

Like the Band That Keeps Playing While the Ship Goes Down

CURRENT AFFAIRS

\$12.95

VOL. 8, ISSUE 1

JAN./FEB. 2023



LAW

*Why it's a bad idea
to base it on theology*

DR. PHIL

*Useless, wrong, and
morally questionable*

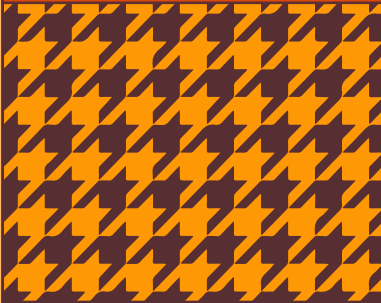
STALIN

*Another evil man
with a comical moustache*

TO BEGIN WITH

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PATTERN OF THE MONTH HOUNDSTOOTH



LETTER MANATEES FOREVER!

Dear [Current Affairs],
That guy who tried to cancel his subscription because *Current Affairs* has too many references to manatees is a tiny-brained son of a European dictator who died eating his own testicles. And you can tell him I said that. Manatees are the gentlest, most harmless creatures on Planet Earth. Someone ought to give the species a Nobel Peace Prize.

—A recent but already loyal and devoted reader

HAVE YOU TREATED YOURSELF TO AN ICE CREAM SANDWICH LATELY?



Do it!
You deserve it!

NEW BOOK: RESPONDING TO THE RIGHT

We are thrilled to announce the publication of the Editor in Chief's new book *Responding to the Right: Brief Replies to 25 Conservative Arguments*. After the Editor in Chief missed his manuscript deadline several times (due to a reluctance to suffer through the number of Tucker Carlson episodes necessary to conclude the research), the book finally hit shelves on St. Valentine's Day, making it an appropriate gift for those one loves (as well as those one loathes). Across 360 premium-quality pages, the book debunks many of the most commonly-spouted right-wing talking points. Refuted are:

- Government Is the Problem, Not the Solution
- Minimum Wages and Rent Control Are Economically Disastrous
- Taxation Is Theft and/or Slavery
- Capitalism Rewards Innovation and Gives People What They Deserve
- The United States Is a Force for Good in the World
- There's No Such Thing as White Privilege
- The Left Are Woke Totalitarians Trying to Destroy Free Speech in the Name of "Social Justice"
- Socialized Medicine Will Kill Your Grandma
- Scandinavian Social Democracy Won't Work in the United States
- The Welfare State Will Lead Us Down the "Road to Serfdom"
- The Nazis Were Socialists
- Feminism Hurts Both Men and Women
- Price Gouging, Child Labor, and Sweatshops Are Good
- We Don't Need a Green New Deal
- Academia Is a Radical Indoctrination Factory
- There Is a War on Cops When We Need to Be Tougher on Crime
- Labor Unions Hurt Workers
- Transgender People Are Delusional and a Threat

- Abortion Is Murder
- There Is a War on Christianity
- We Must Respect the Constitution and the Founding Fathers
- People Should "Pull Themselves Up by Their Bootstraps" and Not Need "Handouts"
- Immigration Is Harmful
- Inequality Is Fine
- Democracy Is Overrated

These refutations are comprehensive and conclusive, meaning that if anyone persists in holding right-wing beliefs after reading them, they have rejected Reason itself. But in addition to these useful rebuttals, the book contains a series of general tips for how to engage effectively in political arguments and shows why conservative talking points are successful in swaying people. The book is available for less than \$20 from the estimable St. Martin's Press. Pick up your copy TODAY!

BRIEF REPLIES TO 25 CONSERVATIVE ARGUMENTS

RESPONDING TO THE RIGHT

NATHAN J. ROBINSON

EDITOR OF CURRENT AFFAIRS



CONSTRUCTION ZONE

THIS PART OF THE MAGAZINE IS
STILL UNDER CONSTRUCTION.
PLEASE PARDON OUR DUST!

WELCOME TO 2023

Because the January-February issue of *Current Affairs* is not released until late February (meaning "at the last possible minute"), our staff has not yet had a chance to welcome you to the year 2023. We would like to take this opportunity to do just that. Happy 2023, beloved reader! How's it proceeding thus far? No major calamities? We hope you haven't accidentally lopped a finger off or set fire to your collection of rare vintage postcards. We hope Tragedy and Misfortune have passed you by entirely, and gone to pick on someone else (unless that someone else is a subscriber as well, in which case we hope they, too, are passed by). May you have a year abundant with joys and short in sorrows. May all of your magazine subscriptions arrive on time (except this one, which we both know will not). May your baths be bubbly and your spaghetti well-cooked. May you get a moment here and there to lie down on the grass and look up to see if any of the clouds have taken on rude shapes. May you not get distracted by petty nonsense and may your every step be taken in comfortable shoes. We shall be with you all the way! Here we go!



FLOWER FOR YOUR LAPEL

CUT IT OUT AND BECOME INSTANTLY RESPECTABLE

THE SECRET SAUCE THAT MAKES THE MAGAZINE

People ask us "What's your secret sauce, Current Affairs?" Usually we respond "Prefer Not To Answer." But today people asked us very nicely. We are therefore prepared to disclose that our secret sauce is: **GOO**. Tons of it. Mountains upon mountains of the stickiest imaginable goo. How else do you think the pages stay together?



Watch out for insects
They're everywhere
and they have
NO REASON to like you

"GARISH"

The *New York Review of Other Magazines* is not nearly as respected in the French Quarter as it may be in Greenpoint, and we have let several of that infamous trade publication's heckles and jibes pass by without comment. But a recent column classifying *Current Affairs* as the most "garish" of today's print political periodicals went a step too far. Garish? GARISH? How dare they. We are bright and cheerful, admittedly a contrast with the passionless, neutered aesthetic of the *New York City* rags. A *New York* magazine is afraid of emotion. Its colors are subdued, its tone insincere. Not so a *New Orleans* magazine. We take inspiration from the glorious Mardi Gras Indians, suited up in neon feathers. Life should be lived in technicolor, not sepia. You, *New York Review*, you are sepia. We are technicolor. To call us garish is to reveal only that you are sad and repressed. Come dance and parade in the streets with us, and we will make you feel alive. You will finally experience the full spectrum of human feelings, and never again will you see as garish and tacky what is merely vivacious and impassioned.

EXCESS QUANTITIES OF FEATHER BOAS

Mardi Gras is over (alas!), which means that the *Current Affairs* office is, as usual for the season, overflowing not only with unsolicited review copies of unpopular books, but huge quantities of feather boas, some of which are damp with booze and all of which are shedding feathers uncontrollably. Several editors have sworn that the boas are mating and reproducing, for no matter how many are set alight and disposed of, more seem to appear in every corner. The situation threatens to become uncontrollable and absurd. The magazine publication schedule may be delayed as the staff attempt to deal with the ongoing crisis.

GIVE US MONEY AND WE WILL FIX EVERYTHING!

Did you know that you can give *Current Affairs* money? It's true! And what's more: we won't squander it! In fact, we'll use it to build a formidable independent media apparatus that can help preserve democracy, reverse all of our major social crises, and exhort the populace to take control of its destiny and usher in a glorious utopian future. We will pay for incisive writing, trenchant journalistic investigations, and gorgeous illustrations to complement it all. Truly a bargain! No better way to spend your fortune. Simply head to <http://currentaffairs.org/donate>



SUBSCRIBERS' TEA

The editors wish to thank those subscribers who attended the recent virtual Subscribers' Tea event. A fine time was had by all who participated. Many cups of Harney & Sons Dragon Pearl Jasmine Tea were consumed by the editor in chief. Other refreshments, such as coffee, beer, and water, were taken by certain subscribers with more flexible understandings of the definition of a Subscribers' Tea. At least one subscriber tasted the first crumpet of their life (with marmalade), a momentous event that it was our privilege to be present for. *Current Affairs* writers previewed their upcoming work, and we heard the personal testimony of a subscriber who quit their job thanks to a *Current Affairs* cartoon. We also heard from a pastor-subscriber who found a *Current Affairs* article useful in preparing to deliver his weekly sermon to the assembled masses. Spirits remained high throughout the event, and attendance was strong. The overwhelming success of this refined and pleasant get-together means this magazine will certainly be hosting further such events in the future. Do consider attending!

THE CURRENT AFFAIRS GUIDE TO HOW TO WIN A FIGHT

"When," many subscribers ask, "will *Current Affairs* produce a definitive guide to how to win fights? A handbook of sorts, one compiling every known technique for pummeling an opponent into a pulpy mess." We confess to being a little shocked by the frequency with which this request arrives in the editorial inbox, especially given this magazine's history of publishing articles bearing titles like "War: Why It Is Bad" and "Pacifists: Why You Should Be One." Admittedly, however, sometimes one cannot avoid sparring with some noxious blackguard over a matter of political difference or personal honor, and when such occasions arise, it may be morally necessary to prevail. Here, however, is what we recommend: Do not deploy mere brute physical force (you will lose). Instead, memorize striking passages from recent *Current Affairs* articles. Shout them at your opponent at the highest volume your lungs can muster. They will either be so impressed by the insight contained in the quotations, or so baffled by your unexpected and seemingly deranged behavior, that they will pause to wonder what your angle is. At which point you can clock them in the jaw. There you have it: The official *Current Affairs* Guide to How to Win A Fight.

A LANDLORD EXPLAINS THE SYSTEM

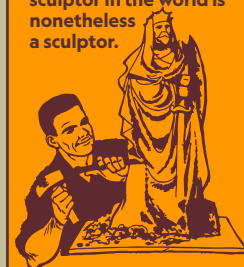
We can think of no better explainer of the fundamentals of the capitalist system than this recent tweet from financial guru and landlord Tyler Wright: "Bank buys me the house. Tenants pay off the loan. Property manager handles everything. I collect cash every month. Inflation builds me massive wealth. Real Estate. [house emoji]" — @DefiningWealth Well that just tells you all you need to know, doesn't it?

EVERYONE LOOKS GOOD IN SUNGLASSES!



HAVE YOU CONSIDERED TAKING UP SCULPTURE?

We hear it's relaxing. Plus, when strangers ask "And what do you do?" you will be able to reply, truthfully, "Oh, I do a bit of sculpting." They will be fascinated! What's more: there is no rule that says your sculptures have to be good. It is enough to have made any sculptures at all. Even the worst sculptor in the world is nonetheless a sculptor.



QUOTE OF THE MONTH

"The editor over there [at *Current Affairs*] strikes me as someone who is truly mentally unwell, given some of the insane things he's written about me and the length at which he's written them"

—SAM HARRIS, FINALLY COMMENTING ON THE 2018 CA ARTICLE ABOUT HIM

THIS MAGAZINE IS STUFFED WITH DELICIOUS FORTIFYING NUTRIENTS BUT DO NOT EAT IT BECAUSE THE INK IS POISON



JUST SAY "NO" TO UGLY BUILDINGS



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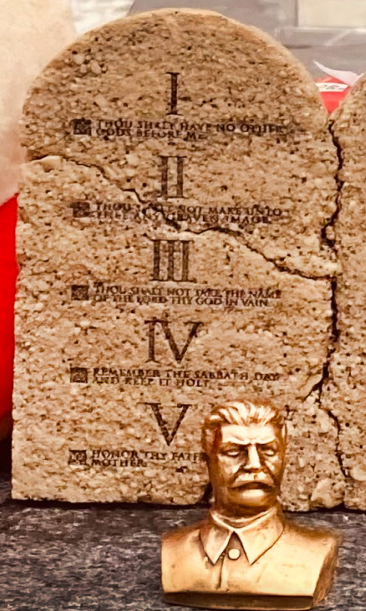


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NO
CHILDREN'S BOOKS THAT
MENTION TRANS PEOPLE
NO
CRITICAL RACE THEORY
IN SCHOOL
NO
DRAGQUEENS EVER

IMPOSING THE LAWS OF GOD

by K. Wilson

FOR THE PAST SEVERAL DECADES, ORIGINALISM has been the preeminent conservative legal philosophy. The basic idea of originalism—that statutes and constitutional provisions should be given their literal, original meaning—is simple and straightforward. As a consequence, originalism often takes the blame for unpopular decisions by the ultraconservative Supreme Court majority. For instance, after the Court repealed *Roe v. Wade* and deprived millions of women of the opportunity to receive safe abortions, the Brennan Center, a liberal think tank, lamented that originalism poses “a threat to modern life.”

But originalism’s luster in the conservative legal movement seems to be fading—and something much worse threatens to take its place. The first critical moment in this trend followed the Court’s decision in *Bostock v. Clayton County*, which used the text-centric principles of originalism to find that the Civil Rights Act protects gay and transgender people. The reaction on the right was predictably hysterical. John Horvat, a conservative academic, wrote a polemic against *Bostock* arguing that originalism is a product of “the moral decadence of the times” and that we must instead return to “natural law, written on the hearts of men, valid for all peoples and places, providing the foundation of moral certainty.”

If you haven’t been keeping up with developments in the conservative legal movement, the term “natural law” might not ring

a bell. Until pretty recently, natural law was the ugly stepchild of the conservative legal movement, always standing in the shadow of its more illustrious sibling, originalism. But as skepticism of originalism grows, natural law is gaining immense traction among conservative jurists and legal scholars.

On the current Supreme Court, Clarence Thomas, Neil Gorsuch, and Amy Coney Barrett are closely associated with natural law. In a speech in the 1980s, Thomas proclaimed that “the American Constitution [is] unintelligible without the Declaration of Independence, and the declaration is unintelligible without the notion of a higher law by which we fallible men and women can take our bearings.” Barrett, a conservative Catholic “steeped in natural-law teachings,” wrote in 1998 that Catholic judges should recuse themselves from cases where their religious beliefs might conflict with their judicial duties—because, in her words, “a judge who is heedful of ecclesiastical pronouncements cannot dispense” impartial justice. More telling than this statement itself is Barrett’s blatant refusal to follow it—she hasn’t recused herself from death penalty or abortion cases, despite the Church’s “ecclesiastical pronouncements” on those issues. Gorsuch completed his doctoral thesis under the supervision of John Finnis, the foremost living exponent of natural law (more on him later), and later wrote a book arguing that legalizing physician-assisted suicide was contrary to natural law.

These justices are just part of a larger trend. A legion of conservative lower court judges and legal academics have begun to

express interest in resurrecting natural law. The spread of natural law in the upper echelons of our legal system should scare people. It's a radical and extreme philosophy, and its rise portends sinister changes to American law.

The Meaning of Law

UNDERSTANDING NATURAL LAW THEORY AND WHY IT'S so radical requires a quick foray into different ways of thinking about what "law" is. Most modern theories of law fall into a school of thought called "legal positivism," which assumes that "law" is the will of a sovereign as enacted through established procedures. In republics like the United States, the people are the sovereign, and they express their will through representative institutions like Congress. In an absolutist monarchy, the monarch is the sovereign, and his or her commands are the law. Thus, for a legal positivist, law is simply the set of human-made rules that govern society.

Natural law comes from a fundamentally different intellectual tradition. The basic idea of natural law is that by studying human nature and the conditions of the world, and by consulting one's own instincts, one can discover intrinsically true moral principles—and that these principles form the basis for all valid laws. Law, in other words, is *immanent in nature* (hence the name "natural law"), not man-made.

The ur-text of natural law jurisprudence is the *Treatise on Law*, written in the 1200s by Catholic saint and philosopher Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas argued that through experience, people gain insight into human nature, and from human nature, people can derive intrinsically true moral principles. For instance, through my experience, I know most people would rather live than die, so I can infer that a desire to live is part of human nature. From those premises, I can conclude that one person killing another violates the natural order of things, leading to the principle, "one must not kill."

How do these principles relate to *positive*—that is, human-made—law? Aquinas explained that positive laws are valid only to the extent they comport with natural law. "[E]very human law," he wrote, "has just so much of the nature of law, as it is derived from the law of nature. But if at any point it deflects from the law of nature, it is no longer a law but a perversion of law."

That reasoning might seem plausible (and appealing) when applied to murder. But Aquinas, like other natural law theorists, didn't stop there. By his logic, all "unnatural" acts by definition contravene the law of nature—and therefore warrant state prohibition. For example, here's his take on why heterosexual sex is fine, but homosexual sex isn't:

By human nature we may mean either that which is proper to man ... or we may mean that nature which is common to man and other animals; and in this sense, certain special sins are said to be

against nature; thus contrary to sexual intercourse, which is natural to all animals, is unisexual lust, which has received the special name of the unnatural crime (emphasis mine).

In other words, "unisexual lust" is "unnatural"—and *therefore it is a crime*. And, by Aquinas' logic, because homosexual sex violates natural law, any positive law that permits such conduct is "no longer a law but a perversion of law."

That is the core problem with natural law philosophy. It starts by identifying moral tenets that are supposedly immanent in nature (usually based on theology, because what's more natural than God's will?) and claims that those tenets reflect "natural law." Then, it says positive laws are valid only insofar as they reflect the natural law. Natural law theory is, in short, a justification for using the state to enforce the natural law theorist's moral convictions. If you think that sounds like a recipe for authoritarian theocracy, you are correct.

The Greater of Two Evils

NATURAL LAW MAKES ORIGINALISM LOOK WARM AND cuddly by comparison. At least originalism falls in the positivist camp. For an originalist, the government makes law by setting out a collection of words that define rules people must follow. Therefore, to discern what the law means, judges should focus on the words that make up its text. To quote Justice Scalia, the man who put originalism front and center of the conservative legal movement, "[t]he text *is* the law, and it is the text that must be observed."

To be clear, originalism is still a bad legal philosophy. Determining the "original" meaning of words is a perilously subjective exercise, and originalist judges usually settle on meanings that reflect their own political views. Query why the Second Amendment protects assault rifles, which didn't exist when the Constitution was drafted. And even when it's possible to discern the original meaning of old words, that meaning is often profoundly undemocratic—after all, the framers of the Constitution owned slaves and thought only white male property-owners should vote.

But, critically, originalism has an inherent and logical limit: the text of the Constitution and duly enacted statutes. While an originalist might hesitate to recognize rights that have no concrete textual support, like abortion or gay marriage, the originalist will also fiercely defend rights that *do* have textual support. That's why Scalia, despite his vociferously right-wing views, often sided with his liberal colleagues on issues of free speech and criminal procedure. For instance, he cast the deciding vote in *Texas v. Johnson*, which held that the First Amendment protects the right to burn the flag, even though he later remarked that "if it were up to me, I would put in jail every sandal-wearing, scruffy-bearded weirdo who burns the American flag."

It is precisely because of these principled limits that the right-



AMY CONEY BARRETT IS SWORN IN FOR HER SENATE TESTIMONY / ASSOCIATED PRESS

most wing of the conservative legal movement has begun to express discontent with originalism and renewed their interest in natural law. After all, *Bostock*—the case that found that the Civil Rights Act protects gay and transgender people—was a straightforward application of originalist reasoning. The opinion reasoned as follows: (1) the text of the Civil Rights Act prohibits employers from “discriminat[ing] against any individual ... because of such individual’s ... sex”; (2) that means an employer can’t fire a person of one sex for doing something if it wouldn’t fire a person of the opposite sex for doing the same thing; (3) an employer wouldn’t fire a man for having a romantic encounter with a woman; (4) therefore, if the employer fired a *woman* for having a romantic encounter with a woman, that would be discrimination “because of” sex. *Bostock* focused on the text of the statute—a form of positive law—and eschewed any inquiry into the “intent” of the law.

Indeed, the main quarrel that uber-right-wing legal scholars have with originalism is that it’s too positivist. In his screed against *Bostock*, Horvat argued that originalism pays too much heed to positive laws that conflict with God’s will. Under originalism, he wrote, “law becomes merely the mechanical rules that keep society running smoothly, not the product of a divinely ordained order.”

Adrian Vermeule is the most prominent legal scholar to pivot to natural law. Vermeule was never a staunch originalist—his early work is more an argument for a weak judiciary than anything else—but he was originalist enough to clerk for Scalia. That changed over the past few years. In 2020, Vermeule wrote an infamous *Atlantic* article in which he argued that although “allegiance to the constitutional theory known as originalism

has become all but mandatory for American legal conservatives,” the doctrine has “served its purpose.” Instead, Vermeule pitched a version of natural law called “common-good constitutionalism,” under which judges should use “principles of objective natural morality” to inform their decisions.

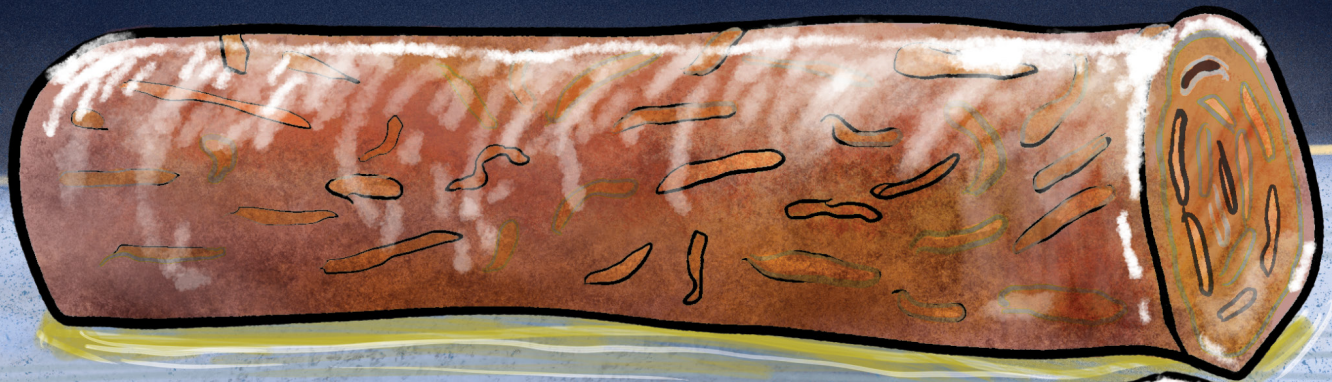
The *Atlantic* article is remarkable for its casual creepiness. Vermeule bragged that one advantage of his system is that it “does not suffer from a horror of political domination and hierarchy, because it sees that law is parental, a wise teacher and an inculcator of good habits.” Although he acknowledged that this could result in “legal strictures possibly experienced at first as coercive,” he wrote that over time, citizens would “form more authentic desires for the individual and common goods, better habits, and beliefs that better track and promote communal well-being.” (Of course, the “authentic” desires people will develop happen to coincide exactly with Vermeule’s own desires.)

If that sounds crazy to you, just wait. It turns out Vermeule’s *Atlantic* piece was the *restrained* version of his theory. Vermeule, like many proponents of natural law, is an ardent Catholic, to such an extent that he denies the legitimacy of other Christian denominations. In a 2016 interview, he said, “there is no stable middle ground between Catholicism and atheist materialism.” Vermeule has espoused a worldview called “integralism” which rejects the separation between church and state and suggests that Catholics should work toward a government run by the Vatican. In a blog post, he proclaimed that the end goal of his legal scholarship was “the eventual formation of the Empire of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and ultimately the world government required by natural law.” Yikes.

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OFFICIAL SNACK OF THE UNITED STATES FOR-PROFIT PRISON SYSTEM

Into the Depths

NOT ONLY IS NATURAL LAW THEORY FRIGHTENINGLY undemocratic; it's also fundamentally incoherent. It simply doesn't hang together as a philosophy.

Let's start with some basic questions. Assume, for the moment, that "natural law" exists. Assume also that people can discover it. How? And what happens if two people disagree about what the natural law is?

The most thorough attempt to answer this question comes from John Finnis, Gorsuch's dissertation adviser and the foremost living natural law scholar. Broadly, Finnis argues that natural law protects "basic values" or "goods" common to all human beings. A rule that promotes basic values is consistent with the natural law; a rule that inhibits them is not.

That reasoning, of course, just kicks the can down the road, because how are we supposed to decide what qualifies as "basic values"? Finnis answers this question with a concrete example. He begins with "knowledge," which he posits as a basic value. All humans, Finnis contends, innately desire knowledge because we are curious about things—we want to "find out about something just for the sake of knowing." For example, I might want to know the name of the fifth Spice Girl. With this empirical observation, we can formulate what Finnis calls a "practical principle": "knowledge is something good to have."

This reasoning is already muddled. How do you go from "what was the name of the fifth Spice Girl again?" to "knowing the name of the fifth Spice Girl is something good for everyone to have"?

But now Finnis really goes off the rails. The "practical principle," Finnis argues, is evidence that

knowledge is really a good, an aspect of authentic human flourishing. ... It seems clear that such indeed is the case, and that there are no sufficient reasons for doubting it to be so. The good of knowledge is self-evident, obvious. It cannot be demonstrated, but equally it needs no demonstration (emphasis mine).

Pause for a moment and mull this passage over. What it boils down to is this: the best Finnis could come up with to justify the existence of the universal "goods" on which natural law rests is, "I mean, isn't it obvious?"

Obviously not. Later in his chapter on knowledge, Finnis quotes with approval Aquinas, who wrote "[a]ll knowledge is obviously good." But anyone with a brain knows that *some* knowledge is obviously bad. If I set kittens on fire because I'm curious what burning fur smells like, even if I satisfy my curiosity, no "good" has come about.

The incoherence runs deeper. For the moment, let's spot Finnis that knowledge is a universal good. What about a more controversial example, like spirituality? For some people, spirituality is an indispensable part of their lives, and those people would probably say it's a self-evident good. (Finnis falls in that camp, positing

"religion" as a "basic value.") Other people don't find spirituality "obviously" valuable. A crisis emerges: spirituality is self-evident as a good only to some people.

Worry not, because Finnis has a brilliant solution (lifted straight from Aquinas). Sure, he concedes, the value of fundamental goods isn't obvious to *everyone*. But that doesn't mean they're not fundamental goods. Instead, some "propositions are self-evident only to 'the wise,' since only the relatively wise (or learned) understand what they mean." It's a neat trick: if you disagree with Finnis, you're just not wise enough for his point to be self-evident to you. Sorry.

AT LEAST FINNIS IS HONEST ABOUT HIS methodology. Other natural law theorists reach the same point in sneakier ways. For example, Vermeule—the Harvard Law professor trying to establish a global "Empire of Our Lady of Guadalupe"—has been consistently mealy-mouthed about whether there's any sort of objective basis for his idea of the "common good." In his *Atlantic* article, he threw out "the *ius gentium*" and "the early modern theory of *ragion di stato*" as possible "sources" for the common good. These references are puzzling, but Vermeule's rhetorical strategy is not; by throwing around obscure foreign phrases, he hopes to trick the reader into thinking there's some solid intellectual pedigree for his theory. But even a cursory inquiry into the *meaning* of these phrases reveals the vacuity of Vermeule's reasoning. *Ius gentium* is a natural law theory from ancient Rome that primarily concerned inter-state activities like war and diplomacy, so it's unclear how it plays into Vermeule's vision. *Ragion di stato* is the title of a 16th-century manuscript by a Jesuit priest which argued that the Church should form the backbone of civil government and a ruler "must prostrate himself in all humility before the Divine Majesty." A creepy allusion, but not a source of jurisprudential insight, unless you count "the Church should run the government" as an insight.

In a speech at a conservative think tank, Vermeule was a little more honest about how his system might work in practice. Invoking Aquinas (see how he keeps popping up?), Vermeule argued that natural law is a matter of "the art or craft of practical reasoning." A "judge cannot simply recline back into some sort of general skepticism about the common good or its determinacy, intoning 'who decides?'" Vermeule said. "For legal purposes, the jurists decide."

There's "practical reasoning" again. When a judge engages in "practical reasoning," she applies her own experiences and sense of right and wrong. So to the extent this means anything, it means that "common-good constitutionalism" will be the sum of common-good constitutionalists' beliefs. As with Finnis, lurking under Vermeule's academic jargon is an appeal to unverifiable personal convictions.

To be clear, I don't have a problem with judges sometimes relying on personal moral beliefs. If a duly-enacted statute forbade

Natural law, in short, has terrifying potential to serve as a legal fig leaf for reactionary, paternalistic legislation.

people from harboring escaped slaves, or mandated sterilization of the intellectually disabled, or put everyone of a certain ethnicity into internment camps (all real examples), judges *should* say “I won’t enforce that law, it’s wrong.” But there’s a crucial distinction between using personal morality as a backstop against a patently evil law, and claiming personal morality *is* the law. Natural law, at bottom, reflects that latter position—and that’s what makes it so dangerous.

One more example confirms the point. In the ‘90s, Gorsuch penned a law journal article arguing that physician-assisted suicide should be illegal. The article discusses several arguments that proponents of assisted suicide often cite, like arguments based on fairness or bodily autonomy. Gorsuch tries to rebut each of these arguments, and ultimately concludes that it’s impossible to “resolve end-of-life questions objectively.” Instead, he says “a necessarily subjective conception of right and wrong is required.”

So far, so good. If the morality of assisted suicide is “necessarily subjective,” then we should leave end-of-life decision to patients and their doctors—right?

Wrong! Gorsuch inexplicably backtracks, arguing that “there are certain irreducible and categorical moral goods and evils” which are “fundamental aspects of human nature.” And life, per Gorsuch, is one of those fundamental goods. Ergo, “the intentional taking of human life by private persons is always wrong.”

The article is a marvelous exercise in cognitive dissonance. Gor-

such surveys and rejects purportedly objective criteria for evaluating assisted suicide; concedes that “end-of-life questions” require a “subjective conception” of good and evil; articulates an (unverifiable) subjective belief that life is always good; and claims that this justifies banning assisted suicide. Or, to summarize his argument more succinctly: *assisted suicide is wrong... because I said so.*

All this reminds me of an old joke. A scientist gives a public lecture about astronomy, explaining that earth is a big rock hurtling through space. After the lecture, a woman approaches him and says, “Your theory is very nice, professor, but I’ve got a better one. I think the earth stands on the back of a giant turtle.” The professor politely asks, “But ma’am, what does the turtle stand on?” “Why, that’s easy,” the woman responds, “another, bigger turtle.” “But what does the second turtle stand on?” the scientist queries. The woman laughs. “You can’t fool me, professor—it’s turtles all the way down!”

