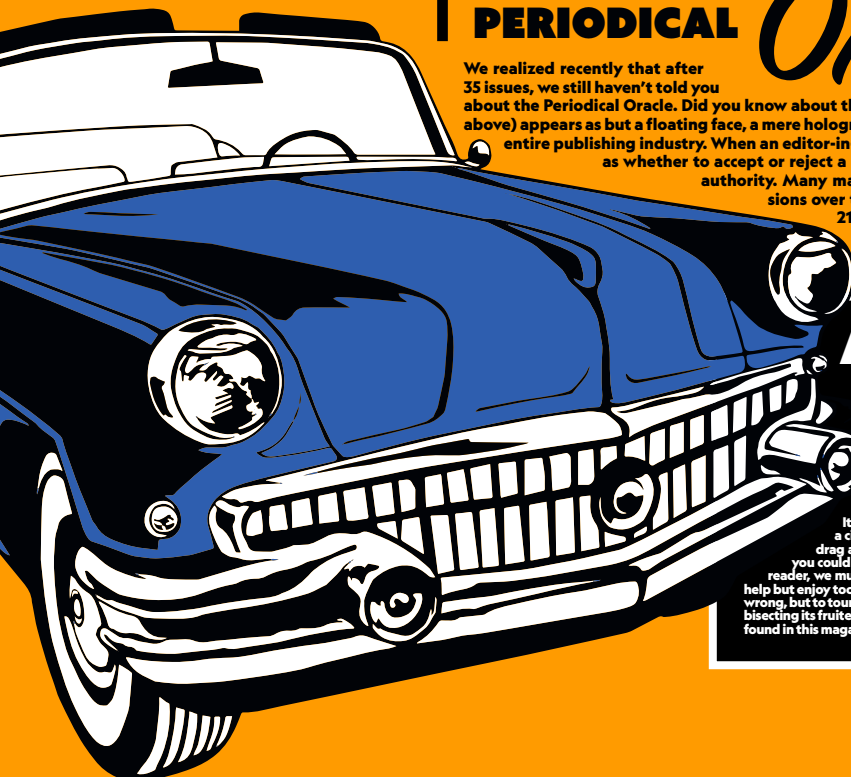
**SHE MAY BE GUILTY OF INTERNATIONAL ESPIONAGE**  
*Report her now!*



# Oracle

## AMBIVALENCE ABOUT THE Automobile

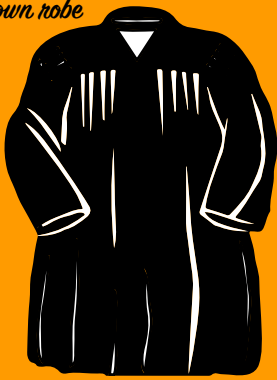
It is the official position of this magazine that cars are weird, and also unnecessary. If we were to design a city from scratch, there would be no place for the automobile in it. Why on earth would you want to drag a personal two-ton hunk of metal with you wherever you go, when in any sensibly-designed place you could walk, bicycle, or take the train to wherever you needed to be? No, the car must go, eventually. But reader, we must confess a certain ambivalence. We detest the automobile in principle, but in practice we cannot help but enjoy tooling down the open road with the wind in our hair. We know that the guzzling of gasoline is a moral wrong, but to tour the highways and byways of this great land, ascending its purple mountains' majesty in comfort and basking in its fruited plains, is an incomparable thrill. All of which is to explain why perspectives on the automobile to be found in this magazine may be muddled and inconsistent. Please write in with your thoughts on the matter.



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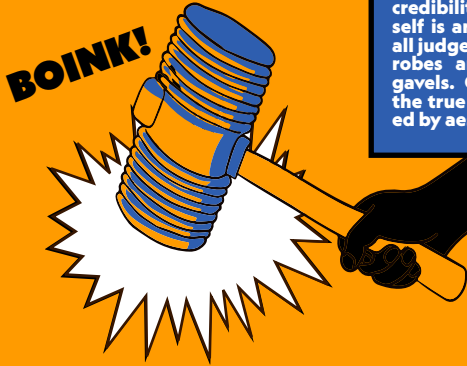


your own robe



## thoughts on JUDICIAL AUTHORITY

From where does the judge get their authority? The judge is able to rule only because the judge is obeyed. But why is the judge obeyed? It is plain that the robe and gavel are a major part of the story. If it were not so, a judge could be equally well-respected while doing the job in a T-shirt and flip-flops, and wielding a rubber toy gavel that makes a "boink" sound. We believe that any credibility coming from the robe itself is arbitrary and irrational. Thus all judges should be stripped of their robes and given novelty "boink" gavels. Only then will we discover the true meaning of justice, undiluted by aesthetic suasion.



## FRIENDS DON'T LET FRIENDS BECOME YIMBYS

How could I  
be so freaking  
stupid,  
Miranda?

It's okay,  
François. You  
didn't know  
who they were.



STAY  
AWAY  
FROM  
FAKE  
SOCIAL  
MOVEMENTS

## Podcast!

It is a curious fact that many readers of the Current Affairs magazine are unaware of the existence of the *Current Affairs* podcast, and many listeners of its podcast are unaware of its magazine. The situation is tragic, for enjoyers of one are sure to enjoy the other, meaning that the levels of joy in the world are becoming dangerously sub-optimal. So: if you enjoy this magazine, go to [patreon.com/currentaffairs](https://patreon.com/currentaffairs) and listen to its exceptionally good podcast, which delivers as spirited an imitation of a print magazine as can be accomplished in sound. And if you encounter a tradesman or lighthouse keeper who pronounces themselves a fan of the *Current Affairs* podcast, be sure to enlighten them as to the existence of our print edition. If history is anything to judge by, they will thank you for the rest of your days.

## FUN HISTORY FACT

From 1945 to 1959, the U.S. essentially ran a jobs program for Nazi scientists, bringing more than 1,600 Nazi German scientists to the U.S. for government employment. American public opinion was against rehabilitating Nazis in America, so the program was kept secret.

## THIS IS YOUR PALM TREE

## Tips for House-Building

Regular readers will be aware that this publication is known for its strong stances on architectural topics. As a result, C.A.H.Q. finds its mailbox overflowing with requests from readers for tips on how to build a house. We confess to finding these requests an irritant. This is not *DIY Digest*! This is *Current Affairs*! Look at the sign on the front of the building! A current affair is an abstraction, a building is an object. They could not be more different. "But why do you have so many opinions about architecture in that case?" you reply. Because an opinion is not itself an object. Stop asking silly questions. But if you must know our rules for building houses, here they are: all houses should have a front porch and/or a balcony. Rooms should be cozy, not too big and not too small. Design should fit within a tradition and a local context without mindless emulation. If there is more than one floor, there should be a slide or fire pole from the second floor to the first. All rooms should have light on two sides. There should be plenty of plants. (At least one room should be a "jungle room.") Despite popular opinion, floral wallpaper has not "had its day." The selection of chairs is the most important choice you will make. Make sure you have pink flashing overhead lights available in the living room for when you need to turn your house to "disco mode." A second fridge was never regretted. Wire it for sound, and you're done. There. Elementary. Spare us future pleas for advice. Only you can build your house.



Remember that plants are people, too.



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# RUN. HIDE. FIGHT.

*Active shooter trainings place members of the public inside seemingly inevitable mass shootings and ask us to save ourselves by preparing for the worst. What if, instead, we tried to prevent shootings altogether?*

BY ARJUN S. BYJU

**I**T IS EASY TO VIEW EMAIL AS A TASK LIST, what was once a means of connection now a nagging receptacle for chores. It's also easy to put off, if only temporarily, unread messages piling high in one's inbox, a drudgery best fit for another day. So when that day finally came and I waded through the slough of missed deadlines and expired promotions, it was with little surprise that I learned I was overdue on my university's annual online trainings: modules on academic dishonesty, drug and alcohol policy, insurance and confidentiality. I turned on the TV as I half-heartedly began my yearly ritual, clicking through the insipid series of videos and quizzes.

As anyone who has completed similar "trainings" can attest, the least annoying ones allow users to skip to the end of the lesson, while the newer (and more savvy) modules omit this function, requiring a certain amount of time "in-session." As of yet, the modules aren't designed to tell whether you have the sound on, though, so I muted my computer until

it was time for the quizzes—which were either ridiculously simple or could be taken an infinite number of times.

As I idly passed through the core requirements, I noticed that I was being redirected to another site, SafeColleges, this time for my "Active Shooter Training." Although I must have completed this course during my previous years of medical school, it only now struck me as remarkable.

The training began with a bland statement about the routes of egress from major buildings should someone dangerous be spotted on campus, as well as the importance of the mass communication system in which all students had been enrolled. Every semester I get a text in all caps, "THIS IS A SYSTEM TEST..." reminding me that if an armed individual came to my school, I would receive a notice on my smartphone—and that data rates may apply. Yikes. "YES," I dutifully respond each time. Message received.

But then the training got more ominous. The music and the lighting changed and three words appeared on the screen: "Run. Hide. Fight." I sat upright and turned on the volume. How had I missed *this* before?





Katie, an elementary school teacher, takes part in a simulated active shooter drill during a three-day firearms course for school teachers and administrators sponsored by FASTER Colorado at Flatrock Training Center in Commerce City, Colorado on June 28, 2018. FASTER Colorado (Faculty/Administrator Safety Training and Emergency Response) has been sponsoring firearms training to Colorado teachers and administrators since 2017. Colorado is one of approximately 30 states that allow firearms within school limits, and an estimated 25 school districts in Colorado allow teachers and administrators to carry concealed firearms / JASON CONNOLLY/AFP via Getty Images)

WHAT FOLLOWED WAS AN unsettling reenactment of a workplace shooting. Sponsored by the Department of Homeland Security, the video purported to offer viewers three “options for consideration” when responding to a shooter: Run, Hide, or Fight. What starts as a regular day at the office—a woman laments to her colleague, “Last night, as I closed my eyes, all I could see were slide decks”—turns quickly into anyone’s worst nightmare. Employees are shown demonstrating the three pillars in response to hearing gunshots: fleeing the office, hunkering down in a conference room, and, as a last resort, readying themselves to confront their assailant.

Much of the film was unnerving, including watching an older fellow resolutely arm himself with a tiny hammer or a young woman in a wheelchair, for whom running and fighting were largely impossible. Her colleagues might have to decide between escaping or staying behind to help her.

And yet, I was somehow bored. Despite the frightful subject matter, the video maintained an uninspired, bureaucratic tone. It was still a compulsory training, after all, so the nar-

ration was banal and the acting stilted (at one point, a man approaches a woman and awkwardly asks, “Hey, you got a minute to ... uh ... catch me up on ... that thing?”). I felt guilty for rolling my eyes—I reminded myself that this was a video about murder—but the underlying pretense had been so thoroughly cloaked in a shell of inauthenticity and served in succession with other mind-numbing digital checkboxes that it was hard to not view the training as perfunctory, something *else* I simply had to endure.

I skated through the quiz, distractedly answering queries about the most appropriate three-pronged response to a shooter (was it *Evacuate, Barricade, Confront* or was it *Run, Hide, Fight?*) and true-false statements like, “Having situational awareness and being prepared for an active shooter event will increase a person’s chances of survival.” (Hint: it’s not a trick question!) After passing the assessment with flying colors, I briefly contemplated whether hiding behind an industrial printer would be effective at stopping a shower of machine gun fire, and then I closed the tab. I returned to my inbox, where I was greeted by a reminder for an upcoming dentist appointment and a survey from Spirit Airlines: *Please rate your recent flight.*





Dave Acosta, founder of Fight Back, holds a dummy handgun as he talks about how to react and fight back during an active shooter event for teachers from Freedom Preparatory Academy on September 4, 2019, in Provo, Utah / GEORGE FREY/GETTY IMAGES

THE FOLLOWING WEEK, I ASKED MY FRIENDS what they had thought of the training and was invariably met with one of two responses. Either they hadn't noticed it, had been in a dissociative fugue for the duration of their annual recertifications, or they found it reasonable—sure the acting was a bit cheesy, they confessed, but wasn't that to be expected?

What disturbed me in the days following my online training was not that I was upset, but exactly the opposite: how *little* I felt. Government statistics define a “mass shooting” as one in which four or more individuals (excluding the shooter) are killed, so even though there were 23 school shootings this year, there have been “only” 12 *mass* school shootings since 1999—the most recent and second deadliest being the May 2022 Robb Elementary School shooting in Uvalde, Texas. Nevertheless, starting with Columbine, these massacres have routinely sparked policy debates, gripped national media, and provoked outpourings of emotion. I remember crying when I learned of Sandy Hook and Marjory Stoneman Douglas; consoling friends after the synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh; choking up while playing “An American Elegy,”

a piece composed in the wake of Columbine, in my high school orchestra. Why was I now bereft of emotion? How had moral outrage congealed into insouciance, numbness, even acceptance?

Thousands of schools, colleges, and workplaces use programs like the one I completed, often combining them with in-person courses, to prepare for the arrival of a gunman. ALICE, which is the largest and most successful of these for-profit ventures, boasts that it has trained over 18 million people on its eponymous platform, which is a cutesy acronym for Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, and Evacuate.

Regardless of the purveyor, these trainings all share a common narrative—a shooter is coming and it's up to you to stay alive—while engaging in a form of fantasy role play. Ready Houston's video from 2012 opens with the lines, “It may feel like just another day at the office. But occasionally life feels more like an action movie than reality,” as it pans to a bald man in sunglasses who begins to blast people with a shotgun. The FBI's video—which is slicker and more modern but nevertheless reverts to the same mantra of “Run, Hide, Fight”—encourages viewers to imagine themselves on a fun night out. After shots are fired at a lively bar, the actors turn to the





camera, breaking the cinematic fourth wall, and say things like “Running makes you harder to hit and improves your chances of survival,” and “He’s applying direct pressure to the wound until we can find a tourniquet. In the meantime, turn off your phones and make a plan to defend yourself.” Another video from the FBI, titled Prepare to Survive, scans through a synagogue and suggests “if you must, empower yourself.” Then, highlighting a set of knives and frying pans, the video continues, “Find something to use as a weapon and don’t fight fair.” This sharing of experience mixed with imperative statements (*hold my hand, we’re going to escape this massacre together!*) seems central to much of the active shooter genre, if only because it is otherwise so difficult to prepare for such an event in real life.

---

*“Two masked men wearing hoodies and wielding handguns burst into the Pine Eagle Charter School in this tiny rural community on Friday. [T]he gunmen headed into a meeting room full of teachers and opened fire. Someone figured out in a few seconds that the bullets were not drawing blood. [T]hey were blanks and the exercise was a drill, designed to test Pine Eagle’s preparation for an assault by ‘active shooters’ who were, in reality, members of the school staff. But those few seconds left everybody plenty scared. They weren’t expecting a drill like this, and they were caught by surprise when the two men entered and began firing.”*

— *The Oregonian* (2013)

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Difficult, but not beyond attempt, as the leagues of workplaces that conduct in-person shooter drills can attest. At least 95 percent of public schools in the U.S. practice lockdown drills, in which elementary-aged students and high schoolers lock doors, turn off lights, and remain quiet while administrators go around banging on classrooms. This is rather tame compared to the elaborate mock-shootings many schools perform for the benefit of preparedness, using fake blood and blank rounds to simulate the “real deal.” Bafflingly, some of these drills are *unannounced*, so that students and teachers believe they are in a genuine life-or-death situation. As the president of the National Education Association, a major teachers’ union, said, “You have kids wetting their pants, you have kids crying, you have teachers crying and you have everyone saying, ‘this is it—I’m going to die.’ ... And when it’s over, it’s like—just kidding!” (And I thought gym class was scary!)





Law enforcement and first responders participate in a regional active shooter training at Deering High School in Portland, ME. Deering High School students lay on the floor simulating victims during the drill. / STAFF PHOTO BY DEREK DAVIS, PORTLAND PRESS HERALD VIA GETTY IMAGES

Such drills have been rightly criticized, and seem a far cry from my poorly-scripted and mostly boring online training. But in reality, they share a common ethos. Both approaches—drab online modules and ultra-realistic reenactments—promote a given: that mass shootings *will* happen. Whether sliding slaughter into bland corporate-style videos or injecting danger vividly into classrooms, we make violence and bloodshed fundamental and unavoidable. As the Department of Homeland Security training flatly states,

*“Whenever you enter a building as an employee, guest, or customer, you must be prepared and know what it is you will do if faced with the worst-case scenario—even if it’s just another day at the office.”*

Whenever I enter a building? In the last week alone, that includes a hospital, a research lab, a bank, several restaurants and coffee shops, a gym, and a concert hall. To be prepared for the worst-case scenario everywhere I go seems an atrocious fate. But steeper still is the price of ignoring my training—or so I’m told. What feels wrong about the mass shooting pre-

paredness industry is this comfortability with the worst-case scenario, the practicality it evinces, the way in which training to get shot at work, school, or church is made to seem so utterly normal.

THE ASSUMPTION IMPLICIT IN ALL active shooter training is that these violent rampages will happen and may strike “anywhere at any time.” Indeed, for those who watch the news, it may seem obvious that public mass shootings are increasing in frequency and severity and can occur anywhere from playgrounds to nursing homes. This is surely distressing, and any honest and holistic assessment of the trend would raise two obvious questions: *why* do these shootings happen and *how* can we prevent them?

Yet the preparedness industry dodges both issues, accepting as foregone that shootings will continue to occur and



that little can be done to predict them. Observing the seemingly endless spate of shootings in America over the last few decades, a columnist for the *LA Times* cracked that mass shootings are now part of American culture (and that was back in 2015!). I, too, find myself nauseated by how familiar I am with the typical response to this violence whenever it occurs: incredulity on the part of the victims, promises not to glorify the shooter's name, conservatives calling for arming

more civilians, liberals calling for gun control, conservatives bemoaning the Left's attempts to politicize a tragedy, and reporters comfortably obtaining the sound bites we crave—as they have a dozen times before, from stoic sheriffs and weeping parents and psychologists to preachers and town mayors and jaded activists. Then, everyone moves on. And it happens again.

When faced with the same cycle of violence and lip service, people may naturally accept mass shootings as a kind of fate, a problem of the new millennium, like climate change or smartphone addiction, that we can at best hope to mitigate. As Jaclyn Schildkraut, a professor at SUNY Oswego and proponent of lockdown drills, said to CNN:

*This is unfortunately a product of the time that we're in, and we have to prepare our kids with these tools [lockdown drills] to stay safe. ... I think that there is a belief that we can profile mass shooters or prevent them. ... But the reality is that if somebody wants to harm you, they're going to find a way.*

Schildkraut's sentiment is widely accepted by the active shooter training industry, which has decidedly pivoted from *preventing* armed violence to *responding* to it, concluding as fact that harm will come to us all, one way or another. "The authorities are working hard to protect you and to protect our public spaces," says the narrator of the Ready Houston video on surviving an active shooter. "But sometimes," he continues, "bad people do bad things." This glib narrative, reminiscent of children's stories about bad guys who like doing bad stuff, moves the onus somewhere else, away from public discourse and political action. The good guys tried as hard as they could, but these things sometimes *just happen*.

But did we really try?

The framework espoused by the training industry precludes the possibility that maybe, actually, there *was* something that could have been done: reporting a colleague who made threatening remarks, or better yet, eliminating his access to firearms. If we could wave a magic wand and vanish away the nearly 400 million guns in this country (this is but a thought experiment, although New Zealand has tried as much) then there would be no mass shootings. In reality, this is politically unlikely in the U.S., where the disproportionately powerful gun lobby has galvanized support around perceived infringements on constitutional rights. Even though a bipartisan majority of Americans support basic gun legislation—like background checks for private sales and bans on assault weapons—enacting federal gun control of this kind has proven elusive. Such "common sense" approaches would make killing sprees harder to commit, and if nothing more, could reduce the innumerable *other* deaths and injuries from firearms that, involving fewer than four victims at a time, are not categorized as mass shootings.

# CURRENT AFFAIRS

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## RUN. HIDE. FIGHT.

While legislation in this country has admittedly been scarce, it remains evident that guns are a necessary, although insufficient, prerequisite to mass killings. Studies over the last several decades have continually demonstrated that access to firearms is associated with increased suicide risk, with the largest analysis concluding that “people who owned handguns had rates of suicide that were nearly four times higher than people living in the same neighborhood who did not own handguns.” There is a much greater chance that someone will experience an accident, suicide, or homicide from a gun in their home than that it will be used in self-defense. Similarly, one can assume that mortal injury is more likely to be carried out by those with guns, not because they are necessarily more criminal, but because their tool is *more fatal*. Remove, or make less available, the fatal tool, and we might expect fewer deaths. Psychiatrist and sociologist Jonathan M. Metzler quantified this effect in his 2019 book *Dying of Whiteness*, concluding that lax gun laws enacted in the 2000s in Missouri (one of the most gun-friendly states in the nation) were responsible for the loss of over 10,500 productive years of life.

Some respond that would-be shooters are inordinately motivated, and would break gun control laws even if they existed. Again, this is a variant of the argument that bad guys do bad things. Not only is this logic circular—we only know they are bad after they have done something bad *with a gun*—it is, worse, defeatist. Since there are people motivated to kill, shouldn’t we at least *try* to stop them?

In training videos, shootings are portrayed as omnipresent threats without causality or predictability—as things that happen *out of the blue*—obviating any hope we might harbor around prevention. Furthermore, the emphasis placed on the “badness” of the “bad guys” renders these attacks fundamentally outside human control. These narratives matter, for they create the borders in which we operate, obscuring some realities and highlighting others. As Ann Mongoven insightfully argues:

*One entrenched family of metaphors that deserves critical debunking is a linguistic web implying this master-metaphor: gun violence is natural. If you don’t think that gun violence is natural, stop talking about it in terms of tragedies, incidents, and events. That is a metaphorical family that we use to describe natural disasters.*

*“Tragedy” conveys a sense of misfortune, the vicissitude of nature over and against the frailty of human mortality. While the term highlights the catastrophic consequences of mass shootings, it obscures their intentional nature. That intentional execution is further downplayed through the use of terms such as “inci-*



RIGHT: Teachers interact with a video simulator that creates an active shooter scenario in a school during a 2019 training session in Provo, Utah. The 20 hour, six-week course “trains teachers and school administrators skills to handle active shooter incidents in schools, including firearm training.” / GETTY IMAGES





Joe Emery of TAC\*ONE Consulting, an active shooting trainer and former Las Vegas police department sergeant, speaks to kindergarten students at Pinnacle Charter School during TAC\*ONE training for an active shooter situation in a school in Thornton, Colorado, U.S. August 29, 2019. / REUTERS

*dent” or “event” to describe shootings, language often applied to things outside of human control. To call a mass shooting a tragic incident is linguistically to pose it as inevitable.*

One of the central failings of active shooter training is this linguistic passivity in relation to abject violence and ambivalence toward intent. It may be uncomfortable to accept that some of our fellow humans want to kill us, but side-stepping that conversation or using euphemisms only handicaps our chance at preventing murder. Mongoven furthers:

*Ironically, the language of “tragedy” is often paired with a metaphorical description of the shooter as “pure evil.” Thus, the shooting is a natural disaster, while the assailant’s power is a diabolical force that breaks into the natural world. So mass murders are rendered both an act of God and an act of the Devil. The paradox spares us from thinking about the massacres as products of human culture, the shooters as neighbors raised in our communities, and the shootings as preventable.*

Although the conversations after the 1999 Columbine High School shooting in Colorado may have been misguided in their exploration of violent video games and incendiary

music (e.g., Marilyn Manson), they at least sought to answer the *why* question, proposing an exploration of the society and culture from which the murderers arose. Within that conversation is the theoretical possibility of change and action, either through legislation around guns or proactive approaches to adolescent mental distress. A popular GOP refrain, and one that has reemerged as this piece goes to press in the days following the Uvalde shooting, is that “We cannot legislate away evil.” Nowadays, we are more likely to accept mass shootings as destiny, like the fates and furies of Greek mythology, something horrible that may strike us from without, and to which we are all but consigned.

Consider, for example, how often mass shootings are compared to natural disasters. Ready.gov lists “attacks in public places” alongside tornadoes, earthquakes, and floods, implicitly comparing a violent school rampage to events that follow inexorable patterns like tectonic shifts. (Similarly, FEMA—the organization infamous for its dismal Hurricane Katrina response—regularly directs trainings on active shooters.) Schildkraut, the proponent of lockdown drills cited earlier,





Teachers and staff members take part in an active shooter training at James I. O'Neill High School in Highland Falls, New York, U.S., December 12, 2017 / REUTERS

makes this analogy explicit in her interview with CNN: “We train students in the Midwest to deal with tornadoes, and we train students in the West to deal with earthquakes. Yet for some reason, we won’t do it for a manmade disaster, only for a natural disaster, which seems counterintuitive.”

On some level, this reasoning, which is couched as mature and realistic, is hard to argue against. As long as shootings keep happening, why *not* be prepared? Isn’t it better to be safe than sorry? Why live in denial?

**M**ANY PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN DISTRAUGHT over mass violence and at one time hoped for gun control, myself included, have felt this way, reckoning that as long as the country remains gridlocked we might as well prepare for calamity.

