

*The Magazine That Remembers Your Name*

# CURRENT AFFAIRS

\$12.95

VOL. 7, ISSUE 4

JULY/AUG. 2022

## BASEBALL CARDS

*Why people would  
ever want them*

## SATAN

*Does he get  
a bad rap?*

## TRAINS

*Why we need 'em*

## PALESTINE

*What it was like  
before all this started*

## MARVEL FILMS

*Jingoistic trash?*

## SOBRIETY MEMOIRS

*Are they really helping?*





# Before we Begin

CURRENT AFFAIRS (ISSN 2471-2647) IS PUBLISHED BIMONTHLY FOR \$69.99/YEAR BY CURRENT AFFAIRS INC., 631 ST. CHARLES AVE., NEW ORLEANS, LA 70130 PERIODICALS POSTAGE PAID AT NEW ORLEANS, LA AND ADDITIONAL MAILING OFFICES. POSTMASTER: SEND ADDRESS CHANGES TO CURRENT AFFAIRS, 631 ST. CHARLES AVE., NEW ORLEANS, LA 70130 PRINTED IN KANSAS BY ALLEN PRESS, INC.

If you're not  
reading your  
magazine with a  
*bagel*



...then what the hell are you even doing?

SPONSORED BY Big Bagel



YOUR FORTUNE:

*A very small  
thing will happen  
that will turn  
out to be quite  
significant.*

DR. MAGAZINE SAYS:  
"The prescription is a subscription!"

Thank you to  
Kristian Berg  
for suggesting the  
Table of Contents  
concept.



DO NOT KICK THE  
*newsies*

If you have been to an American city, you will have seen *Current Affairs* newsies before: small children hawking copies of this magazine on street corners, belting phrases like "Affairs! Get your Affairs!" and "Madam, do you like your affairs current? If so..." at the top of their lungs for all the neighborhood to hear. They are a charming sight that form part of the cultural landscape of the contemporary metropolis. (And no, before you ask, their employment does not violate child labor laws, for they are unpaid. They sell magazines because they love magazines and not in the service of personal pecuniary gain.) But all wonderful things are destined to be ruined sooner or later, and so it is with our precious team of newsies. We have received reports from multiple parts of the country of our saleschildren being scolded and kicked by passersby. They have been called "urchins" and banished from city parks. They have had their satchels stolen and their caps torn asunder.

America, this will not do. What did these children do to deserve such ill-treatment, beyond trying to bring quality periodicals to the urban public? What kind of way is this to repay them for their service? If you do not care for their shrieking cries of "MAGAZINES APLENTY!", delivered at considerable volume beginning at 5 a.m., then pay them to stop. It's a free country, and you can pay anyone not to do anything you don't like having them do. Your freedom does not, however, include the right to kick a child merely because it is irritating you on your commute or using aggressive and borderline deceptive sales tactics. That is uncivilized behavior and it will stop immediately, or there shall be consequences the likes of which you cannot conceive. We are serious, America. Don't kick the newsies. Just buy the damned magazine.

Bad City of the Month:  
*New York City*  
It smells bad and there  
are rats everywhere.  
PROVE US WRONG

## READER MAIL

Transcribed from a postcard, the front of which depicts a man reading a magazine while the world burns behind him

Berlin, July 22, 2022  
Dear Affairs (Current),

I'm writing this post-card to tell you about the joy you're bringing into my life. Your articles are on surprising matters, often very clever, but not without a goal. The visual content is childish in an important political way. Especially in the current state the world is in, this doesn't amount to the [illegible German expression credited to Walter Benjamin]. But it's a [illegible, obscured by black scribble]. All the best, [name illegible, obscured by postmark].

Dear Illegible in Berlin,

Your words are kind and your well-selected postcard accurately conveys the state of things. We are going to use "Childish in an Important Political Way" as a marketing slogan, if you don't mind.

Yours,



## A Little Hat

Inexplicably, many readers have been writing in lately asking if they could have "a little hat to put on their magazine." Apparently this is a thing on TikTok? Which is itself apparently a thing? We don't pretend to understand it, but we're happy to oblige. You want a little hat? Hey, presto! A little hat you shall have. Do you thing with it.

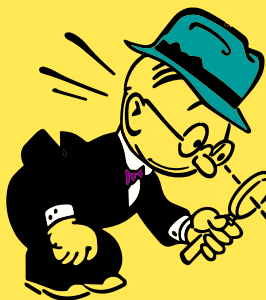
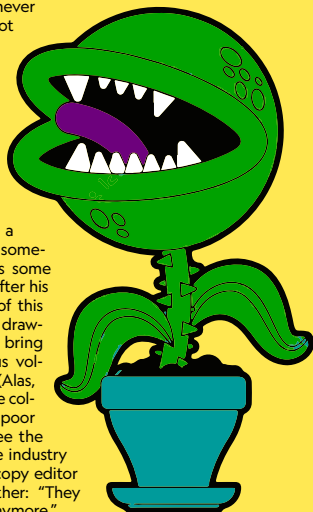


## OUR BLOODSHED

Many readers do not realize just how much blood is shed in the production of an edition of *Current Affairs*. They assume that writing, editing, printing, and shipping is a painless task. It is not, dear reader. Every page you touch is filled with the literal sweat of the editorial staff, mopped straight from the editorial brow. Nothing valuable in this world is produced without severe pain and suffering, and our remarkable periodical is no exception. We do not tell you this in order to make you feel guilt. No, reader, your guilt would be useless. What comfort is it to those who have endured torment to know that strangers anguish over it? No, we merely provide you the information so that, if you choose, you may reflect on how much blood was spilled to produce the pages you now hold in your hands.

## TRAGICALLY EATEN BY PLANTS

We are distressed to report that a longtime *Current Affairs* contributor, Orville "Tex" Wonder, was recently devoured by carnivorous plants outside his home in Lexington, MA. Dr. Wonder had been a contributor to this magazine since its inception, and was known for his wry perspective on matters ranging from libertarianism to very large ships. For a period in the 1980s, he filled in as our publication's knitting columnist, though he did not know how to knit. This magnanimous act showcased his adaptability and range, although the dangerous advice he gave resulted in several ghastly impalements and a flood of litigation. After the settlements, Wonder was reassigned to the sports desk, where he rendered a similar service to the magazine. Entirely ignorant of baseball, he simply made up the names of players and teams (the St. Louis Spithorns, the Dallas Horseshoes, the Kansas City Clawfeet, etc.) and hoped readers would not notice the difference. Readers did, and sports fans were livid at the insult to their intelligence and perceived mockery of their silly pastime. Nevertheless, since the falsehoods exposed the magazine only to reputational damage rather than personal injury suits, Wonder was kept in his post for more than two decades. The magazine became notorious for its errors but respected for its consistency. For a brief period in the 2000s, Wonder's name made the national press due to his prediction in 1998 that "there is no future for the World Wide Web. None. Zero. And if I am wrong, I shall eat not just one but all of my hats." Midway through the Bush administration (the second Bush, not the first), Wonder was hospitalized after following through on the aforementioned vow. His stomach was pumped and he was never the same. Wonder was not renowned for his prophetic wisdom, but he was assuredly a man of integrity. Such was Wonder's devotion to his craft that even after he was forced out of the magazine over misconduct allegations (not sexual), he continued to write his weekly column, and simply filed it away in a desk drawer as if it would someday be published. Perhaps some part of him dreamed that after his death, the editor-in-chief of this magazine would open the drawer, collect the columns, and bring them out in a posthumous volume for the world to read. (Alas, the drawer is locked and the columns were undoubtedly of poor quality. They shall never see the light of day.) The magazine industry has lost a legend. As one copy editor once remarked to the other: "They don't make them like Tex anymore."



Thank you to  
*Citizen*  
Proofreader  
Finding Typos  
Depends on  
**YOU**

*Magazine Safety Tip*  
Do Not Take Your Magazine  
**UNDERWATER**  
It Could Get Very Wet



## ASK A Magazine

The column where you can ask the questions you've always wished a magazine would answer.

Dear *Current Affairs*,  
How many toes does a magazine have?  
Sadie, Age 8

**Sadie, dearest:**  
Is this a serious question? Do you know what a magazine is? Have you ever seen one? How did you get this address? Tell you what, Sadie. Pick me up. Flip through me. Look in all of my creases and folds. How many toes do you see? It's "none," isn't it? Because a magazine is not an animal. It is a pile of papers glued together, or sometimes stapled. Did your mommy or daddy never tell you that? Good grief. Try raising your kids, people.  
Yours,  
*Current Affairs*

Dear *Current Affairs*,  
I noticed the paper stock on the last edition was 60 lb. rather than the usual 80. Skimpflation much? What gives?  
Troy Complainerman  
Fictitioustown, OR

**Dear unfortunately-named subscriber,**  
We don't do skimpflation around here, thank you very much. No, it was June, and the magazine simply adopted its "summer beach body." Nice and slim, in the hopes of attracting the eye of *The Nation* or, if she did not respond, *The Baffler*. Alas, their affections were not forthcoming, and both went to the dance with magazines of far higher subscriber-counts. We were left in the cold yet again. Fortunately for you, our misery is your gain, and we've begun to pack on the pounds again. You will find that the paper weight of the present edition is once again healthy and plump.  
Affectionately,  
*Current Affairs*

Multiple readers wrote in to ask what "the secret ingredient" in our magazine is. *Current Affairs* is produced, as we have said before, in accordance with an old family recipe that has never been made public. In accordance with the sacred tradition, we will not disclose the full procedure here. But we can finally reveal that the crucial ingredient that gives the magazine its distinctive salty tang is:

# O N I O N S

Don't believe us? Give your *Current Affairs* a lick or sniff. The faint note of onion will be impossible to miss.

## COURT-MANDATED STATEMENT

Sickened by Fumes From This  
Magazine? **CALL A LAWYER TODAY.**  
As part of a recent class action  
agreement, you may be eligible  
for **FOUR DOLLARS.**

## A Message To Chaplin Haters

Our recent article about Charlie Chaplin sparked a surprising amount of irate letters from the public. Evidently there are still stalwart partisans of Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton, and boy, do they have access to stationery. We have received all of your notes, but we must disappoint you: this is a Marxist-Chaplinist publication, and we will not be providing "equal time" to lesser silent film stars. Our editorial stance is firm and there is no use continuing to send us twenty-dollar bills in the mail accompanied with requests to publish long profiles on the deceased actor of your choice. These will be ignored, and the money will be kept and put towards the purchase of more Charlie Chaplin content.

THIS MAGAZINE NOW CONTAINS ALL OF THE SUBJECT MATTER STATISTICALLY CALCULATED TO MAXIMIZE YOUR LIKELIHOOD OF PURCHASING AND SUBSCRIBING

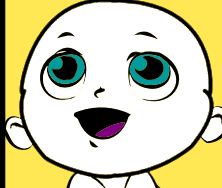
## SEX



## CRIME



## BABIES



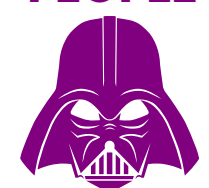
## CATS



## GOLF



## FAMOUS PEOPLE





BASEBALL CARDS

62

VIETNAM AS U.S. WITH  
CHINA

SQUID

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THERE IS A THIRD PERSON

DISPOSITION FORM

5:45 AM

PALESTINE

Issue 37

FASTING

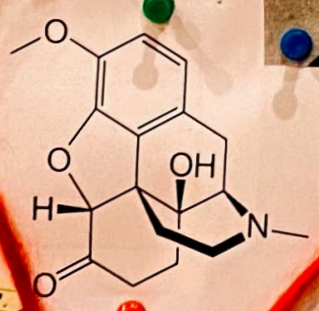
38

BASED

WHAT IS THIS?

SATAN

31

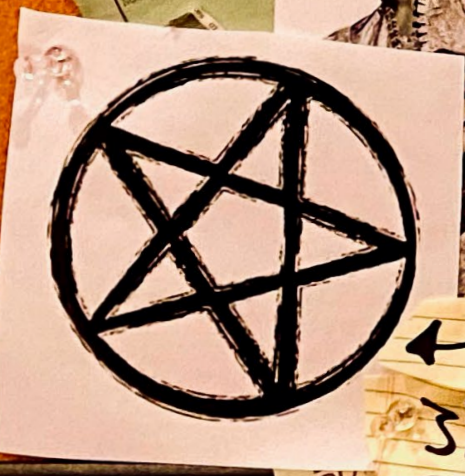


SUR

DISPOSITION FORM



UNIT TO TAKE WITH YOU ON THE DAY OF ENLISTMENT  
a. Birth Certificate  
b. Alien Registration Card (Form 1-51)  
c. National Identification Number  
d. Draft & Social Security Card  
e. ...  
SPECIAL NOTICE -- Before you report to the station to notify your recruiter of any and all conditions how minor they may seem, including traffic violations, concealment of any juvenile or civil offenses, fraudulent enlistment, court-martial, and if you have been contacted or questioned by police or other law enforcement agencies, you must inform your recruiter. If you are not guilty, you must inform your recruiter. If you are guilty, you must inform your recruiter. If you are not guilty, you must inform your recruiter. If you are guilty, you must inform your recruiter.

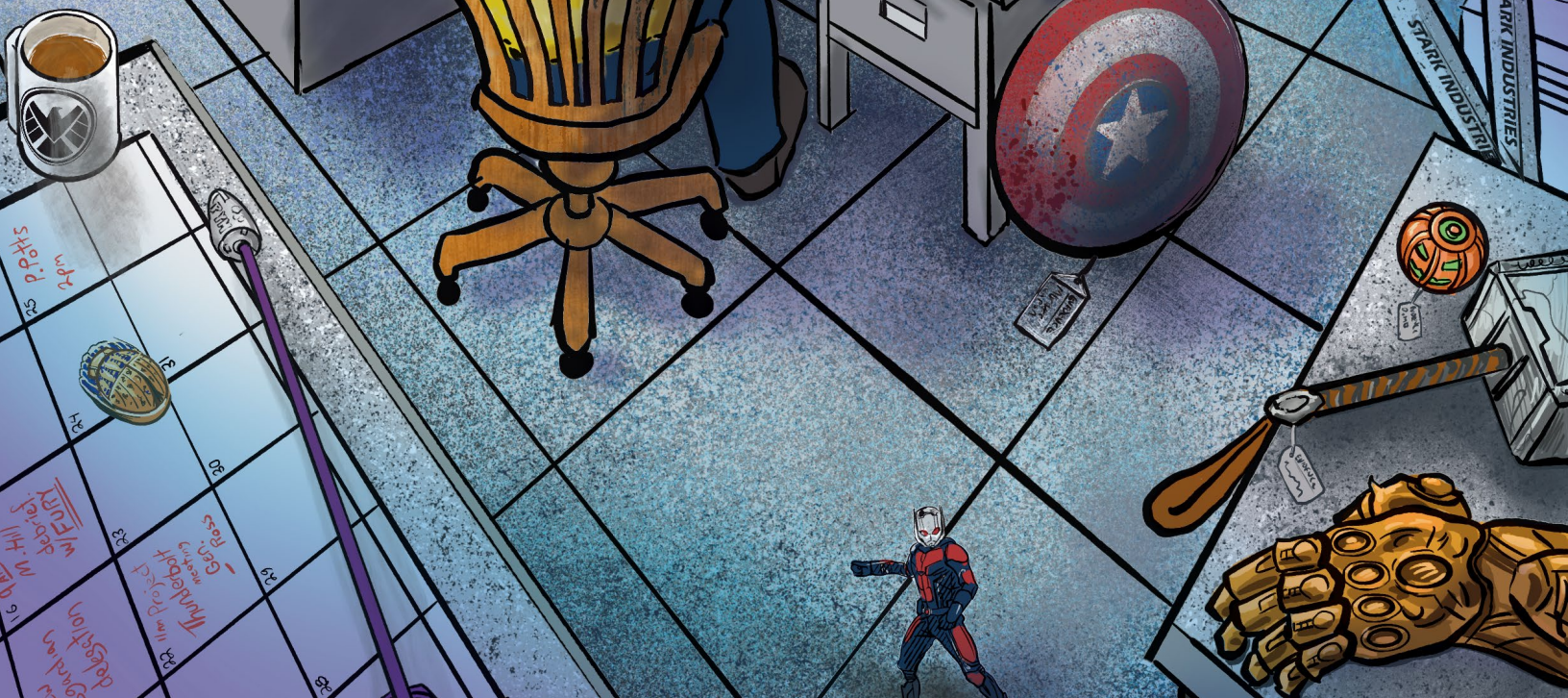
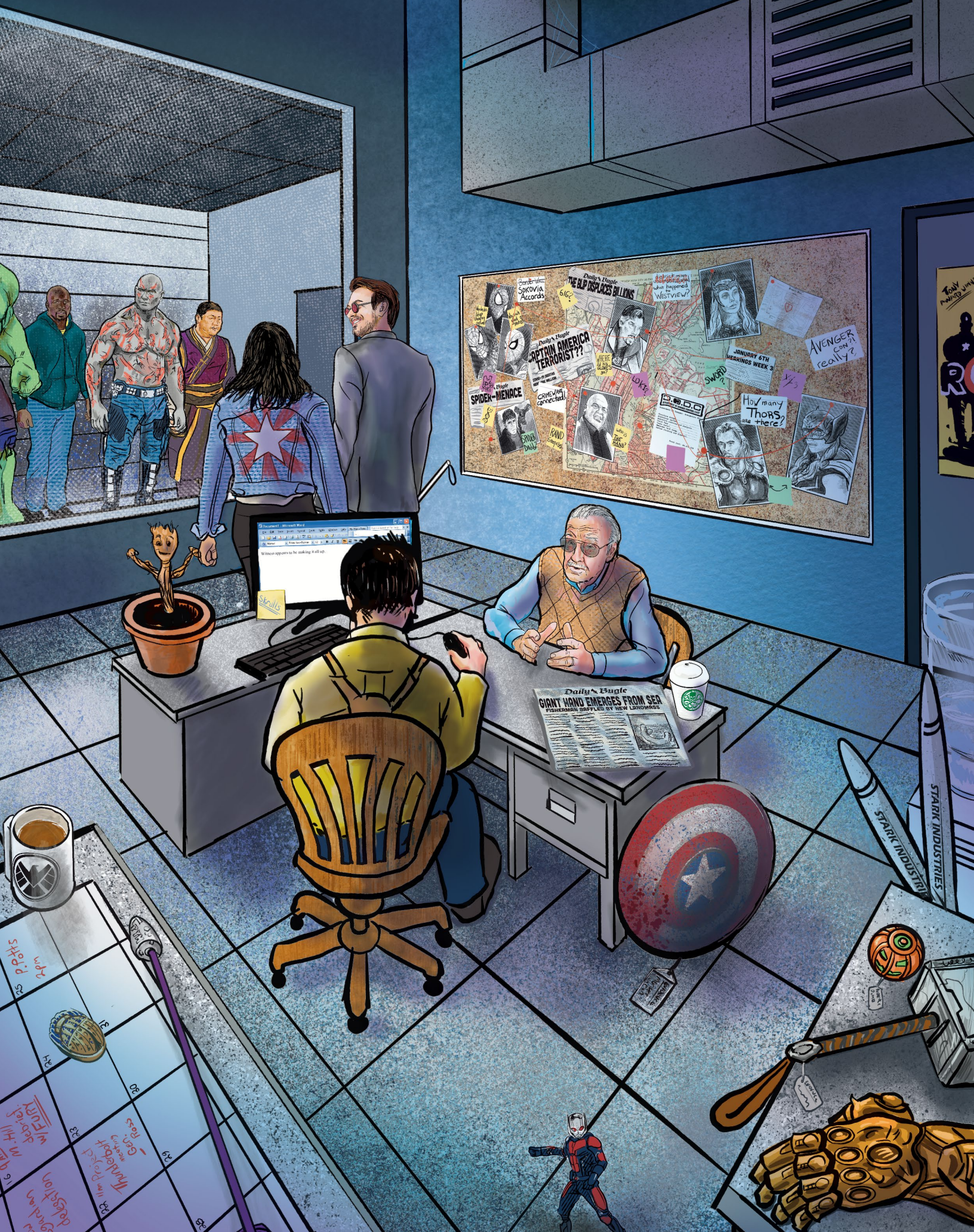


WHITE











# u.s. empire and the MARVEL MORAL UNIVERSE

BY PETER TAYLOR

REMEMBER VERY VIVIDLY THE FIRST TIME I WATCHED *Iron Man 2*. It was the middle of the summer, and a friend of mine had invited a group to watch the movie, which must have just been released on DVD, at his house as a part of a celebration of his 12th birthday. Eager for cartoonish violence in the manner stereotypical of boys of that age, we loved the film for its fast-paced plot and numerous action scenes, but the part that excited us most was the briefest glimpse of the famous shield of Captain America, which Tony Stark/Iron Man uses to jury-rig a machine he is building. We were still a year away from that famous hero's true silver screen debut in *Captain America: The First Avenger*, but the promise of his eventual appearance was enough to rile a gaggle of kids already hopped up on popcorn and soda.

Nearly 12 years later, it's impossible to watch that part of the movie without seeing it as anything but a glorified commercial for Marvel's upcoming creative ventures. The scene was an augur of the model that has both made the studio's films unique and seemingly condemned them to a superficial model of eternal self-referentiality. Now, the very word "Marvel" conjures up notions of grand scale superhero stories, none of which seem to be watchable anymore without knowing what else has happened in any of the dozens of

preceding releases (good luck following the newest *Doctor Strange* without watching *WandaVision* on the subscription-based streaming service Disney+). At this point, you might be fully on board, caught up with the latest entangled installments of the ever-evolving tale of enhanced beings fighting enemies wherever they may be found. Or you're fully lost, left out of the studio's business model of cinematic dominance that ensures that your local theater, even if it's no longer playing *Drive My Car*, has dozens of daily showtimes for *Doctor Strange and The Multiverse of Madness*.

Since the creation of the Marvel Cinematic Universe in 2008 and its subsequent acquisition by Disney in 2009, Marvel has perfected a business model predicated upon the continual release of largely formulaic action films. These films, primarily drawing their emotional weight from nostalgia and self-reference, tend to lack artistic and moral complexity and creative risk—and reflect a political ethos that is attuned to liberal-woke sensibilities but nonetheless glorifies imperialism. The same way ancient Athenian theater reinforced civic ideals of democracy, justice, and honor using the heroes and deities from Hellenic mythology, the Marvel Cinematic Universe draws on the mythology of American comic books to reinforce our culture's dominant ideals, those of perpetual conflict



against perpetual enemies in a world order characterized by American military and political hegemony. The films hardly make any effort to justify these ideals, much less critically interrogate them. The movies' characters do at times use certain leftist critiques, such as the language of class antagonism or the concern about wealth and power being abused by individuals. But these critiques end up neutralized in favor of the status quo.

Comic books and their heroes have had a rich and contradictory history in U.S. culture. Paul S. Hirsch has tracked their history in his thorough and incisive (not to mention well-illustrated) book *Pulp Empire: The Secret History of Comic Book Imperialism*. Hirsch shows that American attitudes toward comic books have evolved. First they were seen as harmless pulp, then as a scandalous danger in need of censoring (a series of Congressional hearings in the mid-1950s linked the content and popularity of comic books to an apparent increase in juvenile delinquency), before their eventual appropriation by the American security state for use, at least in part, as imperial propaganda. In his introduction, Hirsch writes that many of:

*"Marvel's new heroes [in the 1960s] straddled the line between purely commercial comic books and propaganda titles. These characters*

*Anti-communism in Marvel comics, including a racist depiction of a fictitious country clearly standing in for Vietnam*



*and narratives supported the Cold War consensus, a domestic coalition that crossed party lines and embraced the exertion of American power around the world and confrontations with Communism wherever it surfaced. By the early 1960s, comic book superheroes were waging war against the communists in Vietnam. Armed with the fruits of American technological prowess and wealth, Iron Man fought a one-man war against Soviet-style totalitarianism. Thor also went to Vietnam, where he used his godly powers to halt a North Vietnamese sneak attack."*

Surprisingly, many of these comics were not even created under input from federal officials, originating instead as work-arounds for censorship codes that emerged after the aforementioned Congressional hearing, and for the general Cold War panic that pervaded American culture at the time.

**P**OPULAR COMIC BOOK HEROES FIRST MADE THE jump from the page to the silver screen in film serials throughout the 1940s. Though commercially successful at the time, these serials didn't survive the decline of the Saturday matinee format alongside the rise of television. The first big-budget superhero film that might be said to resemble the kind we watch today was Richard Donner's 1978 film *Superman*, with Christopher Reeve in the starring role. Eleven years later came Tim Burton's similarly well-received *Batman*. Both critically and commercially successful, each film spawned franchises that petered out after the dwindling reception of the later sequels. Furthermore, the success of *Batman* and *Superman* wasn't part of a trend. Despite the popularity of these flagship DC comics characters, the popularity of their films remained more the exception than the rule for comic book movies. Marvel, while home to other iconic superhero teams like the Avengers and the Fantastic Four, did not achieve the same success as its DC counterparts, most of their releases appearing only on television or being released directly to home video.

This changed in the late '90s and early aughts with the appearance of *Blade* in 1998, then *X-Men* in 2000. Both of these films and their subsequent sequels were early indicators of the potential for superheroes to generate not only mass cultural appeal but also handsome box office returns: *X-Men* brought in nearly \$300 million on a \$75 million budget, and its sequels did even better, most of them raking in more than \$400 million each. Chris Hewitt of *Empire* has written that *X-Men* was "the catalyst for everything that's come since, good and bad. Without it, there's no Marvel Studios," the production group that later blossomed out of the comic company's desire to make their own movies, instead of merely licensing out their intellectual properties to other film studios.

Hot on the heels of the success of *Blade* and *X-Men*, various studios continued to make films by licensing the rights to different Marvel properties throughout the early 2000s with varying results, from the critical acclaim of *Spider-Man 2* to the near universal panning of films like *Daredevil* and *Elektra*. This model shifted when



producer and businessman David Maisel approached the then small Marvel Studios about earning more money for their films. Instead of simply licensing out their intellectual properties for other film studios to adapt, Marvel could, Maisel proposed, make their own films using characters whose rights they hadn't yet sold, including many of the original members of the Avengers, Marvel's analogue of DC Comics' Justice League and perhaps its most recognizable property. Instead of just aiming to make a slew of independent stories, however, the budding film studio decided to set their films within the same fictional continuity, laying the groundwork for a media empire built on the potential for different heroes to appear in each other's films as part of a shared universe known as the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). For such an approach to succeed, however, the studio would have to kick it off with a bang. The first on the docket: *Iron Man*, released in 2008.

Perhaps no superhero looms larger in our current cultural consciousness than arms magnate turned superhero Iron Man, even after his onscreen death in 2019's *Avengers: Endgame*. Despite his fictional backstory as a founding member of the Avengers, Tony Stark (and his mech-suit alter ego) was until recently considered a relatively minor superhero, lacking the name recognition of a hero like Spider-Man or Thor. In the end, it didn't matter: Jon Favreau's *Iron Man* was released to near universal positive acclaim from critics and fans alike, particularly for Robert Downey Jr.'s performance in the titular role (the late Roger Ebert of *Chicago Sun-Times* wrote, "At the end of the day it's Robert Downey Jr. who powers the lift-off separating this from most other superhero movies.") Furthermore, the first utterance of the word "Avenger" in a post-credits scene promised the movie to be the first chapter in an interconnected saga that would unite so many beloved superheroes on the same screen. The film was so successful that the fine folks over at Disney must have foreseen an oncoming boom on which they could cash in. At the end of 2009, the media conglomerate acquired Marvel Studios for \$4 billion. Disney's investment has paid off: nearly 14 years after *Iron Man*'s 2008, the 28 films of the MCU have grossed more than \$26 billion worldwide.

**Y**OU WOULDN'T NECESSARILY KNOW IT from the way the movies have evolved, but the first *Iron Man* film gestures at a critique of the American military-industrial complex. After a weapons demonstration in Afghanistan, arms magnate Tony Stark is captured by the terrorist organization the Ten Rings, who show him the destruction his handiwork has helped wreak when they try to force him to build the same advanced missiles he builds for the U.S. Air Force. Instead, he builds the Iron Man suit, which he uses to escape captivity

before returning stateside and shutting down his company's weapons sales. He takes on the Iron Man mantle in his solo efforts to defeat his former business partner Obadiah Stane, who builds his own mech-suit to kill Tony so that the company's war profiteering can continue undisturbed.

Tony Stark's character may selectively excoriate war profiteering, but the film ignores any real structural critique of American imperialism. Released at a moment of growing popular dissatisfaction with America's endless military adventuring in the Middle East, *Iron Man* bemoans the loss of the lives of American soldiers, yet it fails to make any broader or more incisive interrogations of U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, or of the broader apparatus of the American war machine. Instead of asking why the Ten Rings, a clear stand-in for the Taliban or Al-Qaeda, might want to expel the American military, the film treats terrorists as faceless enemies with opaque and static motives. The film treats their wickedness as second only to that of Obadiah Stane, who commits the cardinal sin not of selling arms, but of selling them to people the U.S. Air Force doesn't like. Instead of channeling his newly discovered morality into a critical re-examination of war and geopolitics, Stark channels it into the creation of his own superweapon, one that only he, an arrogant, unaccountable billionaire, is allowed to use.

While the first film at least nods





towards critique, *Iron Man 2* abandons the anti-imperialist pretense altogether, painting as ludicrous the attempts of the U.S. Congress—a legislative body not exactly known for its checks on American warmaking—to commandeer the Iron Man suit. “I’ve successfully privatized world peace,” says Stark, unironically showing us that a billionaire will always act like a billionaire, no matter how much of a conscience they seem to have grown.

**B**UT IRON MAN IS JUST ONE HERO. IF MARVEL and Disney were going to make a media empire, they would need a couple other larger-than-life characters to balance him out to ensure audiences’ emotional and financial buy-in to the franchise’s storytelling choices—and simply to keep them from getting bored. They found one such foil in Steve Rogers, better known as Captain America.

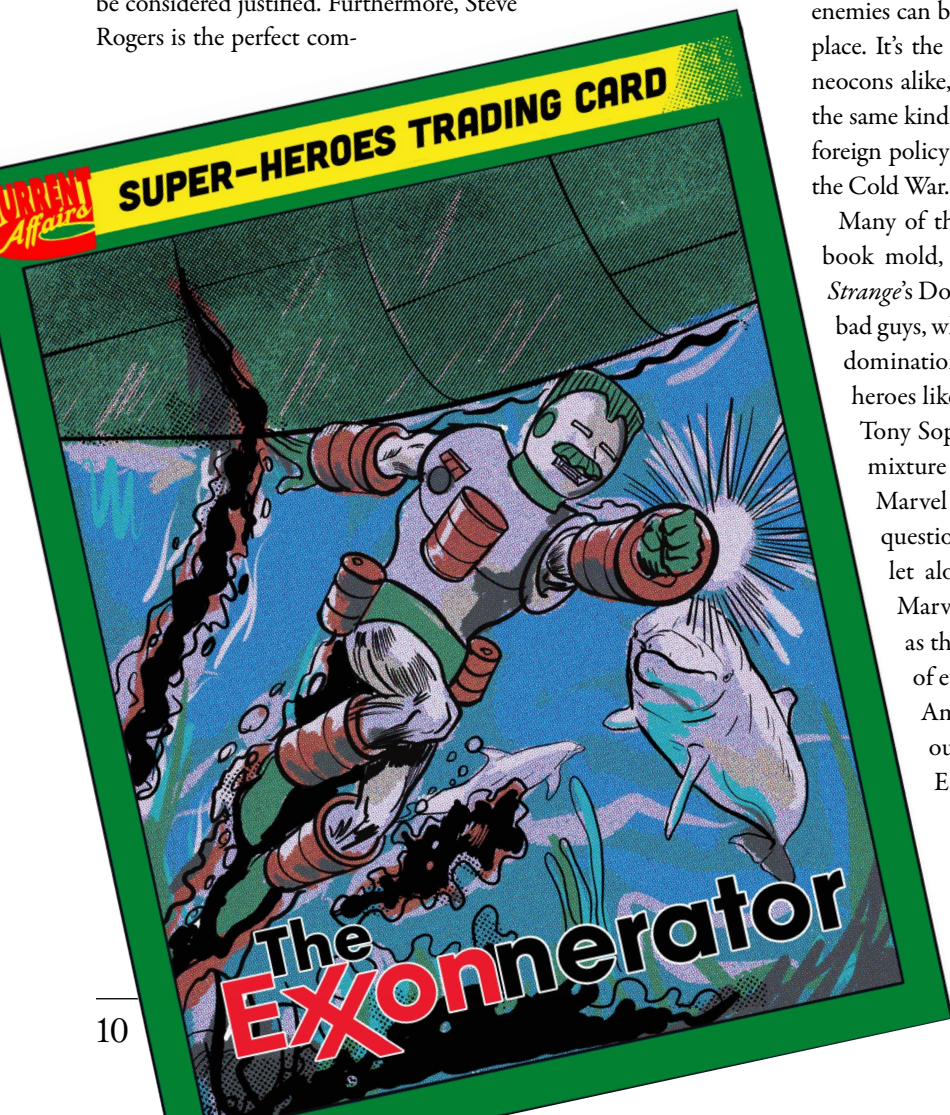
*Captain America: The First Avenger*, released in 2011 to further acclaim, is a fun escapist romp, a kind of alternate history wherein science fiction and fantasy elements buttress the historical narrative of the fight against Hitler’s genocidal fascism. As expected for a film set in World War II, the movie relies heavily on our collective cultural nostalgia for the last war our country waged that could be considered justified. Furthermore, Steve Rogers is the perfect com-

plement to Tony Stark. Whereas Iron Man was a minor comic book character until he found success on the silver screen in 2008, Captain America has been a household name since his first appearance as Nazi-bashing superhero on the eve of World War II. While Tony Stark is the perpetual winner whose recently discovered morality gives him *carte blanche* to wage war with impunity, Steve Rogers is a scrappy underdog, a sickly kid from Brooklyn who becomes Captain America not just because of an experimental serum, but also through his selflessness—not to mention unbridled patriotism. His primary villain is not the faceless Arabs of the Middle East or their greedy American benefactor, but the Red Skull, Hitler’s fictional protégé. You couldn’t ask for a more all-American hero.