The parallels are obvious. Natural law philosophy: “The law derives from fundamental goods.” You: “How do you establish fundamental goods?” Natural law: “Fundamental goods are self-evident, and if you disagree, you’re stupid.” It’s fundamental goods all the way down. The only self-evident truth in all of this is its circularity. Natural law philosophy ends, after a meandering journey, where it started: the personal convictions of the natural law philosopher.

De Influentia Philosophiae

ONE OF THE FIRST AND BEST LONGITUDINAL SURVEYS of American jurisprudence is *The Common Law*, an 1881 treatise by future Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. Holmes wrote that when judges decide legal issues, they have many analytical tools at their disposal: the text of the law, default rules for interpreting that text, the reasoning in prior cases, statements by Congress or another legislative body, abstract theories about the law, and their own common sense. Different tools sometimes point to different outcomes, and there’s often no clear framework for prioritizing one tool over another. So, according to Holmes, judges usually make an ad-hoc determination about which tool produces a “reasonable” outcome in the case before them.

At first blush, that seems to suggest that the rise of natural law jurisprudence doesn’t matter: if judges decide the result of a case and then pick a justification, of what import is the justification?

But actually, I think the opposite is true. By its very nature, a legal philosophy holds that judges should prioritize some analytical tools over others. And if a legal philosophy becomes embedded in the institutions that shape our legal system—law schools, courts, public discourse—that philosophy can cause decision-making norms to drift, slowly and inexorably reshaping the legal landscape.

Originalism, the conservative legal philosophy that natural law theorists aim to displace, is a perfect example of this phenomenon. Back in the day, when judges had to decide the meaning of

words in a law, they engaged in a meandering hunt for the “intent” behind the words. The poster child for this approach is the 1873 Supreme Court decision in the so-called *Slaughterhouse Cases*. The Court was tasked with interpreting the relatively new 14th Amendment, which, among other things, prevents states from “deny[ing] to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” Louisiana had passed a law granting one company an exclusive monopoly on slaughterhouses. The plaintiffs, a group of butchers whose livelihood the monopoly destroyed, argued that the law violated the “equal protection” clause by treating them differently from the monopoly-holder.

The Court summarily rejected that argument. It wrote that there was only “one pervading purpose” in the 14th Amendment, namely “the freedom of the slave race, the security and firm establishment of that freedom, and the protection of the newly made freeman.” Thus, though the Court acknowledged that the 14th Amendment doesn’t even mention Black folks or freed slaves, it wrote: “[w]e doubt very much whether any action of a State not directed by way of discrimination against the negroes as a class, or on account of their race, will *ever* be held to come within the purview of this provision.” Intent, in other words, trumps text.

A century later, the Court applied the same loosey-goosey procedure in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, the case that established a constitutional right to privacy. But this time, the Court ignored the text in order to *expand*, rather than contract, constitutional rights. It acknowledged that the word “privacy” appears nowhere in the Constitution. But, per the Court, the “specific guarantees in the Bill of Rights have penumbras, formed by emanations from those guarantees,” and a right to privacy emerges from those “penumbras and emanations.” Not for the first or last time, the Court made law based primarily on a vibe check.

Things are very different now, mostly due to originalism. In the ‘70s and ‘80s, a group of conservative jurists began to attack the earlier, freewheeling way of interpreting the law. They argued that it’s unprincipled and undemocratic for judges to ignore the text of the laws they’re asked to interpret. After all, the text is the product of the democratic law-making process; to base a decision on non-textual factors would convert judges into philosopher-kings. Originalism shifted the priority of analytical tools, obliging judges to center their analysis of the law on the relevant text.

This view has been incredibly influential, and not just among conservatives. Nowadays, virtually every judge starts—and often stops—with the text of the law. If you wrote a brief invoking “penumbras and emanations,” you’d be laughed out of court. Justice Kagan, one of the three liberals on the Court, summed up this sea change with a quip at her confirmation hearings: “We’re all originalists now.”

Originalism shows that when a legal philosophy becomes popular, over time, it can work deep structural change on American jurisprudence. That’s what Vermeule and his ilk want natural law to do.

Vermeule’s article hints darkly at what that would entail. Originalism, he wrote, “has prevailed, mainly because it has met the political and rhetorical needs of legal conservatives struggling against an overwhelmingly left-liberal legal culture.” But

circumstances have now changed. The hostile legal environment that made originalism a useful rhetorical and political expedient is now gone. ... If President Donald Trump is reelected, some version of legal conservatism will become the law’s animating spirit for a generation or more; and even if he is not, the reconstruction of the judiciary has proceeded far enough that legal conservatism will remain a potent force, not a beleaguered and eccentric view.

Turns out originalism was nothing more than an effective way for right-wingers to play defense in an era of legal reform. And now that they’ve “reconstructed” the judiciary and infiltrated the academy, it’s time to go on the attack.

What might that look like? The possibilities are far-reaching. Take abortion. Last year, the Court overturned *Roe* and eliminated the constitutional right to abortion—a triumph of originalism. But 20 or so states still protect the right to abortion, either by statute, state-court precedent, or constitutional provision. What happens if the GOP seizes control of Congress and passes a nationwide abortion ban—a strategy Lindsey Graham has already floated?

A sincere originalist would probably say that’s a bridge too far. The power of Congress to regulate interstate commerce, though vast, does not extend to purely intrastate medical procedures—at least, not under the original public meaning of the text of the commerce clause.

THAT CONCERN WOULDN’T MATTER TO natural law theorists. According to Vermeule, Finnis, and Gorsuch, the law is “parental, a wise teacher and an inculcator of good habits” and exists to protect “basic, self-evident values” and “irreducible and categorical moral goods”—like life. If performing an abortion is taking a life, then the State—the “parental, wise teacher”—*must* be able to forbid it. Indeed, per Aquinas, any regime of positive law that *fails* to forbid conduct that contravenes the law of nature is “is no longer a law but a perversion of law.”

Natural law, in short, has terrifying potential to serve as a legal fig leaf for reactionary, paternalistic legislation. Indeed, the GOP seems to be paving the way for efforts to ban many regarded as “unnatural” by traditional theology. The Texas GOP recently declared homosexuality to be an “abnormal lifestyle choice,” and stated its “official position” that “there are only two genders.” It’s a short leap from there to “homosexuality and transgenderism are unnatural.” Couple that with a legal philosophy that justifies state enforcement of theocratic morality—and all of us are in for a bad time. ✚



Humans are famous for wrecking their home by burning fossil fuels and obliterating their environment. Of course, there were many other energy options, but humans love a challenge.

WATER BOTTLES

Humans love putting their most basic necessity into bottles. Each was wrapped in a collectible picture of a famous waterfall from the *Before Times*.

In captivity, humans do miss Earth. But don't worry—we make them feel at home. We set the temperature at a balmy 125 degrees, just as they liked Earth's atmosphere to be. **Toasty!**


PLEASE TAP ON THE GLASS

Humans, unlike other creatures, are prone to develop existential angst whenever they recall that, most of the time, no one is observing them.

WELCOME TO THE HUMANS EXHIBIT AT THE INTERGALACTIC ZOO

Extinct in the wild, the human is a fascinating life form. Watch them argue about misunderstandings and hypothetical situations. If you look closely, you might get to see a human pace nervously. Look at them go!

TEXT BY MICHAEL LODATO



To humans, garbage is sacred. They pile garbage as far as the eye can see. Many human meals are in fact contained in a shiny garbage casing! Humans often accompany meals with religious observances. No meal is complete without the ceremonial crumpling of the wrapper.

Humans love pretending to procreate. It is one of their favorite activities! Yet mating is often followed by intense shame. This is because humans avoid creating more of themselves—their offspring are often deranged maniacs who consume copious fuel and grain. Once a baby is born, the struggle to survive begins. Parents must compete in the ancient ritual of sending emails from the kitchen table until they gain enough resources to feed their young.

DID YOU KNOW?

BEHAVIOR

In captivity, there is no need for humans to compete. Nevertheless, some humans still attempt to attain “alpha” status by flexing in the mirror and pouting.

CURRENT STATUS: THREATENED

Humans feel threatened all of the time no matter what. Scientists once thought fear was an ingenious adaptation, but since humans do nothing to improve their situation, their feelings appear to be merely vestigial.

CULTURE

When bad things happen, humans share comforting sayings, like “Everything happens for a reason.” Humans have not yet discovered that most bad things happen because of unbridled greed and horniness. The rest, of course, happen because of pressure fronts and plate tectonics.



THE PEOPLE'S DOCTOR

BY LIAM BURTON

JANUARY 2023 ENDED WITH SHOCKING NEWS: *Dr. Phil*, the long-running Emmy-nominated pop psychology talk show, would end in a matter of months.

Where would we be without *Dr. Phil* host Phil McGraw, aka the People's Doctor? McGraw is the tall, bald, Southern-accented man who famously said:

"I want you to get excited about your life."

"How's that working for you?"

"You're bright-eyed and bushy-tailed!"

"No matter how flat you make a pancake, it's got two sides!"

Rather than provide therapy, McGraw consistently subjected *Dr. Phil* guests to a blend of witty aphorisms, good humor, and "tough love" to solve their problems. As McGraw once told an audience at the American Psychological Association's 2006 Annual Convention, "What if you could deliver common sense, understandable information about life and living and deliver it to the safety, security, and privacy of people's homes every day for free?"

The success of *Dr. Phil*, the show and the man, wasn't inevitable. McGraw, as he tells it, grew up very poor, even living penniless on the streets. Before working in behavioral medicine and forensic psychology, McGraw worked "hundreds of jobs" as he pushed himself through school to earn his degrees. By 1989, McGraw had left the mental health sphere. He co-founded Courtroom Sciences Inc. (CSI), which provided trial consulting, jury selection, and witness training to "dozens of Fortune 500 companies." McGraw may have permanently stayed out of the media limelight had a woman named Oprah Winfrey not hired him to fight a "beef libel" lawsuit.

Most know this story: In the mid-'90s, Texas cattle ranchers sued Oprah Winfrey for stating on her talk show that she would not eat hamburgers anymore for fear of "Mad Cow Disease" (a neurological disease of cattle that, rarely, can spread to humans). To aid her in the ensuing lawsuit, Winfrey hired McGraw and CSI. She emerged victorious.

As Winfrey heavily credited him for her acquittal, McGraw became Winfrey's recurring guest on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. McGraw's popularity grew so much that *Oprah's* Tuesday show became "Dr. Phil Tuesday." It was only a matter of time before McGraw got his own spin-off show (similar to *Dr. Oz*, another Oprah-platformed charlatan).

The rest is history. *Dr. Phil* launched in 2002 and, for a while, was a TV mainstay. Phil McGraw entertained audiences with his avuncular personality while simultaneously intimidating them with his "no-non-

sense" attitude. Eric Rasmussen of Texas Tech University noted that while McGraw is not a licensed doctor (he previously practiced clinical psychology), he still exudes the *authority* of one and creates a "parasocial bond" with his audience.

Plenty of *Dr. Phil* resembled *Maury*. A compilation of *Dr. Phil's* "craziest" guests includes the woman who claimed she was about to give birth to "baby Jesus" and that she was Eminem's daughter. Other lists mention the man with "Sexy Vegan" tattooed on his forehead and the guy who claimed to be Taylor Swift's song co-writer and "soul mate." In the last few years, viewers also might have seen the 60-year-old woman engaged to a 22-year-old Nigerian man, who McGraw suspected was the victim of a cat-fishing scam, or even the 71-year-old unemployed Frank Sinatra impersonator who blamed his 90-year-old mother for his lifelong failure. We couldn't forget the "Catch Me Outside" girl, either, who later became a rapper.

Unlike other sleazy TV show hosts, McGraw understood that viewers get really bored seeing the same thing over and over again. You saw one bickering couple and a "dangerous" teen on *Dr. Phil*, you saw them all. That's why McGraw always shook things up on *Dr. Phil*, inserting coverage of news stories, celebrity tragedies, and current events in between regular advice episodes. He explained in an interview that his team's ethos essentially boiled down to "Don't make anything boring!" If the *team* thinks the show is becoming formulaic, so will the *viewer*.

Additionally, McGraw proved himself to be an innovative, adaptive man in an ever-changing media landscape. McGraw and his son Jay created a medical talk show, *The Doctors* (the show lasted a nice 14 seasons, despite a *British Medical Journal* review finding only 63 percent of the show's recommendations to be credible). For a few years, McGraw also executive produced *Daily Mail TV*. In an age of cord-cutting, *Dr. Phil* clips uploaded to YouTube have received millions of views. McGraw became one of the first daytime TV show hosts to simultaneously release a podcast when he launched *Phil in the Blanks* in 2019. Few 70-something-year-olds are friends with Mr. Beast or have TikToks with 7.6 million followers.

Dr. Phil is over, but we apparently haven't seen the last of McGraw. McGraw promised something big for prime time. CBS Media Ventures also stated that new segments would be added to *Dr. Phil* reruns, such as updates on the show's guests.

Commendably, upon learning of his daytime TV exit, the media resisted giving McGraw a hagiography. *The Hollywood Reporter* subtly noted that McGraw, like Judge Judy, Ellen DeGeneres, and *Dr. Oz*, was yet an-

other daytime TV show host exiting the stage with accusations of questionable ethics and/or toxic workplaces in tow. *CNN*, *Newsweek*, *MSNBC*, *NPR*, *Rolling Stone*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *Variety* couldn't help but list McGraw's legacy of scandals. These ranged from McGraw sending *Dr. Phil* guests to abusive treatment centers, staging unsolicited and exploitative interventions, and allegedly making drug users struggling with addiction look more disheveled on TV, in addition to mocking those with mental health issues. Of course, no one article can *truly* document all the wrongs associated with Phil McGraw. Through the use of his Teflon-powers, McGraw remained successful.

Most notably, the press voiced practically no criticism towards *Dr. Phil*'s final season, which dabbled in far-right punditry. An article or two reminded people that McGraw appeared on *The Ingraham Angle* to denounce COVID lockdowns in 2020 (McGraw sheepishly apologized for that later but still pushed on with filming in 2021 when other studios had "pushed back filming schedules amid the virus surge"). Those pieces still missed the forest for the trees.

IN THE LAST FEW YEARS OF *DR. PHIL*, MCGRAW HAS associated himself with far-right pundits like Matt Walsh, Andy Ngo, James Lindsay, Lila Rose, Will Witt, Asra Noman, and the founders of Moms for Liberty. McGraw's appearance on Laura Ingraham's program makes a lot more sense when one realizes that he has also appeared on *The Ben Shapiro Show*, *Hannity*, and two episodes of *The Joe Rogan Experience* (first in 2019 and again in 2022). As for his own show, there's a reason *Media Matters for America* (the one publication apparently paying attention) released an article entitled "CBS' Dr. Phil Has Become a Safe Space for Right-Wing Personalities to Spread Hate and Misinformation."

This is an abrupt shift to anyone who skipped *Dr. Phil* for several years and assumed the show was mere pop psychology. *Dr. Phil* didn't air on Fox News or Newsmax. The show competed with *The View* and *Live With Kelly and Ryan*.

Previously, we might have assumed that McGraw had *some* conservative beliefs such as "personal responsibility." He's a Texan from an older generation, after all. Yet, McGraw didn't spend the bulk of his career demonizing "the left" or collaborating with PragerU. He's not part of the "Intellectual Dark Web," and his podcast doesn't harbor anti-vaccine or anti-trans views. In fact, for the longest time, people of either conservative or liberal views could watch *Dr. Phil* without taking much offense.

In 2018, Stephen Colbert asked McGraw, "I know you don't talk about politics, but do you follow politics?" In response, McGraw told Colbert,

I don't talk politics because I don't think I should use my platform to influence people on things I don't know enough about. And I, frankly, don't know enough about it, and most of the people that do talk about it don't know enough about it to be talking about it.

Rest assured, it didn't take too long for McGraw to reverse course.

McGraw has said that "socialism doesn't work" because eventually "you run out of money." This much remains a fact to him, even if high-GDP countries with socialist policies (however flawed) consistently spend more than "five times what Americans do on unemployment insurance and other labor market programs." He also doesn't believe people deserve an "equal outcome." McGraw believes "hard work" creates riches, ignoring the fact that tax evasion, worker exploitation, and consolidated

political power actually create and perpetuate wealth.

McGraw once cited "the science" on the issue of COVID restrictions and mortality to claim that Florida, a state with fewer COVID restriction measures, ranked better (in terms of mortality) than California, a state with more restrictions. He joked that obstinate liberals would blame the study's findings on "Republicans." We can't prove with certainty which study McGraw was referring to, but it's quite possible he was referring to some part of an anti-COVID restriction study showing that red states "outperformed" blue states, which *Media Matters* says "engineered" its results by manipulating statistics and which originated from conservative think tank partisans who favor economic prosperity! *Whoops!*

McGraw is very vocal about cancel culture being "out of control." On the show and podcast, he'd state that college students today are too soft. McGraw frames student protestors (such as the UNM students who protested Tomi Lahren's Turning Point USA-sponsored speech) as "too afraid" of "words and ideas" rather than the white supremacist violence that conservative speakers historically incite. He also voiced no dissent when *Dr. Phil* guest, author Greg Lukianoff, implied that a horrific religious extremist attack on Salman Rushdie was another symptom of "cancel culture."

Despite *all of that*, it'd be unfair for us to dismiss McGraw as a regressive right-winger. McGraw isn't Tucker Carlson. McGraw is more like Joe Rogan: his "common sense" conservatism is shielded by a vague set of progressive views.

McGraw frequently criticizes "victimhood culture" (a dog-whistle often implying that systemic racism is not real) but concedes that carceral violence, housing discrimination, police brutality, and general racial inequality exist. McGraw even came around to understanding the causal link between racism and homelessness. McGraw said that anyone trying to outlaw transgender existence could "kiss my ass" and endorses many LGBTQ organizations. Most impressively, McGraw showed on *Dr. Phil* that Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill uses sneaky wording to ban the teaching of LGBTQ topics for students of all grades (not just grades K-3, as the bill's proponents still deceptively claim).

For the longest time, *Dr. Phil* avoided politics unless it was the kind that translated into sensationalist TV. The most controversial news item *Dr. Phil* ever addressed may have been the two episodes on Trayvon Martin's death, but the rest of the show mostly consisted of conflict resolution episodes.

That is, until we got the *Dr. Phil* episode abhorred by Native American activists: "Adoption Controversy: Battle Over Baby Veronica." The show concerned the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 (ICWA), a law prioritizing Native American guardians in Native adoptions. This episode is actually relevant over a decade after it aired, not just because the heavily-conservative Supreme Court will likely abolish ICWA in *Brackeen v. Haaland*. "Adoption Controversy" also gave us the earliest glimpse of a formula McGraw would use in the final seasons of *Dr. Phil*.

To start off the episode, McGraw interviewed Matt and Melanie Capobianco, who (at the time of airing) lost custody of their adopted Cherokee daughter, Veronica. The South Carolina Supreme Court awarded custody to Dusten Brown, Veronica's biological Cherokee father, citing ICWA. McGraw asked the Capobiancos leading questions like, "Was this [court decision] made in the best interest of the child?" and implied that ICWA was outdated, despite the depressingly still-relevant problem of white people taking Native children from their families. One of the people McGraw brought on to support the Capobiancos was his friend

Jay McCarthy of the Academy of Adoption and Assisted Reproduction Attorneys. Within Native circles, McCarthy is known for using shady tactics to illegally defy ICWA.

McGraw primed viewers to think that the Capobiancos suffered a grave injustice, but he ignored vital facts about their custody battle. Per ICWA, the courts broke the law by never informing Dusten Brown that his daughter was placed for adoption. The Capobiancos were fully aware that a Cherokee guardian had priority in Veronica's adoption, but they pursued adoption anyway. The South Carolina Supreme Court sided with Dusten Brown for these reasons. Also important, McGraw did not explain the broader context of Native cultural genocide, or the history of greedy law firms using ICWA custody battles as a proxy for undoing tribal sovereignty laws.

Dr. Phil's other guests, Chrissi Nimmo (then assistant attorney general for the Cherokee Nation) and Les Marston (a tribal judge), countered with all the facts above. They added that the custody dispute wasn't about "race" but citizenship and tribal sovereignty.

McGraw ignored such complicating points. McGraw exclaimed to Nimmo and Marston, "What I hear you saying, is what's best for the tribe, and not what's best for the child!", even though the child's trauma (of moving homes) could have been entirely avoided had everyone involved followed ICWA in the first place. Months after the show aired, Veronica's custody case made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court. The Court ruled in the Capobiancos' favor, using logic no less flawed than McGraw's.

Though we wouldn't see it in action for several years, "Adoption Controversy" actually established a four-step formula McGraw would reuse when discussing politics.

STEP ONE:

Introduce a topical issue that generates outrage.

IN THE MOST RECENT SEASONS OF *DR. PHIL*, THE SHOW introduced debates on political divisiveness, cancel culture, racial justice, cultural appropriation, abortion, transgender and nonbinary rights, inclusive learning practices, and harm reduction spaces, amongst other topics. A sample of flashy episode titles reveals the show's implicit biases:

"Carry to Bury—The Abortion Debate"

"Appropriation Nation: Has it Gone Too Far?"

"You Can't Say That!"

"Parents Battle Over 'Woke' School Curriculum"

"Transgender Athletes"

"Inclusivity or Indoctrination?"

"Slut Shaming or Asking for Modesty?"

STEP TWO:

Platform speakers without disclosing their sordid reputations. Ignore any inconvenient facts.

MCGRAW MADE HIS RIGHT-WING *DR. PHIL* GUESTS LOOK undeservably credible, because he never told viewers their true origins. One of the first topical debates McGraw did post—"Adoption Controversy" was 2019's "Controversy Over Hate Crimes." After going "behind the headlines" of actor Jussie Smollett's infamous staged hate crime attack, McGraw essentially asked: *Are hate crimes as big of a deal as the media says? Should we be more skeptical of people who claim they were victims*

of such crimes? Does Jussie Smollett's hoax ruin the cases of actual victims?

For this debate, McGraw's guests, Clay Cane (a gay Black radio host, experienced with racialized violence) and activist Sally Kohn, affirmed the growing threat of hate crimes. McGraw's other guests, *Daily Wire* editor Ben Shapiro and then *Quillette* editor Andy Ngo, meanwhile, argued that the media dishonestly chases "white supremacist narratives" when covering hate crimes (whereas Shapiro's *The Daily Wire* frequently, and dishonestly, molds stories to fit their right-wing grievance narratives). Ngo stated that hate crimes in America are actually uncommon.

It's very interesting that McGraw thought Shapiro and Ngo were the world's best experts on white supremacy and hate crimes. By 2019, Shapiro and his publication *The Daily Wire* had already amassed enough race-related controversies. Ngo's statements about hate crimes not being real rings especially disturbing, considering that Ngo enabled a white supremacist attack just months after this episode aired and has been accused of targeting at least one journalist of color with a disinformation campaign that the journalist says led to death threats against him.

All of this was just the beginning. In the ensuing seasons, particularly *Dr. Phil's* final season, viewers demanded McGraw cover more topical issues. To help him deliver on his viewers requests, McGraw solicited more conservative pundits.

During Season 19, McGraw casually spoke to Piers Morgan (a man linked to one of the worst tabloid privacy exploitation scandals) and Bret Weinstein (a former biology professor and current Ivermectin grifter) about their very narrow conception of cancel culture. McGraw helped Weinstein portray himself as a "canceled" free-speech martyr, rather than a guy who attracted alt-right figures to Evergreen State after needlessly intervening in a student protest against campus police brutality.

Season 20's "Gender Pronoun Debate" featured *Daily Wire* stochastic terrorist Matt Walsh. McGraw at least admitted upon introduction that Walsh was a controversial figure. McGraw needn't have done so, though. Walsh proved himself to be very sensitive and kind-hearted ... *just kidding*. Walsh couldn't go five seconds without verbally attacking McGraw's nonbinary guests for the crime of existing. He lied about a trans person being the perpetrator of a Virginia school's sexual assault case for good measure, too. The same season featured a "Should Critical Race Theory be Taught in Schools?" debate where James Lindsay ranted about CRT being "Marxism."

NEGATIVE PLATFORMING ONLY CONTINUED during *Dr. Phil's* final season, which premiered with an abortion debate. McGraw is pro-choice but begged people to take seriously the opinions of his anti-abortion guest, Lila Rose. "No matter how flat you make a pancake, it's got two sides," right? That illusion might have been ruined had McGraw disclosed that Rose spent years producing Project Veritas hoax videos and bogus "sting" operations against Planned Parenthood. McGraw actually countered Rose's lies about scientists agreeing that "life begins at fertilization," but Rose kept interrupting with more lies.

During a cancel culture episode, McGraw fawned over a Young America's Foundation student who faced censorship. Yet, he made no mention of YAF's anti-immigrant rhetoric, LGBTQ book ban efforts, or their "Ban Transgenderism" events. In the same episode, McGraw framed

Turning Point USA as an unfairly maligned organization—and not one whose speakers express similar sentiments while promoting election denial and keeping a professor “watchlist” that targets professors too far on the “left.”

McGraw led viewers to think Tiffany Justice and Tina Descovich were just very involved parents running a friendly organization called Moms for Liberty. Justice and Descovich themselves insisted their goals are pure: they advocate for bans on books and curricula that “sexualize” kids (i.e., that it’s OK not to be cis or straight) and that make them “feel bad” about their race (i.e., teach them honest history). Would viewers have taken Justice and Descovich’s positions seriously if they knew about their ties to the Heritage Foundation and the Florida Republican Party? If McGraw had detailed their smear campaigns against educators (one of which included a false child abuse allegation) and their attacks against LGBTQ people and trans-affirming healthcare, might that explain their agenda better?

Likewise, McGraw relied on Dr. Carole Hooven, a lecturer in evolutionary biology at Harvard, and NCAA swimmer Riley Gaines to advocate for trans exclusion in sports. He didn’t disclose either woman’s status as Fox News media darlings, something viewers might have benefited from knowing.

McGraw’s worst whitewashing came in his “Inclusivity or Indoctrination” episode. Up for debate was whether schools need to notify parents if their child comes out as trans. McGraw interviewed Asra Nomani and a parent only identified as “Jennifer,” both associated with the Independent Women’s Forum. McGraw made no mention of Nomani’s deranged articles from *The Federalist*, but amazingly, Nomani didn’t come off as terrible as Jennifer.

Jennifer openly stated that she pulled her child out of school because the school did not disclose that her child came out as trans (Jennifer claimed not to have been aware of this for months even though she admitted that the child had been “experimenting with these different identities” for some time). Jennifer explained to McGraw that, essentially, she forcibly socially detransitioned her child: “we removed her basically from all the influences that were affirming her [gender identity]” such as “devices” and LGBTQ-identifying friends, and “slowly she let go of it.”

Instead of pointing out to Jennifer that forcibly detransitioning a child is likened to abuse, McGraw nodded along. After all, if we’re too accepting of LGBTQ people, YOUR CHILD’S SCHOOL might brainwash YOUR CHILD into being trans! If it happened to Jennifer, *it could happen to you*. Of course, McGraw forgot to mention that the Independent Women’s Forum (the organization that Jennifer and Asra Nomani are associated with) is Koch brother-funded and regularly produces anti-trans misinformation. Jennifer can be seen in such a misinformation video, perhaps suggesting she is more “demagogue” than “concerned parent.”

STEP THREE:

Create a debate by having token speakers of an opposing view.

McGraw admitted to Joe Rogan that he read the *Media Matters* piece calling him a “safe space” for “hate and misinformation,” stating:

I actually read an article by some site I’ve never even heard of that says, ‘Dr. Phil has become a platform for right-wing ... hatemongers.’ ... They listed some

shows where I had on people on the right, giving them a voice, ... [but] not one time did they mention that sitting right across from them, was the other side!

McGraw is being completely truthful. He interviewed Lila Rose in the abortion episode, but he also interviewed National Organization for Women president Christian Nunes and pro-abortion civil rights lawyer Ben Crump. PragerU pundits Will Witt and Amala Ekpunobi defended cultural appropriation (and received free advertising for PragerU’s racist videos). Yet, McGraw also talked to YouTuber Brittany Collins, Arizona State University professor Neal Lester, and journalist Angela Pagán, all of whom explained cultural appropriation’s harmful impacts.

“The Gender Pronoun Debate” infamously featured Matt Walsh, but Walsh only came ten minutes after nonbinary influencer Addison Rose Vincent and their partner, Ethan, patiently explained gender pronouns and identities to McGraw and his audience. Walsh actually complained to Megyn Kelly that he didn’t get his own segment! Moms for Liberty’s co-founders were recurring *Dr. Phil* guests, but so was Shaun Harper, the founder and executive director of USC’s Race and Equity Center. In one episode, Harper, who himself has taught CRT, said that CRT was being used as a “bogeyman,” and in another, Harper openly disagreed with Greg Lukianoff on the rate at which college professors are fired.

Because McGraw platformed both right-wing *and* left-wing pundits on *Dr. Phil*, he felt that anyone who criticized his choices of guests was too close-minded.

McGraw didn’t agree with California State Senator Scott Wiener and Dr. Maia Szalavitz on harm reduction spaces (legally sanctioned locations for unhoused drug users to receive clean needles, fentanyl tests, and medical attention), but he *still* had them on his show. McGraw may have instead sided with Michael Shellenberger (his climate change-denying guest who wrote *San Fransicko: Why Progressives Ruin Cities*), but he still later featured Shellenberger and Weiner on separate podcasts. Similarly, McGraw might not have agreed with everything his guest Eli Erlick said about trans rights. Yet, he still let Erlick shut down a transphobic audience member who repeated the lie that trans people “regret” doing “permanent harm” to their bodies.

