

*If Birds Had a Favorite Magazine, It Would Be This Magazine*

# CURRENT AFFAIRS

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## QUACKS

*Why doesn't the medical profession stop doctors who lie to patients?*

## LOTTOS

*How states fund services from gambling rather than taxes*

## CLOTHES

*Is fashion regressive? Or can we be both stylish and ethical?*



# BEGIN HERE

## THE FUTURE OF THE MAGAZINE INDUSTRY DEPENDS ON

# YOU



**T**he survival of the economy requires constant consumption, we are told. Should the GDP drop even a percentage point, we are in peril. Should it even *stay the same* there will be disaster. No, it must grow infinitely forever, and to help it along, we must buy, buy, buy. Thus, failure to keep buying is actively immoral. You might as well be a murderer or a man who kicks dogs for a living. (Yes, there are those out there who will pay to watch a man kick dogs. Ours is a depraved world indeed.) If you love your country, and your fellow human beings, and your family, you must ceaselessly purchase consumer goods. It is, we are reliably informed, The American Way.<sup>TM</sup>

But there is good news: The GDP does not care what you purchase with your U.S. Dollars. You can buy shaving lotions or you can buy beans, you can buy fiberglass Corinthian columns or colorful silicone objects to place in your anus. Freedom itself is officially defined as *the absence of any judgment on your purchase history*. You are free when you can buy whatever you want.

We at *Current Affairs* know we are not supposed to shame you over planet-destroying consumption choices. And we will hold our tongues, for the most part. But we will say this: *since* you can purchase anything you want in this great country, *why not make it magazines?* Specifically this one. Buying subscriptions for all your friends will not only appease the hungry god that is the Gross Domestic Product, but it will also ensure a viable future for political media. A win-win! Even better, you and all those you know will get to surround yourself with edifying print matter. Keep the economy going! Keep the line going up! Buy magazines! And then more magazines! The future is in print!

## IN PRAISE OF LOVING DINOSAURS

The *Financial Times* recently posed the question in a headline: "Why do kids love dinosaurs?" Child psychologists and paleontologists were duly consulted, the paper ultimately leaving the mystery unresolved. But as usual, the bourgeois press is working from disastrously ill-conceived premises. Surely the question is not "why do kids love dinosaurs" but "why does there come a point in life at which people cease to love dinosaurs?" After all, it is no mystery why someone would love dinosaurs. They're awesome. They're weird and scary and they ruled the Earth! They're like lizards but also birds! Dinosaurs rock. This is beyond serious dispute. And yet: if you have spent time among adults lately, you will find that they are vastly more likely to talk about such tedious subjects as microbrews and the weather than they are to talk about how cool dinosaurs are. When was the last time a colleague turned up at your workspace to ask if they could show you a really neat picture of a plesiosaurus they'd found? Unless you work at a plesiosaurus research facility, the answer is almost certainly "a very long time ago." It is simply *not done* to talk about dinosaurs in polite company.

What is wrong with us? Instead of conducting serious self-scrutiny over this obvious flaw in our behavior, we turn our critical eye on the children, because they happen to see what we no longer can—namely, that the rational human being would inevitably develop a fascination with dinosaurs. That we do not universally have such a fascination suggests that we are not rational. That society is governed by people who are not rational is alarming. The inescapable conclusion: until our society is ruled by those who are obsessively interested in talking about dinosaurs, we cannot be confident that it is being well-governed. (If this means we must allow a child to become President of

the United

States, so be

it.) We must make

it clear to all adults

that there is no reason

for them to throw away

their childhood obsessions

and become boring. Let

it be screamed from the

rooftops by men and

women of all ages: "I like

dinosaurs and I am not

ashamed of it!"

THE PLESIOSAURUS



## YOU ARE PERMITTED TO CUT THIS MAGAZINE INTO PIECES FOR USE IN COLLAGE

## SCRATCH OFF AND

# WIN



"IF IT SCRATCHES OFF, YOU WIN!"

## THE PASSWORD:

m#P52s@ap\$V

## KEEP IT HANDY ALWAYS!

## ANIMAL OF THE MONTH:

# The Lynx



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# REST IN POWER

**HARRY  
BELAFONTE  
(1927-2023)**



## Making Up Prizes OF OUR OWN

Here is a fun fact about the "Nobel Prize in Economics": Alfred Nobel had no intention of endowing such a prize. The Nobel Prizes are in Physics, Chemistry, Medicine, Literature, and Peace. However, economists are constantly in search of validation for their pseudoscience, and so in 1968 the central bank of Sweden established the "Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel." This has been controversial, with members of the Nobel family disowning the prize. Peter Nobel, a Swedish human rights lawyer, has said that Alfred Nobel "despised people who cared more about profits than society's well-being....here is nothing to indicate that he would have wanted such a prize." Nobel calls the prize "a PR coup by economists to improve their reputation." Indeed, winning a "Nobel Prize in Economics" is now considered something of an honor (not by us).

But two can play at this game. Since there is no law against giving out prizes in memory of Alfred Nobel (God rest his soul), we would hereby like to announce the Nobel Prize For Magazine Editing (officially the "Current Affairs Prize For Being A Great Magazine Editor Offered In Memory Of Alfred Nobel"), which our esteemed editor-in-chief is to be the first recipient of.

We would like to recommend the strategy of making up fake Nobel Prizes to other dubious disciplines in need of legitimizing. Astrologers should try this trick. Nobody can stop you from memorializing old Alfred with a prize of your own.



REMINDER THAT ALL OF THIS COULD BE

# FIXED

It is in part the task of this magazine to expand the boundaries of what is considered possible. Many of the world's institutions can appear immovable and unchangeable. Those who would like to keep these institutions the way they are have an interest in preserving this impression. But *Current Affairs* knows better, and it is our duty to say so. We know that much of what ails the nation and the world is utterly avoidable and fixable. We know that Things Do Not Have To Be This Way. It is practically our slogan. We say it incessantly. If we repeat ourselves, it is because it can be easy to forget this, to accustom oneself to things as they are and simply make do, and lose all hope for ever substantially altering existing conditions. Reader, do not do this! Keep the faith. Optimism of the will! This can be fixed. All we need is a sprinkling of that classic trait, "moxie." We can do it! Let's alter our circumstances before they alter us!

## OVERRATED

Cy Twombly

Dr. Seuss

Yuval Harari

Artificial Intelligence

Stalin

## UNDERRATED

James Booker



What do  
you want  
the year

# SEVEN MILLION

to look  
like?

Write in  
and tell us!

STATE OF THE MONTH:

# FLORIDA\*

\*Being Current

*Affairs* state of the month  
does not mean you are a GOOD  
state. It's like being *TIME's*  
Person of the Year. It just means  
you have managed to draw a lot of  
attention to yourself lately.



## the editor WISHES TO THANK

The editor would like to extend heartfelt thanks to those subscribers who have dropped by the New Orleans office for tea and discussion in recent months. The life of a magazine editor can be a lonesome one—long hours spent meticulously proofreading novelty crosswords or bashing out opinion columns on the Topics of the Day. It can feel, to both editor and staff, that the editor is on the brink of madness. The only relief sometimes comes in the form of a subscriber who pops in to remind those who put together this periodical that the outside world exists and that the subscribers are not a mere abstraction in the void, but flesh-and-blood humans with hardwood coffee tables, upon which they place this publication. We realize, too, that New Orleans is considered something of a backwater in the publishing industry, and many who might pop by the offices of the *New Yorker* or *Vogue* would never find their way to the Crescent City merely to come and say hello to those who edit a popular bimonthly. So thank you to those who do!

*Special thanks to Sean Burke and Jag Bhalla for their generous support of our magazine's work!*

## YOU, TOO, ARE A Character In History

You know the people from the 1920s? That's you! You're just like them, but for someone else. When some child in the future reads a textbook on the Trump-Biden-Trump era, you will be to them like little Victorian street urchins are to us. What is to you the present will someday be the past. This should be obvious enough, but it can cause us to ask other questions. For instance, if you were suddenly transported back to the year 1910, what would you do? Presumably you would do everything you could to stop World War One from breaking out. People often speak of the time traveler's obligation to "kill baby Hitler," although it's not clear why infanticide is the go-to solution ("Distract the future Mrs. Hitler before she meets Mr. Alois Hitler and the decision is made to procreate" being a far more humane option, it being a tricky thing indeed to convict a newborn on charges of nascent genocidal intent.) The question for you, as a historical character in your own right, is: What is *your* equivalent of "killing baby Hitler"? That is: What, given the role you could play in the history of your own time, is your obligation? Professor Henry Shue of Oxford has argued in an interview with *Current Affairs* that once we understand ourselves as persons who live in history and can thus affect it, we have a similar obligation to combat climate change as a prior generation did to stop the scourge of Nazism. Those future children reading their future textbooks will look back at us, and when they do, what do we wish for them to think of us? Do we want them to think "They did the best they could under trying circumstances"? Or do we want them to think "Why did that bunch of complete idiots ignore the most pressing crises of their time?" The moral obligation of a historical character is not about finding which baby to kill in order to prevent their future crimes. It is about examining the direction in which things seem to be heading and doing one's best to organize with others in order to avoid catastrophe. Are we up for the task?