Though the politics of the first *Captain America* film are themselves neither particularly egregious nor sophisticated, the movie serves to foreground one of the MCU’s most central assumptions: the ubiquity of adversarial and antagonistic forces. It doesn’t matter whether these adversaries are Nazis, terrorists foreign or domestic, enhanced beings with evil agendas or personal grudges, invading alien overlords, robots gone haywire, or even visitors from other dimensions. According to the logic of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, there are always *bad guys*, so we will always need the *good guys*, who are inexplicably always on *our* team, to keep them at bay. Individual enemies can be defeated, but new ones will always rise to take their place. It’s the same logic peddled by emperors, kings, fascists, and neocons alike, one that discourages critical reflection and reaffirms the same kind of tribalist exceptionalism that has defined American foreign policy since the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War.

Many of these enemies are simply villains of the classic comic book mold, characters like *Ant-Man*’s Yellow Jacket or *Doctor Strange*’s Dormammu who have little motivation other than to be bad guys, whether out of desire for money or some form of world domination. Villains like these may be less interesting than anti-heroes like *The Godfather*’s Michael Corleone or *The Sopranos*’ Tony Soprano, who fall into their evil ways out of a complex mixture of innate and extrinsic forces, but the villainy of these Marvel characters remains simple enough as not to be worth questioning. These villains are hardly worth understanding, let alone sympathizing with. In this sense, much of the Marvel moral universe is built around the same worldview as the kind George W. Bush espoused in his famous “axis of evil” speech delivered in the months after 9/11, where America’s enemies were unquestionably malevolent but our own history of incessantly bombing the Middle East remained unmentioned.

While some evildoers simply crave power or chaos, the Marvel Cinematic Universe also makes villains out of people with reasonable grievances, who seem to turn to crime or wickedness less out of pure evil than out of a zealotry that has been circumstan-





tially intensified. Unlike in the case of some of the movies' more straightforward villains, the presence of these grievances actually does complicate the villains' characterizations, but the films nonetheless condemn the wrongdoers, or else only pardon them after their defeat at the hands of the ever-righteous hero. Apparently, their violent tactics cancel out any complexity that might define their motivations. One example is Adrian Toomes/The Vulture of 2017's *Spider-Man: Homecoming*. Originally of a working-class background, Toomes has made a fortune building and selling weapons made from stolen alien technology that has been otherwise hoarded by Tony Stark/Iron Man and the Avengers. Toomes' exchange with Peter Parker/Spider-Man in the lead up to the film's climax is particularly illustrative:

**TOOMES:** Peter, you're young. You don't understand how the world works.

**PARKER:** Yeah, but I understand that selling weapons to criminals is wrong.

**TOOMES:** How do you think your buddy Stark paid for that tower? Or any of his little toys? Those people, Pete, those people up there, the rich and the powerful, they do whatever they want. Guys like us, you and me, they don't care about us. We build their roads, we fight all their wars and everything, they don't care about us. We have to pick up after them, we have to eat their table scraps. That's how it is.

Here, Toomes sounds like a veritable class warrior, a Bernie Sanders in the making. Such language evoking class antagonism is notable given Americans' distaste for the economic inequality of U.S. society. This year, Pew Research Center noted that a majority of Americans surveyed believe that the economy works for the rich and harms the poor and middle class; roughly half of those surveyed also believe the economy hurts their families. But unlike the more radical wing of the left, which would call for the expropriation of billionaires, Toomes does not seem interested in toppling the reigning order, as "that's how it is." Instead, Toomes is simply a villain who dares to steal from the almighty Avengers, while Stark, Peter Parker/Spider-Man's in-movie mentor, remains a hero because of both his wealth and his connection to the Avengers and the American security and military state, whose insurmountable body counts go unmentioned. Thus, Toomes' class analysis is ultimately neutralized. Though released three years prior to George Floyd's murder, *Spider-Man: Homecoming* also presages the logic deployed by mainstream cable news outlets towards rioters and looters in the summer of 2020, never mentioning the continuous "legalized looting" of the working class by our country's elite, to use the words of Cornel West in an appearance on CNN in June 2020. Whereas the Avengers continue to operate, Toomes is defeated in a kind of proxy metaphor for the ongoing assault on the working class, the class war's perpetual losers seemingly long resigned to their continual losses.

**A** MORE EGREGIOUS VILLAINIZATION OF AN individual with legitimate grievances appears in the critically acclaimed 2018 film *Black Panther*, wherein Erik Killmonger, the film's villain, attempts to initiate a global revolution for Black liberation by taking over and appropriating the resources of Wakanda, a fictional African nation noted for its hyper-development and profuse natural and technological resources. From a leftist perspective attuned to the crimes of imperialism and the myriad ways anti-Black racism manifests itself as an agent or remnant of colonial structures, Killmonger's cause is hardly beyond reproach, as he attempts to appropriate Wakanda's resources to advance a just and populist cause. Indeed, Killmonger is acting in service of the "wretched of the earth," to pilfer a phrase from Frantz Fanon, the legendary anticolonial thinker who advocated for the necessity of violent revolution in shaking off the chains of colonial oppressors. If anything, Killmonger doesn't take a solidaristic enough approach (such as that taken by some Third World leftists of the global south who wished to unite against colonialism and imperialism in the mid-20th century), implicitly ignoring the plights of the poor and working classes of other races in his focus on the unique oppression that befalls Black people the world over. Through the film's liberal imperialist lens, however, Killmonger is a wayward villain whom hero T'Challa, the young king of Wakanda who takes on the role of the Black Panther, needs to defeat. He even enlists the help of a CIA agent, suggestive of the numerous instances throughout the 20th century wherein agents of American imperialism crushed leftist governments or leftist resistance movements in the name of containing communism. Ultimately, *Black Panther's* treatment of Killmonger reminds me of when a professor of mine once said, "The Israel-Palestine conflict is so difficult to solve because the Palestinians keep engaging in terrorism," completely ignoring the conditions of violent oppression that might cause the oppressed to resort to violence of their own.

The 2021 television miniseries *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* does perhaps slightly better justice to its primary villain Karli Morgenthau, whose pro-refugee, anti-border slogan "One world, one people" sounds like it could've been uttered by Leon Trotsky in his anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist advocacy of permanent international revolution. At the end of the series, Sam Wilson, a Black man who has newly assumed the mantle of Captain America following Steve Rogers' *de facto* retirement in 2019's *Avengers: Endgame*, says, "You need to stop calling [Morgenthau and her followers] terrorists." But this advocacy rings hollow coming from the avatar for American imperialism. To be fair, Wilson's emotional struggle with taking up this mantle is a focal point of the series as he attempts to reckon with his country's historical treatment of its Black super soldiers. His primary grievance arises upon his discovery that a Black super soldier named Isaiah Bradley was hidden from public and tortured by the United States government in lieu



of recognition for his service in the Korean War. Wilson's horror at the American empire's treatment of its Black soldiers is justified but incomplete: the series rightfully acknowledges the brutality of this fictional injustice by giving Bradley a memorial in the Smithsonian in the final episode, but it doesn't leave a word for, say, the hundreds of thousands of North Korean and Chinese soldiers and civilians who also died as casualties of America's frequent and devastating bombings throughout the early 1950s.

Such is the myopia of Marvel's attempted response to liberal calls for greater representation of people from marginalized communities in their films. Their approach mirrors that of the modern Democratic Party, which is content to place women and people of color in positions of power and influence but refuses to address the structural and historical causes that have contributed to those same groups' historical marginalization. Just as the inclusion into politics of individual members of marginalized groups does not ensure radical, structural change, their representation in superhero films does not do justice to the conditions of their oppression when unaccompanied by a sufficiently complex characterization. It's liberal imperialism at its most gripping and most refined, shown through the prism of sensational superhero movies that prioritize "inclusion in the atrocious" rather than any sort of radical critique of the institutions that commit and perpetuate such atrocities.

IN THE END, IT'S NOT THAT THE MARVEL CINEMATIC Universe shallowly avoids grappling with the moral and political complexities of the conflicts it portrays. Instead, it chooses to tackle them, and yet nearly always comes down on the wrong side. Even in the Marvel movie with the best politics, 2014's *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, the implicit critique of the American surveillance state and Obama-era drone warfare is barely directed at S.H.I.E.L.D., the MCU's analogue for the colossal apparatus that makes up the modern American security state. Instead, it's all the fault of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s (neo-)Nazi counterpart Hydra, which has infiltrated the American agency, a sneaky way for the filmmakers to portray a domestic threat without actually critiquing the United States.

Nowhere is this tendency more evident than 2016's *Captain America: Civil War*, which pits the MCU's two golden boys, Captain America and Iron Man, against each other in a disagreement that even their camaraderie can't handle. At the film's beginning, the U.S. Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross urges the Avengers to submit themselves to the United Nations' efforts to rein in the Avengers' ability to operate with impunity, no matter the extent of the destruction the team wreaks across the world. Embodying the pattern of the MCU's more or less uncritical depiction of so many of its heroes, Steve Rogers/Captain America balks at the notion of accountability, saying, "The safest hands are still our own." Captain America's words can be interpreted as an embodiment of U.S. military impunity at its most extreme, where it operates on the assumption of its continuous

infallibility despite its abysmal track record of building democracy through military coercion, not to mention its long list of war crimes and its tendency to treat international law as an easily ignorable suggestion. Colonel James Rhodes/War Machine, a former Air Force pilot and another Avenger, justifiably describes Rogers' attitude as "dangerously arrogant." Considering the clear parallel to the UN's continued and unheeded efforts to call out American war crimes, the applicability of this former soldier's comments to U.S. foreign policy represents a textbook example of irony, one apparently lost on the filmmakers who seem to have more interest in reinforcing than subverting cultural norms. Instead, the film treats Rhodes as misguided and Rogers as in the right, because he's Steve Rogers, leader of the Avengers, the Earth's mightiest heroes and an unquestioned Force for Good. Captain America practically scoffs at the notion of boundaries, blinded by his lack of self-reflection and self-criticism just like the imperial nation whose colors he wears.

In a drastic reversal from his characteristic arrogance, Tony Stark takes the opposite approach from his superhero comrade: "If we can't accept boundaries, we're no better than the bad guys." Here, Stark is finally showing the self-awareness he lacked in the original *Iron Man*, when he rained missiles and bullets across the Middle East in accordance with his whims. The android Vision, another Avenger, goes even further than Stark when he says of the superhero team, "Our very strength invites challenge. Challenge incites conflict. And conflict breeds catastrophe." On their own, these kinds of statements could be read as a critique not only of the Avengers but also of the American approach to security, whose global military overreach has consistently created threats in the name of deterring them. For example, America's consistent military presence in the Middle East over the past two decades has led to the rise of extremist groups like ISIS. Instead, the film frames Tony Stark and the Vision as antagonists, the same way the American media class treats critics of American military hegemony: not as cautious bearers of necessary warnings, but foolish traitors whose only goal is to support America's enemies.

Ultimately, this framing both relies on and reinforces the conceit of the aforementioned ubiquity of threats, a notion that has guided messaging of American foreign policy for far too long. In the case of the Second World War, the threats to democracy and freedom were indeed quite genuine. Germany, Italy, and Japan were imperialist powers controlled by ruthless or even genocidal dictators, and without the efforts of the United States and Soviet Union (whose overwhelming role in defeating the Nazis has been conveniently whitewashed from American history), we might all today be living under a global fascist empire. World War II was one moment in human history where the good and evil sides were less muddled than, say, the geopolitical imperialist squabbles that sparked and sustained the slaughter of World War I. The reality was certainly more complicated than the jingoistic version we learn in our history classes, where all sides were brought into the dirt of the ravages of war. No matter: since 1945, our country has held on to the notion of American infal-



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libility practically as gospel, even as our enemies have changed from the Soviet Union and its communist satellites to Middle Eastern dictators to terrorists and now back to Russia and China.

Perhaps producers Isaac Perlmutter and Kevin Feige sat through numerous meetings with Department of Defense officials who compelled them to craft the installments of the MCU as effortless propaganda of the American military-industrial complex. Just as likely however, is that the MCU's military cheerleading is a side effect of the film studio's obvious goals to assert a cultural preeminence that can only be achieved without challenging or upsetting any established cultural norms. What Noam Chomsky discusses in *Manufacturing Consent*, whereby news media self-censors on behalf of their corporate overlords, is the same king of logic that drives the production of summer action flicks like *Top Gun: Maverick* (as much an extended recruitment ad for the Navy as its predecessor) or artsier equivalents like *Zero Dark Thirty* (which celebrates the American special forces' assassination of Osama bin Laden). Instead of setting these stories in the real world, the creators place the MCU in a heightened reality, one where the filmmakers have dared to put wizards and robots on the same battlefields but have not been so bold as to challenge the American empire.

AS MORE AND MORE MARVEL MOVIES ARE released, they tend to draw their primary weight less from their individual stories and more from continued references to the franchise's past and future. This approach is not necessarily a fault of the franchise *per se*: there is certainly a degree of logistical and creative ingenuity to the MCU's self-referential storytelling, which has juggled dozens of heroes and villains across nearly a decade-and-a-half of film and television releases. Authors like William Faulkner or Gabriel García Márquez have similarly set many of their novels and stories in the same continuity with any number of the same characters recurring across narratives, to consistent critical and scholarly acclaim. Where Faulkner and García Márquez use this approach for thematic complexity and narrative/historical continuity, Marvel's approach ultimately serves to encourage viewers to continue shilling out money year after year, release after release, just to keep everything straight. With each Marvel movie released, it becomes harder and harder to follow them without knowing the context of the preceding dozens of films and television episodes. Even people who have watched most if not all of the MCU properties, like me, might have trouble keeping track of all the crisscrossing references. With this approach, all Marvel movies, no matter the intellectual property they are adapting, are forced to conform to a general stylistic and tonal formula, wherein formula supersedes risk and conformity supersedes creativity. As the years have gone on and the MCU has grown larger with each passing film, the franchise is content to recycle accumulated cultural cachet in the place of making any narrative or stylistic choice that might upset the delicate balance of its curated uniformity. After all, why do something new that might attract a smaller, more niche group, when you could continue to write for a broad and an already captive audience—and their money?

This approach is perhaps most evident in the most recent Spider-Man film, *Spider-Man: No Way Home*. In an example of cooperation within the capitalist class that the modern left can still only dream among our own disparate factions, Sony and Marvel Studios reached an agreement that allowed Marvel to use the Spider-Man character, whose license was still owned by Sony, and his concomitant properties, within the MCU in exchange for a split of the profits. After the beloved character's multiple previous appearances in a portrayal by young upstart actor Tom Holland, *Spider-Man: No Way Home* took it one step further by bringing in actors from both series of previous Spider-Man films of other corporate continuities, recast now as alternate versions from different dimensions. The result is less a movie that stands on its own than an extended montage of references and callbacks to, or even reimaginings of, characters and moments from preexisting films, the accumulation of which





winds up significantly weaker than the sum of its individual parts.

For someone like me, who grew up watching the other on-screen iterations of Spider-Man (Tobey Maguire from 2007 and Andrew Garfield from 2014), seeing these other actors play Spider-Man again might be meaningful, a flashback to your childhood. But if you've never seen the movies featuring Maguire or Garfield as the web-slinger—or if you're re-watching *No Way Home*, when the surprise is no longer a surprise—these actors' presence is a largely hollow attempt to trigger a nostalgic joy you may have once felt watching earlier, better movies. Instead of creating new films with their own emotional weight, the filmmakers rely on the work done by previous films as a shortcut to audience investment, all part of a growing Hollywood tendency to capitalize on nostalgia through big-budget quasi-remakes (one 2018 article in *Den of Geek* detailed their anticipation for 121 remakes of older films). Where a film like the live-action reimagining of *The Lion King* at least reimagined everyone's favorite singing animals through impressive photo-realistic imitations, the Marvel Cinematic Universe banks purely on our desire to revisit what we already know and love rather than attempt to break any new ground. One could argue that the same could be said of any adaptation from one medium to another, whose very existence is predicated on bringing to life an already familiar storyline, setting, or cast of characters. But the most recent outings of the MCU represent the laziest, most facile approach to making interesting cinema by assuming the audience is already interested. Sometimes, this approach even seems to work, less a result, however, of the quality of the films themselves than of the encompassing totality of the corporate machine that has come to dominate the cinematic market.

**B**UT ARE MARVEL MOVIES EVEN CINEMA in the traditional sense? Acclaimed American filmmaker Martin Scorsese doesn't think so, at least not in his widely discussed opinion piece for the *New York Times* where he described Marvel films as more akin to "theme parks" than artistic achievements. He writes that in films of the MCU, "Nothing is at risk. The pictures are made to satisfy a specific set of demands, and they are designed as variations on a finite number of themes. ... [They are] market-researched, audience-tested, vetted, modified, revetted and remodified until they're ready for consumption." Canadian director Denis Villeneuve takes a similar tack, saying, "The problem today ... well, if we're talking about Marvel, the thing is, all these films are made from the same mold. Some filmmakers can add a little color to it, but they're all cast in the same factory."

It might be easy to call Scorsese and Villeneuve's ideas elitist, and they might be. Who gets to define cinema? Does the average moviegoer care whether this or that film conforms to such a definition? After all, not all movies need to be black-and-white character studies of aging boxers or mentally disturbed gangsters to be enjoyable art. But the films of the Marvel Cinematic Universe are creations that never truly aim to break any new kind of cinematic or artistic ground,

settling for infinite variations of the same dull formula. Scorsese is certainly right that they're "made to satisfy a specific set of demands," "as variations on a finite number of themes."

It's easy to write off Marvel films as populist drivel, movies so middling and formulaic as to be beneath substantive criticism, but to do so ignores the importance storytelling plays in the role of shaping and reaffirming cultural and political attitudes. We can't allow ourselves to settle for imperialist propaganda in our search for fantastical entertainment. Why should we, with the existence of a movie like *Howl's Moving Castle*, a thrilling fantastical adventure of milliners and wizards and demons, and a heart-rending screed against endless war? Or a television show like *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, which deftly explores questions of imperialism, propaganda, and genocide with both nuance and clarity? How about a movie like James Cameron's *Avatar*, which despite its relatively formulaic and straightforward plot at least gives us an anti-colonialist allegory? Or, perhaps most of all, the recently released masterpiece *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, which takes the concept of a "multiverse" and uses it not as an excuse to mash together a montage of corporate nostalgia but instead turns it into a brutal yet hopeful (not to mention class-conscious!) rumination on existential despair?

There is a place for superhero films, for movies that allow us to get lost in otherworldly adventures, whether as ruminative art or even just rip-roaring entertainment. But such movies should not have to conform to our preconceptions about what an action-adventure story can be, nor should they merely serve to reinforce cultural and political norms. Art and storytelling are crucial sculptors of our cultural consciousness, and there is no doubt they can be wielded for radical ends, ends that make us reconsider the world and our relationship to it and to one another. Just like their anti-communist comic book writer predecessors, the makers of the MCU surely understand the power of art to influence and subvert. Otherwise, they wouldn't be so committed to making their films vehicles for liberal imperialist propaganda—or they're too clueless, too inept, or too dull to see that liberalism is far from the most interesting or novel lens through which to tell a compelling story. Now, with the possibility of World War III looming over us and the American experiment revealing its failure more and more every day, it's more important than ever to call out this propaganda and the business model that reinforces it.

But the elite economic forces that have come to act as our cultural tastemakers aren't going to abandon a winning formula, the same one that both guarantees continued profits and reinforces their values. Instead, it's on our society's artists to continue making subversive art, art that broadens our horizons and challenges the status quo, as radical artists have always done, even if only in the shadows. More immediately, it's on us, as audiences, to prise ourselves from the grip of the Disney culture machine, and seek out stories that are better than those that depict the suppression of revolutions favorably. As we endeavor to exempt ourselves from Marvel's blinding glare, it's on us to bring other stories, different stories, out of the shadows and into a new kind of light. ✦







# THE BOSS IS WATCHING

by Ruqaiyah Zarook

**“Don’t stop for lunch: be ahead of your competitor. The Billows Feeding Machine will eliminate the lunch hour, increase your production, and decrease your overhead.”**

—The Mechanical Salesman,

*Modern Times* dir. by Charlie Chaplin, 1936

IT’S NO COINCIDENCE THAT THE DICTATORIAL HEAD of Electro Steel Corp. in Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* strikes an uncanny resemblance to Henry Ford. The classic silent comedy from 1936 not only tells us about the state of Depression-era labor standards and the pitfalls of unfettered capitalism. It also reveals the unforgiving realities of working on the moving assembly line, one of the most transformative innovations in modern history. The film was inspired by Chaplin’s real-life rendezvous with the legendary factory boss in October 1923 at the Ford Motor Company in Highland Park, Michigan. During his visit, Chaplin learned of how young men were plucked from neighboring farms and hired to work on Ford’s factory floor. As depicted in the film, many of these men succumbed to nervous breakdowns, a typical symptom of the breakneck tempo of both the assembly line and the industrial age.

Amazon, the country’s second largest employer, is well known for its similarly dehumanizing working conditions in which employees resort to peeing in bottles to make delivery quotas. In April, workers at the JFK8 Amazon fulfillment center on Staten Island voted to unionize, a historic feat propelled by workers who were facing strict productivity goals and pernicious high-tech surveillance practices by management. According to a survey put out by the American Management Association, approximately 66 percent of U.S. companies monitor their employees’ internet usage, with at least 45 percent of companies logging keystrokes and 43 percent of companies tracking workers’ emails. Employees’ locations can even be tracked through the GPS feature of cell phones provided to workers by their employers. In a 2016 investigation by the *Daily Mail* in Glasgow, Amazon workers were described as “Amazombies” because of the extent to which they were surveilled. Workers faced disciplinary action if they

ran behind schedule or took too long of a bathroom break.

Justine Medina, an organizer at JFK8, described the surveillance conditions at Amazon:

*“If you’re away from your station for more than five minutes, the clock starts tracking you. And if you’re away from your station for more than 30 minutes, then you can get written up. So that’s cumulatively through your whole work day, which can be 10-12 hours. If you’re away from your station for more than five minutes, you start clocking towards that. But it can take you five minutes just to walk to the bathroom—especially, like I said, if you’re elderly or have some sort of disability or are just tired from being on your feet all day and moving really heavy things. You could get written up just for going to the bathroom.”*

UPS’s surveillance program from 2009 is another example of modern tyrannical workplace surveillance. The company tailored their delivery trucks to have two hundred sensors tracking the backup speeds and stop times of drivers, allowing UPS to figure out which workers were taking unapproved breaks and how many deliveries were being made in a day. With this system in place, from 2009-2013, the company was able to deliver 1.4 million more packages with one thousand fewer drivers. These unrealistic standards, combined with lax safety and health standards, have resulted in chronic injuries for workers. One worker said the company had created a “culture of fear” by retaliating against those who reported their injuries.

Surveillance developments of the 21st century have replaced the traditional gaze of the supervisor on the industrial factory floor with an automated, digital one that continuously collects real-time data on living, breathing people. Even unionized workers do not have an explicit legal right to bargain over surveillance technologies; when it comes to the right to privacy, unions have an uphill battle to fight. We now live in a world where employees are stuck in a web of participatory surveillance because they consent to be monitored as a condition for entry into the workplace. Today’s workplace surveillance practices, as in the case of Amazon, have become invasive and almost limitless. Technology has allowed employers an unprecedented ability to surveil workers. Management can minutely track and persistently push workers toward greater productivity,



at the risk of exacerbating harms to workers' physical health, as the high rates of injury in Amazon warehouses show. And the growing business of selling workplace surveillance software has allowed for massive amounts of data to be collected on working people: when and who they talk to, how quickly they complete tasks, what they search for on their computers, how often they use the toilet and even the state of their current health and moods.

There's an old business adage by management guru Peter Drucker that explains the key to control: what gets measured, gets managed. In this case, workers are increasingly being micromanaged as every part of their labor is measured through surveillance for the purposes of productivity. And the overall cost of these practices is tremendous. Human dignity is sacrificed when workers are turned into faceless numbers in the equation to maximize profits. Some may interpret the skepticism of all-encompassing workplace surveillance as anti-tech, but in reality, it is simply an endeavor to restrain the zealotry of profit-makers and to restore the privacy, dignity, health, and well-being of workers.

### THE ORIGINS OF MODERN WORKPLACE SURVEILLANCE

Surveillance has long been essential to discipline and control workers. The practice is rooted in the transformation of the American workforce between the mid-19th to early-21st centuries when laborers moved from rural areas to industrializing cities to earn wages. According to historian Frank Morn, some businessmen in the mid-1850s saw a need for increased control over their workers. The rise of big business and more complex firms required greater managerial authority. The solution? A private detective agency. Private law enforcement magnate Allan Pinkerton determined this was the perfect market to capitalize on. In February 1855, Pinkerton and his attorney Edward Rucker formed the North-Western Policy Agency, which later became the Pinkerton National Detective Agency. The agency arguably created a more aggressive form of worker surveillance, one that did not simply seek to observe the union activities of workers and report back to their employers. They also got involved in the intimate lives of workers at the behest of their employers. The agency was influential in establishing the blueprint for modern workplace surveillance and union-busting tactics.\*

The Pinkertons performed "missionary work," which entailed sending undercover spy operatives to incite dissent by any means necessary within union halls and carry out sabotage and intimidation tactics, all to disrupt labor activities. As organizer Kim Kelly wrote in 2020: "Throughout the Civil War era and in the decades after, Pinkerton operatives left their bloody mark on strikes, protests, and massacres, and gained a ruthless reputation for protecting the interests of capital by any means necessary." One such lauded triumph they claim against the working class involved the infiltration of the union activities of the Molly Maguires, the

first worker-only labor movement in the United States made up of Irish immigrant coal miners (Sean Connery starred in a 1970 film about them). The Maguires killed mining officials, foremen, owners, and policemen in the name of protecting exploited Irish workers and for their labor cause. Thanks in part to the Pinkertons' infiltration efforts, numerous Molly Maguires were executed in 1877.

The Pinkertons took part in many high-profile, wholesale slaughters of workers. In the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, Pinkerton agents violently shut down a 70-day strike by railway workers that killed at least 100 people; they also helped the Colorado National Guard set a mining encampment ablaze during the Ludlow Massacre in 1914, killing at least 66 people. These massacres were only a couple examples of the violent acts perpetrated against unions and workers. The Pinkertons' power grew to such an extent that the Anti-Pinkerton Act of 1893 was passed to curtail the government's own ability to contract their services. Needless to say, this did not apply to private employers who were still hiring Pinkerton detectives with virtually no checks or balances.

THE PATH TO MODERN WORKPLACE SURVEILLANCE continued with Frederick W. Taylor's 1911 *Principles of Scientific Management*, which extolled the virtues of scientifically managing workers for the utmost productivity and profits, of which surveillance was a key feature. Taylor (1856-1915), the father of modern management theory, argued for more regimented supervision at work. In his influential book, Taylor argued that workers, by nature, would always put the least effort into their work without the benevolent, paternal supervision of management. He sought to eliminate "soldiering," which involved individuals deliberately "working slowly so as to avoid doing a full day's work." This, to the indignant boss, constituted "the greatest evil with which working people ... are now afflicted."

As America joined the First World War in 1917, the government and other institutions fervently adopted Taylor's techniques, which were proclaimed to be the "quintessential achievement in workplace efficiency," according to Professor of Legal Studies in Business Robert Sprague. As John and Michael C. Wood's book on Taylor describes, Taylor developed techniques that purposefully "sought to eliminate work practices that enabled workers to talk among themselves." His notion of pre-planning "all the details of work was based on the notion that this would prevent workers from forming 'little debating societies to decide upon their methods' of work. Taylor argued that providing workers with clear, daily tasks would prevent workers from "discussing their grievances and ... trying to devise remedies for them."

Biographer Robert Kanigel, in an article on how Taylor refashioned modern life in his image, characterized Taylorism as an "unholy obsession with time, order, productivity, and efficiency that marks our age." Through this new system of management, workers would be under constant surveillance by a manager with a stopwatch who would not only measure time, but judge, pry, and intrude on every aspect of their timetable. Such practices, argues historian Caitlin C. Rosenthal, harken back to the management practices of slave plantations in the United States and the West In-

\*Martin Jay Levitt, in his 1993 book, *CONFESSIONS OF A UNION BUSTER*, wrote: "To stop a union proponent—a pusher, in the anti-union lexicon—the [union] buster will go anywhere, not just to the lunch room, but into the bedroom if necessary. The buster not only is a terrorist; he is also a spy. My team and I routinely pried into workers' police records, personnel files, credit histories, medical records, and family lives in search of a weakness that we could use to discredit union activists."



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dies. Rosenthal notes that Taylor's scientific management system tried to reproduce "slavery's extractive techniques while jettisoning the institution itself." Taylor was aware of this connection. He lamented the "unfortunate connection" between a worker's given "task" (what is to be done, how it should be done, and the exact time allowed for the task to be done) and "slave-driving." Many workers agreed with his assessment and saw their labor as a form of exploitation. In 1911, the same year *The Principles of Scientific Management* was published, union machinists subjected to harsh Taylorian conditions at Watertown Arsenal went on strike. For workers, the stopwatch was the epitome of Taylorism and his time studies. As Kanigel explains, it represented "a hideous invasion of privacy, an oppressive all-seeing eye that peered into their work lives, ripping at their dignity." The workers also pushed for Congress to hold hearings on Taylorism—and Congress did just that.

The testimony from the hearings was full of references to workers being pushed to the brink as though they were machines. When a chairman of the committee asked a Taylorist "efficiency engineer" whether he would place a man in the same category as a typical machine, the engineer replied he would consider the man as a "little portable power plant ... a mighty and delicate complicated machine." The hearings revealed that Taylorism led to inhuman practices, casting doubt on the "science" behind the scientific management of work. Taylorism simply kept workers in a continuous state of distress and anxiety.

Taylorism also arguably set the stage for the advent of Fordism and empowered Henry Ford to develop the assembly line, leading to the revolutionary and infamous Five-Dollar Day wage experiment that required the close monitoring of workers' hygiene and health, among other aspects of their lives, to conform to Ford's American worker ideal. Sociologist Robert Linhart describes Ford's methods of controlling and surveilling workers as "an application of the Taylor system to mass production." One Ford machine worker in the 1920s even told a journalist at the time: "The machine I'm on goes at such a terrific speed that I can't help stepping on it in order to keep up with the machine. It's my boss."

**I**N THE POPULAR AMERICAN IMAGINATION, HENRY Ford holds an almost mythical status. Ford represented the rags-to-riches archetype of the poor farm boy who became a billionaire-industrialist-magnate through sheer discipline and spirit, the embodiment of the American Dream. He was the same man who invented the horseless carriage, after all. Although some christened him as "the industrial high priest" and "the high priest of efficiency," Ford workers saw him as the man who created the foremost disease of the industrial age: "Forditis," as it was called, signified "a nervous stomach and all parts of your body breaking down." Ford's development of the assembly line represented the dawn of the auto-industrialist age and allowed for mass production beyond anything that had ever been seen before. "If they can kill cows and pigs that way, we can build cars that way," Ford supposedly said after witnessing the "disassembly" lines of Chicago meatpackers. By 1914, Ford's cars were everywhere, but building more of them required a colossal workforce of approximately 14,000 workers.

The company had an extremely high turnover rate. In the prior

year, it hired 52,000 people even though it already had 15,000 on its payroll. The monotonous and perilous factory work did not pay well at the time, and Ford's factory was always in a "state of mass exodus," a problem of factory work that still plagues companies such as Amazon today. To battle these turnover rates, Ford decided to double the minimum wage from \$2.34 a day to \$5 a day. The raise shook the automotive industry. Ford workers could now afford to "buy the cars they made."

To qualify for the pay raise, workers had to demonstrate that they were model Americans. The Ford employee had to be "thrifty and continent," "keep his home neat and his children healthy," and had to be married if older than 22 years of age. Women were only eligible if they were single and had children to support, and married men were eligible only if they had wives who did not work outside the home. To this end, Ford created the Sociological Department within the company and staffed it with private inspectors who would keep workers in line by scrutinizing virtually every aspect of their lives. The investigators acted like detectives. They would show up unannounced to workers' homes and interrogate them about their alcohol consumption, finances, the details of their marital relationships, and the general state of their homes.\*

Many workers begrudgingly allowed these practices because their jobs depended on it. Ford's morality enforcers from the Sociology Department made sure workers followed his stipulations to the letter, and this was ensured through close surveillance practices. If a worker couldn't live up to Fordian standards, their pay was cut back to \$2.34 and they were eventually fired if still unable to comply with standards after a six-month period. As noted by *Tech Insider*, in 1986, the *New York Times* wrote the following about Ford's morality standards: "the irony was that in trying to make over his workers in terms of 'Americanization' and 'Fordliness,' Ford created a form of Big Brotherism that was closer to the totalitarian model."