IF MCGRAW CAN HANDLE DISAGREEMENT AND differing voices on his show, why can’t we on the left do the same? Well, would it surprise anyone that McGraw is creating a false premise when he acts like his critics are just afraid of disagreement? The “both sides” approach makes sense when referring to a bickering couple with equally understandable arguments. But it’s invalid for debates between an informed activist with lived experience and a grifter trying to move the Overton Window.

McGraw’s insistence that every issue has two equally weighted sides creates its own type of harm. Platforming is never impartial. YouTuber Shaun astutely noted that if you platform a “flat-earther” in the name of impartiality (as the BBC said it hypothetically might), you’re treating an otherwise incorrect and inaccurate view as valid. More people will believe the incorrect views (or at least, be less inclined to disagree with them) if they’re falsely presented as “two sides to the same coin.”

Shaun Harper and those who defend Critical Race Theory are not equivalent to the paid Republican activists who drummed up the CRT moral panic in the first place. Ben Crump and Christian Nunes, who

provide, respectively, legal and healthcare resources for those affected by draconian abortion laws, are not equally weighted to Lila Rose's anti-abortion propaganda and hoax operations. Guests like Addison Rose Vincent and Eli Erlick advocate for LGBTQ people to safely exist. People like Matt Walsh, on the other hand, disagree to the point of thinking LGBTQ people deserve violence directed at them.

For McGraw though, these views are just the two extremes of the "culture war."

Columnist Adam Johnson observed that the media uses clichéd euphemisms like "issues" and "culture war" to mask grotesque, prejudiced attacks against marginalized groups that *exclusively* come from conservatives and the far right. "The Other Side" does nothing of equivalence, but the media, including *Dr. Phil*, ignores this so that everything can be put up for "debate."

STEP FOUR:

McGraw gets the last word.

He frames his incorrect and/or misleading views as "common sense."

McGraw misleadingly convinced his audience that evil Native Americans kidnapped children from white parents in "Adoption Controversy." He had more tricks up his sleeve in the ensuing seasons. McGraw believes that harm reduction spaces "enable" addiction and, as per B.F. Skinner and behaviorism, "You do not [should not] reward bad behavior!" Never mind that Noam Chomsky and other professionals have challenged "behaviorism" for decades. Portugal and the Netherlands have decriminalized some drugs, and the countries' rehabilitation strategies suggest that harm reduction policies are better than carceral policies in addressing drug use and addiction. Still, McGraw "respectfully disagree[s]."

McGraw has questioned whether kids are too young to learn about pronouns and gender identities. He condescendingly suggested to psychiatrist Yalda Safai that she should break confidentiality if a child comes out to them. McGraw is technically correct about a child therapist not being legally bound by confidentiality with a patient who is a minor, but it would still be unethical for a therapist to *out* a trans kids to their potentially non-accepting parents.

McGraw similarly felt that excluding trans women from sports was "common sense." McGraw also neglected to mention that laws banning trans people from sports are made by organizations like Alliance Defending Freedom, which sees this as a gateway to outlawing trans existence.

Ultimately, the most incorrect belief McGraw ever stated was that people he featured on his show had more to agree on than disagree. It'd be nice if this were true.

The controversial people McGraw was so intent on platforming *never wanted to find common ground with their opponents*. Andy Ngo and his allies literally want his enemies destroyed. Lila Rose evidently sinks to the lowest of the low to get abortion permanently outlawed. Matt Walsh outright said he has no interest in finding unity with non-cis/non-straight people—he prefers they not exist at all. Ben Shapiro laughably laments how divided Americans are in his book *The Right Side of History*, but Shapiro's brand is "owning the left." Young America's Foundation constantly pushes videos of speakers "owning" "arrogant leftists" and "shutting down" trans people at colleges. Tomi Lahren and Turning Point USA will always liken antifascist and racial justice movements to "terrorism."

Amala Ekpunobi still ridicules "woke" protesters and students. Moms for Liberty wants Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill enacted in all 50 states and any teacher teaching inclusive education or anything honest about racism canned. The Independent Women's Forum supports similar outcomes.

By treating these people with kid gloves, McGraw advanced everyone's goals. Matt Walsh wanted more airtime on his episode but being on a non-Fox News show sufficed (Walsh lists his heavily discussed *Dr. Phil* appearance as his first major achievement of 2022). Both Ben Shapiro and Tucker Carlson praised Lila Rose for "owning" *Dr. Phil*'s pro-abortion audience. Amala Ekpunobi used her *Dr. Phil* appearance as mocking fodder for her podcast, *Unapologetic*. The guests from Moms for Liberty and the Independent Women's Forum similarly gloated about *Dr. Phil* increasing their exposure and legitimacy.

IF THE "CULTURE WAR" WAS AN ACTUAL WAR, THE early 2020s served as the left's series of really tough losses. *Dobbs* overturned *Roe v. Wade* and the predominantly conservative U.S. Supreme Court has more terrible, life-altering decisions on the way. Police departments have received more funding and increased their shootings of civilians. Progressive prosecutors, when not being replaced with unelected, corrupt officials, had their legitimacy jeopardized by the people and the press. White supremacist violence is growing stronger, even in "blue states." Elon reinstated the worst Twitter accounts while silencing progressive voices. Florida finalized its status as one of the worst states for LGBTQ people by having its "Don't Say Gay" law criminalize inclusive education (something Gov. Ron DeSantis modeled after Hungarian autocrat Viktor Orbán) and by criminalizing trans-affirming healthcare (the legislature relied on "gender conversion" advocates and those with no experience in trans healthcare to justify their views. Other states followed suit.). Moral panic journalism is translating to Republican-led legislative victories.

Adding insult to injury, Phil McGraw flooded the political discourse with half-truths and misinformation. Journalists, media critics, psychology professionals, and even everyday people can mock McGraw all they want. He got away with all of it because he made for a compelling TV personality.

McGraw essentially told millions of people that it is OK to be a reactionary. "Soft on crime" lawmakers *have* ruined cities. Oversensitive "wokes" *do* "cancel" people for ridiculous reasons. LGBTQ people *are* going too far by "forcing" kids to be gay and trans. McGraw was one notch above Fox News by featuring credible guests who disagreed, but those guests likely only made viewers angrier and proved that the world really is depraved. Even the more centrist viewers likely appreciated McGraw's right-wing guests (whose true backgrounds they didn't actually know) for validating their honest thoughts. Subsequently, McGraw served as their gateway for accepting the worst of far-right rhetoric.

Dr. Phil is gone now, but it will take a long time to undo the damage he left behind on all fronts. As McGraw continues to work in the media, we should keep everything analyzed here in mind. At the very least, we'll make sure he doesn't skate by on his reputation as "The People's Doctor." ✚



MIGHT MAKES RIGHT

BY NATHAN J. ROBINSON

FOR THOSE OF US WHO ARGUE THAT U.S. foreign policy is built around the preservation of global dominance rather than the spreading of democratic values, the new book written by Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR) provides some helpful supporting evidence. *Only The Strong: Reversing The Left's Plot to Sabotage American Power* is a foreign policy manifesto that makes the case that U.S. Democrats are insufficiently militaristic. The core argument is laughable—from Truman annihilating Japanese civilians with atomic weapons to Obama's drone strikes on helpless civilians, elected Democrats have never shown pacifistic tendencies or meaningfully curtailed American militarism. But in the course of making the argument, Cotton makes some useful, and terrifying, admissions about the core values that motivate those like him.

What's jarring about reading *Only The Strong* is that it's frank about facts that are usually concealed or obfuscated by defenders of U.S. foreign policy. All my life, I have seen critics like Noam Chomsky and Chris Hedges amassing exhaustive evidence to prove that, contrary to our leaders' pronouncements, U.S. foreign policy

is not based on values but on a desire to maintain power over the rest of the world. They argue that when presidents say we stand for the "rules-based international order," what they mean is an order where *we make the rules*, running roughshod over international law, destroying other countries when it serves our interests, and generally being willing to use extreme levels of brutal violence in order to suppress any challenge to our position as the most powerful country in the world.

Most U.S. politicians would object to this argument. Barack Obama called the country "the greatest force for freedom and security that the world has ever known." George W. Bush said that "we have no desire to dominate, no ambitions of empire. Our aim is a democratic peace." Their story is that American power serves humanity as a whole, and that we are fundamentally a good country that acts out of benevolent motives. Ambassador Charles Bohlen said in 1969 that "one of the difficulties of explaining [American] policy" is that "our policy is not rooted in any national material interest of the United States, as most foreign policies of other countries in the past have been."

Tom Cotton disagrees. Cotton's response to the charge that the U.S. is a violent, selfish, and imperialist country is not "How dare you" but "Yes, and?" *Only The Strong* is remarkably blunt about asserting that the U.S. should not care about the fates of anyone else in the world, and that the job of American politicians is to follow

Tom Cotton, *Only the Strong: Reversing the Left's Plot to Sabotage American Power* (Twelve Books, 288pp, \$30)

what Adam Smith famously called the “vile maxim of the masters of mankind”: all for us and none for everybody else. “America must come first,” Cotton says. “The goal of American strategy is the safety, freedom, and prosperity of the American people.” For Cotton, that means that the central question of U.S. foreign policy is never “Is this legal?” or “Is this democratic?” or “Will this cause mass murder?” but rather “Is this good for the United States?” If something is good for the United States, it is good, period, regardless of how many millions of non-American lives it may destroy. He scorns those who put “humanity first,” and who think American power “should be deployed not to advance America’s interests, but rather to improve the social, economic, and political conditions of other nations and the world at large.”

Other politicians may try to give elaborate explanations of how the pursuit of the American “national interest” is actually in the interests of humanity itself. Not Cotton. To the charge that the U.S. supports hideous dictatorships when they are willing to serve our interests, Cotton says *of course we do*, in one of the most remarkably blunt quotes I have ever seen from a U.S. official: “No one ever mistook Diem, Somoza, the Shah, or Mubarak for the Little Sisters of the Poor ... But what matters, in the end, is less whether a country is democratic or non-democratic, and more whether the country is pro-American or anti-American.” In other words, we care about democracy elsewhere only when doing so benefits us. If a dictator is pro-American, we will actually support their efforts to *prevent* democracy from breaking out. Cotton is highly critical of Barack Obama for abandoning U.S. support for Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak, saying that “no doubt Mubarak was authoritarian and repressive, but he largely supported America’s interests and he led the Arab world’s largest nation and cultural heartland.”

COTTON’S PHILOSOPHY IS ROUGHLY this: The world is full of dangerous enemies, and it is the job of the American government to pursue “America’s vital national interests.” In doing this, we have no moral obligation to care about international law or the fates of people in other countries. Let others worry about such things. The “liberal, rules-based international order,” he says, is “the kind of abstraction progressives love, but for which no soldier ever picked up a rifle and fought.” The U.S. priority is the U.S., period. We are to be a wholly sociopathic nation, interested only in ourselves. That interest is served through *strength*, which means threatening to kill anyone who gets in our way. When Cotton looks over American history, what he sees is this:

We went from a global backwater to an undisputed global champion. We possessed the world’s mightiest, most fearsome military. What’s more, we built the world’s largest and most dynamic economy, providing

the highest standards of living ever known for the working man, with unlimited opportunity for success. And then we prevailed in the Cold War. America had fulfilled what Ronald Reagan called our “rendezvous with destiny”: we had become the greatest superpower in the history of the world.

Our job is to protect that status as the greatest superpower in the history of the world, using the threat of extreme violence if necessary, and Cotton is scornful of “globalist” presidents from Woodrow Wilson to Obama who have rhetorically indicated that they see the interests of others as mattering.

It is hard to overstate the extremity of Cotton’s militarism. He criticizes John F. Kennedy not for invading Cuba and trying to assassinate its leader, but for failing to try hard enough to invade Cuba and assassinate its leader. Cotton says that JFK should have deposed Castro because it was in our “interests” to do so, international law and respect for sovereignty being irrelevant. Cotton defends the 1953 U.S.-backed overthrow of the Iranian government of Mohammad Mossaddegh, saying that it was actually “Mossaddegh who mounted a coup by clinging to office” instead of letting us depose him. Cotton’s view on the Vietnam War is that the United States was not aggressive *enough* (even though the U.S. sent half a million troops, dropped more bombs on Southeast Asia than had been dropped in all of World War II, and the war killed millions of Vietnamese people). Cotton says we should have continued to back the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua, that there should be no respect for international legal institutions like the International Criminal Court (“foreign bureaucrats”), and that Woodrow Wilson should have prosecuted World War I with greater zeal (and framed it as a struggle for U.S. “interests” rather than a war for the future of democracy). Cotton believes that any admission that the U.S. has committed crimes or even made mistakes is “apologizing for America,” virtually tantamount to treason. Of course he thinks Joe Biden should have stayed in Afghanistan and “won,” without giving any explanation as to how that could have been done.

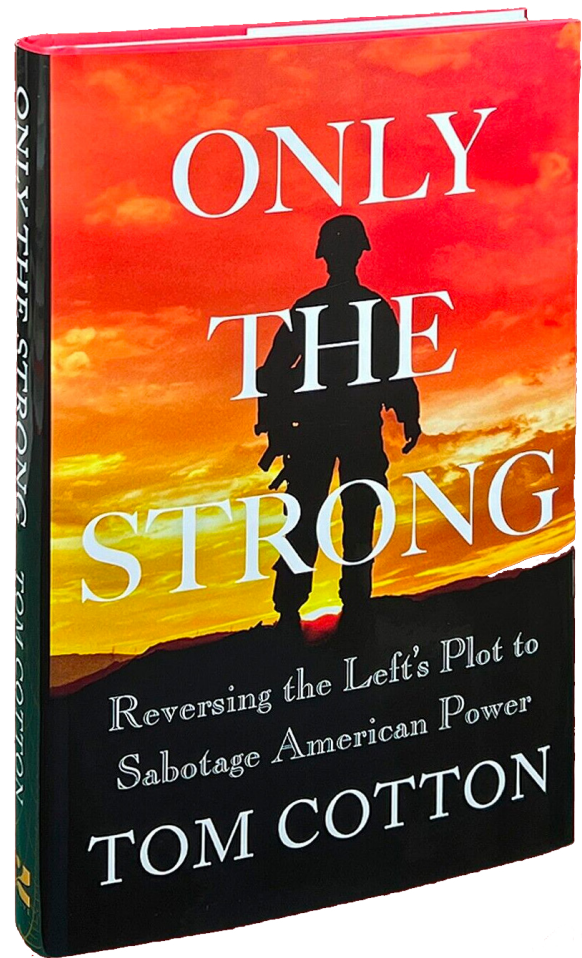
Cotton retells American history as a story of Republicans keeping America safe and Democrats being weak and pacifistic. It’s a hard story to sustain, because so many awkward facts conflict with the narrative. If Democrats and The Left are pacifists trying to undermine the country’s strength, why did Democratic president Lyndon Johnson invade Vietnam, with leftists coming to despise Johnson? (Cotton’s answer, as we have seen, is that Johnson simply didn’t invade Vietnam hard enough.) Cotton does not say much about the Iraq War, probably because it was a murderous calamity that significantly undermines his arguments. The Bush administration followed Cotton’s philosophy exactly, showing strength through the use of military force and refusing to use diplomacy. The result was that they launched the most disastrous war of our century and destroyed a country. When the results of Cotton’s philosophy conflict with his view that militarism produces security and prosperity, he simply doesn’t discuss the facts.

EVEN BEFORE THIS BOOK, COTTON had produced a record of public statements that put him on the hardest of the hard right. In the *New York Times*, he called for using the military to brutally crush Black Lives Matter protests. Guantanamo Bay detainees, who have never received due process of law, should nevertheless “rot in hell.” Cotton opposed limits on a president’s ability to authorize torture and attracted controversy for calling slavery a “necessary evil.”

In his book, Cotton adds to this record. He calls for the U.S. to fight China in a new Cold War, taking whatever extreme measures are necessary to prevail, including banning Chinese people from U.S. graduate programs in the sciences. He even seems to want more Chinese villains in movies. (“Have you noticed that there hasn’t been a movie with a Chinese villain in more than a decade? That’s because the studios are desperate for access to the Chinese market.” He is nostalgic for the good old days when “from *Red Dawn* to *Rocky IV*, Hollywood churned out patriotic, anti-Soviet hits.”)

He advocates a global nuclear arms race, tearing up arms control agreements and pushing us toward an even more dangerous world in which superpowers are constantly on the brink of annihilating each other with atomic weapons. (Cotton does point out, again uncommonly bluntly for a U.S. politician, that the notion we haven’t used nuclear weapons since World War II is wrong. “We use our nuclear weapons every single day and we have for seventy-seven years because their mere existence deters our enemies,” he writes.” In other words, you use a weapon when you threaten people with it, and this is what we do.) He of course believes we should immediately further militarize the border and step up deportations, reciting the common erroneous right-wing talking point that if a country doesn’t have a hard border it isn’t actually a country. (The U.S. did not have a militarized border for centuries but was nevertheless a country.)

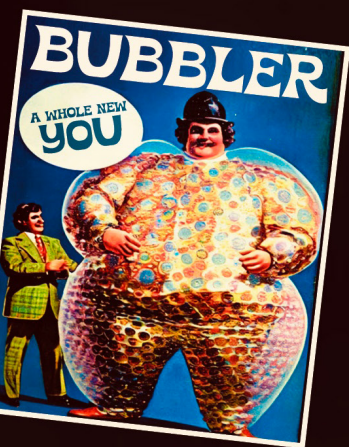
Cotton argues that we must reject any attempt at international accountability for our crimes: “If we ever join the International Criminal Court, American troops could face trial and imprisonment by foreign bureaucrats.” (Left unsaid is that they would face trial *if they committed war crimes*, and that if we didn’t join the court *they wouldn’t face trial for those war crimes*.) Cotton is scathing about all international agreements, inevitably seeing them as “one-sided” attempts to constrain U.S. power. He is thrilled that the Kyoto Protocol was never ratified, because “had the Senate ratified Bill Clinton’s Kyoto Protocol on global warming, you would be paying much more to gas up your car and to heat your home.” He appears to view all international climate agreements as conspiracies by other countries to hamstring the U.S. and keep us from being prosperous and free. Cotton is clearly an out-right climate change denier, because he doesn’t mention it, advocating massively escalating our production and use of fossil fuels, without any indication that this might have negative consequences.



All of this is insane and terrifying. Cotton, more so than any other Republican I have read (and I’ve read quite a few), comes across as a deranged authoritarian militarist who does not care in the least about democracy or human rights. But he is not a *hypocrite*, and he is not inconsistent. Cotton argues straightforwardly that the reason we should care about Taiwan is that semiconductors are produced there. (“That’s why it’s in our vital national interest to deter a Chinese invasion of Taiwan and encourage TSMC and its competitors to build new factories in America.”) This means that he, unlike Joe Biden, cannot be tripped up by questions like “Why do you support Ukraine but not Palestine?” or “Why do you care about Taiwan but not Yemen?” Cotton has a simple answer: because Israel and Taiwan are strategic partners of the U.S., and therefore we support them. Cotton does not play this game of pretending that we are involved in some noble struggle of “democracy” against the forces of “authoritarianism.” For him, we are trying to serve our own interests as other countries serve theirs. If doing so causes democracy to flourish around the world, great. If it doesn’t, that’s none of our business. Cotton recently wrote a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed making the case for continuing to arm Ukraine, and he made clear that the justifications have little to do with principle and everything to do with self-interest. The Ukrainian “cause is sympathetic, but the world is a

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dangerous place and America shouldn't act out of sympathy alone. We act to protect our vital national interests." We should "back Ukraine to the hilt" because the alternative "favors Russia and harms our interests."

Cotton does not dwell on the implications of his view that self-interest should trump morality and law, but it's worth thinking about them, because he is right that similar thinking has long guided U.S. policy, whatever the noble rhetoric of our presidents. Cotton says the Vietnam War was worth fighting *not* because the Vietnamese deserved self-determination (about which he makes clear he does not care), but because "U.S. national security interests" were at stake, namely the question of whether Vietnam would be governed by a regime sympathetic to the U.S. or one sympathetic to our main geopolitical rival. For Cotton, the millions of Vietnamese people who died in the war might as well have been ants. Their lives simply do not factor into the equation. What mattered, as he says openly, was whether there was a pro-American regime or not. It doesn't matter whether the majority of Vietnamese people wanted the South Vietnamese dictatorship gone. It was still legitimate to fight to preserve it, no matter the cost in lives or the opinions of the populace, *because it was on our side*.

Cotton does not mention some of the worst atrocities the U.S. has supported on reasoning similar to his own. For instance, when the Indonesian government started massacring communists by the hundreds of thousands in 1965 and 1966, the U.S. gave Indonesia its full support. The U.S. backed the Khmer Rouge after it was ousted by Vietnam, going so far as to oppose U.N. measures condemning the Cambodian genocide. When Saddam Hussein was gassing Iranians with chemical weapons, the U.S. not only continued to support Hussein, but concealed the evidence of Hussein's crimes, because we wanted him to keep fighting Iran by any means necessary. All of this is appalling, but all of this is the perfectly rational consequence of adopting the Cotton worldview: ourselves above all others, morality be damned.

FOR THE SAKE OF BOTH THE REST of the world and ourselves, Cotton needs to be kept from attaining any more power than he already has. (It's more than a little frustrating that the last time he came up for reelection, he didn't even have a Democratic opponent.) It's obvious enough why anyone in any other country should fear a politician with this worldview—Cotton might support an outright genocide if it served our "vital national security interests." But Americans shouldn't buy Cotton's rhetoric about preserving their "security" and "safety." Ripping up arms control agreements, violating international law, and viewing the rest of the world as enemies who need to be coerced does not ultimately make us safer. The Iraq War, for instance, was justified as a means of keeping the U.S. safe through deploying military force, but in fact it made the country substantially *less* safe by giving terrorists a powerful new recruiting tool. Blustering and confrontational rhetoric

toward China makes an eventual war more rather than less likely. If the world ever experiences a catastrophic nuclear holocaust, it will be because politicians like Cotton believed other countries had to be threatened rather than negotiated with.

What is frightening is that, while Cotton is on the "hawkish" end of the U.S. foreign policy spectrum, his general views are not at all out of the mainstream. While he believes Democrats are weak and vacillating and do not sufficiently fund the military, the confrontational posture toward China, for instance, has been fully bipartisan. Barack Obama

P O E M
At Smedley Butler's Grave
by W.D. Ehrhart

Oaklands Cemetery
West Chester, PA

So here I am with Smedley Butler,
major general, Maverick Marine,
Old Gimlet Eye, the Stormy Petrel,
two-time Medal of Honor winner;
me a sergeant with a Purple Heart
for doing nothing but getting hit.
(Don't kid yourself, there's nothing
heroic in that; just bad luck.)

Yet here I am at Butler's grave. But why?
Well, we were both Marines, there's that.
And he graduated in 1898 from the school
where I taught decades later for 18 years.
And he wrote a book called *War Is a Racket*
in which he concluded, "To Hell with War!"
How can you not love the guy for that?

was not wrong when he said it "turns out I'm really good at killing people," and both he and Biden pursued the Cotton strategy of embracing dictators who serve our interests. (Obama offered a historic \$115 billion in weapons sales to Saudi Arabia, for instance.) Those who believe U.S. policy should be based on values rather than the pursuit of power for power's sake might be horrified by some of Cotton's rhetoric in the book, which sees the rest of the world as enemies to be subdued and openly advocates the embrace of authoritarian allies. But the major difference between Cotton and his Democratic opponents, despite what both he and they would say, is that he is more honest in his elevation of naked self-interest as a policy imperative. He might believe that Democrats erode the country's power, they might believe that they support the "rules-based international order," but the record of both Democratic and Republican administrations shows that the use of extreme violence to maintain American hegemony is a bipartisan constant. The belief that might makes right, and that the United States has a God-given right to be the most powerful country in the world, is foundational to U.S. foreign policy. ✚

Tous les Soirs à 8h



GERMINAL

5 ACTES 12 TABLEAUX

EMILE ZOLA

“Books of This Kind May Serve Some Purpose”

BY PETER TAYLOR

“Are there any factories in Montsou?” the young man asked.

The old man coughed up some phlegm and then spoke up loudly against the wind:

“Oh, there are plenty of factories, all right. You should’ve seen ‘em three or four years ago, thundering away, they couldn’t find enough workmen, never was so much money about ... but now we’ve got to tighten our belts again. It’s a crying shame round here, people laid off, workshops closing down, one after the other. ... Maybe it’s not the Emperor’s own fault; but why does he need to go off to fight in America? Not to mention the cattle that’s dying of cholera, like everyone else.”

—ÉMILE ZOLA, *GERMINAL*

THE OPENING SECTION TO ONE OF THE MOST enduring novels in the French literary tradition is not a particularly cheery one. When Étienne Lantier arrives in the fictional town of Montsou in search of a job, he does not expect to come face to face with a microcosm of the capitalist system that rules the French countryside. Zola channeled his considerable intellect and literary talent into a tale of how brutal poverty pushes a ragged group of miners to struggle against both the intransigent greed of their bosses and the ruthless ferocity of their greatest ally, the state. Passages like this one give us a portrait of rural 19th-century France steeped in the particulars of Zola’s era, yet it remains uncomfortably pertinent—the same way James Baldwin’s thoughts on contemporaneous American race relations remind us of all the work still to be done to end systemic racism and all its harmful downstream effects.

The 19th century was a big one for socialism: Kropotkin, *Das Kapital*, the revolutions of 1848. It was also a century that gave us some of our most enduring writers, the century where English poet Percy Shelley famously wrote, “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” Long before the advent of literary styles like the frequent-

ly obscure and esoteric Modernism or the “nothing makes sense so let’s just riff on it all” jokiness of Postmodernism, 19th-century European literature concerned itself first and foremost with humans’ relationship to the world we inhabit and the societies we construct and uphold. Some novelists, such as Jane Austen and Mark Twain, used wit and humor to poke fun at strictures of class, gender hierarchies, and racism. Others like Charles Dickens or Leo Tolstoy sought both to expose and offer compelling alternative moral visions to the repressive conditions of, say, English workhouses or Russian serfdom. Simply (and very reductively) put, the 19th century was a period in which writers—or, at the very least, the authors whose works have stood the test of time—took themselves seriously enough to believe that their work had relevance beyond itself and the academy.

As an appreciator of everything from Dostoevsky to Lorrie Moore, I must assure you that my goal is not to turn to the literature of the past to make a broader critical point at the expense of the present. Instead, I want to look at it for its own sake, to dive into two novels that remain acclaimed within academic and intellectual circles but which time, cultural remove, and other gatekeepers may have obscured from even the readers of *Current Affairs* or other erudite Americans: Zola’s *Germinale* and Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*. What might these books offer modern readers more than a century later? More than you might suspect: gripping narratives and unforgettable characters; deep concern for the plight of workers and the oppressed the world over; and the exemplary wisdom of their authors, many of whose observations seem to apply just as neatly to our—or any—society as they do to 19th-century France. In these times of extreme inequality and unceasing capitalistic extraction, the left needs novels such as these for sustenance as much as we need movements, leaders like Bernie Sanders, or other publications like *Jacobin*. In the age of Twitter and “hot takes,” we could all stand to read books that require sustained attention. If we do, we might find more than just a little bit of “hidden” wisdom in the writings of a couple of Frenchmen, now long dead but whose words can still teach us about the ongoing struggle for a free and just world.

BORN IN 1802 TO AN OFFICER IN Napoleon's army, Victor Hugo is widely considered one of the greatest authors ever to write in French. The author of dozens of novels and plays and hundreds of poems, Hugo was a preeminent man of letters within contemporaneous French society. He was also a politician, elected to both the National Assembly and the Senate, and an activist, one of his primary *causes célèbres* having been a fierce opposition to the death penalty. By the time of Hugo's death in 1885, his popularity among the French citizenry was such that his funeral in Paris attracted more than 2 million people, more than the city's population at the time and a large enough audience that the French government usurped management of the funeral out of fear of a potential uprising. Hugo's massive influence on French political and literary culture still lingers, so much so that it is estimated that every town in the entire country of France has at least one street named after the writer-politician.

Despite his work's influence on socialist organizers and movements throughout history (Eugene Victor Debs, named for the writer, reportedly read *Les Misérables* over and over throughout his life), Hugo was far from a committed socialist in his own political career. Coming onto the literary scene amidst a restored post-Napoleonic French monarchy, Hugo failed his first political test during the revolutions of 1848 by taking the side of the royalists, fighting against the barricades that he would immortalize in his most famous novel. Only in the revolution's aftermath did he become “radicalized,” veering towards the left as he became one of the leading Republican reformist opposition voices to the absolutist government of Louis Napoleon. Once he left Paris in exile after Louis Napoleon's successful anti-constitutionalist coup in 1851, Hugo garnered a reputation as a political radical, both by lending his vocal support to movements around the world and writing the book that has most cemented his historical reputation, *Les Misérables*. When he returned from exile upon the declaration of France's Third Republic in 1870, he was immediately elected as a senator. He failed another crucial political test upon refusing a suggestion to run for a place on the central committee of the now legendary Paris Commune, whose goals he apparently supported but whose methods he condemned alongside the violence of the state in a textbook example of “both sides”-ism usually the domain of tepid liberals.* After the Commune's brutal dismantling, Hugo must have seen the error of his ways, for he opened his home to persecuted *communards* and fought for their complete political amnesty, drawing the ire of numerous contemporaries but rallying the support of working people across France.

Hugo was at the forefront of the artistic movement known as

Romanticism, itself a kind of backlash or response to the Enlightenment thinkers who had dominated European intellectual currents throughout the 18th century. Where the Enlightenment stressed rationality and order, the Romantics preferred to emphasize emotion and embrace the mysterious aspects of human life. Furthermore, artists no longer adhered quite as strictly to classically accepted approaches to artistic composition, instead placing more emphasis on the sublimity of nature and its connection with the imaginations of the individual artists. Perhaps it was Alfred de Musset, noted French poet and dramaturge, who offered up the most characteristic elucidation of the Romantic movement:

Romanticism is the star which weeps, the wind which cries out, the night which shivers, the flower which gives its scent, the bird which flies. ... It is the infinite and the starry, the warmth, the broken, the sober, and yet at the same time the plain and the round, the diamond-shaped, the pyramidal, the vivid, the restrained, the embraced, the turbulent.