An apt analogy to this perspective is Mark Fisher’s concept of capitalist realism, which proposes that capitalism has become so entrenched that it is impossible to contemplate its alternative—a sentiment often associated with the quip “it is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to cap-

italism.” As our society rushes to install bulletproof whiteboards, spends millions to curve hallways to make it harder to mow down children, as we contemplate stocking classrooms with tampons to staunch gunshot wounds or moving school completely online to avoid violence entirely—it is easier to imagine *anything*, even arming kindergarteners with assault weapons, than it is to imagine an end to school shootings.

“Kinder Guardians,” a ludicrous proposal from comedian Sacha Baron Cohen to do just that—arm children *as young as 24 months* with machine guns and grenade launchers—garnered support from several conservatives who opined, “The way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good kid with a gun.” Cohen’s scheme was ultimately satire, but is not much crazier than real life. Currently, the ALICE program teaches students to throw objects, like staplers, books, and hole punchers, at assailants and describes a “swarm” technique by which children can tackle a gunman (they note that “swarming” is only advised for sufficiently mature children, at least 14 years old). A teacher recounted the number of tragically desperate measures he and his colleagues were led to consider in order



to debilitate a would-be shooter, including throwing marbles down the hallway so that the intruder might slip. These Tom and Jerry-esque hijinks are easy to laugh at, but they betray the underlying anxiety inherent in all preparedness culture: it's up to *you* to save yourself.

Many of the training videos say this outright. ALICE reminds participants that police can take awhile and therefore professes, "You are responsible for your own survival." "You can survive a mass shooting," the FBI's video proclaims, "if you're prepared."

The most pernicious element of the pragmatist school of thought is this cruel inversion: foisting responsibility for sur-

*"I can tell you personally, just as an educator, we were not okay [after drills]. We were in bathrooms crying, shaking, not sleeping for months. The consensus from my friends and peers is that we are not okay."*

— K-12 teacher, quoted in  
**The Impact of Active Shooter Drills in Schools**

vival on the individual. In a drill conducted in Indiana, teachers were brutally reminded of this fact—that they could not count on governments or civil institutions or even the police to save them—as they were forced to kneel, were shot with rubber bullets "execution style," and were told, "This is what happens if you just cower and do nothing."

This ethic is a ghost of American individualism and our obsession with personal responsibility. It is a close cousin of the anxiety many of us face about recycling while industry continues to burn fossil fuels, or of saving money for the chance we become ill because the government is unable to enact a very popular program, Medicare for All. Many colleges offer informal courses on budgeting or how to live frugally on loans even though they are the ones putting students grotesquely in debt. We are told simply that *this is the way the world is* and we would do well to be practical, like voting for the moderate instead of the radical, or accepting a compromised bill over no legislation at all. These deals are ones we would be foolish to refuse. The modern energy-intense economy and the skyrocket-

ing racket of college tuition and the entrenched web of lax gun laws are not going to be upended any time soon, we are told, so we might as well do our part and be *prepared*. Better something than nothing, right?

But what if diligently preparing for the worst case scenario makes unassailable the conditions that perpetuate the status quo? As Natalie Baker in the *Brooklyn Rail* contends, our "obsession with planning to harness the chaos of the future allows us to neglect what brings us to disaster in the first place—poverty, inequality, capitalism, colonialism and so on."

In theory it's possible to prepare for the worst while fighting equally vigorously for better conditions, like alleviating poverty, inequality, and creating safe public spaces. But in practice—and certainly when it comes to gun violence—this is rarely what happens. We point to tawdry trainings to expiate our guilt, to say "Look, we did *something!*" Some have appropriately called this "security theater," a charade akin to pandemic temperature checks with inaccurate thermometers, or wiping down surfaces when the main mode of a virus' spread is via aerosol. What is the point, if not to *seem* like we are taking action, especially when many of the additions to campuses and workplaces, like security cameras, are onetime upgrades without plans or budgets for maintenance or upkeep—and go on to sit unused or unrepaired.

**I**N TRUTH, MEASURES LIKE ONLINE VIDEOS and quizzes proliferate because they are tangible and quantifiable, can be used to abjure liability, and are sellable. On the other hand, the work necessary to make shootings less likely is complex, challenging, and not easily commercialized. As Ken Trump, president of National School Safety and Security Services (a school safety consulting firm) said:

*It's harder to point to adults building relationships with kids; improved counseling and mental health support; regular planning and cross-training with first responders; diversified lockdown, evacuation, fire and other drills; and proactive communications strategy with parents and the community—all of which truly make schools safer.*

Trump's for-profit company is, of course, trying to sell safety products to schools, and I disagree with his omission of gun control, but I am generally sympathetic to his perspective that preventing school violence requires integrated, long-lasting, and local changes. Most K-12 shooters are students from the school itself, so facilitating communication between parents, teachers, students, and mental crisis experts seems more successful than a one-size-fits-all, pre-packaged training. And while I'm wary of arguing vaguely for "mental health support" as it has become a standard insincerity on the Right and a deflection away from gun control, I appreciate





Dave Acosta, founder of Fight Back, uses a dummy handguns as he demonstrates with a teacher how to disarm a shooter during an active shooter event with teachers from Freedom Preparatory Academy on September 4, 2019 in Provo, Utah. / GEORGE FREY/GETTY IMAGES

that this response is at least aimed at *prevention*, and, if undertaken earnestly, would alleviate vast swathes of suffering among teens, if nothing more.

By accepting gun violence as foregone, the training industry sustains a self-fulfilling prophecy: insisting there's nothing we can do to stop these events means we never will. Nicole Hockley, whose child was killed at Sandy Hook, similarly expressed her discomfort with the preparedness industry: "It's so much focus on imminent danger and what you do in the moment ... as opposed to what you do to stop it from happening in the first place."

Hockley advocates for gun control, but admits that if not politically feasible, there are other preventive measures she endorses—like an anonymous reporting system at schools. According to Jillian Peterson, a professor of criminology at Hamline University, 80 percent of school mass shooters threaten or leak their plans ahead of time, so a robust reporting system—and one that does not merely punish or expel students, but offers them crisis support—could catch violence before it occurs. Similarly, she notes that 80 percent of school mass shooters get their gun(s) from family members, mainly parents. While troubling, this fact implies that simple measures, like expanded use of safes and locks at home, could greatly reduce the likelihood of mass shootings (it would also be nice if the firearms inside the safes weren't assault weapons, which have been used in the five deadliest mass shootings in our country, but that's

a separate point.) These are only two approaches, but they are laudable, if only because they attempt to forestall violence—and refuse to accept mass shootings as fate.

SCHOPENHAUER SAID THAT LIFE WAS like a pendulum, swinging endlessly between boredom and pain. After enduring a pandemic quarantine I can say this is accurate, although it also describes the way we approach mass shootings. On the one hand, we consume dull training videos: bland, poorly-acted, and easy to tune out. The very nature of these videos and quizzes elaborates a narrative of unremarkableness—of something that must be done to maintain order, to prevent lawsuits, to be in compliance—and of inevitability, of disasters that can and will strike at random. On the other hand, we have panic-inducing lockdowns with students soiling themselves, preparing wills, and writing notes on their arms in case they perish in a school massacre; teachers, too, are traumatized by drills, occasionally injuring hips and developing PTSD. A study conducted by the Everytown research group, which monitored social media posts before and after active shooter drills, concluded that the simulations were associated with a 39 percent increase in depressive thoughts and a 42 percent increase in stress and anxiety.

No wonder then that young people are confused, torn between apathy and terror as we slowly normalize mass vi-



olence. As one teacher-in-training described, many children today remain worried about school violence, while others pay it no heed, accepting what may come with a nonchalance that is in some ways more unsettling than fear:

*I have some students who are completely unfazed. This is normal to them, and it scares me some days. They're high schoolers, and many have accepted that it may one day be them, but are unshaken. Then I have the other half, and we have discussions about how to be safe and ways to find comfort in scary times. They're paranoid and afraid. My heart is broken on either end of the scale.*

Reflecting on my own childhood, attending public school in Florida, I remember innumerable “Code Red” drills, in which we

huddled silently in our classroom as the teacher bolted the door and turned off the lights. Occurring every quarter, these events became routine. Mimicking the rhythm and synchronicity of fire drills (the two perils were implicitly related), these exercises taught us to understand both fires and shootings as bland, unpredictable events that required an unemotional, orderly response.

I recall finding these drills innocuous, as an 11-year-old, a reprieve from the monotony of class as I hid behind filing cabinets and cubbies and made faces at my friends. And yet, I can distinctly remember pausing, once or twice, to contemplate what it meant when we were told to huddle away from windows and cover our necks so as to avoid shards of glass that could nick a carotid artery. Thoughts of exsanguination were quickly diverted, though, by the banality and redundancy of the task at hand, by the same untroubled energy by which we ignore in-flight safety demonstrations, our nose buried in a book, headphones blocking out all sound.

ASTOUNDINGLY ENOUGH, THE AD BELOW IS NOT IN FACT ONE OF CURRENT AFFAIRS' SIGNATURE DARK PARODY ADVERTISEMENTS BUT AN ACTUAL WEBSITE FOR A DYSTOPIAN NEW KIND OF INSURANCE BUSINESS:

Active Shooter Insurance

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Complete Coverage

- NO Terrorism exclusions
- NO Employee exclusions
- NO Casualties threshold
- NO Vehicle exclusion
- NO Drone exclusion

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- Houses of Worship
- Restaurants & Hotels
- Retail Establishments
- Manufacturing Plants

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Application Information

- # of Employees
- # of Students/Patients
- # of Location
- # of Years in business
- # Hours of operation

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- Individual Training
- Corporate Training
- Certification Program
- Online or Onsite

READ MORE

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- ✓ \$1M – \$20M Standard Limits ( \$100M capacity ).
- ✓ Victim Expenses – Medical, dental, psychological, death, funeral, & burial expenses.
- ✓ Rehabilitation, Vision loss, Hearing Loss, Permanent disablement.
- ✓ 3rd Party Legal Liability Expenses – defense costs, indemnity, judgments, settlements.
- ✓ Business Interruption/Extra Expenses – Resume Ops. Post-event crisis management & public relations.
- ✓ Physical Damage to Property including demolition, clearance, & memorialization costs.
- ✓ Aggregated Policy.
- ✓ Off-site exposures.
- ✓ \$0 – \$10K retention in most cases.

“LET’S BE VERY CLEAR,” BEGINS A BLOG post from Aegis, a company which sells training courses, security guards, and risk assessments for mass shootings. “This is not about being afraid. This is about being smart and being prepared.” The post, which focuses on Jewish synagogue security and refers directly to the 2022 hostage crisis in Colleyville, encourages all Jewish organizations to protect themselves with an “iron dome” of emergency plans and drills. The author further suggests that synagogues should conduct “pen tests” (short for penetration tests) in which “specialists” attempt to infiltrate the synagogue and observe congregants’ reactions in real time. Despite best efforts, it’s hard to imagine how anyone would *not* be afraid as mock gunmen stormed their house of worship, possibly unannounced, and simulated an act of terror. But being afraid, at least according to this blogger, would be silly. Simulations like these are but a practical necessity, a precaution only fools could ignore.

More than anything else, what have irked me about the active shooter industry (now worth \$2.7 billion) are the dicta, like these, about *how* we ought to feel—particularly from people who are trying to sell us something. It’s often a smattering of sobriety and practicality—*don’t be emotional, this is what you need to do*—mixed with blatant fearmongering and pressure tactics—*remember this recent tragedy, you wouldn’t want that to be you, would you?* It’s an unsettling juxtaposition to be hawking bulletproof backpacks at an expo 10 miles from Disney World, all while cultivating an air of staid price-consciousness. As one salesman, who rents undercover special ops agents to schools (literally the plot of *21 Jump Street*), explained:

*The beauty of it is it’s all for the price of a Netflix subscription, so it’s really hard to argue with me about ‘Well, it costs too much.’ You can’t tell me that.*



Yes, we probably can't argue about price, although prudence is another matter. The active shooter industry wants us to be clear, cool, rational—detached from our emotions and realistic about mitigating, if never preventing, harm. And yet, they prey on temporary bouts of outrage and terror. I have held off on reciting statistics about gun violence, but think it's worth mentioning that campus gun deaths remain incredibly rare. First, according to CNN's interpretation of FBI data since 2000, on average five students or staff a year have died in mass shooter incidents at schools. That's five out of 56 million students who are in the school system. The odds are higher that you will be struck

*"[There is] evidence that active shooter drills in schools can deeply harm the mental and physical outcomes of students and the communities that support them."*

— The Impact of Active Shooter Drills in Schools, Everytown For Gun Safety (2021)

by lightning. This is not to trivialize those deaths, but to offer an alternative narrative of the numbers, since we are so often beseeched to be "practical."

Second, mass killings constitute only 1 percent of all homicides and happen overwhelmingly in private residences—meaning that our inordinate attention to mass murderers and perpetual securitization of public spaces may be largely misguided. Again, this is not to say that deaths from public mass killings don't matter, or that gun control measures wouldn't be important—they would probably curb much of the other 99 percent of homicides, too—but simply to say that if we are being "smart" we ought to give consideration to how resources are allocated holistically and in service of prevention. I'd wager, for example, that at the school with nearly \$50 million dollars in curved hallway renovations, many students still hail from homes with loaded and unlocked guns and teachers are paid a pittance.

**I**N OTHER WORDS, THERE'S GOOD REASON TO question the heady march towards "hardening" schools, workplaces, and our entire culture—especially because there is scant evidence that armed security guards, metal detectors, or shooter trainings work. As



A student with fake wounds, who played a victim during a 2014 active shooter drill in Missouri. NBC News reported: "These volunteer victims, mostly culled from the school's drama class, are outfitted in fake-bloody bullet wounds, still wet and dripping down their foreheads, necks and chests. Bowen tells them what to expect: They'll see 'bad guys with AR-15s' shooting blanks... PVC pipes will be dropped on the floor to approximate IEDs." PHOTO BY NBC NEWS

much as these trainings do prepare students, their goals are undercut by the psychological toll they incur; students who watch training videos report feeling more prepared, but also *much more afraid*. This has led some, like James Alan Fox, a professor of criminal justice at Northeastern, to conclude that we'd be better off simply *stating* the protocol in case of a shooter, rather than going to lengths to simulate the occurrence. "There is no evidence that [an active shooter drill] prepares people any better than just instructing them verbally or in writing." As such, we should demand empirical evidence from those peddling security features like iron cages, facial recognition software, or "pen tests," if only because, once introduced, these measures are unlikely to ever go away.

But that doesn't mean you *shouldn't* be upset, either. Sometimes, emotionality is what drives genuine change. Perhaps to make the world a better place we have to be afraid, angry, indignant, or fired up. Many of our greatest triumphs in legislative action—on animal cruelty or child labor, for instance—were motivated in large part by our affective, visceral response to their horribleness. What made these campaigns meaningful was our aspiration to attain a society without injustice, to *prevent* bad things rather than resign ourselves to living with them. When it comes to school violence, it will take *passion* to agitate for more locks and firearm safety at home, robust and nonpunitive reporting systems in schools, improved crisis and mental health support, holistic resource allocation rather than onetime upgrades, and, principally, a reduction in the quantity and lethality of guns available in this country. It's hard to imagine any proactive change *without* fervor.

Fortunately, the world isn't handed to us preformed, but is created anew each day. And as we have been reminded repeatedly, when confronted with adversity, we can respond in many ways: we can run, we can hide, or we can fight. ✚







# "FORGET THEY ARE AN ANIMAL"

By Marina Bolotnikova

REPORTING ON ANIMAL AGRICULTURE, I think a lot about euphemisms. Any time the meat industry describes things one way, there's a good chance the reality is the 180-degree opposite. Diabolical torture methods are called "euthanasia." Caging pregnant pigs in crates so small they can barely move is said to reduce stress and promote their welfare. These industry lies are banal and unsurprising. But sometimes they're so obscene that they almost appear designed to mock the idea that, when it comes to nonhuman animals, the truth has any meaning at all.

Take this Orwellian "We ♥ moms" advertisement:



**We ♥ Moms**

**HERE, EVERY DAY IS MOTHER'S DAY**

At United Animal Health, we are committed to extensive sow research. We have made the investments to be the leader in sow research.

**Healthy Sow. Healthy Start.**

Sow research is time consuming and tedious to conduct. Few companies even attempt it. The challenging variables with reproduction make it complex and expensive. While this research is difficult, the rewards are knowledge and insights that can change your entire system. It all begins with the sow.

This campaign was created by the Indiana-based company United Animal Health, whose name is itself a euphemism. As an "animal science" research firm, its mission is to "create value for livestock producers." In the pork industry, "sow research" means engineering female pigs to give birth to as many viable piglets as possible throughout their lives. Each mother pig on a typical factory farm is immobilized in a tiny cage, artificially inseminated, and forced to give birth to litter after litter of baby pigs, who are promptly taken away and slaughtered at about six months old.

In his book *Porkopolis*, anthropologist Alex Blanchette explains

that one consequence of pushing pig pregnancies to their limit has been "litters that are too large to supply adequate nutrients to fetuses in the uterus"—in other words, litters full of ailing runts. "[I]t appears to be near-impossible in the industry to encounter a conceptual or ethical limit proposed for sows' biological reproductive capacity," Blanchette writes. "The idea that litter sizes must interminably grow has become so taken for granted that even animal welfare scientists—those most concerned with the pig's bodily integrity—have taken a central measure of humane farming conditions to be whether the sow reproduces at high levels." The point of all this is to extract ever more value from the body of each animal, which matters for an industry that has relatively little growth potential in the U.S. "An average of one extra pig per litter in corporations that own 100,000 sows—which would allow them to house fewer sows—means that they can save \$25 million per year," Blanchette writes.

How does raw greed come to be portrayed as love? Today's consumers—who are mostly urban, have little direct experience with agriculture, and have heard vaguely disturbing mentions of "factory farming"—want to be told that the animals they eat were treated nicely, like family. They need to be convinced that what's good for business is good for animals. I believe this is even shaping how some people within the factory farm industry see their roles. Helping to bring life into the world, no matter how perverse the system it's born into, can create a genuine sense that what you're doing is nurturing, providing a kind of care. So we end up with absurd narratives like "We ♥ moms" and "Here, every day is Mother's Day." According to the pork industry, "love" means "we lock you up and take your babies and kill you." All this in the name of turning animals into cheap hot dog filling.

It can be vertigo-inducing to imagine what was going through the mind of the person who designed that advertisement, which, I think, is exactly the point. Fascist propaganda can't be reasoned with; it's meant to put forth a fraudulent reality that makes you question your own sanity.

A few months ago, I came across a different kind of meat industry propaganda. A 2014 *Washington Post* op-ed by Matthew Prescott, an advocate with the Humane Society of the United States, quoted two prominent pork industry magazines from the 1970s:

"Forget the pig is an animal—treat him just like a machine in a factory," recommended *Hog Farm Management* in 1976. Two years later, *National Hog Farmer* advised: "The breeding sow should be thought of, and treated as, a valuable piece of machinery whose func-



## "FORGET THEY ARE AN ANIMAL"

tion is to pump out baby pigs like a sausage machine."

These quotes seemed unbelievable, and part of me doubted that they were real. A lot has changed since the '70s, but were things really so different that pork producers communicated this way? Here, out in the open, was exactly what animal rights activists have long said the meat industry really thinks about animals. So I sought out the original copies of these journals. (One of them, *National Hog Farmer*, is still publishing and is where I first saw the "We ♥ moms" ad this past April.)

**Raising pigs by the calendar**

September 1976

Sunday Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday

1 expose gilts from lot 2B to boars. Sept. 1-15, All gilts and boars used for  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8 first breeding to be exposed to stock now immune to SMEI  
9  
10 expose sows from lot 2B to boars select litters for  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19 gilts herd  
20  
21  
22 first castration inspection in lot 3A  
23  
24  
25  
26 second period castration & inspection of lot 3A pigs.  
27  
28  
29  
30

By John Byrnes  
Staff Editor

**F**ORGET THE pig is an animal. Treat him just like a machine in a factory. Schedule treatments like you would lubrication. Breeding season like the first step in an assembly line. And marketing like the delivery of finished goods.

those certain times can really louse up your schedule.

That was the first problem confronting Harry Blasingham, a retired truck manufacturing executive, when he set out to organize the farm he inherited in the same way he organized truck factories.

Blasingham solved his problem by doing two things:

Related to the Reproduction Process of Piglets.

Inside the book is the sacred calendar that governs the operation. Backing up the calendar are a host of documents... operation sheets, flow charts, facility occupation guidelines and performance standards.

**RUNS BY CALENDAR**

But the basic governing principle

Sure enough, right in the lede, this article from the September 1976 issue of *Hog Farm Management* encouraged farmers to "forget the pig is an animal" and "treat him just like a machine." There is no subtlety here: Readers are instructed to "use the same principles in hogs as in organizing industry," viewing their animals as "widgets" and managing their reproduction on a rigid, calendarized basis. For help with this, farmers need look no further than PREG-ALERT, a technology conveniently advertised in the middle of the article:

With PREG-ALERT, you can "cull out the feed wasters"—pigs who aren't making enough babies—and "concentrate on your big producers."

In the second article, from March 1978's *National Hog Farmer*, a British meatpacking executive urges his American counterparts to systematize pigs' reproduction with artificial insemination (too many farmers just put a boar in with their female pigs and hope it ends in pregnancy!), a practice tantamount to bestiality that's now meat industry standard. And then the infamous quote, which is cited in texts including Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*: "The breeding sow should be thought of, and treated as, a valuable piece of machinery whose function is to pump out baby pigs like a sausage machine."

You'd never see industry sources talking openly about animals this way today. In the '70s, only people in animal agriculture would have been reading these journals, but the context collapse created by the internet means the industry now needs to be much more careful about what it says. Entire marketing budgets are devoted to

convincing the public that industrial animal farming is a business of love and care.

The articles reflect a time when more than a third of Americans were rural and unoffended by describing farm animals as exactly what they are: commodities. It was also when the factory farmification of the pork industry was quickly taking off, so talking about animal agriculture as just like any industrial process would have sounded novel and interesting, rather than, as many consumers now see it, dystopian. I was reminded of historian Caitlin Rosenthal's work on the economics of slavery, the chilling feeling I got reading about how plantation records rendered enslaved people as inputs, meticulously tracking their productivity and "depreciation." "Systematic accounting practices thrived on antebellum plantations—not despite the chattel principle, but because of it," Rosenthal writes. Reducing lives to units on a spreadsheet obviously results in horrors, but when you're running a business, it's simply rational. This is what it means to commodify lives.

**Probe for extra profits with PREG-ALERT®**

Here's a smart new way to minimize swine production costs—and maximize your profits!

PREG-ALERT is an electronic, ultrasonic device specifically made to help you improve your herd. It gives you the advance information you need to plan a low-overhead, profitable swine production program.

PREG-ALERT gives you fast, dependable readings on:

- pregnancy—normally in only 30 days!
- back fat
- loin thickness

Easy-to-use PREG-ALERT® provides clear, accurate "test scores" on all your animals. So you can cull out the feed wasters, concentrate on your big producers.

Think of PREG-ALERT as a scientific new way to fight off high feed and labor costs. And during the current "profit squeeze" in swine farming, isn't that the name of the game?

Probe in on extra profits with PREG-ALERT!®

Handy Carrying Case permits one-man operation; one hand for probe, the other free.

Portable, battery-operated PREG-ALERT® comes equipped with its own re-charging unit. (Operates up to 10 hours on one charge.) Durable construction features 100% solid state design.

No Special Training needed to operate PREG-ALERT. So safe, simple and easy-to-read, any farm worker can handle it!

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In reality, the Mother's Day ad is only possible if you already view pigs as machines to be optimized. Grafting a narrative of love onto this process, or conflating increasing litter sizes with animal welfare, means the animal is no longer registered as having any desires or essence beyond what is required to turn them into food. And if you know where to look, you can still find this kind of cynicism out in the open, if not so explicitly. Sometimes, even scarier than the meat industry's lies is when they just tell the truth. ✦





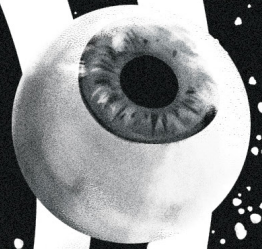
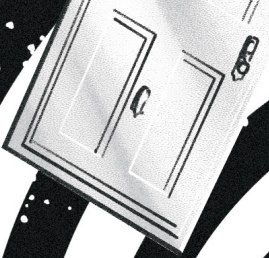
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300

Special Jackpot  
1000000



# Entering The TWILIGHT ZONE

by CIARA MOLONEY

**D**ESPITE THE NEAR-CONSTANT REFRAIN that this or that season of television is really more like a “ten-hour movie,” the birth of TV as a medium is tied much closer to radio than cinema. Genres that developed on the radio jumped to TV, from sitcoms to soap operas and game shows to police procedurals. Like radio, early television drama was broadcast live, often performed twice, once for the U.S.’s east coast and again for the west coast. “Like a child in hand-me-down clothes, television inherited the best and worst that radio had to offer, from the Ed Wynns and Jack Bennys, who made millions of Americans laugh every week, to the blatant commercialism that drove the system,” Jeff Kesseloff writes in the introduction to *The Box*, his oral history of early TV. “Television did it all, but radio did it first.”