The worker surveillance practices of the Fordian era were, however, limited in scope and hindered by the technology of the time. Eventually, Ford had to end his monitoring of workers because it was both economically untenable and paternalistic.

For Ford's workers, following a rigorously moral and hygienic way of living was worth it for a while to maintain eligibility for the Five-Dollar workday wage. For employees of the modern age, employability itself is at stake. As employers gather data on workers' productivity, methods of communication, and movements both in and out of the workplace, technology in the 21st century has replaced the Panopticon, an instrument of discipline and punishment allowing the employer to surveil the employee just as the watchmen in Jeremy Bentham's prison surveilled the prisoner from their circular tower.

Now, this Panoptic surveillance need only occur at the touch of a button.

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*\* In Richard Snow's I INVENTED THE MODERN AGE: THE RISE OF HENRY FORD, a worker defiantly tells one of Ford's hired private investigators, John Lee, that he would like to buy a car. Lee asks the worker if he has enough money, if he has a family, if his furniture is fully paid for or if he's still paying off his loans, and whether the worker has insurance. The worker answers all his questions in the affirmative, making him eligible to buy a Ford car. Mr. Lee tells the worker to go ahead and buy the car. The worker tells Mr. Lee: "Thanks, Lee. Oh, by the way, Mr. Lee, my wife is going to have another baby. I'm going to buy a Buick."*



## THE EMPLOYEE SURVEILLANCE SOFTWARE BOOM

The COVID pandemic has allowed for an unprecedented turn to remote work. This has prompted companies around the world to invest in intrusive surveillance software to track and monitor the movements of their workers. The demand for surveillance software has jumped at least 58 percent since the start of the pandemic more than two years ago. The software certainly isn't subtle when it comes to its purpose, as their names indicate: StaffCop, an employee monitoring company, allows for the monitoring of worker activity on company workstations and claims it protects against corporate data loss. Another monitoring software, Kickidler, calls itself the "new-generation employee monitoring software for analyzing employee performance at PCs," and notes its software is used in 60 countries to "supervise employees and increase their productivity."

Employers are also acquiring unregulated health and wellness metadata, social media activity, browsing histories, and large outputs of "predictive 'big data' analytics," which means using statistics and modeling techniques to predict future performance. As the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), *The Pulse* (a science podcast), and *Vox* have reported, employers use software to read instant messages and emails, record app usage, view calendars, notes, and reminders, control desktops remotely, keylog what employees type and track with their mouses, monitor internet activity, and even record employees' screens. In 2015, a woman claimed in a lawsuit against her former employer that she was fired for deleting a tracking app on her phone installed by her employers that recorded all her movements, even those she made outside of work. According to court documents:

*"She had no problem with the app's GPS function during work hours, but she objected to the monitoring of her location during non-work hours and complained to Stubits [Regional Vice President of Sales at the company] that this was an invasion of her privacy. She likened the app to a prisoner's ankle bracelet and informed Stubits that his actions were illegal. Stubits replied that she should tolerate the illegal intrusion."*

While employees see invasive monitoring as intrusive, employers see it as the opposite. "Data creates a lot of clarity around decision-making," said Sean Boyle of Amazon Web Services' finance division, to the *New York Times*. "Data is incredibly liberating."

## BIG DATA IS THE NEW OIL

Big data refers to extraordinarily large data sets that are often analyzed computationally, revealing patterns, trends, and links, particularly as it relates to human behavior and interactions. Although the concept is fairly new, the first attempts to quantify the world's growing volume of data go back to the '60s and '70s. The first data centers and relational databases, largely related to military and census data collecting, were just beginning to develop at the time, and the expansion of open-source frameworks was a watershed moment that made it easier and cheaper to store data. The striking value of data to industry combined with its impact on the environment (data storage uses significant amounts of energy) prompted British mathematician Clive Humby to declare data "the new oil."

Businesses sit on a treasure trove of employee data. Big data an-

alytics and the pursuit of data-driven insights about a company's workforce involves creating and maintaining digital records of employees' personal information and their most intimate movements, which is translated into actionable information for employers. It has also changed the nature and terms of work. Employers in various industries have turned to data-mining technology to analyze aspects of worker behavior in the workplace, and sometimes even outside of it. They leverage this data to help determine wages, schedules, promotions, and even terminations.

Employees are put at an incredible disadvantage by these technologies. The most obvious concern is worker privacy. But it gets worse than privacy infringement. When employers accumulate heaps of data about workers, this creates an "informational asymmetry" which serves as a "power-multiplier for management, with no counter-balance for workers." Companies simply have "too much power" over workers' information. In today's world, algorithms can preemptively pick out employees who are most likely to engage in union organizing, talk to journalists, protest stagnation in pay, or even quit their jobs. Sometimes, companies know more about their employees than their own families do, from browsing history to purchasing preferences, hidden hobbies, and other interests. And while some workers may appreciate insights provided by data to improve their work performance and address safety issues, this asymmetry of knowledge demonstrably obstructs worker mobilization and ultimately limits working class power.

Lisa Kresge, a researcher at the University of California at Berkeley's Labor Center, notes that unions have an extensive history of negotiating how management can wield technology in the workplace. She has cited the 1950s and '60s, times in which unions bargained over job displacement and layoffs caused by the automation of assembly lines and negotiated for proactive communication about new technologies in the workplace. With the acceleration of computer and internet technologies in the 1980s and 1990s, unions also began to argue against data derived from electronic monitoring to discipline workers. The Package Division of the Teamsters, which represents UPS workers, has, for example, bargained over not allowing surveillance data to be the sole means by which an employee is terminated (UPS has found ways around this, however).

Despite the history of unions resisting workplace monitoring, labor market policy analyst Kathryn Zickuhr argues bluntly that the pervasive implementation of workplace surveillance is "the new normal for U.S. workers." In the United States, federal protections against this type of surveillance are limited and inadequate, and employees are often left to guess how their data will be collected and used. Some states have passed legislation that pushes for more data transparency on employees. The California State Assembly's "Workplace Technology Act" is a proposed piece of legislation that would "establish much needed, yet reasonable, limitations on how employers use data-driven technology at work." In New York, effective May 2022, employers are required to provide notice to private-sector employees of electronic monitoring practices.

As Kresge observes, unions in the U.S. are currently in the throes of negotiating for limitations on how data can be used by employers and against the unnecessary uses of countless surveillance technologies in the workplace, from accumulating employee biometric information to GPS tracking during non-work hours. Amazon's





# deluxe pencil towers

- thinner than ever before
- servant chute (for when they get insolent)
- legally mandated "affordable" units in basement accessible through pleb door
- latest in uncomfortable contemporary furniture
- wall-to-wall fishbowl windows so the masses can look at you with envy
- snipers on roof to shoot potential thieves
- restaurant serving world's highest price-to-size ratio meals
- no entrance or exit, because why would you need to set foot in the filthy city of subhuman poor people? drones supply your every need

new in new york city  
real estate



first union was largely galvanized due to unfair labor practices associated with employee surveillance, and the company has, predictably, responded by firing pro-union workers. How companies use technology to monitor workers is quickly becoming an important talking point in unionizing efforts.

Although some recent data indicate some employees may accept the all-encompassing, Big Brother-like surveillance techniques of the modern workplace, leading surveillance studies scholar Ivan Manokha argues there are legitimate reasons why workers may not openly oppose this surveillance. The fear of losing their job, of how they would be perceived by managers, or the fear of compromising their career trajectories are all reasons that can explain why some employees have accepted workplace monitoring as the inevitable norm.

Modern working conditions are bad for our health. American workers are already overworked and underpaid compared to those in peer nations. Too many workers lack paid vacation, and the country has no mandatory paid parental leave or universal child care provisions, effectively making any semblance of work-life balance impossible, particularly for the working class. Punitive technology in the workplace creates a public health crisis. Research shows that stressful jobs can negatively impact health and even cause chronic headaches, nausea, and insomnia. One 2021 study found a strong link between the level of workplace exploitation and the deterioration of mental health. Workplace surveillance has also been cited in a report by Human Impact Partners, an advocacy and research group that bridges public health with social justice, as “a key culprit in pushing workers into mental and physical health distress,” particularly for workers at Amazon, Lyft, and Uber. As Courtenay Brown, a worker at Amazon Fresh warehouse in Avenel, New Jersey, put it, the company can “see everything you do, and it’s all to their benefit. ... They don’t value you as a human being. It’s demeaning.”

In the context of Amazon’s “data-driven management” of employees, numerous current and former Amazon employees who had white-collar jobs described their experience as Darwinian, as employees with health issues (such as cancer or those who just had surgery) were “put on performance improvement plans” in advance of possible declines in work performance. Bo Olson, who was in a book marketing role at Amazon for less than two years, told the *New York Times* that the most memorable image of his time at the company was of coworkers weeping. “You walk out of a conference room and you’ll see a grown man covering his face. Nearly every person I worked with, I saw cry at their desk.”

In a 2015 report on the human costs of workplace monitoring for *Harper’s*, Esther Kaplan writes that a UPS spokesperson told her that the monitoring of employees had improved workplace safety due to near-perfect seatbelt use. But the UPS drivers she spoke to recounted a different story. Workers said they buckled their seat belts behind them so that the running monitoring program would pick them up as wearing seatbelts when they really weren’t. Some workers misdelivered packages and even drove with the backdoor of their trucks open, rushing to make quotas at the expense of their safety and the safety of those around them. “People get intimidated and they work faster,” a worker told Kaplan. “It’s like when they whip animals. But this is a mental whip.”

## RESISTING THE ‘DEVIL’S BARGAIN’

As Sam Adler-Bell and Michelle Miller put it: “For consumers, the digital age presents a devil’s bargain: in exchange for basically unfettered access to our personal data, massive corporations like Amazon, Google, and Facebook give us unprecedented connectivity, convenience, personalization, and innovation. Scholars have exposed the dangers and illusions of this bargain: the corrosion of personal liberty, the accumulation of monopoly power, the threat of digital redlining [when Internet companies underinvest in the provision of services to lower-income communities], [and] predatory ad-targeting.”

This same devil’s bargain is happening in our workplaces, and workers deserve more protections. While some workers are using anti-surveillance techniques of their own to trick monitoring software, like using mouse-moving apps that periodically move your mouse to make it look like you’re constantly online, individual hacks are not going to cut it.

Employers ought to be barred from using most, if not all, intrusive workplace surveillance techniques that micromanage workers (Amazon logging keyboard and mouse strokes or companies using eye-tracking systems, for example). The bare minimum might be for the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to deem these surveillance tactics as unfair and as an infringement on the organizing rights of workers. We also need legislation requiring employers divulge the extent to which a place of work is surveilled and the particular activities the surveillance is meant to deter. But even this is not enough. Merely notifying employees of these practices simply gives surveillance a friendly face: it would be like someone asking for permission to come into your home without waiting for an answer. Whenever privacy and human dignity is at stake—as it is in the workplace, where most of us spend significant portions of our lives—we ought to err on the side of more protections, not fewer. It should go without saying that there should also be no debate over whether employers should be allowed to monitor employees outside of work.

We must support local unionization efforts when we can, as union participation is one of the few ways workers can fight back against dystopian working conditions. (Amazon has warehouses all over the U.S., and workers for Amazon or other companies may be organizing near you.) The Teamsters, for instance, are considering a strike if UPS is unwilling to meet their demands for improved working conditions in their 2023 contract. As extreme heat has impacted the U.S. this summer, UPS workers, many driving trucks and working in warehouses without air conditioning, have been sickened with heatstroke. One worker died in his truck, according to *In These Times*. “Workers say their trucks need air conditioning to do their jobs safely, but UPS is focused instead on installing truck surveillance cameras.”

Workplace surveillance is here to stay for the unforeseen future, but this regime cannot be left unchecked. Countering big data wielded by American businesses must be understood as an all-out struggle for our humanity and our right to a dignified work experience. ✦



# the war on PALESTINE

A CONVERSATION WITH RASHID KHALIDI

**T**oday, we see children killed in Gaza by Israeli airstrikes, but anyone who gets their understanding of the Israel-Palestine conflict from news reports lacks the context necessary to make sense of the horrors they are seeing. To understand why there is an Israel-Palestine conflict today, we have to go back 100 years to see what Palestine was like before the state of Israel was established and how things have changed since. To discuss the background of the conflict, *Current Affairs* editor-in-chief Nathan J. Robinson recently spoke to one of the leading historians on the region, Rashid Khalidi of Columbia University. He is the author of *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917–2017*, edits the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, and in the '90s served as an advisor to the Palestinian delegation to the Madrid and Washington Arab-Israeli peace negotiations.

## NATHAN J. ROBINSON

Something that comes across in *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine* is that in order to understand what is going on in Palestine today, to make sense of the events we see unfolding, we really have to go back 100 years. So let's start with Palestine at the turn of the 20th century, as you do in the book. Paint a picture of Palestine at the beginning, pre-Zionism.

## RASHID KHALIDI

You're right to say let's start with the history. We're often told to forget the history. Well, they want us to forget the history because without it, you can't understand what's going on now, and they can put all kinds of silly ideas into our

heads—"making deserts bloom," "only democracy in the Middle East," and that sort of nonsense.

The history is simple, actually. People always say, "Oh, it's very complex." It's not complex at all. This was a society made up of Muslims, Christians, and Jews, who identified in different ways but whose lingua franca was Arabic and whose governmental language was, under the Ottomans, Turkish. It was a society in rapid development. Education was developing rapidly, even though the literacy rate was still not very high. Roads, railways, electrification, and so on were just developing at the turn of the century.

And it was a society that had been and was relatively peaceful for a very, very long period of

time. There is not a history of violence in Palestine between Muslims and Jews or Muslims and Christians, or in fact any of the various groups in Palestine at the time, nor had there been for several hundreds of years.

So this was a developing society, backwards in many ways, largely rural, with an upper class that monopolized power, and was well connected to the Ottoman ruling authorities. But one that, as I say, was actually developing rather rapidly.

## ROBINSON

You say that it was a society of Muslims, Christians, and Jews, but the demographics were not equal.



## KHALIDI

Right before, during and after World War I, when we have relatively good statistics, the Jewish population of Palestine was in the realm of around 6 percent, maybe 8 percent. There was a larger proportion of Christians, and the overwhelming majority of people were Muslims. Almost all of that population—certainly Muslim and Christian, but also a large part of the Jewish population—were Arabic speaking. The Jewish population spoke several other languages; some were immigrants and spoke their languages of origin. Many were beginning to speak Hebrew; most of them used Hebrew as a sacred language. But the lingua franca for most of the existing population in Palestine was Arabic. And many of them felt themselves part of that society, even though they were distinct in religious terms.

This of course is before the rise of modern political Zionism. We're talking about the indigenous Jewish population of Palestine at the time. Immigrants were arriving, but they were still a minority. And these immigrants were people who were motivated by political ideas, mainly Zionism.

## ROBINSON

Well, I want to get to the effect of Zionism on Palestine in the early 20th century. In the book, you quote from an extraordinary letter written by your great-great uncle, who was the mayor of Jerusalem. He wrote to Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism, and said, in effect: your people have a historical association with this land, but Zionism is going to lead to a disaster for Palestine. This prophetic letter is a kind of warning.

## KHALIDI

He was an interesting character. His name was Yusuf Dia Pasha al-Khalidi. He had been, as you say, mayor of Jerusalem. He was also the elected deputy for Jerusalem in the 1878 Ottoman parliament. And he was an educated man. He had studied and taught in Europe, he taught in Vienna at the Royal Imperial University. He spoke Arabic, English, and French. And he was fully aware of what political Zionism entailed. It entailed turning an Arab country into a Jewish state. That was the title of Herzl's famous monograph, *Der Judenstaat* (*The Jewish State*, or *The State of the Jews*, depending on how you choose to translate it). He knew about those writings. He knew about the first Zionist Congress in 1897. So when he writes to Herzl in 1898, he's fully aware of what political Zionism entails. It's not just a historic connection of the Jewish people to the land of Israel, which he talks about in the letter and admits and celebrates. But it is rather a replacement of the existing population with a new population. And he says Zionism in and



YUSUF DIA PASHA AL-KHALIDI

of itself is fine. But you can't do it *here*. There are people here that will not be supplanted. And so, as you say, I think the letter is prophetic, and I choose to open the book with that letter. And then with Herzl's response.

## ROBINSON

Herzl doesn't heed the warning, needless to say.

## KHALIDI

Well, he does what Zionist leaders have done ever since. He acts as if the Arabs are irrelevant, or are fools, and he essentially blows Yusuf al-Khalidi off. He just tells him, *Oh, have no fear, everything's fine*. And he says something rather interesting. At no stage in his letter did Yusuf al-Khalidi talk about the displacement or the replacement or the elimination of the Palestinians. He said: *You can't do this here because there's an existing people*. And in his letter, strangely, Herzl says, *there's no idea of*

*replacing these people*. Then you go back to Herzl's diary, and in fact, he is thinking about spiriting the population across the frontier. So it's an unasked question, which Herzl answers, which I think is very revelatory.

## ROBINSON

So your great-great uncle gets the reply and thinks *Hmm, I didn't ask you about replacement*. It is fascinating that when you go back to a lot of the early Zionist discourse, in the romantic imagination, Palestine is a desolate desert that can be colonized with no problems. But a lot of the early Zionists admit pretty much openly: *Look, we're trying to colonize a country that has people in it; we need to have a discussion on how to get rid of them*.

## KHALIDI

There are two sets of Zionists insofar as how they regard the Arabs. There are those



who, as you say, are blunt about it. People like Ze'ev Jabotinsky, who was the leader of the revisionist strain of Zionism, which has pretty much dominated Israeli politics since 1977—every prime minister, with one or two exceptions, since 1977 was a follower of Jabotinsky. He was very blunt about it. He says: *Yes, we're going to replace these people. And we need an iron wall*—meaning of the British—to help us to do this. *And we are colonizing and all colonizers face resistance, every people resists colonization.* So Jabotinsky is very blunt about it. [Jabotinsky wrote: "Zionist colonisation must either stop, or else proceed regardless of the native population. Which means that it can proceed and develop only under the protection of a power that is independent of the native population—behind an iron wall, which the native population cannot breach."]

Many other Zionist leaders, I think, were either deceptive or were deceiving themselves in pretending that somehow this could be arranged without eliminating the existing population one way or another—removing, driving them out, whatever. And that was crucial to their propaganda abroad. Because if they said, "We're gonna go in there, and we're gonna face enormous resistance, and these people will fight like hell to retain their country and they have national aspirations," it would have been a little harder to raise money and engender support for the Zionist project.

So people like Jabotinsky, who are in the minority, were sort of pushed to the sidelines by the leaders of the mainstream Zionist movement, for whom it was really important to sell this to British and American statesmen, European statesmen, and to the Jewish communities the world over as a project that

could be done without violence, without replacing an existing people. Or by saying they're not a "real" people, they're just Bedouins or they have no roots here, or by ignoring their existence. *A land without a people for a people without a land* was a slogan that many Zionist leaders repeated. Israel Zangwill is the most noted. Of course, there were people on the land, like Jabotinsky admitted.

## ROBINSON

Now, just to clarify, the reason that you're saying that the original political Zionist project couldn't have been done without expulsion or ethnic cleansing, is because imposing a Jewish state necessitated it? Can you describe what it was about the plan that made violence unavoidable?

## KHALIDI

It's actually very simple. You have an overwhelming Arab majority. So you either drive them out or you flood them with new immigrants, so that you have a Jewish majority. And so you completely transform the nature of the country, either by massive immigration, which creates a new Jewish majority (and then you have an Arab minority in a Jewish majority state), or by driving as many as possible of the existing population out.

The objective of Zionists was not to live as a Jewish minority in Palestine. The Arabs are a majority in Palestine. Right up to 1948, 65 percent of the population of the country was Arab. In 1948, the year after the United Nations gave most of the country to a 35, or 33 percent, Jewish minority, you would have to either have had, as I've said, massive immigration, which never really fully developed, or you had to plan to get rid of them. Those are

the only two ways you could create a Jewish majority state. And the objective was for Jews to leave a situation in which they were a minority in Europe, and to create a new Jewish majority political entity, a Jewish state. And so Herzl lays it out in 1897. And that is the objective of Zionism to this day.

## ROBINSON

When you go to the writings of, for instance, David Ben-Gurion, at the point at which it's been concluded that immigration alone will not create a Jewish majority, you find pretty open acknowledgment that what is needed is what is euphemistically called *transfer*. We're going to have to transfer some people. I don't know how you can describe that other than as ethnic cleansing.

## KHALIDI

There's no other way to describe it but as ethnic cleansing. "Transfer" was an Orwellian euphemism, which Zionism appropriated and used throughout. The idea was that people weren't being uprooted and forced to leave, they were simply being "transferred" from place to place. It was a nice, neat, clean way of saying "kicking these people out of their homes and stealing their property," which is actually what happened.

## ROBINSON

And this helps us to understand the development of Palestinian resistance to this project. Today, this is characterized often as being based on irrational anti-Semitism. But as you point out, when we understand the *history* of the development of this resistance, we see it differently. There are even early Zionists on the record saying things like *I don't know how you expect the Palestinians to react, they're going to react the same way every indigenous population reacts when there is a colonial project to impose minority rule.* [Ben-Gurion himself said: "If I were an Arab leader, I would never sign an agreement with Israel. It is normal; we have taken their country."]

## KHALIDI

I mean, it's as absurd to call the Palestinian resistance to having their country taken away, being expelled and having their property stolen, "anti-Semitism" as to describe Algerian resistance to the French as anti-France-ism, or South African resistance to the Boers as anti-Boerism, or Native American resistance as anti-American. This is anti-colonial resistance by an indigenous people in peril of losing their homeland, their property, and in many cases, their lives. It has nothing to do with anti-Semitism. That's one of the most vicious canards around. To claim that any form of resistance to colonialism, wherever

JERUSALEM, 1930S





it may be, is motivated by some kind of racist etiology is absurd. I mean, the Irish were not anti-British; the Irish are simply opposed to British English colonialism. Same with other colonized peoples.

## ROBINSON

I'm dwelling here on what I think is one of the most important takeaways from your book, which is that the development of the modern state of Israel—which is a recent development, founded within the lifetimes of people who are still alive today—is a colonial project. It's also backed crucially by the British and wouldn't have come into being without the British Empire.

## KHALIDI

Zionism is a unique colonial project. It's easy to say "this is a form of colonialism" or settler colonialism, which it was. It self-described as colonial. Early Zionists were not ashamed to use the word colonial or colonialism. The Jewish Colonization Agency was one of the main financing arms of the settlement project. So that's incontrovertible.

It was also, however, a national project. It was not an emanation of a mother country, the way that English settlers in North America or in Australia were or French settlers in Algeria were. It was a separate independent national project, which without the backing of great European colonial powers would never have been able to succeed. It operated in terms of settler colonialism, but had a national aspect to it. And it's very important to understand that it has been very different in that respect from South Africa or Nigeria, or North America or Australia or Kenya, or other settler colonial projects.

## ROBINSON

One of the charges that is brought up often is that while Jewish settlers in Palestine were trying to establish a nation-state, the Palestinians supposedly did not constitute a nation, and therefore were not entitled to a state. Golda Meir infamously said: "There was no such thing as Palestinians. ... It was not as though there was a Palestinian people in Palestine considering itself as a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country from them. They did not exist." The idea being that while Palestinians may have existed as individual people they did not have a sufficiently well-developed collective identity to be entitled to self-determination. How did Palestinian identity develop over time and how do you think about its relevance?

## KHALIDI

That's an important question, because most modern national identities in the overwhelm-

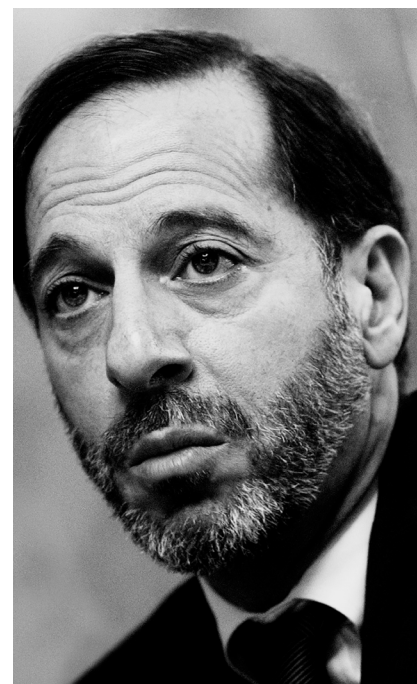
ing majority of countries in the world are, like *both* Palestinian and Israeli identity, extremely recent. The great-great-grandparents of every Israeli never thought of themselves as Israelis. There was no Israel, there was no idea of a nation-state encompassing all Jews, which is what Zionism involves, in 1800. Nobody thought of that. It's a recent modern national identity, as is Palestinian, as is Arab.

All of these have roots in earlier forms of identity. So there's a Jewish idea of peoplehood. There's an Arab idea of peoplehood. There are linguistic bonds and religious elements that come into modern nationalism. But modern nation-state nationalism is a very, very recent phenomenon. I am right now in France. The part of France I am in was not part of the French monarchy until the 15th century. They spoke a different language. I believe it's Montesquieu, or one of the great French *philosophes* who said, these people are savages. They don't speak French. They spoke Provençal. The unification of France is a French revolutionary and 19th century project. And the creation of "Frenchmen" out of peasants is a result of education and the army.

So modern national identities have roots that go back, whether we're talking about Israeli or Palestinian or Arab or whatever, but they are all relatively recent, i.e., the last couple of centuries, in almost every case. Of course, one of the great successes of Zionism is to hitch modern political Zionism, a 120-year-old phenomenon, to the biblical narrative and to Jewish peoplehood. The Palestinians do the same thing, the Philistines, the Canaanites, the Jebusites, and so on and so forth. This is the way in which modern identities are constructed. Modern identities are transformed from either being religious into modern nation-state nationalisms. And so this is what happens with the Palestinians. It has to be understood, however, that the blows that the Palestinians received, the Great Revolt that they launched against the British in the 1930s, the expulsion of the majority of Palestinians from the country in 1948, helped to mold and shape an identity that was already developing. As is often the case, conflict and trauma often shape and change identities on a mass basis. It's also true for individuals.

## ROBINSON

So it may be true that the contemporary nation of Palestine, the "imagined community," has been formed in part through resistance to the project of taking away the country. But it is also true that, as you say, every national identity is a recent construct. And if we apply the same standards as Meir did to Palestinians, "there were no Israelis" either. After all, nearly every Israeli leader changed their surname as part of the project. [Golda Meir



RASHID KHALIDI

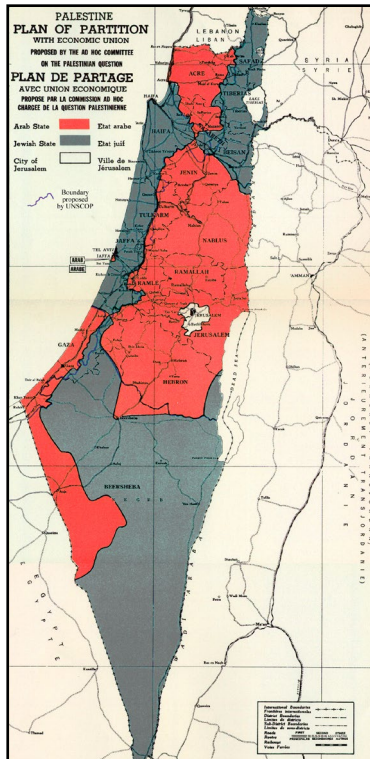
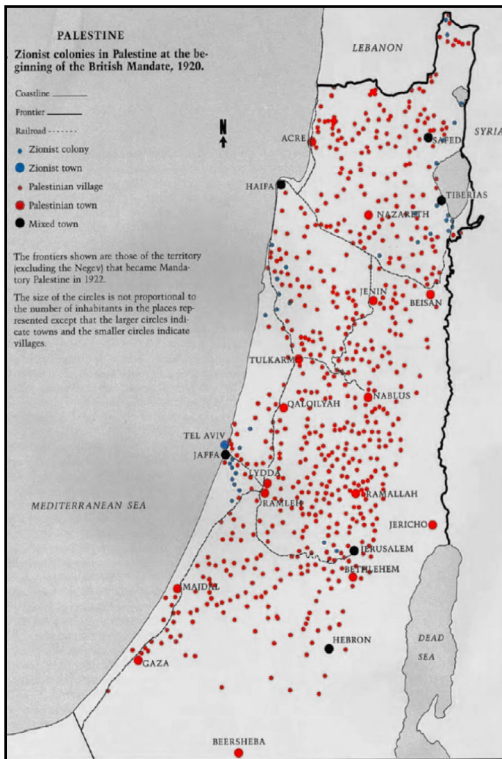
was born Golda Mabovitch, Shimon Peres was born Szymon Perski, David Ben-Gurion was born David Grün, Ariel Sharon was born Ariel Scheinermann, etc.] Then there was the changing of all the existing names in Palestine, giving everything a Hebrew name.

## KHALIDI

You can say two things about this. First, the construction of identities and imagined communities is universal. If you were to apply the same standards, there would be no Lebanese, no Iraqi, no Turkish, and so on, identity, which is not to say there were not states there before, but the Ottoman State was not a Turkish state, the Qajar state was not an Iranian state, even the Egyptian state, which goes back to Pharaonic times, had all kinds of different forms of identity. So the reconstruction and the manipulation, if you want, of preexisting identities, is universal.

The other thing to say is that in this case, what you see is a project of renaming and taking over, which is unique to settler colonial projects. I live in New York on an island called Manhattan, which happens to have a Native American name. But I live in a state called New York named for the Duke of York. That's what settler colonial projects do. All of Australia, all of New Zealand, all of Canada, all of the United States, and all of Israel has named certain places and rivers and mountains and so on, some of which reflect the original naming, but most of which are imposed in a new language and reflecting a new culture, the culture of the colonizers.





LEFT: MAP OF PALESTINE IN 1920 / RIGHT: UN PARTITION PLAN, 1947

## ROBINSON

A common story about the founding of the State of Israel is that in 1947 the Palestinians were offered a state and declined it, thus creating their own problem. Perhaps you could respond to this particular pernicious myth.

## KHALIDI

Palestinians always relied on the terms of the Mandate for Palestine that was given to Britain by the League of Nations, which said that the mandatory power was supposed to work toward self-determination. There was no self-determination of Palestine at any time, between the British conquest of the country in 1917 and the handover of the problem to the UN in 1947. Self-determination would have entailed a Palestinian Arab majority state. That was self-determination. Every other state under mandate received such independence. Only Palestine was exempted from what one of the articles of the covenant of the League of Nations said was the whole purpose of the mandate system.

So the Palestinians said, “We were supposed to become independent. We’re the majority. We should have a country of our own.” If there’s a Jewish minority, fine. It was only 35 percent in 1948, by the way, even after waves of immigration. And the United Nations simply ignored its own charter, which talks about self-determination. Self-determination would have meant the majority

ruling or getting the majority of the country. Instead, the United Nations, under the impetus of the United States and the Soviet Union, which wanted the creation of a Jewish state, basically divided the country up, giving the one-third of the population, a minority, more than half the country including most of the arable land.

It’s inconceivable that any people would have accepted giving up more than 55 percent of their country to a minority. Imagine if someone came along and tried to establish a new state in the United States and said “we’re going to take 55 percent of it.” Most Americans would probably not go along with that, and most Palestinians did not go along with the partition.

## ROBINSON

It’s also true that many of the Zionist leaders had made it fairly clear that they intended to use this as a stepping stone. Partition was accepted as what was being offered at the moment, but not as an end to the project of building a Jewish state in Palestine.

## KHALIDI

No, and the various military plans that the Zionist militias laid out in the months before partition came into effect in 1948 were dedicated to taking over areas that were actually allocated to the Arab state under partition, such as the city of Jaffa, or areas along the road to Jerusalem. So expansion for strategic

reasons, but also for expansionist reasons, was part of the plan from the very beginning, even before partition was adopted.

But right up to the moment that Israel was established as a state in mid-May 1948, Israeli forces were advancing all over the country. Cities like Jaffa and Haifa had been overrun, their populations expelled—60 to 70,000 people in each case. Smaller towns, same thing. Maybe 30,000 Arabs lived in West Jerusalem together with a much larger number of Jews. Israel overran the population and expelled them. This was in areas that were supposed to be part of the Arab state, or which were supposed to be part of the Jewish state but where the Arab population was supposed to be able to live in peace.

Now this is part of a war that was going on. But it was a lopsided war between a modern army backed politically, diplomatically, and financially by the United States and the Soviet Union and a disorganized and weak Palestinian resistance. It was no contest by the time the State of Israel was established in 1948. The Arab armies finally move in when Israelis have basically crushed Palestinian resistance, and then Israel, over time, is able to defeat the various Arab armies, of which really only two were serious contenders, the Egyptian and Jordanian armies.

## ROBINSON

And over the course of the next several decades, Israel does engage in successive expansionist wars. There’s usually a pretext as to why the war has to be waged, but it repeatedly ends up with more territory coming under Israel’s control.