Published in 1862 after nearly twenty years of work, *Les Misérables* first appeared on the literary scene after the Romantic movement had largely given way to writers like Balzac and Flaubert, who themselves spearheaded a response movement appropriately known as Realism. Despite its later publication, Hugo's great novel still exhibits many of the paradigmatic trends of the movement of which its author had spent the previous decades at the forefront, notably its grandeur and sweep. In this regard, no idea for Hugo is too grand or unparseable to avoid scrutiny. Within the more than 1,300 pages that make up *Les Misérables*, Hugo touches on God, revolution, poverty, faith, goodness, evil, authority, freedom, nationalism, unity, capital punishment, social justice, and class struggle (just to name a few). Anyone who has seen the novel's famous musical adaptation can attest to the gripping nature of the plot, but the narrative is merely one aspect of a novel whose primary subject is nothing less than all the grandeur and drama inherent to human life.

In line with both his literary proclivities and the better angels of his political nature, Hugo wrote with the idea that his novel could bear witness to the kinds of conditions that can surround and catalyze social upheaval. Such testimony might then help effect change, laying the moral groundwork for the kind of society dreamers like Hugo envisioned. The best evidence of this comes at the novel's very beginning in this brief epigraph:

As long as through the workings of laws and customs there exists a damnation-by-society artificially creating hell in the very midst of civilization and complicating destiny, which is divine, with a man-made fate; as long as the three problems of the age are not resolved: the debasement of men through proletarianization, the moral degradation of women through hunger, and the blighting of children by keeping them in darkness; as long as in certain strata social suffocation is possible; in other words and from an even broader perspective, as long as there are ignorance and poverty on earth, books of this kind may serve some purpose.

Passages like this—many similar ones can be found among Hugo's other writings and extensive correspondence—are a rarer sight in contemporary literature, which I sometimes fear has all but resigned itself to a fate of cultural obsolescence (surveys have documented declining rates of literature reading among American adults). For Hugo, however, art might not merely observe or poke fun at the world but might ac-

* Such a stance is particularly ironic given the inclusion of the following passage in his novel: “For everything there is a theory that declares itself to be ‘common sense’; Philinte as opposed to Alceste; mediation offered between truth and falsehood; justification, censure, a somewhat lordly extenuation that, because it contains a mixture of blame and excuse, considers itself wisdom and is often just pedantry. A whole school of politics called ‘the happy medium’ derives from this. Between cold water and hot, this is the party of the lukewarm. In its entirely superficial pseudo-profundity, which analyses the effects without looking at the causes, with its semi-scientific superiority this school condemns public unrest.”



Act. I. Jean Valjean. Jacquin Une Femme. (2^e T) M^{lle} Magloire. M^{lle} Baptistine. Un Brigadier. M^r Miriel



(5^e T) - Javert. Fantine. (4^e T) - La Tenardier. Fantine. Tenardier. (3^e T) - Petit Gervais.



(5^e T) Fauchelevent. Un Ouvrier. (6^e T) Jean Valjean. (8^e T) Sœur Simplice. Fantine. (9^e T.) - Cosette.



(10^e T) Claquesous. Tenardier. Montparnasse Eponine (11^e T) - Cosette. (12^e T) Fauchelevent.

tually probe its depths enough to inspire change. A common attitude among his contemporaries, such an attitude is, today, practically radical.

Rather than wade into the historical forests of the 1789 or 1848 revolutions, Hugo chose for the setting of his novel the June Rebellion of 1832, an obscure (and swiftly curtailed) anti-monarchist revolt of Parisian republicans. The novel may technically take place in the midst of a real event, but Hugo's interest lies less in historical verisimilitude than in using the insurrection as a kind of blank literary canvas on which he can expound upon his broader attitudes towards revolution and progress. In fact, the setting is probably better understood as a stand-in for (and perhaps an atonement for his mistaken allegiances in) the revolutions of 1848, which the great sociologist Karl Marx considered the first meaningfully working-class revolutions in European history. The novel's more vague temporal setting does much to explain the story's lasting appeal and ongoing inspiration to revolutionaries the world over.

Even if you've never read the original novel, you may have a sense of its plot and characters, either through cultural osmosis or exposure to any one of the novel's adaptations, the most popular of which remains the 1985 West End musical and its numerous revivals (plus an adaptation into a pretty bad movie in 2012 that does not do justice to Claude-Michel Schönberg's musical score, let alone Hugo's tome). The story functionally begins with the introduction of Jean Valjean upon his release from a 19-year prison sentence, originally conferred as punishment for his theft of a single loaf of bread to feed his starving family. After a benevolent rural bishop helps the former convict get back on his feet, the novel follows Jean Valjean through the rest of his life, which he strives to fill with acts of honesty and charity to atone for his criminal past. He takes into his care Cosette, the daughter of a young factory worker turned sex worker named Fantine, and eventually becomes entangled in an uprising of a student movement known as the ABCs, one of whose members, young Marius, has fallen in love

with Cosette. Like he has a hellhound on his trail, Jean Valjean spends decades evading pursuit by the infamous Javert, a police inspector whose ferocity is outmatched only by his reverence for authority. The chase culminates after the destruction of the novel's famous barricade, leading Javert and Valjean, with the body of an unconscious Marius in tow, to a final climactic encounter in the Parisian sewers in a section long considered one of the richest in all of French literature.

UGO'S CHARACTERS ARE SOME OF the most memorable in any work of fiction I've ever encountered. Jean Valjean and Fantine have become literary archetypes for the victims of a system that condemns innocent people to poverty and suffering. A clear autobiographical stand-in for the author in the similarity of their political trajectories, Marius Pontmercy disowns the inheritance of his royalist grandfather when he grows into a more egalitarian political consciousness, eventually putting his life on the line at the barricades for his ideals. The Thénardiens, a quasi-foster family from whose mistreatment Valjean rescues his adoptive daughter Cosette, exemplify the greed and wickedness of the petite bourgeoisie who care more about losing a precarious middle-class existence than envisioning a world of kindness and justice. Just as distinctive as Hugo's principal characters, however, are the numerous minor characters that fill the novel's pages, from the heroic street orphan Gavroche to Marius' dastardly royalist uncle Monsieur Gillenormand, for whom Hugo elicits sympathy for his grief over Marius' decision to abandon the family. My personal favorite of these side characters is Monsieur Mabeuf, an initially apolitical man whose circumstances drive him to financial ruin, which forces him to sell his prized collection of rare books to make ends meet in his old age. Radicalized by his destitution, Mabeuf ultimately comes around to the cause of the ABCs, eventually sacrificing his life on the barricades in the name of their revolutionary cause.

For Hugo, no person, historical or fictitious, is uninteresting. Though he includes extensive digressions on the lives of “great men” like Napoleon or King Louis-Philippe, Hugo is even more interested in the lives of the normal people mired in poverty and oppression for whom he names his novel. Far from making them mere caricatures or one-dimensional symbols, Hugo breathes life into his characters, who come off as profoundly real people as notable for their struggles within and against oppression as for their societal trappings. Though inextricably tied to their social circumstances, characters like Marius or Jean Valjean continue to speak to readers precisely because they are dynamic people who seek to build a life within the confines of a society that simultaneously stifles them and (more importantly) begs to be overthrown.

Les Misérables has long been recognized as shorthand for the over-long novel, reportedly one of the longest ever written at more than 650,000 words. Aside from its gripping plot and memorable characters, Hugo's massive novel is in this vein particularly (in)famous for its extended digressions, estimated to comprise nearly a quarter of its more than 1,300 pages. Some of these digressions relate to the novel's broader themes of revolution and social consciousness. Many of them,



however, are almost completely unrelated to the book's general thrust, such as when Hugo decides to expound upon his historical theories surrounding Napoleon's infamous defeat at Waterloo in 1815 or to take several dozen pages relating his general contempt for the cloistered lifestyle of monastic Christian orders and their isolation from pressing material concerns. Though some of these digressions can get a bit cumbersome—I never thought I would learn so much about the layout of the Parisian sewage system circa 1832, a topic for which my interest is practically nonexistent—they serve a function of profound importance in terms of lending extreme verisimilitude to the novel's milieu.

Any reader could be reasonably excused from skimming through or even entirely jumping past, say, Hugo's extensive cataloging of contemporaneous Parisian slang, especially given the gripping plot from which Hugo is asking his readers to deviate. To write off such passages, however, would be to ignore Hugo's larger interest in examining and critiquing the society that has shaped his characters' material circumstances. As much due as he gives his story's individual actors, Hugo is, throughout the novel, perhaps even more interested in dissecting the structures that both defined the France of his time and that still resonate for those living under today's oppressive global capitalist order.

Take, for example, this passage from the novel's early pages, where Hugo uses the Bishop of Digne as a mouthpiece for one of the most concise condemnations of the social “order” you'll ever read:

The failings of women, children and servants, of the feeble, the destitute and the ignorant, are the fault of their husbands, fathers and masters, of the strong, the rich, and the learned. ... Teach those who are ignorant as much as you can. Society is to blame for not giving free education. It's responsible for the darkness it produces. In any benighted soul—that's where sin is committed. It's not he who commits the sin that's to blame but he who causes the darkness to prevail.

Or this one, where in the midst of Jean Valjean's unraveling backstory, Hugo rhetorically interrogates in the loftiest of Romantic terms the reasons a person might be driven to commit a crime:

Does human nature change so thoroughly and so radically? Can the human being created good by God be made wicked by man? Can the soul be completely remade by fate and, being ill-fated, become ill-natured? Can the heart grow deformed and develop incurable uglinesses and infirmities under the pressure of inordinate misfortune, like the spine under too low a vault? Is there not in every human soul, was there not in the soul of Jean Valjean in particular an original spark, a divine element, incorruptible in this world, immortal in the next, which goodness is capable of nurturing, stoking, kindling, fanning into a glorious blaze of brilliance, and which evil can very wholly extinguish?

(Hugo's implicit response to each of these questions is a resounding yes.)

Or how about this one, which sadly resonates in light of my own government's continued commitment to its military apparatus instead of robust social spending?

It has been calculated that in salvoes, royal and military honors, exchanges of courtesy volley, ceremonial signals, harbor and citadel formalities, sunrise and sunset salutes et cetera, the civilized world was discharging around the globe every twenty-four hours one hundred and fifty thousand unnecessary cannon shots. At six francs per cannon shot, that comes to nine hundred thousand francs a day, three hundred million a

year, that go up in smoke. This is just one small detail. Meanwhile the poor are dying of hunger.

Even more than in the thrilling description of battles at the barricade erected between Rue Plumet Idyll and Rue St-Denis Epic, passages like these are where the core of Hugo's social critique best shines through. A perennial adherent to the movement he helped define, the author can occasionally issue statements that came off as a little overwrought or grand, particularly to modern readers like us who might be a little less conditioned to think of the world in Christian absolutes like good and evil, virtue and sin. These Romantic pronouncements are more than lofty language, but act as a conduit for Hugo's otherwise very material understanding and critique of 19th-century France and human civilization more generally.

Such trappings of his artistic proclivities superficially obscure Hugo's very clear and incisive framing of the novel's most definitive conflict: that between the authority of an unjust order and the resistance that strives to replace it with a just one. Nowhere is this more evident than in the character of Inspector Javert, one of literature's most memorable villains. From the outset, Hugo establishes the officer of the law as a simplistic man dominated by “two very simple sentiments ... respect for authority and hatred of rebellion,” the latter of which Javert defines to include “theft, murder, [and] any crime.” He views “any state official, from the prime minister to the rural policeman, with a deep-seated blind faith,” whereas on “anyone who had once crossed the legal threshold of wrong-doing he heaped scorn, loathing and disgust.”

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN EASY AND NOT WHOLLY ungenerous for Hugo to paint Javert one-dimensionally, as an unquestioning arm of the law deserving of only reproach, not sympathy. Instead, Javert is more than a mere foil for his heroes but another conduit into larger societal critique. His backstory, given very early in the novel, characterizes Javert if not equally a victim as Valjean or Fantine, then at least as equally subjected to his fate by the strictures of society. Consider this passage, which Hugo gives us very early in the novel:

Javert was born in prison of a fortune teller whose husband was a convicted felon. As he grew up, he believed he was on the outside of society and had no hope of ever being let in. He observed that society unforgivingly kept out two classes of men, those who attack it and those who guard it. He had the choice between these two classes only. At the same time he was conscious of some underlying inflexibility, steadiness and probity within him, compounded by an inexpressible hatred for that gypsy race to which he belonged. He joined the police.

It is not unbridled evil that compels Javert's unwavering, decades-long pursuit of Jean Valjean; it is a respect for authority which, when it leads the believer to unquestioningly conflate authority with goodness and justice, turns the inspector into an agent of evil. It is only when Valjean spares his pursuer's life at the novel's end that Javert is forced into a crisis of consciousness. He is unable to reconcile his perceived moral duty to continue hunting a man who has just saved his life. “The law was no more than a broken stick in his hand,” Hugo writes. “Taking place inside him was an emotional epiphany completely distinct from any legal considerations, his sole yardstick until then.”

Deserted by that “blind faith that breeds a grim integrity,” Javert takes his own life, unable to bear the conflict between his duty and Valjean’s kindness. Javert may be a victim of himself and his own impulses, his own lack of moral imagination, but he is also a victim of the same system as Jean Valjean, the society that forced a starving man to steal and transformed a child born into misery into a trained practitioner of state violence. Killing off Javert in such a way shows us the depth of Hugo’s understanding of the ferocity of an oppressive order. Just as Fantine is driven to prostitution and eventual death by her poverty, Javert becomes a casualty of the same structures when he confronts the misplacement of their brutality first hand.

Despite numerous dark moments like these, Hugo’s novel is overall quite optimistic, perhaps even naive in its appraisal of the inevitability of societal progress. Such is the dominance of Hugo’s Romanticism, which doesn’t quite deign to visions of hopelessness. Though the novel certainly valorizes revolution, Hugo places even greater value on notions of progress and goodness, the presence and power of the latter ensuing the inevitable victory of the former. No matter the darkness of its depths, Hugo’s novel ultimately always returns to the optimism of the light.

FROM A MODERN PERSPECTIVE, IT’S EASY to lump both Hugo and Zola into the same category of “dead white French guys,” but their respective biographies are quite distinct. Where Hugo was a child of a military officer and a member of the bourgeoisie his entire life, Zola was born in 1840 to poverty. Where Hugo was a Senator and a member of the *académie française*, Zola never passed his baccalaureate exams (the French educational system’s rough equivalent to an American high school degree, or British A-levels). Where Hugo waffled throughout his life around a tepid reformist conservatism despite his books’ radical propensities, Zola was far more directly antagonistic towards the French state, briefly convicted criminally over his advocacy on behalf of Alfred Dreyfus, a young French officer accused of treason on bogus—not to mention anti-Semitic—grounds during the famous Dreyfus Affair. The lingering (and somewhat stereotypical) perception of the outsized influence of national intellectuals on French politics and culture can perhaps most directly be traced back to Zola, whose original “J’accuse...” invective against the government in the left-leaning newspaper *L’Aurore* caused a societal stir bigger than any Twitter controversy this side of Cat Person.

Zola’s influence and reputation tower comparably highly to Hugo’s within the literary world, if not necessarily the American cultural imagination (at least not until Hugh Jackman takes a turn as Étienne Lantier). A devotee of the earlier French Realists like Balzac and Flaubert, Zola spearheaded an offshoot of Realism known as Naturalism, which sought to frame and construct narratives under the guidance of scientific principles and with an encyclopedic attention to detail. In this regard, Charles Darwin was perhaps as much an influence on Zola as any literary precursor, not out of any positivist subscription to dog-eat-dog social Darwinist principles but because he understood

and was curious about the way both hereditary and environmental factors influence human life.

That may sound indistinguishable from the roots of Hugo’s critique, and we are indeed able to trace numerous similarities between his systemic critique in *Les Misérables* and Zola’s in *Germinal*, his tale of miners striking against the capitalist system of greed that keeps them suffering. Reading the two novels side by side reveals a stark contrast, however, between Hugo’s lofty pronouncements about human progress and Zola’s gritty, even visceral interrogations of the dark and dangerous conditions under which late 19th-century coal miners toiled. Though Zola, like Hugo, was never a committed socialist in any sort of organized sense, he, like his Romantic forerunner, writes with a deep attention to and compassion for brutalized and repressed workers, as he was heavily informed by several months he spent in rural France alongside real-life miners.

Named for a month in the Revolutionary Calendar as determined by the Committee of Public Safety in the years after the Revolution of 1789, *Germinal* begins with the arrival of young migrant worker Étienne Lantier to Montsou, who has left the Paris of his abusive alcoholic family and wretched material poverty in search of work as a miner. It is not long before Lantier, upon witnessing the severity of the miners’ own poverty and the extent of their bosses’ greed, takes it upon himself to organize his new comrades into a strike that lasts through a cold and hungry winter. Though their commitment begins strong and hopes are high, the group’s collective enthusiasm wanes as an even greater poverty begins to take its toll on the miners and their hungry families—not to mention the vicious strikebreaking efforts of the police and the army that ultimately cause the deaths of several workers and their children (laws regulating and/or banning child labor were non-existent at the time). The strike continues as the novel barrels toward an unforgettable conclusion in the depths of a fragile mineshaft from which no one emerges unscathed. Like a good Realist-Naturalist, Zola refuses an easy, happy ending, instead leaving the reader with an imprint of the suffering he has spent more than 500 pages depicting.

Though relatively intriguing in their own right, Zola’s characters seem cardboard in comparison to the creations of Victor Hugo, who leap off the page and linger in the mind long after the novel’s close. Zola’s characters, however, serve a distinct purpose as archetypes through which the author explores the complex labor-capital ecosystem and the miners’ subsequent efforts to tip the scales. His characters run the gamut from the wild revolutionism of Souvarine, a Bakunin-style anarchist, to the bourgeois Hennebeau, who would rather incite the police to kill children than part with even a *franc* more than necessary in order to maintain profits. Some of the novel’s most interesting characters actually exist at least a degree from the labor-capital relationship. Zola shows us the petite bourgeois timidity of Rasseneur, a miner turned bar owner, after his early attempts to organize the miners, alongside the ruthlessness of a police captain who refuses to cease his fire lest he get in trouble with his superiors. Within this extensive polyphony, Zola rarely emerges as any kind of voice of conscience, a far cry from Hugo’s extensive and often moralizing digressions. A true Realist, he only wishes to portray the situation he has created as naturally and objectively as if it were real and he were reporting it for a newspaper. Even without directly inserting authorial commentary,

Zola's focus on material circumstances leads the reader to the most obvious conclusion of the workers' rectitude and the owners' evil.

Many of the novel's most intense passages deal with the viscera of such inhuman conditions, which Zola portrays with equal parts care and devastation. Take this passage, where the author personifies the danger of the mine:

He squatted down inside one of the tubs with his workmates, it plunged down again, then barely four minutes later, it surged back up again, ready to swallow down another load of men. For half an hour the pit gulped down these meals, in more or less greedy mouthfuls, depending on the depth of the level they were bound for, but without ever stopping, always hungry, its giant bowels capable of digesting a nation. It filled, and filled again, and the dark depths remained silent as the cage rose up from the void, silently opening its gaping jaws.

Or this one, a frank digression about the difficult nature of coal mining:

To tell the truth, it certainly wasn't an easy trip. The distance from the coal-face to the incline was fifty or sixty meters; and the passage, which the stonemen had not yet widened, was hardly more than a gully, whose very uneven roof bulged and buckled all over the place: in some places, there was only just enough room to get the loaded tub through; the trammers had to crouch and push on hands and knees to avoid splitting their heads open. Besides, the props had already started to bend and split. You could see long, pale cracks running right up the middle of them, making them look like broken crutches. You had to watch out not to rip your skin on these splinters; and under the relentless pressure, which was slowly crushing these oak posts even though they were as thick as a man's thigh, you had to slip along on your belly, with the secret fear of suddenly hearing your back snap in two.

In passages like these, Zola's greatest virtues as a writer shine most brightly. Intent on depicting life as he views it, he's even more committed than Hugo to observing the darkest aspects of reality, no matter how gruesome. These passages are only two examples of numerous moments that, to be frank, outshine the novel's plot and characters in their raw honesty about the brutality of coal mining and, by metaphoric extension, the capitalist system wherein working people risk their lives and well-being at the behest of the owners who profit from their toil.

Without spoiling the details of the novel's harrowing conclusion, we must take a look at the novel's closing passage, which synthesizes the narrative twists and turns into a defiant paean to struggle:

All around [Étienne] seeds were swelling and shoots were growing, cracking the surface of the plain, driven upwards by their need for warmth and light. The sap flowed upwards and spilled over in soft whispers; the sound of germinating seeds rose and swelled to form a kiss. Again, and again, and ever more clearly, as if they too were rising towards the sunlight, his comrades kept tapping away [a reference to the noise of the miners working beneath Étienne's feet]. Beneath the blazing rays of the sun, in that morning of new growth, the countryside rang with song, as its belly swelled with a black and avenging army of men, germinating slowly in its furrows, growing upwards in readiness for harvests to come, until one day soon their ripening would burst open the earth itself.

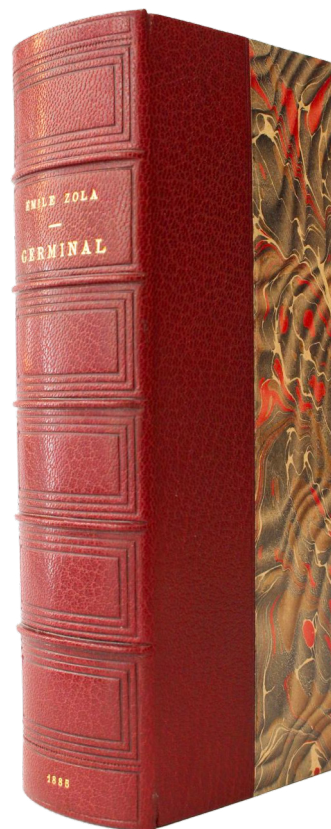
No, Zola does not presage the inevitable victory of progress à la Victor Hugo. Instead, he presents a vision of nascent working-class power in the midst of their struggle. Where Hugo views struggle more

as means to an end, Zola ultimately seems to valorize working-class insurrection perhaps even more than victory. Such is a Realism-Naturalism worthy of a stubbornly persistent left, whose adherents, in the face of near perennial defeat, so often resort to idolizing the fight rather than the world we seek to build.

“DURING THE VIETNAM WAR, WHICH lasted longer than any war we've ever been in—and which we lost—every respectable artist in this country was against the war,” said novelist Kurt Vonnegut in a 2003 interview. “It was like a laser beam. We were all aimed in the same direction. The power of this weapon turns out to be that of a custard pie dropped from a stepladder six feet high.”

It is easy to underplay the power of literature and other forms of art. After all, if art were all it took, then the Vietnam War might've ended after Woodstock! But to write off literature as irrelevant to social progress ignores the profound influence novels like these can have on our consciousness, the way even a single encounter with a great book can seem to change everything, can bring something into focus or cast everything you thought you knew in a completely different light. The great James Baldwin said it best: “You write in order to change the world, knowing perfectly well that you probably can't, but also knowing that literature is indispensable to the world. In some way, your aspirations and concern for a single man in fact do begin to change the world. The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even by a millimeter, the way ... people look at reality, then you can change it.”

It may not always be evident, but literature and art can be more than just a falling custard pie. In fact, it could be a vehicle, a conduit to everything we're missing. We need a book like Zola's *Germinal* to paint us a portrait of the brutality of our enemies, to remind us viscerally of the difficulty of the fight for a better world which we may never win but must nonetheless attempt. We also need a book like Hugo's *Les Misérables* to remind us why we fight, to re-ignite in us the compassion we have for our fellow human beings and the world we want to build for each other. Sure, it's a tough sell to imagine that we'd start the transition to socialism if we just mailed a couple of old French novels to 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. But as long as they exist—sitting in bookstores and libraries ready to inspire the hearts and minds of unsuspecting readers, reaching towards a little spot in their brains where they maybe, just maybe, can deposit a little clarity or a little hope—as long as they exist, “books of this kind may serve some purpose.” ♦



WHAT TO DO IN EVERY CONCEIVABLE SITUATION

ABRIDGED VERSION

The book ***What To Do In Every Conceivable Situation*** is an invaluable guide to extricating yourself from each one of life's many conceivable dilemmas. Running 90,000 volumes, it covers matters ranging from "What To Do If A Lizard Is Looking At You" to "What To Do If Someone Says 'Hey!' and You Say 'Hey!' Back But It Turns Out They Were Saying 'Hey!' At Someone Else." Here we present several excerpts from this mighty tome, covering several of the more common situations our readers may encounter in their daily lives.

The trouble with declining offers made by the Devil is that He is remarkably persistent and has a way of seeing through excuses.

"I am afraid I have forgotten my racket," you feebly protest. He instantly conjures a golden Satanic Racket, with catgut strings made from actual cat gut.

"You were saying?" He remarks with a smirk that is, well, positively devilish.

"I... well, I'm very out of practice these days. I haven't played in years, to tell you the truth."

"No matter," replies the Devil.

"You will receive ten full lessons from the Ghost of Pete Sampras. Then when the lessons are concluded, we shall play."

"I've really got an awful lot on my calendar in the next few months," you insist.

"I have cleared your calendar... permanently," He cackles, and you can tell that what He means is that He has murdered your family and colleagues. With them went most of the excuses you could have offered.

What then, do you do when this situation arises? You could refuse outright, but the Devil would call

you a coward, and nobody wants to be taunted by Satan. Your honor is at stake.

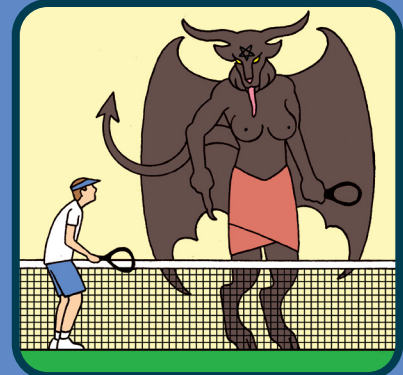
You could, of course, simply play the Devil at tennis. But you will lose, and it will be embarrassing, and then there goes your soul—although to be honest the biological function of a soul remains unclear and medically speaking one can function indefinitely, and even reach high public office, without one.

Your best option is to cheat. Pick up a bargain-priced tennis cheater's guide in a second-hand bookshop (the *Cad's Guide to Non-Sportsmanship* is a perennial classic, as is *Winning For Losers*) and master some of the simpler ruses and misdirections. Then deploy them casually on the Devil.

If He objects, and says that cheating isn't allowed, you should point out that this is a bit rich coming from the Devil, who is not exactly known for fair play and honest dealing.

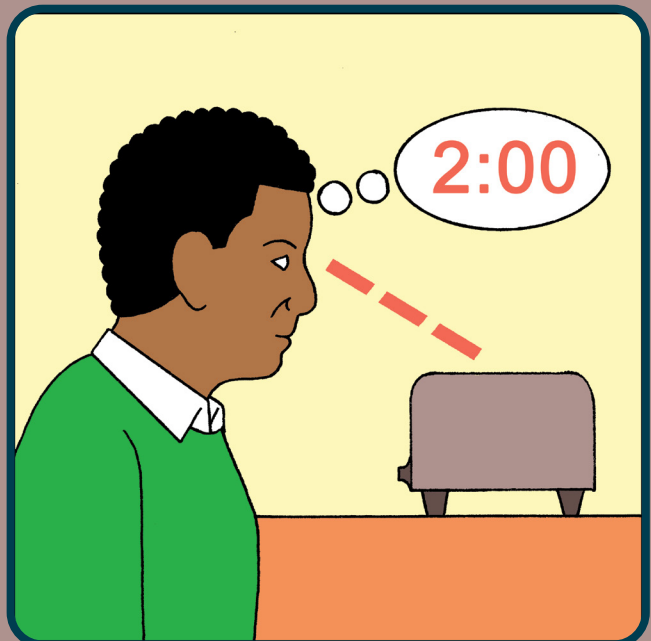
The one thing the Devil hates most is having His hypocrisy exposed. He will likely break his racket in two and storm off the court in a huff. For you, this is victory, of a sort.

WHAT TO DO WHEN SATAN CHALLENGES YOU TO A TENNIS MATCH



WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU HAVE BURNED THE TOAST

First, stop crying. It is just toast. Everyone burns toast now and then. It is not a big deal. Why the hell are you crying over it? That's nuts. That's so melodramatic. If you think burning a piece of toast is bad, wait until you hear about war crimes committed by your government. Oh, wait, *those won't make you cry, will they, because you have bourgeois moral priorities and think imperceptibly small amounts of suffering on your part are somehow more significant than horrific injustices committed toward members of subaltern populations.* Now that you have stopped crying, dispose of the burned piece of toast. Go to the bread bin and remove a new slice. (If it is unsliced bread, hack a piece off.) Place Slice 2 in the toaster and push down the button, making sure the setting is correct. Watch the toast this time, so that it does not burn. Check on it frequently. When it pops up, remove it, place it on your plate, and cover it in butter or a smear of your favorite fruity spread. Pick it up between your fingertips, bite down, and enjoy!



WHAT TO DO IF AN UNKNOWN CHEMICAL SUBSTANCE ENTERS YOUR BLOODSTREAM

It had looked so delicious. Innocent, too. But some mushrooms are not meant for eating. They are poisonous. You should not eat them.

Eat them, however, you did, and now the contents of your insides are spilling out of the hole in your posterior. "This," you say to yourself, "was not one of my finer decisions."

Can we get you out of this jam? We can. But it will require some litmus paper and a blotting cloth.