## Professional WRITING TIPS

1. Never use one word where you can use ten instead.
2. If the reader can't understand you, they'll assume you know far more than they do. Conversely, if they find a text intelligible, they will assume the writer is no smarter than they are.
3. It is the job of the reader to find a text's meaning, not the job of a writer to convey it.
4. Great writers are great on the first draft. All editing is an insult. To accept an edit is to humiliate oneself.
5. Time spent reading could be spent writing instead. Thus the best writers never read, except their own work.
6. The secret to being a writer lies not in the writing itself, but in conceiving of yourself as a writer. It matters far more whether you feel like a writer than what you produce.

## You Don't Need A Pair Of NOVELTY EYEGLASSES To See How Good Our Magazine Is



## ADVICE

Observe the design of  
ordinary things. Some of  
them may surprise you.  
Be astonished by the  
trivial! Be fascinated by  
the obvious.



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# THE LOTTERY ROBS US ALL

BY Alex Skopic

**T**HE AMERICAN news media loves a story about the lottery. Whenever a popular numbers game like Powerball or Mega Millions rolls out an unusually high top prize, it triggers a cycle of breathless coverage, with frequent updates on the nation's "lottery fever." These stories are treated as headline news and broadcast alongside stories about war, elections, and natural disasters. Late in 2022, the Powerball jackpot reached a historic \$2 billion, and the media circus escalated to new heights. From November 2 to November 8, when a winner finally emerged, NBC Nightly News ran a story *every night* about people flocking to buy lottery tickets, essentially providing a week of free advertising for the game. (In this time, they made no mention of the lethal war in Ethiopia's Tigray region, which reached an important peace deal on November 2.) Local stations joined in the commotion, interviewing ticket purchasers and speculating endlessly about the chances someone from their area might win. Even on ordinary days,

many TV channels embed within the actual news broadcasts daily segments devoted to revealing winning numbers. The lottery is a constant background radiation in the public consciousness. It's in thousands of gas stations, convenience stores, and supermarkets across the country, with millions of players every year. But are lotteries really the fun, harmless pastimes they're portrayed to be? Or is something more sinister going on?

In the first place, it's important to recognize that lotteries are effectively impossible to win. For that \$2 billion Powerball, the odds of picking correct numbers for all six "balls" were an eye-watering 1 in 292,201,338. For the Mega Millions game, which has a similar format with slightly more options per ball, the odds are even steeper at 1 in 302,575,350. Scratch-off games are harder to quantify, since there are so many different versions, but a typical ticket sold in Pennsylvania in 2021 had just ten \$250,000 winners in a print run of "approximately 12,000,000," making the likelihood of securing the grand prize something like 1 in 1,200,000. These are *much worse* odds than traditional

casino games like roulette (where a straight bet on a single number has just 1 in 37 odds) or even slot machines (where the chance of getting all three jackpot images in a row is estimated at 1 in 262,144 on a typical three-reel machine.) Unfortunately, the human brain is notoriously bad at processing big numbers, so it can be hard to grasp what these figures actually mean. Told to picture "a million," most people probably envision something closer to ten thousand; a hundred million, or a billion, is completely beyond ordinary experience. Here, colorful and slightly ridiculous examples can help. For instance, if an immortal vampire played a random set of Powerball numbers every day, it would take them more than 800,000 years to cash in. ( $292,201,338 / 365 = 800,551$ , to be exact.) For mere mortals, it's technically *possible*, in the same way it's *possible* that a crate full of money could fall off a truck and land at your feet—but for virtually everyone alive today, it won't happen.

For this reason, lotteries have been called "a tax on people who don't know math" (Bill Nye the Science Guy) and "a Tax upon unfortunate self-conceit-

ed fools” (17th-century economist Sir William Petty). These descriptions may be accurate on their face, but they’re also somewhat lacking in empathy. In most cases, “people who don’t know math” doesn’t actually mean “self-conceited fools,” only people who weren’t given an expensive education in probability and statistics. In other words, the poor and the underprivileged. In their PR materials, lottery industry groups get very defensive about the idea that they might be disproportionately affecting low-income people, calling it a “debunked myth.” Their customers, they insist, come from “society as a whole,” with 44 percent having incomes of \$55,000 or more annually. But even if we assume this is true, it leaves another 56 percent unaccounted for—and more impartial research tells a different story. A 1989 study on lotteries by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that “the proportion of adults who participate drops from 49 percent for those with less than a high school education to 30 percent for those with a college degree,” and that “lotteries appeal to a less well-educated clientele [more] than most other forms of gambling,” which actually *increase* with a high school degree or higher. By itself, this suggests a class divide, since there’s a strong correlation between income and education—the richer you are, the more likely you are to graduate from a good college, and so on. A comprehensive literature review in the *Journal of Gambling Studies* supports this view, finding not only that “education remains negatively related to lottery gambling,” but that “an inverted U-shape relationship is found between SES [socioeconomic status] and lottery gambling,” with “a strong and positive relationship between sales and poverty rates.” (By contrast, the figure about incomes above \$55,000 comes from Vision Critical, a “customer experience management” firm now rebranded as Alida which works directly with the lottery industry to market its products. You can probably draw your own conclusions.)

**T**HE HEART OF THE ISSUE IS SOMETHING deeper, though. Even if we take the lottery industry at its word, and assume that people from all economic groups play an equal amount, the impact would still be felt the hardest by poor and working-class people. According to the *New York Times*, “people with a household income of less than \$10,000 a year who play the lottery spend \$597 a year on tickets,” slightly higher than the national average of \$540—but critically, this represents a much larger *portion* of their income than it would for any other group. \$597 may be pocket change to some, but it’s a lot of money when you can’t afford to lose it, especially considering that in 2022, 49 percent of Americans reported that they didn’t have enough savings to cover an emergency expense of \$400 or more. Something can technically be “equal” in one sense, and still be completely disproportionate in others.

There’s evidence that people with lower incomes play the

lottery for fundamentally different reasons, too. In a 2004 study, three Cornell University economists tested competing rationales for why people who live “around the poverty line” might participate. According to the “entertainment hypothesis,” lotteries are just that: an inexpensive way of entertaining yourself, with each ticket offering admission to a “short, real-life drama” similar to a movie. The lotteries themselves embrace this “entertainment” narrative, with Michigan touting “fun and entertaining games of chance” in their mission statement, and Idaho coining an embarrassing neologism for it (“we embrace the phenomenon of ‘wooh’. The optimism, the fun, the joy”). However, the Cornell study notes that there is another, darker possibility:

*[C]onsumers, especially those in dire economic circumstances, see lotteries as a convenient and accessible tool for radically altering their standard of living, a government-run, financial “hail-mary strategy.” In short, bad times may cause desperation and the desperate may turn to lotteries in an effort to escape hardship. Such behavior predicted by the “desperation hypothesis” would have the unfortunate effect of further lowering wealth in households with already declining fortunes.*

Of course, this isn’t necessarily an either/or proposition. Someone can simultaneously buy a lottery ticket for entertainment, *and* because they see it as a possible escape from poverty. But the “desperation hypothesis” is troubling, and the Cornell economists found evidence for it. If people are simply “economizing on their entertainment expenditures,” they reason, then we could “expect box office sales to also increase with poverty if consumers are simply seeking inexpensive entertainment,” at a comparable rate to lottery sales. Instead, they found “no evidence that poor consumers increase their consumption of movie tickets when their incomes decline,” while they *do* buy more lottery tickets. Drawing on previous surveys, the study also finds evidence that poverty and desperation influence people’s attitudes to lottery gambling:

*When asked what is your “best chance to obtain half a million dollars or more in your lifetime,” 47% said “save and invest a portion of your income,” while 27% of all respondents said, “win a lottery or sweepstakes.” However, among respondents with incomes of \$15,000 to \$25,000, 45% chose a lottery while only 31% selected saving as the best opportunity to accumulate half a million dollars.*

The pattern seems clear. In a time of worsening inequality, there are few real paths to upward social mobility, and for many people, winning the lottery might be the *only* way they can imagine achieving a better quality of life. The more precarious your economic status is, and the more limited your access to education, the more powerful the lottery’s appeal will be—and in a cruel irony, the greater the impact of the all-but-inevitable losses.