## KHALIDI

In 1956, Israel attacks Egypt, together with Britain and France. In 1967, Israel attacks Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, with the support of the United States. I go in great detail into the fact that in 1967, the United States was convinced, first of all, that the Arabs wouldn’t attack and secondly, that if they did, they would be crushed. So Israel is in no danger of elimination or annihilation or a new Holocaust, even though many Israelis believed that and many people in the United States were conned into thinking that that was the case, and that [the Six-Day War] was essentially a pre-emptive war. The Arabs had mobilized but they were incapable of winning that war, according to what American intelligence and American military assessments at the time indicated. In 1973, Israel was attacked by Syria and Egypt. That starts as a defensive war. But it’s a defensive war in a situation where Israel is insisting on holding on to occupied territory, and Egypt and Syria are fighting the war solely to liberate the occupied Sinai peninsula and occupied Golan Heights. They’re not fighting a war to destroy Israel, they’re not fighting a



war to reverse the results of the 1948 War. So this is a defensive war on Israel's part.

1982 is another war which Israel launches. They had been completely quiet on the northern border for 11 months when Israel attacks Lebanon in 1982. So most Israeli wars with again, the exception of '48 and the exception of '73—but '56, '67, '82, are essentially Israeli wars of expansion or aggression. Obviously, there are important pretexts, but they fit your description.

## ROBINSON

And since 1967, when Israel took over the West Bank, the Palestinians have been living under this continuous state of military occupation.

## KHALIDI

Exactly. Well, it can be argued that what happens to the Palestinians who remain inside Israel—a couple hundred thousand—is occupation. They're under military rule from 1948 until 1966. They cannot move without permits. So Palestinian citizens of the State of Israel have their lands taken away under various laws that are passed. They're unable to move. The secret police, Shabak, controls their actions, their movements, surveils them, and so on. It is an occupation of the Arab parts of the country. And all of the land that is taken in this period is Arab land. In 1948, Jewish ownership of land was about 6 percent. Six percent of the land of Palestine was owned by either individual Jewish owners or by agencies of the Zionist movement. They basically steal the rest after 1948. Anyone who had left the country is described as an "absentee." Their property becomes "absentee property." The 750,000 Palestinians forced to leave what becomes Israel in 1948 are deprived of all their property, their fixed property, their mobile property, their furniture, their rugs, their books, their homes, in addition, of course, to their lands and their businesses and their bank accounts, I mean, everything is stolen.

## ROBINSON

Readers of your book might be surprised by how critical you are of many *Palestinian* leaders over the years, in their efforts at negotiation. You do point out that one challenge for the development of effective Palestinian resistance is that there has been a long Israeli program of assassinating, deporting, and jailing effective Palestinian leaders.

## KHALIDI

Right. They killed as many as they could of the good ones. They left a few miserable characters who were either noxious or not considered effective. Palestinian leadership was very, very flawed. The elite leadership of the '20s, the '30s, and the '40s, in my view,

failed miserably. They were perhaps facing an impossible task. They had the British, the League of Nations, and a very well-financed, well-organized, well-motivated Zionist project to deal with. They had the support of Arab public opinion, but the Arab countries were under colonial rule. The Arabs couldn't do very much in the '20s and '30s, into the '40s. So they were facing an uphill task.

Nevertheless, I think they performed very poorly. And I argue in the book that that was partly because of the class nature of this leadership, its lack of democratic roots. It's a failure born of fear of mobilizing the population in certain ways. And a variety of other failures. These were people who by and large didn't understand international politics. Very, very few of the leadership and even fewer of the population were familiar with European countries or the rest of the world. They didn't speak foreign languages, as against the Zionist movement, all of whose leaders came from Europe or the United States, and were native Americans, native Russians, native Germans, native Europeans. They were part of the political culture of Europe and spoke the languages. Abba Eban is a perfect example. Golda Meir grew up in Milwaukee. These are people who understood Western political culture and how to make that system work for them in a way that Arab leadership in Palestine simply did not.

So they were facing an uphill task but they nevertheless performed poorly. I would argue that the same is true to a certain extent for subsequent leaderships. The PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization] had some successes, but it had many failures. And I go into some of them in the book. Again, some of the failures are a function of their lack of understanding of certain aspects of the international arena.

## ROBINSON

There have been many attempts in the United States and Israel to make Palestinians completely unpalatable and impossible offers and then characterize Palestinians as unreasonable, uncompromising "rejectionists" when they won't accept the offer.

## KHALIDI

That's a trope that goes back to Abba Eban: "Never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity." There weren't very many opportunities. There might have been one or two. I talk about the 1939 White Paper. It was a very limited opportunity. The Palestinians, in my view, were very foolish to fail to accept it. There might have been other opportunities. I was involved in the negotiations at Madrid and Washington [in the early 1990s] with an Israeli delegation in which we tried to achieve self-determination and statehood. And that was something that

was systematically denied us by the ground rules laid down by the United States at the behest of Israel. The same ground rules ended up governing the Oslo process later on. So there was no opportunity there.

It turns out, I argue in the book, and I've argued elsewhere, that the maximum that would be offered, has ever been offered to the Palestinians, is some form of autonomy under Israeli sovereignty with complete and absolute Israeli security control. Israelis would have control of the borders, the airspace, the land, and the water under everything that Israel was willing to offer under every Israeli government. I go into Yitzhak Rabin's shift in his willingness to accept the existence of a Palestinian people and his willingness to negotiate with the PLO. But even Rabin in his last speech made it very clear that there would never be a Palestinian state.

So self-determination, statehood, and independence are *ruled out* by the Americans and Israelis, then and now, I would argue. So *what are we talking about?* You can pick up your own garbage, but we'll arrest anybody we want, any time we want, to torture them, beat them up, and drag them off to our jails? And we'll do it to anybody who resists our dominance, and we make all the laws, and you obey our military rules? What kind of "state" is that? That's not a very good deal.

## ROBINSON

Let me dwell on this because it seems critical. To the extent that there has been talk of a "two-state solution," what has *actually* been on the table consistently in every negotiation for the last 50 years has *never* involved a concession by the United States and Israel—they negotiate together—that Palestinians should have anything that we would consider to be equivalent to a state in the sense that other states are states.

## KHALIDI

The United States talks the talk, but it will not walk the walk. It will never say "this outcome has to include complete and absolute Palestinian independence." It will never impose that in Israel. It will never lay that on the table as the outcome that has to be reached.

There are some Israeli governments that came closer to this than others. Rabin came closer. But none of them would have accepted the idea that Israel would give up its security control, that Israel would cease to control the borders, that Israel would cease to be the only sovereign power. I mean, if you don't have your own army and your own borders, and your own economy, and your own ports and your own airports and your own airspace, you're not sovereign. You're not independent. You're a dependent subunit of a larger sovereign state. And that's all that Israel has



so far been willing to offer. The United States has never pushed it to do anything more than what Israel was willing to do. The deference of the United States to Israel is limitless.

## ROBINSON

An associate of Benjamin Netanyahu once said that the Palestinians could call whatever Israel was willing to give them “a state” or they could call it “fried chicken.” In other words, Israel was happy to give Palestinians something they could *call* a state if they wanted to, but what mattered was the balance of power.

You’ve talked about the role of the United States in the continuing denial of Palestinian self-determination. The implication is that altering U.S. public opinion and then U.S. public policy is pretty critical if we are ever going to see the Palestinians granted that right to self-determination in some part of their former country.

## KHALIDI

I think you’ve put your finger on something absolutely crucial. If we look at the political map today, we see the United States putting its large thumb on the scales in favor of Israel in every circumstance. In the United Nations, in terms of arming it, in terms of financing its military to the tune of over \$4 billion, in terms of a huge river of tax-free 501(c)(3) donations, which fuel the settlement movement, fuel the aggressive stealing of Palestinian land, and on which Israel floats. The amount of money that goes to Israel from the United States is not just what taxpayers are paying. It is also people not paying taxes by contributing to 501(c)(3)s that are doing things like supporting the Israeli army. “Friends of the IDF” is a 501(c)(3)! As are multiple institutions that support settlements all over the occupied territories. That’s the situation on the ground.

If you look at it theoretically, and you understand Israel as in some respects both a nation-state and national project, but also a settler colonial project, the United States and Europe are the metropolises. And without them, this project would have enormous difficulty. That’s why Chaim Weizmann went to the British and managed to sell them on the idea of a Jewish state and Palestine. He understood that you needed a grand imperial sponsor. First it was Britain, and eventually it became the United States.

So what happens in the United States is crucial. And one of the interesting phenomena in the last decade or so, is that you’re beginning to see a shift in some parts of American public opinion, away from blind, uncritical swallowing of any nonsense that the Israelis put out. It’s moving to a more nuanced, more critical, more informed understanding that there is a Goliath, which is Israel. And there’s a David, which is the Palestinians. And it’s not the other way

around. The Palestinians are under occupation. And Israel is denying them their rights.

Now, this is not a majority view in the United States by any means. But *nobody* thought that 50 or 30, or even 20, years ago. Today, you have a couple dozen congresspeople who express views that go quite counter to the established false narrative, which the leaderships of both the Republican and Democratic parties are still completely committed to. This is new. This never happened before. Today, you have dozens of American campuses where the students have voted in favor of boycott, divestment, and sanctions. That is a symbolic step, but it’s an indication of a shift in public opinion. You have independent media which are talking about things that were *forbidden*. You could not show or say certain things most of the time about Israel and the Palestinians. The mainstream media still is terrified—as your own experience with the *Guardian* indicates—of saying certain things, whether it’s television networks, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Guardian*, or Reuters and AP. But non-mainstream media and social media are much more open. And most young people don’t know the *New York Times* from a hole in the wall. They don’t care about Fox or CNN. That’s not where they get their information. So there’s a much freer flow of information, and I think that has dislodged a large number of fixed ideas in the minds of younger people. That’s an important shift, I think, for the future.

## ROBINSON

I think that’s right. Some of the dynamics of the conflict are more accurately understood. But a lot of the history you lay out in *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine* is very much still buried. I think people really don’t grasp what Palestine *was*, what the Zionist enterprise was at the beginning, and how the situation came about in the first place.

## KHALIDI

Every part of the title, and the book itself, is dedicated to challenging the false received version of that history. This is not a war between two peoples on the basis of equality. It’s not France and Germany. This is a war *on* Palestine. It’s not just a war waged by the Zionist movement in Israel. It’s a war waged *by* Britain, by the United States, by the Soviet Union, by Britain and France, on the Palestinians. It’s not just the renaissance of the ancient Israeli state. It’s a national project, with a Jewish ancestral link to the land of Israel, but it is also a settler colonial project, by its own description. And if you compare it to other settler colonial projects such as Ireland or Algeria, you see all the parallels. And you see that what the Palestinians are doing is not engaging in terrorism. They’re engaging

in resistance, whether one likes their means or doesn’t like their means. And I think that each part of the title of the book, *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine, A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance*, is a reference to one or another aspect of that challenge to the false received version of history.

## ROBINSON

When you said the Palestinians are not engaging in terrorism, one important point is that various means of resistance are *denied* them. You’re very critical in the book of attacks on civilians. But at every stage, the available ways that Palestinians can fight back have been constricted, and those things that horrify us come out of that.

## KHALIDI

I think there’s another point to be made. I argue in the book that various forms of armed action, including, especially, attacks on civilians, are horrific, immoral, and, very importantly, politically counterproductive. I go into this in some detail at one point in the book. *But it has to be said that slaughtering civilians is slaughtering civilians*. When Israel kills 16 children and five women in Gaza, using 2000-pound bombs and Hellfire missiles, if you don’t describe *that* as terrorism, and you describe the death of an Israeli child or an Israeli woman or another Israeli civilian as terrorism, this is Orwellian language. You are simply using the word “terrorism” as a bludgeon to demonize Palestinian resistance, whereas somehow the murder of children in Gaza ... 16 kids were killed in these attacks, five women were killed in these attacks. Heaven knows how many other civilians were killed. Maybe a dozen militants were killed? I don’t know. But 30 or so civilians were murdered. If that’s not terrorism, then the word has no meaning. And this happens every single time. There were 240 civilians killed in one of these attacks a few years ago. Each time the toll is equally lopsided. Why are attacks on civilians not considered terrorism? If you use the same measure, I have no problem with the use of that term. But then you have to describe the use of Hellfire missiles and F-16s and heavy artillery in the same way. In the book I go into the kinds of weapons that are used by Israel—the artillery, the missiles, the aircraft, the helicopters—and the indiscriminate nature of the attacks on a population of a couple of million people in a tiny area. If that’s not terrorism, I don’t know what is. But of course, the term is only applied to the Palestinians. Somehow Ukrainian resistance is not terrorism yet Palestinian resistance is. I repeat, *I think the killing of civilians is wrong and immoral*. It’s a violation of international law. But if that’s true for the Palestinians, certainly it’s true for the Israelis as well and on a much larger scale. +



# Manufacturing Consent & the Case of

# Satan

An extract from the Book of Noam

by Nathan J.  
Robinson

*The following is not written as an attack on Christianity. It is instead intended as an exercise in critical thinking, by taking one of the most familiar known stories of Good and Evil, and flipping it on its head as completely as possible to show how even in the case of the supposed most evil character conceivable, an alternate story could be constructed using additional information that might give us a wholly different understanding of what is going on. Thus we always need to question what is seemingly "self-evident" and investigate the evidence. I want readers to ask themselves: "Would our view of what is good and what is evil change if we knew more? How do you know the 'Satan' of your society wasn't a labor organizer, since you would have been told the same kind of official story if he had been?" This is a story about politics, not about religion. It uses "God" and "Satan" because these are convenient stand-ins for "the thing we understand to be good" and "the thing we understand to be evil."*

**S**ATAN WAS NOT A "FALLEN ANGEL." TO SAY THIS IS to accept the entire propaganda language which it is our job here to dismantle. Nobody is an "angel." There are only those who convince themselves of their perfection and *consider* themselves angelic. God is neither all-powerful, all-seeing, nor good, except on his (I do not use the capital, for obvious reasons) own terms. The "Problem of Evil" is only a problem if you accept the government line. Once we grasp the situation clearly, the existence of extreme evil is not an intellectual puzzle; we are simply noticing the clash between what lies in front of our eyes and the framework we have internalized. However, much that is said about





God Almighty\* is completely correct, if misleading. He is certainly both transcendent and immanent. *Immanent* in the sense that his interventions in what we call “our world” are constant, and his rules are enforced absolutely (except in the limited spheres where his power does not reach, which do exist, mostly thanks to popular struggle). *Transcendent* in the sense that it is impossible to cross from “our world” into his without his permission (I do not mean impossible in a physical sense but in a practical one given the imbalance of force).

Unfortunately, the growth of “atheism,” and its conflation with rational thought, has prevented a serious understanding of the power system. Atheism begins by noticing, as many of us do when we are young, that the propaganda system cannot explain the basic facts of reality. It concludes that, therefore, “God does not exist.” This is as much of a non sequitur as saying “nothing the government says is true, therefore the government does not exist.” Atheism has never attracted more than a small portion of the population because it is unable to offer any kind of alternate explanation for what people see in front of them. The government, of course, tolerates it, because it could not wish for a better stance in the opposition. The whole way the population is kept passive is by keeping the government’s *visible*

power to a minimum. Any ruler would smile at a protest movement trying to convince people the ruler does not exist. (There is a reason billionaires in the United States try to lay low and keep their names out of the press.)

Now take Satan. Satan is an interesting case, because usually the whole system of “meritocracy” (which actually tests for rule-following) works flawlessly. Barely a single accurate word has ever been said about Satan in what is called “our world” (if you want to call it that, fine, but it is deeply misleading, and is probably better considered “our region”). About the only correct thing anybody knows is that he “rebelled against God.”

Lucifer Satan (“Luc” to friends) was probably as close to a perfect example of a product of the meritocratic system as you could expect. He knew all the stories, all the rules. If he had been born into “our world,” he would have been an academic theologian of some kind. Or a hedge fund manager. But he was *not* born into our world, and understood his place and our own on the terms that he was raised with. God “created us” and was perfectly good and omniscient and all of that. Satan swallowed this completely until after his fall, and it is why his rebellion in Heaven (I do not like the term because it suggests the description is accurate, though as it is the offi-

cial name it will do) was very limited in what it *challenged* versus what it *accepted* as normal. This can be compared to the way that 18th century American revolutionaries’ rejection of others’ power over *them* was coupled with an acceptance of their own power over others. Those who are angels in the legal sense are, of course, not angels in the colloquial sense, so they are subject to the same biases as ourselves. Those who have a genuine desire to overthrow tyrannies can also be tyrannizing over others simultaneously.



**H A T W A S** Satan’s Rebellion about? Milton says, accurately enough, “he durst defy th’ Omnipotent,” and this is the consensus view. It was *defiance*—which, notably, is treated as wrong by definition, given that the goodness of God is, conveniently, unquestionable. Disobeying instructions and challenging authority is the crime of both Satan and Eve. Note, no morally persuasive argument is given against the *substance* of the action that constituted disobedience. In fact, for Eve, the choice of “eating an apple” as the means of seduction into sin was deliberate, because the point was to show that even the most trivial acts, if in defiance of the law, would be punished severely with no possibility of forgiveness or restorative justice. (“Eve” never existed, of course, but was a composite of several different women who, in the early history of the present power system, showed an irritating tendency to ask power to justify itself. It was an expert piece of propaganda not to *deny* that such women existed, but to show horrible consequences of even the most minor and utterly meaningless transgressions.) The “apple tree test” is a simple obedience examination, and we are informed that failure of an obedience test is the worst thing you can do within the system. (Certainly, it is the worst in terms of its consequences for the transgressor.) Updated versions of the apple tree test are still used in the contemporary public school system, which measures whether one can “follow directions,” preferring this metric over whether one understands the subject matter or has defensible moral values.

Now, the Satanic rebellion was another case of mere disobedience being punished, but there were more politics involved as well. Archangels are simply high-ranking government officials, with various administrative duties over both “Paradise” (another name used for it in the propaganda system, with a rather sickeningly Maoist touch) and our world. Of course there is vicious competition among the angelic class, most

of it passive aggressive due to the official dogma that all of them are perfect and must remain cheerful at all times. (They do not, of course, play harps or have real wings, which would be absurd, and is one of those aspects of the official propaganda developed simply to see how much transparent foolishness those in our world will swallow without question. They are, however, forced to wear ludicrous uniforms, yet another obedience test.) Satan can most accurately be described as a shrewd and talented bureaucrat, promoted consistently through the ranks by outflanking competitors.

The motives of Satan’s rebellion were a mixture of noble ideals and petty resentment, and it is difficult to disentangle the two. Milton says—again, accurately enough—that he had “envie against the Son of God.” God had made it clear that his son, Jesús H. Chryst-Almighty would—now that he was coming to live in Heaven after his decadent Rumspringa on Earth—be appointed to succeed God upon his death.

Let us digress with a brief biographical note upon the life of Chryst-Almighty: Jesús himself was conceived during one of the senior Almighty’s frequent visits to our part of the world to seduce virgins. On this particular occasion, his conquest resulted in the pregnancy of a shepherd’s wife, Mary Chryst. The privilege of the powerful is to be able to sexually exploit the powerless without consequence. The whole thing threatened to become an awkward scandal for the whole regime, because people in our world were talking about how miraculous and strange it was that a virgin could have given birth, and little Jesús attracted considerable attention. Jewish (i.e., official) theologians of the day had been given their marching orders from central command and denied the child’s paternity, but celestial control of public opinion is not absolute. There was a great deal of division among angelic bureaucrats about what to do about the situation, some suggesting retaining the Jewish approach of just telling the people of Earth there must have been some mistake, and a group (called, rather comically, “Chryst-ians”) suggesting that paternity actually be acknowledged and celebrated as proof that various official dogmas are true. The problem was that there was no place in the existing state mythology for a random poor virgin getting mysteriously impregnated, which even then was known to be biologically impossible. A whole story had to be concocted, and maintained by ridiculous means, with Paradise sending emissaries to give the child advanced technologies he could use to perform “miracles” that defied people’s understanding of the

\*God Almighty’s surname was originally pronounced AL-ma-TEE, spelled Almitry. The pronunciation was of course adjusted to suggest he was “all mighty,” like Stalin, the Man of Steel. God is short for Godfrey.





possible. Eventually, when the child was in his early 30s (and convinced himself that he was a “miracle worker,” though not understanding why he kept finding strange new handheld devices in convenient locations), he developed symptoms of his father’s megalomania and began amassing followers. All of which was harmless as far as it went (the Chrystian and Jewish factions in Heaven itself watched the development of the two religions much as one might watch a sports match or an ant farm), but eventually Jesús became openly defiant of the laws of our world and attracted felony charges. (Incidentally, charges which were completely justified under the law, though his “disciples”—most dedicated flunkies—would successfully portray him as wrongfully convicted, sometimes to the point of simply blaming the Jews.) God, not wanting to see his only son murdered by people over whom he had complete control, sent agents to fake the death and whisk the “body” away back to Heaven, using a bit of cheap stage magic to explain why it had disappeared.

The dictator’s child (for let us be honest about the facts and call things what they are) was just as megalomaniacal in Heaven as he had been on earth. Like Saddam’s children or the Trumps, having been raised convinced absolutely of his specialness, he flexed his power and interfered in various angels’ departments. Satan, who headed Human Resources, was particularly aggrieved, having ambitions of his own. The whole thing culminated in open hostility between Chryst-Almighty and Satan.

Satan was rather clever. There was no way to convince God to prefer Satan over his only son, no matter how obsequious Satan was or what his performance numbers were like. Instead, Satan tried something rather different: *organizing* the angels. He told them, quite correctly, that it was unfair for God to rule Heaven as an unelected despot. Various angels with longstanding grievances against the regime, many of whom had suffered indignities at the hands of Chryst-Almighty, joined Satan’s efforts. Satan proposed that God should not rule, that “each angel should rule as a god.” (A close equivalent to the phrase “every man a king”; there are actually interesting parallels between Satan’s work and the governorship of Huey P. Long in Louisiana much later on, which scholars have mostly overlooked). It was rather awkward for God, because his power *within* Heaven had been enforced largely through the perpetuation of official myth (rather than, as it was on Earth, a combination of myth and violent punishment for disobedience), since an effective propaganda system need not rely on the direct application of force to

ensure compliance. That myth had been punctured by Chryst-Almighty’s brash exercises of his rights as the dictator’s son, his obvious misconduct having exposed the flawed humanity of the supposed divine family. Nothing imperils the legitimacy of a monarchy like manifestly unqualified male offspring, as the British case shows. God’s actual *power* in Heaven was quite weak, maintained largely by convincing other people that they should not *try* to challenge him. (The same method is today used by the Democratic Party leadership to ward off would-be challengers.) It did not take much political pressure to put his rule at risk.

**N**OW, INTERESTINGLY, I say Satan’s motives were mixed rather than selfish, because there is some evidence that while before Chryst-Almighty’s return, Satan had been a simple ladder-climber, by the time of the rebellion he *had* genuinely come to conclude that Heaven should be organized on a collective governance model with each angel given an equal share. We need not get into details of the actual war in Heaven. The earthly representations of what actually happened have been largely accurate, if one-sided. What they exclude is the motivations of the actors. This is where the propaganda system comes into play, by downplaying the actual *demands* made by the Satanic faction among the angels and simply emphasizing that they disobeyed. The victors, of course, write the history books. Dead men tell no tales, and while in Heaven the failed union drive and resulting war are well-known, God’s total control over the filtration of information from Heaven to Earth means everything known by human beings is pure government spin.

An interesting aspect of propaganda, however, is that often elements of truth can be found in it if you analyze critically, because the story must be made believable. Satan did not say it was “better to rule in Hell than to be a servant in Heaven,” as is reputed. The accurate quote, which can be found in the regime’s own internal documents—all have been kept from being released into our world, the “mystery of God’s ways” invoked as a substitute for basic accountability and transparency—is “better to have self-government in exile than subordination in Heaven.” It is part of a pamphlet Satan wrote that helped to foment the rebellion among angels, the equivalent of Paine’s *Common Sense*, though naturally the text was suppressed.

Let us recall why Satan said “exile” in particular. God had made clear at the outset of the uprising that anyone who



opposed his rule, if arrested, would be cast out of Heaven. He might simply have chosen to kill them, but instead saw a convenient opportunity to transform the way he exercised power. Up until this time, human beings both in Heaven and on Earth (again, two bordering regions of the same world, *not*, as propaganda would have it, an *actual* “earthly” and “celestial” realm) lived for 500 or 600 years. God himself was approximately 300 years old, having completed his major conquests and built his empire starting at about age 150 (not a word of which makes it into the official propaganda, of course, which depends for its entire functioning on the idea that God “created the world,” in total defiance of the evidence of physics, biology, etc. The very implausibility of the idea is another obedience test; again, see harps.)

**T**HE AREA NOW KNOWN as Hell was, in fact, simply a barren wasteland, which nobody from Heaven could think of any way to develop economically. It is craggy, mountainous, full of caves. Sulfur deposits are about the only mineral resource of any value, and the area is plagued by vicious wildfires, the dismal result of several centuries of colossally wasteful and destructive carbon emissions caused by the residents’ of Heaven’s wanton indulgence of obscene luxury without regard to the externalized costs. Up until the time of Satan’s rebellion, God had simply left the area alone, unable to see any use for it.

The rebellion, however, gave God an idea: a kind of equivalent to U.S. mass incarceration or Russian “exile to Siberia.” He controlled access to the region through his vast quantity of destructive arms (while it is true that he did not create the world, he did have the power to destroy it through atomic weaponry), and could simply banish those who displeased him and then militarize the border. There was no need to police the region internally once people were sent, since the area was so impoverished in resources that it could never breed any serious military opposition. Life in Hell would be extremely difficult, and there would be no coming back, so anyone sent there would have to live the rest of their natural lives in a place of suffering and desperation. Heaven itself, while obviously not a “Paradise,” had all the opulence one expects of a ruling class gated community, which is essentially all it is. Excellent restaurants, water parks, and of course golf courses. Few angels would want to be banished, since, having grown up rich, being distant from God and Heaven (and being forced to live among ordinary people from our world) would be a far worse punishment than death.

Satan, of course, was the first to be sent, so that he could be an example to other would-be rebels who dared to question the doctrine of absolute obedience. As with Stalin’s use of the image of Trotsky, Satan was the Official Enemy. Despite having served as a compli-



## MANUFACTURING CONSENT AND THE CASE OF SATAN

ant bureaucrat most of his life, and his only crime being defiance, the official propaganda portrayed Satan as a man who literally existed to do evil. There are certain striking parallels with the image of Osama bin Laden cultivated by the Bush administration to justify its policies. (Bin Laden wrote a manifesto, laying out many grievances against United States military aggression that were quite well-justified, though the reasonable points are mixed with lunatic anti-Semitism and religious fanaticism.)

The official propaganda around Satan is somewhat fascinating to dissect, because Satan is presented as an absolutely cartoonishly evil being. Milton has him saying:

*Whereto with speedy words th' Arch-Fiend replied:—*

*"Fallen Cherub, to be weak is miserable,  
Doing or suffering: but of this be sure—  
To do aught good never will be our task."*

Actually, *Paradise Lost* is an instructive example of how truly clever propaganda works. Milton, who was a fine poet and knew as many of the facts as one could reasonably gather given the government's control of information, made the interesting decision to give Satan's character prominence in his story of the rebellion. Satan is considered a protagonist or anti-hero of the work. But of course it does

not actually tell "Satan's side of the story." It *purports* to richly analyze the character of Satan, while in fact simply parroting God's official party line. The "empathy" with Satan is so effective that William Blake could say of Milton that he was of "the Devil's party without knowing it." In fact, that is precisely what the ruling power would wish us to think; that a depiction of Satan of any depth whatsoever, regardless of the message, represents the outer limit of the sympathy one can show. To portray the enemy as having any reasons or thoughts whatsoever is considered scandalous.

IT IS RATHER SHOCKING to realize just how implausible the theological depiction of God and Satan is. God is described as good, gracious, righteous, all-seeing, all-knowing. Something is good because God wills it, bad because he

opposes it. (We can see parallels in contemporary defenses of the U.S. immigration system: *but they violated the law*. The justice or injustice of the law itself is considered irrelevant to the moral evaluation, because obedience is considered virtue and defiance a sin.) The *proof* of God's goodness that is offered is the structure of the meritocratic system, whereby those from the colony are allowed, should they demonstrate adequate fealty to the law, to advance (at "death") to minor positions in Paradise. Instead of the *actual* deaths of people (which, as I say, would naturally occur after a few hundred years, though they could be cut short in the usual ways) God imposed what is functionally describable as a kidnapping or forced disappearance. At a certain point in one's life, one is plucked away, a realistic corpse substituted, and one is either cast "below" into Hell or sent "above" into Heaven ("above" and "below" are about as accurate as calling north "up" and

south "down"; they are simply more propaganda designed to enforce the conflation of wealth and abundance with virtue and uplift versus poverty and suffering as wickedness and degradation).

The moment of judgment is a sham, of course. Entrance into the walled metropolis of Paradise/Heaven is determined entirely by the fluctuating demands of Heaven's economic system. If more gardeners are needed, gardeners are taken. If more physicists are needed, a physicist is taken. The subjugated region is simply mined for talent. As is usual with occupying powers, the process of colonial extraction is justified as being for the subjected people's own good. Though it is plainly obvious that seizing someone who did nothing wrong, and who had much more to accomplish here, is the worst kind of cruelty, entrance to Heaven is treated as a great reward for one's virtue that one should be grateful for. (Rather sickeningly, childless angels often "adopt" earthly babies whom they find especially endearing.) Importantly, the idea of entrance into Paradise as a "reward" for one's behavior is used *within* Paradise to justify the hierarchical arrangement of power with God at the top. Immigrants from the colony are told that they are *lucky* and given scraps of access to abundance such as they nev-





er had when they were home. Thus many of them continue to believe the meritocratic propaganda even though they should know through firsthand experience that it is false.

Hell, of course, is used to punish dissent. Nobody in our region has ever actually seen Hell, and the border wall ensures no information escapes from there, so the myths of its dangerousness and barbarity are easily swallowed. James Joyce, in his classic hellfire sermon, captures well the official description of hell as a “strait and dark and foul-smelling prison, an abode of demons and lost souls, filled with fire and smoke.” Hell is, in other words, a real shithole. It is also a place where, in the absence of nationalism and the rule of law, anarchy reigns, everyone is tortured forever, and one encounters the worst people imaginable:

*In hell all laws are overturned—there is no thought of family or country, of ties, of relationships. The damned howl and scream at one another, their torture and rage intensified by the presence of beings tortured and raging like themselves. All sense of humanity is forgotten. The yells of the suffering sinners fill the remotest corners of the vast abyss. The mouths of the damned are full of blasphemies against God and of hatred for their fellow sufferers and of curses against those souls which were their accomplices in sin.*

Joyce’s work was fiction but it captures well the longstanding official party line on Hell. As with the rest of the propaganda, there is some truth. When Milton writes that it is a place where “rest can never dwell, hope never comes,” he is technically accurate, but this is entirely because of an intentional decision to leave Hell impoverished, to seal its borders off, and to extract whatever wealth is created there through high-interest IMF loans.

There has, however, been a move away from hellfire rhetoric in recent years, because it began to seem comically over-the-top to humans, and with nobody ever having *seen* Hell its existence might seem doubtful. God could not take steps to expose what Hell was really like, since, like the Wizard of Oz, this would necessarily have shown how mundane and impoverished a place it is. But it was realized that this did not really matter. God’s power, as we saw with the case of atheism, does not actually depend on a belief on him. British rule in India did not require Indians to believe there was a Britain somewhere or understand what went on there. The only thing that matters is that the population does not get out of line and that the ruling power is allowed to continue to rule.

Hellfire rhetoric, however, was actually quite accurate in depicting the real-life power that God holds. Consider Jona-

than Edwards’ famous “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

*There is nothing that keeps wicked men at any one moment out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God. There is no want of power in God to cast wicked men into hell at any moment. Men’s hands cannot be strong when God rises up. The strongest have no power to resist him, nor can any deliver out of his hands. He is not only able to cast wicked men into hell, but he can most easily do it. They deserve to be cast into hell; so that divine justice never stands in the way, it makes no objection against God’s using his power at any moment to destroy them. Yea, on the contrary, justice calls aloud for an infinite punishment of their sins.*

God certainly can send anyone to Hell that he likes; such is the privilege of the totalitarian. The notion that judgments in practice have any relation to moral desert is, as God’s own propaganda acknowledges implicitly through its constant emphasis on compliance and commandment, utterly baseless. But while God has not yet, thankfully, achieved the all-powerful surveillance state and absolute hierarchy of which he dreams, the extent of the state’s power is considerable.

**L**ET US CLOSE BY returning to Satan, and the question of how the veil of lies might be pierced and the truth perceived. Officials have built mechanisms into media depictions of Satan to discourage anyone from investigating his side of the story. He is, Robert Burton says in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, the “author of confusion and lies.” He has cloven feet and horns (again, the absurdity of a story helps filter out the most credulous individuals for promotion). He will come to you like a gangster and tempt you with some offer you shouldn’t take, and steal your soul if you don’t comply. In fact, Satan has never left Hell, for the obvious reason that he is imprisoned. He is a sort of guerrilla there, having amassed a band of “sinners” and “demons” (ordinary working people who failed their obedience tests), but he is utterly powerless to affect the external world. The portrayal of Satan as some kind of counterpart to God in his power is an attempt to obscure the international hierarchy of state power, by portraying a small contained region of rebels as a terrifying aggressor, and the imperial hegemon as being under constant threat. The fascist, as Umberto Eco says, treats the enemy as both weak and strong; God rules absolutely and yet Satan’s temptations are everywhere.