Long before he created *The Twilight Zone*, Rod Serling grew up a radio fanatic. Radio was, naturally, where he started his writing career. After returning from World War II with a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star, he had night terrors that would plague him for the rest of his life. He had enlisted the day after

his high school graduation, becoming a paratrooper despite being, at five foot four, under regulation height. Only one in three men in Serling’s regiment survived. He witnessed a close friend being decapitated by a falling food crate, and came within an inch of dying himself when a Japanese soldier had a rifle pointed at him at close range. Despite sustaining a knee injury in battle that would plague him for the rest of his life, he had not been medically evacuated. “What I vividly recall is my dad having nightmares, and in the morning I would ask him what happened,” his daughter Anne later said, “and he would say he dreamed the Japanese were coming at him.” Writing stories and radio scripts became his outlet: “I was bitter about everything and at loose ends when I got out of the service,” he said. “I think I turned to writing to get it off my chest.” While going to college with his GI Bill educational benefits and disability payments, he submitted freelance radio scripts everywhere he could, ran the college radio station, and had a paid internship at WNYC in New York. After graduating, he worked as a radio staff writer and continued submitting freelance scripts. A script he wrote about boxing “would be far better for sight than



"There is a fifth dimension, beyond that which is known to man. It is a dimension as vast as space and as timeless as infinity. It is the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition, and it lies between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge. This is the dimension of imagination. It is an area which we call The Twilight Zone."

*— opening narration, Season 1 (1959)*

for sound only, because in any radio presentation, the fights are not seen," Martin Horrell told him when rejecting it in 1949. "Perhaps this is a baby you should try on some of the producers of television shows."

He did start trying his babies on TV producers—and eventually made a name for himself writing episodes of anthology programs like *Playhouse 90* or *Kraft Dinner Theater*, plays-on-TV beamed right into your living room. This was the period once denoted by the phrase "Golden Age of Television": Americans saw *Twelve Angry Men* as a live episode of *Studio One* on CBS three years before Sidney Lumet made it into a film with Henry Fonda; Paddy Chayefsky wrote *Marty* as an episode of *The Philco Television Playhouse* two years before the film version would win both Best Picture and the Palme d'Or. But Serling was frequently frustrated by censorship from

both networks and sponsors. This ranged from the annoyingly silly—the line "Got a match?" was deleted from his TV play "Requiem for a Heavyweight" because Ronson lighters was a sponsor—to the grotesque, like his foiled attempts to write a script inspired by the murder of 14-year-old Black boy Emmett Till in Mississippi.

The first time Serling tried to address Till's murder, he pre-censored himself by focusing his script on the lynching of a Jewish man in the South, rather than a Black boy. But when he let it slip in an interview that the script was inspired by Emmett Till's murder, thousands of angry letters from white supremacist organizations and garden-variety racists poured in. ABC capitulated, and when the episode aired, no ethnicities were mentioned, the action was moved to New England, and, in Serling's words, the killer was portrayed as "just a good, decent, American boy momentarily gone wrong." Serling was devastated, writing to a friend, "I felt like I got run over by a truck and then it back[ed] up to finish the job." His second attempt to write about Till's murder—the *Playhouse 90* episode "A Town Has Turned to Dust"—was more successful, though far from what he'd wanted, with the victim changed from Black to Mexican and the setting moved from the contemporary 1950s to the 19th century.

"I think it's criminal that we are not permitted to make dramatic note of social evils as they exist," Serling said in 1959. Though he described himself as a "moderate liberal whose roots go deep into the American soil, pounded there by immigrant parents who fled Eastern Europe during the nineteenth century," Serling was passionately opposed to the Vietnam War and war in general, strongly egalitarian and pro-civil rights, and "subscribe[d] to and support[ed]" the goals of the New Left, endorsing Eugene McCarthy's presidential run in 1968. That peculiar mix of Greatest Generation emotional belief in America's alleged values and 1960s counterculture's clear-eyed





rage at all the horrors committed in America's name could lend his writing a sticky in-betweenness, but at his best, it feels like seeing beyond the generational clash into something bigger.

Eventually, Serling hit on two ways to get around the censors. One was science fiction, which allowed him to write allegorical political stories that drew less censorious ire. "In retrospect, I probably would have had a much more adult play had I made it science fiction, put it in the year 2057, and peopled the Senate with robots." Serling said about one of his censor-butchered scripts, "This would probably have been more reasonable and no less dramatically incisive." The second was to make his own damn show, one over which he would have creative control. He called it *The Twilight Zone*.

**I** GREW UP WITH *THE TWILIGHT ZONE* THE way most millennials did, the same way I was exposed to most of human culture: through the medium of *Simpsons* parodies. The *Treehouse of Horror* episodes of *The Simpsons* usually had segments parodying classic works of sci-fi and horror, from Edgar Allan Poe to Stephen King—and more than anything, episodes of the original *Twilight Zone* series. By the time I finally saw *The Twilight Zone*, so much of it (its plots, its aesthetics, the rhythms of Rod Serling's narration) felt warmly familiar, almost nostalgic. Serling's jaw is tight and his mouth hardly moves, his deep voice resonating from his nose, a cigarette clutched in his hand: he has a tale to submit for your approval, one that takes place in "a fifth dimension, beyond that which is known to man ... a dimension not only of sight and sound, but of mind ... a land of both shadow and substance, of things and ideas." It might be on a distant planet, a future dystopia, an ordinary street, or the old West. Everything might seem perfectly ordinary—until it doesn't. Everything might seem strange, until a twist ending reveals what was happening all along. They're stories, as *Rolling Stone* put it, "about everyday people thrust into extraordinary circumstances, folks who find themselves stuck in (and running out of) time, and dreamers who learn that every granted wish comes with a price tag." It's a show I knew as easy as breathing, collaged from parodies and homages and the thousand times somebody had said "it's like something out of *The Twilight Zone*."

With those kinds of endlessly referenced cultural touchstones, sometimes the impact of the original feels blunted—like seeing *Hamlet* as full of clichés. But in *The Twilight Zone*, the familiar is made strange: sharp, fresh, and frequently unsettling, it feels endlessly relevant. Not—or not just—in its approach to universal human themes, but in how it deals with issues that we're still dealing with today: war, capitalism, bigotry, the moral implications of technology, and the ever-precarious tightrope between conspiracy and paranoia. *The Twilight Zone* remains one of the most incisive works of art about life in the age of American imperialism.

An anthology show, *The Twilight Zone's* episodes each work as standalones. Though the series forms a coherent whole in a way that 1950s anthology TV plays like *Playhouse 90* never attempted, it can be hard to describe what, if anything, is *The Twilight Zone's* premise. Like its contemporary *Alfred Hitch-*

*cock Presents*, its episodes are united in a combination of tones, tropes, and themes, less like a premise for a show than setting out a genre all its own. But where *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* brought the Hitchcockian stylings developed over decades of the director's film career to the small screen, *The Twilight Zone* was inventing something more or less from whole cloth. It's a sci-fi show, but not always. Sometimes it's set in something approximating the real world: in "The Silence," one man bets another that he can't go an entire year without speaking—which he does, only by severing his vocal cords. In "The Fever," a trip to Vegas takes a dark turn when a slot machine calls a man's name and stalks him to his hotel room, and it feels like a look inside the internal struggle of an addict more than anything supernatural. Often the show goes beyond science fiction into fantasy: plenty of episodes feature magical wishes, premonitions, or the devil himself. It frequently delves into horror (sometimes drawing in part from Serling's night terrors) but is no stranger to comedy or straight drama. "The Night of the Meek" features a Santa Claus origin story is as delightful and charming a half-hour of television as you'll see. It loves to do social or political allegory, but makes room for just telling spooky stories, too.

When I try to fit *The Twilight Zone* in a genre box, I am reminded of Dr Pepper. Ask someone to describe the taste of Dr Pepper, and they can't, not really. Dr Pepper and its knockoffs have been described in copyright courts as "pepper sodas," not because they contain any pepper—they don't—but because the only reference point to describe its not-quite-cola taste is the original soda. There's no other way to capture what makes it not coke. By a similar logic, *The Twilight Zone* is—like Jordan Peele's *Get Out* and *Us*, like *Black Mirror*, like about half of all twist endings ever since—quite simply, a *Twilight Zone*.

In addition to hosting the show and writing or co-writing 92 episodes of the series across five years, Serling brought on





## ENTERING THE TWILIGHT ZONE

screenwriters with more experience in science fiction—most importantly, Charles Beaumont and Richard Matheson. In addition to writing great sci-fi and horror short stories—many of which were adapted into *Twilight Zone* episode—both Beaumont and Matheson wrote screenplays for B-movie king Roger Corman, including for his series of Edgar Allan Poe adaptations. If you watch something like *The Intruder*, written by Beaumont and directed by Corman, in which a white supremacist (William Shatner, using his Captain Kirk speech-delivery powers for evil) arrives in a small Southern town to incite the white townspeople to violently oppose integration, you instantly sense why he'd be one of Serling's first calls. *The Twilight Zone* is usually talked about as Serling's baby, and that's fair. But—especially in the show's first years, prior to Beaumont's illness—it feels like a three-man operation, with Serling as fearless leader. Watch enough and you can feel the rhythms each works in, and know whether Rod or Chuck or Dick are going to pop up in the “written by” credit at the end of the show. Dick Matheson episodes are clockwork-clever plotted sci-fi. Charles Beaumont leans more horror, even gothic, with a more political edge. Rod Serling, naturally, traverses the genres and styles that exist within *The Twilight Zone*, at once writing the show's most political episodes and its silliest.

**S**EASON ONE'S “THE MONSTERS ARE DUE ON Maple Street” is an episode that could only make it onto television in 1960 through science fiction, single-handedly vindicating Serling's ambition. A perfectly ordinary street in suburbia—“a tree-lined little world of front porch gliders, barbecues, the laughter of children, and the bell of an ice cream vendor,” Serling says in his opening narration—has a power outage. The residents gather out on the street, seeing if anyone knows what's going on. One of the neighbors, Pete—hammer slung in his overalls—says he'll go to the next street over to see if they're affected, too. While he's gone, a little boy called Tommy starts talking about how similar this is to a story he read about alien invasion: in the story, aliens disguised as a human family acted as scouts, and the power going out was their moment to strike. The adults initially dismiss Tommy and his childish ramblings, but the idea burrows its way in, festering.

When Les's car mysteriously starts by itself, the neighbors

point out that Les didn't participate in the initial speculation about what caused the outage. *And hasn't he always been kind of a strange guy? Haven't I seen him, late at night, staring up at the stars—almost like he was waiting for something? Wait, remember when Steve built a ham radio: why has no one ever seen it? Is he using it to talk to the aliens?* (Steve sarcastically confirms that yes, he's been talking to *aliens* on his *ham radio*, which goes about as well as you'd expect.) Accusations start flying hard and fast in every direction. Any idiosyncratic behavior becomes evidence of the extraterrestrial, and that there is an extraterrestrial hidden among them becomes unquestionable. A shadowy figure, hammer visible, approaches—the monster, Tommy says. So a man called Charlie shoots him. It was, of course, Pete, returned from the next street over, now dead.

It should be the moment that the suspicions they've let themselves run away with give way to cold, hard reality. But instead, suspicion turns on Charlie. What if Pete knew Charlie was the monster, and he killed Charlie to cover his tracks? The neighbors start pelting him and his home with stones. Terrified, he deflects suspicion onto Tommy: isn't it something that he “knew” about the aliens from the beginning? Instead of Pete's death sobering the crowd, they end up in a full-scale riot.

It is a very, very obvious allegory for McCarthyism and the Red Scare. Because of television's reliance on advertising revenue, the Red Scare was even more effective there than it was in the film industry. This is the origin of TV's reputation for conservatism. “Anticommunist groups could get quick results by threatening to organize boycotts of the goods produced by the sponsor of a show that employed a ‘blacklisted’ individual, whether a performer or a member of the production staff,” Robert J. Thompson explains. Lucille Ball managed to wriggle out of being blacklisted by claiming her past affiliation with the communist party was insincere and at her socialist grandfather's insistence. “The only thing red about Lucy is her hair,” Ball's husband, co-star, and business partner Desi Arnaz quipped, “and even that is not legitimate.” When Hazel Scott, one of the first Black people to host an American TV show, was named in an anti-communist pamphlet, she wasn't so lucky, and her show was immediately canceled. Making a non-allegorical TV episode about the Red Scare in 1960 would have been completely impossible. But “The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street” doesn't feel cautious. We







DEAN STOCKWELL AND DALE ISHIMOTO AS MEMBERS OF THE IMPERIAL JAPANESE ARMY IN "A QUALITY OF MERCY," 1961

know Serling turned to sci-fi to throw censors off his scent, but nothing in "Maple Street" feels like its allegory was born out of a wish not to be found out. At once a cousin to 1970s paranoia thrillers and *Star Trek* episodes that use future alien societies to comment on the present, human one, it pulls no punches. "There are weapons that are simply thoughts, attitudes, prejudices, to be found only in the minds of men," Serling says in his closing narration. In a way Tommy is right: there are monsters living amongst the ordinary residents of Maple Street. But they're not aliens. They're horribly, terrifyingly human.

"For the record, prejudices can kill, and suspicion can destroy, and a thoughtless, frightened search for a scapegoat has a fallout all of its own—for the children and the children yet unborn," Serling continues. "And the pity of it is that these things cannot be confined to the Twilight Zone."

**W**HILE *THE TWILIGHT ZONE*'S POLITICS always felt directly tied to its historical moment the way "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street" is—to all the hope and horror of the Kennedy era—what's fascinating is how often it remains vivid

and urgent in our own time. War, and especially the spectre of nuclear war, is a constant on *The Twilight Zone*, from the H-bomb that leaves Burgess Meredith the last man on earth in "Time Enough at Last" to the strange glow a lieutenant serving in the Second World War can see around the men who are about to die in "The Purple Testament." "A Quality of Mercy"—in which an American soldier in World War II temporarily becomes a soldier in the Japanese Imperial Army—has a degree of empathy for the Japanese that's still rare in America, and was practically nonexistent in 1961. War in *The Twilight Zone* is ever-present and terrifying, leaving individual lives and the fate of the whole world on a knife's edge. In "The Shelter," the friendships of families living on the same street are torn apart when a nuclear attack is announced to be imminent and only one family has a fallout shelter. In "Third Rock from the Sun," scientists flee their nuclear-war-torn planet—and in the episode's final twist, we find out that the new planet they've escaped to is called Earth. The threat of the nuclear bomb was a core part of the public imagination in the "duck and cover" era, but it doesn't feel antique. The threat shapeshifts and slithers, from the Cold War going nuclear to the War on Terror to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but the core anxiety remains.



## ENTERING THE TWILIGHT ZONE

Its consistent anti-war stance fits into a broader theme in *The Twilight Zone*: a preoccupation with inhumanity, inequality, and attacks on human freedom. In a speech at Moorpark College in 1968, Serling praised young people for their skepticism of “the war, the draft, deeply embedded social inequality and the worship of anachronisms which have become more ritualistic than real.” These were Serling’s themes, too. In “Eye of the Beholder,” a woman’s face is wrapped entirely in bandages as she recovers from her eleventh procedure to correct her hideous deformity and make her look “normal.” When the bandages are removed, the doctor intones that the procedure was a failure and there has been no change to her face—just as we see that the woman is conventionally beautiful. It’s then revealed that the doctors, nurses, and everyone else in this society has a pig’s snout for a nose. Because of the procedure’s failure, the woman is going to be exiled to a place where she’ll be among her “own kind.” The state’s pig-snouted leader gives a speech on television about the need for greater conformity. It is, rightly, one of the most iconic twists in a show full of them. It’s also one of the richest. At the simplest level, it’s a reminder—one that never goes astray—of the fundamental arbitrariness of beauty standards. But it also makes the case for noticing the fundamental arbitrariness of so many of the features around which humans base their prejudices, how diversity is so often treated as dangerous nonconformity. Just because a certain group of people are in the majority, that doesn’t mean everyone else is defective.

*The Twilight Zone*’s cynicism towards state-sanctioned conformity feels like a reaction to the 1950s and a prelude to 1960s counterculture all at once. In “The Obsolete Man,” Burgess Meredith plays Romney Wordsworth, put on trial in a future totalitarian state for obsolescence. He’s a librarian, which is punishable by death. The state has eliminated books. Further, Wordsworth believes in God, despite the

state having proven God doesn’t exist. The Chancellor finds him guilty, but grants Wordsworth’s requests that he be allowed to keep his chosen method of execution secret, and for his execution to be broadcast on television. (The former is highly unorthodox, the latter is standard practice.) The Chancellor visits Wordsworth in his final hour, when Wordsworth reveals he’s chosen to die via a bomb—and that he’s locked the door. The Chancellor begs for his life, in the name of God, and Wordsworth lets him go. His subordinates see the broadcast, and the Chancellor himself is found obsolete and killed. The God stuff feels a little weak: I could imagine it striking a contemporary viewer as akin to the weird anti-secularism parables of Pure Flix, the evangelical film production company behind *God’s Not Dead*, rather than the real-world state-atheist totalitarian regimes it’s trying to evoke. But Rod drives the point home when he, unusually, appears on-screen for his final narration:

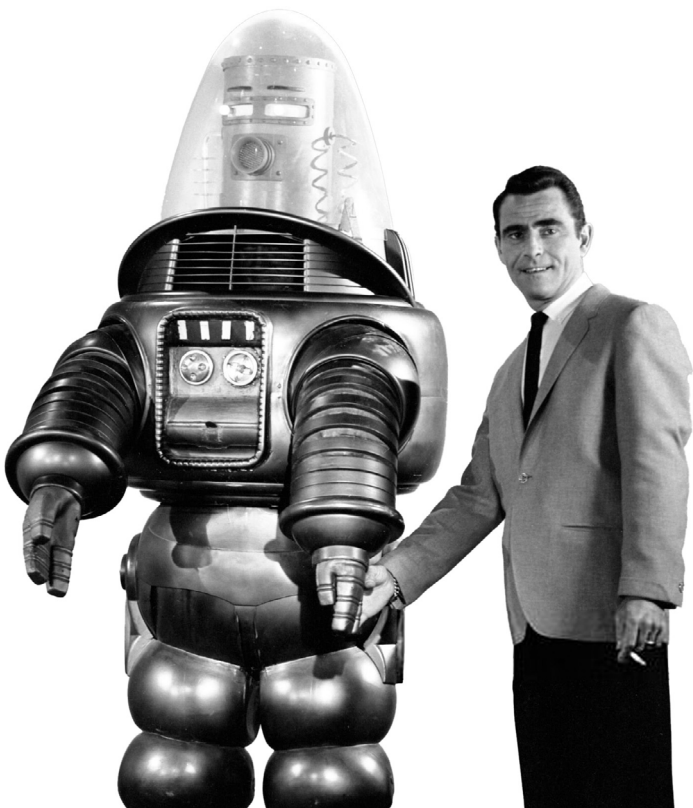
*“The chancellor, the late chancellor, was only partly correct. He was obsolete. But so is the State, the entity he worshiped. Any state, any entity, any ideology which fails to recognize the worth, the dignity, the rights of Man ... that state is obsolete. A case to be filed under “M” for “Mankind”—in The Twilight Zone.”*

Included in the original script, but not making it to broadcast, was the line, “Any state, entity, or ideology becomes obsolete when it stockpiles the wrong weapons: when it captures territories, but not minds; when it enslaves millions, but convinces nobody. When it is naked, yet puts on armor and calls it faith, while in the Eyes of God it has no faith at all.”

SERLING DIED AT THE AGE OF FIFTY FROM A heart attack. Of his two major collaborators on *The Twilight Zone*, Richard Matheson died in his sleep as an old man and Charles Beaumont died at just thirty-eight, after suffering from a mysterious brain disease that aged him rapidly: his son said he “looked ninety-five and was, in fact, ninety-five by every calendar except the one on your watch.”

There have been many attempts to revive *The Twilight Zone* since Serling’s original series, none particularly successful or acclaimed. Hollywood, as always, learns the wrong lessons, treating the show as another valuable property to exploit, missing what made it great. Gene Roddenberry, creator of *Star Trek*, once said: “No one could know Serling, or view or read his work, without recognizing his deep affection for humanity and his determination to enlarge our horizons by giving us a better understanding of ourselves.”

As Kisseloff explained, TV, in its origins from radio, is nakedly commercial—maybe the most commercial of any art form, and certainly the most corporate. But I have always loved television. Raised on a steady diet of sitcoms, soap operas, quiz shows and cartoons, I was the kind of kid adults despaired about getting square eyes. *The Twilight Zone* reminds me how great television can be. Even this corporate, commercial, censorious medium can be an outlet for great, innovative, and politically incisive artists like Serling. ♣







# TODAY IN THE TWILIGHT ZONE

BY CIARA MOLONEY

## EPISODE ONE

**SERLING:** Uniquely American institution known as the school shooting. Summer. The present. Allow me to present a man named Ted Cruz, age fifty-one. Occupation: senator of this very state. A small, sweaty man, the kind of man who's like a pebble in your shoe—a minor fixture, in the grand scheme of things, but a persistent irritant nonetheless. In just a moment, Mr. Cruz will put forward his solution to the problem of school shootings. But he doesn't realize, that he's about to take a turn into ... the twilight zone.

**CRUZ:** We talked about what we need to do to harden schools, including not having unlocked back doors, including not having unlocked doors to classrooms, having one door that goes in and out of the school, having armed police officers at that one door.

*As Cruz turns to leave, he finds himself in a long, gray hallway—the kind of hallway that only experience can tell you does not go on forever. But this is a hallway with a difference. There are no doors. As he hears footsteps behind him, Cruz walks faster, then runs, looking for the door. Then he finds one. He pulls on the doorknob, but no such luck. It's locked. The last thing we hear is his scream, knowing he'll be trapped in this hallway forever.*

**SERLING:** Mr. Cruz, a man who advocated for fewer doors until he found himself trapped. There exists a principle known as Occam's razor, which claims the simplest solution to a problem as the best one. For Mr. Cruz, for too many men, they hide the simplest solution out of sight, grasping for alternatives. And that's a road to disaster—whether or not you take a detour into the twilight zone.

## EPISODE TWO

**SERLING:** Though it may look like an ordinary street scene, you are looking at a frog being boiled alive. As the temperature of the water gets hotter and hotter, the frog stays put, adjusting to the gradual increase until it feels normal. But in this case, the frog is a vast number of human beings. Their planet is on fire, a fire that they lit and only they can extinguish. But these human frogs are quite happy to boil, because in exchange, they get fast cars, jet planes, and the ability to buy expensive digital receipts.

*What follows is a reenactment of a UN climate conference.*

**SERLING:** You've just seen a group of human beings negotiate the merits of preventing their own extinction. As the fire licks at their gates, as smoke fills their lungs, they're arguing about how the cost of firefighters will impact their bottom line. About whether putting the fire out will impact the matches and lighters business. In the end, there's no moral, no message, just a simple statement of fact: if everything burns, that includes the cash you have stashed in your back pocket, as you sit and wait for death in the Twilight Zone.

## EPISODE THREE

**SERLING:** Witness Mr. Elon Musk, age thirty-three. Mr. Musk has a simple dream: to replace polluting, gas-guzzling automobiles with clean electric ones. To contribute, in some small way, to making a safer, cleaner, better world. He's about to meet a man of many aliases: Belial, Mephistopheles, Beelzebub. You probably know him as Satan. And he's about to offer Mr. Musk a deal, the kind of deal he's been dreaming of. His electric car company will be a runaway success. He'll become the richest man alive, and get his hair back in the process. But eventually, Mr. Elon Musk will learn the essential fact of any devil's bargain: it comes with a catch.

*We see Musk gains everything the devil said he would. But he also begins to resemble the devil more and more, first in his actions—union-busting, spreading dangerous medical misinformation, baselessly accusing a man trying to save trapped children of being a pedophile—and then in his looks. The fine print, it's revealed, is that by taking the deal, Musk agreed to become the devil himself, leaving Satan free to retire.*

**Rod's outro:** Mr. Elon Musk, a man with a simple dream who made a deal. And that deal leaves him as just another entry on the devil's long list of aliases. And so the original Satan puts his feet up, and takes his first vacation in human history—leaving man to do his business for him ... in the twilight zone.

## EPISODE FOUR

**SERLING:** You're about to meet a man called George Bush, but not the George Bush you know. The year is 2450, and this particular Mr. Bush is the

latest in a long line. And he's about to announce his plan for the invasion of the country that in our time is known as Iraq.