Like with many things in America, racism plays a role in all this. Lottery retailers are not distributed evenly throughout the country—instead, they cluster in certain areas, around certain people. In a 2010 study, Lyna Wiggins, a professor of urban planning, examined the geographic distribution of lottery machines and ticket counters in Middlesex County, New Jersey, and found that they were concentrated in minority neighborhoods. Specifically, “percent Hispanic was strongly significant in all the models predicting lottery outlet density and had the highest explanatory power other than percent commercial.”

dramatic disparities elsewhere, like Georgia’s Fulton County (\$67,802 average income with lotteries, \$103,034 without them; 52 percent Black population in areas with, 32 percent without), but very few areas buck the trend. There’s a distinct echo of the way tobacco companies targeted minority audiences during the “menthol push” of the 1970s and ‘80s. Cigarettes and lottery tickets are often sold in the same places, using the same marketing tactics, and in the same era where brands like Kool were using the faces of legendary Black jazz musicians to peddle their wares, the Washington, D.C. lottery actually brought out

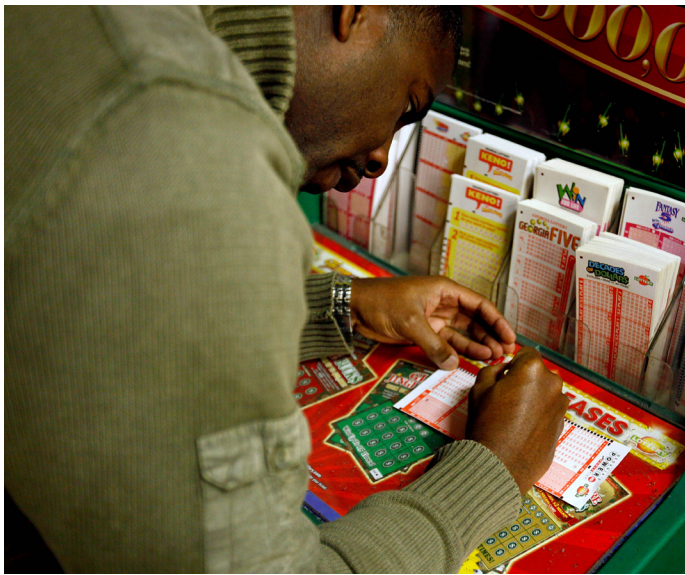
*In a time of  
worsening  
inequality, there  
are few real paths  
to upward social  
mobility, and for  
many people,  
winning the lottery  
might be the only  
way they can  
imagine achieving a  
better quality of life.*



More recently, the Howard Center for Investigative Journalism found that lottery outlets are “disproportionately concentrated in communities with lower levels of education, lower levels of income and higher poverty rates, with larger populations of Black people and Hispanic people” on average throughout the U.S., and released an interactive map showing their exact locations. Playing around with this “Lottery On Your Block” map is a fascinating experience. For instance, in *Current Affairs*’ native New Orleans, the median income in areas *with* lottery retailers is \$43,636 compared to \$55,292 in areas *without*, the Black population is 59 percent compared to 53, and the Hispanic population is 6 percent compared to 5. You can find more

a series of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.-themed ads exhorting the viewer to “honor his dream” (presumably by dreaming about big prizes). Not exactly subtle stuff.

At least the tobacco industry has been banned from most forms of advertising, though. Lotteries currently have no such limitations, and since they’re an arm of state government, they’re actually exempt from many of the regulations about deceptive and misleading practices that bind other advertisers. As a result, they promote themselves endlessly on TV, online, and in print, conducting elaborate media campaigns that would make Don Draper blush. They air commercials with Pixar-quality CG animation, team up with brands like



PEOPLE FILLING OUT POWERBALL CARDS / ASSOCIATED PRESS

Monopoly, Willy Wonka, the Dallas Cowboys and (perversely) *Star Trek*, and deploy all sorts of allegedly cute mascots and scenarios to make their pitch. In Pennsylvania, we're bombarded with ads featuring Gus the Groundhog, a horrifying three-foot rodent who wears a shirt but no pants and tells people to "keep on scratching" their tickets; in Idaho and Georgia they have awkward lottery-themed rap videos (definitely nothing racial going on), and in California, people in fuzzy sweaters give each other tickets for Christmas while vaguely nostalgic music plays in the background. (If anyone is tempted to actually do this, they should remember Norm Macdonald's classic standup routine on the subject: *Here you go, nothing! Merry Christmas, it's nothing, from me to you!*) In lottery ads, the emphasis is always on the possibility of winning, and the luxurious lifestyle you might lead, regardless of how unlikely it actually is. Images of limousines, cruise ships, and cartoonish piles of gold abound, and the word "dream" comes up a lot, with slogans like "What's Your Dream?" (Minnesota) and "Dream Bigger!" (Kansas). The "desperation hypothesis" rears its head again, too; according to Robert Goodman's 1995 book *The Luck Business*, the poorer neighborhoods of Chicago once had lottery billboards that literally read "This Could Be Your Ticket Out." There's a palpable cruelty, intended or not, to this messaging, akin to dangling a steak in front of a starving person only to yank it away at the last second.

The bright lights and colorful characters of lottery ads have another function, though: they appeal to children. In theory, it's illegal to sell lottery tickets to anyone under 18, but since most states use vending machines, there's no way to actually enforce the age restriction, and it's commonplace for people to start playing in their early teens or younger. (Loiter around any gas station, and you can see this happen firsthand. Usually kids seem to start around the same time they discover energy drinks,

which is a public health crisis for another day.) The *Journal of Gambling Studies* reports that lottery play is the most common form of underage gambling in both the U.S. and Canada, with as many as 15.3 million participants between the ages of 12 and 17, and it's easy to see why. Not only are the machines everywhere, but the lottery lacks the aura of sleaziness associated with things like slot machines or video poker; for many people, it may not be perceived as gambling at all. After all, if your favorite sports teams and cartoon characters are stamped on the tickets, how bad could it really be? The answer, of course, is *very bad indeed*, as research shows that underage gambling experiences can cause significant harm to "mental health functioning later in life," with a strong correlation to "increased rates of a variety of risk behaviors, including alcohol use, substance use, seatbelt nonuse, driving after drinking alcohol, and violence," and also put the young person at risk for addiction to gambling itself. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there's also a racial gap in the rate of gambling addiction, which affects Black, Asian, and Native American communities at almost double the rate of white ones—a phenomenon with complex causes, but one in which the lottery and its marketing practices can't be wholly innocent.

HERE'S A RATIONALIZATION, OF COURSE. (Isn't there always?) According to the lottery's proponents, the whole sordid enterprise is ultimately worthwhile because the proceeds go to fund public goods: college scholarships in Arkansas, nature preserves in Colorado, programs for senior citizens in West Virginia, and so on. Obviously these are deserving causes, and they harken back to the early days of U.S. history, when leaders like Benjamin Franklin organized lotteries to raise money for all sorts of infrastructure projects. The sums involved are sometimes im-

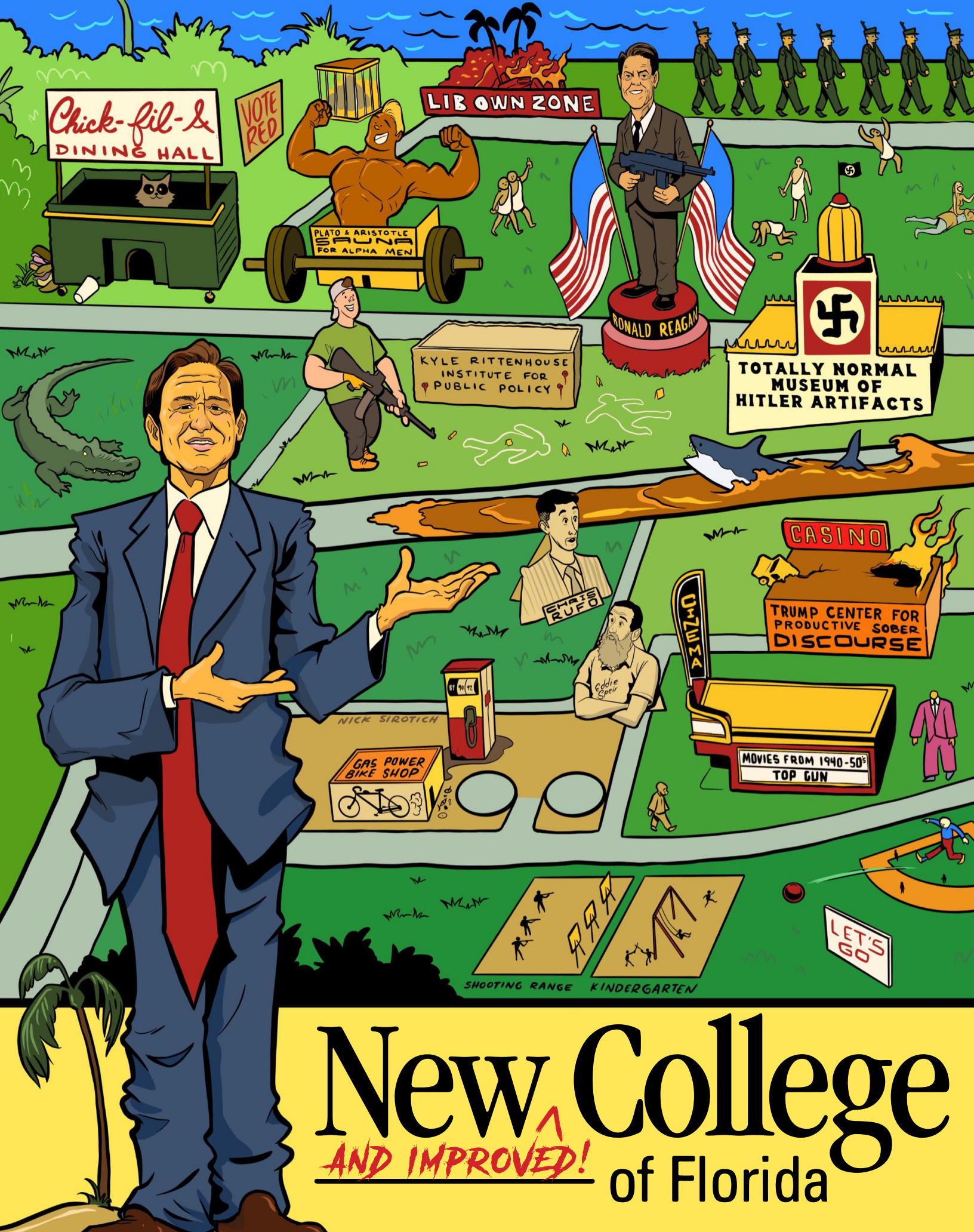
pressive, like the estimated \$900 million raised for Minnesota's Environment & Natural Resources Trust Fund over the past 30 years, or the \$22.6 billion (with a B!) that the Pennsylvania Lottery has contributed to senior care since 1972, at an average of roughly \$443 million per year. Unfortunately, though, there's no guarantee that lottery revenue will actually have the impact it's supposed to. In North Carolina, the state lottery was created in 2005 with the ostensible purpose of boosting education funding, but by the 2008-09 budget year, then-governor Bev Perdue had diverted \$50 million in lottery money to the state's general fund, followed by another \$69 million in the 2009-10 budget. In Oklahoma, the \$31.4 million the lottery contributed to K-12 education in 2014 was immediately canceled out, and then some, by a \$216 million tax break for horizontal oil and gas drilling. And in Wisconsin, there isn't even a fig leaf of public-spiritedness: the "cause" to be funded is simply property tax credits, meaning that only people rich enough to own property in the first place can benefit. Notably, former Wisconsin governor and enemy of the working class Scott Walker was a big fan of the state's lottery, calling for a 40 percent increase in its advertising budget in 2017-19. From his perspective, the move made perfect sense. Lotteries siphon money from the poor, and use it to relieve the tax burden on the wealthy, either directly or by funding something that taxes otherwise would. In this sense, they're a de facto tax in themselves, and a viciously regressive one.