Why, considering the system of thought control disguising power rela-

tions is so obvious, and the propaganda so inconsistent and irrational, has no one yet perceived the true nature of things? In part because of the explicit use of force, as we have seen, but in part because the premises on which discussions take place accept the status quo as natural or inevitable and proceed from there. Take Lewis Sperry Chafer’s well-regarded 1909 biography *Satan*. Chafer had access to all the known records in our world, and represents them accurately. But at the outset he says explicitly:

*This attempt to outline the Scripture teaching on [Satan] will be undertaken under certain general conditions: First—The authority of the Scriptures of both the Old and the New Testaments will be accepted without question. Second—Evidence will be drawn from the Word of God alone, since no final light can be found on this subject other than it has pleased God to reveal in the Bible. Third—There will be no discussion as to the actual existence of Satan; this being both assumed and taught from Genesis to Revelation.*

Even intelligent accounts, then, treat government sources as if they are reliable, without stopping to demand evidence that those sources correspond to reality. Witness an example, selected at random, of the conclusions that Chafer comes to on the basis of these premises:

*It is stated that Satan was perfect in all his ways from the day he was created. It is important to notice both that he was created, and that he was created perfect. Since he was created, he is not self-existent, and never can be free from his dependence upon the Creator. He may vainly propose to become independent, and even be permitted for a time to act under that delusion; but that would only delay the inevitable judgment that awaits him. He was created perfect, or was a perfect fulfillment of the Creator’s intention. Satan was a free moral agent; capable of choosing evil, but not obliged to do so. That he chose evil must ever be his own condemnation; for the Creator had surrounded him with sufficient motives to choose the good.*

The plainly inconsistent statements do not bother Chafer, for he has begun with the belief that Scripture is true, thus contradictory propositions must not contradict and can be reconciled. Satan could have been good and chosen to remain a diligent administrative lickspittle. However, he chose “evil” (labor organizing) and thus he is the author of his own punishment. However, God, being all-powerful, also created Satan, and created Satan perfectly because God does not make mistakes, and Satan is under God’s control. Party propagandists spill thousands of words trying to justify this clear hole in the government’s line, which is the product of the fact that they need to both prove their absolute power over ev-

erything and convince people that decisions by the subaltern are completely free and that what they do is a result of their choices rather than dictated to them by raw state force.

**T**HOSE WHO ATTEMPT a rational investigation of Satan’s claims and the historical record are treated automatically as insane. The charges of blasphemy and heresy, or being “unpatriotic,” are used to avoid having to engage in arguments. The indoctrination system is so total that even to propose such a thing as “the legitimacy of Satan’s political claims” is treated as evidence of deranged evil (“Satanism,” comparable to “deviationism”). The ideology not only tells us what to think, but contains provisions that prevent it from ever being brought into question. When one shows any inclination to read Satanic documents or attempt to empathize with Satanic thinking, one is irrationally accused of being “pro-Satan” who was the “anti-Chrst” (which is true, but only in the same sense that there were Federalists and anti-Federalists; it was a dispute *within* the ruling class). One need not be arrested, tortured, or killed under a system of manufactured consent. Effective challenges to power can be eliminated simply by getting the opposition to base all dissent on premises that justify the basic power structure. Likewise, historically those who have wished to question Church dogma have had to do so within a framework that accepts certain basic unquestionable tenets of that dogma—even Paine’s *Age of Reason* insists that Paine is *not* questioning the existence of God (as he shouldn’t, though he should have questioned the legitimacy of God’s rule on earth.)

If resistance is to be effective, it must start with critical thinking. How do we know that what we have been told is true? We must ask this about everything. The evidence should be sought and then examined. When this is not done, it is easy for official enemies to be made, without anyone pausing to ask whether these “devils” are in fact the “pure evil” they are described as. Perhaps there is more context that would make the situation look quite different, and flip our understanding of who is in the right versus the wrong. No ruling power has ever thought of itself as evil. They believe they are good, and that it is their opponents who are evil. We must make sure we are not falling into the trap of believing we are on the right side simply because we have been told we are. We can only know for certain when we have also heard any given “Satan’s” side of each story. +



An ordinary airport, with the standard miseries and the typical array of characters. But when we briefly look away, and then glance at the scene again, a few small things have changed. Can you spot ten differences between the otherwise-identical airports? **Answers on p. 59**

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AA 138  
NC 56  
NMA 112  
LWA 23  
CA 45  
DL 122 IT'LL GET HERE SOMEDAY  
PP 13

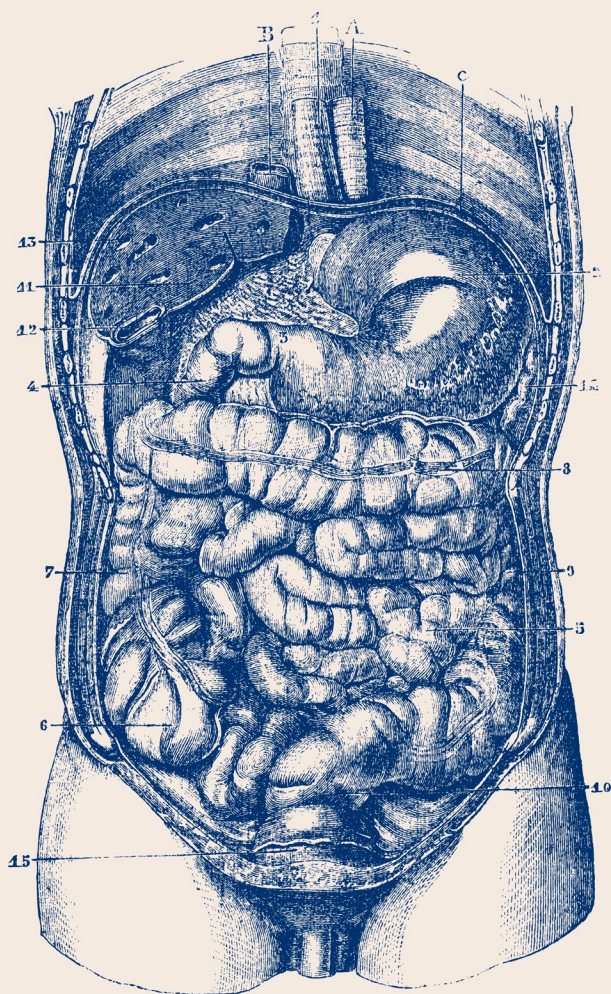
DON'T COUNT ON IT  
MAYBE TOMORROW  
IN YOUR DREAMS  
STUCK IN A CLOUD  
GET COMFORTABLE...  
IT'LL GET HERE SOMEDAY  
NUH - UH

DONUT PET

POP ROCKS







# How We Can Ease The Pain

*by Vinnie Rotondaro*

**A**S I WRITE THESE WORDS I AM FASTING. I have had nothing to eat for more than two days. No calories—only water, coffee, and tea. My mind feels sharp, my mood is calm, and the back pain that has dogged me for 20 years is abating.

Pain is commonplace. We all experience it as humans. But when it drags on for months and years, it can color every facet of your life. Chronic pain, generally defined as that which lasts longer than the time it takes tissue damage to heal, has proven a constant in mine—ever since having a spinal fusion as a teenager. Along with millions of other Americans who have chronic pain, I have learned to live with it. I go to bed with pain and greet it in the morning. I feel it creeping as I stand in line or sit at my computer or lift my daughter into the air. Over the years I have tried every technique imaginable to make it go away, some of which worked better than others—yoga, dieting, medical massage, chiropractic. But fasting has proven the only method that can fully banish it from my body.

The impetus to fast came in an intuitional flash. A few years back when the pain was really kicking, a little voice in my head told me to “stop eating,” and I listened to it. I didn’t know much about fasting at the time, or whether it was safe. But I decided to go with my gut, and I’m glad that I did.

We moderns are conditioned to eat at least three times a day, and the thought of not abiding by that rule felt nutty. There was a bit of Pavlov’s dog at play. At the end of one day without food my stom-

ach was howling, and so was my mind. As dinnertime came and went I felt slightly crazed. But when I awoke the next morning that frenzied feeling was gone and I had entered into a decidedly calm state of mind. Moreover, my pain was melting away. It felt as if I had broken a spell, as much physical as mental in nature, which enabled me to move and *think* in new ways. All the chatter went quiet, and I began to perceive the world from a deeper seat of consciousness.

Since that time I have undertaken numerous fasts, some lasting as long as a week. And each time that I do I experience mental resets and successive ah-ha moments that seem to build upon each other. The cumulative effect makes me wonder: how else might fasting apply to a populace living in a consumerist society like ours? Could we improve the pain of our body politic by depriving ourselves of some exceedingly common yet insidiously harmful stimuli?

Not only calorically, but mentally, in terms of how we feed our heads: from sunup to sundown on polarizing news, pointless memes, mind-narrowing algorithms, and culture war fodder—all of which keeps us distracted and addicted, hooked on bad feelings over social media platforms owned by tech lord billionaires. The Gods of Silicon Valley won’t even let their own kids use social media precisely because it is designed to make us feel isolated, and their platforms manipulate our fears and appeal to our worst instincts, like a 2.0 version of the “opiate of the masses.” What would happen if we just put down our phones and unplugged for a day or two?

On YouTube there’s no shortage of ripped dudes with washboard



abs swearing by fasting as a men's health cure-all. Intermittent fasting specifically has become more popular, and there are numerous different regimens (drastically depriving one's body of calories may not be safe or advisable for everyone, of course). But the shallow focus on looks (and even the more noble emphasis on health) often leaves out the long history of fasting as a spiritual tool to achieve transcendence. Jesus was said to have fasted in the Judean desert for 40 days and nights. The Buddha beat him out by more than a week, lasting 49 days under a Rajayatana tree. Biologically speaking, humans evolved to live without food for long stretches of time—much longer than you might think. The world record was set in the 1960s by an excessively overweight Scottish man named Angus Barbieri who went almost entirely without calories for an astonishing 382 days.

Today, the scientific literature on fasting's numerous health benefits is as robust as it is remarkable. Temporary abstaining from calories ameliorates a host of chronic diseases, such as diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, asthma, and rheumatoid arthritis. It triggers a process called autophagy, where the body metabolizes damaged and dying cells for energy, which produces a powerful anti-cancer effect. As far as pain reduction goes, the research is still in its infancy. But the studies that exist are promising. Fasting has been shown to aid in the production of ketones, an alternative energy source with powerful antioxidant properties (the ripped dudes on YouTube love this); it reduces inflammation, promotes neurogenesis (or the growing of new nerve cells, as one mouse model study showed), and releases serotonin, a neurotransmitter that boosts your mood and helps you sleep. In short, fasting helps heal your body.

What is even more intriguing is that fasting may also repair your mind. Brain plasticity, or neuroplasticity, refers to the way the brain can change its structure and develop new connections over time. "Periods of heightened plasticity have been traditionally identified with the early years of development," according to a 2016 paper published in *The Journal of Pain*. But more recent research "has identified a wide spectrum of methods that can be used to 'reopen' and enhance plasticity and learning in adults." Intermittent fasting was one of the key methods that was hypothesized to promote "healthy neuroplastic changes" by disrupting deeply embedded mind-body connections. As the authors explain: "Neuroplastic changes in brain structure and function are not only a consequence of chronic pain but are involved in the maintenance of pain symptoms."

**B**EFORE GOING ON, I WOULD LIKE TO INTRODUCE you to my screwed up spine, or the whole reason I started fasting in the first place. Back in the late 1990s when I was 15 years old, I discovered a bulge on my back. I had no idea what it was, so my parents decided to take me to a nearby hospital. As I sat in a waiting room, I spied through a cracked door to see the doctors observing my x-rays and was shocked at the sight of my spine. It looked like a writhing snake.

The doctors informed me I had scoliosis, or an abnormal curvature of the spine, which they measured to be roughly 20 degrees off

base beginning at the lowest part of my spine. A few weeks later we visited a specialist and learned that the curve was actually more like 60 degrees, and would require immediate surgery to correct.

In Baltimore at Johns Hopkins, I can remember lying on an operating table as a ring of masked faces peered down at me and a surgeon counted "3, 2, 1," before my vision cut to black. While I was under they opened up my ribs, dislocated my vertebrae, stretched out my spine and fused it back together with bone grafts from my hip. A stainless steel rod was then screwed onto my spine to help stabilize it during healing. When I awoke the next morning I was alarmed to find that I couldn't move my left leg. They had to sever a nerve during surgery and hadn't told me in advance. Additionally, the pediatric ward that I was being kept in ran out of morphine, and I went without appropriate pain relief for hours on end. The pain felt like a supernova exploding throughout my body. The feeling carved a memory that I will never forget.

In the lead-up to surgery, the doctors prepared me for a lot. But they never told me I'd be dealing with chronic pain for the rest of my life. It was as if a Pandora's box had been opened, providing insight into a wider American phenomenon.

Pain is notoriously difficult to measure, but there is no question that America is awash in it. Studies from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) regularly put the number of people suffering from chronic pain at about 50 million, or 20 percent of the population. It remains unclear how the pandemic affected these numbers. Pain factors prominently in the opioid epidemic. It contributes to alcoholism, as well as other forms of addiction. Sometimes it leads to suicide. All of this radiates out to affect families and friends, neighborhoods and communities, and American society as a whole.

According to the British economist Angus Deaton, who became famous for coining the term "deaths of despair," the landscape of American pain is developing in counterintuitive ways. It is commonly assumed that pain increases with age. But in America today, "the elderly report less pain than those in midlife," he writes with Anne Case and Arthur Stone in a 2020 paper titled "Decoding the Mystery of American Pain Reveals a Warning for the Future." "This is the mystery of American pain," they note in regards to the unexpected findings on pain related to age. Another of their important findings is that "the gap in pain between the more and less educated has widened in each successive birth cohort."

In my own experience, there probably was no way to avoid long term pain, considering the trauma that was inflicted upon my trunk and spine—the superconductor of neural connectivity in the body. On top of that, the distortion wrought by scoliosis doesn't just bend, it also twists, and this corkscrewing wasn't totally fixed with the surgery. Worse still, now it was frozen in place.

As a result of my structural imbalance, I am forced to walk a very narrow path. If I don't sleep well, get stressed, eat badly, or drink too much, I seize up with inflammation and the scoliotic pattern radiates outward into the rest of my body. I can *feel* the corkscrewing in my hips and shoulders, in my face and eyes, as if being trapped in a twisted straight jacket. As Quasimodo is described in the *Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, "The grimace was his face. Or rather, his whole person was a grimace."



Then there is the emotional dimension. As pain researchers Ernest Volinn and John Loeser note in a 2022 paper on chronic back pain,

*“The experience in its intense form has been compared to a nightmare: terrible things are happening to those undergoing it, worse are threatened; an inexplicable force is causing those things to happen, against which the will is helpless; and the experience goes on seemingly without end.”*

When I was young I felt unstoppable. I wasn’t allowed to run or jump for a year after the operation, but I didn’t let it get me down. Soon enough I was back to playing basketball, lifting weights, and jogging. Whatever pain I had I simply blasted through, thankfully never becoming addicted to pills. This carried on until I left for college, and the Twin Towers fell during the first week of school, blowing up my slacker state of mind.

*As a nation in pain we  
are sold pills for just  
about everything.*

As the aughts wore on I grew increasingly depressed. You grow up, work more, sleep less, and deal with increasing levels of stress. The resiliency that I felt in high school began to fade as the pain crept inside my brain. At the same time, late stage capitalism was weighing heavy. The 2000s proved to be an age of historic stress and instability, of successive shocks to the system, political dismay among the populace, and spiraling inequality which the pandemic only exacerbated.

Some say that change is constant. There’s nothing new under the sun. But this downplays the level of historical backsliding that “geriatric millennials” like myself have borne witness to. Consider all that has befallen America beginning with 9/11 and leading up to the illegal invasion of Iraq: “Mission Accomplished” turned 20 years of war; Hurricane Katrina and grainy cell phone videos of African Americans being killed by cops or dying in floodwaters; criminal Wall Street negligence, the stock market crash of 2008, and the gall of “Too Big to Fail”; the election of Barack Obama, our first Black president, whose message of “Hope and Change” turned out to be just another corporate lie (consider his record on deportations or the prosecution of whistleblowers, his exponential expansion of Bush’s illegal wars and continuation of mass surveillance, the brutality of his drone strikes, his refusal to codify *Roe v. Wade*, his refusal to prosecute the bankers who destroyed our economy and caused millions to lose their homes). As Obama said of himself once: “My policies are so mainstream that if I had set the same policies ... back in the 1980s,

I would be considered a moderate Republican.”

Now add the pangs of climate change, the agony of the opioid epidemic, the horror of mass shootings and children being slaughtered at school. The middle class collapsed. Then, after decades of cratering faith in American public institutions, we got Donald Trump—a reality show host turned president—the shock of which was directly followed by COVID, a biblical plague that we have been told to “learn to live with” and which punctuates the slow-motion death of the American dream. No, this has not been a time like any other.

Furthermore, the “it’s always been this way” argument ignores how *very strange* this time has been with the advent of the Internet and the ubiquity of screen culture—on par with the development of the written word itself—which captures curated snippets from our struggles and streams them straight back into our collective conscience. While the Internet possesses incredible potential, so far its results do not seem promising regarding human development. On the one hand we are entering an era of unprecedented connection and globalized consciousness. On the other, a new Dark Age of the mind.

To what extent do we perpetuate our shitty modern reality by indulging in Big Information Overload? As the Thien Buddhist monk and peace activist Thich Nhan Hanh once said, “water the flowers, not the weeds.” When we’re online, let’s face it, we tend to water the weeds. Whatever you focus on grows. You wanna *fight nazis*? You wanna *smash socialists*? In some ways the left and right create each other. It’s phenomenology. Meanwhile, the ceaseless flow of smartphone media seems to tap the addiction centers in our brains and lead to negative impacts on our emotions. If we’re depressed, angry, anxious, or fearful, it can be easy to unload our feelings onto some enemy “other” in society.

Like chewing on a canker sore, we keep coming back for more. The incessant alerts allow us no stillness. Tribalism means we never lay down our guard and look for commonality. The tension and turbulence builds up in our system. And at the root of it all we live with pain, the grinding prosaic, and a concurrent inability to break our over-sensitized buzz.

**B**UT THERE IS HOPE, FOR AS THE SCIENCE OF pain medicine shows, simply learning about how pain works can often prove half the battle.

According to a handy little book called *Why Do I Hurt? A Patient Book About the Neuroscience of Pain*: “Once pain patients become educated about the neuroscience of pain, they understand more about how danger messages are processed. Realizing that a lot of the pain they experience is due to extra sensitive nerves, their nerve sensitivity is actually turned down.”

It may sound crazy, but pain is entirely produced in the brain. Biologically speaking, when you stub your toe, it’s not pain that shoots up your leg, but a signal which travels through the nervous system up the spine to the brain, where it is evaluated, taking into account memory and context, to produce an appropriate protective response. This process is called nociception.

So in a way, pain is indeed in your head. But it’s real. Complicating matters, it can be highly subjective and often misread reality. Memory plays a crucial role. To illustrate this point, the Australian



pain researcher Lorimer Moseley likes to tell a story about a time he was hiking in the bush and felt a prick on his leg. “The way I make sense of what happened to me,” he said in a TED Talk, “is that the brain thought: ‘Frontal lobe, have we been anywhere like this before?’ ‘Hang on, I’ll just ask the posterior parietal cortex: Have we been in this environment before?’ ‘Yes, we have.’ ‘Has it happened at this stage of the gait cycle?’ ‘Yes, it has.’ ‘Is it coming from the same location?’ ‘Yes, it is.’ ‘What is it?’ ‘Well your whole life growing up you used to scratch your legs on twigs. This is not dangerous.’”

Moseley had been bitten by a deadly Eastern brown snake. But he kept walking and later fell unconscious from the venom’s toxic effect, barely surviving the incident. Six months later he felt another prick on his leg as he was walking outside; he collapsed on the ground screaming. This time around, his posterior parietal cortex reasoned: “Last time you were here you almost died and I’m going to make this hurt so much that you can do nothing else, and I was in absolute agony for what seemed like minutes. Screaming pain. Until one of my mates looked at my leg, and there was a little scratch from a twig.”

**W**HEN PAIN BECOMES CHRONIC, IT CAN spread throughout your body. “In some people, the nerves that ‘wake up’ to alert you to the danger in your tissues calm down very slowly and remain elevated and ‘buzzing,’” according to *Why Do I Hurt?*. “If the alarm system in your house goes off, it probably wakes the neighbors right next to you,” it continues. “If the alarm system keeps going, some neighborhood down the street may also wake up. Nerves work the same way.” The growing cacophony of signals overwhelms the system and produces paranoia. “In this state, it does not take much activity, such as sitting, reaching, bending or driving, to get the nerves to fire off danger messages to the brain. The nerves become extra sensitive. ... The main issue is increased nerve sensitivity.”

Further aggravating the situation, the body then sends immune molecules (which are designed to keep you healthy) to see if anything is wrong, which can make matters worse. Tellingly, the book likens these immune molecules to police officers going around from house to house knocking on doors to see what’s up. More often than not, this ends up doing more harm than good.

Another elusive aspect of pain is that it can exist without obvious physical damage to the body. Such is the case with much chronic pain, where the brain generates pain internally without any outside stimuli through a process known as “central sensitization.” (This is different from nociception, or local pain triggered by external agents.) In many ways chronic pain amounts to emotional pain. In my own experience, I saw how it could become synonymous with depression. Others develop chronic pain via emotional abuse which can dog them throughout life, especially when suffered as a child. Research has shown that adults who were abused as children can experience abdominal pain when there is no obvious physical cause.

“As human beings we belong to an extremely resilient species,” writes the psychologist Bessel van der Kolk in the groundbreaking

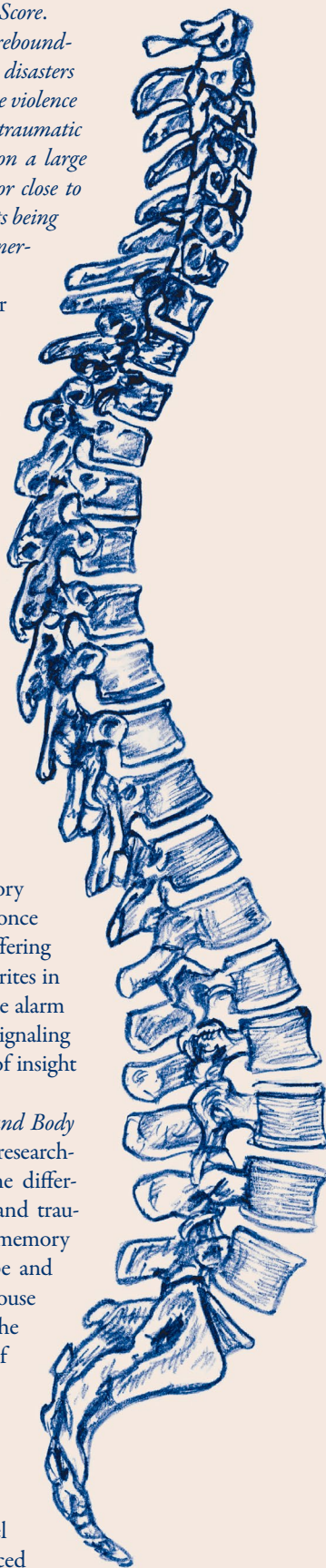
study on trauma, *The Body Keeps the Score*.

*“Since time immemorial we have rebounded from our relentless wars, countless disasters (both natural and manmade), and the violence and betrayal in our own lives. But traumatic experiences do leave traces, whether on a large scale (on our histories and cultures) or close to home, on our families, with dark secrets being imperceptibly passed down through generations.”*

When trauma occurs—whether caused by physical injury, psychological abuse, exposure to war or systemic oppression—anger, depression, illness, and anxiety can follow. As van der Kolk notes, people react in different ways depending on the circumstances involved and the subject’s inborn biological traits. When triggered, Jack might freeze up whereas Jill flies into a rage. Perhaps this explains some key aspect of our political freefall, with far-right candidates exploiting pockets of rage and defiance while simultaneously profiting from a broader sense of alienation and indifference felt amongst those who don’t see much use in voting.

Again and again, the role of memory proves crucial. As Sigmund Freud once remarked, “I think this man is suffering from memories.” As van der Kolk writes in *The Body Keeps the Score*, “When the alarm bell of the emotional brain keeps signaling that you are in danger, no amount of insight will silence it.”

In *Trauma and Memory: Brain and Body in a Search for the Living Past*, the researcher Peter A. Levine writes about the difference between “normal” memories and traumatic ones. Regular, declarative memory is “ephemeral, ever shifting in shape and meaning,” he writes, “like a fragile house of cards, perched precariously upon the shifting sands of time, at the mercy of interpretation and confabulation.” It is something that we are able to consciously work with and reconstruct in a process that creates “cohesive narratives.” Traumatic memory, on the other hand, operates at the level of the unconscious and is experienced





“as fragmented splinters of inchoate and indigestible sensations, emotions, images, smells, tastes, thoughts, and so on,” which afflict the body and mind in unexpected, deleterious ways. Without help, someone suffering from traumatic memory is essentially powerless to control what is happening to them.

This raises a question: at a time in which a broad sense of powerlessness is increasingly being shared amongst Americans, in relation to the environment, our politics, and the economy, how should we relate to one another? What we tend to have now is mutual intolerance and culture war hate, which only propels the status quo. What we need is radical acceptance and compassion.

**T**O “RADICALLY ACCEPT” DOES NOT MEAN WE should forgo our morals, accept bad politics, or ignore violence and oppression, but instead to recognize that hate is almost always born out of trauma and wounding, and that hating hate only begets more hate. As James Baldwin once wrote, “I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.”

In the emergent field of psychedelic therapy—which has proven remarkably effective at treating addiction, depression, and other chronic conditions, while posing little to no addictive risk itself—a treatment modality known as Internal Family Systems [IFS] is increasingly being used to strengthen the benefits of a psychedelic trip. IFS operates on the assumption that there is no such thing as a unitary self, but instead that we are composed of a variety of “parts,” which exist in relation to each other. In essence, IFS proposes that we “contain multitudes,” to quote poet Walt Whitman. One “part” of you may feel like a loving parent, where another personifies your inner race car driver. In a healthy and secure place, these subpersonalities resonate and sing together, making us living embodiments of inner diversity. But when the body experiences trauma, certain “parts” can become frozen in time, or repressed, leading others to abandon their natural roles in an effort to protect or even shame the “exiled” parts. As a result, friction, imbalance, pain, and disharmony afflict the entire system.

It is interesting to think about American trauma through the lens of Internal Family Systems, to consider the cultural narratives that scaffold our pain and the formative wounds that haunt the present day—many of which have largely been forgotten. If the collective American psyche took a heroic dose and reckoned with its history, good lord, who knows what would come out? A revolution? A protest? A giant comical fart?

But we aren’t ready for that. No, not even close. We haven’t even learned how to sit with ourselves and be quiet.

In some ways we are no more free than Pavlov’s dog. In others we can choose how to inform and condition our minds.

**I**N HIS CLASSIC BOOK *THE FOUR AGREEMENTS*, THE Mexican spiritualist Don Miguel Ruíz appeals to Toltec wisdom to argue that personal freedom can only be achieved by rooting out external forces of manipulation from the mind. Freedom means “being who we really are,” he says. Much of his

work deals with the question of “domestication” (loosely, societal programming) and how it relates to our collective “dream of the world.” We can live a dream of heaven or a dream of hell, he says; it all depends on how we use our “word,” which is a form of “magic.” But from the Toltec point of view, “All humans who are domesticated are sick. They are sick because there is a parasite that controls the mind and controls the brain. The food for the parasite is the negative emotions that come from fear.”

Writing in 1997, Ruíz likens this parasite to a “computer virus.” He states: “When we see the world through a computer virus, it is easy to justify the cruelest behavior. What we don’t see is that misuse of our word is putting us deeper into hell.” Further developing this idea, Ruíz draws up the Toltec concept of *Mitote*, or “the chaos of a thousand different voices all trying to talk at once in the mind.” *Mitote* is similar to the Hindu concept of Maya, or the fog of perception, and it reminds me a great deal of the cumulative effect of screen culture.

Ruíz believes that we need to “rebel” against this virus of the mind, and suggests a couple ways of doing so. Liking the parasite “to a monster with a thousand heads” each of which represents our fears, he says that “one solution is to attack the parasite head by head.” Conversely, a second and perhaps more straightforward approach would simply be to “stop feeding” it.

In my own experience, fasting taught me just how much food is like a drug, as is social media. Online there is an informative video lecture presented by cardiologist Pradip Jamnadas, who enumerates all the ways that fasting benefits your health, while pointing out that you never see it advertised. Somewhere in the lecture, he says, “I have nothing to sell you,” which really got me thinking.

Maybe one reason people think fasting is crazy is because it’s antithetical to the entire capitalist system. As a nation in pain we are sold pills for just about everything. “More than four in ten older adults take five or more prescription medications a day, tripling over the past two decades, according to one 2019 study. “Nearly 20 percent take ten drugs or more.” Needless to say, this approach only treats symptoms and mires us in an overmedicated fog. In a world that is becoming less and less predictable, we desperately search for meaning and stability while being deluged by myths and narratives that distract us from the true nature of our chaos. As if Russian interference is to blame for our freefall. Or was it pedophilic Lizard People? These narratives are as cheap and fake as the pink slime that adulterates our fast food, and as toxic as the pills that get marketed as silver bullets for our pain.

Meanwhile, online algorithms and the harmful realities they create only give profit to the people at the top, who will fly off in rocket ships when the world finally goes up in flames. But what if the best way to break free from this collective mental stranglehold was to tune out corporate predatory media altogether?

Put down your smartphone. Question your screens. Go for a walk in the woods. Take a look at the leaves on the trees. Trauma or tragedy can live in the body. So can beauty and poetry. What matters most now is that we clear the fog of our pain so that we can come back to our senses, and begin to envision a better way of being. ♣





# WHY YOU HATE YOUR JOB

by Aravind "Vinny" Byju

**T**HREE YEARS AGO I WAS WORKING AS a management consultant intern at a top firm. I wore fancy suits and flew around the country. I pretended to take notes during high-powered meetings and drained hours aligning the margins of graphics in PowerPoint slides that surely would never be seen by anyone. I was getting paid more money than I could ever spend, especially given the precious few hours I had outside of those wasted away in Excel. I was miserable.

In an era of stark inequality, I should have been satisfied with my place in society. Those of us with a bachelor's degree generally earn more than twice those with only a high school diploma. Ivy League graduates earn double even that of the median college graduate. Beyond finances, shockingly, in the last 30 years, the death rates for college graduates decreased by 40 percent; they rose by 25

percent for those without a degree. Yet, despite my membership in this group of societal winners, I found myself trying to unravel the puzzle of why I couldn't just be happy with my prestigious job.

**O**NLY AFTER LEARNING THE DEFINITION OF what the late anthropologist David Graeber called *bullshit jobs* did I realize that—despite the unparalleled clout I received from society as a consultant—I was, in fact, working a bullshit job. This simple detail would reveal not only why I was so miserably employed, but also an alarming truth about how we've arranged our society.

In his 2018 book, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, Graeber defined a bullshit job as "a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its



existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case.” Graeber argued that, despite the hope that technology would one day free us from the burdens of work, we still work a lot, and much of the work done in our modern society is unnecessary and inane:

*“In the year 1930, John Maynard Keynes predicted that, by century’s end, technology would have advanced sufficiently that countries like Great Britain or the United States would have achieved a fifteen-hour work week. There’s every reason to believe he was right. In technological terms, we are quite capable of this. And yet it didn’t happen. Instead, technology has been marshaled, if anything, to figure out ways to make us all work more. In order to achieve this, jobs have had to be created that are, effectively, pointless.”*

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*“Entire professions  
and even sectors  
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that, were they to be  
eliminated, would  
leave the world no  
worse off, and perhaps  
even better.”*

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In other words—as in Adam Smith’s nightmare of inefficiency—entire professions and even sectors exist in our economy that, were they to be eliminated, would leave the world no worse off, and perhaps even better. This bullshit jobs category includes white-collar jobs like professional and managerial work, sectors that have tripled in size in the last century. This expanding balloon of bullshit comprises lobbyists, middle managers, corporate lawyers, and IT professionals. More broadly, at the center of this maelstrom of meaninglessness lies the FIRE sector: finance, insurance, and real estate. Graeber explained: “[the FIRE sector] creates money (by making loans) and then moves it around in often extremely complicated ways, extracting another small cut with every transaction.”

If at this point you’re nodding along with a sinking feeling of familiarity as you think of your own job and how much time you spend sending crypto memes to the squad group chat while on the clock, you’re not alone. According to Graeber, various polls across the globe had reported that as high as 40 to 50 percent of workers think their work is pointless or does not make a meaningful contribution to the

world. Other researchers have since called into question the prevalence of Graeber’s phenomenon, citing survey data that reveals a lower preponderance of workers admitting they have useless jobs. At the same time, however, other surveys like those conducted by Gallup have measured exceedingly low levels of relevant workplace factors like “engagement.” Regardless, these critiques that debate the prevalence of bullshit jobs miss the crucial point, which is that these jobs exist at all. There shouldn’t be bullshit jobs, and the fact that there are says that our “perfect” market economy that justly doles out societal rewards is not as perfect as we would like to think.