*After the invasion of Iraq, George Bush wakes up in the same position years later, once again about to launch the invasion of Iraq. Distressed and confused, he goes to bed ill, only to wake up another few decades into the future, once again launching the invasion of Iraq. This pattern repeats in a kind of time loop, and regardless of his changing intentions, Bush's invasion causes indescribable death and suffering. Finally, he wakes up back in his own time, and expresses a change of heart to his advisors. They quickly talk him out of it and the invasion proceeds as scheduled.*

**SERLING:** Mr. George Bush, a man not unlike the one you know. A man with a destiny. A man for whom destiny trumps countless deaths. At least, it looks that way from the twilight zone.









# ARE OUR PHONES DESTROYING OUR FOCUS, OUR RELATIONSHIPS, AND EVEN OUR HUMANITY?

*By Thomas Moller-Nielsen*

LET'S CONSIDER A FEW DATA POINTS ON AMERICA'S relationship with the smartphone. First, a recent survey published by *SellCell*, a cellphone price comparison company, found that 54 percent of Americans answered "yes" to the question "Would you rather spend time on your phone than in your partner's company?" with 71 percent reporting that they *do* in fact spend more personal time with their phone than their partner. Another survey, conducted by independent reviewing site *Reviews.org*, found that 41 percent of Americans "say they'd rather give up sex for a year than give up their phone for a year." Should one doubt the methodological rigor of *SellCell*, gold-standard research firm Pew found in 2021 that over half of Americans say their partner is often or sometimes distracted by their phone when they are trying to have a conversation with them, and that nearly one in three adults now says they are "almost constantly" online. It is not difficult to find plenty more troubling statistics: most people now sleep next to their phones, never turn their phones off, report a sense of panic when their battery is low, check their phones within minutes of waking up, are uneasy leaving their phones at home, touch their phones thousands of times a day, and use their phones while using the toilet. Most 18 year olds admit to having texted while driving. Nearly half of people sometimes text others who are in the same house. A similar number consider their phones their most valuable possessions, and polls have found anywhere between half and  $\frac{3}{4}$  of Americans confessing to phone addiction. Nearly half of Americans reported spending 5-6 hours a day on their phones. Furthermore, the number of people who *don't* have smartphones is growing smaller and smaller: 85 percent of Americans now report having a smartphone, while 97 percent own a cellphone of some kind.

The reports about the way smartphones have impacted romantic relationships are perhaps the most disquieting. Though, arguably, sexual desire and love for one's partner aren't drives quite as biologically basic as the will to stay alive, there is no disputing the fact that for the vast majority of people, love and sexual desire are—or, until relatively recently *were*—extraordinarily deeply entrenched aspects of their identities. (Indeed, even the small number of Americans who are asexual, and who thus experience no sexual attraction to others, are often still willing partners in romantic relationships.)

One might be tempted to attribute many of the extraordinary recent findings to the coronavirus pandemic, which temporarily made everyone much more online. But reports of the replacement of relationships with phones began streaming in years ago. (NBC News, 2011: "Survey: One-third would rather give up sex than phone"; CNBC, 2013: "Sex or Smartphone? Women Prefer the Gadgets"; Bloomberg, 2015: "Give Up Sex or Your Mobile Phone? Third of Americans Forgo Sex.") Furthermore, the decline in sexual frequency is well documented. A study in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior* found that "American adults had sex about nine fewer times per year in the early 2010s compared to the late 1990s." That might not sound like too much of a difference, but the numbers are particularly extreme among younger people, as another study in the same journal showed: "Between 2009 and 2018, the proportion of adolescents reporting no sexual activity, either alone or with partners, rose from 28.8 percent to 44.2 percent among young men and from 49.5 percent in 2009 to 74 percent among young women." One of the study authors, Tsung-chieh (Jane) Fu of the Indiana University School of Public Health, explained that "for young people, computer games, increasing social media use, video games—something is replacing that time."

What the existing data points seem to show is that vast swaths of the U.S. population would prefer to spend time with their personalized high-tech gadgets, rather than attempting to foster meaningful human relationships and/or engage in one of life's most biologically basic activities. Is this healthy? We might be tempted to dismiss the trends as benign, or the product of individual choices to maximize happiness. But as journalist Glenn Greenwald wrote in a 2020 article called "The Social Fabric of the U.S. is Fraying Severely, if Not Unravelling," there are "very troubling [new] data that reflect intensifying pathologies in the U.S. population—not moral or allegorical sicknesses but mental, emotional, psychological, and scientifically proven sickness." Greenwald cited a 2020 Centers for Disease Control (CDC) survey, which assessed the mental health of American adults. Among other discoveries, the report found that 10.7 percent of American adults, equating, roughly, to 20 million Americans, had "seriously considered suicide" in the past 30 days—that is, "not fleetingly considered [suicide] as a momentary



## WHAT OUR PHONES ARE DOING TO US

nor thought about it ever in their lifetime,” as Greenwald elaborated, “but *seriously considered suicide* at least once in the past *thirty days*.” Among younger Americans, the figures were even more disturbing: *more than a quarter* (25.5 percent) of American adults between the ages of 18-24, and 16 percent of adults between the ages of 25-44, had thought seriously about taking their own lives during the previous month. Greenwald commented:

*“In a remotely healthy society, one that provides basic emotional needs to its population, suicide and serious suicidal ideation are rare events. It is anathema to the most basic human instinct: the will to live. A society in which such a vast swath of the population is seriously considering it as an option is one which is anything but healthy, one which is plainly failing to provide its citizens the basic necessities for a fulfilling life.”*

It is certainly possible to point to the pandemic to explain some of the increase in anxiety and depression. But as *US News & World Report* documents, among children “anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems appear to be on the rise, while the amount of time kids spent being physically active or getting preventive care has been on the decline,” plus “parental emotional well-being and mental health ... [were found] to be suffering in tandem.” The magazine notes that “that was all pre-pandemic,” with the pandemic making an already-bad situation worse. A 2018 article in the *American Journal of Public Health* notes that “Sociologists have observed the decline in various measures of psychosocial well-being in the United States for some time” and “alarming declines in measures such as trust have been documented for decades.” Happiness, trust, sex frequency, and life expectancy have all been in decline, while despair has increased, which leads the AJPH researchers to conclude that “the United States has experienced what amounts to a social crisis that dates back to at least the 1980s.”

**I**N THE CONTEXT OF THIS SOCIAL CRISIS, WE SHOULD BE CAUTIOUS about what we attribute to technology alone. We must also disentangle cause from effect: has addiction to phones torn us apart, or has an already-suffering society turned to the narcotic of smartphones to relieve the pain? (The same caution applies when trying to analyze the opioid epidemic and understand the degree to which the drugs are a cause rather than a symptom of other problems in people’s lives.) We do know that material deprivation is clearly a major part of the story—the AJPH cites rising medical costs as a major culprit in declining mental health. But it’s also worth appreciating just how *monumental* a shift in our living patterns we have undergone as smartphones have become ubiquitous. It is a fact that most of us now spend a significant portion of our day that would once have been spent around physical human beings in an artificial world (there are those in Silicon Valley who even anticipate that we will soon live almost full-time in a dystopian place they call the Metaverse). Surely the switch of huge portions of daily activity from in-person to online has significant effects on us. Smartphone use appears to have played a major role in reshaping the “internal environment” of the human

individual: in particular, it appears to have radically restructured what we take to be most important in life—a restructuring which, at least prior to the smartphone era, many of us would have regarded as overwhelmingly negative.

In fact, many Americans seem to recognize the current state of affairs as inherently problematic. According to one survey, 73 percent of Americans said that they would be “happier if they spent less time” on their phones, with only slightly fewer (70 percent) admitting that smartphones are adversely impacting their relationships with those closest to them. Smartphone use has been credibly linked to a variety of mental and physical afflictions, including anxiety, depression, loneliness, short attention spans, reduction in reading ability, reduced in-person socializing, stunted childhood growth, general lower intelligence, obesity, poor eyesight, and even suicide. Indeed, there is little doubt that smartphone use has in many ways exacerbated and reinforced many of the pathologies confronting contemporary American society. In a country in which, for instance, more than three-fifths of the population report being lonely (with the figure rising to four-fifths for Gen Z), it is not difficult to understand how spending one’s time on one’s phone addictively scrolling through social media, as opposed to forming and sustaining meaningful human relationships, is unlikely to alleviate, and indeed is much more likely to exacerbate, such feelings of desperation. U.S. children now spend a lot of time online (the overwhelming majority of young children spend more time in front of a screen than experts recommend). Parents certainly don’t have terribly high opinions of smartphones. Technology is the #1 factor parents cite as making parenting harder today than it used to be, and Pew research found that 71 percent of parents think “smartphones will hurt [their] children’s abilities to develop healthy friendships and learn social skills” and the “potential harm [of smartphones] outweighs the potential benefit.”

This does not mean that the parents are necessarily *right*, of course. We also have to acknowledge that even though Americans worry about their addiction to smartphones, they also like their phones. One Gallup study found that 70% of smartphone users say that smartphones have “made their lives better.” Many may well recognize they are addicted, but feel it’s an addiction they’re happy to live with. On this interpretation, maybe people really do *prefer* to be on Instagram rather than spend time with loved ones. Given the choice between having or sustaining a meaningful human relationship and being on their phones, they would willingly choose the latter over the former, without regrets.

Not *all* of the smartphone’s effects on human society have been negative. Indeed, according to a 2019 Pew poll, a significant majority of people in developing countries report that their lives have improved enormously as a result of acquiring cellphones, by, e.g., facilitating online banking. (These results, however, should be juxtaposed with the fact that the same poll found that significant majorities of people in emerging economies believe





that mobile phones “have had a bad influence on children in their country,” as well as by the fact that the people in the developing world who actually manufacture smartphones typically work in abominable conditions.) Moreover, even in the developed world, smartphones have certainly made life more convenient in various ways: they allow us to instantly look up an elusive fact at a moment’s notice, to almost instantly order food and transport, and yes, occasionally, to talk to loved ones on the other side of the globe. The question is: at what cost?

**J**OHANN HARI’S BOOK *STOLEN FOCUS: WHY YOU CAN’T Pay Attention and How to Think Deeply Again* is a useful addition to the conversation around technology, addiction, and social crisis. Hari’s first book, *Chasing the Scream*, focused on the science of addiction and the War on Drugs. His second, *Lost Connections*, examined depression. *Stolen Focus* addresses our current “attention crisis”: according to data cited by Hari, a typical office worker today focuses on tasks for just three minutes at a time; college students fare even worse, switching tasks on average every sixty-five seconds.

Hari’s interest in the subject is personal as well as scientific. He describes his own experience:

*“The sensation of being alive in the early twenty-first century consisted of the sense that our ability to pay attention—to focus—was cracking and breaking. I could feel it happen to me—I would buy piles of books, and I would glimpse them guiltily from the corner of my eye as I sent, I told myself, just one more tweet. I still read a lot, but with each year that passed, it felt more and more like running up a down escalator.”*

This mixture of scientific and personal curiosity—as in *Chasing the Scream* and *Lost Connections*—leads Hari on a journey all over the world, “from Miami to Moscow, from Montreal to Melbourne,” interviewing more than 250 experts on human attention. His conclusion is that there are twelve “deep forces” responsible for harming our attention. His goal in the book is to explain what they are, and what we need to do to “get our attention back.”

Hari does not attempt to dispel, or even downplay, the significance of the obvious candidate responsible for our attention crisis, namely modern technology: smartphones, email, social media, and, more specifically, Facebook, Google, and other tech platforms’ contemporary model of “surveillance capitalism,” or the capturing and analysis of user data in the service of user manipulation and monetization. Indeed, Hari spends large portions of the book emphasizing just how debilitating much of modern technology has been both for individual consumers and for wider society: it has arguably made us (mentally) unhealthier, angrier, and more politically divided than at any point in modern human history.

But Hari draws a clear distinction between the *technology itself* and the *incentive structures* underlying them. It is the latter, he notes, which constitute the real, fundamental problem:

*“The arrival of the smartphone would always have increased to some degree the number of distractions in life, to be sure, but a great deal of the damage to our attention spans is being caused by something more subtle. It’s not the smartphone in and of itself; it is the way the apps on the smartphone and the sites on our laptops are designed [...] It’s not just the internet: it’s the way the internet is currently designed – and the incentives for the people designing it. You could keep your phone and your laptop, and you could keep your social-media accounts—and have much better attention, if they were designed around a different set of incentives.”*

As is well known, the current incentive structures of platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok aim to optimize things like time spent on a given platform, number of clicks, and number of advertisements seen. Their skilful efforts to maximize our use of the platforms are clearly a large part of why we’re so often incapable of removing our dazed stare from our smartphones’ screens. At one point in *Stolen Focus*, Hari interviews Israeli

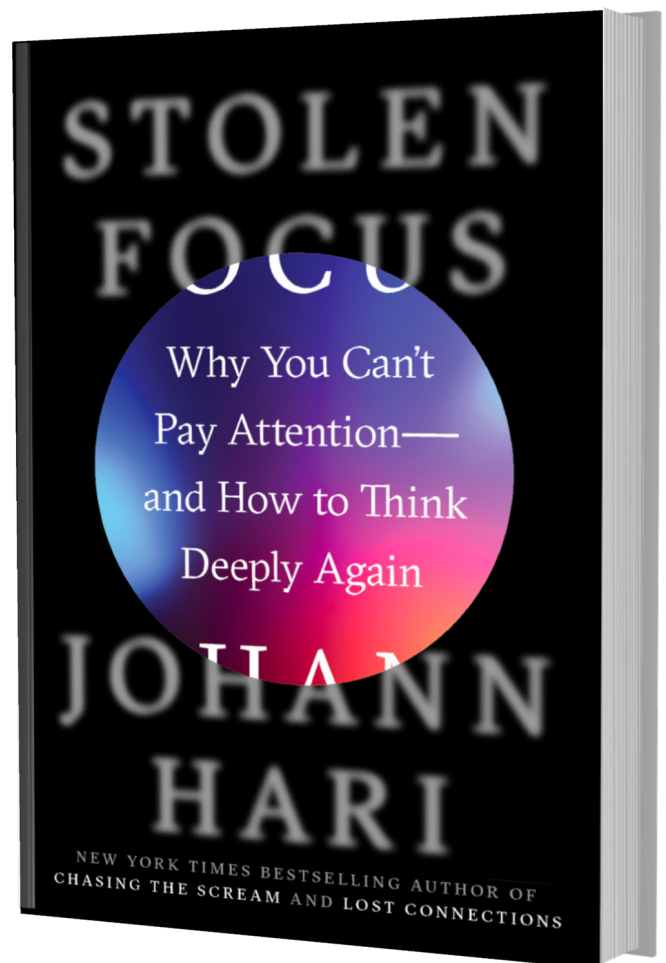
American tech designer Nir Eyal, the author of a book called *Indistractable: How to Control Your Attention and Choose Your Life*. Eyal himself recommends *individualist* solutions to the attention problem, showing people tips for getting their tech addictions under control and encouraging a “personal responsibility” approach to smartphone use. But Hari points out that Eyal is *also* the author of a book called *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products*, which Eyal calls a “cookbook” containing a “recipe for human behavior.” Eyal describes the techniques of “mind manipulation” used to “create a craving” for a product, by implanting an “internal trigger” in the user’s psychology, an uncomfortable emotional state that can only be relieved by the product, that will keep them coming back over and over. As Hari comments:

*In Hooked [Eyal] talks about using ferociously powerful machinery to get us ‘fiendishly hooked’ and in ‘pain’ until we get our next techno-fix. Yet in Indistractable he tells us that when we feel distracted by this machinery, we should try gentle personal changes. In the first book, he describes big and powerful forces used to hook us; in the second, he describes fragile little personal interventions that he says will get us out.*

As Hari indicates, the addiction-producing incentives built into tech are far from inevitable. As he puts it:

*“[Y]ou could design [technology] ... to maximally respect people’s need for sustained attention, and to interrupt them as little as possible. You could design the technology not so that it pulls people away from their deeper and more meaningful goals, but so that it helps them to achieve them.”*

Thus, not only is Hari surely right to conclude that “banning surveillance capitalism” is an absolutely necessary step toward reclaiming our attention—“people who are being hacked and deliberately hooked [on tech





platforms] can't focus," as he neatly puts it—but he is also similarly correct in his suggestion that we should *want more*: we should want technology to be aligned with our interests, rather than being merely not-misaligned with them. We should, as tech ethicist James Williams has put it, want technology not simply to get off our backs, but to be actively on our side.

Hari also goes beyond technological causes. Indeed, much of *Stolen Focus's* originality, and in fact one of its great strengths, is that it does not restrict itself to a discussion of the attention-sapping nature of modern technology, but rather emphasizes how other crucial factors like our chronic lack of sleep, worsening diets, and increasingly polluted cities have also harmed our ability to focus. He shows how these factors work together to create the attention problem. Take Hari's beautifully succinct explanation for the measurable decrease in children's attention spans:

*"We don't let [children] play freely; we imprison them in their homes, with little to do except interact via screens; and our school system largely deadens and bores them. We feed them food that causes energy crashes, contains drug-like additives that can make them hyper, and doesn't contain the nutrients they need. We expose them to brain-disrupting chemicals in the atmosphere. It's not a flaw in them that, as a result, they are struggling to learn attention. It's a flaw in the world we built for them."*

The ultimate solutions Hari offers for "healing our attention" are, in my view, extremely reasonable. Some are proffered at the individual level, for instance, "pre-committing" to individual tasks, getting at least eight hours of sleep every night, and taking regular time off social media. Hari himself estimates that, as a result of these individual changes to his life, his own attention was boosted by about 15-20 percent. However, he is clear that such individual solutions can only take you so far; they will not—indeed, cannot—constitute a satisfactory long-term solution. On this point he quotes a telling remark from Williams, who notes that "digital detoxes" and other individual methods are "not the solution, for the same reason that wearing a gas mask for two days a week isn't the answer to pollution. It might, for a short period of time, keep, at an individual level, certain effects at bay. But it's not sustainable, and it doesn't address the systemic issues."

Thus, Hari believes that it is at the *societal* level that substantive change must ultimately be made. In particular, other than banning surveillance capitalism, Hari also suggests introducing a four-day work week (to combat physical and especially mental exhaustion) and encouraging children to play freely from the very earliest stages of childhood. Moreover, he makes a persuasive point about how, in the absence of a resolution to our attentional crisis, a host of our societal problems will likely remain, including (but not limited to) the climate crisis and the rise in authoritarianism around the world:

*"Solving big problems requires the sustained focus of many people over many years. Democracy requires the ability of a population to pay attention long enough to identify real problems, distinguish them from fantasies, come up with solutions, and hold their leaders accountable if they fail to deliver them. If we lose that, we lose our ability to have a fully functioning society.... People who can't focus will be more drawn to simplistic authoritarian solutions—and less likely to see clearly when they fail."*

Or, to quote Williams: "In order to do anything that matters, we must first be able to give attention to the things that matter." Indeed, I would be tempted to go further still: to the extent that we are unable to focus, we are, plausibly, unable to meaningfully exist.

ONE CENTRAL, INESCAPABLE FACT REMAINS: FOR HUGE numbers of people, smartphones are having a seriously deleterious impact across many aspects of their lives. Not only are they causing mental or physical illness, but, by users' own admission, they are addictive, and seem to have radically skewed how people spend their time and their conception of what they should consider important in life. But if we conclude—as I think we

should—that the costs of smartphone use outweigh the benefits, an obvious question arises: What should we do?

We can answer that question at both the individual and the societal level. At the individual level, the simplest response—which I personally would recommend—would be to *get rid of your smartphone*. Simple "flip" phones are far less distracting and, typically, also far cheaper than your average smartphone—and, what's more, they still allow you to call and text your loved ones. Other useful suggestions for minimizing your smartphone use include changing your screen to grayscale, downloading ad blocking software, and even—in the most extreme cases—buying a phone timer "lock box."

Such individual solutions, however, will not—indeed, cannot—constitute a satisfactory long-term solution to the problem, because the devices in question are being designed specifically to overcome human willpower. As Williams remarked in his 2018 book, *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy*:

*"What we have [...] is, on one side, an entire industry spending billions of dollars trying to capture your attention using the most sophisticated computers in the world, and on the other side ... your attention. This is [...] akin to a soldier seeing an army of thousands of tanks and guns advance upon him, and running in a bunker for refuge."*

Thus, it is at the *societal* level that we must respond. We can first imagine what the most draconian solutions would look like; for instance, regulation of smartphone use in a manner comparable to cigarette use. People could be restricted from using their smartphones except in certain designated areas (compare to "smoking rooms" at airports). If we followed the cigarette model, warning labels and images would be placed on phones (featuring, perhaps, a helpless child desperately trying to get the attention of their smartphone-addicted parent?) just as some countries place images of dying or deceased smokers on cigarette packets.

CIVIL LIBERTARIANS LIKE MYSELF ARE WARY OF MEASURES that intrude on freedom, like trying to ban smartphones outright. A more sensible response is possible: we—that is, activists, concerned citizens, relevant NGOs, etc.—could pressure policy-makers and businesses to radically overhaul the perverse incentive structures governing the design of these products' software: those designs which are specifically designed to "hook" the user to the product through the use of features like randomized variable rewards (essentially the same process underlying slot machines) as a means of optimizing metrics like time spent on a given platform, number of clicks, number of advertisements seen, etc. A different set of incentives needn't have such a deleterious effect on us. More specifically, these designs and underlying incentive structures could be redesigned so as to align more with users' *actual* interests and concerns (which might include things like reading more, learning a new language, or fostering genuinely meaningful, i.e., mostly offline interactions with friends and family members). To quote Williams again: "No one wakes up in the morning and thinks, 'How much time could I possibly spend on social media today?'"

In the absence of any such societal response, however, the onus will be on each individual separately to determine for him or herself what they should do. It is not easy. Anyone uncomfortable with their phone addiction must fight a difficult fight to free themselves from it. But in addition to trying to bring our own personal habits in line with our true values and desires, those of us who believe the social effects are seriously damaging have a responsibility to try to convey our position effectively to those who disagree. We need to make the case persuasively that the increases in convenience, and our occasional use of smartphones to (meaningfully) connect with people, are absolutely *not* worth the cost of addiction, depression, and, perhaps most importantly, a fundamental rewiring of what makes us human. ✦



# Why we should...

BY LILY SÁNCHEZ

## ABOLISH THE FAMILY

**M**Y SISTER AND I GREW UP IN THE SHADOW OF our parents' divorce. The failure of that marriage, and the resulting financial impact, was our life's lesson. We understood that we'd come from a "broken" family. The message was clear: *don't let divorce happen to you.*

We came of age in the '80s and '90s: Nancy Reagan's Just Say No to drugs and family values rhetoric, Bill Clinton's welfare reform and the "defense of marriage." Clinton's "end of welfare as we know it" promoted work and marriage as a solution to poverty (as Sarah Jaffe has noted, the preamble of the 1996 law included "Marriage is the foundation of a successful society").





The Defense of Marriage Act defined the institution of marriage as a union between a man and a woman and allowed states not to recognize same-sex marriages. By that time, the “endless privatization of everyday life and necessary resources that we call neoliberalism,” as Yasmin Nair puts it, had come into force.

My mother relied on our neighbors (themselves housewives) and family members for child care and rides to get us to and from public school while she was at work. Even though my mother had a college degree, we lived, to use a phrase Bernie Sanders uses, “paycheck to paycheck.” My mother didn’t get to do things she enjoyed: stargazing, astronomy, bike riding, or even just exercising. Her days were spent at work, and her evenings and weekends caring for children. It never occurred to me as a child to consider the love or care my mother was *not* getting while my sister and I were loved and cared for and managed to grow up and go off to college. What conservatives would see as a success story, I see as a kind of tragedy. I wish my mother had been, in the words of writer Sophie Lewis, “less alone, less burdened by caring responsibilities, less trapped.”

As a child, I also understood that *my* family did not measure up to *the* family. As professor of gender, sexuality, and feminist studies Kathi Weeks has written, the family, characterized by privatized care, the (heterosexual) couple unit, and biologically related kin, is “legislatively declared, legally defended, and socially prescribed” in the United States. There’s a right way to do family, and a wrong way, as conservatives often tell us.

We all need families—sometimes more than one—in order to survive. In a society built around scarcity—of educational opportunities and jobs, healthcare, housing, and even the prospect of a dignified retirement—a desire for coupledom and family makes sense. As M.E. O’Brien, a writer who focuses on gender freedom and communist theory, puts it, “there’s a strong material logic” to the couple form. “If you find the right person, you’re going to be okay.” But beyond material considerations, even wealthy pop stars want *the one and the family*. John Mayer, the singer-songwriter and guitarist who rose to fame in the early 2000s, has been singing about serial monogamy for over 20 years and makes clear in his music (and in interviews) that he wants to get married and have children, a house, and a “home life” (things that have eluded him thus far). Adele has admitted she was “obsessed with the nuclear family because I never came from one.” She got divorced a few years ago—“I was just embarrassed I didn’t make my marriage work”—and said, in an interview with Mayer, that marriage had given her the “safest” feeling she’d ever had.