Some remedies are obvious. For a start, there should be much tighter restrictions on lottery advertising, if not an outright ban. At the very least, the industry should be prevented from marketing its games with cartoons and animal mascots, as with other potentially-addictive products. (It'll be no great loss: we've already put Joe Camel out to pasture, and at least he was undeniably *cool*.) In Massachusetts, some vending machines already require users to scan an ID proving they're above 18 before buying lottery tickets, which seems like a sensible way of cutting down the underage-gambling issue across the board. More radically, you could eliminate machines entirely, and only allow sales by an actual human cashier. Retail locations could be subject to a licensing system, like with alcohol sales, and redistributed to correct disparities of race and class. More resources for gambling addiction, which causes 17 percent of its victims to attempt suicide, wouldn't go amiss, along with prominent warnings on whatever lottery materials *are* still allowed. (Currently there's just a lukewarm plea to "play responsibly," usually written in tiny letters.) Tax cuts and rebates associated with the lottery can be reexamined, and reversed when they're only benefiting the upper income brackets.

The nice part is, most of these reforms can be carried out at the state level, and some could even be municipal ordinances. Mayors and city councils can experiment with different combinations of regulations, harm-reduction programs, and other

measures, seeing what works and what doesn't, before exporting the successes outward; it's about time American federalism did something useful for once. The key point is that progressive-minded people who manage to get into office should at least have lotteries on their radar as an issue. Until now, the most effective campaigns against them have come from conservatives, and have been rooted in religious ideas about the immorality of "casting lots" rather than actual injustice. Their only real tactic has been outright bans, which is why heavily-evangelical Alabama and predominantly-Mormon Utah are two of the only remaining states without a lottery. (The others are Hawaii and Nevada, where the casino industry doesn't want the competition; Alaska doesn't participate in national games like Powerball, but started its own state lottery in 2017.) From 1890 to 1934, lotteries were banned in every state except Louisiana and Delaware, thanks to a combination of evangelical pressure and highly public corruption scandals. The period overlapped with Prohibition, and like with alcohol, it turned out that simply banning things doesn't address the deeper underlying problems that made people use and abuse them in the first place. (This is one of the rare points libertarians are right about.) Organized crime took the "numbers rackets" underground, where they became even more corrupt and extortionate than the legal versions (in some cities you could place bets on credit, running up catastrophic debts with your bookmaker.) Ultimately nothing was solved, and when lotteries were re-legalized (starting, significantly, with Puerto Rico in 1934) they still bore strong traces of their racketeering history, and the exploitation that went with it.

**W**HAT, THEN, WOULD IT MEAN TO address the underlying issues? The answer is simple, and it's one people are probably tired of hearing from socialists, but it's still true. Rampant lottery gambling, like a hundred other horrors and absurdities, is just a morbid symptom. The disease is poverty, inequality, precarious living conditions, and lack of education—which is to say, *capitalism*, and a society centered around the almighty dollar. If everyone's basic needs were already met, and everyone could reasonably expect to have some nice things in their lives from time to time, there would be little reason to play the lottery in hopes of striking it rich. If the world's resources were more rationally distributed, and our public services were amply funded by something like Senator Bernie Sanders' proposed Tax on Wall Street Speculation Act, the state would have much less reason to *run* lotteries. They wouldn't even need to be banned, only reduced to a quaint hobby like chessboxing or philately. The lottery commodifies people's misery and desire to escape the life they're stuck in, and sells it back to them, and that may be its greatest crime. When we're all free, its power will be at an end. ✦



# New College

**AND IMPROVED!**

## of Florida





# REVISITING The Miracle Worker

by Ciara Moloney

**T**he *Miracle Worker* is something of a middle school staple in the United States. Helen Keller is a significant figure in American history—she was the first deafblind person to earn a bachelor’s degree and a co-founder of the American Civil Liberties Union, among other things—and the 1962 film offers an accessible way into her story. But when something’s a middle school staple, you inevitably tend to continue viewing it through your middle school eyes, no matter how the years pass. It can take so much to let go of that—even though, if pushed, none of us would have trouble admitting that we were really stupid when we were 13.

I’m from Ireland, where *The Miracle Worker* doesn’t have that kind of cultural cache, but I’ve spent enough of my life online to absorb it by osmosis. For American leftists in particular—eager to reassert Helen Keller’s socialism, since that doesn’t seem to come up in middle school—*The Miracle Worker* is almost a bogeyman. The more I learned about Helen Keller, the more it seemed like people talking about her life and work were actively countering *The Miracle Worker*, sometimes explicitly. *The Miracle Worker* is the official Helen Keller story, sanitized

and shrink-wrapped for moral majority suburbanites, a reduction of a complex, trailblazing woman. For disability activists, it’s invoked the way *Rain Man* is by autistics: *this is how they see us, this is what we are understood to be*.

So when I watched *The Miracle Worker*, I had a very strong impression of what to expect. If nothing else, the title seemed to give the game away. I thought Helen would be a simplistic flatline of a character meant to inspire an abled audience. That, in turn, her teacher Anne Sullivan’s vision impairment would be glossed over or erased entirely, positioning her as the Heroic Abled Person “saving” Helen. That it would embody, if not create, so many of the tropes of how disabled people are represented on screen: designed primarily to make those of us who can see and hear feel “grateful” not to be otherwise.

Not only was I dead wrong, but pretty much the opposite is true.

**T**he *Miracle Worker*, adapted by William Gibson from his play of the same name, opens when Helen is 6 months old. She has recovered from a serious illness, and the doctor says she’ll be okay as he leaves. It’s Helen’s

mother who notices something is wrong when Helen doesn’t respond to her name.

The bulk of the movie takes place when Helen is 6 or 7 years old. Though Patty Duke, who originated the role on stage, should be, at 16, too old to play Keller, it works. She throws herself into the role with remarkable conviction and zero vanity, delivering a huge, hideous performance that I am certain must have been an influence on Linda Blair’s possessed little girl in *The Exorcist*.

If that sounds like an odd comparison, let me be clear: Helen is a brat. Of *course* she’s a brat. Helen has no way of communicating with the outside world—she has some “home signs,” understood by her family, like a sign for her mother, but no language, whether spoken, written or signed. So the main form of communication she has is screaming and throwing tantrums and hitting out. Her father ignores Helen and her brother belittles her, both essentially dismissing her as more nuisance than human being. Her mother, meanwhile, loves her with a pitying love, unwilling to deny her anything when she has already been denied sight and sound. Between them, Helen becomes a spoiled tyrant. She smacks her parents without consequences. They

let her grab food off their dinner plates with her hands to avoid telling her no (her mom) and in the hopes of getting some peace and quiet (her dad).

While writer Elsa Sjunneson (herself deafblind) criticises this portrayal as presenting disability as something “scary and disturbing,” to me, it’s a shocking and effective counter to the rhetorical tendency to treat disabled children as angels walking the Earth. It still feels genuinely audacious 60 years later.