It’s important to note that in Graeber’s formulation, domestic, industrial, agricultural, and most working-class jobs are *not* bullshit, because they involve necessary work without which society would not function. This fact was made painfully apparent during the pandemic, as working-class people risked their lives to go to work because they were so essential (somehow we managed to scrape by without consultants flying cross country twice a week to provide their services). Here Graeber made the distinction between “bullshit” jobs and these other “shit” jobs:

*“Bullshit jobs often pay quite well and tend to offer excellent working conditions. They’re just pointless. Shit jobs are usually not at all bullshit; they typically involve work that needs to be done and is clearly of benefit to society; it’s just that the workers who do them are paid and treated badly.”*

Graeber made clear that while these “shit” jobs are by no means inherently degrading, our society often makes them so with low pay, poor working conditions, and general disrespect. Nevertheless, when these workers, like garbage collectors, go on strike, cities are brought to their knees (Instead, when bankers in Ireland, some decades ago, went on a strike for six months, most didn’t bat an eye).

There are legitimate and necessary debates to be had concerning these jobs—particularly issues spotlighted by the pandemic—like raising our embarrassingly low minimum wage and providing woefully overlooked benefits to essential workers. Today, we also hear even more revolutionary discourse with voices like the r/antiwork community examining the very nature of work and which screenshots of sassy quitting texts to bosses one can post to garner the most sweet sweet Reddit karma.

Given the plight of those working in nonbullshit employment, it’s hard to not see any other job as comparatively fortunate. Indeed, the pandemic blessed many white collar workers with flexible schedules and work targets and the golden goose of work-from-home. While these work arrangements, along with comfortable in-office jobs, might sound like the perfect capitalist grift—what exactly is wrong with being handsomely paid to scroll Instagram at your work cubicle or play with your cat in between at-home meetings?—Graeber pointed out otherwise. A core part of Graeber’s thesis was that despite their cushy nature, bullshit jobs are devastating in their own way (Graeber noted it would be hard to imagine something worse than a job that is both shit *and* bullshit. Recent internal reports from firms like Goldman Sachs detailing 100-hour work weeks, rampant workplace abuses, and crumbling mental health reveal that such tortures have indeed been imagined).

As anyone who has held a bullshit job can tell you, the work is overwhelmingly “soul-sucking.” As one worker with the classic



indeterminate job title of “Digital Product Project Manager” confessed to Graeber, “What’s it like to have a job like this? Demoralizing. Depressing. I get most of the meaning in my life from my job, and now my job has no meaning or purpose.” To Graeber, this was a kind of “spiritual violence.”

Nonetheless, Graeber didn’t delve deeply into the backgrounds of these bullshit job holders. Here, I wish to pick up where Graeber left off and take a closer look at *who* exactly chooses bullshit jobs and *why*. I would argue that Graeber drastically overstates the ability of the “elite” to thrive in bullshit workplaces or even avoid them altogether. Woefully—and, perhaps, counterintuitively—graduating from an illustrious college does not make one immune to being miserable in a bullshit job.

**I**N MY SHORT STINT AS A CONSULTANT, I WAS surrounded by other graduates of elite institutions. I had graduated from Harvard College in 2020, and a staggering 45 percent of my classmates had gone on to employment in finance or consulting. One study found that “a full 70 percent of Harvard’s senior class submits résumés to Wall Street and consulting firms.”

While Graeber speculated that members of this elite class are uniquely suited to play the game and create meaning when they find themselves in bullshit jobs, I was not unique in my work dissatisfaction. Only 39 percent of those with Ivy League degrees report being engaged at work, and when it comes to personal well-being, just 11 percent are “thriving,” numbers nearly identical to graduates of public or non-selective private universities. In finance and consulting specifically, a meager 6 percent of new employees see themselves in those fields long term. Ask any young professional in such a prestigious job what they think about it and witness their response invariably devolve into a convoluted plan of eventually leaving in pursuit of a higher calling (a friend of mine in finance once detailed to me the politics of clandestinely applying to other jobs while at your Wall Street cubicle).

It is hard to imagine high schoolers being excited to attend a distinguished college in order to then be recruited by JPMorgan to spend 100 hours a week performing contracted proactive asset management. (In case you’re an investment banker chomping at the bit to learn what “contracted proactive asset management” is, it’s a completely fake term I generated with the Financial Bullshit Generator.) In fact, when kids start at elite colleges, this *isn’t* how they see their lives turning out. At Stanford, only (a uniquely deranged) 6 percent of incoming freshmen intend to enter consulting or finance. In fact, in her first graduation speech as President of Harvard, Drew Faust warned graduating seniors of the allure of finance and consulting, instead imploring them to pursue what they love and “what you think will be most meaningful.” (Despite saying “if you don’t try to do what you love ... if you don’t pursue what you think will be most meaningful, you will regret it,” it’s worth noting that in 2018, four days after ending her tenure as President of Harvard University, Faust joined the board of directors of Goldman Sachs. Guess she really must love whatever it is the board of directors of a large financial firm does. That, or the \$575,000 per year that comes with the post.)

With all the privilege and opportunity necessary to transcend the bullshit, why do we find so many members of the elite forsaking Faust’s advice?

Though economic incentives are surely part of the story, it’s not just about following the money. Data on graduates of elite schools show they have immense privilege and a freedom from having to take financial considerations into account in choosing their work. At Ivy League colleges, there are more students in the top 1 percent of income than from all of the bottom half combined. This privilege is not restricted to the Ivy League, as more than 70 percent of students attending the hundred most competitive colleges in the U.S. come from the top quarter of incomes, whereas only 3 percent come from the bottom quartile.

Instead, bullshit jobs held by the upper crust are defined by their exclusivity and prestige. For example, with virtually no differentiation between actual services and employment experience (copying and pasting cover letters never required fewer changes), finance and consulting firms are able to attract graduates by their reputation (simply mention the “Big Three” and watch wannabe consultants start to salivate). Companies pride and advertise themselves on how few applicants they accept and, more importantly, how many they are able to reject. Such application processes are time-consuming, anxiety-inducing, and, above all else, demoralizing. Yet it is precisely because of the complex and degrading path to attain these jobs that they are endowed with prestige, the true drug elite students pursue. One’s career is thus transformed into another special hoop to jump through and brag about (during recruiting season on college campuses, it’s even seen as a badge of honor to leave class early or show up to a party late in business attire to signal that you have been jetting around for interviews). Where exactly you end up working doesn’t really matter, just as long as others can’t join you there.

**P**ERHAPS THE BEST EVIDENCE OF THE POWER of prestige comes from the Teach for America (TFA) program, where new college graduates, typically without a formal background in education, are brought to the decidedly non-bullshit profession of public school teaching. Amy Binder explains: “[The] basic intuition that there must be ways to arrange pathways to alternative careers that undergrads from elite schools might choose is a sound one. Proof of concept comes from Teach for America, the nonprofit founded by Wendy Kopp. As a Princeton undergraduate, Kopp had the profound insight that she could lure elite students into teaching in low-income schools by creating the same kind of high-stakes, tournament-like competition that Wall Street and consulting firms use.”

The genius of TFA comes from using artificial scarcity to create coveted positions. Even as teacher shortages are rampant across the country, TFA still manages to reject over 85 percent of applicants. An important lesson can be gleaned from TFA about how top-tier students react to prestige. The program was hyper-exclusive from the start, focusing on the Ivy League, mimicking the selectiveness of a Wall Street bank. In 2002, TFA accepted 11 times as many students who had applied from Yale as did from Fordham. Accord-



ingly, the gentry of higher education fought their way to get a slice of the renown. Even as recently as 2010, a whopping 12 percent of all Ivy League seniors submitted applications to the program. That year, Teach for America was the largest employer of graduating students at Yale and Dartmouth.

Nevertheless, as the program grew in size and resources, it shifted its recruiting and branding strategy. Binder writes, “Having originally started with the Ivy League, the organization now recruits at hundreds of other selective but not-so-elite campuses.” TFA also explicitly began to recruit with the aim of increasing both racial and economic diversity in its corps members, something Bellwether Education reports was deemphasized in the past in order to “[allow] the perception of a largely white, elite institution to flourish.” However, the contemporary diversification effort has succeeded. Currently, half of TFA’s teachers are people of color, half come from a low-income background, and one-third are first-generation college graduates.

This expansion of diversity is unequivocally a positive development, and research (unsurprisingly) shows that teacher quality, standards, and classroom results have been maintained. Nonetheless, this progress still came at the cost of the program’s stature. In recent years, as applications across the board have dropped off, the steepest decline has been seen at the most selective colleges. In 2011, Harvard was the number one medium-sized college contributing to TFA with 66 students. In 2019, Harvard was just the seventh contributing school with a mere 17 students entering the program. Perhaps no better evidence of how TFA’s changed perception of exclusivity affected the pursuits of graduating liberal elites comes from Cornell’s newspaper, *The Chronicle*. Ten years ago, articles exalting the number of graduating Cornellians joining TFA or profiling students “making a difference” through the program were commonplace. In the last five years, however, only one piece spotlights the program. Its title? “Seven first-generation graduates join Teach For America.”

The case of Teach for America demonstrates a bitter truth about upper echelon job-seekers and the bullshit employment they so often pursue: as long as you make your positions in short supply, arduous to apply to, irrationally selective, and avoid perceptions of inclusivity and diversity, you can get spoiled Ivy Leaguers to do pretty much anything (just as long as they get a branded sticker for their Macbook to flex on those who didn’t make the cut). Revealingly, while TFA is obviously not the only way to become a teacher, only 10 percent of applicants say they would consider entering the field through another route.

TFA was unique in its explicit design of leveraging prestige to draw our “best and brightest” into a low-paying line of work that is critical to society. While there is a separate debate to be had regarding the efficacy and results of the program, it still provides a striking testament to the power of prestige (as a member of the TFA corps for one year, I can anecdotally testify to both the harm and good done by the organization in the low-income communities we served. Overwhelmingly, I witnessed passionate educators giving their all and making real change. Additionally, a variety of research and literature on the program confirms this experience).

If the allure of TFA as a prestigious postgraduate bragging right reveals something about the psychological motivations of elites when deciding their careers, we still need to ask how we ended up in a market economy where many of our other prestigious career paths lead to dead ends of bullshit.

**G**RAEBER POSITED THAT BULLSHIT JOBS play a societal role in keeping the masses too diverted to organize against the ruling classes. But something more sinister is at play with top-tier bullshit jobs. Sure, if not kept chained to their Wall Street desks for 90 hours a week, privileged Ivy League graduates might take to the streets and bring about the anarchist revolution (Graeber himself is not a bad example of what disruptive elites can get into if not properly bogged down. However, his disruption did get him fired from his Yale professorship). Yet, their upper echelon bullshit jobs play another role in propping up our capitalist society. These particular bullshit jobs help maintain the signifiers of status and class that preserve our illusion of societal meritocracy.

Fields like finance and consulting are useful microcosms of how our society has come to blindly accept credentialism and technocracy. Binder offers her insight once again:

*“Other industries managed to find the talent they needed—to, say, devise new medicines or software or oil exploration techniques—from the broad array of American colleges and universities. While happy to hire Ivy Leaguers, they didn’t inordinately seek them out. Wall Street and the consulting firms, by contrast, developed business models that relied on the appearance of brainpower in order to win clients. This put a premium on recruiting from a handful of universities with the highest worldwide brand equity. Top students from Purdue or UCLA might be just as good, or even better, at putting together spreadsheets. But being able to boast that you have a team of kids from Harvard is important when you are trying to sell high-cost consulting and financial services of uncertain value.”*

Just as manufactured prestige lures graduates of esteemed institutions toward these fields, the same narrative sells the bullshit services of these companies to their clients for hundreds of millions of dollars. The number of Ivy League suits you can have running around your office has become far more important than any real metric of efficacy. It’s for this reason that these companies are willing to devote so much time, effort, and resources into recruiting and wooing these potential employees exclusively from a handful of super-elite schools while ignoring the rest of the talent pool. (In one case, close to \$1 million was budgeted per year for “social events” at just one elite school. That’s a lot of cocktail party hors d’oeuvres to put down between classes and frat parties.) Wining and dining 19-year-olds as you fly them around the country for interviews and office visits actually gives a solid return on investment when they join your ranks and grant you prominence. We have collectively become so obsessed with the purported excellence of eminent educational institutions that we are willing to accept and even idolize the existence of entire industries that provide little, or even negative, impact to the world.



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# WHY YOU HATE YOUR JOB

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In his recent book *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?*, Michael J. Sandel sets out to prove the harm we cause by admiring credentials to the point of worship.<sup>1</sup> He explains that only recently has higher education come to be viewed as a competitive and meritocratic process of selecting the most talented young Americans and training them to lead society. Just 50 years ago more than 80 percent of Americans didn't attend four-year universities, and colleges like Stanford accepted close to one out of three applicants. Today, however, Stanford's acceptance rate is under 4 percent. This hyper-exclusivity manufactures superiority with real-world consequence. Sandel writes:

*"More than a matter of bragging rights, the kudos associated with attending a highly selective college carry over into employment opportunities after graduation. This is not mainly because employers believe students learn more at elite colleges than at less-selective places, but because employers have faith in the sorting function these colleges perform and value the meritocratic honor they bestow."*

The glaring problem with our love of educational meritocracy and the prestige and riches we confer to those at the top is, of course, the fact that our sorting system is not actually fair. In both higher education and the broader job market, we don't actually select the "best and brightest," but rather the "prosperous and privileged."

For example, key variables in the college admissions process like SAT scores and access to extracurriculars are highly correlated with wealth. It's no wonder that according to researcher Raj Chetty, students from the 1 percent have a 77 times greater chance of getting into the Ivy League than their counterparts from the bottom 20 percent (beyond income, schools like Harvard have an admissions rate for legacy applicants of 33 percent, compared to under 5 percent for the general populace). Furthermore, in research across 1,800 colleges and universities, Chetty finds economic mobility to be jarringly low, with less than 2 percent of students rising from the bottom quintile of income to the top.

Thus, higher education really isn't the great equalizer and path out of poverty that we make it out to be. In Sandel's own words, "American higher education is like an elevator in a building that most people enter on the top floor." For this reason, influential companies are incorrect in their assumption that pulling exclusively from top-ranked universities will supply them with the cream of the crop. Instead, they just rake from a pool of privileged students.

For example, during my recruiting process for illustrious management consulting firms, the word "Harvard" was a proxy for showing I knew what I was doing, when, in fact, I truly did not. Yes, I copy and pasted cover letters and painstakingly chose a font for my résumé. I even performed in esoteric interviews where I correctly guesstimated the number of toilet paper rolls sold each year or how many park benches exist in the country (for this later "case interview," I panicked and said "more than 100." Needless to say, even my Harvard background did not help me land that job). But I was undeniably bringing little substance to the table. During my internship, realizing the bullshit I had found myself in, I filled my time sleeping through meetings, watching NPR Tiny Desk concerts on my computer, and stalking through our corporate building for free

luncheons. Yet, bafflingly, I was still given a return offer with a starting salary of \$85,000. I was rewarded for my credentials and for abiding by the rules of the prestigious bullshit job.

Here we uncover the true societal purpose of boutique bullshit jobs. When our higher education system spits out thousands of the (allegedly) finest, who, in fact, are neither the most gifted nor best trained, what do you do with them? Sending them to be exposed in the grind of the regular corporate workforce (think famously annoying Cornellian Andy Bernard from *The Office*), or, God forbid, to labor amongst the lower classes (remember, it's only Matt Damon's Harvard-sized brain that ends up rescuing his character from janitorial work in *Good Will Hunting*), is out of the question. Viewed from another direction, there are few naturally occurring jobs that can justify four years of a bullshit liberal arts education at the tune of \$60,000 a year. Enter elite bullshit jobs. In these enclaves of enigmatic business practices, we walking products of false meritocracy can be compensated exorbitantly to plug away at pointless bullshit, maintaining the facade that we are indeed the crème de la crème.

**T**HESE ELITE BULLSHIT JOBS ARE ULTIMATELY sending a dangerous message: they tell us that while there may be class hierarchies in society, those at the top deserve to be where they are. Perversely, the more outrageous the evidence we see of this inequality, the more it seems to affirm the staggering skill and talent of the elite. A teenager can lock down a lifetime of six- to eight-figure salaries based on two hour-long interviews? "Wow, I guess he really must be the best of the best."

Perhaps the easiest way to see how ingrained this worldview has become is to look at instances that deviate from the mold of expected social status and occupation pairing. When I was employed as "just" a high school history teacher, I could see the circuits in peoples' brains shorting when they found out where I went to college. In answering not-so-subtle questions like "what are you doing here?" or "what happened?" I could never leave them satisfied until I shared that I was part of Teach for America. Then, faith in the justness of society had been restored. Nevertheless, when I later worked as a part-time garbage man, I learned quickly to never mention my educational pedigree.

This near universal understanding and acceptance of how we allocate fortune based on supposed meritocracy is detrimental to society for many reasons. (Although note that even a meritocracy that had not failed would still be unfair. Sandel goes so far as to argue that even if we did live in a world where we could sort citizens perfectly based on their natural talent, this would not necessarily be any more just and would still be accompanied by significant harm.) As Ivy League graduates manipulate obscure financial instruments and jet around the world to attend corporate meetings, others can look on with awe; but they can only jealously curse their own shortcomings for why the roles aren't reversed. We fail to question those who are successful and resist important debate when we embrace the notion that those on top have utterly earned their status. Even amongst the elite Sandel argues that:

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1. As a disclosure, I worked with Sandel as an undergraduate research assistant for this book.



*"It is impossible to view success as anything other than the result of individual effort and achievement. This is the standpoint that generates the conviction among the winners that they have earned their success, that they have made it on their own. This belief can be criticized as a form of meritocratic hubris; it attributes more than it should to individual striving and forgets the advantages that convert effort into success.*

At the same time, our society incorrectly views the misfortune and livelihood of those at the bottom as products of their own doing, and therefore less worthy of reparation or respect:

*"The meritocratic age has also inflicted a more insidious injury on working people: eroding the dignity of work. By valorizing the 'brains' it takes to score well on college admission tests, the sorting machine disparages those without meritocratic credentials. It tells them that the work they do, less valued by the market than the work of well-paid professionals, is a lesser contribution to the common good, and so less worthy of social recognition and esteem. It legitimates the lavish rewards the market bestows on the winners and the meager pay it offers workers without a college degree."*

At the same time that we lionize the "winners" of the constructed educational game, we have internalized dangerous opinions on the necessity of formal higher education and those that don't fit the mold. Alarming, the most common, extreme, and unapologetic biases those with college educations hold are against the less-educated, perhaps the only remaining group acceptable to mock (peruse some fun *Buzzfeed* listicles like "20 Extremely Dumb People Who Somehow Breathe The Exact Same Air You Do").

**S**O HOW DO WE GET OUT OF THE DYSTOPIAN prestige trap? Although Graeber made it clear that his book was simply about exposing the problem of bullshit jobs and not about making policy recommendations, he briefly discussed the implications of Universal Basic Income (UBI)—a program of regular, direct, and non-means tested government payouts—on our work regime. Depending on how comprehensive the payouts would be, a UBI could instantaneously eliminate entire swaths of our current bloated, ineffective, and demeaning system of means-tested welfare benefits. Even government-hating conservatives could get behind this massive reduction of agencies and intervention.

More directly related to shit and bullshit jobs, the creation of a sufficient payment would liberate many Americans from degrading working conditions and meaningless work. In response to the objection that lazy recipients would sit around all day and do nothing, Graeber pointed out that even people who win the lottery or are inmates in prison still choose to work. But even still, we can answer the question of what people will do with their lives without the cruel spur of poverty with a simple, "who cares what they do?" Surely when given the freedom to self-determine, individuals will be happier than when imprisoned in workplace hells. As for the "essential" jobs, we would have to properly pay and appreciate the contributions of those that perform them, by no means a bad thing. Graeber writes:

*"It's extremely difficult to imagine someone living without finan-*

*cial constraints choosing to spend any significant amount of their time highlighting forms for a Medical Care Cost Management company. ... [A]nd if Medical Care Cost Management companies continued to exist, they would have to figure out another way to highlight their forms. ... No doubt a certain proportion of the population of a free society would spend their lives on projects most others would consider to be silly or pointless; but it's hard to imagine how it would go much over 10 or 20 percent. But already right now, 37 to 40 percent of workers in rich countries already feel their jobs are pointless. Roughly half the economy consists of, or exists in support of, bullshit. And it's not even particularly interesting bullshit! If we let everyone decide for themselves how they were best fit to benefit humanity, with no restrictions at all, how could they possibly end up with a distribution of labor more inefficient than the one we already have?"*

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A UBI could also create a greater culture of equality through its universal nature. By giving the payment to all members of society, even those fortunate enough not to need it, society creates a human right to a basic minimum. All members of society would start on a level playing field (further needs like disability could be compensated for after the original inclusive payment). Perhaps this fundamental understanding of inherent worth could help combat the arrogant hierarchy of meritocracy.

Regarding the feasibility of such a policy, multiple proposals exist to fund payments, from converting budgets of existing welfare programs to increased taxation for industries like finance or technology. Most relevantly, multiple countries established various forms of direct payments to citizens during the pandemic. Even Vice President Kamala Harris proposed \$2,000 payments to be given during and after the pandemic, tweeting, "it's that basic."

Furthermore, to solve our crisis of attitude toward higher education



and credentialed prestige, Sandel offers a few proposals. In regards to the hyper-exclusivity of elite college admissions, after using a basic filter for those who meet minimum requirements and are able to succeed if accepted, we could make transparent the privilege and luck inherent to the process by openly randomizing the selection of students from this pool of applicants. This would recognize the difficulty of sorting for potential, treat merit as a threshold qualification instead of an ideal to be maximized, and humble those fortunate enough to be admitted without demeaning those that are not admitted.

Going even further, we could prioritize other forms of higher education besides private four-year universities. In recent years, Sandel reports that funding for public colleges has plummeted to a nadir where schools derive more funding from tuition than by actual governmental support. This has in many ways given rise to the unaffordable nature of college and the student debt crisis. We also grossly overlook technical and vocational training. Annually, \$162 billion is spent to help Americans go to college, but only \$1.1 billion is allocated for career and technical education. When compared to other advanced countries, the U.S. spends 0.1 percent of GDP on active labor market programs while others spend five to ten times that rate. Sandel summarizes:

*“One way to begin [repairing the damage] is by dismantling the hierarchy of esteem that accords greater honor and prestige to students enrolled in name-brand colleges and universities than to those in community colleges or in technical and vocational training programs. Learning to become a plumber or electrician or dental hygienist should be respected as a valuable contribution to the common good, not regarded as a consolation prize for those who lack the SAT scores or financial means to make it to the Ivy League.”*

Finally, a solution to our problem can come from an interior change in how we view our own employment, irrespective of society's valuations. I am not here to convince you that you have a Bullshit Job. I truly believe that only your own soul-searching and reflection of your work will provide you with an honest answer to that question. But there indeed exist other ways of directing one's professional life beyond the pursuit of prestige.

Sandel once again reminds us of the significance of work and the power of a properly constructed labor scheme,

*“From the standpoint of the civic conception, the most important role we play in the economy is not as consumers but as producers. For it is as producers that we develop and exercise our abilities to provide goods and services that fulfill the needs of our fellow citizens and win social esteem.”*

We must ask ourselves in what way we want to produce for our community. As an alternative to external regard, perhaps measured by how easily our grandmas can brag about us to their friends or how serviceable our job title is in our Tinder bio, we can make a turn toward an internal dignity of work, or how high we can hold our heads after a day's work. Marrying legitimate passions with impactful professions is one way to accomplish this. Eager doctors, lawyers, researchers, academics, and teachers can all find personal pride in the consequence of their work, with or without the outside valuation accorded by top institutions or preeminent organizations.

Trade and craft vocations like those of electricians and plumbers offer us commendable frameworks for how this can and has been

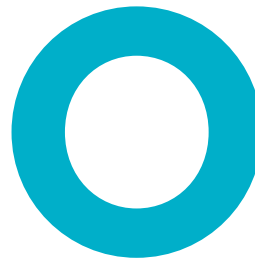
achieved for countless workers. Have you ever watched a plumber fix your toilet? The knowledge and skill required is undeniably impressive. The impact on our lives is even more incontrovertible. I'd like to see a consultant point to such direct results. (Once, a software engineer friend teased me for not knowing what a for-loop was. When, in return, I asked him whether he knew how to operate a trash compactor, he shut up quickly.) There is no reason why everyone can not similarly produce their own respect for meaningful work.

Even more radically, such internal dignity need not exempt the positions sorely overlooked by society, or even wait for the broader culture to come around. Just because our capitalist economy has improperly awarded workers in essential fields like farming, sanitation, and hospitality does not mean dignity can't be found in their indispensable nature. At the very least, pursuing such careers should provide more righteousness than working a bullshit job of any degree, where you are quite literally contributing nothing to the common good.

In recent years, I have spent short stints employed in such positions. (I first conceived of this article while working on a farm and literally scooping various types of shit.) While I in no way wish to romanticize or ignore the exhausting realities of this labor, I found certain value in these positions that was absent in any bullshit job I had previously held. As Martin Luther King, Jr., asserted:

*“Whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity and is for the building of humanity, it has dignity, and it has worth. One day our society must come to see this. One day our society will come to respect the sanitation worker if it is to survive, for the person who picks up our garbage, in the final analysis, is as significant as the physician, for if he doesn't do his job, diseases are rampant. All labor has dignity.”*

Whether this dignity of labor is derived from external or internal sources, it is a prerequisite to our pursuit of the good life, both as individuals and as a people.



OUR SOCIETY PLACES A TREMENDOUS value on our profession as part of our identity. When you meet someone at a party (remember those?), after their name, their job is the first thing you ask them (actually most common surnames are literally derived from jobs: Smith, Miller, etc.). “What do you do?” Such

broad phrasing, yet we all know what it means.

If our jobs are so important, we ought to have work that is meaningful, both to ourselves and society, and that pays a dignified wage. Irrespective of socioeconomic, educational, or racial background, all individuals deserve to be respected producers for their communities. By changing how we think about our work, we could truly revolutionize our life experience.

Maybe in the not-too-distant future, our identities will no longer be based on the work we do for a wage. When people at parties ask “What do you do?” it won't feel like a teeth-pulling performance of small talk. Maybe our answers will help us learn about one another in a more genuine way. We can connect with each other as people with passions, relationships, and dreams. At the very least, parties might just be a bit more bearable. ✚

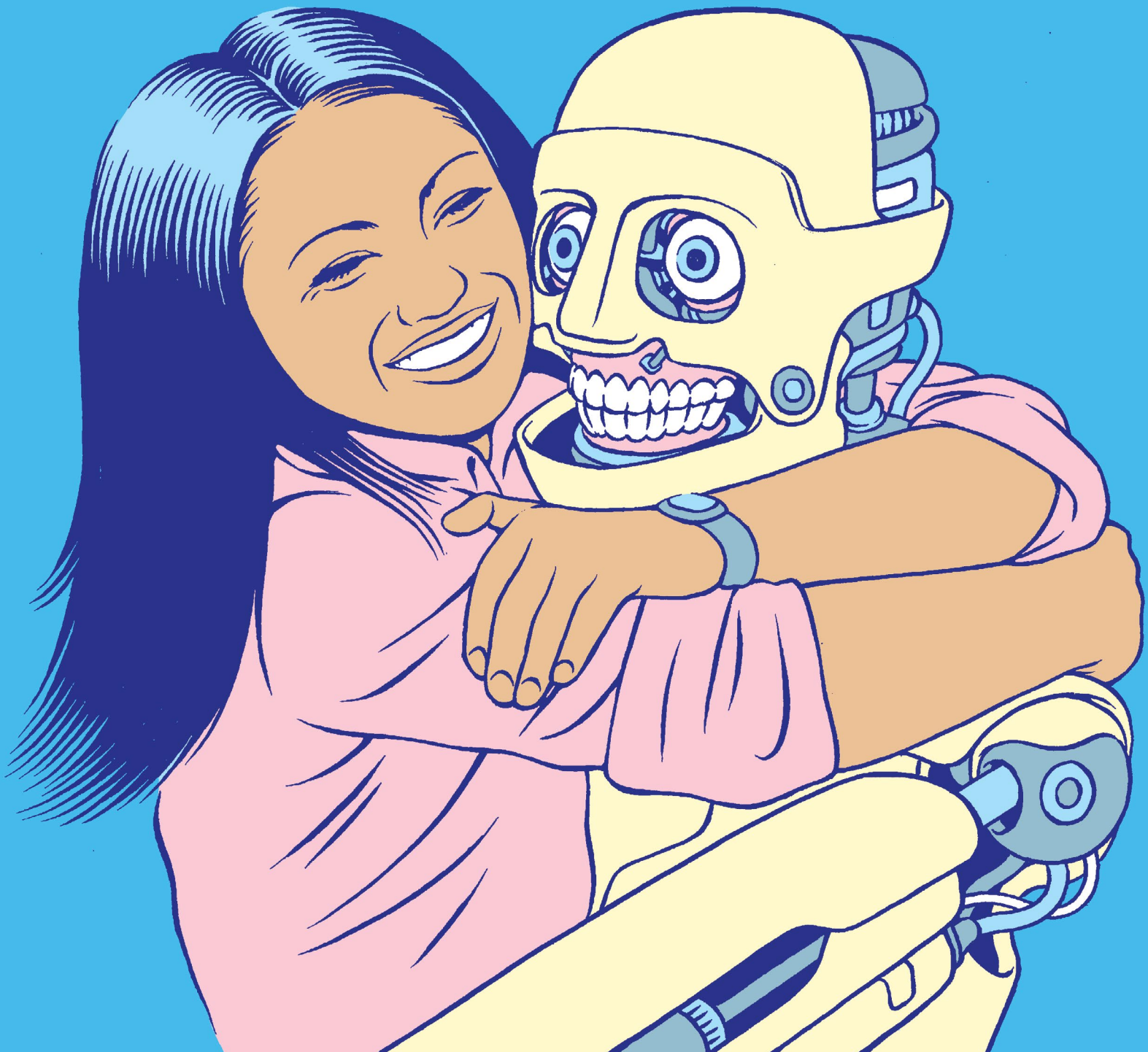


# LONELY?

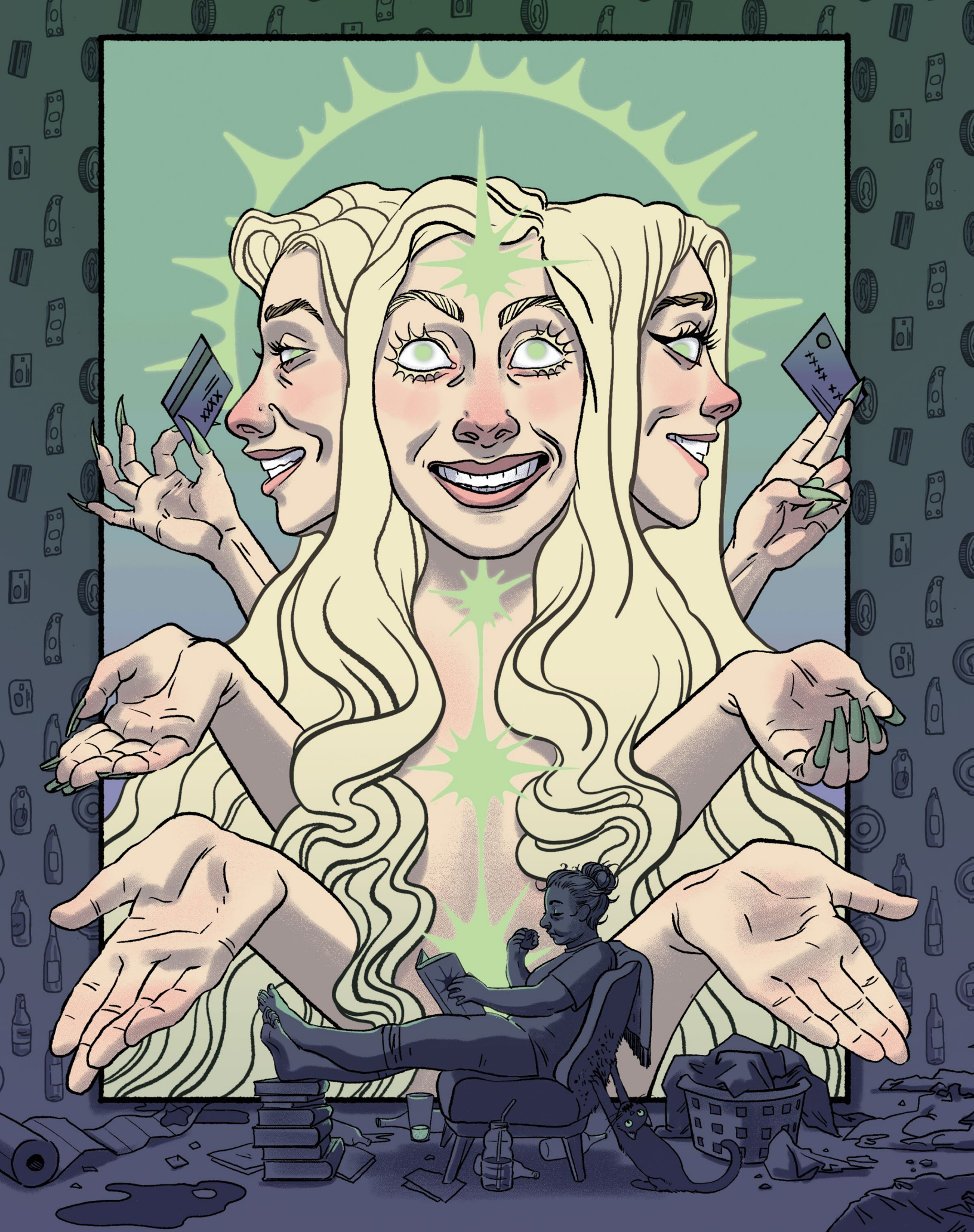
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**A**LCOHOL POSES AN EVER-INCREASING THREAT to women's health and the quality of their lives. In 2019, four percent of women in the United States had an alcohol use disorder, and 13 percent of adult women binge drank several times each month. Ap-

proximately 1 out of every 20 pregnant women binge drinks while pregnant. In recent years, beverage corporations have aggressively pursued women by linking alcohol with breast cancer awareness pink ribbons (also known as "pink washing"), promoting "skinny" drinks, and posting social media content that conflates drinking with female empowerment. Alcohol presents even more serious problems for women of color and of lower socioeconomic status, as these women are far less likely to receive treatment and experience greater stigmatization and discrimination for substance abuse issues. Sexual minority women face even greater risks; they are seven times more likely to meet the criteria for alcohol dependence compared to heterosexual women.