The psychologist Erich Fromm wrote in his 1956 book *The Art of Loving* that “In the United States ... to a vast extent, people are in search of ‘romantic love,’ of the personal experience of love that should lead to marriage.” But, according to Fromm, capitalist societies had commodified human relations, particularly the search for spouses, to the detriment of humans. He wrote about the marriage “market” of his time, in which people looked for the best “deal” of “personality packages.” We now have online dating, which ultimately turns dating into a market (you must pay for access to that market) where people and their profiles are like items on a menu to choose from. For Fromm, love was a way of being, an orientation, not primarily an attachment to another person or the possession of a certain status (a marriage and family). And yet, he argued, we spend so much time searching for someone to love rather than cultivating the art of loving as a practice involving “the active concern for the life and the growth of that which we love.”

What this has to do with the family is that we have substituted rig-

id notions of family structure (and “family values”) for the practice of loving. We only need families because our society is organized in such a way as to make atomized families the main social unit responsible for our survival in an increasingly unequal society with limited social safety nets. Yet, marriage and the nuclear family are but one way we human beings can organize ourselves. They are not inevitable, universal, or timeless despite all the cultural and political signals we get that suggest they are.

To critique the family, then, is to level a critique of the conditions of a capitalist society that make the nuclear family our main source of support and survival and that uses the family as a weapon to discipline or stigmatize those that don’t comply with traditional family structures or norms around gender and sexuality. The family is, in O’Brien’s words, an “obstacle to human freedom.” The family must be abolished, which means a “breaking open of the family to free and unleash what’s good in it and to generalize that into the social body as a whole. To make the necessary forms of care available to everyone unconditionally.”

Everyone can support family abolition, even those who feel there is nothing wrong with their family. Family abolition is not about breaking up individual families but about radically changing the society that makes the family structure necessary, about creating a society in which everyone is cared for. We can—and must—imagine and create better ways to live and to love each other.

**W**E ARE OFTEN TOLD BY CONSERVATIVES that the traditional family is the bedrock of a moral society. Take this “family values” passage from the 1976 Republican Party platform:

*Families must continue to be the foundation of our nation. Families—not government programs—are the best way to make sure our children are properly nurtured, our elderly are cared for, our cultural and spiritual heritages are perpetuated, our laws are observed and our values are preserved. ... [I]t is imperative that our government’s programs, actions, officials, and social welfare institutions never be allowed to jeopardize the family. We fear the government may be powerful enough to destroy our families; we know that it is not powerful enough to replace them.*

The platform goes on to explain how the tax code, the estate tax (to “minimize disruption of already bereaved families”), and welfare stipulations encouraging marriage were to be designed with the preservation of the family in mind. Government policies still confer financial benefits to married people compared to singles. From 2001–2014 the federal government spent nearly \$800 million on marriage promotion programs, often targeting poor people of color for relationship counseling. These programs have been largely ineffective in achieving stated goals. Currently, the government maintains Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood program funding; its web site claims that children do best when raised by two married biological parents, a longtime claim of social conservatives which has been refuted by recent research and which ignores the fact that many cultures practice communal child rearing, also called alloparenting. Despite such public policy, marriage rates in the U.S. are now at a 20-year low.

The right-wing, Christian family values agenda picked up influence in the 1970s, according to historian Anthea Butler. In *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America*, Butler explains how the Moral Majority, formed in 1979 by evangelical lead-



## WHY WE SHOULD ABOLISH THE FAMILY

ers, “explicitly teamed with Republican Party politics and political action” to “re-create this great nation” according to white, Christian standards. Around the same time, offshoot organizations such as American Family Association, Focus on the Family, and the Family Research Council “began lobbying government on evangelical concerns about the family, marriage, abortion, and education.” An “underlying message of these groups,” she argues, was that “sexual immorality, including race mixing, would be its [America’s] downfall.” Butler also argues that evangelicalism is no longer simply a religious movement but rather a “nationalistic political movement whose purpose is to support the hegemony of white Christian men over and against the flourishing of others.” Evangelicals tend to vote in large numbers for right-wing politicians, including Donald J. Trump, an accused sexual predator who has spoken in vulgar language even about his own daughter.

The 1976 platform seems quaint compared to GOP Florida Sen. Rick Scott’s chilling manifesto, “An 11 Point Plan to Rescue America,” released earlier this year. Decrying the “militant left’s” plan to “change or destroy” things like “the nuclear family, gender, [and] traditional morality,” Scott elaborates:

*We will protect, defend, and promote the American Family at all costs. The nuclear family is crucial to civilization, it is God’s design for humanity, and it must be protected and celebrated. To say otherwise is to deny science.*

While Republicans are the most rabidly in favor of the heterosexual marriage-based family, both Republicans and Democrats use rhetoric around the family to appeal to voters, sometimes as part of the ongoing “culture wars.” Conservatives invoke family values to oppose everything from abortion, feminism, pornography, comprehensive sex education, and divorce to homosexuality, rights for trans people, same-sex marriage, critical race theory, and Black Lives Matter. As Lewis has argued, “to attack the family is ... unthinkable” in our current politics. “Nowhere on the party-political spectrum can one find proposals to dethrone the family, hasten its demise, or even decenter it in policy.”

WHILE CONSERVATIVES ARE PREOCCUPIED with the family as a force for moral good, they are not as attentive to the ways in which the family harms people. Feminist writer Madeline Lane-McKinley predicted early in 2020 that the pandemic would expose the dark underbelly of family and home life:

“Households are capitalism’s pressure cookers. This crisis will see a surge in housework—cleaning, cooking, caretaking, but also child abuse, molestation, intimate partner rape, psychological torture, and more.” Indeed, there has been a significant rise in domestic violence worldwide since the start of the pandemic. Lewis has pointed out that the “vast majority of queerphobic and sexualized violence” takes place within the family. According to a 2019 Congressional Research Service report on homeless youth, LGBTQ youth face increased risk of homelessness, often because they are forced out of their homes due to negative reactions from family when they come out. As journalist Rachel Louise Snyder wrote in her 2019 book *No Visible Bruises: What We Don’t Know About Domestic Violence Can Kill Us*, domestic violence is responsible for 50 percent of cases of homelessness for women and is the third leading cause of homelessness in the U.S. Thus, Snyder writes, the “private violence” of families has “vastly public consequences.”

For many, family violence often has lasting effects. Sociologist Jennifer M. Silva interviewed 100 young working-class adults (defined









as adults whose fathers had not obtained a bachelor's degree) for her 2013 book *Coming up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty*. Silva noted that for many of the respondents in her book, "hurtful and agonizing betrayals within the family lie at the root" of their personal "demons." The adults in Silva's cohort spent tremendous amounts of energy, sometimes unsuccessfully, trying to heal themselves from their family traumas.

**A**S NICOLE SUSSNER RODGERS AND JULIE KOHLER write in *The Nation*, for the right, "the battle may be about the uterus, but the war is for the future of the family." Indeed, we are often told that the traditional family is in crisis. David Brooks' 2020 *Atlantic* article, "The Nuclear Family was a Mistake," argues that a lack of extended family (he laments the rise of single-parent and "chaotic" families) has increased inequality in our society. Popular books by academics also note the decline of the traditional family, or a family values-based "way of life," arguing that non-traditional family structures are implicated in troubling social phenomena such as inequality and deaths of despair. Sociologist Robert D. Putnam describes the "opportunity gap" between those with and without a college degree in his 2015 book *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, noting different family structures (among other characteristics) between the educated and uneducated. Economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton describe deaths from suicide, alcoholism, and drug overdoses among the white working class in their 2020 book *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*. Case and Deaton come to ominous conclusions. A lack of family values can be, in their view, an important part of a pathway to despair. And while the authors admit that the impacts of lifestyle choices do not have easily quantifiable values, the book's moralizing focus on such matters is hard to ignore; the effect is to de-emphasize the importance of systemic policies that can be legislated, such as improved wages and working conditions, universal health care, free college, public housing, and universal child care and pre-K.

Conservatives are right that the family is in crisis—to the extent that "crisis" means that the structures of peoples' lives (their marital status, their living arrangements, their decisions regarding reproduction) often reflect their overall level of economic security (or lack thereof). The traditional family has become unattainable for many, especially the working class. As Silva writes: "Traditional markers of adulthood—leaving home, completing school, establishing financial independence, marriage, and childbearing—have become strikingly delayed or even foregone in the latter half of the twentieth century, particularly for the working class." She notes that the majority of her respondents dealt with unstable and low-paying service jobs, credit card debt, family dissolution, and "illness and work-related disabilities, domestic violence, and constant financial stress." In her study sample, respondents were haunted by an idealized working-class life of the past: of marriage, gendered norms (male breadwinner, female homemaker), home ownership, and having children. But for most, the overall instability of their lives precluded any chance of achieving this kind of life. This is a point that Putnam also concedes: "Unemployment, underemployment, and poor economic prospects discourage and undermine stable relationships—that is the nearly universal finding of many studies, both qualitative and quantitative," he writes in *Our Kids*.

Despite all this, the crisis of the family is a chronic concern of conservatives, and it's a story that is not going anywhere.

**T**HE STORY OF THE TRADITIONAL FAMILY IS, LIKE most myths, a mixture of truth and fantasy. As marriage historian Stephanie Coontz writes in *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, "Like most visions of a 'golden age,' the 'traditional family' ... evaporates on closer examination. It is an ahistorical amalgam of structures, values, and behaviors that never coexisted in the same time and place." Nonetheless, what we think of as the traditional family with heterosexual couple, male breadwinner, female housewife, and children became possible due to the convergence of multiple factors in the early and mid 20th century.

The workers' movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, bolstered by unions, led to improved wages such that the male breadwinner family was promoted as a desirable feature of (white) working-class life. The Depression era saw a "disruption of the family," as massive unemployment and destitution led to homelessness. People sought refuge in shantytowns called Hoovervilles or moved in with others when possible. Children were unable to attend school; women turned to sex work; there was the sense that the family was "broken." The New Deal response led the state to be more actively involved in the family, as this was the period which gave us Social Security and Aid to Dependent Children, among other programs. In *Work Won't Love You Back*, Sarah Jaffe writes that the New Deal period in the U.S. "gave us the thing we think of as the 'traditional' family: the suburban two-point five-kid picket-fence white nuclear household, June Cleaver mom at home making dinner in high heels and waiting for her husband to come home from his eight-hour day in his five-day workweek." Putnam notes that around the mid 20th century, the male breadwinner nuclear family became common.

But since the '70s, a number of changes (including the stagnation or decrease of working-class wages and the shifting of gender roles, with women entering the workforce and obtaining higher education) have brought about the collapse of the family and a diversification of structures. O'Brien again:

*The male-breadwinner family form is no longer characteristic of any sector of society, and has lost its social hegemony due to the convergence of several simultaneous trends. In its place, we've seen the dramatic and steady growth of dual-wage earner households, of people choosing not to partner or marry, of atomized and fragmented family structures. ... These dynamics have produced a heterogeneous array of family forms in working-class life.*

In *Our Kids*, Putnam describes what he calls a "two-tier" family system of the U.S., which he says has predominated for the last 30 or so years. He breaks up society broadly into thirds: upper third is college educated, middle third has some post-secondary education, and bottom third has no more than a high school diploma. For the upper third, college-educated of society, there's the "neo-traditional" model in which the educated tend to marry each other and both spouses work; these families can afford to pay for labor and childcare that was traditionally carried out by a housewife. For the lower third of society, there are "blended families," in which adults tend not to marry and tend to have children with multiple partners, sometimes called "fragile families," a phrase of the late sociologist Sara McLanahan. Much is made of these structures and how the children of the neo-traditional model enjoy better life outcomes than those unfortunate to be raised in the lower model. Putnam is careful to acknowledge that correlation is not causation. But there is an underlying assumption in his book: namely, that if we could make the lower third more like the upper third, more children could do better in life. The tendency is to think of family structure as the thing that needs fixing instead of simply giving care to everyone.



Rather than think of the collapse of the traditional family as a sign of moral degeneration of the citizenry, though, we ought to think of it as the inevitable fate of an institution that was never natural or stable to begin with.

**A**S IRAMI OSEI-FRIMPONG, AN ACADEMIC and political commentator, recently argued in response to the Supreme Court leak about a possible overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, much of the U.S. culture wars, including the question of abortion, boil down to a question of “Who Gets to Have Sex?” and under what conditions? The “who” can refer to race, gender, sexual orientation, class, or employment or marital status. The conditions can refer to what sex is for: Pleasure? Procreation? Exchange of money? Something else? The standard narrative of the right is that heterosexual, marriage-based, procreative sex is legitimate, and behavior different from this is to be dismissed (and even outlawed) as an abomination. Sen. Rick Scott claims this narrative is based on science. But he is mixing value judgments with scientific facts. Science provides tools and observations we can use to understand the world but doesn’t constitute a value system for those observations.

Scott claims that science is the basis of the family as “God’s design for humanity” and that science dictates strict gender binaries of male and female (implied as the basis of the pair bond). “Facts are facts, the earth is round, the sun is hot, there are two genders ... to say otherwise is to deny science.” When Scott conflates his values with other documented facts about the universe, he isn’t just co-opting the vocabulary of liberal wokeness (“Listen to the scientists,” per President Biden). His argument goes much deeper. He’s promoting the family almost as if it were *human nature*.

A simple consideration of other cultures different from our own provides examples of human behavior that do not adhere to Scott’s story about the purpose of sex and marriage. One example comes from David Graeber’s *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. In the book, Graeber cited anthropological observations of barter ceremonies between groups of neighboring people. In Australia, the Gunwinggu people were noted to carry out a barter ceremony called *dzamalag*. These elaborate rituals—the one Graeber cited happened in the 1940s—involved singing, dancing, and sex between members of the different groups, even individuals who were noted to be married. (Their idea of “marriage” must have been different from our own.) The Mosuo people in China, as another example, are a matriarchal society in which women have a great degree of sexual freedom:

*Men and women practise what is known as a “walking marriage”—an elegant term for what are essentially furtive, nocturnal hook-ups with lovers known as “xia.” A man’s hat hung on the door handle of a woman’s quarters is a sign to other men not to enter. These range from one-night stands to regular encounters that deepen into exclusive, life-long partnerships—and may or may not end in pregnancy. But couples never live together, and no one says, “I do.”*

Also consider that in Islam, the second most practiced faith in the world, there exists a temporary marriage of varying lengths called a *mut’ah*. While it is not practiced uniformly and has been likened by some within the faith to a form of prostitution because it involves the payment of money to the woman, the fact that this arrangement could be considered legitimate reveals how arbitrary our sexual mores can be. Just as we can observe a range of sexual and social behaviors among humans, sanctioned (or not) by religion or culture, it turns out that the U.S. family as we know it also arose from specific historical conditions.

**T**HE NUCLEAR FAMILY AS PROMOTED BY THE STATE has been imposed upon non-white and immigrant populations since colonial times. Consider the case of Native Americans. As Stephanie Coontz explains in *The Way We Never Were*, colonialists forced Native American extended families off their collective property and onto single-family plots. They made Indian men the public representatives of families, ignoring the traditional role of women in community leadership, and placed Indian children in boarding schools to eradicate traditional Native American values.

Discoveries of mass graves at sites of these boarding schools reveal just one aspect of the larger genocide of Native people (survivors also recall rampant sexual abuse by Catholic officials at these religious schools).

Professor of Native studies Kim TallBear explains further that “settler sexuality” rested on notions of binary sexes, hetero-normativity, and sexual monogamy. Quoting Cree-Métis feminist Kim Anderson in *Making Kin Not Population*, TallBear writes,

*‘One of the biggest targets of colonialism was the Indigenous family’ in which women had occupied positions of authority and controlled property. The colonial state targeted women’s power, tying land tenure rights to heterosexual, one-on-one, lifelong marriages, thus tying women’s economic well being to men who legally controlled the property. Indeed, women themselves became property.*

TallBear describes Native genders and sexual relationships as more fluid than that of the settlers—especially the rigid notion of monogamy, which she says can be considered a form of “hoarding” another person’s body. Caretaking and domestic duties, she notes, were also carried out more diffusely, among “extended kinship” relationships. Thus, the idea of a “single mother” is nonsensical.

African American families have faced family-related oppression since the days of slavery. Most obviously, kidnapping African people to work in bondage was a form of destruction to those societies; slave families were routinely torn apart at the auction block. Once freed from slavery, Black people were forced into tenant sharecropping under the white backlash to Reconstruction which gave us Jim Crow. Sharecropping conditions favored marriage; at the same time, the workers’ movement gains of the early 20th century were denied to Black people due to racism within that movement (the New Deal also excluded domestic and agricultural workers, sectors where Black workers were concentrated). Thus, the male-breadwinner wage was largely inaccessible to Black men and families.

The Black family has been and continues to be pathologized and directly targeted by policy. The oft-mentioned Moynihan Report of 1965 (*The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*), which blamed Black mothers for the “disintegration of the Black family” and linked Black family demise to the urban unrest of the period, was used to justify the burgeoning “war on crime” that targeted neighborhoods of color. In *Our Kids*, Putnam admits that there are three policy choices that “probably did contribute to [the] family breakdown” that his book is concerned with: the war on drugs, “three strikes” sentencing, and the sharp increase in incarceration.

For a society so concerned about the family, the U.S. has traumatized the most vulnerable members of the family—children—as a matter of official policy. As professor of law and sociology Dorothy Roberts has written:

*Since its inception, the United States has wielded child removal to terrorize, control, and disintegrate racialized population: enslaved Af-*



## WHY WE SHOULD ABOLISH THE FAMILY

*rican families, emancipated Black children held captive as apprentices by their former enslavers, Indigenous children kidnapped and confined to boarding schools under a federal campaign of tribal decimation, and European immigrant children swept up from urban slums by elite charities and put to work on distant farms.*

Finally, the state of U.S. children needs to be mentioned. Our child poverty rate is higher than many peer nations; social mobility has decreased; more than 140,000 U.S. children have been orphaned due to loss of caregivers from COVID; and a recent shortage of baby formula was noted by Pete Buttigieg to be an unfortunate side effect of our capitalist economy. The cruel family separations at the U.S.-Mexico border are also a reminder that the integrity of *those* families does not matter to the state. The U.S. does not seem to act like a society that cares enough about children.

**T**HE LEFT HAS LONG CRITIQUED THE TRADITIONAL family, from Marx and Engels, who saw the family as a key part of the bourgeois social order (via inheritance), to 19th century utopian socialists and the anti-capitalist feminists and queer radicals of the 1970s. Central to the leftist critique is the fact that the family is an institution that has been critical to the functioning of capitalism. Workers have to be fed, clothed, housed, and taken care of, and the household is the site where this care (and sexual reproduction, or the creation of new workers) takes place. Labor is gendered in the household, with wom-

en often doing unpaid work. The family also enables people who don't or can't work—infants and children, the elderly, and the disabled and unemployed—to receive care. The family is where we are supposed to get all the emotional and physical care we need. Thus, the family is where we are made dependent on a wage laborer—and disciplined in terms of gender roles and expression.

While liberal feminists wanted women to get out of the house and to secure equality in the workplace, radical feminists saw husbands as bosses in their own right. Radicals of the late '60s and '70s "sought the abolition of the male-breadwinner, heterosexual nuclear family form as a means towards full sexual and gender freedom." But over time, feminists began to favor diversity of family form, which "remains the dominant feminist approach to the politics of the family since the 1990s," writes Weeks. Yet diversification and representation—making capitalist institutions (marriage, the military, politics) more friendly and inclusive to racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ people, or others who have been marginalized—are not radical. A radical leftist vision is one that seeks to dismantle or transform these institutions entirely, including the family.

As Weeks points out, popular leftist policy proposals around health insurance and wages could decrease our dependence on the family structure. These policies would compensate for injustices exacerbated by the family or obviate the need for the family altogether: policies like Medicare for All, free college and student debt cancellation, universal basic income (UBI), and a \$25 minimum wage, just to name a few. With Medicare for All, healthcare benefits would not be tied to marital status; young people wouldn't get kicked off their parents' insurance at a certain age. With free college, there's no need to take on mountains of debt to get a college degree, or to depend on parents who might be unwilling or unable to fill out financial aid forms or contribute to the cost of education. With UBI and higher wages, people do not have to stay dependent upon other wage earners or the living arrangements sometimes dictated by those relationships. These policies increase human freedom and thus our freedom from the confines of the family structure.





And yet, family abolition is more than a series of policies. It's a political project to create an entirely different society in which everyone's needs are met. In "Communizing Care," O'Brien describes post-revolutionary, communist arrangements in which people care for each other in larger structures loosely based on the phalansteries conceived of by the utopianist Charles Fourier (the phalansteries were to rescue people from what Fourier saw as the dreadfulness of married life). These are not counterculture communes that exist within capitalism but true post-capitalist structures in which groups of a couple hundred people or so are in charge of taking care of everyone in the group and coordinating with other communes the production and distribution of goods and services that people need to live.

What's notable about O'Brien's vision of the phalansteries is that there is a concern for everyone's well-being, sexual needs as collective concerns, as well as attention and sensitivity to vulnerable people, to "biological variation ... [what] we now define as disability, neurodivergence, or mental illness." While people would be free to form their own kinship units, including with biological relatives, the family as it is known would not form any kind of "economic unit" as in current life. We can imagine communal parenting, freedom of expression for sexuality and gender, and relationships not based on economic coercion.

The roots of such structures can be seen in the caring communities that pop up in protest movements such as Occupy Wall Street in 2011 or Standing Rock, the Indigenous-led protest movement against the Dakota Access Pipeline, or DAPL, north of the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, in 2016. (O'Brien describes such protest kitchens as part of insurrections as key features of family abolition.) In *Our History is the Future*, Native writer Nick Estes describes camp life at the site of #NoDAPL:

*The main camp was a fully functioning city. There was no running water, but the Cannon Ball Community Center opened its doors for showers. There was no electricity, but Prairie Knights Casino, the tribal casino two miles up the road, had Wi-Fi. And there were no flushable toilets, but Standing Rock paid for porta potties. Where physical infrastructure lacked, an infrastructure of Indigenous resistance and caretaking of relations proliferated—of living and being in community according to Indigenous values—which for the most part kept people safe and warm. ... The main kitchen served three hot meals a day. (At its height there were about thirteen free camp kitchens and a half dozen medic tents.) ... Elders and children ate first, following a meal prayer. If there were guests ... they ate first. The donations tent was well stocked with sleeping bags, blankets, tents, socks, gloves, hats, boots, and so forth. ... Everyone was fed and clothed. Everyone had a place. At camp check-in, bodies were needed to cook, dig compost holes, chop wood, take care of children, give rides to Walmart, among other tasks. Many quit their jobs, instead making it their full-time work to cook and to keep others warm and safe.*

The camp included a day school for children as well as direct action training. (And to be clear, family abolition is not about idealizing makeshift camp structures of survival or about making our living conditions less comfortable than we might imagine. The camps illustrate the how and the why of family abolition, not the end goals for the material circumstances of our lives.)

In August 2020, the *Intercepted* podcast "Escape from the Nuclear Family" featured a story about a group of people weathering the pandemic in Oakland, California. Four families had lived together for 15 years in a "democratic community with friends." They talked about how their communal life enabled them to deal with the stress of the pandemic.

*It's a lifesaver, you know, to have other people you know and trust and who care about you and care about your children being a part of your life. We need each other to be our best selves because it's not as simple as an act of will. And so having that extra support around parenting and even just coordinating ... knowing that there's always people around and that my kids feel comfortable and safe. That's hugely important and it creates an enormous amount of resilience in our ability to navigate disturbances, whether they're small or big.*

A policy change we can make now is to build public housing designed with social interactions in mind instead of more unaffordable single-family homes.

Transitioning from isolated units to communal living environments will be challenging; humans are complex and conflict-prone. A post-nuclear family society does not portend freedom from conflict or bad behavior; people could still harm each other. But it does mean people have the opportunity to change their surroundings if their relationships are not working out and would have more support instead of isolation within an abusive environment. The goal is also freedom from the economic constraints under capitalism that make conflict and violence a routine part of human interactions, whether within families or on the streets or in our jobs.

Humans are social creatures, and we evolved to cooperate with others for our survival. We face an epidemic of loneliness and deaths of despair in our society. As people who make it to old age live longer, we will need more care, not less. We need more community and more support, not less.

**I**N TODAY'S LANGUAGE OF THE FAMILY, WE'RE TO HAVE it all: work-life balance. We're to work full time and (if we can afford it) hire other women to clean the house, do laundry, and care for children or other family members. As many on the left have pointed out, society will pay people (often women, and often not much) to take care of children or the elderly—as long as those children and elderly are somebody else's family members. In reality, society should collectively pay for the care of people of all ages no matter who does the caring.

Perhaps the most important point of family abolition is the idea of creating a society rooted in love for everyone, not just one's genetic kin. To love everyone means to be actively concerned with their care and growth, as Fromm put it. We should want care for everyone. As Lewis argues: "When you love someone, it simply makes no sense to endorse a social technology that isolates them; privatizes their life-world, arbitrarily assigns their dwelling-place, class, and very identity in law; and drastically circumscribes their sphere of intimate, interdependent ties."

The institution of the family—and those who defend it—continues to limit our freedom, as current narratives about gender, reproduction, and sexuality show. The federal right to an abortion may be overturned, and we are in the midst of a moral panic as the right promotes false narratives about drag queens and transgender people as sexual predators.