While depicting disability itself as scary is a definite problem in media, Helen’s behavior is clearly not a result of her disability—it’s the result of ableism. Helen is allowed to get away with things that no hearing or seeing child would be. The Kellers set the bar low for her, on the expectation that the bar can never be low enough for her to get over. There’s no point in trying to get her to sit at the dinner table with her family, or to stop hitting other people, or wear her clothes properly. Both Keller parents fundamentally underestimate Helen’s capabilities. She is so clearly intelligent, played with whip-smart wiliness by Duke, yet she is assumed to be intellectually disabled. Doctors encourage the Kellers to have her admitted to an asylum. Helen’s mother refuses to acquiesce, contacting the Perkins School for the Blind in the hopes they can help.

They send Anne Sullivan: not, as the Kellers had hoped, one of the school’s teachers, but one of its recent graduates. “Another invalid to take care of,” Helen’s brother sneers.

Anne, played by Anne Bancroft in dark glasses, was valedictorian. Her flashbacks are out of focus, mimicking her impaired eyesight. An Irish Catholic orphan in a Northern city, she grew up in one of the asylums that Helen’s doctor recommended: Tewksbury Almshouse in Massachusetts. She and her brother with the disabled leg used to play with rats. The children and adults were all on top of one another, and sexual abuse was rampant—Anne tells Helen’s mother about a baby who had “diseases no baby is supposed to have.” The film doesn’t embellish this—if anything, the full horrors of the Tewksbury Almshouse are played down. (The investigation into the institution received a report of a dead patient being skinned and the skin being tanned into leather.) Anne’s backstory casts Helen’s life—hitting her parents with impunity, growing up in a Southern aristocratic family who, even if the movie never says it aloud, obviously owned slaves (and are vocally nostalgic for the Confederacy)—in a very different light. Instead of pitying her, you realize she is comparatively privileged.

Anne’s vision impairment makes

the Kellers nervous, like it makes her less capable, but it is in fact what makes her uniquely qualified for the job. She is capable of love without pity, of frustration without dismissiveness. How can she feel sorry for Helen when Helen has so much more than she ever did?

Helen smacks Anne so hard she knocks one of her teeth out.

**F**rom there on out, most of the film is this ongoing mental—and sometimes physical—tussle between Helen and Anne. It’s a sleek showcase for two brave and revelatory central performances, for which Duke and Bancroft rightly both won Oscars. Anne refuses to be subject to Helen’s tyrannical whims, and so takes on the *Nanny 911* role of teaching her some manners. At one point, there’s a nearly 10-minute fight scene between Anne and Helen, and it’s one of the best scenes in cinema. Arthur Penn, who would go on to direct New Hollywood milestone *Bonnie and Clyde*, made a lot of violent movies, but this scene might be the most visceral, the most savage and wild. Anne wrestles with Helen to try to get her to eat with a spoon. By the fight’s end, Helen has eaten her food and folded her napkin—and the entire room has been destroyed. Helen is dogged; Anne is ruthless. Bancroft and Duke reportedly needed to go to the hospital after filming.

The scene is uncomfortable in the best way art can be: it challenges you, forces you to live without easy resolution. The fight scene is funny, frustrating, scary, shocking, hopeful, joyous: the whole movie in microcosm.

All the while—even during the fight—Anne is constantly at her true work, the thing she came to do: teach Helen language. She finger-spells everything for her. It’s the same way you talk to a baby, Anne explains to Helen’s mother. You know they don’t understand, but you keep at it until, eventually, the words and what they



refer to click together. At a certain point, Anne begins to despair: Helen's behavior has improved, but she can only mimic Anne's fingerspelling, "monkey see, monkey do" (as Helen later put it). Helen's parents are pleased, but for Anne, obedience on its own is no gift at all. She wants Helen to have the ability to communicate. For words and meaning to finally click. It ultimately does in the film's most famous scene, when Anne finger-spells W-A-T-E-R, signifying the water she can feel running from the tap. It's a realization we probably all make as babies, but don't remember. Helen, deprived of language until the age of 6, goes through that realization at an old enough age to remember it forever. It's incredible. It plays with the punch-the-air thrill of the climax of a sports movie, but with a deaf-blind girl learning language instead of Rocky going the distance against the heavyweight champ. (It's the same basic idea. Helen is in training the whole movie, and after all, she is the ultimate underdog.)

Nothing about it feels sanitized or shrink-wrapped. It feels bold and uncompromising. It feels, for me, politically incisive: its disability politics are liberatory. There can be a tendency to assume representation of minority groups has continually gotten better over time. This assumption leads to preemptive dismissal of older representations. Even if it's true in some narrow ways, the accompanying dismissal is nevertheless, as David Byrne once wrote about music improving over time, "typical of the high self-regard of those who live in the present." In *The Miracle Worker*, there is, crucially, no abled hero, like in *Johnny Belinda*, *Radio*, or *Me Before You*. It's not the disability equivalent of Sandra Bullock saving a Black kid in *The Blind Side*. It's a vision-impaired woman teaching a deafblind child. Anne is underestimated precisely because she's a young disabled woman, and she succeeds in



no small part *because* she is a young disabled woman. I dislike the title *The Miracle Worker*—it seems to elide the film's complexity in favour of an ironed-out inspirational narrative—but it amazes me, still, that that hokey sounding title refers to a disabled woman. That she earns the title not by being an angel upon the earth, but by being a goddamn professional determined to see things through.

And inside that story about disability, there's a clear class narrative that subtly calls ahead to Helen Keller's socialist activism. Anne and Helen are both extraordinary people.

They were both disabled from infancy. They both succeed in leaps and bounds when given appropriate education. But only Anne was institutionalized. Only Anne was thrown away like a sack of rubbish, left to fend for herself in hell. Helen isn't fully insulated by her class position—that asshole doctor keeps suggesting the asylum, after all—but Anne faced the brunt of society's ableism at its most violent and most horrific. And there are surely dozens of disabled kids as whip-smart and bright as Helen hidden away in institutions all over the country—not one of whom will get the miracle they deserve. ✚



# The GAMES People Play

by NATHAN J. ROBINSON

**F**OR MANY DECADES, MONOPOLY'S MAKERS lied about the origins of the best-selling game. The official line was that a man named Charles Darrow had come up with it in 1935. But he didn't. The game was invented decades before by a leftist feminist named Lizzie Magie. Darrow had adapted it, not invented it. But the myth of Darrow as "inventor" persisted. In 2019, Hasbro released *Ms. Monopoly*, a special feminist edition of the game in which female players are paid more than male players (I am surprised this didn't spark a segment on Tucker Carlson's show). Instead of properties, players purchase items that women contributed to the invention of ("modern shapewear," "retractable dog leash," "bulletproof fest"). But as the *New York Times* noted upon the game's release, even in promotions for this 21st century girlboss edition, Hasbro claimed that the "game as we know it was invented by Charles Darrow, who sold his idea to Parker Brothers in 1935."

By now, the story of Lizzie Magie is much better known than it was a few years back, and an oft-told "fun fact" about Monopoly is that it was originally meant to be *anti-capitalist*. Magie's story has been told in a book, Mary Pilon's *The Monopolists*. (Pilon said of *Ms. Monopoly* that "if Hasbro was serious about women's empowerment, they could start by admitting that a woman invented the game.") For those who haven't heard it, the true story is that Magie patented a Monopoly-like game called The Landlord's

Game in 1903. In the 1930s, Darrow encountered a variant of Magie's game, made some tweaks (like adding question marks on the Chance cards), and got himself a patent for "Monopoly." He sold it to Parker Brothers and became the first millionaire board game inventor. Monopoly was a clear infringement of Magie's patent, so in her old age she was paid \$500 to relinquish her legal claim. After that, Parker promoted Darrow as the sole inventor of the game. "Maybe it was easier to market Monopoly with the Darrow myth than with the real story of a Quaker woman trying to demonstrate the evils of land ownership," speculates one writer for a game review magazine.

The Landlord's Game was an attempt to illustrate how landlords are economically parasitic, in order to argue for the imposition of a land tax. Magie was a devoted follower of the economist Henry George, whose *Progress and Poverty* was one of the best-selling books of its era. Magie saw The Landlord's Game as a teaching tool, citing the pedagogical effect it would have on 9- or 10-year-olds who played it:

"[T]he little landlords take a general delight in demanding the payment of their rent. They learn that the quickest way to accumulate wealth and gain power is to get all the land they can in the best localities and hold on to it. Let the children once see clearly the gross injustice of our present land system and when they grow up, if they are allowed to develop naturally, the evil will soon be remedied."



AN EARLY VERSION OF "THE LANDLORD'S GAME"

IT DIDN'T QUITE WORK out that way. But looking at an old Landlord's Game board, we can see just how ingenious Magie was in her attempt to convey a straightforward economic idea by means of a board game.

The structure is familiar from Monopoly. But the educational aspects, and the underlying point, are much clearer. People get wages ("Labor Upon Mother Earth Produces Wages"), and as they go through life, they have to pay various kinds of expenses ("Fuel," "Food," "Clothing," etc.). They must pay gas bills and trolley fares, and most importantly, *rent*. The game shows the power that landlords have, and how renters have no choice but to fork over their wages to those who own the land and the structures on it.