If you go to your local library or bookstore and peruse the psychology sections, you are likely to come across at least a couple of books about addiction written by women who have journeyed through sobriety. A close look at more than a dozen books in this genre, all of which I initially read in my first sober year, reveals themes of work and family stress, eating disorders, childhood trauma, sorrow, anger, and, in many cases, success in recovery.

One noticeable problem with the genre is that it ignores the socioeconomic and racial realities of alcohol dependency among women in the U.S. While Americans with higher socioeconomic status use alcohol similarly or even more so than those with fewer financial resources, people with lower socioeconomic status often face greater consequences for drinking, including loss of employment, health complications, arrests, and convictions. Women with more resources can hide their drinking more easily because they experience less scrutiny and greater autonomy at work, can pay for childcare and grocery delivery, and can afford ridesharing services when going out at night, minimizing their risk for employment, family,

and legal challenges as a result of their drinking. In contrast, women in poverty bear the burden of psychological distress due to not only their lack of economic resources but also because of neighborhood violence, which increases their risk for alcoholism. White female drinkers who live in poorer neighborhoods, when compared with those in

wealthier ones, typically have more alcohol-related family trauma and use drugs at higher rates. Additionally, white women are significantly more likely to receive treatment for sub-

stance use disorders than Black and Latina women, even those with similar socioeconomic and insurance statuses.

Further barriers for women of color include lack of childcare and valid concerns about being reported to child welfare agencies, which tend to target Black families disproportionately.

Additionally, top-selling books are not rigorously fact-checked (a serious problem in the world of nonfiction books), and authors often mix discussions of legitimate science with quackery or unproven practices, which is outright dangerous for the non-discerning reader.

Authors in this genre also tend to appropriate the language of social justice (rallying against capitalism, patriarchy, and so forth) to make readers think that tackling their alcohol problems (or doing self-care) equates to a larger project of social change. These writers cleverly create a trail of breadcrumbs that leads vulnerable readers to programs such as expensive online

courses and coaching services and related products and services, many of which are offered by the authors themselves. Aspirational big-money lifestyles are highlighted while effective programs like Alcoholics Anonymous are trashed. Most dangerous of all, this consumptive approach to alcohol dependency treatment makes products a substitute for healthcare from a qualified mental health professional.

**I**N 2021, THE YEAR I QUIT DRINKING, I SPENT A great deal of time walking around my neighborhood in the fog of early sobriety, headphones in, the words of self-help writers rolling into my ears. I found this practice an effective way to not only burn off the sugar from all the boxes of Entenmann's donuts I consumed but also to fill the time between

# THE QUIT-LIT PSEUDOSCIENCE

*and*

# FAULTY FEMINISM

*of*

# WOMEN'S SOBRIETY MEMOIRS

*by Jennifer Dines*

managing my antipsychotic medications, attending therapy appointments, napping, and watching *The Sopranos*.

I'd first forayed into the women's addiction genre in the early-aughts, when I came across a copy of Caroline Knapp's *Drinking: A Love Story* in a thrift store. I purchased Knapp's memoir for \$2, and I read it nearly a dozen times in the span of a couple years. The book offered numerous scenes of the type of drinking I loved to do. Alone at a bar. With a close friend at a bar, stumbling into the bathroom and back, then having another and another. All-weekend binges with someone who drank more than I did, who made me say to myself, "At least I'm not as bad as my sad sack friend. I can handle my drinks." And, my favorite: drinking glass after glass of wine while whipping up some elaborate meal.

At that time, I went out every night to either attend rock shows or perform in them with my band Anti-Love Project. I routinely consumed anywhere from four to more than a dozen drinks a night. I felt tough that I could keep up with the boys around me, but I also secretly worried about my penchant for self-destruction and the days I strung together sleeping in bed in the pitch-blackness of depression.

Almost all of *Drinking: A Love Story*, with its romanticized scenes of alcohol consumption alongside Knapp's maintenance of her writing gig at the *Boston Phoenix*, seemed adventurous and so realistic, a map for my possible future. Except for the part at the end when Knapp goes to rehab and meets up with friends at coffee shops, which sounded extremely boring. Even after a stint in the emergency room, which landed me in the dual-diagnosis unit at McLean Hospital—the very place made famous by *Girl, Interrupted*—I remained loyal to my favorite substance. I would never give up on my drinking like Caroline did. Or so I thought.

**F**AST-FORWARD TO 2021 WHEN, NEWLY DRIED OUT, I purchased the audiobook of *Drinking: A Love Story*. From there, I bought the next suggested title and then the next one. Leslie Jamison's *The Recovering: Intoxication and Its Aftermath* seamlessly weaves Jamison's personal story and surgical self-analysis with a breadth of research about alcohol-fueled literary geniuses and the history of Alcoholics Anonymous. Cat Marnell's whiplash addiction memoir *How to Murder Your Life* took me on a wild ride through her relatable anxiety-powered bouts of creative sundowning and offered up fascinating insider tidbits on the New York fashion and beauty world.

Several of these books serve as an entry point into the authors' online courses, meetings, and coaching services.<sup>1</sup> Laura McKowen's *We Are the Luckiest* allows you to continue your journey in her on-

line Luckiest Club for \$242 per year. Holly Whitaker's *Quit Like a Woman: The Radical Choice to Not Drink in a Culture Obsessed with Alcohol* leads to the Tempest Sobriety School for \$59 per month. (Tempest partnered with Syracuse University in a study to test the program's effectiveness, which found that the program resulted in positive changes in mental health and reduced alcohol and drug use in the fraction of participants who fully completed the study. However, the fine print shows that Holly Whitaker co-authored the study and Tempest funded it.) Annie Grace, who wrote *This Naked Mind*, has a free 30-day sobriety program, but beware the upsell. She charges \$197 for *100 Days of Lasting Change*, and \$997 for a full year of *The Path: Freedom Accelerated*. Sober vegans who delight in Rebecca Weller's *A Happier Hour* can participate in her *Sexy Sobriety* program for \$799 per year.

In recent years, health care professionals have shown increasing interest in online programs and apps for the treatment of substance use disorders, due to their cost-effectiveness, accessibility, and wide reach. However, these electronic interventions work best when they are empirically tested, supported by mental health professionals, and used in conjunction with traditional therapy sessions. The rogue courses developed by private for-profit entities tend not to have such features. In fact, the Luckiest Club, Tempest, and This Naked Mind all have disclaimers on their websites stating that their personnel are not licensed medical professionals.

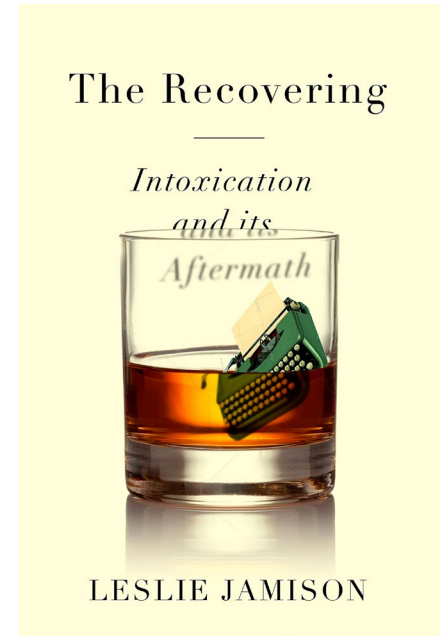
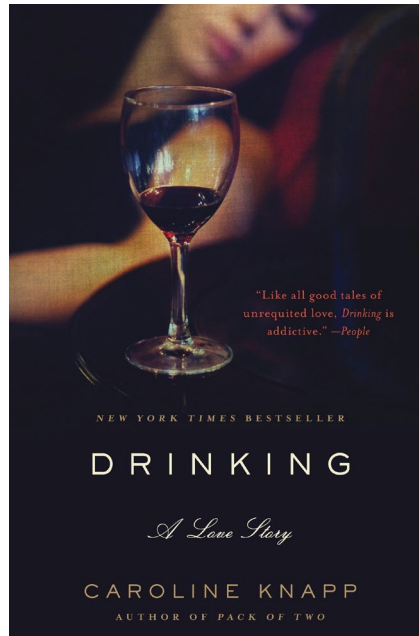
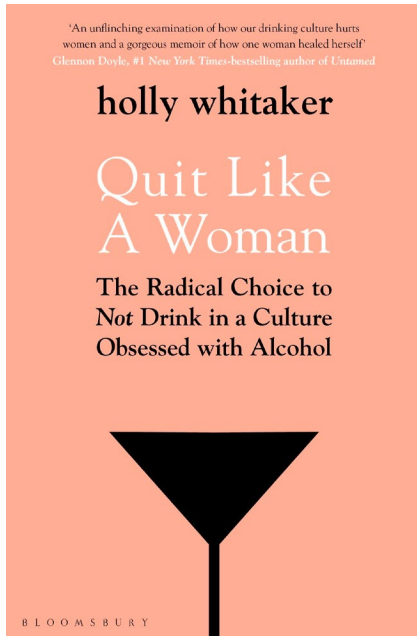
## WeWoke

AN IMPORTANT FEATURE OF THE GENRE IS THE WAY THE authors build emotional intimacy with the reader. Both Whitaker and Grace strategically use first-plural pronouns (we, us, and our) to promote the idea that we're all in this together. For example, in the introduction of *Quit*, Whitaker claims that her book is "about our power as women—both as individuals and as a collective," bonding us all together as we move through Whitaker's 300-plus-page infomercial. The last paragraph of *This Naked Mind* reminds the readers that buying into Grace's ideology means that "we save ourselves and prepare this amazing planet and all its incredible inhabitants for the next generation for our children." We have joined the club and are now part of saving the world for the imaginable future. This very skillful use of language belies the fact that the authors seek to turn a profit from the reader by encouraging consumption. How more consumption translates into "saving the planet" is unclear.

Both authors also appeal to a reader's sense of powerlessness against big corporations that dominate every aspect of modern life. *Quit Like a Woman* and *This Naked Mind*, for instance, got me the most riled up to fight the battle against both Big Alcohol (the mega-corporations such as Anheuser-Busch, Coors, and Heineken that aggressively market the poisonous beverages they sell) and Big Sobriety (the unregulated for-profit rehabilitation companies that aggressively market their expensive treatment centers despite the fact that they don't actually offer medical care). Whitaker convinced me that my own personal sobriety could stick it to the man:

1. While none of these sobriety product-peddling women authors hold degrees or certifications in the medical field, their prestigious educational and professional credentials may lead readers to believe that they possess greater expertise in healthcare than they really do. McKowen, a former Vice-President in a large public relations firm, holds a B.A. in Marketing as well as an MBA. Whitaker has a degree in Business Management Economics and formerly worked as a Revenue Director at One Medical, a membership-based primary care service. Grace held a position as Global Head of Marketing in the financial services industry and has a graduate degree in Business Marketing and Entrepreneurial Studies. Weller formerly had a corporate career and now serves as a brand ambassador for the Institute for Integrative Nutrition, which offers a Health Coach Training Program, open to anyone with at least a high school diploma or equivalent, for \$6,995.





“the capitalist patriarchy” of Big Alcohol’s “assloads of money and power and access.” Whitaker appealingly connects the act of quitting drinking to the “ascension” of “women and other historically marginalized individuals.” She poses the question: What would happen if we all rejected alcohol? According to Whitaker: “world domination, bitches.” (What she means by this, however, is never elaborated upon.)

Whitaker condemns the patriarchy, but her book has multiple references to people who allegedly committed sexual abuse against women and girls. For example, she quotes the late yoga guru Yogi Bha-jan (yoga historian Philip Deslippe said he would be remembered as the “Harvey Weinstein of Yoga,” and the *New York Times* referred to him in 2004 in an obituary as the “boss’ of worlds spiritual and capitalistic”), seemingly unaware of claims that he had been accused of physically, sexually, and emotionally abusing women and children. She also repeatedly cites “integral philosopher” and climate denier Ken Wilber (who, according to a 2008 *Salon* profile, held “out the promise that we can understand mystical experience without lapsing into New Age mush”) despite his partnership with spiritual leader Marc Gafni, a yoga teacher and former rabbi accused of sexual assault of a teenage girl. Another passage in *This Naked Mind* appears to sympathize with college rapists who commit their sexual assaults while drunk: “The majority of college rapes involving alcohol are not planned. These boys don’t intend to become rapists. In a major study, a boy who forced sex on a female friend wrote, ‘Alcohol loosened us up and the situation occurred by accident. If no alcohol was consumed, I never would have crossed that line.’”<sup>2</sup> It’s jarring to read someone who claims to want to empower female readers citing such harmful characters.

2. The ‘drinking made me do it’ argument was also used by Stanford rapist Brock Turner. Chanel Miller made her thoughts about alcohol and rape clear in the victim impact statement she read aloud to Turner at his trial: “This is not a story of another drunk college hookup with poor decision making. Assault is not an accident.”

Whitaker then rails against the collective oppressions of “poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, classism, ableism.” My own experience primed me to see Whitaker’s proclamations as important. As a veteran bilingual teacher in the Boston Public Schools, I have witnessed the effects of these -isms on my new immigrant students in terms of homelessness, medical care, and food access. But it was plain to see that Whitaker’s equating of sobriety with social justice held no real weight; rather, Whitaker dabbles in equality to further her own self-improvement, rather than committing herself to real means of changing society.

Whitaker writes that she has “gone to a number of antiracism workshops that [she] would count as not just ‘personal development’ but ‘societal and cultural development.’” This seems a bit like checking these items off a list. In the style of Black-People-Love-Us (a satirical website featuring a fictitious preppy white couple boasting about their crew of Black friends), she namedrops her activist “friend” Rachel Cargle, founder of the Loveland Therapy Fund which (unlike Tempest) takes action against racial disparities in mental health care by financing these services for women of color. She further boosts her own equality cred by trying out a protest, the 2017 Women’s March in Los Angeles, where she was broadly “protesting (for or against) all the things: the NRA, reproductive rights, diversity and inclusion.” She even advises the readers to do this little experiment for themselves: “If you’ve never been to a protest, check one out.” While it’s certainly commendable to go to a protest in support of your beliefs and to encourage others to do the same, the effort here seemed lacking in a deeper commitment to involvement in organizations that do the hard work of improving people’s lives in concrete ways.

What’s more troubling, however, is the following: in the last paragraph of *Quit*, Whitaker draws parallels between the Stone-wall Riots (throwing in a mini history lesson: “a group of queer and

trans people fought back against the harassment of the LGBTQIA community by the NYPD”) and the “revolution” that Whitaker herself began in a bar. She bases this comparison on the fact that she wrote the final words of her book on June 28, the anniversary of Stonewall. The suggestion that her individual experience resembled those of the Stonewall rioters is simply bizarre.

If Whitaker were serious about combating the societal injustices she cites, she would be better off advocating for policy changes such as expanding community-based prevention programs and access to medical care. Instead, she spends a good portion of her book outlining all the products and services she consumed in her sobriety journey and ultimately leads the reader to services from which she will make a generous profit.

## Consumers Are Us

THE FIRST CHAPTER OF *QUIT* READS LIKE A CONSUMER superhero origin story. At the tender age of 13, Whitaker visits her cousin, an accountant, and lusts after her fancy home in an exclusive neighborhood with “the best schools” and fondly remembers her “first Starbucks.” As a young adult, Whitaker wants nothing less than “money,” “status,” and “purity” (whatever that means). She admiringly watches *Pirates of Silicon Valley* and lands a job in a “Big Four” accounting firm.

Whitaker details the investments she made in “treating” her own sobriety, including massages at the Kabuki Spa (\$120-170), amino acid therapy (\$139 for 90 min.), Kundalini yoga teacher training (\$200-\$7,000), sound therapy (\$80 to \$500 an hour), and even a two-month trip to Italy to celebrate quitting her corporate job à la *Eat Pray Love*. In total, Whitaker “spent thousands of dollars on therapy and programs and acupuncture and health care and vitamins and gurus” including a “magical” therapist who “wasn’t fucking around ... charged \$250 a session” and “didn’t scrap with insurance.” Basically, in Whitaker’s world, less-costly insurance-taking therapists just yank our cranks and we should all be asking ourselves: why save when we can spend?

Whitaker clearly has a specific audience in mind, perhaps the sort of woman who can consume her way to social justice the way Whitaker consumes her way to personal wellness:

*“We buy organic. We use natural sunscreens and beauty products. We worry about fluoride in our water, smog in our air, hydrogenated oils in our food, and we debate whether plastic bottles are safe to drink from. We replace toxic cleaning products with Mrs. Meyer’s and homemade vinegar concoctions. We do yoga, we run, we SoulCycle and Fitbit, we go paleo and keto, we juice, we cleanse. We do coffee enemas and steam our yonis and drink clay and charcoal and shoot up vitamins and sit in infrared foil boxes and hire naturopaths and shamans and functional doctors and we take nootropics [drugs to enhance cognition], and we stress about our telomeres (those are all real words). We Instagram how proud we are of this and follow Goop and Well + Good and drop forty bucks on an exercise class because there are healing crystals in the floor.”*

Who exactly belongs to this particular class of “we”? Certainly,

not me, a middle-class public school teacher and mother of three. The only “real” people I knew of who do all these things are *The Real Housewives*. And it’s hard to say which is more troubling: that Whitaker’s hyper-consumptive regimen of (mostly) pseudoscience is so extreme, or that some readers may find it aspirational.

## Is Alcoholics Anonymous For Idiots?

*QUIT LIKE A WOMAN* AND *THIS NAKED MIND* HAVE extremely flawed takes on Alcoholics Anonymous, presumably because the *Big Book* by Alcoholics Anonymous, an organization with “several million members in 181 countries,” is part of their competition for clients. And AA’s price point of free certainly can’t be beat. (Both *Quit* and *This Naked Mind* also fail to mention employer-based initiatives. For example, the federal Family Medical Leave Act allows 12 weeks of leave for addiction treatment. According to U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics for 2021, 55 percent of U.S. employees had access to Employee Assistance Programs through which licensed professionals provide confidential mental health services at no cost to employees.)

Both Grace and Whitaker take issue with AA’s adoption of the disease model of addiction—meaning the classification of alcoholism as a medical condition. While it’s one thing to object to a label—both authors claim that the program forces its members to unnecessarily label themselves as alcoholics—the reality is that alcohol use, especially heavy and prolonged alcohol use, does cause serious medical diseases such as alcoholic liver disease (which can lead to a more severe form called cirrhosis) and alcoholic neuropathy, as well as a heightened risk for numerous cancers. Grace cites Dr. Lance Dodes’ controversial claims that that AA only works for a small percentage of its members and that “spontaneous sobriety,” or forgoing any type of treatment whatsoever, has four to seven times more effectiveness than AA. In *Quit*’s sixth chapter, titled “AA Was Created for Men,” Whitaker argues that AA tells women and people from other marginalized backgrounds “to renounce power, voice, authority, and desire” and characterizes addicts as “egocentric selfish liars” while asserting that “women [need] a different approach,” presumably the one designed by Whitaker herself.

However, a 2020 literature review published in *Alcohol and Alcoholism* by researchers from Harvard Medical School, the Stanford University School of Medicine, and The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction finds that AA attracts “a diverse membership of women and men from a wide range of racial and ethnic backgrounds.” While AA and other outpatient treatment programs had comparable effectiveness in areas such as periods of abstinence and number of drinks per day, AA resulted in higher abstinence rates and greater cost-effectiveness. A 2012 study in the journal *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* acknowledges concerns around the concept of “powerlessness” (the first of AA’s 12 Steps is that “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable”) and male pronouns in AA’s literature with regards to the possible disenfranchisement



of women. However, the article indicates that philosophical concerns “have not been born out empirically,” as women comprise a third of AA members and multiple studies also show that women in AA benefit as much or more than men.

*Quit* acknowledges that “Alcoholics Anonymous was truly revolutionary, the first organization that helped people stop drinking on a mass scale.” But ultimately she reduces it to a “simple program that any idiot could do who had two cents and some humility.” You don’t even need a pair of pennies to sit in an AA meeting; all you need to do is show up. But remember: *free* doesn’t cut it for Big Spender Holly Whitaker.

## What Me Science?

IN READING THESE BOOKS, AN INITIAL RED FLAG FOR ME came from something so small that it could be attributed to an innocent error or typo. In *Quit*, Whitaker claims that the final season of *Mad Men* was set in 1976 even though it was actually 1970. Since something so easy to fact-check hadn’t been, I became suspicious. I didn’t have to go far to find other problems where the authors skipped over nuance or offered contradictory takes. For instance, Grace’s *This Naked Mind* contains a “too-good-to-be-true” claim about heroin users from the Vietnam War. Grace claims that American GIs who used heroin in Vietnam easily quit “with almost no withdrawal symptoms” because they had reunited with their families. The case of the Vietnam GI heroin users has been cited by writer Johann Hari, who has emphasized the role of a person’s environment in his writing about the science of addiction. However, studies in accredited medical journals offer more nuance, noting a range of factors with regards to heroin addiction and recovery: snorting/smoking versus injection, concurrent psychiatric illness, rehabilitation overseas before soldiers re-entered the United States, race, and pre-Vietnam drug use.

Whitaker’s takes on science and medicine are confusing for the average reader and demonstrate a lack of critical thinking. She has a real bone to pick with science and medical authority figures. While subjecting authority figures to healthy skepticism is indeed good, Whitaker’s takes are thin on substance. She won’t believe health claims “just because they came from a medical doctor or scientist’s mouth.” If credentials don’t confer legitimacy, what does? (We’re not told.) She objects to the “the classification of alcoholism as a disease,” arguing that addiction stems from “an increasingly dislocated capitalist society, not from medical pathology.” She then contradicts herself by acknowledging that “the disease model has been upheld by recent advances in neuroscience and is what the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) endorse: addiction means that the brain is diseased chronically.” It should be noted, of course, that the conditions of life under U.S. capitalism are increasingly harsh for the vast majority of people. The U.S. has record inequality, worsening inflation, falling life expectancy, poorer health outcomes compared to other wealthy nations, dystopian working conditions for the working class, and an opioid

crisis, just to name a few problems. Whitaker fails to acknowledge that while the environment (“capitalism”) impacts our health and behavior, it’s also a leap of logic to say that a critique of capitalism means we ought to reject medical science.<sup>3</sup>

She peppers *Quit* with a fair number legitimate scientific and academic sources, such as the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD). But she also legitimizes unproven or less well accepted complementary or alternative medicine theories and practices such as gut-healing for “leaky gut” and meridian-point tapping (a highly variable practice that can be traced back to traditional Chinese medicine). She cites incredibly problematic sources such as Dr. Dharma Khalsa, who peddles unapproved Alzheimer supplements online. She argues that “addiction is a dysfunction in our first chakra” and quotes experts in “medieval women’s mysticism” who (however justifiably) warn readers of the harms of the “fashion industry” and “pornographers.” She takes a jab at Oprah for spending her “precious Weight Watchers points on wine,” but plenty of her own sources have been propped up by Winfrey’s so-called junk science queendom (Winfrey has given figures like Dr. Oz and Jenny McCarthy, among others, platforms to spread their sensationalist and scientifically false claims on, respectively, health cures and vaccines). Several of Whitaker’s New Age influences have connections with Oprah, including spiritual teacher Eckhart “Thinking has become a disease” Tolle, Marianne “sickness is an illusion” Williamson, and Pema Chodron, a Buddhist nun and alleged sexual abuse denier.

In *The Naked Mind*, Grace also references Tolle and Chodron. To her credit, Grace has some intriguing tidbits from legitimate scientists and works of public health research such as public policy professor Philip J. Cook’s *Paying the Tab*, a survey of the socioeconomics of alcohol, and neuroscientist Thad Polk’s explorations of the role of genetics in addiction. But she then cites Jason “the Juice Master” Vale, who promotes 800-calorie-a-day diets and argues that there is no such thing as alcoholism. Grace states that “a growing body of research suggests that our unconscious minds cannot actually tell the difference between a real experience and a vividly imagined fake experience,” and, indeed, the book’s endnotes cite the source of this mind-boggling statement about the subconscious as a blog post written by self-proclaimed “brain-wave enthusiast” and sound engineer Lawrence Weller on his website.

With such an inconsistent jumble of sources from these authors, how is the reader to distinguish between what’s scientifically legitimate and what’s not?

THE U.S. HEALTHCARE SYSTEM AND MEDICAL profession certainly have a long way to go in terms of improving addiction medicine services, access to healthcare, and cost of care. So it’s understandable that people would seek out complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), or

3. Grace brings up some “controversial experiments on humans” conducted by Robert Galbraith Heath, an old-timey neurologist and psychiatrist who spent his career implanting electrodes into the brains of gay men in hopes of curing their homosexuality and using African Americans as test subjects because, according to one collaborator, “they were everywhere and cheap experimental animals.” While the medical profession has an ugly history of racism, homophobia, and unethical experimentation, this by itself does not disprove medical science or practice; this unfortunate history is rather evidence of the fallibility of humans and human institutions.

*“Vulnerable women suffering from addiction deserve much better than shoddy books whose authors want readers to pull out their credit cards at the conclusion.”*

practices that fall outside of mainstream medical practice. The latest government statistics from the 2012 National Health Interview Survey reveal that 3 to 18 percent of Americans reported using some form of CAM. One 2017 paper based on the 2012 survey data found that nearly 40 percent of people with mental health needs used CAM to treat conditions including anxiety and depression due to needs unmet by conventional practices. Acupuncture, meditation, tai chi, and yoga have all been found to improve symptoms of mental illness. Yet CAM acceptance among medical practitioners remains uneven and confusion around whether Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations apply to CAM-related products remains a problem.

At minimum, authors tackling such complex subject matter probably need co-writers to help them break things down for the reader and explain which practices have a scientific basis (and which don't) and which are safe (or harmful). What's more, I find it especially troubling that, despite their dubious sources, both *Tempest* and *This Naked Mind* offer sobriety coaching services that may be viewed by readers as a substitute for therapy or medical care.

### **Coaches: More Than Just “Glorified AA Sponsors”**

RECOVERY COACHING IS A KIND OF LIFE COACHING geared to help people who are recovering from conditions such as mental illness or substance abuse. All fifty states offer Peer Recovery Coaching Training and Certification programs that generally cost a couple hundred dollars. Graduates of these programs must meet requirements for coursework, certification exams, and supervised practicums. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics considers such workers to be community health workers. The 2021 median pay for workers in this field was \$37,610.

Recovery coaching is also big business. As Kelly Fitzgerald, who became a coach after being laid off from her content creation job, writes in a 2019 article on *Tempest's* website, “What is a Recovery Coach?”: “According to the International Coaching Federation, in 2016, there were 17,500 coaches in North America who generated over \$955 million,” or almost \$55,000 per coach.

For-profit private coaching remains largely unregulated. Coaches operate independently with little oversight. When sobriety coaches are not integrated with licensed mental health professionals, they can easily get in over their heads, especially when it comes to clients who need advice on medication, who face relationship issues and financial struggles, and who feel suicidal.

This *Naked Mind*, the program affiliated with author Annie Grace, trains its own Certified Recovery Coaches (one GoFundMe fundraiser in 2020 asked for \$15,000 to pay for the training fees for one person), and upon graduation, coaches are listed in the online coaching directory. In a business model that whiffs of multi-level marketing, the coaches operate their own independent businesses. The website of one of these coaches sells jewelry and yoga classes and charges \$65 for a 45-minute phone call. Another, a former lawyer, began her coaching business as a way to find work-life bal-



ance after becoming a parent. In an e-mail exchange with Annie Grace's public relations representative, I directly asked about the qualifications needed to become a coach, but this question went unanswered in her reply. Tempest, associated with Holly Whitaker, offers coaching sessions that cost \$75 per half-hour, and their coaches past work stints include jobs as creative writing teachers, yoga instructors, and public relations and marketing strategists. These people are not mental health professionals.

Fitzgerald, who wrote the coaching article for Tempest, reinforces the more-money-equals-better-than concept by critiquing the free-of-charge AA sponsors who fail to "invest in" recovery and merely "share their experience, strength of hope with others." Fitzgerald's coaching credential from the International Association of Professional Recovery Coaches (which requires no application other than a \$2,897 payment) apparently makes her much more effective than the AA sponsors who do their "work" for free. As she puts it quite plainly: "No, I'm not a therapist or an AA sponsor, I'm a recovery coach. And, yes, of course, I charge for my services." She also argues that recovery coaching carries less stigma than AA or psychotherapy, but this made me wonder whether the real work of those passionate about addiction recovery should focus on activism to reduce this stigma rather than to profit from it.

Accredited addiction rehabilitation facilities, such as South Boston's nonprofit Gavin Foundation, offer coaching as a way to support clients in their transition from inpatient treatment to community re-entry. John McGahan, Gavin's President and CEO, explained to me the important role that coaches play in guiding people through everyday life after completing structured rehabilitation programs:

*"In rehab, patients are given a schedule and a routine to follow. Someone instructs them on what to do at every moment. But when people only have 12-step meetings for an hour-and-a-half per day, they don't know what to do with themselves. Coaches engage with them during inpatient and continue their services into the real world. Prior to having coaches, patients were just cut loose after rehab."*

Coaching is thus an important part of recovery. As with any aspect of healthcare, though, we need to question the for-profit nature of the care and the insidious blurring of coaching (as lifestyle consumerism) with addiction healthcare.

According to a 2016 Surgeon General's Report, *Facing Addiction in America*, only about 3 percent of individuals with substance use disorder obtain treatment that meets minimal standards of care. The authors' "Vision for the Future" chapter argues that we have not only a moral imperative to combat the disease of addiction but also an economic one. Addiction costs the U.S. "\$442 billion each year in health care costs, lost productivity, and criminal justice costs." To truly combat addiction in all its complexity (including socioeconomic and racial disparities), and to ensure better outcomes for all women, we need society to prioritize addiction treatment and prevention for all. Congress should pass the highly popular program Medicare for All, which would include mental health and addiction treatment for everyone at no cost at the point of care.

Furthermore, addressing the public health aspect of addiction would require: "expanding access to evidence-based treatment, offering wide-reaching community-based prevention and policies

(including those that can be delivered in individual homes, schools, and community centers), full integration of addiction treatment into mainstream healthcare, and laws that increase access to services, and funding for future research." We also need widespread cultural change, shifting our society to one in which people who need help can seek it without fear of stigmatization, in which health care professionals demonstrate compassion for patients with addiction disorders at the same level as they would for patients with other chronic conditions, and in which addicted people are celebrated for their progress toward wellness.

**W**E NEED TO DO A BETTER JOB AT prevention by addressing root causes that put children at risk for future addiction disorders. Adverse childhood experiences (also known as ACEs) such as abuse, neglect, mental illness, and domestic violence, among others, have been shown to create 'toxic stress' which puts children at risk for future medical conditions and social problems including substance abuse. Creating conditions to minimize ACEs would involve making sure everyone has the basic goods and services they need to thrive. This would include culturally responsive support for the youth living in poverty, increased quality of care for pregnant women and children, affordable housing, and increased early childhood education.

Books in the women's sobriety memoir genre can be highly seductive. These authors create emotional intimacy with the reader while providing endless medical and scientific citations to establish expertise and authority. Mixed with Whitaker's rallying cries of feminism and Grace's supposed scholarship, all of it had me duped at first. As Johnny Rotten famously inquired at the conclusion of the Sex Pistols' terminal performance: "Ever get the feeling you've been cheated?" Yes, yes, I did.

Vulnerable women suffering from addiction deserve much better than shoddy books whose authors want readers to pull out their credit cards at the conclusion. I would love to see a book written by women such as Becca Lilly and Bernadette Calicchio, who run a needle exchange program in Wilmington, North Carolina; or Jess Tilley, who founded the New England User's Union, a group that fights the stigmatization of drug use. This would ultimately require agents and publishers to provide advances so that women other than those at the upper echelons of economic privilege could have the opportunity to tell their stories of collective action in book form. At the very least, we need authors to promote programs that have been tested according to rigorous scientific standards and to promote critical thinking rather than saleswomanism in their readers. ♣

ANSWERS TO THE AIRPORT PUZZLE  
Africa and Europe are gone. Boredom crop has disappeared. Footprints have appeared.  
Sarcophagus has a candy cane. Man's bobble is gone. DO NOT IS DONUT. Eyepatch switched.  
Hobo's patches changed color. Vulture pattern altered. Dracula's flip-flops.