As Robin D. G. Kelley explains in *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, freedom and love are revolutionary ideas, and we need both to imagine a better world. To imagine a society free from the oppression of the family, we need to imagine an expansion of love, not a contraction of it. An inclusivity of love for everyone, not the stifling exclusivity offered by the family. ♣



# OUR INVASIONS

BY NATHAN J. ROBINSON

*"... the decision of one man to launch a wholly unjustified and brutal invasion of Iraq  
—I mean of Ukraine." — George W. Bush*

*"Kick ass. ... If someone tries to stop the march to democracy, we will seek them out and kill  
them. ... Kill them! Be confident! Prevail! We are going to wipe them out!  
We are not blinking!" — George W. Bush to his generals*

*"This is a farewell kiss from the Iraqi people, you dog,"  
— Iraqi journalist Muntadhar al-Zaidi, while throwing his shoes at George W. Bush*

IT IS BEGINNING TO SEEM AS IF THERE WILL NEVER BE ANY MEANINGFUL accountability for the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. George W. Bush, now a personal friend of the Obamas, is being rehabilitated among the political elite, his crimes forgotten (except by his victims' families). These disastrous wars have destabilized the Middle East and caused hundreds of thousands of deaths; the cases for both wars were built on mountains of lies; and they both involved unspeakable criminal violence (from the use of horrific white phosphorous in Fallujah to the bombing of a Doctors Without Borders hospital in Afghanistan that burned patients alive in their beds). Yet these wars are receding in Americans' memories. The sheer amount of death and deprivation unleashed is difficult to even begin to come to grips with. The bipartisan consensus position in the U.S. appears to be that we are just not going to talk about it anymore, that while scores of Iraqis and Afghans will grow up orphaned, maimed, or both, there will be no investigations and no trials for some of the worst crimes committed in the 21st century.

There are still those who think the invasion of Afghanistan was a morally justifiable "good war," since it was conducted with the explicit purpose of rooting out Al-Qaeda after the 9/11 attacks. It is hard to maintain this conclusion after reading the U.S. government's own internal accounts of the war, as revealed in *Washington Post* reporter Craig Whitlock's 2021 book *The Afghanistan Papers*. We have evidence that the Taliban might have been willing to strike a deal to end the war quickly; the *Guardian* reported in October 2001 that "President George Bush rejected as 'non-negotiable' an offer by the Taliban to discuss turning over Osama bin Laden if the United States ended the bombing in Afghanistan." In fact, as Whitlock shows, the Bush administration conflated the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, thus turning what should have been a narrow operation to round up a small criminal gang into an all-out war that toppled the country's government and replaced it with an unstable, corrupt, and unpopular alternative. For 20 years, successive administrations were unwilling to admit that the war was squandering vast amounts of lives and money and achieving almost nothing. As in Vietnam, Whitlock says, U.S. officials were consistently "making rosy pronouncements they knew to be false and hiding unmistakable evidence the war had become unwinnable." Whitlock documents almost unbelievable examples of ignorant policymaking, from trying to win "hearts and minds" by giving children soccer balls with Koran verses on them (utterly offensive) to destroying poppy fields in the name of the War on Drugs, thus encouraging enraged, impoverished farmers to join the Taliban. The Costs of War project at Brown University has summarized the harm done to the country:

PHOTO: U.S. marines of the 3rd Light Armoured  
Reconnaissance Battalion in Kuwait, March 2003,  
preparing to invade Iraq. AP IMAGES





The war in Afghanistan continues destroying lives, due to the direct consequences of violence and the war-induced breakdown of public health, security, and infrastructure. Civilians have been killed by crossfire, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), assassinations, bombings, and night raids into houses of suspected insurgents. The United States military in 2017 relaxed its rules of engagement for airstrikes in Afghanistan, which resulted in a massive increase in civilian casualties. From the last year of the Obama administration to the last full year of recorded data during the Trump administration, the number of civilians killed by U.S.-led airstrikes in Afghanistan increased by 330 percent. The CIA has armed Afghan militia groups to fight Islamist militants and these militias are responsible for serious human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings of civilians. Even in the absence of fighting, unexploded ordnance from this war and landmines from previous wars continue to kill, injure, and maim civilians. Fields, roads, and school buildings are contaminated by ordnance, which often harms children as they go about chores like gathering wood. The war has also inflicted invisible wounds. In 2009, the Afghan Ministry of Public Health reported that fully two-thirds of Afghans suffer from mental health problems. Prior wars and civil conflict in the country have made Afghan society extremely vulnerable to the reverberating effects of the current war. Those war effects include elevated rates of disease due to lack of clean drinking water, malnutrition, and reduced access to health care. Nearly every factor associated with premature death—poverty, malnutrition, poor sanitation, lack of access to health care, environmental degradation—is exacerbated by the current war. About 241,000 people have been killed in the Afghanistan and Pakistan war zone since 2001. More than 71,000 of those killed have been civilians.

George W. Bush said in 2002 that “the history of military conflict in Afghanistan [has] been one of initial success, followed by long years of floundering and ultimate failure. We’re not going to repeat that mistake.” Whitlock shows that that is precisely what happened, and that it was the Afghan people who suffered the most. The Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations all lied to the U.S. public about how the war was going. After the U.S. finally withdrew (with one final horrifying drone strike on civilians for good measure, plus a coverup), the Taliban predictably returned to power. The U.S., not content to wreck the country with 20 years of war, froze Afghanistan’s assets and halted aid out of a purported concern with “human rights.” As a result, millions of Afghans are now on the brink of starvation. As the *Washington Post* notes in a report on the crisis, this is squarely the fault of the Biden administration, since “it was [Biden’s] decision to halt aid in response to the Taliban takeover that put the country on the brink of catastrophe.”

*“We were outside of [an Iraqi city] watching as bombs were dropping on the town. ... We were talking.*

*And Pat said, ‘You know, this war is so fucking illegal.’”*

—Army Spec. Russell Baer, speaking of Pat Tillman, NFL football player and Army Ranger killed by friendly fire in Afghanistan

THE IRAQ WAR WAS COMPLETELY INDEFENSIBLE from the start. The Bush administration knew that the intelligence it was relying on was shaky, but deliberately eliminated any possibility of doubt. It tried to terrify the American public into supporting the war by warning that proof of Saddam Hussein’s secret arsenal of world-ending weapons would come in the form of a “mushroom cloud.”

Saddam Hussein, interviewed in February of 2003 by Dan Rather, made protestations that turned out to be quite true, and accused the Bush administration of delusion:

**HUSSEIN:** *The inspection teams have been here. They have inspected every place. ... I think the U.S. and the world know that Iraq no longer has the weapons. There are no missiles that are contrary to the prescription of the United Nations in Iraq ...*

**DAN RATHER:** *Mr. President, Americans are very much concerned about anyone’s connections to Osama bin Laden. Do you have, have you had, any connections to Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden?*

**HUSSEIN:** *Is this the basis of the anxiety in the minds of U.S. officials? Or is it the basis of anxiety in the minds of the people of the United States? ... This topic did not appear amongst the concerns of U.S. officials—that is, about any relationship between Iraq and Osama bin Laden—until recently. That is when they realized that what they had been saying about Iraq—that Iraq was probably in possession of proscribed weapons of mass destruction—or that Iraq might have manufactured some of those weapons ... if that was the case, then that would be an embarrassment to the United Nations.*

The elimination of Hussein, a homicidal psychopath, as Iraq’s leader, could have been a worthy goal in and of itself. Indeed, “bringing democracy to Iraq” swiftly became one of the major public justifications for the war (after it became apparent that the other reasons were nonsense). Yet at every stage the war and occupation were conducted without regard to the well-being or desires of the people of Iraq. After Hussein’s ouster, Bush installed a nincompoop named L. Paul Bremer (a Harvard MBA who spoke no Arabic and had never set foot in Iraq), who ruled over the country like an imperial viceroy. Bremer made disastrous, ignorant decisions that plunged the country into hideous violence, most infamously by disbanding the Iraqi Army, thus instantly creating anarchy. “We created half a million angry, armed, unemployed Iraqis in 48 hours,” commented Bremer’s predecessor. Bremer may have been a bit of a scapegoat for the administration’s failures—some Republicans blame Bremer in order to exonerate Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld—but he did fine out of it. After destroying Iraq, Bremer went on to serve as chairman of the advisory board for Global Secure Corporation, a company that focuses “on securing the homeland with integrated products and services for the critical incident response community worldwide,” as well as on the board of BlastGard International, a “Florida-based company that manufactures materials to mitigate the impact of explosions.” When he’s not doing that, he lives a pleasant life as a ski instructor in Vermont.

Let us review the damage: 500,000 Iraqis died as a result of the U.S. war. Nearly 200,000 of those were violent deaths—people who were blown to pieces by coalition airstrikes or suicide bombers from the insurgency the U.S. occupation unleashed. Others died as a result of the collapse of the medical system—doctors fled the country in droves, since their colleagues were being killed or abducted. Childhood mortality and infant mortality in the country rose, and so did malnutrition and starvation. Millions of people were displaced, and toxins (such as depleted uranium, which is toxic when ingested or inhaled and, like other radioactive substances, confers a risk of cancer) introduced by American bombardment have been suspected of causing a range of public health effects including “increase[s] in Fallujah of congenital malformations, sterility, and infertility.” A “generation of orphans” was created; hundreds of thousands of children lost parents with many left to wander the streets homeless. The country’s infrastructure collapsed, its libraries and museums were looted, and its univer-



sity system was decimated, its professors assassinated. For years, residents of Baghdad had to deal with suicide bombings as a daily feature of life, and of course, for every violent death, scores more people were left injured or traumatized for life. In 2007 the Red Cross said that there were “mothers appealing for someone to pick up the bodies on the street so their children will be spared the horror of looking at them on their way to school.” The amount of death, misery, suffering, and trauma is almost inconceivable. In many places, we created a kind of hell on earth.

U.S. forces were not trained to deal with Iraqis as human beings. They solved problems with violence, and had little understanding of the culture. Houses were ransacked or destroyed in searches; people were shot for making sudden movements. The U.S. had absolutely no idea how to make Iraq into a functional country after destroying its government, and didn’t care to put in much effort. Testimonies from Iraq Veterans Against The War’s “Winter Soldier” interviews offer a disturbing look at how casual the dehumanization and violence toward Iraqis was:

- *“I remember one woman walking by. ... She was carrying a huge bag, and she looked like she was heading toward us, so we lit her up with the Mark 19, which is an automatic grenade launcher, and when the dust settled, we realized that the bag was full of groceries. She had been trying to bring us food, and we blew her to pieces.”* — Jason Washburn, a corporal in the U.S. Marines who served three tours in Iraq.
- *“By the time we got to Baghdad ... I was explicitly told by my chain of command that I could shoot anyone who came closer to me than I felt comfortable with, if that person did not immediately move when I ordered them to do so, keeping in mind I don’t speak Arabic. My chain of command’s general attitude was ‘better them than us,’ and we were given guidance that reinforced that attitude across the ranks. I watched that attitude intensify throughout my three tours. ... [At one point our commander] ordered that everyone on the streets was an enemy combatant. I can remember one instance that afternoon when we came around a corner and an unarmed Iraqi man stepped out of a doorway. I remember the marine directly in front of me raising his rifle and aiming at the unarmed man. Then I think, due to some psychological reason, my brain blocked out the actual shots, because the next thing I remember is stepping over the dead man’s body to clear the room that he came out of. It was a storage room and it was full of some Arabic version of Cheetos. There weren’t any weapons in the area except ours. The commander told us a couple of weeks later that over a hundred enemies had been killed, and to the best of my knowledge that number includes the people who were shot for simply walking down the street in their own city.”* — Jason Wayne Lemieux, sergeant, U.S. Marine Corps
- *“One time they said to fire on all taxicabs because the enemy was using them for transportation. In Iraq, any car can be a taxi cab; you just paint it white and orange. One of the snipers replied back, ‘Excuse me? Did I hear that right? Fire on all taxi cabs?’ The lieutenant colonel responded, ‘You heard me, trooper, fire on all taxi cabs.’ After that, the town lit up, with all the units firing on cars. This was my first experience with war, and that kind of set the tone for the rest of the deployment.”* — Hart Viges, U.S. Army Infantry specialist, 82nd Airborne Division

Very little of this was reported in the U.S. press. As Ashleigh Banfield of MSNBC, who was punished by the network for being publicly critical of the war, said: “There are horrors that were completely left out of this war” by the media. Not that exposure made much difference. The practice of torturing detainees at Abu Ghraib prison and

CIA black sites was eventually exposed to the public, but when Barack Obama came into office, he made it clear that there would be complete impunity for misconduct. As Karen Greenberg of the NYU Center on Law and Security noted, Obama “refused to clamp down on [torture] in a way that would make it hard for people in the future to do it.” Obama said that he wanted to “look forward, not backward,” a bizarre phrase that would sound laughable applied to any other serious crime.

Iraqis of all sects and backgrounds made it clear from early on that they did not want to be occupied—public opinion polling consistently showed that the majority wanted the U.S. to leave, despite American rhetoric about bringing “democracy” to Iraq. (In a sign of how much the U.S. respected Iraqi democracy, when the Iraqi parliament voted to expel U.S. troops in 2020, Donald Trump responded by threatening the country with sanctions.) One Iraqi quoted by a Winter Soldier testimonial likely spoke for many when he summarized: “Before America invaded, we didn’t have to worry about car bombs in our neighborhoods. We didn’t have to worry about the safety of our own children before they walked to school, and we didn’t have to worry about U.S. soldiers shooting at us as we drive up and down our own streets.”

**W**HEN VLADIMIR PUTIN INVADED UKRAINE, American politicians were almost unanimous in correctly declaring the war a hideous crime against humanity. But hardly any wished to discuss the difficult question: With what moral credibility can this country condemn aggressive warfare? We have long claimed the right to invade wherever and whenever we please in order to protect what we see as our national interests. We have wrecked countries and done nothing to make amends for our crimes. On what grounds do we claim Vladimir Putin is not allowed to do the same thing? Having undermined international law repeatedly, we are hardly in a position now to invoke it.

Joe Biden has publicly announced that he believes Vladimir Putin should be tried in the International Criminal Court for the invasion of Ukraine. He should. But shouldn’t George W. Bush? The United States declines to be bound by the jurisdiction of the ICC, and even claims the right to militarily rescue U.S. citizens who find themselves on trial there. (We have a law that has been dubbed the “Hague Invasion Act.”) If we believe that Vladimir Putin should be prosecuted, do we also believe in holding our own war criminals to account? Or do they get a free pass? If they *do* get a free pass, then the United States makes clear that it believes Putin should be bound by rules that we should be exempt from. And why should Putin be expected to accept such a setup? Asked in a 2003 press conference whether his Iraq policy was a violation of international law, George W. Bush joked: “International law? I better call my lawyer; he didn’t bring that up to me.” If Putin replied like this, we would consider it evidence of his depravity.

The invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan have caused decades-long human misery. Our lack of concern for the Iraqi people caused hundreds of thousands of them to die gruesomely, and gave the world the barbaric Islamic State. Afghanistan is now back under Taliban rule, but its people are starving to death. Few in the United States seem inclined to discuss what our country’s government did in our names. Supposedly there is no statute of limitations on murder. But if you are a U.S. official, the statute of limitations is “whenever public attention moves on to the next thing.” Usually that’s about five minutes. Then you are scot-free. Are we truly willing to accept this? ✚



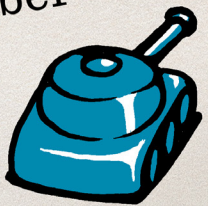
# EXTREMELY FUCKING HIGH RISK!

## RULES!

**COMBAT!** Roll the dice for advantage and damage! Remember that moving lines on a map means grinding thousands of families into pulp! Conscientious objectors lose a turn!

**ESCALATION CARDS!** In the event of a tie in the roll, a Stalemate allows the attacker to draw an Escalation Card! What will happen? A hack of hospital infrastructure? No-Fly Zones shooting down enemy planes? Full Nuclear War? WHO KNOWS?

**NUKES!** If an Escalation Card calls for Nuclear War, both players douse themselves with the enclosed Freedom Fluid [legally distinct from lighter fluid] and flick the enclosed rusty secondhand lighter as many times as they have Nuke Cards. First player to get merely horribly disfigured but not wholly melted alive wins, free to live a remnant of life having seen far too much.







CSTO

CSTO

CSTO

HACK

NUKE

NUKE

NATO

NATO

NATO

HEAVY ARMS

SANCTIONS

NUKE







# THE DAY WELLS FARGO CLOSED

*by Terri Friedline*

**W**ELLS FARGO CLOSED ITS DOORS TODAY FOR good, ending the megabank's centuries-long reign of power in the global economy.

I had just submitted my final grades for the semester and was finishing my morning tea when the alert popped up on my phone. I swiveled around in my chair and threw my hands into the air. Yes! I had been anticipating this day for months, and it had finally arrived. I heard a few cheers erupt from the bustling sidewalk outside my office window. I grabbed my bag and slid out, from behind my bookshelf, the decorated poster board with bold lettering that I'd prepared for just this occasion. I walked quickly out of the building to join a small crowd that had gathered spontaneously in the university quad and whose chorus, "Hey, hey, ho, ho, Wells Fargo has got to go!" was growing louder by the minute.

Eighteen years ago, a bank closure wouldn't have gotten this kind of attention. Fortunately, things changed. People were radicalized by an onslaught of environmental and economic catastrophes, bank scandals (especially scandals involving Wells Fargo), and a creative use of financial education that, collectively, brought banks' power into sharp focus. Banks spent millions of dollars each year telling people to take responsibility for their finances and budget their way out of poverty. Organizers and academic researchers like myself started to leverage the financial education that banks had financed. We didn't just teach people how to contest their overdraft fees or fix errors on their credit reports. We taught popular education and built political power. We explained how private banks make money off of dubious account fees and how proprietary credit scoring algorithms surveil and discriminate. So, many people were ready to celebrate the closure of a bank that had once been deemed "too big to fail."

No one knows exactly what set off the chain of events that caused regulators to finally close the bank. As a researcher studying the power and politics of banks, I had watched for decades as the pressure against Wells Fargo mounted and more people called for change. Native organizers identified Wells Fargo as a primary target for boycotts and divestment campaigns, given the bank's routine violations of Indigenous rights. The Action Center on Race & the Economy, a hub for organizations working to bring racial

justice and accountability to Wall Street, ran a campaign called "Forgo Wells." Even some progressive policymakers like Sen. Elizabeth Warren started calling on regulators to break up the bank. I couldn't be sure of the final straw that caused regulatory action. But, I have a few guesses.

Maybe regulators were taking climate change seriously as a systemic risk to the financial system. After all, this year, 2040, is the year that scientists predicted global warming would reach 1.5 degrees Celsius. The year is still symbolic even though we passed the temperature threshold a while ago.

Wells Fargo was always financing harmful projects like coal mines and oil pipelines.<sup>1</sup> Wells Fargo was one of the "Dirty Thirty," a list of banks compiled by environmental justice groups and ranked based on their investments in fossil fuels, which scientists warned were causing the planet to warm to unsafe levels.<sup>2</sup> Even after countries signed the Paris Agreement in 2015 (what ended up being a normative approach to preventing climate atrocity), Wells Fargo amped up its investments in fossil fuels and poured more than \$223 billion into coal and oil industries.<sup>3</sup> And these projects wrought renewed public ire when climate reports again foretold impending planetary and human catastrophes unless we stopped using fossil fuels.<sup>4</sup> Some environmental activists even set themselves on fire to raise awareness about the dire situation and compel meaningful action.

Or, maybe it was because of new scandals, like problems with the bank's blockchain and cryptocurrency that finally bubbled up to the surface or fresh accusations of discriminatory lending. During the pandemic years, when homeowners were refinancing their mortgages and locking in their wealth alongside low interest rates, investigative reports uncovered evidence that the bank engaged in discriminatory lending. Wells Fargo approved fewer than half of Black borrowers' loan applications while approving nearly three quarters of White borrowers' applications.<sup>5</sup> After claims of discrimination, major cities vowed to prohibit the bank from receiving public contracts.<sup>6</sup> Policymakers held hearings to publicly chastise the bank,<sup>7</sup> and regulators tried to force some degree of accountability through sanctions.

Or, maybe because regulators had discovered an old scandal was greater in scope than originally reported. What began as an inves-



tigation into the bank's retail banking unit—the “fake accounts” scandal that surfaced in 2013—quickly spread to wealth management and other units.<sup>8</sup> What happened was that Wells Fargo employees had opened bank accounts and lines of credit without customers' permission. Then the bank charged customers fees on accounts they didn't know they owned! And, of course, they targeted Black, Latinx, and Native customers.<sup>9</sup> The Justice Department, Securities and Exchange Commission, and Federal Bureau of Investigation kept widening the scope of their investigations because they kept discovering new leads.<sup>10</sup> For a while, it seemed like regulators were issuing new monetary sanctions against the bank every few months for this decade-old scandal.<sup>11</sup>

**T**HESE SCANDALS WERE actually just the most recent ones in the company's much longer history.

In an embezzlement scheme uncovered in the 1980s, Wells Fargo employees stole around \$21 million from the bank by taking advantage of a delay in the computerized system that processed transactions from its branches.<sup>12</sup> Harold Smith, a boxing promoter and chair of a sports enterprise named after Muhammad Ali, helped to embezzle the funds. Bankers allegedly used the money to secure lucrative oil deals in African countries by leveraging the famous boxer's name.<sup>13</sup> The scheme ran undetected for two years until a lawyer for Muhammad Ali<sup>14</sup> became concerned with the sports enterprise's extravagant spending. The lawyer tipped off an employee at the branch where the funds were being embezzled, and the employee noticed irregularities. A lot of people were caught up once the scandal was revealed, including Smith and at least four bank executives along with the chairman of Wells Fargo's board.<sup>15</sup>

Investigations revealed an embezzlement scandal that had all the trappings of a Hollywood action movie—a setting not too far away from the Beverly Hills branch where most of the money disappeared. In interviews with investigators, Smith described going into hiding once the fraud surfaced, his sons being kidnapped by a Wells Fargo rep-

resentative, and being chased by armed pursuers through the snowy mountains of Colorado. So many of the retellings cast Smith as the protagonist in this saga.<sup>16</sup> But it probably didn't take much effort for Wells Fargo to leverage the perceived overachievement of a successful Black man and make him the public face of a scandal in order to downplay its own responsibility. White America always has a stage set for a Black man to play a part in their script.

For years after the “fake accounts” scandal surfaced, Wells Fargo executives paraded in front of regulators and congressional committees with empty apologies and feigned deference to oversight. Policymakers held special congressional hearings where Wells Fargo executives were required to testify.<sup>17</sup> Wells Fargo paid over \$4 billion in fines and penalties to regulators; this had become part of the bank's routine cost of doing business.<sup>18</sup>

Wells Fargo never really recuperated whatever was left of its flimsy public image. And it seemed like everyone knew the latest “fake accounts” scandal wasn't an exception. It was just part of how the bank and the wider financial industry operated. Every moment is a sales opportunity, every customer a potential mark, every minute a chance to make a profit.<sup>19</sup> It was well-known that other banks had aspired to Wells Fargo's corrosive sales culture.<sup>20</sup> Other banks just didn't get caught.

Wells Fargo employees were vocal about the bank's sales culture when it came time for them to tell their stories. In interviews with reporters, employees talked as if they were deployed as soldiers during wartime or worked in sweatshops of the 1930s, saying that working in the bank's sales offices was worse than anyone could have imagined.<sup>21</sup> One employee revealed, “I was in the 1991 Gulf War. ... This is sad and hard for me to say, but I had less stress in the 1991 Gulf War than working for Wells Fargo.” And that's really saying something because people who have survived through war can imagine an awful lot. Employees were ridiculed and threatened by supervisors. Some were forced to walk outside on the hot concrete under blistering sun as punishment. Just imagine how climate change made that punishment so much worse! It wasn't safe to be outside even in those days,

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10. Conrad, L. (2018, March 16). Federal probe extends into Wells Fargo's wealth business: Report. *American Banker*.
11. Jaeger, J. (2021, January 19). Ex-Wells Fargo general counsel fined \$3.5M for fake accounts role. *Compliance Week*.
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13. Lindsey, R. (1981, March 20). 4 at Wells Fargo named by boxing figure in fraud. *The New York Times*.
14. According to Mr. Ali's statements reported in coverage by the *New York Times*, he was not involved in any management aspects at Muhammad Ali Professional Sports Inc., which was known as Maps and where Harold Smith served as the chairman. Mr. Ali received a fee for his name being used in the sports enterprise.
15. Goulding, J. (1981, February 4). Wells Fargo chairman denies \$200,000 embezzlement charge. *United Press International*.
16. Anderson, D. (1981, February 8). Harold Smith: Man and his money remain a mystery. *The New York Times*. Henderson, B., & Allison, D. (2014). *Ring of Deceit: Inside the Biggest Sports and Bank Scandal in U.S. History*. Bruce Henderson Books.
17. The U.S. House Committee on Financial Services held hearings entitled *Holding Wells Fargo Accountable: Examining the Role of the Board of Directors in the Bank's Egregious Pattern*





PHOTOS BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

when the surface temperature of sidewalks and parking lots rose to 150 degrees Fahrenheit. One employee was threatened with being “transferred to a store where someone had been shot and killed” if they failed to meet their sales goals.<sup>22</sup>

**W**ELLS FARGO GOT ITS start in the Gold Rush of California. In the late 1840s, masses of people migrated westward hoping to strike it rich after gold was discovered in California. The mostly White settlers who began occupying the California foothills needed loans to buy mining equipment and other supplies. The lucky ones needed to exchange their gold dust for paper money. And that’s when Henry Wells and William Fargo, executives of the stagecoach mail delivery company American Express, devised a plan to secure their own fortunes. Wells and Fargo founded their bank to capitalize on the colonial occupation and gold speculation of the West.