Fold the litmus-paper thrice-wise and place it on your tongue. Give the blotting cloth an ounce or two of turpentine (the ordinary kind will do). Allow both to settle before application. If you do not know the code of chemical colors, remember the mnemonic from your school days:

Red Or Black, Put It Back

Yellow Or Blue, No Harm It'll Do

Green Or Grey, Stay Away

Teal Or Orange, Probably Fine

Once the test is complete, simply check the color of the strip, and interpret according to the relevant code provision. You should now be aware of whether you will live or die.

A man in a soiled trenchcoat comes up to you in an alleyway. "Are you [your name here]?" he whispers. "I am," you say proudly, "and what of it, Sir?" He tells you that there is a "casting call" over behind the warehouse and that you were specifically asked for by the director. "What director is that, Sir?" you ask the man, suspicious of his beard, which is obviously false.

"I...have forgotten his name," replies the hirsute stranger. "Or perhaps...it is a name I would rather not say." Your suspicions are further inflamed when the man says he cannot remember the Director's name. After all, it would have been written in large letters on the back of the Director's chair. The man would have seen this, surely. But your fears are allayed when he clarifies that he simply does not wish to speak the name. Many Directors have names that should not be said.

You follow the man through the backstreets of the Shipping District, avoiding stray cargo containers and inebriated urchins. Finally, you find yourself at the Warehouse In Question. But it does not look like any "film set" you have ever seen.

"Aye, it's right in there," says the man, pointing to a tiny, olive-colored door using his wooden leg. "Up the corridor." (He pronounces this "cawrider.") "Ye can't miss it." Jauntily, you spring through the door, sure that nothing could ever go amiss in the Shipping District. But though you go up the corridor, and though the man said you couldn't miss it, you do appear to miss it. There is nothing here at all. Nothing, that is, except disused machinery from what appears to have once been a joke factory, or at least a facility for crafting novelty objects.

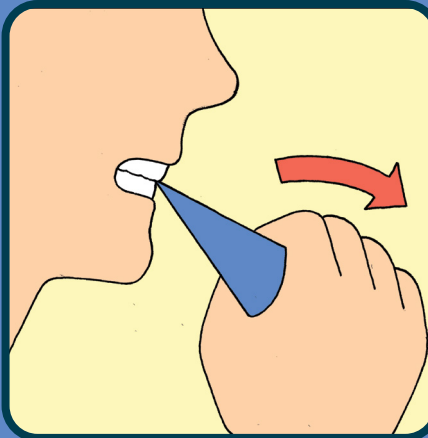
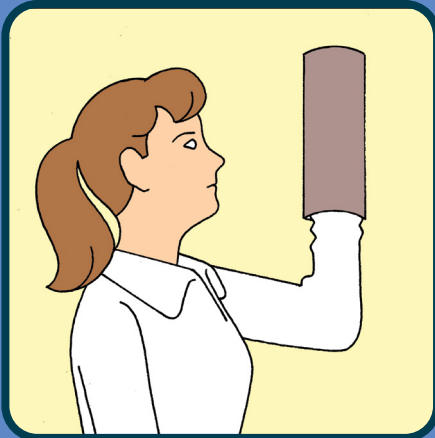
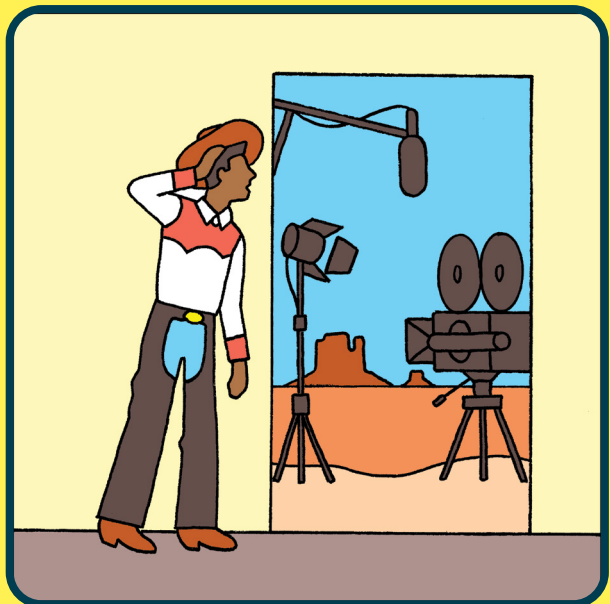
"You! The man!" you shout, hoping to catch the stranger's attention but realizing you do not know his name. There is no response, so you take a seat next to a box of winches. After about five minutes, a figure approaches you through the gloom.

"Are you... The Director?" you ask.

"I am," replies a genderless voice. "Come with me."

You follow, and are introduced to the cast. The picture is a smashing success, and you are invited to star in the sequel.

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU ARE INVITED TO STAR IN A WESTERN MOVIE



WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU GET YOUR HAND STUCK IN A TUBE

We have all put our hands in tubes. It is not morally wrong. It is just unwise. But sometimes when you do this, you find it difficult to extract your hand. It becomes "stuck." The tube is firmly affixed. You waggle this way. You waggle that. No amount of waggling can free you.

What do you do when this unfortunate situation has befallen you? Your first instinct might be to call the fire department, because a fire hose is something like a tube, and they also extract things from other things, and so it might seem like the sort of calamity they have some expertise in dealing with. *Do not call the fire department*, unless you enjoy being mocked by burly men in yellow overcoats. They will come, yes, but they will most

likely chastise you for wasting their time, and they will not be wrong.

What you need is not firefighters but *lubrication*. Your problem actually has nothing to do with tubes or hands. Your problem has to do with friction, the rubbing of things on other things. What you need to do is create a "frictionless environment" between your hand and the cylinder in which it is contained. Go to your mother's cake pantry and remove a tin of tube-grease. (Not pan grease, unless you want to be permanently covered in blotches and scabs.) Rip the tube grease container open using your teeth (it takes two hands, but one of yours is stuck in a tube). Do your best not to let the grease splatter everywhere

when the tin opens. Now pour "as much grease as possible" down the small openings between your hand and the inner walls of the tube. Begin to wriggle, first softly then slightly louder. As your wriggling reaches a fever pitch, you will hopefully attract the attention of a passerby. The passerby will ask you if there is anything wrong. Reply "Yes" and hold up the tube containing your hand. "Aha!" they will shout. "Have you greased it?" Inform them that you have. Then politely ask them to give your tube a yank. (They won't assume this is euphemism, it is obvious what you are referring to, so long as you do not wink as you speak.) A swift tug or two should do it. Thank them afterward, and remember to offer them a small financial reward.



NO MORE STALINS

by Alex Skopic

IOSEB BESARIONIS DZE DZHUGASHVILI, better known to the world as Josef Stalin, has been dead for almost 70 years now. Strangely, though, he still has living supporters. Spend enough time on the socialist left, and you'll eventually encounter this vocal minority of latter-day Stalinists. Some are just online trolls and contrarians who use Stalin's image for shock value in absurd memes—Stalin turning SpongeBob's "Goo Lagoon" into a "Goo Lag," and so on. Others, though, are quite serious about their Stalinism, and see the USSR of the 1930s and '40s as something to admire and imitate today. Among them are tenured academics like Dr. Asatar Bair, who recently annoyed Fox News by calling Stalin "one of the great leaders of the 20th century" who had "the strength to make tough decisions that have no easy answers." At Montclair State University, Grover Furr has written more than a dozen books defending Stalin from various criticisms, and in Europe, historians Ludo Martens and Domenico Losurdo have each written one (*Another View of Stalin* and *Stalin: The History and Critique of a Black Legend*, respectively). Even the Slovenian (quasi)Marxist Slavoj Žižek has dabbled in Stalin apologetics, notoriously declaring "better the worst of Stalinism than the best of the liberal-capitalist welfare state" in his book *Trouble in Paradise*. By themselves, these figures are fairly marginal, but the politics Stalin represents—admiration for dictators, disdain for democracy and debate, and a fast-and-loose approach to human rights and the historical record—are far more widespread. So how, we might ask, do otherwise intelli-

gent people find themselves drawn to Stalinism, then and now? What is the appeal?

We can find the key word in Bair's comments: *strength*. Stalinists long for a "strong" left that wins at any cost—one that isn't afraid to fight dirty, or to use harsh and autocratic methods against its enemies. In the Anglophone West, some may have been disillusioned by the electoral defeat of figures like Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn, and concluded that democratic socialism is too "weak" for the tasks at hand, turning to more authoritarian strains instead. In the Global South, meanwhile, some labor leaders and activists see the former USSR as fairly benign compared to genocidal abusers like the U.S. and Britain, and admire Stalin himself enough to name their kids after him. Hence the jarring appearance of political figures like India's M.K. Stalin or Sri Lanka's Joseph Stalin (a trade unionist arrested for helping to organize a general strike in 2022). In either case, the underlying assumption is that Stalin really was the "Man of Steel" portrayed in Soviet propaganda—a tireless warrior who embodied the will of the global working class, and an implacable enemy of exploiters and fascists everywhere.

It's easy to see how such an image would be attractive, especially in difficult political and economic times. People want heroes, and they'll ignore any number of inconvenient facts to preserve a narrative they find satisfying. In the wake of Stalin's death in 1953, the floodgates of state censorship opened, and a seemingly endless series of atrocity stories came out—but some socialists, both in the USSR and the West, simply refused to be-

lieve them, as Vivian Gornick recounts in *The Romance of American Communism*:

My mother was desperately confused. My aunt remained adamantly Stalinist. Night after night we quarreled violently.

"Lies!" I screamed at my aunt. "Lies and treachery and murder. A maniac has been sitting there in Moscow! A maniac has been sitting there in the name of socialism. In the name of socialism!" [...]

"A Red-baiter!" my aunt yelled back. "A lousy little Red-baiter you've become! Louie Gornick must be turning over in his grave, that his daughter has become a Red-baiter!"

Others believed the accounts of torture and repression, but found ways to rationalize them, as Norman Finkelstein ruefully recalls in his essay "Misadventures in the Class Struggle":

In my mind I was able to adduce a thousand justifications: some more, some less plausible, one often contradicting the other, each containing a morsel of truth, but, although not wrong, none—when I look back—finally adequate. I could facilely draw on an arsenal of clichés: "Revolution is not a dinner party" (Mao), "Revolutions are not pink teas" (Rosa Luxemburg), or the old Bolshevik standbys, "To make an omelette, you have to break eggs," and "When you fell a tree, chips will fly." If on occasion I found myself inwardly unnerved by the bloody horrors, I imagined that it was because I was too faint of heart, lacking the requisite ruthlessness to be a true revolutionary.

These are, broadly speaking, the two rationales used by Stalin's defenders today. Either the murderous nature of his regime was completely fabricated (the theme of Grover Furr's signature book *Khrushchev Lied*), or the noble goal of revolution justified the "requisite ruthlessness" along the way. Mix and match as needed.

IT DOESN'T HELP, OF COURSE, THAT STALIN'S MOST prominent critics today actually are "red-baiters" who cynically use his crimes as a cudgel against socialism in general. Consider our old friend Ben Shapiro, who immediately jumped to condemn Dr. Bair's pro-Stalin comments, insisting that Stalin was "a mass murderer responsible for the death of tens of millions of human beings." (Notably, Shapiro supported the invasion of Iraq and continues to support the ethnic cleansing of Palestine, so it's not like he objects to mass murder as such.) Then there's Jordan Peterson, who cites Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* as a formative influence for his own hatred of "radical leftists." (He leaves out the bit where Solzhenitsyn was a none-too-subtle antisemite who wanted Jews to accept "their own share of sin" for their supposed "disproportionate role" in the Soviet government.) In the media, any reasonably prominent socialist can expect to get accused of being a potential Stalin. This guilt-by-association was the root of commentator Chris Matthews' public meltdown during the 2020 presidential primaries, when he speculated that a Bernie Sanders victory would lead to "executions in Central Park," and of Boris Johnson's rhetoric in the 2019 U.K. elections,

when he accused Jeremy Corbyn of persecuting the rich "with a relish and a vindictiveness not seen since Stalin." These are obviously absurd smear attempts, so it's tempting to imagine that the basic concept of Stalin-as-evil is equally groundless—and further, that he might even have been a misunderstood hero if right-wing ideologues hate him so much.

Then, too, it's important to give the devil his due. Stalin had his strengths, and he knew how to use them. While Hitler is usually recognized for his rhetorical skill and ability to sway a crowd, Stalin could be just as eloquent, if not more so. When he criticized the capitalist West, as he did in a 1936 interview with the American journalist Roy Howard, his points struck home:

It is difficult for me to imagine what "personal liberty" is enjoyed by an unemployed person, who goes about hungry, and cannot find employment. Real liberty can exist only where exploitation has been abolished, where there is no oppression of some by others, where there is no unemployment and poverty, where a man is not haunted by the fear of being tomorrow deprived of work, of home and of bread. Only in such a society is real, and not paper, personal and every other liberty possible.

All this is perfectly true, and beautifully stated. Predictably enough, the quote still circulates as a meme today. It's not the only rhetorical victory for Stalinism, either. In the ongoing rivalry between the two powers, Stalin and his propagandists never missed a chance to slam the United States for its record on racial injustice, deploying the bitter phrase "А у вас негров линчуют" ("And you are lynching Negroes!") whenever American diplomats criticized the USSR's human rights abuses. This was, of course, a cynical ploy, but it had positive consequences. After being publicly shamed in forums like the United Nations, some postwar American leaders felt pressured to support the Civil Rights movement "out of a desire to promote a positive image of America abroad, particularly in the contest for support in developing and decolonized countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America—principal proxy arenas for the Cold War." (This much is, nowadays, admitted on official government websites.) As interventions in world history go, that's not a small thing, and Stalin's government won the support of several prominent African American thinkers and activists, including Langston Hughes (who poignantly noted that "In the Soviet Union, dark men are also mayors of cities"), Paul Robeson (who visited the USSR in 1934 and said that "Here, I am not a Negro but a human being for the first time in my life"), and even a late-career W.E.B. Du Bois. Could these three men, each a genius in his own field, have been so completely wrong?

Well, yes. Sadly, they could. To an extent, they had good reason for being taken in—the extent of Soviet repression wasn't yet well known, and when people like Hughes and Robeson toured the USSR, they were shown a carefully curated version that showcased only the best elements. (For the same reason, dignitaries visiting the U.S. do not see Rikers Island.) The Stalinists of the 20th century desperately wanted to believe in the



FEMALE MEMBERS OF THE FREE GERMAN YOUTH CARRY STALIN'S PICTURES AT THE 3RD WORLD FESTIVAL OF YOUTH AND STUDENTS IN EAST BERLIN, 1951

promise of a new society, and they weren't given the facts they needed to see through the illusion. In the 21st century, though, we have no such excuse. There is ample evidence from dozens of different sources detailing Stalin's abuses and betrayals, and it has become impossible to view his time in power with any kind of admiration or nostalgia. Instead, it's vital for today's leftists to face the truth, horrible as it is, and avoid falling into the same old patterns of self-deception.

STALIN WAS WORSE THAN A "FLAWED" OR "corrupted" communist. Rather—with the single exception of Hitler—he was the most lethal anti-communist of his time. In fact, the epitaph of virtually every prominent European socialist to die in the years 1928-1945 reads either "murdered by Hitler" or "murdered by Stalin." Soon after he was named General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1922, Stalin began maneuvering against the other Bolshevik leaders who had organized the October Revolution, packing important positions with his own supporters and arranging various smears and frame-ups against his rivals. Leon Trotsky, the leader of the Left Opposition faction, was ejected from the Party in 1927 after he refused to abandon the idea of global revolution (which Stalin opposed); by 1929 he had been exiled

from the USSR altogether, and in 1940 Stalin had him assassinated. Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, close associates of Lenin who were originally supposed to rule with Stalin in a triumvirate, were accused of the murder of Sergei Kirov (for which some historians believe Stalin was also responsible) and summarily executed in 1936. With each year, the accusations of treachery grew wilder, and the evidence more thin, often relying entirely on confessions extracted under torture. Solidarity between comrades vanished overnight, replaced by paranoia and palace intrigue. Trials became farces lasting as little as 15 or 20 minutes. Nikolai Bukharin, leader of the moderate Right Opposition, managed to survive until 1938, but in the end he, too, was sentenced to death for his supposed involvement in a Trotskyist and/or Nazi conspiracy; with his passing, there ceased to be any significant Opposition at all. (Bukharin's last message is particularly haunting, using Stalin's personal nickname in an appeal to their onetime friendship: *Koba, why do you need me to die?*) In the same year, Jānis Rudzutaks, a Latvian revolutionary who had served ten years in Tsarist prisons for his Bolshevik convictions, was executed despite never having voiced the slightest objection to the Party line. His only offense, according to Stalin's confidante Vyacheslav Molotov, was that he was "too easygoing about the opposition" and "indulged too much in partying with philistine friends," and was therefore a liability. No one was safe.

The list goes on forever, and these are only the most famous names. In March of 1938, the American Marxist newspaper *Socialist Appeal* ran a memorable photo gallery, entitled “LENIN’S GENERAL STAFF OF 1917: STALIN, THE EXECUTIONER, ALONE REMAINS.” As it turns out, they were slightly off; of the 24 people pictured, Alexandra Kollontai and Matvei Muranov, listed as “missing,” had survived. Still, this gives some sense of the bloody ruin Stalin made of the Bolshevik party. (With characteristic chutzpah, Grover Furr attempts to justify the purges in *Khrushchev Lied*, asserting that all of the above really were spies and saboteurs, but the numbers are against him. What are the odds, after all, that essentially everyone *but* Stalin suddenly turned traitor, leaving him the only stalwart?)

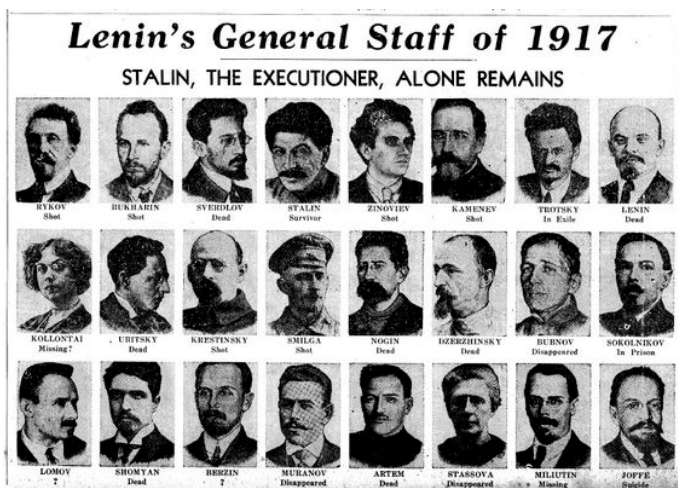
With each new show trial, a ripple effect ran through Soviet society, as anyone who was tainted by association with the “guilty” party—from their family members, to people who were merely seen talking to them or reading their books—stood a decent chance of being arrested, executed, or deported to Siberia in turn. Like American cops today, Stalin’s secret police worked on a quota system, in which officers were required to make a certain number of arrests per month; when the mandated number of “conspirators” couldn’t be found, they were invented, lest the officers themselves be purged for their failure. In a typical case, one unlucky woman was arrested as a Trotskyist, then had her charge changed to “bourgeois nationalism,” on the grounds that the local NKVD had “exceeded the quota for Trotskyites, but were short on nationalists, even though they’d taken all the Tatar writers they could think of.” Later, others fell victim to the sadism of Lavrentiy Beria, a truly vile figure who used his position as head of the secret police to sexually assault hundreds of women and girls, often threatening a loved one under arrest to secure their silence. (When this method didn’t work, Beria simply murdered his victims; in 1993, workers digging a ditch at his former home found several sets of human remains that had been hastily covered up with quicklime.)

ONE OF THE STANDARD FEATURES OF STALINIST apologetics, past and present, is to quibble over the precise number of the dead. Western scholarship, says Michael Parenti in *Blackshirts and Reds*, offers “inflated numbers” which “serve neither historical truth nor the cause of justice but merely help to reinforce a knee-jerk fear and loathing of those terrible Reds.” It couldn’t possibly be 20 million victims (Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror*) or 30-40 million (Anton Antonov-Ovseyenko, *The Time of Stalin*); these estimates are packed with all sorts of extraneous deaths that Stalin wasn’t directly responsible for. So the argument goes—but it misses the point completely. Even if we grant the most pro-Stalin interpretation of the facts, counting only the deaths directly recorded in the Soviet archives (799,455 executions, 1.7 million deaths while imprisoned, 390,000 during the forced resettlement of rural peasants, and 400,000 people deported to Siberia and elsewhere), we still get a figure of more than three million. Some of these, doubtless, were actually guilty of something, including Nazi sympathizers and fifth columnists. Still, *no* crime justifies a slow, agonizing death by frostbite or starvation in the Gulag. This is practically the definition of “cruel and unusual.” Even at the time, socialists were among the most vocal opponents of capital punishment as an institution, and Stalin’s haphazard death-dealing shows exactly why. Even one life wrongfully taken in the name of socialism would be an appalling tragedy. Three million is a horror almost too vast to contemplate.

Along with the death of citizens came the death of ideals. Under Stalin’s leadership, many of the hard-won victories of 1917 were undermined and rolled back, in a downward slide into social and political conservatism. As Leon Sedov, son of the exiled Trotsky, noted mournfully in 1936:

In the most diverse areas, the heritage of the October revolution is being liquidated. Revolutionary internationalism gives way to the cult of the fatherland in the strictest sense. And the fatherland means, above all, the authorities. Ranks, decorations and titles have been reintroduced. The officer caste headed by the marshals has been reestablished. The old communist workers are pushed into the background; the working class is divided into different layers. [...] The old petit-bourgeois family is being reestablished and idealized in the most middle-class way; despite the general protestations, abortions are prohibited, which, given the difficult material conditions and the primitive state of culture and hygiene, means the enslavement of women, that is, the return to pre-October times.

There are layers of irony to this passage. Trotsky himself, after all, had been instrumental in putting down the 1921 Kronstadt sailors’ uprising, so it’s a bit rich for his heirs to decry the return of military hierarchy. But if anything, Sedov is understating his case. More than being “divided into different layers,” the working class found itself increasingly micromanaged and exploited under Stalin. As Sheila Fitzpatrick details in her meticulous book *Everyday Stalinism*, new labor-discipline laws introduced





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in 1938 and 1940 made it a criminal offense to be more than 20 minutes late to work, punishable by dismissal at minimum and sometimes actual imprisonment. The hated “domestic passports” used by the Tsars were reintroduced, forcing workers to show their “papers” to police at a moment’s notice, and justify why they were in a given area. If they couldn’t, this too could lead to arrest and prison time. The government even resorted to strikebreaking and the suppression of labor power, arresting workers en masse in the cotton-mill town of Teikovo when they organized a short-lived strike against food rationing. Bolshevism had offered a promise of total liberation for working people, but now, Stalinism delivered the opposite. In place of a “dictatorship of the proletariat,” there was only a dictatorship of the police and prisons *over* the proletariat, with men like Beria as the cops-in-chief.

THE POINT ABOUT “REVOLUTIONARY internationalism,” too, deserves a closer look. At first glance, this might seem like an arcane Trotskyist grievance, but the consequences for people around the world were very real. To the extent that he believed in anything, Stalin was a firm believer in “socialism in one country”—that is, the idea that the Soviet Union should focus on its own industrial development, compete with the West on that basis, and remain detached from any form of global class struggle. The old slogan “workers of the world, unite!” was abandoned, and the Soviet state became either indifferent or actively hostile to the efforts of socialist movements in other countries, even as those movements looked to it for support and guidance. In the Spanish Civil War, for example, the USSR lent a limited amount of military aid to the Republican forces battling Francisco Franco. But at the same time, Stalin dictated the policy line of the Spanish Communist Party (*Partido Comunista de España*, or PCE), which was fiercely loyal to Moscow, and through this mouthpiece, he made it painfully clear that there would be no workers’ revolution as a result of the war. Instead, the PCE mandated a “united front” with a so-called “progressive bourgeoisie”—in other words, any part of the ruling class that wasn’t actively fascist—dismantled the self-governing workers’ councils that had sprung up in the early days of the war, and declared that “any seizure of property by the workers is only a temporary measure in the interests of defence,” with capitalist ownership to return as soon as possible. Understandably, many Spanish communists refused to follow these high-handed orders, especially in the POUM (*Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista*, or Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification—the *other*, non-Stalinist communist party in the mix). So the Stalinists pressured the Republican government to declare the POUM an illegal organization, causing open conflict between the two factions. As Jesús Hernández, a high-ranking member of the PCE, recalls in his memoirs, POUM founder Andreu Nin was captured by agents of Stalin’s

NKVD, who tried to make him confess to being a fascist traitor:

Nin did not capitulate. He resisted, to their dismay. His torturers grew impatient. They decided to abandon the ‘dry’ method. Now came the living blood, the rended flesh, the twisted muscles, which would put to the test the man’s integrity and capacity for physical resistance. Nin bore up under the cruelty of the torment and the pain of refined torture. At the end of a few days his human shape had been turned into a formless mass of swollen flesh. Orlov, in a frenzy, crazed by the fear of failure—a failure which could mean his own liquidation—slavered over with rage against this sick man who agonised without ‘confessing,’ without implicating himself or seeking to implicate his party comrades who, at a single word from him, would have been stood up against the wall for execution, to the joy and heart-felt satisfaction of all the Russians.

Nin never did give his tormentors what they wanted, and his courage and endurance only brings their betrayal of the most basic socialist principles into sharp relief. Still, the damage was already done. The fratricidal infighting between POUM and PCE drove a wedge through the Republican alliance as a whole, weakening its forces even as Franco gained in strength, and by 1939, the war was lost. Far from securing a united front, Stalin’s meddling had snuffed out any hope of resistance, and Spanish fascism reigned supreme. This hostility to revolutionary movements abroad didn’t end with Spain, either. In his own memoirs, Yugoslavian diplomat Milovan Djilas recalls how Stalin’s USSR was strangely reluctant to acknowledge the ambitions of his country’s socialist partisans, who were fighting a war on two fronts—both against Nazi invasion, and to overthrow their monarchy:

Though nobody, not even the Yugoslav Communists, spoke of revolution, it was long since obvious that it was going on. In the West they were already writing a great deal about it. In Moscow, however, they obdurately refused to recognize it—even those who had, so to speak, every reason to do so. Everyone stubbornly talked only about the struggle against the German invaders, and even more stubbornly stressed exclusively the patriotic nature of that struggle.

There could be any number of reasons for this stance, from Stalin’s distrust of internationalism in general to a desire to avoid angering the Allies by stirring up revolutionary fervor in Eastern Europe. Whatever the cause, relations between the two camps remained frosty, and it took until 1945 for Yugoslavia to actually become a socialist nation—a much longer and bloodier struggle than it might have been.

Even after the conclusion of WWII, this standoffishness remained a consistent pattern. When Greek communists begged Stalin for help in their own civil war, their pleas fell on deaf ears. Stalin, it turned out, had promised to stay out of Greece and Turkey in a backroom deal he made with Churchill, in exchange for greater influence over the Balkans—and he valued his word to an arch-imperialist more than the lives of the Greek partisans. Across the ocean, Harry Truman had no such qualms, and supplied the Greek far right with both military advisors and napalm. The revolution burned to ash.

ALL THIS WOULD BE BAD ENOUGH, but it's not the end. We'd be remiss, in this brief tour of Hell, not to stop and consider Stalin's homophobia, and the bitter discrimination his government unleashed against gay men in particular. Unlike some of the more famous crimes, there's no possible strategic reason behind this one; it's purely a matter of ignorance and bigotry. With its penal code of 1922, the USSR had become one of the first nations on Earth (after revolutionary France and its imitators) to decriminalize homosexuality, and homophobia—although it obviously still existed—had begun to fade into the margins, viewed as part of the same feudal “backwardness” and conservatism that characterized the old Tsarist regime. The Bolshevik party had its share of gay officials, such as Georgy Chicherin, who served as People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs from 1918 to 1930, and openly gay writers and artists like Mikhail Kuzmin were highly respected in early Soviet cultural circles. (Kuzmin himself, incidentally, is one of the great forgotten figures of world literature; among other things, his novel *Wings* is the first widely-published work to depict a “coming out” scene.)

With Stalin, all this changed. In 1933, secret police deputy chief Genrikh Yagoda wrote to Stalin claiming that homosexuality had “politically demoralized various social layers of young men, including young workers,” and that gay men were likely to be spies and traitors meeting in conspiratorial “circles.” Stalin agreed, and replied that “these scoundrels must receive exemplary punishment.” The following year, a new article was added to the penal code, dictating that “sexual relations of a man with a man (pederasty) shall be punished by deprivation of freedom for a term of up to five years,” and police raids on the homes of well-known gay men became commonplace. (Like Victorian England, the state made no mention of lesbians, apparently reluctant to acknowledge they existed.) When the Scottish Marxist Harry Whyte, then working for the *Moscow Daily News*, wrote his own impassioned letter to Stalin defending gay rights, Stalin's answer was blunt, scrawled across the letter in pencil: “An idiot and a degenerate.” (To the archives the letter went.) The homophobic law remained on the books until 1993, and it decimated the Soviet LGBT community, sending thousands to the Gulag—where they were ostracized, labeled with various slurs, and routinely abused and assaulted by both the guards and their fellow prisoners. With a few strokes of a pen, the Soviet Union's brief window of sexual and gender liberation had been savagely slammed shut.

In its place, Stalin favored a stifling heteronormativity that revolved around the glorification of reproduction, motherhood, and traditional gender roles. Like his homophobia, this was deeply at odds with revolutionary Bolshevik ideals—the Russian Revolution, it is often forgotten, began as a women's

march, and throughout its early years figures like Alexandra Kollontai and Nadezhda Krupskaya had held independent political sway within the Party. Now, though, women were told that—although “the Soviet woman is a full and equal citizen of her country”—the important thing was that “our state has simultaneously ensured all the conditions necessary for her to fulfil[1] her natural obligation—that of being a mother bringing up her children and mistress of her home.” (Ironically, the editorial in question was written by Kollontai herself; it's not clear whether she simply grew more conservative with age, or was coerced into following the Party line.) To encourage this “natural obligation,” the state issued paid maternity leave and cash allowances for childcare supplies. There were even special government medals for women who had multiple children, placing motherhood on an equal footing with military service as a priority of Soviet society—and tacitly discouraging other ambitions.