# UTOPIA OF THE MONTH

This month: the Utopia of Games. Games are pointless, and yet we play them. They are a strange activity when you think about it: entirely unnecessary, unproductive, and often very complicated. But in the Utopia of Games, nobody spends time worrying about whether games make sense or pondering why we play them. They are too engrossed. Let's take a visit, shall we?













# manufacturing nostalgia

BY BENJAMIN CHARLES GERMAIN LEE

FOR MUCH OF MY CHILDHOOD IN THE EARLY 2000s, my parents would drive me to the local sports card shop to pick a pack or two from the ever-rotating boxes of licensed card products. Like top shelf liquor, their names emphasized swank: Topps Finest, Bowman's Best, Skybox Premium, Donruss Elite, Playoff National Treasures, Leaf Limited, Pacific Crown Royale, Upper Deck Black Diamond. The cards and foil wrappers alike conformed to a simple visual grammar, with action shots of professional athletes printed on the fronts and rows of statistics printed on the backs. In place of seasonal batting averages or shooting percentages, the foil wrapper versos instead reported statistical probabilities concerning the manufacturer: the odds of "pulling" an autographed card, a holographic card, or a card containing a clipped swatch of a game-worn jersey. Accompanying the mathematical ratios were instructions for entering "No Purchase Necessary" promotions for a chance to obtain free cards by mailing in a 3x5 index card with one's name and address. Initially codified in response to a prevalence of contest scams, North American sweepstakes laws compelled trading card companies—purveyors of chance—to run these NPN promotions, as they were called, in order to put their products on shelves. Legally speaking, the NPNs were all that separated opening the foil packs from buying scratch-offs, or betting on horses.

For an adolescent, the local card shop was a crash course in the economics of nostalgia. Sports card enthusiasts waxed poetic about their youths spent collecting and cards that their mothers had thrown away, while speculating on the futures of rookies and stars and speaking of "investments." Glass display cases housed rows of rare cards for sale or trade. Dollar bins held countless others strewn about, the mass-produced cards from the late '80s and cards of forgotten draft picks. Always

within the line of sight was a *Beckett Sports Card Monthly* price guide, which standardized card values across the country based on an inscrutable combination of variables such as upcoming Hall of Fame inductions, recent Super Bowl victories, previous sales, and card condition. And so the price stickers in the card shop's display cases bore the markings of grades and other signifiers: "gem mint," "3x MVP," "#/100." Within the brick and mortar confines of the suburban Maryland strip mall, the local card shop was a veritable marketplace with liquid assets, commodities forecasting, and market making.

Like many other card shops across the country, my local card shop had sprung up in the 1990s to capitalize on the demands of a growing hobby. To increase profit margins with this cardboard craze, trading card companies began releasing hobby-only versions of products, distinguished from retail products by exclusivity—they couldn't be found at the local drugstore or K-Mart—and named accordingly as luxury brands. With these hobby products, the card companies followed a simple economic calculus: a higher price tag meant more favorable probabilities on the foil wrappers, as well as exclusive, "hobby-only" cards. The mark-ups were lucrative. By the time I had started collecting in the early 2000s, hobby products were already reaching unconscionable prices (\$100 for a sealed box of sports cards was a common sight). But 2003 saw the release of a new tier of product: Upper Deck's Exquisite Collection. Replacing the foil wrappers, each etched wooden box housed just five cards and retailed for \$500. Exquisite Collection was seemingly a *reductio ad absurdum* of manufactured scarcity. Each card on the checklist was individually serial numbered to no more than 225 copies. The basketball card release built on an already exciting year for the hobby, the rookie season of budding phenom LeBron James. The product sold like wildfire. Fifteen years later, an

unopened box would sell for \$43,200 at auction.

Today, the situation is, astonishingly, even worse. The \$5,000 padlocked metal suitcases of Panini Flawless have replaced the \$500 wooden boxes of Upper Deck Exquisite. A secondary industry of live-streamed “box breaks” has cropped up, enticing collectors to bid on the right to receive all cards of a specific team or player in a box opened via live-stream by professional “breakers,” viewed on Twitch with masturbatory anticipation. Opportunistic middlemen waited for hours in lines at Target during COVID in order to clear the shelves of boxes and packs ostensibly intended for children. Card grading companies are backlogged by months due to the paucity of staff trained to numerically evaluate card condition, including corner sharpness and centering. Condition is so critical that card companies have started releasing cards that are already encased in thick plastic holders in boxes. Auction houses plug sports card investment portfolios and justify ROIs with charts and graphs. The sports card economy is so robust that in just a year, rare rookie cards of the Charlotte Hornets basketball star LaMelo Ball have completed entire life cycles within the hobby: from production and quality control in a factory to transitory placement on Walmart shelves; to unveilings in YouTube box breaks; to evaluation by grading companies; to hyperbolic description in auction house catalogs, culminating in gavel sales for tens of thousands of dollars. Each step in the life cycle entails speculation on monetary terms: whether the release will be successful; whether a quick profit on retail boxes can be turned;

whether a box contains a “grail”; what grade a card will receive; whether LaMelo Ball will have a Hall of Fame-worthy career. For each one of these LaMelo rookie cards pulled, encapsulated, and sold for bloated hammer prices, there are thousands of other cards with stories attesting to a different kind of wastefulness, instead digested and offloaded in dollar bins or Goodwill donations or simply thrown away.

The sheer complexity emerging from the marketization of the sports card hobby begs a simple question: what happened to the days of baseball cards in shoeboxes or dimestore wax packs with slabs of bubble gum? And what does this tell us about nostalgia?

**T**HE HISTORY OF TRADING CARDS IS a 140 year history of targeted marketing to children. Though “trade” cards were packaged with tobacco products throughout much of the 19th century as a form of advertising promotion, the 1880s saw the first collecting craze in the United States. Tobacco companies such as Allen & Ginter and W. Duke, Sons & Co. produced cards depicting actresses, athletes, tropical birds, race horses, coats-of-arms, flags of nations, Native Americans, and generals of the Civil War with the explicit intent of enticing children either to purchase tobacco products themselves or harass their parents into doing so. As described by Dave Jamieson in *Mint Condition: How Baseball Cards Became an American Obsession*:

*“The cigarette ‘would lie down and die tomorrow’ if it weren’t for the high volume of sales to ‘small boys,’ one tobacco man told the Chicago Daily Tribune in 1888 ... [S]ome tobacco salesmen grew convinced that the pictures were instrumental in turning a generation of city boys into cigarette ‘fiends’ in the 1880s. One dealer told the Tribune that, ‘It would do away with half this boys’ trade, I think, if there was a law prohibiting the giving away of pictures in packages of cigarettes.’ Politicians in several cities around the country tried to put just such laws on the books. Charleston, South Carolina, effected an ordinance in 1887 prohibiting the sale of cigarettes with baseball cards.”*

The cards were an exploitative marketing tool intended to grow brand loyalty, printed by the tens of millions.

In 1890, James Buchanan Duke (namesake of Duke University) formed the American Tobacco Company through a series of mergers, cornering the market on tobacco sales in the United States. As reported in local papers, the merger was brought upon largely by the strains of the trading card arms race that had developed among companies, which cost the companies an estimated combined \$2 million a year. “The central object of the [American Tobacco] trust is to reduce the cost of advertising to a minimum, and, as the pictorial end has been the most expensive, it is sure to be curtailed if not dropped altogether,” reported the *Indianapolis Journal*. And yet, despite the production costs incurred and the temporary bans on distribution, the cards proved





essential to the business model. The merger would usher in the golden age of tobacco cards. The American Tobacco Company produced hundreds of trading card series to be packaged with cigarettes and chewing tobacco, with each printed card bearing subsidiary brand names such as Sweet Caporal, Piedmont, and American Beauty on the back. Though the Supreme Court dissolved the American Tobacco Company in 1911 under the Sherman Antitrust Act, the cards had proven successful marketing ploys, imprinted on the American collective memory at the turn of the century. “Every American over thirty remembers the colorful little cigarette cards distributed with such a lavish hand by the fiercely competitive tobacco companies between 1886 and 1915,” read the opening lines of the 1945 *Esquire* article “The Era of the Cigarette Card.” Today, many collectors ask why so few of the mass-printed tobacco cards have survived to this day, but the real surprise is that so *many* remain. Unlike the cigarette cartons or tobacco pouches themselves, of which virtually none survived, the cards were saved by the millions. Even a century later, “estate fresh” collections of tobacco cards still turn up in attics and drawers and *Antiques Roadshow* segments with predictable regularity. It is for this reason that the designation of cards as “ephemera” within collecting circles is a misnomer. Manufacturers always intended for the cards to be collected and thus valued. That they still are is a measure of the totality of marketing success.

It was because American boys ascribed value to trading cards that collecting became a ritualized way of learning basic economic principles. From teachers in New York City to President Taft in the White House, adults caught children exchanging cards via trades, sales, and bets. “Virtually every boy for almost three decades not only avidly collected and treasured these gaily-colored and educational little pasteboards, but generally, in order to complete some highly-prized set, conducted an exchange with all the shrewdness and persistence of a Yankee horse-swapper,” noted the 1945 *Esquire* article. Local newspapers at the turn of the century were littered with articles describing the trading card proto-market. In an 1890 article “Youthful Picture Dealer: Cigarette Cards are His Wares and He Does a Good Business,” the *Twice-a-week Plain Dealer* reported:

*“One of the queerest of many ways of getting a livelihood is that adopted by a boy who runs the streets of Louisville, KY. This boy is generally to be found among the newsboys and bootblacks, but he never sells a paper or blacks a shoe, says the Louisville Commercial. His business is the buying and selling of cigarette pictures.... For new pictures which have just come out of the boxes he gets twenty-five cents a hundred. Sometimes he has special pictures which bring as much as one cent apiece. Not very long ago he sold 1,000 pictures for eight dollars.”*

An 1890 *Indianapolis Journal* article entitled “A Kindergarten for Gamblers” described: “In almost any street in this city, even in the most fashionable neighborhoods, you can see little clusters of children between the ages of six and twelve years playing dice, pitching pennies and cigarette cards.” “We all know the craze of boys for cigarette pictures which they match and trade

with,” read a 1911 op-ed in *The Washington Times*. The juvenile exchange of cards was an economic playground where children first learned of valuation, trading, and demand, familiarizing them with the terms of the free market.

The long-term consequence of the aggressively marketed and traded tobacco card was the emergence of a new form of nostalgia—one for the childhood collecting days of yore. Consider, for example, the 1929 *New Yorker* article “A New York Childhood: Cigarette Pictures,” a saccharine piece dripping with sentimental recountings of boyhood collecting in Brooklyn:

*“The honeycomb man plods by at intervals, the honey in a large china platter which he carries on his head. The policeman is fat, and wears a big blue hat.... The tinkle of the bells on the car horses is soft, in a minor key.... In this setting, forty years ago, I made my collection of cigarette pictures.”*

This boyhood nostalgia bore out in the emergence of the adult card collecting hobby, which, by 1945, was robust enough to pique the interest of major periodicals. “Collectors Still Continue Fad That Faded Long Ago: Sports Writer, Who Saved Pasteboard Portraits in Youth, Finds Many Continue to Cherish Old Sets,” reported a 1945 *Sporting News* headline. The *Esquire* article published in the same year concluded with a reflection on the nascent adult card collecting hobby and its connection to sentimentalization:

*“The hobby enjoys a ... great advantage: these cards have a strong nostalgic and sentimental attraction in that every American boy once treasured them as his most priceless personal possession, an appeal that coins, old silver, antiques, first editions, old prints, buttons, street car transfers, match book tops or beer bottle caps cannot possibly equal.”*

Lost amid this sentimental attachment to sports cards was the fact that it was purposefully concocted by aggressive corporate marketing. The irony of the card collecting hobby—itsself predicated entirely upon valuation and monetary exchange—is that its mythology of nostalgia has always blotted out the explicitly economic conditions that gave birth to it.

**T**HOUGH PEOPLE OFTEN ASSOCIATE baseball cards with bubblegum, it wasn’t until the 1930s that the two were sold together, an innovation widely credited to the Goudey Gum Company. “Big League Baseball hit like a bombshell in the early spring of 1933 and was an instant success,” noted a 1970 nostalgia piece in *The Ballcard Collector*. “Every kid in school had at least a few and more than one stack was commandeered by the teacher to rest on her desk until school was out.” The Big League Baseball series was a marketing boon, driving total sales up from \$335,000 in 1932 to \$1.4 million in 1933. Among card collectors, the set is remembered for a deliberate arithmetic manipulation intended to keep children purchasing gum: card #106 was never issued in packs, instead printed a year later and mailed to the disgruntled kids who wrote to

the company asking why they couldn't find the card. Such marketing gimmicks were ubiquitous among companies, including checklists to encourage children to complete sets, mail-in incentives such as photographs or baseballs issued in exchange for an accumulation of enough cards or wrappers, and withheld "chase" cards in order to make set completion extremely unlikely, if possible at all. These schemes showed that company profits were ultimately at the root of the whole trading card phenomenon and also ensured the existence of a flourishing secondary trading market among kids.

Indeed, the history of trading cards is marked by targeted and exploitative marketing, children exchanging cards in ritualistic fashion, and the commodification of adults' sentimental attachment to their youth. In the '50s, Topps Chewing Gum, Inc., began to emphasize the cards rather than the gum as the primary product. The cards were a hit. "The most furious trading in the U.S. nowadays goes on not in Wall Street or the Chicago grain market but among youngsters out to collect a connoisseur's fistful of baseball trading cards," the first issue of *Sports Illustrated* reported in 1954. Topps sold hundreds of millions of cards a year.\*

It was the nostalgia of the '50s and '60s Topps generations, with deep pockets in adulthood, that elevated sports card collecting into a booming exchange with real money, codified with valuation standardization (*Beckett Sports Card Monthly* price guides) and trading floors (card shows in VFW halls).

As reported by *The Atlantic*:

"By the '80s, blue-chip cards were outperforming the S&P 500 and collecting had transformed from a sleepy novelty into a billion-dollar industry. In 1991, approximately 18 million people in the United States bought at least one newly issued pack, spending \$2 billion to acquire nearly 21 billion baseball and other sports cards. A 1990 market study found that 77 percent of collectors were drawn to cards partly or fully because they considered them a 'good investment.'"

The sentiment is echoed in *Mint Condition*:

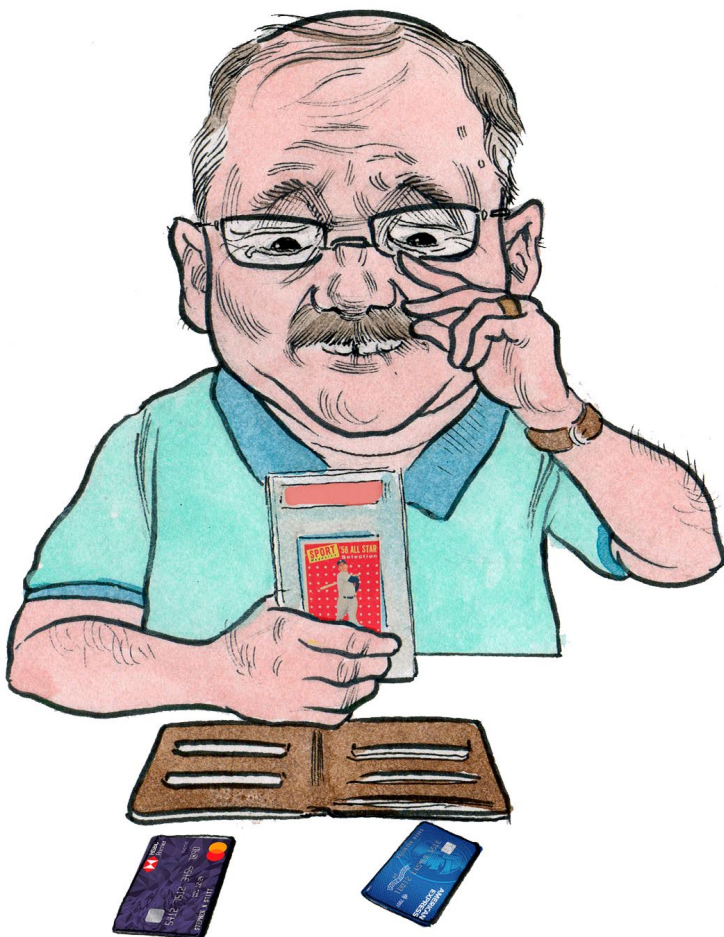
"By the '80s, baseball card values were rising beyond the average hobbyist's means. As prices continued to climb, baseball cards were touted as a legitimate investment alternative to stocks, with the *Wall Street Journal* referring to them as sound 'inflation hedges' and 'nostalgia futures.' Newspapers started running feature stories with headlines such as 'Turning Cardboard Into Cash' (the *Washington Post*), 'A Grand Slam Profit May Be in the Cards' (the *New York Times*), and 'Cards Put Gold, Stocks to Shame as Investment' (the *Orange County Register*). A hobby bulletin called the *Ball Street Journal*, claiming entrée to a network of scouts and coaches, promised collectors 'insider scouting information' that would help them invest in the cards of rising big-league prospects. Collectors bought bundles of rookie cards as a way to gamble legally on a player's future."

The remaining years in the hobby's development are often understood through the dialect of finance: the sports card "bubble" burst in the early '90s due to overproduction, and the hobby only stabilized when manufacturers artificially throttled the sports card market with scarcity in the form of luxury products with serial numbers, autographs, holograms, and swatches of game-worn jerseys embedded into the cards themselves.

Like clockwork, cards printed a few decades earlier surge in value when kids of that era reach middle age. Rare basketball cards from the 90s are currently skyrocketing in this era of sports card modernity, regularly eclipsing thousands of dollars. First-edition Pokémon cards can be traded outright for luxury cars. "Nostalgia Boosts Baseball Cards of the '80s and '90s" read a recent *Wall Street Journal* headline. Nostalgia is a hell of a market force, *Forbes* et al. insist.

**A** CURIOUS FACT ABOUT CARD COLLECTING is that any person in the street will react the same way when confronted with its economics: "Why would anyone spend that much money on a sports card?" they'll ask. The incredulous reaction is an incisive critique. It embodies a visceral skepticism of the market forces that drive the value of a cardboard rectangle up simply because it is a Baudrillardian

\* Topps would win the trading card battle with its rival, Bowman Gum Company, and monopolize baseball card production for two decades by coercing young players into signing contracts guaranteeing exclusive rights to reproduce their likenesses. Though the FTC would file an antitrust lawsuit against Topps in the early '60s, it would lose in appellate court. It is yet another angle to the exploitation and marketization submerged under the saccharine conjurings of baseball cards and bubble gum.





simulacrum of Michael Jordan or has razor-sharp corners or is made scarce through limited print runs. No one in their right mind could possibly rationalize away the kinds of downstream behaviors that the marketization of sports card trading has induced. Who, after all, would ever guess that an entire workforce would be devoted to grading sports cards? Or that posters on [blowoutforums.com](http://blowoutforums.com) would actively monitor weather predictions in Tampa Bay in the days running up to Super Bowl LV, due to projections on how well Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes would play in rain, which would in turn affect his card prices? To that person in the street, the unmistakably contrived nature of card collecting is precisely what makes the hobby such an odd and aberrant spectacle to behold.

And yet, it is the hobby's proximity to the contemporary financial markets that makes its perceived absurdity so significant. Card collectors' meteorological forecasting bears an uncanny resemblance to oil futures speculators' obsession with typhoon patterns. Automated eBay sniping software for placing auction bids at the last possible second is reminiscent of high-frequency trading algorithms. The list goes on, and the parallels run deep. If we are to accept the frivolity of the sports card market, we must also accept just how frivolous the free market itself is, with traders exchanging stocks and derivatives and derivatives of derivatives *ad infinitum*; workers drilling tunnels for fiber-optic cables from New York to Chicago to reduce the latency of algorithmically-executed trades; and hundreds of thousands of people monitoring GameStop stock due to the phenomenon of the "short squeeze." Like the sports card hobby, the free market writ large is a process of alimentation and digestion. It is thus a process of immense waste production—wasting time, wasting resources, wasting labor, and laying waste to those caught in its wake.

Only when considering the market forces that have created and inflated the sports card hobby—the incessant, manipulative, and highly litigious corporate marketing, the ritualized exchanges of cards by children, and the "nostalgia" induced by it—does the truth of the hobby come into focus. The hobby isn't so much a parallel of the free market; the hobby is the free market recursively emulating itself, with contrivance begetting contrivance, waste begetting waste.

IT WAS IN THE PAGES OF *BECKETT SPORTS Card Monthly*, sandwiched between pricings of LeBron James rookie cards and advertisements for a never-ending stream of upcoming products, that I first learned of the National Sports Collectors Convention. Sports memorabilia enthusiasts, trading card companies, auction houses, and dealers converged for four days during the first week of August each year to buy, sell, trade, open, and grade cardboard of all shapes and sizes. I was 11 when I saw the advertisement, and I was transfixed. Until the pandemic, I had attended every "National" since 2006.

The National is an intensely multisensory experience, with colors and sounds incessantly vying for one's attention and drawing one in. Refractor cards glisten under display case lighting. Synchronous screams emanate from promotional events as unopened boxes are passed out by trading card companies. Enormous banners showing promoted cards and consignment opportunities hang from the rafters. Bells ring in the convention hall, signifying new raffle winners at booths. At the Atlantic City 2016 National, it was insidiously unclear where the show floor ended and the casino floor began.

As a marketplace, the National has always been something of an extravaganza. No individual seems remotely coherent unless one considers the broader market forces at play. Year after year, grading companies offer onsite services behind drawn curtains, as if to hide the inherent subjectivity of the process. The UltraPRO™ guy sells a range of hobby paraphernalia, from card sleeves to binder sheets to display cases. Collectibles insurance companies set up shop to offer quotes in the event of an "act of God." Dealers offer candy and koozies to attract prospective buyers to their booths (while leaving condiment-laden hot dogs on display cases housing millions of dollars worth of cards). Auctioneers market bloodied, game-worn jerseys by stressing potential ownership of superstar athlete DNA (the utility of which would be left to the imagination of the prospective buyer). Hobbyists pull out tens of thousands of dollars in cash from their pockets or impossibly rare tobacco cards from backpacks for exchange. Famous and semi-famous athletes and celebrities are escorted to and from booths for autograph signings (I exchanged pleasantries with the Soup Nazi from *Seinfeld* on not one but two separate occasions). FBI agents appear from time to time to investigate fraud rings and make arrests. My 14 years of attendance have revealed these enduring consistencies among the National's main cast.

The latest nostalgia surge is leaving its marks. With each passing year, my college roommate and I seem to encounter larger and larger crowds surrounding the box breakers—seated men livestreaming their hands and hands alone as they open tens of thousands of dollars of sealed foil packs in rapid succession. No matter the pack ripper or box breaker, the speculative euphoria among the crowd inevitably dies down with the opening of the last pack, leaving behind the settled dust of foil wrappers strewn about. Like confetti long after the Gatorade showers and trophy presentations, the shimmering wrappers can be spotted on the floor, overflowing from trash cans, stuck to shoes. As soon as the cards inside have been revealed, and the statistical probabilities have turned into economic certainty, the wrapper goes from an object of enticement to pure detritus. With the memories made and the seeds of nostalgia sown, it is someone else's job to clean up the mess left behind. ✚







*we can have a...*

# PUBLIC TRANSIT PARADISE

BY NATHAN J. ROBINSON

**E**LON MUSK DOES NOT CARE FOR PUBLIC transit. The main reason appears to be that it forces you to spend time around other people, and other people are disgusting:

*"I think public transport is painful. It sucks. Why do you want to get on something with a lot of other people, that doesn't leave where you want it to leave, doesn't start where you want it to start, doesn't end where you want it to end? And it doesn't go all the time. It's a pain in the ass. ... That's why everyone doesn't like it. And there's like a bunch of random strangers, one of who might be a serial killer, OK, great. And so that's why people like individualized transport, that goes where you want, when you want."*

It should be no surprise that the world's richest individual does not like the idea of spending time near random strangers, and considers them all potential serial killers. There is nothing more discomfiting to a rich man than having to spend time in the company of the plebs. Musk's own transportation solutions—tunnels for Tesla cars to catch fire in, a hyperloop that'll fling you across California at high speed—have been underwhelming, and his innovation has mostly been in making luxury electric cars cool through branding.

But some of what Musk points out here about American mass transit is true: a lot of it *is* painfully inefficient. It can take hours to get across a U.S. city on a bus, when driving would take a fraction of the time. Commutes on mass transit tend to take about twice as long as commutes by car. The overwhelming majority of Americans do not take public transit to work—76 percent of Americans commute by driving alone in a car (another 9 percent carpool),

while only 5 percent use mass transit. Only 4 percent of workers live in households that don't have a car.

The dominance of the personal automobile is unfortunate for a few reasons. Cars kill a lot of pedestrians and drivers, among myriad other harms, as George Monbiot explains:

*"Traffic mutes community, as the noise, danger and pollution in busy streets drive people indoors. The places in which children could play and adults could sit and talk are reserved instead for parking. Engine noise, a great but scarcely acknowledged cause of stress and illness, fills our lives. As we jostle to secure our road space, as we swear and shake our fists at other drivers, pedestrians and cyclists, as we grumble about speed limits and traffic calming, cars change us, enhancing our sense of threat and competition, cutting us off from each other."*

Cars are also terrible for the climate. Transportation is the leading source of greenhouse gas emissions, and while electric cars promise to help, when the electricity itself comes from fossil fuels, these cars are not as environmentally friendly as they seem. Because of the U.S. energy sector's fossil fuel intensity, *Carbon Brief* reports that "when compared to the most efficient conventional [gas-powered] vehicle, the climate benefits of the EV [electric vehicles] were near-zero or negative in large parts of the country." Powering EVs with renewable energy is critical to ensuring electric vehicles deliver on their promise, and differences in the energy sources mean that the same electric car can be much better for the environment if it is charged/driven in France or Norway than if it is charged/driven in Minnesota.

Cars do not have to be our future, despite what the cynics might say about mass transit. Randal O'Toole, a libertarian urban plan-

ning scholar, argues that those advocating mass transit in the U.S. simply need to give up, because cars are this country's past, present, and future:

*"I have a message for these anti-auto activists: The war on the automobile is over. The automobile won. More accurately, auto drivers and users won. It is time for those engaged in this war to stop wasting their time, and everyone else's, and start doing something productive. People concerned about the impacts of the automobile should give up trying to reduce driving, which has never worked, and instead encourage new automobiles and highways that are safer, cleaner, and more energy efficient."*

But the war on the automobile cannot have been "lost," because it was never fought in the first place. Instead, the car waged war on the American city. The car triumphed only in part because of its inherent advantages; it also succeeded because the city was adapted to accommodate it, and car use was incentivized and subsidized. In today's car-centric cities of the U.S., pedestrians are killed by automobiles at alarming rates compared to peer nations, and the law has been used to make places very unfriendly to pedestrians in terms of sidewalk and street crossing availability. A city with successful transit, on the other hand, has to be more pedestrian friendly. Since everyone has to walk to a stop or station, designers necessarily have to create safe crossings and sidewalks. It's impossible to make mass transit work in a place where just getting around as a pedestrian requires crossing dangerous roads. It's no wonder the car "won" in places where the law and development combined to make alternative modes of transportation like biking and walking involve taking your life in your hands.

**C**ARS ARE POPULAR IN PART BECAUSE THEY grant their owners a sense of freedom. You don't have to follow someone else's schedule or route; you can just get in and go where you like. Those particular freedoms can never be equaled by mass transit, which by its nature involves serving the needs and desires of more than one person at a time. A bus is a compromise between different people's preferences about where to go. But great transit can provide other kinds of freedom, like the freedom from the burden of having to own and insure a car. When I lived in the Boston area, having a car was a pain, because finding parking was a pain and getting stuck in traffic was a pain. Riding the subway was fantastic, because it was cheap, skipped the traffic, and usually got me pretty close to where I needed to be, fairly near to the time I needed to be there. I had a car, but it was burdensome rather than liberating.

Since the U.S. is a car country, electric vehicles are going to be a crucial part of reducing transportation sector emissions. But we are also seriously lagging behind when it comes to mass transit. Transit is staggeringly efficient; one New York City L train can carry as many commuters in a single hour as 2,000 cars. If the 2.4 million people who work in Manhattan all had to drive to work, the

parking spots needed to accommodate all of their cars would take up more space than the island itself. From a climate perspective, the benefits of efficiently transporting large numbers of people in a small space can be huge. While a typical passenger car with one person gets 25 passenger miles per gallon, a conventional bus at capacity gets 163 passenger miles per gallon.

Note, though, that this is a bus *at capacity*. Running an empty bus is a huge *waste* of energy. Building public transit infrastructure is not going to help anyone unless people actually use it. And there we run into some of the problems outlined in Musk's rant: mass transit is not always a very good way to get you where you need to go. It is often the transportation of last resort, used by people who cannot afford cars. In dense cities like New York City and Boston, riding public transit may actually be preferable to driving. But in many parts of the country, those who ride the bus *have* to ride the bus, and buses have a negative public image in part because they are seen as being for those who can't afford cars. This has not been helped by decades of automaker branding that has painted car ownership as a sign of being successful in life, and mass transit's image will have to be reversed if we are ever going to alter its downward ridership trends (which had begun even before COVID-19 badly damaged transit ridership).

**T**HE MAIN PROBLEM, THOUGH, IS NOT BAD branding but bad service. People don't take public transit because it's not giving them what they want. Some of this is because of a decades-long history of bad American land use policies, which have encouraged the development of places that require a car to get around. Undoing car-centric sprawl is a very long-term project, but well-designed, well-run transit can be successful even in places seemingly ill-suited for it. Houston, for instance, redesigned its bus routes with a focus on giving people frequent, reliable service and saw a substantial increase in ridership. Charlotte's light rail system has seen healthy ridership numbers and boosted development. The U.S. is not automatically doomed to have unreliable public transit that serves as the "locomotion of last resort." As *Bloomberg* notes,

*"There are good, viable models of transit systems that ... are successful both at attracting riders and at being financially viable, from places that have more in common with American cities than one might expect.... [Yet] all too often, transit planners—and even advocates—find themselves resigned to fatalism about the prospect of transit in American suburbs. They're convinced that these spread-out and car-centric spaces are fundamentally irreconcilable with public transportation."*

Christof Spieler's fascinating book *Trains, Buses, People: An Opinionated Atlas of U.S. Transit* profiles the transit systems of dozens of U.S. cities, showing how some places are succeeding where others are failing, and demonstrating the principles that make for quality transit that attracts riders.



Some of those principles are straightforward. Jarrett Walker's *Human Transit: How Clearer Thinking about Public Transit Can Enrich Our Communities and Our Lives* lists seven demands that potential public transit riders have, which will determine whether they decide to actually use the system:

*It takes me where I want to go.*

*It takes me when I want to go.*

*It is a good use of my time.*

*It is a good use of my money.*

*It respects me in the level of safety, comfort, and amenity it provides.*

*I can trust it.*

*It gives me freedom to change my plans.*

Seems straightforward, but plenty of cities lack transit systems that meet the criteria. For instance, here in New Orleans, the average person can reach 89 percent of the jobs in the area with a 30-minute commute via car. They can only reach 12 percent of area jobs with a 30-minute commute on public transit. This means that those who can't afford cars are severely limited in the work they can accept. Transit is not taking them where they want to go.

A lot of transit systems are disappointing because they're not built around reaching these intuitively-obvious basic goals. But when public transit delivers great service at a low cost, people will use it. Plenty of improvements can occur without redesigning entire cities, and Walker argues that cities often measure the wrong things, seeing expanding transit in terms of adding more miles of rail or making sure the entire city is covered by bus routes. Such approaches may appear successful because they make lots of impressive lines on a map (and allow for mayoral ribbon-cutting ceremonies), but cities can end up spending a lot of money to serve areas with few riders.

**S**OME IMPROVEMENTS THAT ATTRACT NEW riders are decidedly unromantic. Increasing the frequency that buses arrive, for instance, makes it much easier to incorporate bus travel into one's day, which is why part of Houston's bus system overhaul focused on frequency. ("Frequency is freedom," Walker says.) Dedicated bus lanes and stoplights that give buses priority will keep buses from getting stuck in traffic. Making sure the routes, fares, and schedule are all easy to understand will make transit less of a headache, and thus make people more likely to consider it. It should be obvious: the more public transit is an *attractive* alternative to driving, the more people are likely to consider it. In general, research shows that the thing people want most is for the transit system to get them places efficiently; they don't care nearly as much about whether they're riding a beautiful, comfortable train or a janky old bus (so long as that bus is reliable).

Musk, then, is right that the central measure of public transit's success is whether it gets you where you want to go, but he's wrong in thinking that cars will always and everywhere beat public transit on this measure. We can have a public transit paradise but we have

to keep the goals in mind. Public transit should not just serve as a form of unsatisfactory transportation welfare for the carless. It should be able to liberate all of us from dreadful, environmentally harmful commutes in vehicles. We need to be committed to mass transit that truly serves the people, that people take not because they *have to*, but because they want to. It can be done, but getting world-class mass transit in the U.S. will require taking on the Koch brothers and steadily redesigning cities, in ways both small and large, to be for people rather than their cars. ✚

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