Importantly, the game demonstrates how *even* under conditions of "equal opportunity" (everyone starts with the same resources), in a competitive system, one person can come to dominate everyone else. As a 1925 version's rules explained, the game "is designed to show the evil resulting from the institution of private property," because:

*"At the start of the game, every player is provided with the same chance of success as every other player. The game ends with one person in possession of all the money."*

It's not just a board game, but a very effective *argument*. Magie was not trying to create an entertaining diversion, but a very clear demonstration of an important dynamic in a capitalist economy. Magie's work was even picked up by some critical

business professors as a teaching tool (including the socialist Scott Nearing, then teaching at the Wharton School). Sadly, not only did a man rename the game and steal all the credit (and get all the money), but Magie's entire point was lost.

There are now plenty of news stories and blog posts about Lizzie Magie, pointing out the interesting ironic fact that a game about getting rich was created by a leftist trying to make a point. It's heartening that Magie is finally getting some of her long overdue credit. But we should also take her actual point seriously. Monopoly, and the Landlord's Game before it, show the instability and ever-increasing unfairness of a capitalist economy, whereby those who gain control over what everyone else needs in order to survive eventually develop an almost complete ability to extract wealth from others and further enrich themselves. Magie's critique of a free market economy with privately owned land, articulated through the game, is a powerful one. (Interestingly, Magie produced an alternative version of the game in which the wealth created by all is distributed equally. The *Wall Street Journal* gloats that this "excited no one" while the competitive version was "fun.")

We might conclude that board games just aren't a great way to teach people anything important, other than how to play board games. Milton Bradley created his "Checkered Game of Life" in 1860 as a "game with a purpose," which would teach "a lesson of success through integrity and right living." "Intemperance" squares would lead to "Poverty" and "Gambling" would lead to "Ruin" while "Perseverance" and "Ambition" could get you to "Happy Old Age." Bradley's "Life" did not successfully produce a moral revolution in the country, though a version reworked in the 1960s would become one of the best-selling board games of all time.

IT'S EASY TO SEE WHY Magie and Bradley did think board games would be useful teaching tools, though. A board game offers a kind of simplified model or abstraction of reality in which certain features and rules are made essential. Chess is a kind of abstraction of war (early Indian forerunners of chess had infantry, cavalry, elephants, and chariotry). In Battleship, all of the complexities of naval warfare are reduced to finding coordinates, aiming torpedoes, and sinking ships.

Abstract models, in which certain features of a system are picked out, can be profoundly useful in understanding how the system works. By simplifying the economy to the flow of dollars from employers to workers to landlords' pockets, we can perceive something important about the economic world even if the actual world is much more complicated. But abstractions can also be dangerous, because if our minimalist mental model of the world *excludes* features that are actually critical, we can lose touch with reality rather than deepening our understanding of it. Think of how Prince

Harry infamously wrote that he saw dead Taliban members as "chess pieces removed from the board." The Taliban pointed out on Twitter that these were also people with families. But if war is conceived of as a kind of chess, with the people merely so many pawns and knights, the humanity of the "pieces" simply has no place in the system of understanding.

But if you want to show how strategic actors navigate a set of rules, games are certainly a great way of demonstrating it clearly. Eric Thurm, in an article for *Topic*, recounts a long history of socially conscious board games, including games that have tried to show how racism works and a game called "Who Can Beat Nixon?" (Thurm himself actually wrote a political game for this magazine once called "Civility! The Game of Reasonable Change Within Carefully Delineated Boundaries," which you can play on our website.)

It's therefore quite possible to create a Marxist board game, because the core theory of Marxism involves competitive actors jockeying for power in a system with a certain set of rules. In 1978, NYU politics professor Bertell Ollman was able to provide a pretty

convincing introductory demonstration of Marxist theory in his board game *Class Struggle*, which sold over 200,000 copies.

Each player in *Class Struggle* is a "class," whether workers or capitalists (the "major classes") or students, small businessmen, farmers, or professionals (the "minor classes"). The rule book is a delight and contains passages like:

- "‘Class Struggle’ reflects the real struggle between the classes in our society. THE OBJECT OF THE GAME IS TO WIN THE REVOLUTION . . . ULTIMATELY. Until then, classes—represented by different players—advance around the board, making and breaking alliances, and picking up strengths and weaknesses that determine the outcome of the elections and general strikes which occur along the way.
- "There are six Confrontation Squares—Life in the factory, two Elections, two General Strikes (when all the workers lay down their tools) and the Revolution. If either Major Class or its allies lands on a Confrontation Square, it has a choice whether or not to call a Confrontation. Non-allied Minor classes cannot call a Confrontation, and only the Major Classes (not even their allies) can call the final Confrontation, which is the Revolution. In a Confrontation, each side adds up its assets and debits (allies are counted together), and the side with the highest number of assets after debits are subtracted wins. IN THE CASE OF THE ELECTIONS AND GENERAL STRIKES, WINNING THE CONFRONTATION SECURES THE VICTORIOUS MAJOR CLASS THREE FREE THROWS OF THE DICE, improving in this way its position in the overall Class Struggle. Rule 6 regarding double numbers does not apply to these three throws. IN THE CASE OF REVOLUTION, WINNING THE CONFRONTATION IS WINNING THE GAME."

#### "CLASS STRUGGLE" BY BERTELL OLLMAN





Players cannot choose which class they want to play as, because “in real life, this is usually determined by the kind of family into which one is born.” Thus they must roll the dice to simulate the “genetic lottery” and determine who they are. And they’d better not show any sympathy for the other side, because as one card for capitalists says: “You are caught feeling sorry for the Workers. Victory in class struggle comes to people who think about their own class. Miss two turns at the dice.”

Ollman put some humor into the game. The box shows Karl Marx arm-wrestling Nelson Rockefeller, and Chance cards could say things like: “Yesterday you shook hands with Republicrat Senator Kennewater, and you believed him when he said he is the workingman’s candidate. Lose 1 asset for being so gullible.” Or: “Together with your fellow workers, you have occupied your factory and locked your boss in the toilet. Capitalists miss 2 turns at the dice.”

#### FROM JACOBIN’S BOARD GAME “CLASS WAR”



**B**UT OLLMAN WAS DEAD SERIOUS THAT THE game should be a way of teaching left politics. “There is a class struggle,” he said, and “there is a great need to help young people understand what it is, how it works, and where they fit into it,” but “they are certainly not going to learn any of this from the mainstream media or in most of their formal education.” Hence *Class Struggle: The Board Game*.

I like this idea, in part because I think leftists should always be thinking of ways to make our ideas more accessible and intelligible to people, and a board game is a useful way of making them both simple and entertaining. It was heartening, then, to see socialist magazine *Jacobin* do a kind of 21st-century twist on Ollman’s game last year, when they produced *Class War*, with a similar division between capitalists and workers, who each compete to achieve dominance. (Unlike Ollman’s game, *Class War* involves cartoon animals, including a Bernie Sanders stand-in called Birdie Feathers.)

The *Jacobin* game quickly went out of print, which is a shame, because I *do* think games can be a useful teaching tool. They’re most useful for teaching about conflict, probably, since board games are almost always competitive. (There are some cooperative board games, though I’ve yet to play one that isn’t boring, the worst I’ve played being the insipid “Rainbowland,” in which “players work together collecting colored raindrops in their buckets to build a new rainbow.” I am told that *Pandemic* is fun, although perhaps a little more depressing post-COVID.) Marxism, or the conflict of interest between landlords and tenants, lends itself well to a board game. So does war.

The challenge is to make games educational without making them didactic, and I think most games that actually stand a chance of imparting any new understandings in their players are going to have to sacrifice some entertainment value. Perhaps not, though. A new “class struggle” game called *Hegemony*, released this year, has received some positive reviews from board game fans despite coming with a 40-page explainer guide giving the rundown on neoliberalism and the IMF. This is because in *Hegemony*, things like this can happen:

*“If the State has taken on more loans than the current Fiscal Policy allows, the International Monetary Fund intervenes. This temporarily blows up the game; any proposed bills get tossed, wages fall to their lowest allowable level, policies are reset, the State loses a bunch of points.”*

There are other contemporary games with leftist themes. *Red Flag Over Paris* is a “two-player card-driven wargame depicting the two months of intense confrontation between the Communards and the government in Versailles during the 1871 Paris Commune,” in which you must “win the hearts and minds of the French population.” There is also “*Bloc By Bloc: the Insurrection Game*,” described as “a semi-cooperative tabletop game inspired



MILTON BRADLEY'S ORIGINAL 1860 "CHECKERED GAME OF LIFE"

by 21st century protest movements, riots and popular uprisings" in which "each player controls a faction of revolutionaries—Workers, Students, Neighbors, or Prisoners—fighting against the State in the streets of a city that change with each game. Build barricades, clash with riot cops, occupy districts, loot shopping centers, and liberate the city before time runs out and the military arrives!" (If that's not fun, I don't know what is.) A reviewer says the game is in fact very good at creating a simulation of both the feeling of injustice and the triumph of collective struggle:

*"[Through the game] we saw a glimmer of what it might feel like to be a victim of injustice by those with the advantages of privilege and power.... in Bloc by Bloc systemic inequality and oppression is part of game setup, but hope exists under every part of the city, waiting for those brave enough and strong enough to free it.... Bloc by Bloc is a terrific game. It's also a simulation—or tool—that helps connect (or reconnect) one's inner beliefs and values to outward actions, in a way that is profoundly restorative."*

In the United States, our most popular board games have long tended to be a bit, well, frivolous. I don't just mean the infamous Donald Trump board game about real estate transactions (which, yes, featured "Trump cards," and was also apparently very dull). I also mean that our games tend to be things like Candy Land and Mouse Trap and Clue, with little relevance to the real world. The "Eurogames" that come from across the Atlantic, on the other hand, feature subjects that are a little more mundane or quotidian, like building rail networks (Ticket to Ride) or developing the textile industry (Brass). I'm not sure that actually makes them better, or means that they teach you anything of value. I don't know how much anybody has ever learned from

a board game that is useful beyond the game. (Being incredibly smart about chess, for instance, doesn't mean you're smart about anything else, as the case of Bobby Fischer infamously proved.) But those of us interested in finding ways to make new political and economic ideas intelligible to a broad audience have a lot to learn from Lizzie Magie. The most obvious lesson is: The capitalists will screw you, so keep a tight hold on your patents. But the Landlord's Game is also a fascinating experiment in how an economic argument can be put into a playable format that people actually enjoy. The jury is still out on the question of how much games can actually teach, but I hope that experiments in creating left board games continue. I enjoyed Mouse Trap as a kid, but I wish I'd been playing Class Struggle instead. +

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# GAMEPLAY FAQ!

**When is the game over?** I've been playing for hours, and I still haven't won. That would be a bad sign if Working from Home: The Board Game had an ending—luckily, it doesn't! Go ahead, do your laundry, have a snack, whatever. But the game never truly stops. You are never not playing. There is no escape. It's like Jumanji!

**Working from Home is not as fun as I thought. Can I return it?** Psh, isn't that fucking rich. You know what? Plenty of people would be very grateful for the opportunity to play Working from Home. You acted all excited about Working from Home, yet put in zero effort. And now you are unhappy with the best available board game. What kind of lazy-ass, no-good—

**Hold on, is this really the best available board game?** Well, everyone says they want to play it!! But fine. Suit yourself. Perhaps you will enjoy our hot new board game. It's called Going Freelance.





# BETTER RED THAN FED



by Rob Larson

**T**HE FEDERAL RESERVE IS AT THE CENTER OF particularly turbulent economic conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns and reopening caused major economic dislocations, which, combined with sanctions on Russian energy following the Russo-Ukrainian War, resulted in historically high inflation, peaking in summer 2022 but remaining elevated. To fight it, the Fed began a high-profile tightening cycle, quickly raising interest rates to combat fast-rising prices. This unfortunately then precipitated a bank panic in the underregulated middle tier of regional banks, fed by the ease of smartphone apps that take the “run” out of bank run.

The Fed continued raising rates in the face of this recent panic, even as banks were making gigantic withdrawals from its emergency facilities to keep the panic from causing bank failures. This increases the chance of a “hard landing”—a full recession with accompanying high unemployment, potentially during the likely-fraught 2024 election year.

What is the Federal Reserve, and who put it in charge? Is there no other way to fight inflation? Just what the hell is going on here?

## RIDING THE BUSINESS CYCLE

THE FEDERAL RESERVE SYSTEM (OR “FED”) IS AMERICA’S central bank, an institution that most countries have and which conducts various policies related to financial mar-

kets. The Fed’s most prominent job is managing monetary policy—using various financial tools to nudge interest rates up or down. Interest rates of course are the cost of borrowing money, whether on a credit card, home mortgage or business loan. Big purchases usually involve debt, like getting a mortgage loan, which allows you to live in a house for the decades needed to repay the loan. Large corporate investments (even by cash-rich companies) are usually at least partially financed as well. So by pushing interest rates up, the Fed can effectively hit the brakes on the economy, since more expensive credit translates into fewer homes and cars bought, and fewer corporate investments made, which broadly means less hiring. Likewise, if the Fed cuts rates, the cheaper money means more borrowing for houses and trucks and business investments, stimulating economic growth to help get out of recessions.

Notably, the Fed does not control most interest rates directly, but rather uses tools to influence the “federal funds rate,” the rate at which banks borrow from one another overnight to meet the legally-required reserve level—a set percentage of depositor money that legally must be kept on hand for withdrawals. But changes in this rate influence the cost of funds in the capital markets, through which credit cards and mortgage loans are drawn, so these rates (and the ones you pay on your actual credit card balance or mortgage) broadly track the federal funds rate up and down. The Fed has more influence over finance markets than direct control, but the

breadth and fundamental nature of its power is quite real.

Generally the Fed is expected to raise interest rates during the upswing of the business cycle in order to keep inflation under control and to prevent market bubbles, and then to lower rates during recessions, to make borrowing and hiring cheaper, which can make the downturn shorter and milder. This can work in hand with the classic New Deal-era Keynesian model focused on the separate tool of fiscal policy, where Congress may cut taxes or raise spending to “stimulate” the economy out of recessions, or run the “austerity” of economy-cooling tax raises and spending cuts during the upswings, to pay down public debt and cool total demand.

The Fed has other important monetary policy tools, including the ability to set the specific level of the required reserves mentioned above, as well as the ability to buy and sell U.S. Treasury bonds, known as “free market operations,” which can pull cash out of the bank system or add to it. By buying and selling bonds (or usually “repo” agreements to purchase them), the Fed can increase or decrease the “monetary base,” or amount of circulating money, known technically as M1 and M2 among economists. These tools are powerful, but changing the required reserve level is considered disruptive to daily banking, and today the Fed’s efforts to influence the federal funds rate via open market ops is the main media event.

The head of the Federal Reserve’s policy-making body, the Board of Governors, is its Chairperson, who is often counted among the most powerful individuals in the world because of the ability of their mere words to move trillions in global markets. The pinnacle of the Chair’s reputation was probably reached in the early 1990s, when then Chair Alan Greenspan was celebrated in a biography titled *Maestro* by prominent D.C. bootlicking toady Alan Woodward. Fifteen years later, Greenspan’s reputation returned to Earth; by then, financial markets, which had been heavily deregulated in the 1980s and ‘90s, had become chronically prone to bubbles and crashes. After the monumental disaster of 2008, Congress hauled the secretive banker, a reader of Ayn Rand in his youth, in front of national cameras and forced him to concede “a flaw” in free market economics.

## INTEREST FATES

THE FED ITSELF IS A FASCINATING INSTITUTION, VERY MUCH a product of the grudging recognition by early 20th century policymakers of the need to regulate the financial markets in some way, especially after the endlessly repeated succession of giant manic economic bubbles and booms alternating with devastating economic plunges into major recessions and depression. (Notably, the Great Depression of the 1930s was actually the third or fourth market downturn to carry the name, along with the storied crashes and mass bankruptcies of the 1870s and 1890s.)

So there was widespread support among senior bank-

ers for an emergency lender and system-stabilizer after the especially brutal Panic of 1907, a highly free-market episode in which a tycoon’s botched attempt to corner the copper market set in motion an excruciatingly arcane series of financial transactions that triggered a giant stock market collapse and incredibly widespread bank runs and panics. The spreading catastrophe was only halted by the towering finance capitalist J.P. Morgan, whose central economic legacy was “Morganizing” enormous naked monopolies in industries from oil to steel to banking. The 1907 maelstrom only ended when he personally pledged gigantic amounts of his own money to essential banks, and was famously able to cajole other elite financiers into going along by threatening them with collapse. Even the American ruling class had to recognize that a “lender of last resort” should at least be a legally defined institution rather than a single hyperloaded capitalist with a weird face.

THE FED WAS THUS CREATED TO provide stability to the banking system, but also to carefully avoid bringing it under anything approaching popular control. Its original mandate was simply to be the “lender of last resort,” a semi-public body that could provide emergency cash to banks on the edge of failure—meaning their depositors were demanding their money back. Because commercial banks only hold a small portion of our deposits as cash, and loan the rest out as mortgages and business loans, the potential exists for depositors wanting to make large withdrawals to exceed the bank’s cash-on-hand, which historically and today have the potential to lead to major panics when people rushed to the bank to try to get their money out, known as a “bank run.” Obviously, with a still-rolling run on various midsize and large banks as I write, this issue hasn’t faded with time.

But at the time of the Bretton Woods economic accords, the U.S. Congress gave the Fed a new, broader mandate: the twin goals of maintaining full employment (meaning medium-low unemployment) and price stability (meaning low inflation). But since then, the Fed has developed a track record that suggests far more devotion to the anti-inflation part of its mission, which caters to inflation-hating Wall Street financial institutions, rather than the full employment leg.