In today's capitalist world, where increasing numbers of young people simply can't afford to have children and are pressured to return immediately to work when they do, some of this might sound genuinely nice. But Stalin was less concerned with helping women or children as such, and more with replacing the devastating loss of population the USSR had suffered in the first World War (to say nothing of his own purges and manufactured famines). Women's bodies were simply a means to an end, and the Soviet state took coercive power over them by outlawing abortion in June 1936. As usual, solidarity between women made this unenforceable, but the resulting black market was both expensive and unsafe, relying on *babki* (midwives) who often worked in cramped and unsanitary conditions. Anyone who helped to end a pregnancy could be sentenced to two years in prison, and police were merciless in pursuing this “crime,” as one woman of the time recalls:

It was terrible, absolutely terrible. So many women died, leaving small children, and so many were sent to prison. Women who had the abortions and suffered were sent to prison, and those who performed the abortions were also sent to prison. We were interrogated. I remember how after I had had the abortion I was lying there, weak from the loss of blood, and they kept questioning me, Who performed it, who performed it? And I was so weak, yet how could I send a person whom I had personally asked to perform the abortion to prison? [...] I felt so awful that on my way home I crept under the railroad platform and thought, I'll just lie here and die. And to think that two children were waiting for me at home!

This, to put it mildly, does not sound like the actions of any socialist state worthy of the name. Instead, it sounds like something Ted Cruz or Ron DeSantis would do if you gave them unlimited power. One starts to suspect there's a reason most of the Stalinists you encounter today are straight men; certainly you can't call yourself any sort of feminist and defend policies like this.

Even art wasn't safe. In its early years, the Soviet Union had seen an unprecedented flowering of avant-garde and ex-



*Before: Surrealism, irony, playful use of symbols. After: BIG BOAT.
(Pavel Filonov, "A Peasant Family (The Holy Family)," 1914; Srdjan Kotarlic,
untitled propaganda poster, 1933.)*

perimental art, in keeping with the idea that a radically new society would express itself in radically new ways. Artists like Pavel Filonov—who was also chairman of the Revolutionary War Committee in the Dunay region—invented entirely new schools of painting, while others enthusiastically adopted European movements like Cubism and Futurism and pushed them to new heights. Authors like Isaac Babel, Mikhail Bulgakov, and Yevgeny Zamyatin wrote some of their most important works in the 1920s. Science fiction imagined a dizzying array of possible futures, and Soviet artists took to the new medium of film to depict them. But these currents existed in an uneasy tension with “socialist realism,” the brainchild of Anatoly Lunacharsky—a Bolshevik commissar who believed that art should be used for didactic purposes, to depict “ideal” workers and communities and instruct people in how they ought to be living their lives. When Stalin took power, he favored this more authoritarian take on art and put strict new restrictions on both the styles that could be used and the content that could be depicted. Non-representational art came to be viewed as “decadent” (just as it was “degenerate” to the Nazis), and it was usually forbidden to display it. Instead, public space became an endless gallery of kitsch, with propaganda posters showing muscular Soviet workmen hammering rocks, driving tractors, and gazing sternly into the distance. Predictably, many of the posters were tacky heroic portraits of Stalin himself: Stalin marching with happy workers, Stalin holding a baby, Stalin steering a big boat marked “СССР.”

If any artist refused to work in socialist realism, or wanted to use a different style, their work as a whole could be banned; this happened to Filonov, who lived in grinding poverty until his death in 1941. In some cases, artists who annoyed Stalin were

even framed and executed in the same way as his political rivals, as with the poet Titsian Tabidze—a close friend of Boris Pasternak, who barely escaped execution himself. In yet another area of life, freedom, playfulness, and exploration had been replaced with grim conformity and fear, and these would be the aesthetic markers that defined the USSR in the eyes of the world.

WHAT ABOUT WORLD WAR II, though? Surely that’s Stalin’s ace in the hole—that no matter how many people he purged, how many socialist movements he wrecked, or how much of a bigot and philistine he was personally, his “tough decisions” were the crucial factor that won the war. Stalinist authors like Furr and Ludo Martens devote many pages to the war years, and there is one thing they’re right about: the Soviet Union, more than any other geopolitical group, was responsible for breaking the back of Nazi Germany, and destroying Hitler’s empire of madness and death. The images of Red Army soldiers throwing open the gates of Auschwitz will live in human history forever, and at Stalingrad alone, more than a million of them gave their lives—more than the U.S. lost in the entire war. But crucially, *these are not Stalin’s victories*, nor his sacrifices. He, like Churchill and Roosevelt, was sitting safely behind his desk when the real heroism happened. To credit him with “winning the war” or “defeating Nazism,” as if he personally parachuted into Berlin with a belt of grenades and started blowing up bunkers, is to erase the collective struggle of millions, and to surrender to the deeply conservative “great man” theory of history. Supposed Marxists should know better.

Apart from this, there's evidence that Stalin and his paranoia actively *harm*ed the Soviet war effort. Because Trotsky had been the original architect of the Red Army, Stalin always viewed its officer corps with deep suspicion and carried out extensive purges in the years 1937-8 just as he had within the Bolshevik Party itself. "Three of the five marshalls, thirteen of the fifteen army commanders, and eight of the nine fleet admirals" were executed, according to one account, together with more than 40,000 men who were dismissed from their posts for various small infractions and accusations of disloyalty. A particularly consequential loss was Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, a military genius who had done more than anyone to modernize the Soviet armed forces, introducing revolutionary tank and aircraft tactics that earned him the title "the Red Napoleon." For his troubles Tukhachevsky was, like so many, tortured into a false confession of treason and shot. (The confession, on file in Moscow today, still has visible bloodstains on it.)

These purges left an enormous talent vacuum at the top, which the USSR's enemies could hardly fail to notice. At the time, General Konstantin Rokossovsky—who was imprisoned for two years, but survived and became a military hero during WWII—said that "this is worse than when artillery fires on its own troops," and at the Nuremberg Trials, Wehrmacht field marshal Wilhelm Keitel testified that Hitler's decision to invade the USSR was based partly on his belief that "the first-class high-ranking officers were wiped out by Stalin in 1937, and the new generation cannot yet provide the brains they need." So not only did Stalin's "tough decisions" not win the war, but they actually played a part in getting his country attacked and leaving it with a limited capacity to fight back.

Certainly today's Nazis aren't worried about Stalinism as a potential threat. Just the opposite, in fact. In *Stalin: The Enduring Legacy*, Kerry Bolton—a New Zealand white supremacist and frequent contributor to the "books you can't read on the bus" subgenre, whose other works include *The Holocaust Myth* and *Mel Gibson and the Pharisees*—praises Stalin for "reversing the Bolshevik-Marxist psychosis that would have reduced Russia to chaos and destroyed the very soul of the Russian people," and hails Stalinism as "a major force for tradition and conservatism in the world, against globalization." Minus the "psychosis" bit, he's exactly right. The diagnosis neatly follows that of Konstantin Rodzaevsky, the leader-in-exile of the Russian Fascist Party, who remarked shortly before his death in 1946 that "Stalinism is exactly what we mistakenly called 'Russian Fascism.' It is our Russian Fascism cleansed of extremes, illusions, and errors." In other words, the two were more alike than they were different. Heavy on quotes like these, all Bolton's book really does is to document different aspects of the USSR's rightward drift under Stalin—he's especially fond of the abortion ban—and then smugly assert that they were actually good things. For the avowed Stalinists of today's left, is this not concerning?

The working people of the world have no need for a Man of Steel.

"[...]the Reign of Terror. We think of this as the reign of people who inspire terror; on the contrary, it is the reign of people who are themselves terrified. Terror consists mostly of useless cruelties perpetrated by frightened people in order to reassure themselves."

So says Engels to Marx in 1870. He was talking about the French Revolution and its aftermath, but he might as well have been looking through a time-warp at Josef Stalin. Rather than the "strength" that his devotees imagine, Stalin offered the world nothing but weakness: constantly jumping at imaginary threats, alienating potential allies, and dividing the working class against itself. If the Soviet Union accomplished anything, it was because extraordinarily brave people kept working in spite of him. Stalinism is nationalistic, homophobic, sexist, and often downright *stupid*; today, it's wholly backward-looking, seeking to restore the imagined glories of 1945 rather than create something new. A "strong" movement does not need to arrest poets for using a different style to the approved one. For anyone skeptical of the police or prisons, the idea that it even *could* be monstrous. Thankfully, it's still fairly rare to find someone who idolizes the man himself, but aspects of the Stalinist idea keep popping up—in defenses of dictators like Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad as opponents of "imperialism," in disdain for feminism and LGBTQ rights as distractions, and in the attitude that anything is justified if it leads to power. All of this is a poisonous dead end for the left, and the question "how can we be sure you won't create another Stalin?" is a serious one for future parties and movements to address. The working people of the world have no need for a Man of Steel; they're already more than capable of leading themselves. ✦



|||ORTII

IN DEFENSE OF SOUTH PARK

by CIARA MOLONEY

IN 2017, THE TWO-HEADED MONSTER OF DONALD Trump's inauguration and *South Park*'s 20th anniversary prompted much hand-wringing over the show's legacy. In the post-2016 rush to point fingers, a cartoon about the adventures of some potty-mouthed 8-year-old boys was made to bear at least some of the blame. Dana Schwartz tweeted that it was impossible to overstate the cultural damage of *South Park*'s portrayal of "earnestness as the only sin" and mockery as "the ultimate inoculation against all criticism"—and then, her point seemingly proven, she was descended on by trolls. *South Park* didn't invent the alt-right, Sean O'Neal wrote for *The AV Club*, "but at their roots are the same bored, irritated distaste for politically correct woke-ness, the same impish thrill at saying the things you're not supposed to say, the same button-pushing racism and sexism, now scrubbed of all irony." For Lara Zarum in *The Village Voice*, the show's misogyny—the creators "never seem content just to make fun of women; they relish sexually humiliating them, too, all while shunting the show's female characters, young and old, to the maddeningly familiar role of disapproving nag"—is deeply tied to Hillary Clinton's election loss.

The consensus that seemed to calcify was that *South Park*'s corrosive influence on popular culture raised a generation of nihilistic trolls that revived American fascism for the *lulz*. At best, it inculcated a wilful apathy, political and otherwise. According to Lindsay Ellis, *South Park* creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone spent the whole 2000s "explaining that things were fine actually, both sides bad": both symptomatic of, and feeding into, a wider apathetic cultural attitude towards social injustice in the 2000s. As Schwartz outlines, *South Park* has always skewered "both the left and the right—and anyone who believed in anything—as equally ridiculous. The smart people were those detached enough to know that everyone was full of it."

There is some ring of truth to all this. The best of these critiques—like Zarum's or O'Neal's—are rooted in an acknowledgement that *South Park* is and has always been extremely funny, and that its cultural effect is not necessarily reflective of Stone and Parker's intentions.

But even still, a fundamental rift inevitably opens up between these arguments and my experience of the show itself.

I've watched *South Park* on and off for most of my life. Its classic years—the first ten seasons or so—are a foundational touchstone for me, shortly behind maybe *The Simpsons*. So much of my brain development, it seems—from my comedic tastes to my politics—is inextricably linked to having watched *South Park*. My abiding love of shock humour and my maximalist approach to free speech can both be traced back to sneaking episodes of *South Park* way past my bedtime. But it wasn't like *South Park* imprinted its values on me without my say-so: all the times I sneered at the show were just as clarifying.

Trey Parker and Matt Stone met in a film class at the University of Colorado, where they bonded over their shared love of Monty Python. Terry Gilliam's paper cutout animations for *Monty Python's Flying Circus* influenced Stone and Parker to make two Christmas-themed cartoon shorts—*Jesus vs. Frosty* and *Jesus vs. Santa*—using paper cutout, stop-motion animation. These shorts acted as prototypes for *South Park*'s style, tone, and character design, prompting Fox broadcasting company to meet with them about producing their planned TV series. But Fox wanted them to get rid of Mr. Hankey the Christmas Poo, the festive talking excrement, so they walked. They shopped *South Park* around and landed on Comedy Central, which ordered a run of six episodes.

Like so many great shows, *South Park* took a little while to figure itself out, not least because Parker and Stone hadn't made a TV show before: the pilot episode, "Cartman Gets an Anal Probe," ran 28 minutes because they didn't realize that they needed to leave time for ad breaks, and they had to hastily cut it to 22 minutes before airing. Similar to *The Simpsons*, it takes a couple of years to color in the supporting cast that populates the town—but like *The Simpsons*, it's a remarkably rich ensemble once this happens. It also takes a couple of years until pretty much every episode is credited solely as written and directed by Trey Parker. (From season four on, Stone has mostly done the coordination and business part of being an executive producer—essentially the con-

duit between Parker's creative genius and the suits at Comedy Central.) But from the start, the core elements are in place: the shocking sensibility, its underlying political bent, and, of course, the four little boys at its center, made up of crude 2D geometric shapes and primary colors, bundled up in hats and coats as they wait for the school bus—Stan Marsh, Kyle Broflovski, Kenny McCormick, Eric Cartman.

Zarum calls it “largely a show about—and that reflected the sensibility of—white American boyhood.” The characters are simultaneously foul-mouthed, profane, and incredibly ignorant. They swear like sailors and aren't entirely sure where babies come from. Cartman is a raging antisemite and also earnestly convinced that the girls in class have acquired a powerful fortune-telling device when he sees them playing with a paper fortune teller on the playground. They're not a realistic depiction of boyhood—Cartman once killed Scott Tenorman's parents and fed them to him as chili, after all—but they capture some ineffable and rarely acknowledged quality of childhood. “Kids are not nice, innocent, flower-loving little rainbow children,” Matt Stone told *The Independent* in 1998. “Kids are all little bastards: they don't have any kind of social tact or etiquette, they're just complete little raging bastards.” The innocence we venerate in children is inseparable from their ignorance and potential cruelty.

Stan, a natural skeptic in a blue bobble hat, is loosely based on Parker, while his best friend, Kyle, a Jewish kid with a strong moral sense and a tendency towards impatience and irritability, is loosely based on Stone. Kenny, whose voice is unintelligibly muffled by his orange parka, is poor and spends the first couple of seasons dying every week. (“Oh my God, they killed Kenny!” “You bastards!”) Cartman, meanwhile, is more similar to Archie Bunker, the bigoted patriarch of 1970s sitcom *All in the Family*, than anyone behind the scenes. Archie Bunker was racist, antisemitic, homophobic, and nostalgic for, of all things, the Hoover administration. When Norman Lear created *All in the Family*, it was “designed to explode the medium's taboos,” Emily Nussbaum writes. He “wanted his shows to be funny, ... but he also wanted to purge prejudice by exposing it.” It was a slackwire act that

had CBS airing the show with this “nervous disclaimer”:

The program you are about to see is All in the Family. It seeks to throw a humorous spotlight on our frailties, prejudices and concerns. By making them a source of laughter, we hope to show—in a mature fashion—just how absurd they are.

Lear's thumbprints on *South Park* are clear—he even served as a writing consultant on some episodes, and voiced Benjamin Franklin in an episode about the Iraq War (long story). He even officiated Trey Parker's wedding. But Lear is an avowed progressive, and Parker and Stone have actively cultivated *South Park* to be an equal opportunity offender. While promoting their War on Terror satire movie *Team America: World Police*, Parker described himself and Stone as “pretty middle-ground guys” who “find just as many things to rip on on the left as ... on the right.” The show is overtly political, but Parker and Stone have always insisted that it's not *ideological*. That they're not on your side, no matter who you are.

“I look at it like this,” Parker explained in 2010. “I have a cat, I love my cat and it's like someone coming in and saying, ‘Hey, is that cat a Republican or a Democrat?’ He's my fucking cat, leave him alone.”

Some of that might be disingenuous—a way to deflect explanation, roughly equivalent to David Lynch saying “the movie is the talking”—but I think most of it speaks to American politics having long since operated on a binary of liberal-conservative which makes it difficult to articulate other worldviews. “What does your cat/TV show believe and advocate for?” is reduced to “Is your cat/TV show a Republican or a Democrat?”

But Parker's politics, as articulated through *South Park*, are pretty clear—it's just not within the liberal-conservative, Democrat-Republican binary. (That's why the show compared choosing between George W. Bush and Al Gore to choosing between a Giant Douche and a Turd Sandwich.) It's libertarianism.

When Stan finds out his dog is gay in the show's first season, he learns to accept and advocate on behalf of gay dogs (and people!) with the help of Big Gay Al, in an episode that was nominated for a GLAAD award. In another episode, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) becomes convinced that a totally normal party is a suicide cult, and the show eviscerates the ATF's handling of the Waco siege: “We know what we're doing. We did this all before in Waco,” an ATF officer says. “Uh yes, but you totally screwed up Waco,” a reporter counters. “You killed a bunch of innocent people and then tried to say they killed themselves.” When a Starbucks analogue comes to South Park, the boys conclude that big corporations are no less moral than small businesses, and only get that big because they offer a product people like. The seventh season episode “Butt Out” compares smoking bans to fascism, and essentially argues for taking personal responsibility instead of blaming those nice tobacco companies. The first episode of *South Park* to air after 9/11—“Osama bin Laden Has Farty Pants”—ends with some low-key patriotic chest-thumping, but along the way it makes time for an Afghan boy to explain that not just the Taliban hates America, a third of the world hates America, no matter what Kyle says he was told in school and on TV. Like all principled libertarians, Parker and Stone are dead right about half the time. The other half, they're about as wrong (as are all principled libertarians) as you can be.

Libertarianism has become a pretty murky label in the last decade. This is in no small part due to regular conservatives-cum-fascists like



Ted Cruz and Tea Party guys claiming the term, so you get a coagulation of opposition to public spending with out-and-out racism and homophobia. Worst of all worlds. But true libertarianism, while ultimately wrongheaded, is underpinned by recognizable ethical values. Prizing human freedom above all else has a kind of moral poetry to it.

I'm a socialist, but I'm certainly also, if not a libertarian, then libertarian-adjacent. There's something there that resonates with me, something irreducible to "socially liberal, fiscally conservative." It's a basic rule of the universe that if everyone in the U.S. Senate—except for Bernie Sanders and Rand Paul, respectively a democratic socialist and a right-wing libertarian, traditionally considered opposites—votes for something, the bill must be evil, whether it's military interventionism, mass surveillance, mass incarceration, or just preventing people from buying medication from Canada. The prizing of human freedom necessitates, for the most part, the upholding of civil liberties. The essential difference is that, as a socialist, I think poverty and corporate power are threats to human freedom, not manifestations of it, and that poverty and corporate power need to be curtailed—or eliminated entirely—to enable the fullness of our liberty. That's a huge difference policywise, but it's not that big a leap philosophically.

WESLEY MORRIS WROTE IN 2018 IN *THE NEW York Times* that there has been a shift—almost an inversion—in the culture wars in the last few years. In the 1980s and 1990s, moralizers “tended to be white people from politics and the church” concerned about young people being exposed to single motherhood on *Murphy Brown*, Cyndi Lauper songs about masturbating, or a sexually active Jesus in Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*. “The culture wars back then always seemed to be about keeping culture from kids. Now the moral panic appears to flow in the opposite direction. The moralizers are young people, not their parents.” He's empathetic to this generational shift, feels it partly himself, but laments how the moral and political urgency pushed onto television and pop music strips it of its potential to be art for art's sake—strips it, all too often, of the messy complications that make art interesting, and replaces aesthetic consideration with moral judgment. *South Park* is emphatically a child of these earlier culture wars, when artists of all stripes were interested in pushing boundaries, testing the limits of free speech, and rubbing conservatives' noses in it.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was a huge boom in shock humor across mediums, the stomach turn of the century. Eminem rapped about killing his wife and raping his mother and went eleven times platinum. Tom Green feigned sex with a dead moose on the side of the road and put dog excrement on his microphone for vox pop interviews. Dave England ate the ingredients of an omelette, vomited it up, cooked it as an omelette, and ate it on *Jackass*. Howard Stern was the biggest thing in radio. “Paedogeddon,” a special episode about pedophilia from the British satirical current affairs program *Brass Eye*, received thousands of complaints and prompted an investigation from the Broadcasting Standards Commission.

South Park was at the forefront of this, poking and prodding at the inherent arbitrariness of taboos and gleefully smashing them. It is shock humor at its best: understanding exactly how shock, disgust, mischief, and delight interact in ways that can leave you queasy or leave you lightheaded with laughter. Some of the shock has been diluted over

time—when you've lived through a time when *Family Guy*, *American Dad!* and *The Cleveland Show* were all on the air, it's hard to get het up about cartoons having swearing—but a remarkable amount of it hasn't. I can't imagine that the boys learning how to “milk” dogs by jerking them off will ever not make me gasp and giggle.

“When we started, [it was] *Beavis and Butthead*, and us, and in some ways *The Simpsons*, and *Married... with Children*—shit like that,” Matt Stone told *Vanity Fair* in 2016. They were part of a reaction against the blandness and aesthetic conservatism of so much of television. Their silly jokes were free speech activism by default, and their movie—*South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut*—is a musical mockery of censorship. (I will never forgive the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for not

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giving “Blame Canada” the Best Original Song Oscar, especially when they gave it to freaking Phil Collins instead.) This cultural context is so different from the one we have now—where, as Morris outlines, the prevailing instinct is “to protect and condemn work, not for its quality, per se, but for its values”—that it makes the position of *South Park* today, on the brink of its 26th season, different, too. The aesthetics of shock humor have become synonymous with facts-don’t-care-about-your-feelings meme fascism. Many of the edgelords of yesteryear, from Sarah Silverman to James Gunn, have embarked on apology tours, in ways that disclaim and deflect and deny and in ways more creatively interesting: Eminem apologizing to (and forgiving) his mother is disarmingly beautiful. But the darkness still calls to me like a siren.

“[S]ometimes this atmosphere of everything and everyone is valid all the time, no uncomfortable questions may be asked, any self-deprecation is a sign of traumatic internalized bigotry, I just need to get out of there for a while and find a place where I can relax and be my edgy self,” Natalie Wynn of ContraPoints says in her video essay on dark humor. “I need a safe space for my edginess, where I can just blurt out whatever stupid question or joke that comes to mind without being afraid that I’m going to inflict horrible trauma on everyone around me.”

Wynn seeks, like I do, to find a path that denigrates neither her comedic sensibilities nor her political commitments, to reckon with her status as a double agent in the culture war, someone in the space between “easily triggered humourless PC cucks” and “badass edgy nothing-off-limits free-speech truth tellers.” Instinctively, I find such a dichotomy false, not just because I’m a double agent, but because so many of my favorite edgelords are double agents of one stripe or another, too.

Take the episode about changing South Park’s flag, two decades before the post-George Floyd protests rush to amend racist symbols. Jimbo, Stan’s gun-toting uncle, wants to keep it since it’s part of South Park’s history. Chef, one of the town’s few Black residents, wants to change it because it’s racist. The way the argument is set up, you expect the flag to include the Confederate flag in some way—so the reveal of the flag, which depicts four white figures hanging a Black person, triggers a shocked laugh. The episode exposes the absurdity of arguments against removing Confederate symbols by applying the same arguments to something as expressly, obviously, unavoidably racist as a literal depiction of racist violence. The final punchline pulls the same trick on superficial liberal multiculturalism: the townspeople eventually agree to change the flag to depict four different color figures hanging a Black person, to make it not racist anymore.

But the question of how politically or morally conscionable *South Park* is, remains. It’s a question most people nominally on the left have settled with a strong vote against: that, like Schwartz argues, it is impossible to overstate the cultural damage *South Park* has inflicted. The most cited—and most accurate—examples are the show’s histories of transphobia and climate change denial. They’re certainly the things that make me the most uneasy.

When the boys’ teacher, Garrison, transitions, *South Park* presents it as absurd: “Mr. Garrison’s Fancy New Vagina” does contain a pretty nice speech from Kyle’s mother about how sometimes people’s outsides don’t match who they are inside, but goes on to equate transition with Kyle getting surgery to become Black (the coach who rejected him for the state team told him Jews can’t play basketball) and Kyle’s dad getting surgery to become a dolphin. It’s gross, but it’s also 2005: it’s not a justification, by any means, but it is typical for that time period. Even

a show as lefty as *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* was making cheap jokes about being disgusted by trans women. So did Jon Stewart, then the standard bearer for liberal comedy. Trey Parker wrote a whole two-parter about how much he hates being compared to the hacks at *Family Guy*, but nevertheless, *Family Guy* was doing vomit-when-you-find-out-you-slept-with-a-trans-woman gags in 2010. It’s all bad. It’s the kind of thing where it seems futile to criticise *South Park* in particular for something that saturated the air and contaminated the water.

THE CLIMATE CHANGE DENIAL IS CRAZIER. In the 2006 episode “ManBearPig,” Al Gore warns everyone about a half-man, half-bear, half-pig creature who is putting *South Park* in mortal danger. It’s a parody, in part, of *An Inconvenient Truth*, Gore’s documentary about the climate crisis. ManBearPig functions as an allegory for climate change, and the

show argues that ManBearPig/climate change is made up and something Al Gore is using to get attention. Gore is represented as a fantasist and an idiot who repeatedly says he’s “super cereal” instead of serious. Stan says that his dad is a geologist, and he says ManBearPig isn’t real. It’s not even the first time a variation on the line “my dad is a geologist, and he says global warming isn’t real” appeared on the show—and considering that in real life Parker’s dad *is* a geologist, it’s easy to pinpoint the likely origin of his climate skepticism, likely reinforced by double-down contrarianism. Then again, my dad learned about climate change in college in the early 1970s, so it seems absurd for *South Park* to pretend the jury was still out in the 2000s. “ManBearPig” wasn’t the first or last time they banged the climate denial drum, either: it underpins their parody of *The Day After Tomorrow* and their episode about Earth Day, too.

“ManBearPig” is the kind of episode that’s easy to reach for when describing *South Park*’s corrosive influence. Nearly 20 years have gone by, and the world has not, as of yet, taken meaningful action to combat the climate crisis. It seems like every couple of years, governments meet up to agree to ten-year targets they should have reached by now. And it’s easier to blame a cartoon about potty-mouthed 8-year-olds than deal with the massive structural problems in our global political and economic systems. Activists “can’t affect social policy—not directly,” Morris writes. “They can, however, amend the culture.” We can’t stop corporate overlords from extracting oil from the ground—but we can take on a cartoon.

The instinct to blame TV and movies for political problems is thoroughly nonpartisan. Liberals blame Trump on *South Park*. Leftists blame the failures of the Obama administration on *The West Wing*, the most potent of Aaron Sorkin’s dark arts. And conservatives are old hands at it: they basically invented it. Mary Whitehouse attributed the “moral collapse” of Britain to the BBC’s “propaganda of disbelief, doubt and dirt ... promiscuity, infidelity and drinking.” George H.W. Bush laid the decline of “family values” at the feet of *The Simpsons*. Everything they could think of was to blame for Columbine: Marilyn Manson, video games, *The Matrix*—anything but gun policy, obviously.

“A lot of people are extremely invested in the idea that the world was ruined by TV and movies because that allows them to, on some level, convince themselves it can be saved by TV and movies,” my friend Dean Buckley said to me recently. But if “ManBearPig” got us here—if television has that power—then the 2018 two-parter “Time to Get Ce-

real”/“Nobody Got Cereal?” should have been able to save us. It turns out that Al Gore was right, ManBearPig is real, and he’s killing people in South Park. But even as bodies pile up, adults in the town continue to deny ManBearPig’s existence. “I thought it was a hell of a statement by *South Park*,” real-life Al Gore said when asked about the episodes in an interview. “And I appreciated it a lot.”

But those episodes didn’t suddenly spur significant climate action. Which undercuts the assumption that “ManBearPig” made a difference in the other direction. For what it’s worth, I was a child—with a brain ripe for molding—when I first saw “ManBearPig,” and though I thought it was pretty funny, I mostly thought it was dumb and wrong. I knew climate change was real and was not convinced otherwise by a cartoon. Even if I had wavered, I have no doubt that it would have been, at most, a brief blip in my otherwise thoroughly climate-change-believing life. I found *South Park* convincing on issues like free speech because their arguments resonated with my understanding of the world and my place in it, and “ManBearPig” did not. By a similar calculus, reading two-thirds of *The Fountainhead* when I was 15 influenced in a big way my opinions about architecture and none of my opinions about individualism and selfishness. Humans are filters, not sponges. That’s only anecdotal, but, of course, so is every argument about the damage “ManBearPig” is responsible for.

But whether *South Park* is morally or politically conscionable is, ultimately, what the Zen Buddhists might call a question wrongly put. Is moral or political righteousness something art can or should embody? Must art be edifying? Must it be moral? (What does it mean for it to be moral?)

If you love art—if you think of art as more than a political tool—I think the answer has to be, No. In a “culture whose artistic value has been replaced by moral judgment,” Morris writes, we are robbed “of what is messy and tense and chaotic and extrajudicial about art ... Avoiding that unpleasantness feels natural, but it denies a truth in art, which is our humanity—all of it.” The answer is No, in part, because the impulse to seek art—and mass media arts in particular—that is edifying has traditionally been the refuge of the scoundrel, whether because they are censorious anti-art conservatives or simply want to deny us our due rest and recreation in front of the idiot box. But it is also that, if you love art, you know its moral fortitude is rarely what you love it for.