The settlers streaming into the foothills

didn’t have it easy. Mining for gold was worse than hard. The work was dangerous. Food and supplies were expensive. In today’s dollars, a dozen eggs cost upwards of \$90 and the price of a full breakfast was \$1,200. The terrain was rugged and living conditions were rustic. Since they feared missing any chance to strike it rich, miners worked nonstop and rarely took breaks. They dug through mud and waded through freezing rivers, sometimes losing fingers and limbs in the process. Competition and jealousy between miners often led to murder.

What happened next is what always happens. Big corporations swooped in, made working conditions worse by subjugating the labor of individual prospectors, destroyed the local environment with industrialized mining, and took off with the profits. White settlers, the people who were the original perpetrators, became the victims of corporate speculation.

Native peoples were attacked, subjugated, and killed during this time, too. Tribes were forced off their ancestral lands and many

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  20. Smith, R. (2011, February 28). In tribute to Wells, banks try the hard sell. *The Wall Street Journal*.
  21. Hiltzik, M. (2020, January 27). That Wells Fargo accounts scandal was even worse than you can imagine. *Los Angeles Times*.
  22. U.S. Department of the Treasury, Office of the Comptroller of the Currency. (2020). *Notice of charges for orders of prohibition and orders to cease and desist and notice of assessments of a civil money penalty* (p. 21). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Treasury, OCC.
  23. Russell, S. (2018, September 13). Wells Fargo preyed on Natives, elderly and college students. *Indian Country Today*.
  24. Perkins, D. (2020). *Bank supervision by federal regulators: Overview and policy issues*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.





were confined to military reservations. The California state legislature gave White settlers legal permission to enslave Native peoples and their children. Thousands of Native peoples died from disease and malnutrition. White America killed them in the name of a shiny, precious manifest destiny—another script in the playbook of a country eager to put nonwhite peoples in their place. In a recent interview, a descendant of a Native group that was attacked during the Gold Rush recalled these events: “These ... were massacres. We didn’t have weapons to fight back,” said the Yuki tribeswoman. “We were their hunt. And what we lost was more than lives.” A history professor indicted California’s legislators, saying they had “established a state-sponsored killing machine.”

It’s an eerie coincidence that Native customers in California were among the first targeted by Wells Fargo’s ‘fake accounts’ scandal.<sup>23</sup> Two hundred years doesn’t make much of a difference when history rhymes.

**R**EGULATORS’ DECISION TO CLOSE DOWN WELLS Fargo was prudent, confidential.<sup>24</sup> We do know that the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) listed fraud on the paperwork as a reason for the bank’s failure. And whatever the reasons, things ran pretty smoothly once regulators set into motion the process for dismantling the bank.

It turns out that regulators have standard operating procedures for closing down a bank. Regulations even require banks to have plans in place for how their private company should be resolved through bankruptcy, if it were to fail.<sup>25</sup> So it was really just a matter of dusting off several large, three-ring binders that had been anchoring down bookshelves in a dimly-lit basement of some government building. Or, more likely, opening computer files of the digitized standard operating procedures and scrolling through the pages. Regulators and bank employees had step-by-step instructions and well-organized checklists to guide the process.

Organizers, policymakers, and academic researchers like myself learned that dismantling a bank isn’t nearly as impossible as banks and their allies make it out to be. Actually, we learned how *easy* it is to dismantle a megabank.

Since Wells Fargo was a federally chartered bank, The Office of the Comptroller of the Currency (OCC) was able to step in and terminate the bank’s charter. The OCC put the FDIC in charge of resolving the bank.<sup>26</sup> And once the FDIC was in charge, it took about seven years to close the bank.

The average time to close a failing bank is five years. But Wells Fargo was big and complex, and there was some disagreement at the beginning about how the bank’s assets should be resolved. The President of the United States got involved. She suggested that the FDIC manage the bank to prevent it from failing. The FDIC was leaning toward this option, and it was rumored that the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury and Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System were ready to approve this approach that would have kept the bank’s assets in the private sector. However, a series of news reports claimed that many high-ranking politi-



cians were private shareholders with a stake in Wells Fargo's assets. And private shareholders would have ended up benefiting financially from the FDIC's management. The reports didn't reveal any names. But, given these concerns, the FDIC chose a public and more transparent method of resolving the bank.

The FDIC decided to settle Wells Fargo's accounts by paying all of the bank's depositors. In other words, the FDIC gave people their money back. This included retail and corporate or business accounts. At the time, commercial bankers were serving nearly 480,000 customers and wealth advisors were managing the investments of 2.8 million customers.<sup>27</sup> And these numbers are probably low estimates since Wells Fargo had nearly \$2 trillion in assets.<sup>28</sup>

There were several benefits to this method of deposit payoffs. The FDIC did not have to decide whether other banks were healthy enough themselves to purchase a failing bank's assets and liabilities. Some of Wells Fargo's more recent problems actually stemmed from agreeing to purchase the assets and liabilities of banks that failed during the Great Recession.<sup>29</sup> Wells Fargo had agreed to these purchases at a time when the federal government was trying to restore stability to the financial system and stepping in to resolve failing institutions. Wells Fargo's problems clearly started before the Great Recession in 2008. But taking on other banks' problems certainly didn't help.

Wells Fargo also had over 250,000 employees<sup>30</sup> that needed to find jobs elsewhere. Since one of the fastest growing sectors is the financial industry,<sup>31</sup> a lot of Wells Fargo employees sought jobs at other banks. And so, that meant there were plenty of jobs for everyone. Employees at several big banks had also formed unions by that time.<sup>32</sup> Bank employees had taken advantage of the momentum built by around labor organizing victories at Amazon,<sup>33</sup> Kellogg,<sup>34</sup> and Starbucks.<sup>35</sup> Former Wells Fargo employees got to move to banks where they were paid better wages and received benefits. They also got to join unions that could advocate on their behalf. No more war- or Gold Rush-like working conditions.

Congress passed legislation guaranteeing a \$25 minimum wage and paid sick leave a few years ago, so sometimes people don't realize that a lot of Wells Fargo employees had been low-wage workers without much of a safety net. In the past, banks like Wells Fargo hadn't paid workers enough to put food on the table. Most tellers and customer service representatives earned less than \$15 per hour and one third received welfare.<sup>36</sup> When bank employees first started to talk about unionizing, a few other researchers and I went around the country asking people about their working conditions and experiences with labor organizing. So I know for sure that many former Wells Fargo employees had better working conditions after leaving the bank.

Of course, not all Wells Fargo employees were low-paid and not all continued working in the financial industry. Some of the higher paid executives retired. Others worked as executives in different industries. And some became consultants, lobbyists, and politicians.





Organizers pushing for the bank's shut down were prepared and made sure that voters knew about the bank's record. Some Wells Fargo employees had taken their insider knowledge of the banking system into the growing number of jobs at grassroots organizations to fight against capitalism, discrimination, and fossil fuel investment, so that helped inform voters, too. Ultimately, voters didn't believe that vice presidents (mostly wealthy White men) of a scandalous megabank could represent their interests in state or federal government, especially once they realized how much harm the bank had done to their communities by investing in fossil fuels and financing discrimination. As a result, most of the political campaigns by former Wells Fargo executives failed.

Organizers also made sure that the failed bank's real estate was repurposed for the public good. When regulators stepped in, the bank was operating 8,050 locations with branches in 31 states and more than 13,000 automated teller machines (ATMs).<sup>37</sup> The bank took up a lot of real estate! And regulators had to figure out what should happen with everything.

Since the FDIC chose a public method to resolve the bank, it was bound by regulation to close the bank in the least costly way. This usually meant selling off a bank's real estate to

the highest bidders. But people didn't want the status quo: another megabank buying up real estate, privatizing property, and continuing the same harms. And really, communities were owed repair. So, the FDIC worked with Congress to pass a onetime exception to this least-cost resolution requirement.<sup>38</sup>

**T**HIS EXCEPTION CAME about because of organizers' strategic portrayals of Wells Fargo in their direct actions. You see, the police had always stood guard at Wells Fargo's branch entrances around the country. The police essentially functioned as publicly-financed bodyguards to Wells Fargo while the private bank bolstered White customers' wealth and underwrote racism and climate destruction.<sup>39</sup> Branch managers regularly called on the police to remove people they thought were suspicious: in other words, Black, brown, or poor White people.<sup>40</sup> And the police remained stationed outside of branches even after regulators announced their plans to close the bank.

Tensions were running high once the closure process got underway. What happened is what always happens whenever police are on the scene: violence. Organizers released dozens of videos showing police violently arresting unhoused people outside Wells Fargo branches, harassing women as they walked by on the sidewalk, and intimidating Black customers entering and exiting the branches. In every video, image, and social media post they shared, organizers reminded people that police violence was a part of the bank's routine operations.

The videos went viral. People organized a day of action and thousands demanded change by camping outside the FDIC headquarters in Arlington, Virginia. They promised to stay 1 minute for each of Wells Fargo's 8,050 bank locations. That was 5 days, 14 hours, 9 minutes, and 59 seconds. The employees at the FDIC headquarters weren't accustomed to being the focus of this type of direct action. And the Washington, D.C. suburb's White and wealthy residents weren't happy about the protests, either. Residents flooded city council meetings with petty grievances and called the police to complain about noise and parking



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34. Funk, J. (2022, March 30). After a spate of strikes, big raises for Kellogg workers. *WTTW*.
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37. Wells Fargo. (2021). *Wells Fargo 2020 annual report*. San Francisco, CA: Wells Fargo & Company.
38. Thank you to Jeremy Kress for his comments on legal authority in the bank resolution process.
39. Angela Glover Blackwell and Michael McAfee write that "Banks have been the underwriters of American racism" and Alyxandra Goodwin writes that "Police are the muscle of racial capitalism." Blackwell, A.G., & McAfee, M. (2020, June 26). Banks should face history and pay reparations. *The New York Times*. ACRE. (2020). *Cancel Wall Street report briefing*. Chicago, IL: Action Center on Race and the Economy.
40. Telusma, B. (2018, July 26). Banking while Black: Wells Fargo threatens to call the police on 78-year old Black woman trying to cash a check. *The Grio*.
41. Stoll, S.L. (2017, October 21). Why Native American women are going after Europe's banks to divest from big oil. *Yes! Magazine*.





violations. Some local businesses including restaurants and grocery stores refused to serve protestors. So, to repair harm, rebuild trust, and appease both protestors and Arlington residents, the FDIC agreed to work with Congress on the least-cost resolution exemption. Then, the FDIC agreed to establish the advisory panel for transferring ownership of branch properties to local communities.

As part of the FDIC's public resolution process, communities could petition to take over local Wells Fargo bank branches. A community advisory panel reviewed the petitions, after which the FDIC transferred properties to local communities for free. Branches around the country became community centers, day cares, shelters, farmers markets, and art studios. Some branches became public banks under the fiscal authority of local governments. These banks were committed to local community investment and public accountability.

A lot of people believe that public banks will help address the climate crisis and stop discriminatory lending—things Wells Fargo and the rest of the financial system have failed to do. Organizers have been working for years to move nearly \$12 trillion in public money from taxes and pension funds out of private banks like Wells Fargo, where interest-bearing profits got siphoned off to shareholders instead of reinvested locally. Some cities like Los Angeles and Philadelphia already have public banks. Now, many cities around the country are following their example. People are even beginning to identify other aspects of life that can be turned over to public control, like housing, healthcare, and safety. It's encouraging to see glimmers of hope for reversing the neoliberalism that has suffocated the country for so long.

**T**HE REMAINING BRANCHES WERE TURNED OVER to communities earlier today. Wells Fargo is officially closed. *The bank no longer exists.*

This day was a long time coming and getting here wasn't always easy. Organizers with Native-led divestment campaigns had been working to close Wells Fargo for decades.<sup>41</sup> There's already talk of how to keep changing the financial system into one that is publicly accountable and aligned with principles of justice, peace, and sustainability. After all, there are still 5,999 more private banks in the United States and 29 left on the "Dirty Thirty" list.

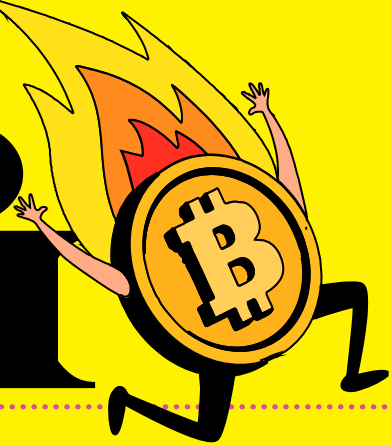
I'm grateful to have played a small part among a much bigger chorus of people calling for something that many said was impossible. Academics like myself, sometimes preferring to prosthetize from comfy armchairs and cushioned retirement accounts without involving ourselves directly in everyday struggles, aren't known for having radical research agendas or revolutionary politics. But in today's world, we need "transformational demands," as activist Mariame Kaba says. We should demand the impossible and not settle for anything less. The last 18 years have taught me this for sure.

The crowd gathered in the quad this morning is just a glimpse of the upcoming festivities. I hope you'll come to the big celebration tonight. We will honor the people who were harmed by the bank and those who fought for its dismantling. It will be good to cry and laugh and dance and celebrate. And to remember where we've been so we can dream about where to go next. ✚



at last, it's time for the:

# CRYPTO CRASH



The crypto world went into a full meltdown this week in a sell-off that graphically illustrated the risks of the experimental and unregulated digital currencies. Even as celebrities such as Kim Kardashian and tech moguls like Elon Musk have talked up crypto, the accelerating declines of virtual currencies like Bitcoin and Ether show that, in some cases, two years of financial gains can disappear overnight. The moment of panic amounted to the worst reset in cryptocurrencies since Bitcoin plummeted 80 percent in 2018. But this time, the falling prices have broader impact because more people and institutions hold the currencies. Critics said the collapse was long overdue, while some traders compared the alarm and fear to the start of the 2008 financial crisis.

— *New York Times*, May 12, 2022

Excerpt from interview between Nicholas Weaver and Current Affairs editor-in-chief Nathan J. Robinson:

**WEAVER:** Modern finance has this rule that anything electronic needs to be reversible for short periods of time. This allows an undo in case of fraud. Have you had your credit card compromised before? I've had my credit card numbers stolen a couple of times. The amount of money I lost is zero. Because we have both good fraud protection and good ability to reverse transactions. That does not exist in the cryptocurrency space. If your cryptocurrency wallet is compromised, all your apes are fudged.

**ROBINSON:** All your what, sorry?

**WEAVER:** Your apes are fudged. Because the cryptocurrencies are often used for buying these "non-fungible tokens" that have pictures of ugly little apes. They just get liberated. But the result is, you cannot store cryptocurrency on an internet-connected computer. Because what will happen is, if your computer ever gets compromised, all your money gets stolen and there's nothing you can do about it. And that's a fundamental problem. But it just doesn't work for payments because of that throughput limit. And the volatility means you get people converting it to real money. And so what is it good for? Well, there are classes of payments that the intermediaries don't allow. The big ones are drug dealing, child sexual abuse material, and ransoms. As a consequence, the cryptocurrency actually used for payments is really only used seriously for: ransomware payments, where companies have to pay \$10 million. Drug deals—drug dealers hate it, but it's the only game in town. And we've had cases of websites selling child exploitation material paid with Bitcoin. And the reason I've gotten so sour on the cryptocurrency space is the ransomware. It's doing tens to hundreds of billions of dollars worth of damage to the global economy. And it only exists because people can pay in Bitcoin.

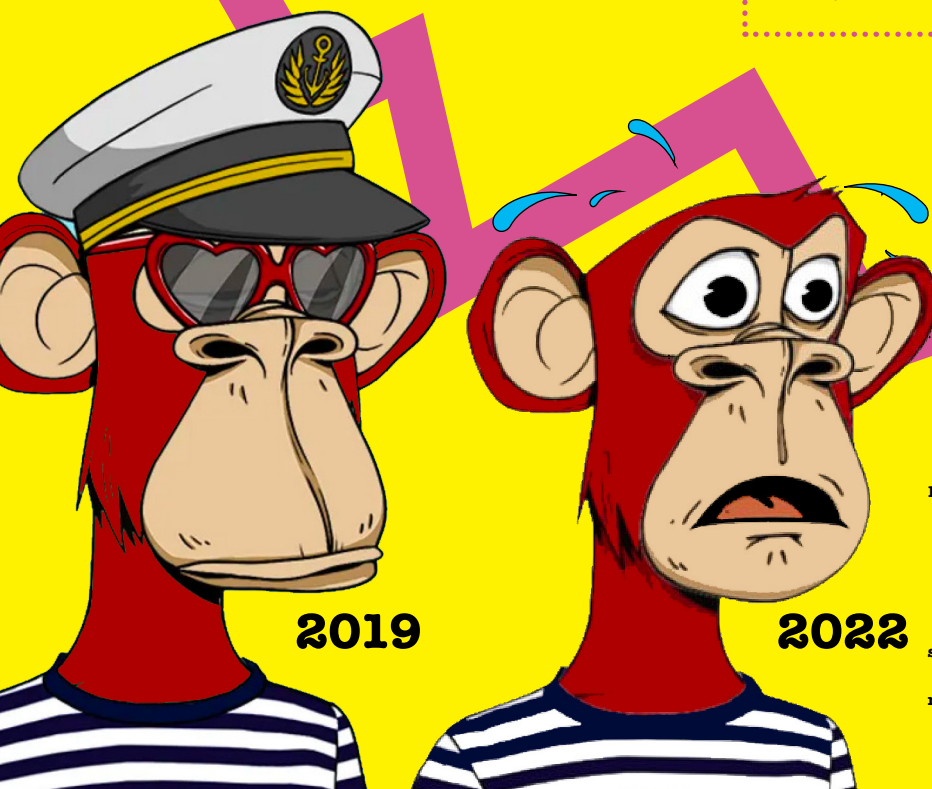
**Y**ou may remember "cryptocurrencies." They're the imaginary alternate money that techie libertarians have been pushing for a few years. Ads at the Super Bowl and on the subway encourage you to invest your savings in them. Matt Damon suggested in an ad that buying cryptocurrency is the equivalent of being a pioneering astronaut, Spike Lee presented cryptocurrencies as helping to free Black people from financial oppression, and an ad with Larry David compared them to the invention of the wheel. Anyone who actually listened to these ads and loaded up on electronic funny money would have lost a substantial amount of their investment, for crypto prices collapsed soon afterwards. Still, senators Kirsten Gillibrand and Cynthia Lummis, who have both been financially supported by the crypto industry, have suggested that people ought to put parts of their retirement funds into crypto as part of a "diversified portfolio," and introduced a hands-off regulatory framework they propose

to pass into law. They are not the only ones who believe crypto has a bright future: it is easy to find boosters across the internet promising that crypto will revolutionize the way we pay for goods and services, that it has amazing advantages over state-backed fiat currency, and that it will liberate the developing world.

There are skeptics. Last month, *Current Affairs* spoke to Prof. Nicholas Weaver of Berkeley, who has said that the entire crypto project should "die in a fire." Weaver has said: "This is a virus. Its harms are substantial. It has enabled billion dollar criminal enterprises. It has enabled venture capitalists to do securities fraud as their business. It has sucked people in." Weaver points to the environmental damage, the inefficiency, and the lack of any ability to regulate fraud. Many crypto projects, he told us, are Ponzi schemes. Weaver specifically singled out a project called "Celsius," which was offering astonishingly high returns on people's investments. Weaver called Celsius "Ponzi economics." The very next month, the value of Celsius

"There are big reasons to think that neither Bitcoin nor any of the myriad cryptocurrencies emerging online will ever pose a serious threat to the state monopoly on money. In the nineteenth century, the United States did have competing currencies: all kinds of little banks issued banknotes that often turned out to be worthless because they were accepted only within a small radius and weren't actually backed by anything. Some Bitcoiners drag this out as a worthy precedent anyway. But Bitcoin could never establish itself as a currency in any serious way without regulation and some sort of insurance scheme, because investors and consumers would not trust substantial savings to it." — Doug Henwood, *The Nation*, 2014

After years of studying it, I believe that cryptocurrency is an inherently right-wing, hyper-capitalistic technology built primarily to amplify the wealth of its proponents through a combination of tax avoidance, diminished regulatory oversight and artificially enforced scarcity. Despite claims of "decentralization," the cryptocurrency industry is controlled by a powerful cartel of wealthy figures who, with time, have evolved to incorporate many of the same institutions tied to the existing centralized financial system they supposedly set out to replace. The cryptocurrency industry leverages a network of shady business connections, bought influencers and pay-for-play media outlets to perpetuate a cult-like "get rich quick" funnel designed to extract new money from the financially desperate and naive. — Jackson Palmer, creator of "Dogecoin"

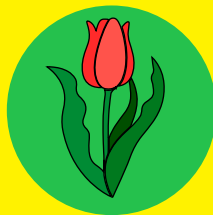




# FOUR ASSETS TO AVOID PUTTING YOUR RETIREMENTS SAVINGS INTO



Late-'90s web companies



Tulips



Beanie Babies



Bitcoins

collapsed by over 80%, and it announced it was freezing users' withdrawals of their money.

*Current Affairs* has never been hot on crypto. In 2021 we published an article called "Why Cryptocurrency is a Giant Fraud," dissecting popular arguments made for its usefulness. The CA take concluded:

*"The world of cryptocurrency is one in which wily and technologically sophisticated people can easily take advantage of less financially or technologically savvy people—and the people making the arguments for it happen to be exactly the ones who can navigate this world well and make money in it. It is the libertarian paradise, a Wild West where everyone is trying to take each other's money and there are no publicly-controlled entities looking out for the common good... Be careful, because this fad could genuinely result in portions of the economy switching to a system that disadvantages consumers, on the promise that it will solve problems that could easily be*

*solved through effective public institutions, if we were able to exercise our collective political will. The need for security, privacy, and easy money transfers is real, but the promise that a new form of money will rein in the surveillance state or free us from profiteers is illusory."*

This month, *Current Affairs* spoke to another crypto skeptic, software engineer Molly White, whose website "Web3 is Going Great" documents the many disastrous failures of crypto and "Web3" projects. White argues that the faith in cryptocurrency is a kind of techno-solutionism that naively believes that the right kind of computer program can help fix social problems. But economic inequality isn't going to be fixed by having inequality measured in Bitcoins rather than dollars. A similar conclusion is reached at the end of the new book *Popping the Crypto Bubble: Market Manias, Phony Populism, and Techno-solutionism* by Stephen Diehl, Jan Akalin, and Darren Tseng. They write:

*"Crypto is a gripping story full of sound and fury, hope and fear, hype and noise, greed and idealism, yet despite all that, it is a tale signifying nothing in the end. Crypto is not just an experiment in anarchocapitalism that did not work; it is an experiment that can never work and will never work. Crypto was promised as the technology of the future, yet it is a technology that can never escape its negative externalities or its entanglement with the terrible ideas of the past. Crypto is not the future of finance; it is the past of finance synthesized with the age-old cry of the populist strongman, To Make Money Great Again."*

In other words, in times of despair and chaos, snake-oil salesmen who are only in it for themselves will come along offering pseudo-solutions. But there's no substitute for the genuine hard work of building a better society. Quick fixes are a fantasy, and many of the arguments for crypto are, when you look at them closely, obvious wishful delusions.

Excerpt from interview between Molly White and *Current Affairs* editor-in-chief Nathan J. Robinson:

**WHITE:** I think a lot of people don't realize that crypto at this stage is sort of the Wild West. In the aftermath of a lot of these crypto projects collapsing, I've been seeing a lot of people who were under the impression that their funds might be protected, in similar ways as they would be in a savings account at a traditional financial institution where you are insured by the FDIC up to a certain amount. Or there were people who believed that the crypto project itself might hold insurance and so their losses might be covered. But after these things collapse, they start to do that research they didn't do before and they realize that there's nothing there for them. They just have to hope that somehow this crypto project is not only able to recoup a lot of their funds, but then is willing to pay off the retail investors, when in reality they're probably prioritizing their debts to larger firms that have more legal power behind them.