My favorite episode of *South Park* is “You Got F’d in the A,” a parody of *You Got Served*, a movie I have never seen or even heard of outside of *South Park* referencing it. The boys are playing with remote-controlled toy cars when a group of kids from Orange County come up and dance in front of them—declaring that they “just got served!” While the boys are baffled, every adult in town seems intensely aware of what “serving” is, apparently regarding it as the most humiliating and harrowing experience a boy can have. Stan’s dad Randy, against his mother’s wishes, teaches him to line dance to “Achy Breaky Heart”—which is exactly what Stan does when those kids “serve” them again. But that, of course, means it’s on. Stan has to put together the ultimate dance crew: one of the goth kids, a guy who’s really good at Dance Dance Revolution, a waitress from Raisins—a kid version of Hooters—and, ultimately, Butters, the sweetest kid in class, who has to overcome the trauma of accidentally killing like a dozen people in his last tap-dancing competition before he can dance again.

It’s one of the best episodes of TV I’ve ever seen. Stan swapping out the Orange County kids’ CD to line dance to “Achy Breaky Heart”

makes me laugh just thinking about it. I love all the weird lingo that everyone but the four main kids understands as obvious: Stan’s mom telling Randy that it’s on, her voice clipped and frustrated, is perfect. I’m in love with the way blood splatters over Butters’ little horrified face. It features “I’ve Got Something in My Front Pocket for You,” possibly the funniest song Trey Parker has written in his Tony- and Grammy-winning career, as a throwaway background gag. There is nothing edifying, nothing improving, about it. It’s just funny. And that’s all I really want, when it comes right down to it. It’s what I watch TV for.

Treating art as politics isn’t just a disservice to art, it’s a disservice to politics. To believe, even implicitly, that everything could be set right if only people watched the right TV shows, is a way to let yourself off the hook—“There was nothing any of us could do, Obama kept appointing *West Wing* fans”—and to convince yourself that watching television is meaningful political action. Cultural works might collectively tip things in one direction or another—with all the force of a custard pie dropped from a stepladder six feet high—but that’s ultimately not what they’re for. Norman Lear created *All in the Family* to expose and satirize prejudice, but, as Nussbaum writes, it also appealed to the kind of people who bought “Archie Bunker for President” bumper stickers: “to those who shared Archie’s frustrations with the culture around him, a ‘silent majority’ who got off on hearing taboo thoughts said aloud.” That isn’t Lear’s fault, and it isn’t a failure. It’s simply that a TV show very rarely changes someone’s entire life, since any TV show is such a small part of it. TV is for fun, beauty, enjoyment. For a laugh and a cry and an arch guffaw. The soundtrack to a dull repetitive task or the relaxation you sink into at the end of a long day. There’s no shame in that. It’s a vital part of any decent life.

And so my approach to *South Park* is my approach to all the culture I take in: to be a filter, not a sponge; to take the good and leave the bad. That’s what all cultural works demand, unless they’re pristine and angelic (and probably boring). *South Park* is TV: hilarious, iconoclastic, imperfect, unstable, repulsive, brilliant TV. +



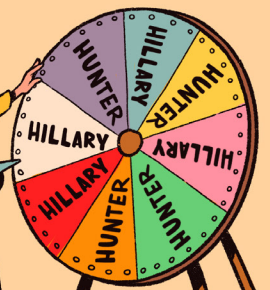
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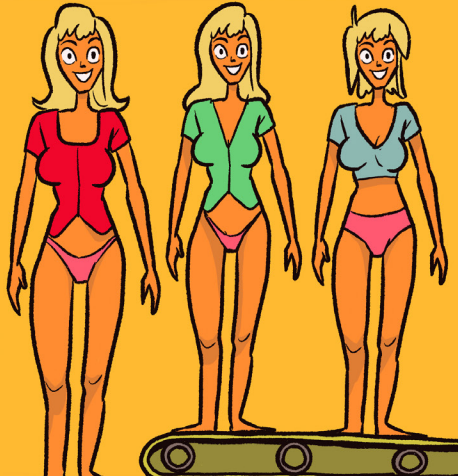
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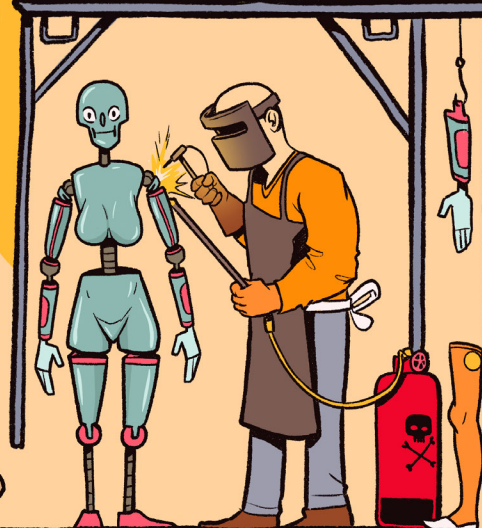
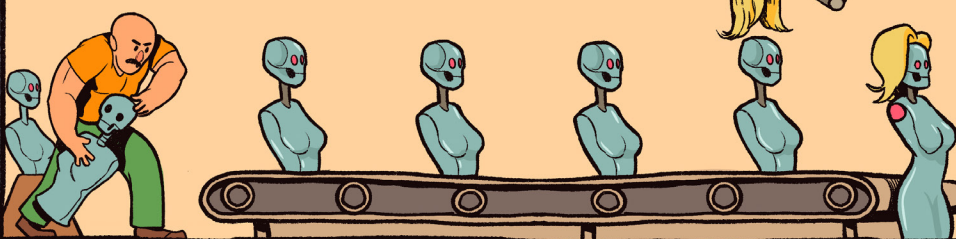
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MANIFEST DESTINY IN SPACE

Mary-Jane Rubenstein is a scholar of religion, but her latest book is about Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, and the "corporate space race." For Rubenstein, the promises that these men offer of a human future in vast colonies on Mars or the moon have much in common with religious myths of a "promised land." And like these other myths, the ideology underlying Silicon Valley's space colonization missions can be used to defend unjust acts in the here and now to serve the glorious long-term destiny of the species. Rubenstein's new book *Astrotopia: The Dangerous Religion of the Corporate Space Race* looks at the ways in which stories about great destinies have been used to rationalize conquest and exploitation. Rubenstein worries that just as "Manifest Destiny" was used as an excuse for genocide in the United States, plans to "expand into space" will be used to justify trashing Earth and ignoring the most pressing issues of inequality in our near-term future. Rubenstein is not against utopianism, but she argues that Silicon Valley techno-utopianism is fraudulent, using the rhetoric of science and reason to disguise the fact that its promises are actually unscientific and unrealistic. Instead, she advocates that we get our ideas for a beautiful human future from a diverse array of other sources, from feminist science fiction to indigenous thinkers. Rubenstein offers us a starting point for thinking about how we might forge a path for our species that is egalitarian and humane. In this conversation with *Current Affairs* editor-in-chief Nathan J. Robinson, Rubenstein discusses the Commercial Space Launch Competitiveness Act of 2015, utilitarianism, the Land of Canaan, privatization, longtermism, Ursula Le Guin, and much more.

NATHAN J. ROBINSON

What is a scholar of religion doing writing about the corporate space race, Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, SpaceX, and the corporate privatization of space? What does any of this have to do with religion?

MARY-JANE RUBENSTEIN

This is a great question. First, when I talk about the corporate space race, it's important to say that corporations have always been involved in some way with space exploration since the beginning. Boeing and Lockheed Martin, for example, have

helped advance U.S. missions in outer space. In the last seven to twelve years, however, increasingly, the U.S. space sector in particular has been turned over to private interests, with legislation that has increasingly given stipends and government contracts to companies that are willing to do much of the heavy lifting for us. This is an era in which enormous corporations are not only competing for government contracts, but increasingly setting the vision of what life in outer space is going to look like. So, they're not just running pizza up to the International Space Station for us.

They're giving us a sense of what we ought to be doing in space, and why. And what we ought to be doing in space, according to these actors, is to start a new economy in space. As you probably know, the Earth is a finite thing—there are finite resources, space, and land on Earth. If profits are going to keep increasing, we need more stuff. So, the argument goes, we're going to have to go beyond the Earth and start a new economy out there and find more resources. We need more metals, energy, and so forth. This is primarily an economic project of having more land and resources,

just like earthly colonialism was.

When Europe needed more stuff to industrialize itself, it started taking over other people's lands. Well, now everybody else's lands are already taken on Earth, so we need more elsewhere. Economic projects that involve taking over new stuff require—especially if they're going to be as extraordinarily difficult as, say, this one or the transatlantic journey—a big story to get people invested ideologically. And increasingly, what we're getting from guys like Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk are these grand stories of coming salvation and upcoming disaster: we're using too much energy, the planet is going to die, and then a promise of salvation somewhere else. It's a big story of humanity about to be destroyed on the one hand, and going to another land where things will be fantastic on the other. It gives the whole thing a religious patina that I think is important to understand.

ROBINSON

Yes. When you start to look into the statements that people like Bezos and Musk have made, Bezos has this insane-sounding plan—he's a little quiet about it, but when he talks about what he's actually planning or hoping for what he sees the future as, he talks about having trillions of human beings in space. There will be thousands of Einsteins, and we're going to move some portion of the population off of Earth to preserve it as a wildlife park, probably for the rich, with the rest of us working at Amazon warehouses in space. And Musk's vision, as you point out, is a little different. He explicitly says, "Fuck the Earth, we're going to Mars—Mars is where it's at. We don't need Earth." Could you tell us more about the stories that are being told by the people who are leading the new space race?

RUBENSTEIN

Yes. I'll focus on Musk and Bezos because they're the characters I tend to think of as prophetic or messianic in some sort of way, these self-appointed folks who chastise us for what we're up to and tell us there's a different way forward that involves moving to a new land. I think Musk's vision is most familiar, so I'll start there. The Earth is eventually going to become completely inhospitable to human life, whether because an asteroid might hit and wipe out humans like what happened with the dinosaurs, AI robots go wild and destroy the human

species and decide the Earth is theirs, or nuclear war will abolish us all. Something is going to wipe out humanity. So, unless we have a little reserve of humans somewhere else, this massive disaster on earth will wipe out not only all of humanity, but all records of humanity. The idea is to get a backup community somewhere off the planet. For Elon Musk, that backup community is going to be on Mars.

Why Mars? It has more elements and gravity than the moon and is better than any other planet out there. Venus is 900 degrees Fahrenheit. You're not going to put anybody on Venus. Mars is cold, but not as cold as Venus is hot. So, we're going to go to Mars, and we're going to bound around in one-third gravity, and, yes, you can't breathe and your blood will boil, but we'll figure that stuff out and get it right and have a backup colony for the time when humanity is destroyed on Earth.

Bezos has a totally different vision. He also believes that there's a disaster coming, but a different kind. Specifically, he's worried that we're using too much energy, and if we want to keep living the way that we're living—which is to say with high-tech devices, first-rate hospitals, fantastic universities that leave the light on all the time, everyone has one or two cars and three refrigerators—there isn't enough energy. All the solar panels in the world are not going to give us enough energy, and, of course, we don't have enough oil in the ground or gas in the mountains. Therefore, Bezos says, we do have to go to space.

But Mars is terrible. It's too far away—it takes three months on a good day, five or six months on a bad day, to get to Mars—and inhospitable. How are you going to warm that planet up? You can't breathe the air, so what should we do instead? Well, we'll build little space pods close to Earth, like where the International Space Station is, or a little farther out, so you can get there pretty easily. There will be gigantic shopping malls, totally climate controlled. You can import anything you want and mine asteroids or the moon to get some water. Everything's going to be 72 degrees Fahrenheit all the time—completely perfect. There we will be, living in our perfect space colonies. And as you've said, in the meantime, says Bezos, with heavy industry and most of the human species relocated to the space pods, Earth can have a chance to heal and regrow to become a gargantuan cosmic park equivalent to a national, or cosmic, park—a protected area. That's his idea.

ROBINSON

It's worth noting that these two men consider themselves to be devotees of science and reason. The stories that you're describing are justified through an economic argument. This is an argument that the resources are finite, so we have to do this and it makes logical sense. When we examine these stories against factual reality, we know Elon Musk is notorious for making grandiose promises that are not well grounded in actual science despite using the rhetoric of reason and rationalism, whether it's promising to build a submarine so small it can rescue children from a cave or to build tunnels under various cities. Is it true that we have good reason to believe that these grandiose stories grounded in the rhetoric of science and reason are closer to being giant myths than they are real promises of things that are on the cusp of happening?

RUBENSTEIN

Yes, I think this is true. And yet, the grandiosity of the vision and the self-righteous humanitarian claim of "trying to save all of humanity," as Musk will say, are very difficult to criticize. The ideas can do lots of damage in the meantime. Because then, if you buy into the vision and presumption that the Earth is done and toast, and we need to start putting our resources into the next place, you can complete the trashing of Earth in the process of trying to enact this extraordinary vision—whether it ever actually comes true. So, whether it's going to happen, the vision is dangerous.

ROBINSON

It also rationalizes inequality. Didn't Musk talk about only trying to amass resources so he can expand the light of humanity to all the distant stars?

RUBENSTEIN

Yes, that's what he says: "I am amassing resources to ensure the immortality of the human species and to make sure that we get to the stars." There are many things one could spend obscene resources on, including providing clean water in most parts of the Earth. And yet, both Musk and Bezos have said they can't think of anything to do with their extraordinary fortunes other than to move us into outer space.

ROBINSON

You talk about the ideology of longtermism that has become popular among

Musk, the Effective Altruism community, and in Silicon Valley. It's supposedly grounded in rational utilitarian morality that almost comes to the conclusion that caring about what we might consider our most pressing problems is immoral compared to building the glorious future Astrotopia.

RUBENSTEIN

Yes. I'll just put my cards on the table here and say it's a terrible position to believe that it is more important to secure the survival of a trillion hypothetical beings in the future than a few billion actual beings now. Therefore, rather than putting your money into development in developing countries, or into access to clean water, healthcare, or universal basic income for people who are here, you should really give the money to the entrepreneurs who are looking toward the future of, again, some major abstracted version of humanity.

ROBINSON

It's easy to critique this kind of utilitarianism as building a dystopia under the guise of building a utopia. But, one of the values of your book in particular is that you contextualize this argument by looking at the history of the rhetoric of promised lands, such as Manifest Destiny. The idea is that we have some kind of either God-given destiny or racial superiority that justifies the devaluing of the present, or of certain lives, in the service of some grand thing.

RUBENSTEIN

Right. To go back to your first question about why somebody who studies religion is writing a book about this space race: it was just so clear, the minute I started paying attention, that these are the same rhetorical and ideological moves that justified the conquest of the New World (initially by Spain and then other European powers), the expansion of white-descended people across the American continent, and now the expansion of humanity into space. In those terrestrial stories, the story of the discovery of the so-called New World and the westward expansion, you can see very clearly that any reservations that ordinary people might have had about taking new land are explicitly precluded or shot down by endorsements from the Church. It is Pope Alexander VI who gives the so-called New World to Spain. He just gives it to them—"It is yours." And so the

shifty or questionable business of taking other peoples' lands, and displacing and even murdering or enslaving them, is swept under the rug of conversion and "saving souls." Right now, we're saving their souls eternally—that's longtermism. You want to think about the original longtermism: it doesn't matter what happens to your body here on Earth, because we're saving you. So, it's okay if you're enslaved, because your soul will be saved. We could call it the Christian version of longtermism. That is what justified the European conquest of the globe.

ROBINSON

Could you talk about the biblical promise of the land of Canaan? You said it almost became the title of the book until you realized that nobody remembers what the land of Canaan was about.

RUBENSTEIN

The story of the land of Canaan is a story of God having chosen, totally arbitrarily, a human being named Abram, and saying to him, "Your people are going to be my people, and I'm going to bless your descendants. You will have many children, and I'm going to give you this land." The first couple of books of the Hebrew Bible are a chronicle of the descendants of Abraham [formerly Abram], then on their tortuous way into the Promised Land, first under Moses, and finally, under Joshua. And, of course, when they get to the promised land, the Israelites are told, "When you're heading in there, you're going to find this land is yours, but it's not totally empty. It's the land of the Canaanites, Amorites, Jebusites, Hittites, etc." And God says, "When you get in there, make sure that you kill them all. Destroy their temples and everything else, otherwise, you might fall into idolatry."

It's important to say that it seems like this didn't happen. It seems like there was no conquering of Canaan, that when the Israelites moved into the land, they settled the way that anybody else does when they're not looking to take over. But it becomes a biblical story to justify the special position that Israel and the people of Israel have as God's people. The problem is not so much what happened to Canaan, because what happened to Canaan, again, doesn't seem to have happened. The problem was what this story does in the early modern period. This Jewish inheritance is,

in part, picked up by Christians, and then, in particular, by imperial Christianity. In the hands of nominally Christian leaders, the story of the conquest of Canaan becomes a blueprint for the conquest of the so-called New World. America is God's New Jerusalem: this is now the land that God has given you, and just as you were supposed to destroy the peoples of Canaan, you should also, as we can see in early sermons, eliminate the Native inhabitants of this land, lest we fall down on the task God has given us to make this a godly Christian nation.

ROBINSON

I imagine there might be Palestinians who would say that it's not so much a matter of whether it happened but when it happened and who it happened to.

RUBENSTEIN

Right. When I say that it didn't happen, I mean in biblical history.

ROBINSON

This kind of Promised Land rhetoric is obviously present in early Zionism and is used to justify the expulsion of Palestinians from their land.

RUBENSTEIN

Right. The Indigenous scholar Robert Warrior has a very helpful book that compares the two conquests of the New World and the Palestinian homeland, both of them as justified by this Canaan narrative. What he says is that it doesn't seem to be a historical problem, but instead a *narrative* problem because of what it justifies now and what it justified in the early modern and modern period in both Palestine and in the Americas.

ROBINSON

One of the things that comes across very strongly in your book is why the narratives of Manifest Destiny are so compelling. They are deeply grounded in morality and inevitability. It has to happen; it must happen; it's good that it's going to happen. The people being driven away or killed either deserve it or it's actually good for them, and we're creating something that is more beautiful than anything that exists or that we could even conceive of.

RUBENSTEIN

Which, again, is the center of longtermism's promise: whatever we're building

is worth the perhaps unsavory means that we're using to get there.

ROBINSON

You're very good at laying out how these ideologies are being pushed by people who have self-interested reasons to push them, and why we might critique these things. Is there an alternate vision for the future in space? These things, as I've just said, are very beautiful and compelling, so where do we begin to construct something else?

RUBENSTEIN

First, it's important to get clear about what the problem is with carrying this model into outer space. It's tricky, because on the one hand, the story is the same. It's the same alliance between private interests and large nation-states, covered over with a religious candy coating, sending us out to conquer a new land. On the other hand, of course, what you're going to hear from "conquest enthusiasts" is that it's a completely different situation: there are no Indigenous people in space. It's actually empty. We can take whatever we want, and we're licensed to use it however we would like because it doesn't clearly belong to anybody else. Our exploits in earthly colonialism were wrong, but we can do whatever we'd like in outer space because, again, there's nobody there.

There are a couple ways to respond to this. We know, at the very least, that the method of extracting as many resources as possible in order to maximize profit has not been good for the land on Earth. It has en-

couraged mining, which has the worst labor practices imaginable. If you want basic job security, worker's compensation, and a safe and healthful workplace, you don't work in a mine. So, what is that going to look like out in the wider solar system where workers will have no access to air, water, and basic survival independently of their employers? Are these really the labor practices that we want to export into the cosmos? Are these really the practices of maximum profiteering that we want to export to other planetary bodies? Having ransacked one planetary body, do we really want to do it everywhere else? Is that a great idea?

So rather than saying there are no Indigenous people out there, why not talk to Indigenous people who have found ways, historically, of living on the land without ravaging it? There are numerous peoples across the globe who found ways to live on land without ravaging it. Why not learn how to do that, instead of taking this model of maximum profiteering out into the universe and thinking that just because it's the fastest way to do it, it's somehow the best way to do it?

The first step is listening to the examples of people who know how to live with and on the land. Of course, these are not just Indigenous folks. I know an abbey of cloistered nuns about an hour away from me who know how to live on their land and tend and care for it respectfully without ransacking it. We could talk to those nuns and ask them, "How do we do outer space better than we've done it?" There are all sorts of people we can talk to, but I don't think that the billionaires are the right ones.

ROBINSON

Could you talk about what we can learn from the writings of science fiction and fantasy authors? You cite Octavia Butler, N. K. Jemisin, and Ursula Le Guin and a number of their stories which you feel illuminate and make very strong critiques of the corporate space race, but that also show us the values that we ought to embrace instead.

RUBENSTEIN

When I teach this material, I will often get to a point with my students toward the end of the semester where I will ask them, "If you had the choice either to live in an extraterrestrial shopping mall under the dominion of Jeff Bezos and have as many devices and as much power as you'd like, or

to stay on Earth and use less stuff and very little modern technology, which would you choose?" They will, almost all, reluctantly—but clearly—say, "I'm going to go with Bezos." And when I ask them, they say, "Look, I'm not proud of this decision."

ROBINSON

That's what they say?! I did not think that was going to be the answer.

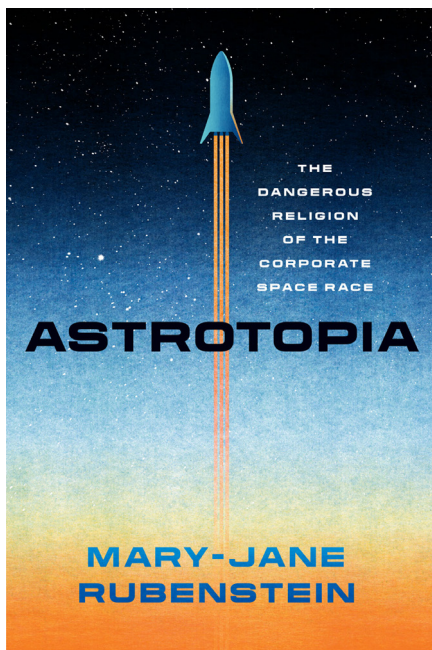
RUBENSTEIN

Absolutely. Even forest bathing students who are environmental studies majors will say, "Yes, I think I'm on the space pod." But when I ask them why, they say they don't think it's possible to live with less stuff. You can't convince people to give up their stuff. And it's at this point that I remind them what Fredric Jameson said: "It's easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism." It is easier to imagine living without the Earth, our entire means of subsistence, than it is to imagine living without an iPhone or something like that. How does that become possible?

What it amounts to, I think, is a failure of imagination. What we need to do is to imagine better, because we know it's been possible. People have lived for tens of thousands of years without the crap that we have. We know what's possible, so what we need are people who can retrain our imagination to allow us to see, think, and eventually live in ways that are different and orthogonal to the ways that we think are possible right now.

The reason I reach for science fiction and speculative fiction—particularly the work of feminist authors, authors of color, and queer authors—is that these authors are not constrained by the possible, the actual, or what seems possible. They are set free to imagine what's genuinely possible, which is to say, with the stuff that seems impossible from wherever we are. They don't have any commitments to maximizing profits or to the laws of gravity—they can decide what they have and don't have commitments to. And then, starting not from scratch, but from their values, what kind of society do we want to build?

N. K. Jemisin can start from her values and say, "What would it look like to build a city in which citizens care for one another?" Let's start from that value of mutual care and build a city. It can be anywhere, and I don't have to make sure that it's



maximizing profits. So, I think that fiction gives us the wherewithal to realize that we can actually do a lot more than we think we can, and the field of what's possible is much wider than we worry that it might be.

ROBINSON

From your title *Astrotopia*, people might assume you're critiquing these utopian ideologies of a great promised land as a general critique of utopianism. But I think it comes across in the book that there is great value to dreaming dreams that we might think of as impossible or radically transformative.

RUBENSTEIN

Absolutely. We need to get clear about the values driving our utopian visions. We have to have ideals and to decide that it's possible to build a more just community than any community that we currently have and to work for it. What I'm worried about is utopianism that's not actually utopianism, a kind of utopian flavor coating the same old stuff. What Bezos and Musk are selling us is the same old system of dominion, of rich white guys getting richer and whiter, especially because they won't have access to the sun. It's just the same thing burnished with a promise of salvation and thrown out into the stratosphere. Go for it, build a utopia, but get clear about what your values are. Don't just sell me the same thing in the sky.

ROBINSON

You draw attention to contemporary events that could shape the human future in space. You bring up a piece of legislation that I don't think anyone even noticed the existence of: the Commercial Space Launch Competitiveness Act. You bring up the privatization of the space program and the direction that the future could, and is starting to, take. Could you talk about things that are happening that we ought to pay attention to that will determine our long-term destiny?

RUBENSTEIN

So, the things that are happening: the first was Obama's 2011 canceling of the Space Shuttle Program. It was at this point that he said we're basically going to have to turn over the space sector to the private sector in the same way that private companies operate airplanes, buses, and, for the most part, trains—private companies are going to

have to start operating spaceships. That was a major decision. In 2015, we got the Commercial Space Launch Competitiveness Act: it ensures that anybody who "recovers" a "resource" from an extraterrestrial body—like the moon, an asteroid, or Mars—has the right to keep, sell, and transfer that resource. This was a response to some worry, in relation to the privatization of space, by entrepreneurs that an international treaty called the Outer Space Treaty dictates that no nation can claim any planetary body—like the moon, Mars, an asteroid, or even a part of an asteroid. The entrepreneurs were saying in the early 2000s, "If we're not allowed to claim part of an extraterrestrial body, then are we allowed to claim the helium or water that we find there?" The Act says you can't claim the land, but you can claim the stuff in the land.

Again, we have an international treaty that says you can't claim the land, and then an American piece of legislation that says you can take the stuff within the land. A number of members of the international community describe it as absurd: how do you claim *within the land* without claiming the land? If you're going to sink a mine on the moon, you're going to have to protect that mine and surround it with space force guardians. You've effectively claimed it—even if you say you're just using it—because you're not going to let China into that space. You've effectively claimed it. The U.S. says, Nope, we are totally in agreement with the treaty.

The problem is, nobody can hold the U.S., China, or Russia to laws they make locally that get them out of international agreements. When the nation of Botswana says they disagree, the U.N. says, "Okay, we are going to record the disagreement of the nation of Botswana." There's nothing to hold them to. What's going on in space now is that in order to demonstrate the validity of the Commercial Space Launch Competitiveness Act, NASA has paid a private company to recover some lunar regolith, which is to say rocky stuff, and transport it from one place on the moon to another. It paid the company \$1 to do that, and what it's effectively doing is establishing international precedent and the legality of extracting, paying for, and delivering space resources. We're looking at the opening of a new economy on the moon, and eventually in the asteroid belt and perhaps on Mars. The gold rush has moved up and out beyond Earth.

ROBINSON

In the book, you draw attention to something that I had never really thought about before. When we got to the moon, we immediately planted the American flag on it, and you mentioned that it was not actually a foregone conclusion. There was a discussion about planting the United Nations flag to suggest that the moon was the common property of all. There's something very symbolic about the fact that, instead, we claimed it for America. I don't know if that's where things took a wrong turn in the journey to outer space, but certainly that is the direction that things continue to go in, with great power competition, militarization, and privatization of space.

RUBENSTEIN

Right. But in the '60s, the rhetoric was that Neil Armstrong was walking, and Americans planting, the flag for all mankind. This was the JFK logic of America beating Russia to the moon on behalf of all humanity—that if humanity was to survive, America had to be first. If it wasn't, the Soviets would be first and make everybody communists and everyone would die. Therefore, America has to be first for the sake of humanity. This is the same rhetoric that we're getting right now. The billionaires have to be set free to do whatever they want and to pursue their own untrammelled profit for the sake of humanity. We still need that ideological patina on top of it.

ROBINSON

Yes. Just as colonialism has to happen for the sake of the colonized, as well as the colonizers.

RUBENSTEIN

That's exactly right. For the sake of their eternal souls. We're still worried about the eternal souls of humanity.

ROBINSON

We do it all because we care so much. We wish we didn't have to care so much, but we do.

RUBENSTEIN

This is the burden of the extraordinarily wealthy! ✦

The transcript has been lightly edited for grammar and clarity. Edited by Patrick Farnsworth.

ACAB

All cops are bastards. No exceptions. Well, one exception. Or two. Can there really be no good cops? What about...

SMOKEY THE BEAR: **ONLY YOU CAN PREVENT FOREST FIRES.**



GOOD COP?

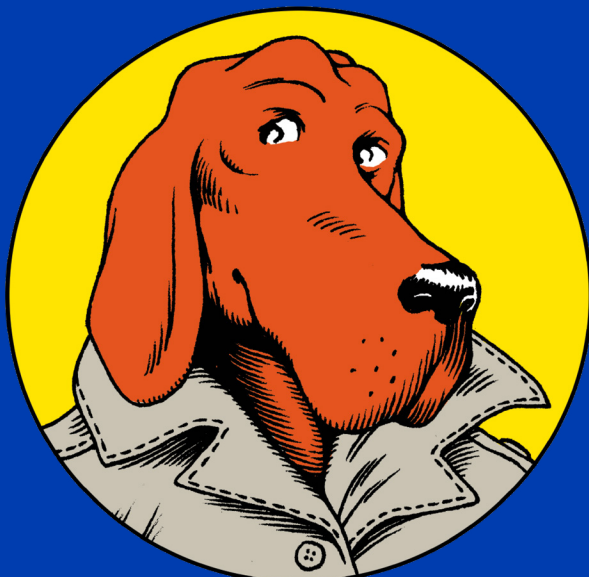
Believes in climate action. Tough but fair.
Shirtless and honestly rocking it.



ACTUALLY, BAD COP.

Only me? I did my part, Smokey. Why don't you
point your finger at ExxonMobil? Let's see your
tax returns. Put a shirt on, you animal!

MCGRUFF THE CRIME DOG: **TAKE A BITE OUT OF CRIME**



GOOD COP?

Huggable. Comforting to my inner
child. Stylish trench coat.