**ROBINSON:** Now, there's a lot of propaganda, isn't there? I mean, it's rather incredible how aggressive some of the proponents of crypto are. They basically make it a full time job to convince people that skeptics, such as yourself, just don't understand it. There is this real effort to discredit critics and and to hype this thing and to make it seem like every intelligent person understands it and everyone who doesn't understand this must not be intelligent.

**WHITE:** Yes, absolutely. The whole crypto ecosystem is propped up on the fact that if you believe it has value, it does have value. [It's the "Tinkerbelle effect."] If you just believe in it hard enough, it will be true. The incentive to make more people believe that crypto is worth something and will go up in price is very much based in that. So at any point people will be telling you to buy crypto. It doesn't matter if the markets are booming and it's higher than it's ever been—people will still say "Buy now! Buy now!" because it's only going to continue to go up. Or you see days like today where crypto is not doing so well. It's lower than it has been in years. And people are saying "Buy now!"

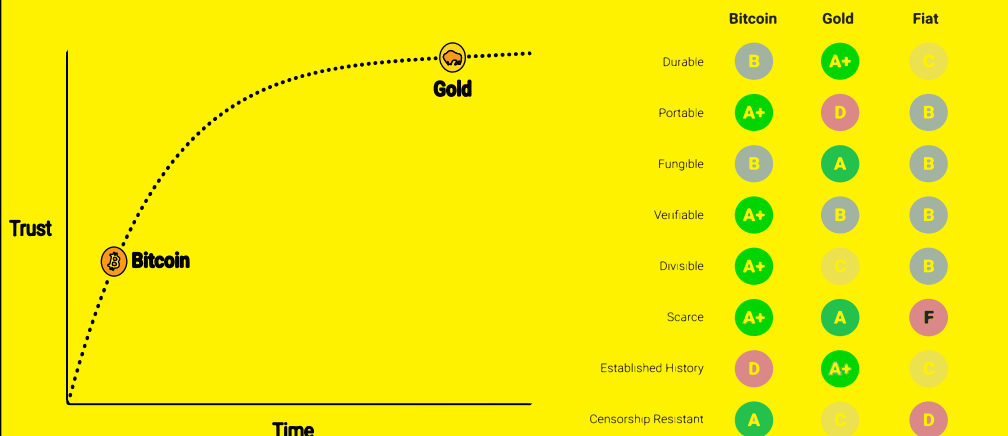
**ROBINSON:** Perfect time to buy!

**WHITE:** Yeah, you'll never get it at a lower price. It's remarkable. People will always say "buy" and it's very rare to see someone say, "maybe don't right now. Maybe wait a little bit and see how things go."

**ROBINSON:** One of the more important realizations that I had when reading about this stuff was that, if we're trying to decide whether or not it's a Ponzi scheme, if it is one, the person pushing it has a very strong incentive to mislead you. And so you have to approach this stuff with extreme skepticism because anyone who is themselves trying to make money in crypto has a very, very strong incentive to try and convince everyone else that it's a good idea, and they should hop on board as well.

**WHITE:** Right. And that incentive doesn't really exist for the critics, although people will sometimes claim that critics have some nefarious incentive to undermine crypto, although it's often somewhat unclear what that is. So there's this very unbalanced ecosystem where there are a lot of people who spend a lot of time boosting crypto, because it's enormously financially beneficial to them. And then there's a handful of skeptics who are mostly doing it in their free time, or, you know, for a very small amount of money for those who do accept payment for it. And so you end up with this imbalance in the media, which is, I think, exacerbated somewhat by a lot of journalists' tendencies to try to buy into the hype, and, you know, see both sides and all that kind of thing.

## THE SILLIEST HYPE DIAGRAMS FROM CRYPTO PROPAGANDA



from Vijay Boyapati, "The Bullish Case for Bitcoin"







# *We Are All* SPARTACUS

BY DAVID HAMBLIN

WHEN IT COMES TO ERECTING monuments, the Left sometimes has a “statue problem.” As a political philosophy, leftism emphasizes and exalts the collective, whereas monuments are often made to individuals. There are abstract representations, such as the Worker and Kolkhoznitza Woman in Moscow, which depicts two people with a hammer and sickle. The choice to build monuments to archetypes does have the benefit of avoiding elevating problematic individuals whose statues have to be torn down once everyone realizes the kind of person they really were. (See, for example, the statue of slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol, which Black Lives Matter protesters tore down and threw into the Bristol Harbour. Glasgow had to take down its wooden statue of Sir Jimmy Savile, the once-beloved British television host who turned out to have been one of the country’s most prolific sexual predators.) When statues of leftists have been raised, they have often been part of a cult of personality (often installed by the one depicted). We do not need more giant heads of Marx and Lenin.

But if we want to identify a single individual emblematic of the struggle we wish to commemorate, we could hardly do better than Spartacus (c. 111–71 B.C.), who helped lead a slave uprising against the Roman Republic. A Thracian (Thrace encompassing parts of modern day Greece, Turkey, and Bulgaria), Spartacus was at once a heroic individual and a representative of the masses.

Spartacus is among the members of the pantheon of leftist heroes who lost their specific battle. In that respect, he keeps the company of the International Brigades (who fought against fascism in the Spanish Civil War, and lost), Rosa Lux-

emburg (who fought for democratic socialism and the nascent forces of fascism in Germany, and lost), and seemingly every candidate yours truly has backed for public office. As Francis Ambrose Ridley observed in his work *Spartacus: A Study in Revolutionary History*, “the names of the great revolutionary liberators and martyrs of humanity, from Spartacus to Rosa Luxemburg, who fell foremost in the age-long struggle to redeem their fellows from the yoke of capital, will shine forever down the ages.”

When others have sought to break their chains, Spartacus has frequently been invoked as a point of comparison. Toussaint Louverture, the Haitian revolutionary who was instrumental in the overthrow of French colonial rule, was described by his friend Étienne Laveaux as “the black Spartacus, the leader announced by Raynal to avenge the crimes perpetrated against his race.” Later, Fidel Castro would echo the comparison, saying that “at a time when Napoleon was imitating Caesar, and France resembled Rome, the soul of Spartacus was reborn in Toussaint Louverture.” (Sudhir Hazareesingh’s excellent book on Toussaint Louverture is also called *Black Spartacus*.)

In an 1861 letter to Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx dubbed Spartacus “the most splendid fellow in the whole of ancient history. Great general (no Garibaldi), noble character, real representative of the ancient proletariat.” Such was Spartacus’ standing in the leftist imagination that Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht’s “Spartacist League,” (the Marxist Revolutionary group formed in post World War I Germany), was named after this Thracian from antiquity, rather than someone nearer to home. When delivering his lecture “The State,” Lenin praised the work of the Spartacist League and waxed lyrical about the illustrious history of their namesake: “For



many years the seemingly omnipotent Roman Empire, which rested entirely on slavery, experienced the shocks and blows of a widespread uprising of slaves who armed and united to form a vast army under the leadership of Spartacus." The struggle of Spartacus two millennia prior was both an inspiration for, and seeming evidence of, Marx and Engels' claim in their 1848 *Communist Manifesto* that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."

As the newly-formed Soviet Union cast its net for heroes running the whole gamut of history, they embraced Spartacus. For good or ill (Stalin was a fan), Spartacus enjoyed a high reputation. As Oleksii Rudenko's "The Making of a Soviet Hero: The Case of Spartacus" shows, the figure of Spartacus was used in a number of different fashions in the USSR: as a revolutionary inspiration, as an exemplar of sporting prowess, and as historical precedent for the forces of socialism. "Spartacus" was introduced as a "socialist" male name for babies, resulting in several prominent Soviet citizens being called Spartacus. Several towns and cities in the USSR had streets named *Spartakovskaya* or *Spartakivska*. Ukraine still has a village called Spartak as well as a Spartak hotel. After the

USSR declined to participate in the Olympics, it launched its own "socialist sport competitions" called Spartakiads.

The Soviets may have made special use of Spartacus, but his story has resonated more broadly. Spartacus has been depicted in film, television, ballet, and literature. Each portrayal is based on verifiable events, but while there are constants—depictions of slaves, gladiators, rebellions, and impeccably defined torsos—most depictions fail to retain the revolutionary zeal of the real Spartacus. We might well ask: beyond entertainment, how useful are these stories for the left? What can they teach us?

LET US FIRST RETURN TO THE STORY OF THE real-world Spartacus. Prior to achieving fame as a literary and cinematic character, Spartacus was featured in classical histories such as those of Plutarch (who was writing circa 100 C.E.) and Appian (who was writing circa 150 C.E.). Across sources, parts of the story remain consistent: Spartacus, having escaped a gladiator school, led a slave rebellion, and the slave army proceeded to roam Italy, defeating Roman armies that were sent to abate their advance (the disgrace of which was enough for the Romans to bring back decimation—the charming practice where one in ten soldiers were selected from across the legion to be executed by their peers—as a form of punishment for their soldiers). Finally, the insurrectionist force was defeated at the hands of the Roman general Crassus. Spartacus is said to have died in battle as he sought out Crassus himself. There is a striking juxtaposition here: the richest man in Rome (Crassus once declared that "no one was rich who could not support an army out of his substance") being opposed by one who had nothing. It's easy to see how Spartacus became idolized.

Over the years, Spartacus has indeed been fashioned into statuary. Nineteenth century French sculptor Denis Foyatier's rendition depicts Spartacus breaking his chains while (in a theme which will become familiar) wearing naught but—well, if not a smile—a stern expression. Initially created for the aristocracy in 1827, with an opportunistic sleight of hand, Foyatier amended the date to July 29, 1830, for some intentional synergy with the Second French Revolution. The statue is an assertion of freedom and sexuality but otherwise says little.

In stark contrast to the immobile work of sculpture, Aram Khachaturian's ballet *Spartacus* (1956) is a riotous depiction of unrest. It emphasizes the dynamism of revolution while retaining a love story at its heart. The ballet portrays a revolution which is almost permanently in motion and at its strongest when the revolutionaries are synchronised and complementary in their actions. The relationship between Spartacus

"Christians! Shall Spartacus tear down your churches?" (1919) ELECTION POSTER FOR THE CONSERVATIVE BAVARIAN PEOPLE'S PARTY BY HERMANN KEIMEL







WOODY STRODE AND KIRK DOUGLAS IN *SPARTACUS* (1960)

and his wife Phrygia is as integral as the slave revolt to the production. It is perhaps the finest example of that all too often overlooked fact of revolution: that it is borne out of many individual acts of love whether they be for a partner, a child, or the fellow members of an oppressed group.

Howard Fast's literary *Spartacus* (1951) is the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century wellspring from which subsequent Spartacus depictions appear to flow. It is an unapologetically revolutionary—even Marxist-Leninist—work written while the author was incarcerated for refusing to name fellow Communist Party members to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Fast is at pains to depict a revolution with a nascent vanguard party (in this case gladiators) who in turn lead the masses (comprised principally of slaves) against the ruling class and the established order. It concludes:

*A time would come when Rome would be torn down—not by the slaves alone, but by slaves and serfs and peasants and by free barbarians who joined with them. And so long as men labored, and other men took and used the fruit of those who labored, the name of Spartacus would be remembered, whispered sometimes and shouted loud and clear at other times.*

Christopher Hitchens, the patriarch of the problematic left (on the one hand, he was a long-standing socialist with a laud-

able body of work on subjects including Orwell and anti-imperialism—but on the other, he used to lash out at anyone who had the temerity to question the efficacy of the War on Terror), was well-acquainted with the works of Howard Fast, and when reviewing the author's autobiography cited *Spartacus* as one of the tomes that “are still on many a shelf, and once set the blood coursing through the veins of men and women who are now safe, staid liberals.” Here Hitchens acknowledges the adrenaline rush that Fast's *Spartacus* could instill, but also the way in which the fervor can subside and those that once proclaimed the revolution become that which they revolted against. (Hitchens does not, however, consider whether he himself might belong in the category.)

Fast's work was adapted for the Kirk Douglas film *Spartacus* (1960), which stands as its own monument to the life of Spartacus and is one of the great “sword and sandal” epics from Hollywood's golden age. Douglas' was not the only attempt to commit the story to screen, as rival Hollywood star Yul Brynner was trying to make a film on the same subject at the same time, though he eventually yielded to Douglas' production. The film was a triumph for Douglas and director Stanley Kubrick, becoming the highest-grossing film of the year and winning four Academy Awards. Douglas' *Spartacus*





SOVIET POSTER FOR SPARTAK (1926), A FILM ABOUT SPARTACUS NOW CONSIDERED LOST. DIRECTED BY MUHSIN ERTUĞRUL, WRITTEN BY UKRAINIAN FUTURIST POET GEO SHKURUPII, ADAPTED FROM RAFFAELLO GIOVAGNOLI'S NOVEL.

became iconic, and since we lack a portrait of the real Spartacus, today when one tries to conjure up a mental image of Spartacus, it is hard not to think of Kirk Douglas.

Douglas devoted a significant portion of his autobiography (*The Ragman's Son*) to the creation of *Spartacus*, and at age 95 wrote an entire book about the experience called *I Am Spartacus!: Making a Film, Breaking The Blacklist*. Douglas recounts the struggles of securing the rights and funding along with the matter of finding a workable script. For all his undoubted zeal, Howard Fast's screenplay was, by a number of accounts, packed with more lectures than action. ("Dear God, it was awful—sixty pages of lifeless characters uttering leaden speeches," Douglas writes in *I Am Spartacus*.)

Veteran screenwriter Dalton Trumbo was drafted to write a script worthy of the epic production. At the time Trumbo was on the Hollywood blacklist (one of the so called "Unfriendly Ten") as one of those who had defied HUAC, and had been imprisoned and fined for his refusal to "name names" of fellow

"Reds." Trumbo was working under a series of aliases (e.g., Felix Lutzkendorf, Robert Rich) or using other writers as "fronts," the other writer taking the screen credit while Trumbo wrote the script. Hedda Hopper, a Hollywood columnist disdainful of suspected communists in the film industry, wrote of *Spartacus* that "that story was sold to Universal from a book written by a Commie and the screen script was written by a Commie." Alas after threatening us all with a good time, Hopper concludes: "so don't go to see it."

Douglas felt an innate relationship with the figure of Spartacus due to the Douglas' own Jewish heritage and identity. When gazing upon historical Egyptian structures he wrote: "I identify with them. As it says in the Torah: 'Slaves were we unto Egypt.' I come from a race of slaves. That would have been my family, me." The story of Spartacus is able to transcend racial and ethnic lines because ultimately it is a story about the oppression of people via an iniquitous economic system. Slavery in all its forms is abhorrent, and those who endure it, either



directly or within collective memory, can relate to Spartacus' effort to end their oppression and destroy their oppressor.

Douglas' Spartacus is somewhat taciturn at the outset but grows in oratory skill and confidence in step with his revolution. While he is always billed as *defiant*, at the outset he is not the leader of men. The breakout from the gladiator school is as exhilarating a depiction of non-hierarchical autonomous collective group dynamics (a.k.a. a crowd working as one) as you'll see committed to celluloid. Anyone who has partaken in demonstrations that have seemingly moved as a single entity without the need to defer to an obvious leader or organizer will be familiar with the phenomenon.

When confronted with the news of the slave rebellion, the Roman Senate in *Spartacus* cannot accept that slaves would join voluntarily, instead pronouncing that "Around Capua they ravage the countryside forcing other slaves to join them. Looting, robbing, burning everything." (From the civil rights movement to union organizing drives, uprisings are often blamed on "outside agitators," the oppressed themselves being considered both too weak and too contented to possibly challenge their condition effectively.) When the Senators decide that sending in troops is the only way to deal with Spartacus et. al., one Senator feels the need to rise to his feet and declare: "I most strongly protest, there are more slaves in Rome than Romans. With the garrison absent, what is to prevent them from rising too?" The chant from contemporary anti-fascist demonstrations (variously directed at both the fascists and the cops), "There are many, many more of us than you," held true even circa 70 B.C.

In *Spartacus*, the rebelling slaves force two Romans into ersatz gladiatorial combat in the same arena where Spartacus and fellow gladiator Draba (who is of African heritage) fought. Yet Spartacus stops the bout, asserting that he swore he would die before watching two men fight to the death for sport (a salutary lesson in the need for revolutionary movements not to become that which they revolted against in the first instance). "What are we, Crixus? What are we becoming? Romans?" As a socialist, I can still acknowledge the wisdom of the point that 19th century anarchist Mikhail Bakunin made when he said: "When the people are being beaten with a stick, they are not much happier if it is called 'the People's Stick.'" Instead of reproducing the worst features of the state apparatus, get yourself a Spartacus (as depicted by Kirk Douglas) who snaps fasces with his bare hands, accompanied with the words: "Tell them we want nothing from Rome. Nothing except our freedom."

The film covers a lot of ground (with a runtime of 197 minutes it has plenty of room to do that) including the ostensible piety of the ruling elites: "I thought you had reservations about the gods." / "Privately I believe in none of them and neither do you. Publicly? I believe in 'em all!" There is also a somewhat patronizing gesture to the role of women in revolution. Spartacus

observes of the slaves they have freed that there are "Too many women" to which he is rebuked, "What's wrong with women? Where would you be now, you lout, without women who had fought all the pains of hell to bring you into the world?"

*Spartacus* also includes the following delicious exchange on the propensity of the ruling class to believe that the proletariat have no motivations, intelligence, or wit of their own, and thus anyone found to possess these qualities must not originate from the laboring class:

**PIRATE LEADER:** "I've heard that you are of noble birth yourself."

**SPARTACUS:** "Son and grandson of slaves."

**PIRATE LEADER:** "Of course, it pleases Roman vanity to think that you are noble. They shrink at the idea of fighting mere slaves."

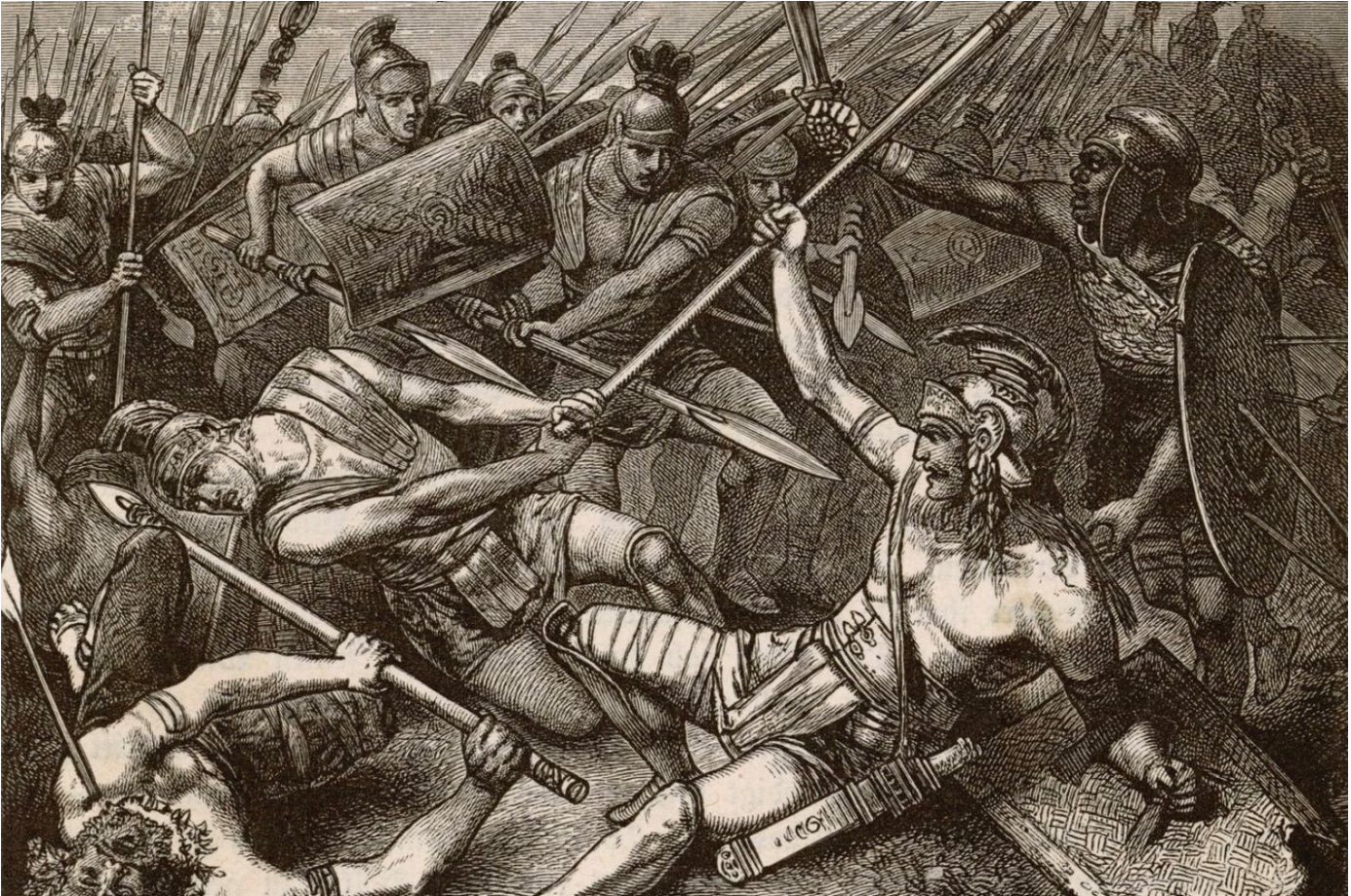
The elite cannot countenance the idea of fighting (or being bested by) workers who they view as being of an inferior rank. It is for this reason that they will home in on those in the movement who have some link with their conceptions of legitimacy (class, education, affiliation, etc.) and declare that the movement as a whole is being run by such people.

Ultimately, Spartacus and his army are defeated. The vanquished slaves are told that they are to be spared crucifixion if they give up Spartacus. Kirk Douglas' Spartacus realizes the enormity of the situation and as he stands to sacrifice himself for the group, his comrade Antoninus beats him to the punch and declares, "I'm Spartacus," only to be joined by a chorus of his fellows doing likewise. Spartacus weeps. The famous scene still has emotional power, despite having become a cliché and having launched numerous parodies of varying quality (from Monty Python's sublime effort in *Life of Brian* through to a less than awe-inspiring Pepsi commercial featuring a Roman Centurion proffering a canned soda to Spartacus).

A COMMON THREAD RUNNING THROUGH depictions of Spartacus has been the propensity for those crafting the works to seem somewhat, well, *libidinous*. The combination of gladiators being of a fabled virility, the raw masculinity of one-to-one combat, and Rome's famed decadent licentiousness all seem to be at the forefront of writers' and artists' minds when adapting the story. Depictions of Spartacus, it must be acknowledged, more often than not seem horny for Spartacus.

In a scene initially cut from the theatrical release, 1960's *Spartacus* featured a scantily clad Tony Curtis washing Larry Olivier's back, with suggestive dialogue. (Antoninus tells Crassus he eats oysters but not snails, while Crassus tells An-





THE DEATH OF SPARTACUS BY HERMANN VOGEL (1882)

toninus “My taste includes both snails and oysters.”) The scene was deemed too damned sexy for Eisenhower’s America—that is, the National Legion of Decency vetoed it. Still, when we see gladiatorial bouts, it’s not with the more heavily armored fighters. It’s underwear and rippling biceps all round, although the lack of clothing on the *retarius* (a type of lightly equipped gladiator armed with a trident and net, styled to look like a fisherman) is historically accurate. *Spartacus* also finds time to show us a nude Jean Simmons, concealed by naught but a tasteful frond—the Hays Code, prohibiting depiction of “the more intimate parts of the human body,” protected her dignity.

The Starz television production *Spartacus* (2010-2013) is untroubled by The Hays Code, or seemingly any other code. It has a free and easy, equal-opportunity approach to nudity and sexuality. A television series has more time to go into the mechanics of revolution (the brewing of discontent, the acquisition of weaponry, and the steeling of resolve) but Starz’s *Spartacus* also uses the time to show John Hannah striding around, often in the buff, having a whale of a time. This *Spartacus* features such a plethora of sex scenes that it seems gratuitous even for the Starz network (which has given us racy fare such as *Outlander* and *Da Vinci’s Demons*).

**S**O WHERE STANDS THE LEGACY OF SPARTACUS? Does he remain crucified on the Appian way of capitalist exploitation? Does he stand alone in the arena, assailed by his many varied representations? We can see why Spartacus became a specifically *leftist* hero, with even the American depiction of him produced by communists. Spartacus was too much the violent revolutionary to become a liberal hero. The story of Spartacus is an inspiration to the oppressed, because he showed what it meant to be truly liberated and defiant. He directed violence against a cruelly violent system.

The spirit of Spartacus is still alive. It exists in every person building collective action in Amazon, Starbucks, and beyond: the union activist who defies the boss and organizes their workplace, the political representative who stands steadfast in their advocacy of basic healthcare against pressure groups, and all those who campaign for true equality and justice. There is a proud kith of all those who struggle against the status quo and seek revolutionary change, and together they utter with one voice echoing across the centuries: “I’m Spartacus!” ✦



all frogs go to  
**HELL**

his heart is  
impure

his intentions  
malicious

he knows  
no right  
from wrong.





# The Illustrators



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