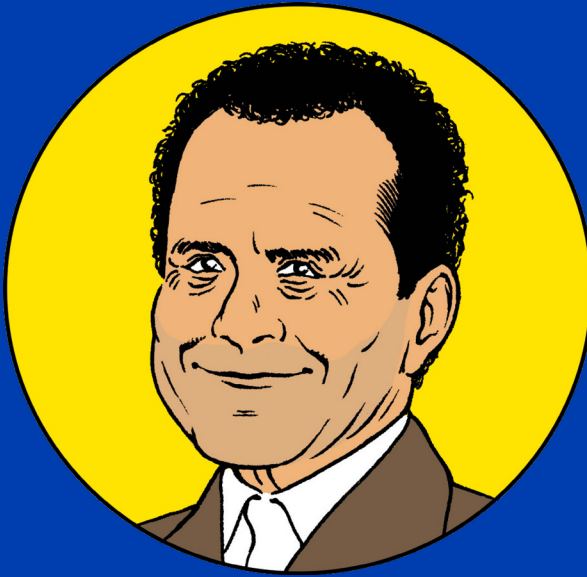


ACTUALLY, BAD COP.

Easily the worst possible job a dog could have.
Dogs should be playing basketball, not investi-
gating petty theft. Probably voted for Nixon.

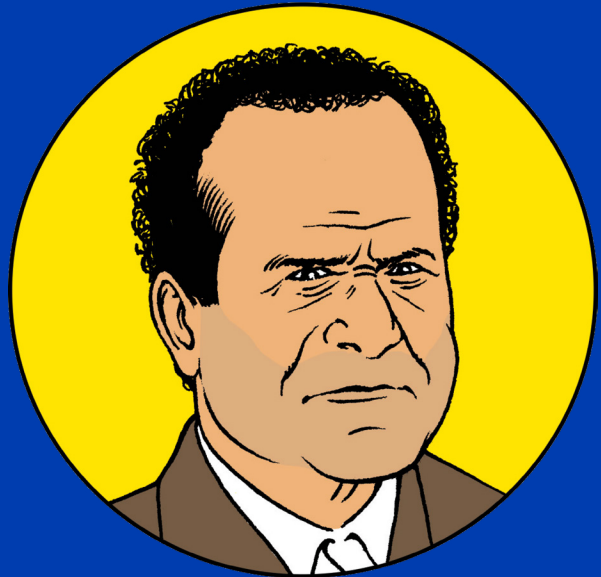
(EXCEPT...?)

ADRIAN MONK: STAR OF THE CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED HIT SERIES "MONK"



GOOD COP?

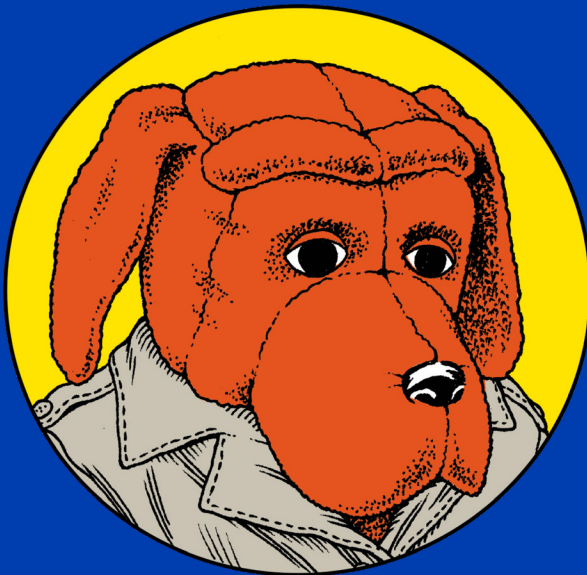
Amazing attention to detail. Cute social awkwardness. Blazers are hot right now.



ACTUALLY, BAD COP.

Don't you dare make perceptive inferences about my apartment. The laundry machine is broken, and I wasn't expecting guests. My quirks and habits are none of your concern. Come back with a warrant!

THE GUY WEARING THE MCGRUFF COSTUME



GOOD COP?

Team player. Good with kids. Giving off major dad energy. Realistic jowls.



ACTUALLY, BAD COP.

Trench coats are actually a bit disconcerting when not being worn by a cartoon dog. What is he doing in there? It's just a mask. He is a propagandist for the State.

ACTUALLY, ALL COPS ARE BASTARDS AFTER ALL. (AACABAA)



FORGOTTEN BOROUGH

b y J a m e s B o s c o

*"What gulfs between him and the seraphim!
Slave of the wheel of labor, what to him
Are Plato and the swing of Pleiades?"*

—poet and Staten Island resident Edwin Markham

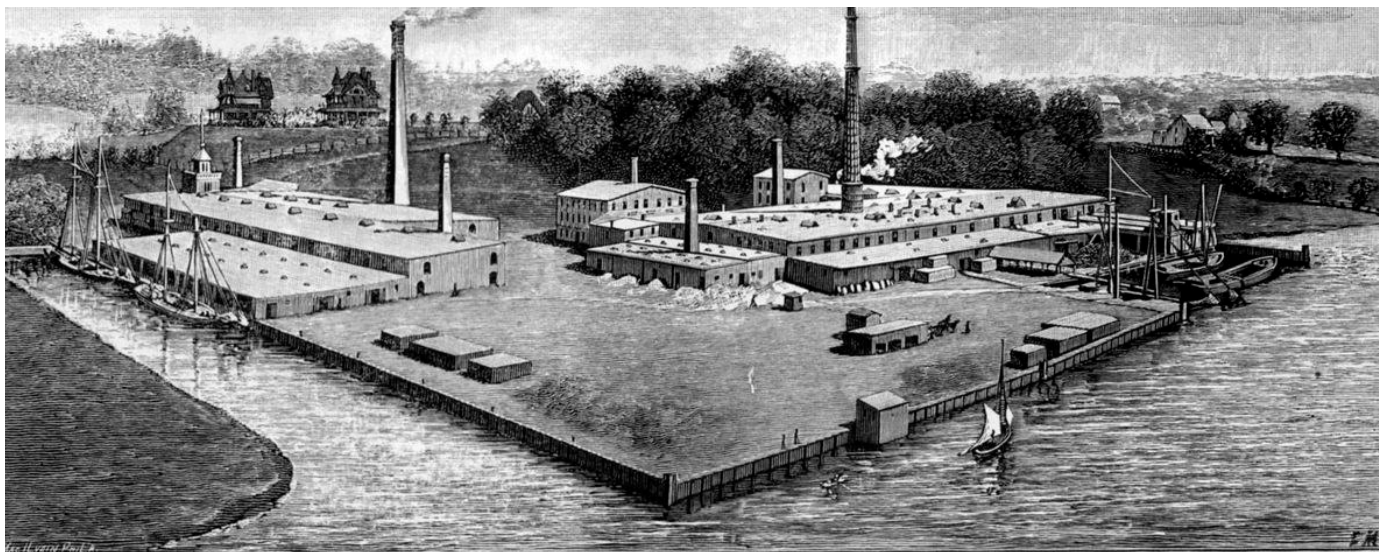
STATEN ISLAND, THE "FORGOTTEN BOROUGH," has always stood apart from the rest of New York City, both geographically and politically. The only borough to vote for Donald Trump (in both 2016 and 2020), Staten Island has long been a red island in the blue sea, voting Republican in 11 of the last 14 presidential elections. "'Staten Island' has become New Yorker shorthand for an out-of-the-way, irrelevant place," *City Journal* says. For many years it was infamously home to the world's largest garbage dump, the Fresh Kills Landfill. (It has since been turned into a park.)

Staten Island's political separateness has a long history. Phillip Papas, in *That Ever Loyal Island*, reports that when the American Revolution broke out, "99 percent of Staten Islanders remained loyal to the Crown by defying the colonial resistance movement and refusing to support American independence." Staten Islanders clashed with others in the New York state government, and "the Staten Island delegates tried to thwart every measure that strengthened the colonial protest movement."

COMMUTERS ON THE STATEN ISLAND FERRY, 1940S

Even Pete Davidson, who is from Staten Island and starred in *The King of Staten Island*, shits on Staten Island. "A bunch of Trump-supporting fucking jerk offs. Fuck them," he told an interviewer. Additional comments Davidson has made on his home borough include "Hurricane Sandy should have finished the job," "[it's] the herpes of the five boroughs," "a terrible borough, filled with horrible people." "I know Staten Island isn't all heroin and racist cops, you know," he said. "It also has meth and racist firefighters." (Despite all that, he still hangs out here a lot.) Staten Island may have given the world the Wu-Tang Clan, but not only did Staten Island vote for Trump, it gave him 82 percent of the vote in the 2016 Republican primary, the highest percentage of anywhere in the state.

And yet: Staten Island is complicated. In 2016, support for Bernie Sanders over Hillary Clinton was far higher in Staten Island than Manhattan. Staten Island is the most union-dense borough in New York City and probably one of the most pro-union counties in America. (I've never been to another place where you might openly talk to strangers in a deli about unions as casually as you would a baseball game.) And in 2022, Staten Island was where Amazon warehouse workers finally defeated the Bezos machine in a union election, creating "one of the biggest victories for organized labor in a generation." To see Staten Island as a nest of reactionary suburbanites is a mistake. When you look beneath the surface, Staten Island has its own unique history of popular struggle.



KREISCHERVILLE, 19TH CENTURY – NOTE THE BROTHERS' MANSIONS ON THE HILL OVERLOOKING THE TOWN NAMED AFTER THEM

HISTORICALLY, WHEN THINGS GOT too hot for revolutionaries in their homelands, some of them found themselves hiding out on Staten Island. Lajos Kossuth, the Hungarian revolutionary and independence fighter sometimes called the “Hungarian George Washington,” stayed on the island. Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, the 19th-century Irish republican rebel who has been called “the first terrorist” for organizing the “dynamite campaign” against Britain, went to live on Staten Island after being exiled by the British. Rossa continued organizing against Britain from his New York home, and in his memoirs issued a stirring defense of being “mad”:

I have myself been called a madman, because I was acting in a way that was not pleasing to England. The longer I live, the more I come to believe that Irishmen will have to go a little mad my way before they go the right way to get any freedom for Ireland. And why shouldn't an Irishman be mad; when he grows up face to face with the plunderers of his land and race, and sees them looking down upon him as if he were a mere thing of loathing and contempt! They strip him of all that belongs to him and made him a pauper and not only that, but they teach him to look upon the robbers as gentlemen, as beings entirely superior to him. They are called “the nobility,” “the quality”; his people are called the “riffraff—the dregs of society.”

Another fascinating radical was John De Morgan, an Irish populist who became infamous in England during the 1870s, where he “was involved with virtually every imaginable radical cause, at various times a temperance advocate, a spiritu-

alist, a First Internationalist, a Republican, a Tichbornite, a Commoner, an anti-vaccinator, an advanced Liberal, a parliamentary candidate, a Home Ruler.” De Morgan “zigzagged nomadically through the mayhem of nineteenth century politics fighting various foes in the press, the clubs, the halls, the pulpit and on the street.” In England he started various short-lived publications, some of which were named after himself (*De Morgan’s Monthly*, *De Morgan’s Weekly*), some of which were grandiose (*The People’s Advocate and Natural Vindicator of Right Versus Wrong*) and some of which aimed, like this publication, to conceal their radicalism beneath a banal title (*House and Home*). De Morgan traveled thousands of miles and gave public speeches to hundreds of thousands of listeners, and eventually received support from Marx and Engels to work for a newly-established International Workingmen’s Association. After spells in prison, De Morgan finally emigrated and landed on Staten Island, where he entangled himself in new causes. He campaigned to keep Staten Island from becoming part of New York City, saying in 1884 that he “shudder[ed] to think of the time when our lovely hills and beautiful valleys shall be made as unsightly as the dirty streets of New York,” and warned that “the neat little cottages with their tasteful gardens shall be swept away, and row after row of brick or stone houses, factories and gin mills [will] occupy their place.” Others on the island disagreed with him and ten years later voted in overwhelming numbers to join New York City.

But De Morgan did leave a legacy on Staten Island. He campaigned for public parks, and in 1900 lobbied the New York State Assembly Committee on Cities to fund the establishment of Silver Lake Park. Legislators were evidently

swayed by his argument that “the people of the community have a right to recreation and pleasure grounds, where ... their children [can be] kept from the contaminating influence of the saloon.” Money was appropriated to create the Silver Lake Park Commission, and today Silver Lake Park is a “209-acre oasis” that serves as “Staten Island’s answer to Central Park.”

One of the more interesting historical political leaders that found their way to Staten Island was General Antonio López de Santa Anna, the five-time (or six-time, depending on how you count) president of Mexico who lay siege to the Alamo. While on Staten Island, Santa Anna introduced chicle to an inventor, who developed it into an early form of chewing gum (and whose American Chicle Company would be, for a time, the largest chewing gum plant in the world).

For about two years, Staten Island was also home to Giuseppe Garibaldi, considered the liberator and unifier of Italy, admired by figures ranging from Abraham Lincoln to Friedrich Engels. (Lincoln even offered Garibaldi, whose command of military strategy was legendary, the command of a Northern army during the Civil War.) During his time on the island, Garibaldi lived with Antonio Meucci, an inventor who created what is argued to be the first telephone. Meucci invented the device to communicate with his wife from his workshop after she became bedridden. But Meucci’s life in Staten Island was marked by struggle. He “struggled to find financial backing, failed to master English and was severely burned in an accident aboard a steamship.” He could not afford to apply for a patent for his *teletrofono*, and Alexander Graham Bell was ultimately granted one a few years later. When Meucci died, he was still engaged in a lawsuit against Bell. (In 2002, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution honoring Meucci’s “work in the invention of the telephone.”)

The house where Meucci and Garibaldi lived sits on Tompkins Avenue in the Rosebank section of Staten Island. Today it serves as a museum for both men and the work they did while they lived on Staten Island. But on July 4, 1932, the Garibaldi monument on Tompkins Ave. was the site of an antifascist battle. The “Battle of Staten Island,” as the *New York Times* would report, was led by the infamous Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) organizer and one of the leaders of the great Paterson Silk Strike of 1913, Carlo Tresca. Tresca led a group of antifascists against the Mussolini-aligned, Italian civic groups that had developed a following among the Italian American population of the Island. Each claimed the legacy of Garibaldi for themselves. The fascists attempted to make the revisionist case that Garibaldi’s politics were the precursor to fascism, while the antifascists considered this a perversion. The *Times* provided a colorful report of the Battle:

About 4 p.m. [the antifascists] decided to hold an indignation meeting in the street, at which they denounced the police and the Sons of Italy and voiced their claims that since the shrine had been dedicated with funds contributed by Italian-Americans generally, they had as much right to hold services at the Garibaldi statue as the Sons of Italy. ... By 5:30 the anti-Fascisti numbers were augmented with 150 new arrivals. Then they waited the arrival of the rival faction. In half an hour, about 3,500 members of the Sons of Italy from all parts of the city, led by a band and their guest speakers, marched to the Shrine. As the main gates swung open to admit them, the anti-Fascisti surged forward, booing and yelling and bearing their Garibaldi wreath aloft. The Sons of Italy answered with boos and yells equally lusty. ... [The] police guard charged down on the anti-Fascisti, swinging their clubs freely. In the melee the big wreath was torn to shreds, and after a brisk passage at arms the anti-Fascisti were again hurled back a block. As they retired they dropped numerous brown paper parcels containing weapons in the form of iron bars, bolts, pieces of cable and pieces of iron bedsteads. By this time, the Sons of Italy had entered the grounds and the gates were closed. They immediately began their program of exercises, but the speeches of the Italian Ambassador and Mr. Pope in praise of Garibaldi were drowned out by the roars of the angry gathering outside the fence. Despite the uproar, the ceremonies continued. Before they ended, some of the members of the Sons of Italy left the grounds and boarded a three-car train of the Staten Island Rapid Transit Company for the ferry terminal. Members of the anti-Fascist group boarded the same train. The shooting occurred just as the police were breathing sighs of relief, believing that the disturbances had ended for the day.

THESE ARE NOT STORIES THAT are widely known by my fellow Italian Americans on Staten Island. I’ve asked many of them. But whenever the “Columbus question” comes up—should Italian Americans continue to celebrate a genocidal monster who sailed under the Spanish flag?—I wonder why we never think of simply replacing Columbus with Garibaldi. The “liberator of Italy” lived on Staten Island, arguably the most Italian place in the United States. (Nearly 36 percent of the population is of Italian descent, making Staten Island the most Italian county in the U.S.)

So many aspects of Staten Island’s rich history have simply been under-studied. There are no comprehensive works on Staten Island’s labor history, as I found out when I started doing research on it for my master’s degree in labor studies. In

FORGOTTEN BOROUGH

fact, the major works on Staten Island's history paint a picture of it as a tranquil place lacking social struggle, where business owners make decisions meant to improve the happiness of their workers. That utopian story can't be true, though, since there is evidence for the existence of unions on the Island dating back to the mid-19th century.

We know that there was a company town named Kreischer-ville, named for Balthasar Kreischer, the man who owned it. Kreischerville made bricks and tiles, and Kreischer himself built "a massive 26-room Italianate villa" on a hill overlooking the town, from which he could observe the people of his town going about their business. We also know that there was an area of the island called "Factoryville," which sounds like it may have its own sordid forgotten history.

WHEN MEUCCI AND GARIBALDI lived together, they helped start the borough's first brewery, and Staten Island breweries soon flourished. Brewery barons were important local figures, though the major breweries died out by the middle of the 20th century. (The Flagship Brewing Company, founded in 2014, is trying to put Staten Island beer back on the map.) There is some evidence of labor strife; George Bechtel, owner of Bechtel's Brewery, is on record as having given in to the demands of workers threatening a strike in the late 19th century.

Some of the Staten Island brewery workers were represented by the Knights of Labor, but there is also evidence of IWW militancy burgeoning in 1906. In fact, some of Staten Island's IWW activity has been overlooked because of a mistake in an early source. Paul Brissenden's 1919 book *The IWW: A Study of American Syndicalism* attributes silk workers locals 176

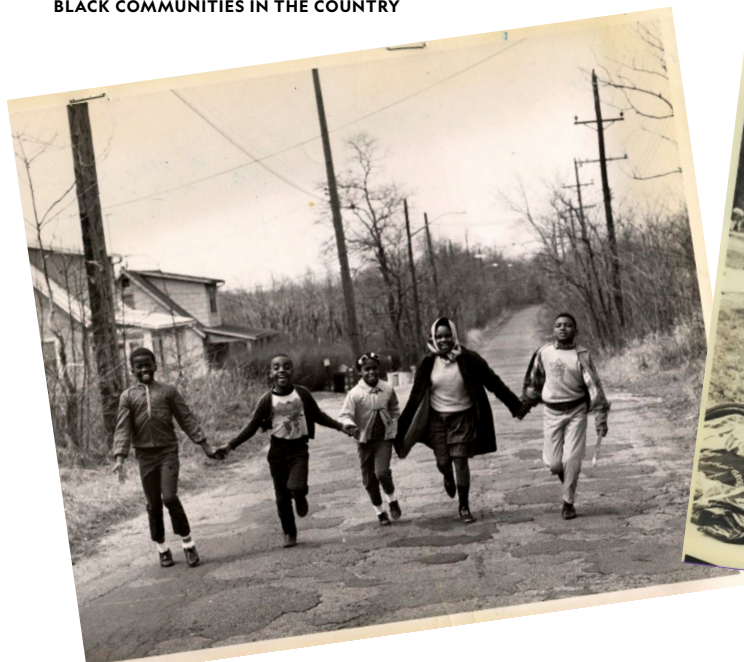
and 190 to New Haven, Connecticut. And the University of Washington's 1906 IWW yearbook lists a "West New Brighton, Connecticut, silk strike." There is no West New Brighton in Connecticut, but there *was* one in Staten Island. The IWW's second convention explicitly talks about the Staten Island silk strike multiple times and attributes it to local 176 of New York.

The labor history of Staten Island may be richer than is assumed by those who see the island through the lens of its stereotypes.

Women played a key role in the labor militancy of the early 20th century, and some of the most important labor leaders and organizers hailed from or moved to Staten Island. Ella Reeve Bloor, more commonly referred to as "Mother Bloor," was born in Sailors' Snug Harbor (West Brighton) and went on to investigate the conditions of the meatpacking plants in Chicago for Upton Sinclair's famous muckraking book, *The Jungle*. Mother Bloor's writing would become inspiration for a Woody Guthrie song, and Bloor would go on to be a founding member of the Social Democracy of America political party alongside Eugene Debs. She also played a role in the founding of the Communist Party of the United States and was one of its leaders for decades.

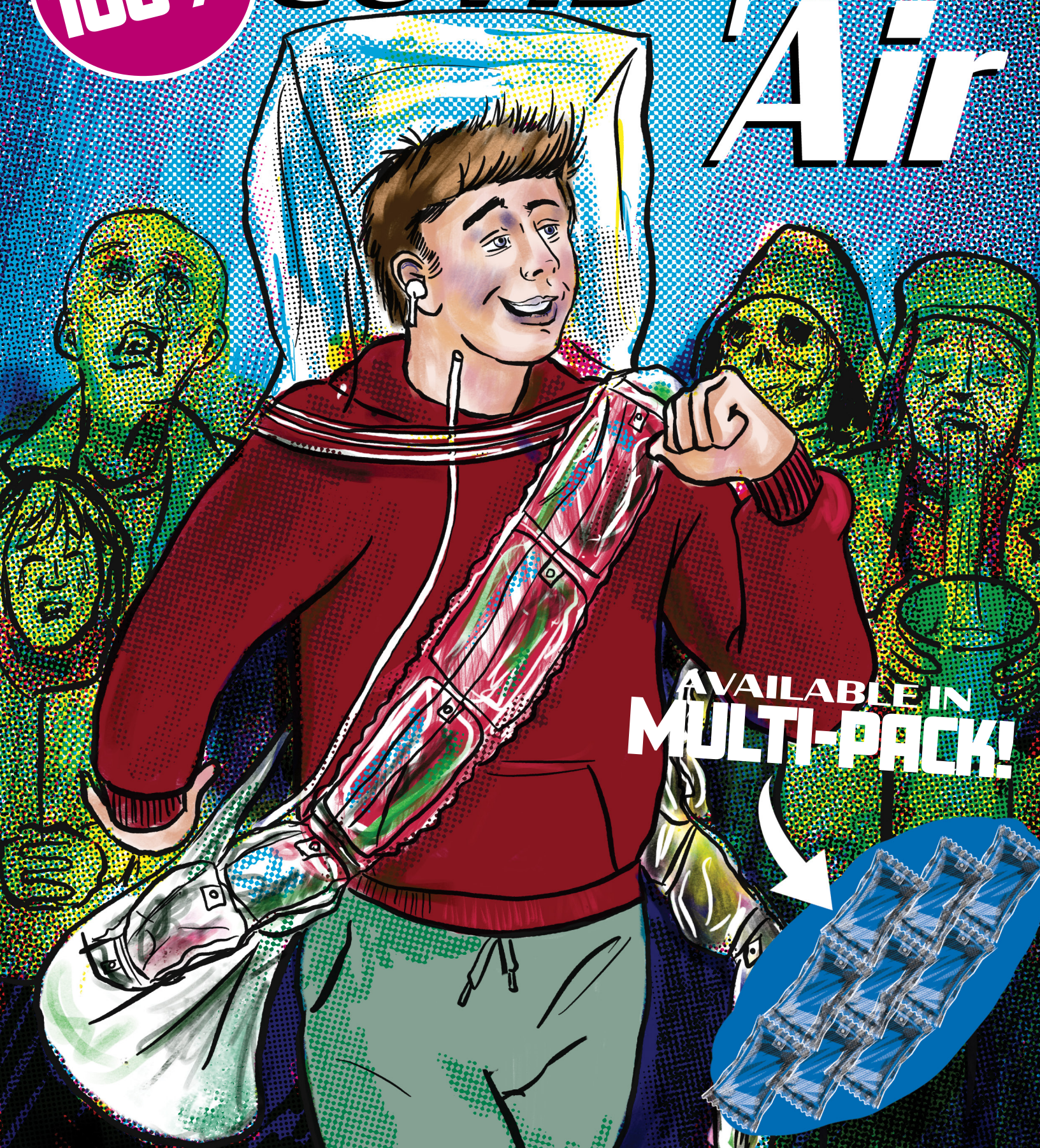
Last year, one of the Staten Island ferry boats was named for another famous local radical, Catholic Worker movement founder Dorothy Day. Day and Peter Maurin began the movement when Day was living on Staten Island. Day, an anarchist, advocated a program of direct action in serving the poor and is now under consideration for sainthood in the Catholic Church. If approved, she would be the first saint from New York since 19th century educator Elizabeth Ann Seton, who founded the Sisters of Charity. Seton was also from Staten Island, having grown up in Tompkinsville. Seton was the first person born in the U.S. to be canonized by the Church, meaning that if Day is approved, Staten Is-

HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPHS FROM SANDY GROUND, ONE OF THE OLDEST BLACK COMMUNITIES IN THE COUNTRY

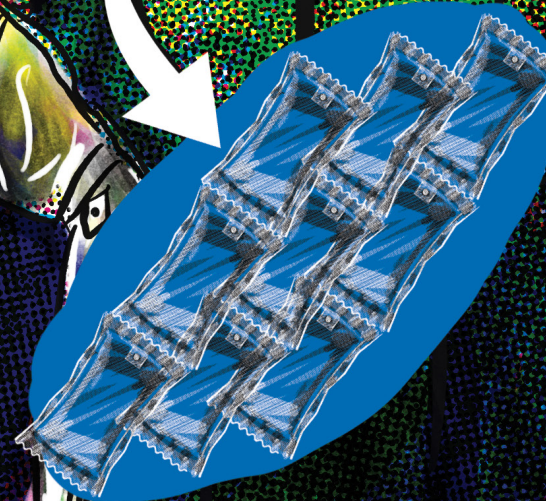


BAG OF
100%

COVID-free Air



AVAILABLE IN
MULTI-PACK!



land will have produced both the first American saint and the first American *anarchist* saint.

At the Staten Island Museum, which has been open since 1881, more research is being done on the important local women who have impacted Staten Island, the country, and the world. Museum archivist Gabriella Leone (who has assisted me in my own research) has been trying to uncover Staten Island's history from below, producing findings on trailblazing women from the island who further complicate Staten Island's image as a bastion of conservatism. (Gabriella has also curated *Women of the Nation Arise!*, a museum exhibit about the fight for suffrage on Staten Island, viewable on the museum's website.) Debbie-Ann Paige, a historian and genealogist who serves as co-president of the local chapter of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society, has created an app called the Staten Island African American Heritage Tour and has helped in the preservation and protection of Sandy Ground, one of the oldest continuously inhabited Black settlements in the country. Sandy Ground was an important antebellum free Black community that served as a stop on the Underground Railroad.

The environmental movement has its own long history on Staten Island, having existed there for over 100 years. Staten Islanders waged a major fight over the presence of the infamous Fresh Kills landfill, with the garbage having been dumped on the island in part because its residents were comparatively politically weak at the time. But environmental activism on the island has been much better documented than other parts of its popular history, perhaps because the movement's participants tend to come from more elite social backgrounds, their history being better preserved than that of average workers.

Allison Nellis is a native Islander who is also digging into the forgotten history of the Island. Discussing the need to tell history from the perspective of those who don't usually get a voice, she told me that

The one thing I wish people knew about Staten Island History is how much work there still has to be done. We've gone for so long not questioning the written history of our borough and its glaring problems. We have to do better with making sure communities of color, women, immigrant communities, and the LGBTQIA+ community are acknowledged in our story.

Stereotypes about Staten Island as a place of monolithic conservatism, then, persist in part because the voices of marginalized Staten Islanders simply aren't heard. Fortunately, as we resurrect this lost history, the existing narratives come undone, and the borough's complexities can finally be broadly understood.

JANUARY 11, 2023, MARKS AN IMPORTANT DAY in Staten Island labor history: Amazon lost its bid to overturn the historic victory of workers who voted to form the first union in an American Amazon warehouse.

There was a lot of skepticism about ALU's chances of winning a union election. I was working as a labor organizer myself at the time, and I too didn't really think there was a chance they'd win. The day of the count was unforgettable and thrilling. ALU's win upended the established order of labor relations and revived the idea that large corporations could be fought and defeated. Relentless union busting efforts by Amazon failed to sway the Staten Island workers.

Staten Island is actually the perfect setting for an unorthodox and independent union struggle. ALU isn't even the first independent union at one of America's largest corporations to be built on Staten Island. Procter and Gamble had a plant on Staten Island called Port Ivory, and their union was the Procter and Gamble Independent Union of Port Ivory. Staten Island may stand apart from the rest of New York City, but it has a spirit of independence. It deserves to be known just as much for the Amazon Labor Union as its status as "the only Republican borough."

Like many people who grew up in working-class neighborhoods, I look at what happened to the kids I grew up with, and I find that many are dead from drug overdoses, about a quarter are locked up or fell off the face of the Earth, and the rest are surviving as best anyone can. Staten Island has the second-highest rate of overdose deaths among the five boroughs. A lot of the kids from my neighborhood got swept up in the personality cult of Trump. My experience is that many of those people were voiceless and looking for a voice, at a time when institutions have failed us.

But those in my generation were also radicalized. Back in the early 2000s, after Columbine and 9/11, we turned to Michael Moore's documentaries, George Carlin's standup, and revolutionary rappers like Immortal Technique for answers. I know that many of the people who ended up voting for Trump once lived and breathed anti-authoritarian, anti-war, and anti-oppression principles. We were street kids who didn't read political and economic theorists. We couldn't conform to rules and commands from adults, but we were all smart in our own ways. We didn't follow party lines.

Staten Island isn't just full of racist neofascists (though it has that element, as the antifascists of 1932 discovered). It's just that the full history of the place, like the borough itself, has often been forgotten. We need to recover from a narrative that leaves the working class silent and cares only about the memory of the masters. We have to stop forgetting. ♣

EVERYONE MATTERS!

SOCIETY IS A BEAUTIFUL INTERLINKED ORGANISM WITH A DELICATE ECOLOGY. EVERYONE HAS A PART TO PLAY IN MAKING IT WORK! BE SURE TO APPRECIATE ALL CONTRIBUTIONS, NO MATTER HOW SMALL OR SEEMINGLY PERVERSE!



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