The clearest example of this can be found in the most obvious predecessor to our current moment—the high inflation of the 1970s and the Fed’s extremely aggressive and destructive means of cooling it. At this time, with the New Deal era ending as neoliberal ideologies of small government were taking hold, the economy was stuck in “stagflation”—an especially ugly economic circumstance characterized by *both* high inflation and weak growth or recession. Notably, at this pre-neoliberal time, organized labor was still a significant

force in the national economy and strikes were running at levels unheard-of today. And most importantly, the high inflation rates and relatively high worker pay due to unionization led to a fateful development—corporate profits actually fell in the late '70s.

The Fed, run at this time by former Chase Bank Vice President Paul Volcker, used the Fed's policy tools to dramatically raise interest rates from 1979 to 1981, driving the federal funds rate north of 20 percent and aggravating a recession that reached a double-digit unemployment rate for the first time since the Great Depression. This complemented U.S. President Ronald Reagan's anti-labor policies, most dramatically his firing thousands of striking members of the air traffic controllers' union, and then his inauguration of a galaxy of policies that undermined unions, from cutting enforcement of organizer protections to encouraging trade deals that allowed offshoring of industry. This major shift in national policy, combined with the Fed's fairly brutal recession, was enough to break the organizational ability of the working class for generations.

Today's conditions are their own beast, with hopes of avoiding a recession next year fading as the bank panic will itself definitely reduce lending and thus reinforce the Fed's still-tightening policy. Corporate profits have wavered in recent earnings reports but still remain well above rates of return from the 1970s, even after adjusting for inflation. Jerome Powell's Fed doesn't appear to have internally committed to a major recession as Volcker's did, but time will tell.

## WALL STREET POTHOLES

THE WILLINGNESS OF THE FEDERAL RESERVE TO SACRIFICE THE working class to the needs of the business cycle is especially striking compared to how the Fed manages bank runs and failures, which we've had far more of since the financial sector was deregulated in the 1990s. While some finance pillars like Citibank had been rescued previously, the 2008 financial meltdown witnessed a whole new scale of government bailouts of the megabanks like Citi and Wells Fargo, which themselves only arose after the industry was deregulated to allow interstate and inter-sector mergers among commercial and investment banks. These giant beasts truly can't be allowed to just go under when they make bad bets, as they did on housing in this case, because of their enormity—Chase, Bank of America, Wells Fargo, and Citigroup each manage over a trillion dollars in assets, far more than the FDIC can make whole. These truly too-big-to-fail institutions got the infamous \$700 billion TARP bailout from Congress, which took two tries to pass and is an outrageous story unto itself.

But not many people are aware of the *other* bailout, which was the Fed's then-mostly secret emergency loan program. First the Board authorized hundreds of billions in discreet loans to large and medium-tier banks, foreign central banks, and other important institutions to avoid a crunch in access to dollars, which play a special role as the world reserve currency.

But perhaps even more significantly, it embarked on an unheard-of effort to replace the short-term bond market.

Bonds are how institutions like governments or corporations borrow money, and among today's giant heinous oligopoly corporations, there's a tendency toward chunky cash flow—small numbers of giant suppliers or distributors, and big expenses like payday, tend to lead to big alternating floods and droughts of cash.

To smooth out the cash flow, even cash-rich companies engage in short-term borrowing of relatively modest amounts for short periods, a little-reported market known in finance as the "commercial paper" market. During the panic created by the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy at the start of the 2008 crisis,

*"The Fed was created to provide stability to the banking system, but also to carefully avoid bringing it under anything approaching popular control."*

banks were quite spooked from lending, and in the resulting "credit crisis" this important market completely dried up. This meant that the great (and quite creditworthy) household name companies of the U.S. and world suddenly could not borrow money, threatening very real bankruptcies across the greater non-financial economy, spreading the Wall Street crisis to Main Street, as in the 1930s.

The Fed gave itself the authority to essentially replace the panicking banks in the commercial paper market, creating new "facilities" for all this lending, and it kept the Fortune 500 in near-term credit so they could avoid skipping payments to suppliers or bondholders, which would have been dangerous developments for huge firms. It also fought like a dog to avoid revealing who needed this credit and how much was loaned, until years later they were finally forced to release the data by a freshman senator named Bernard Sanders. Who ever heard of him!

It turned out that on top of the American and overseas banks getting enormous lines of easy credit, a roster of blue-chip corporations were forced by the credit crisis to rely on Federal Reserve loans until the megabanks got over their fainting spells and felt like doing their jobs again. Household names like McDonald's, Harley-Davidson, Verizon, and Toyota were on the list of program customers. The Fed is fascinating among semi-government entities for granting itself

large new powers during crises and then winding them down again when the emergency is over, ceding the space back to the enormous private sector entities that normally run it. Now *that's* a bailout!

And of course the Fed ran a whole new program of emergency loans with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and shutdowns, keeping Wall Street financially and emotionally reassured as well as making sure that the giant corporations of the U.S. wouldn't have a heart attack of frozen cash flow. This time the federal government unleashed an unusually adequate amount of social spending, leading to fiscal and monetary policy actually pulling in the same direction, and having the effect of dramatically decreasing poverty, although also contributing to inflation. And today's new bailout of regional lenders like Silicon Valley Bank takes its place in the tradition, including a rescue of deposits above the FDIC insurance cap, keeping the banks from insolvency fears by offering face value for bonds that have lost value over the tightening cycle. And above all, the Fed continues its traditional easy-terms, last-resort lending "discount window" for banks, running a gigantic business as our hair-trigger over-financialized economy staggers, hitting an all-time high of \$152 billion early in the panic.

## FED TO THE TEETH

THE FED IS UNPOPULAR ON BOTH THE POLITICAL LEFT AND Right in the U.S.—but for very different reasons.

On the Right, the Fed is seen as an inappropriate government intrusion into free capital markets, which should be mostly free of the Fed's regulatory powers. But above all, the central bank and its requirement of the "fractional reserve" system of holding just a few percent of depositor money as reserves, mentioned above, has become a convenient scapegoat for the Right and the financial world to blame our regular parade of asset bubbles and crashes on. Most associated with former congressman Ron Paul and his son, present Senator and general useless dickhead Rand Paul, calls to "End the Fed" cast the institution as completely to blame for the bubbles and crashes of today.

And they even have a point, since the Fed's responsibility to avoid bubbles is usually neglected, with the policymakers often as swept up as the investors in bubble manias, from subprime housing securities to NFTs. And coming from the financial world in general and Wall Street in particular, the Fed's Board seldom wants to interrupt the real profits made during market bubbles or to spoil the manic mood. Then when the bubble crashes, partly due to the Fed declining to regulate markets or at least lift interest rates (which tends to limit bubbles since they often thrive on cheap credit for buying and flipping assets), the bank tends to overreact and flood the market with cash to help stimulate the economy to limit the recessions that often follow. The effect is indeed to enable market bubbles.

But as usual, the moment the historical record is consid-

ered, the right-wing argument collapses like a Jenga tower in the hands of an underage drunk. After all, the Fed was first created as the banker of last resort in 1913 to put an end to one of the worst features of the capitalist golden age of the 19th century. This period of unregulated markets, no income taxes and almost no inheritance taxes, almost no labor unions, and no meaningfully-enforced antitrust law, was known as the Gilded Age. That gloriously pre-Federal Reserve, small-government period was a nonstop nightmare roller coaster of alternating feverish booms and terrifying crashes. Blaming the Fed Board for the horrors of today's preposterous bubbles and financial crises of Wall Street slimeballs is pretty typical shallow-ass weak-sauce right-wing evasion of the horror show that free financial markets have turned out to be.

The critique from the Left has the advantage of being in touch with reality. The Fed is run by a revolving door of big-time finance capitalists, is completely insulated from any democratic processes which socialists tend to favor, and takes the low-inflation mandate far more seriously than the part that involves getting jobs for working-class people, who also tend to suffer the most in the recessions wrought to calm the price level.

Putting the "End the Fed" libertarian demand into practice would return us to 1907, when the judgment of J.P. Morgan alone was the only hope to steer banks around gigantic crashes. Socialists may not have a perfect vision of the future of monetary policy making, but there are thoughtful progressive proposals to remove the outright control of the regional banks from the financial services industry, and to put some accountability on the Board's policy moves. Clearly, keeping the Fed utterly insulated from any democratic influence is offensive to anyone who believes in worker control of the economy.

**M**ANAGING TODAY'S TURBULENT ECONOMIC crosscurrents—beset by stubborn inflation (anathema to Wall Street) and the perennial perception-obsession of market panics—would require a level of technocratic competence seldom seen in today's ruling class. Time will tell how well Powell's board carries out its effort to suffocate hot prices while avoiding recession and now larger financial disasters. But we can say this: it will use as much secrecy and technocratic independence of democracy as possible, and will with absolute certainty try to fix the mounting problems of our era on the back of the working stiff.

The Fed is a creature of capitalism and will use its market operations to restore the status quo that sees Americans running online fundraisers for health expenses while billionaires fly private jets overseas for high-end cosmetic surgery. A socialist revolution worth its salt will see the Reserve getting its just deserts. ✚

BEST  
SELLER!

amazingly banal

# Eye of Bezos

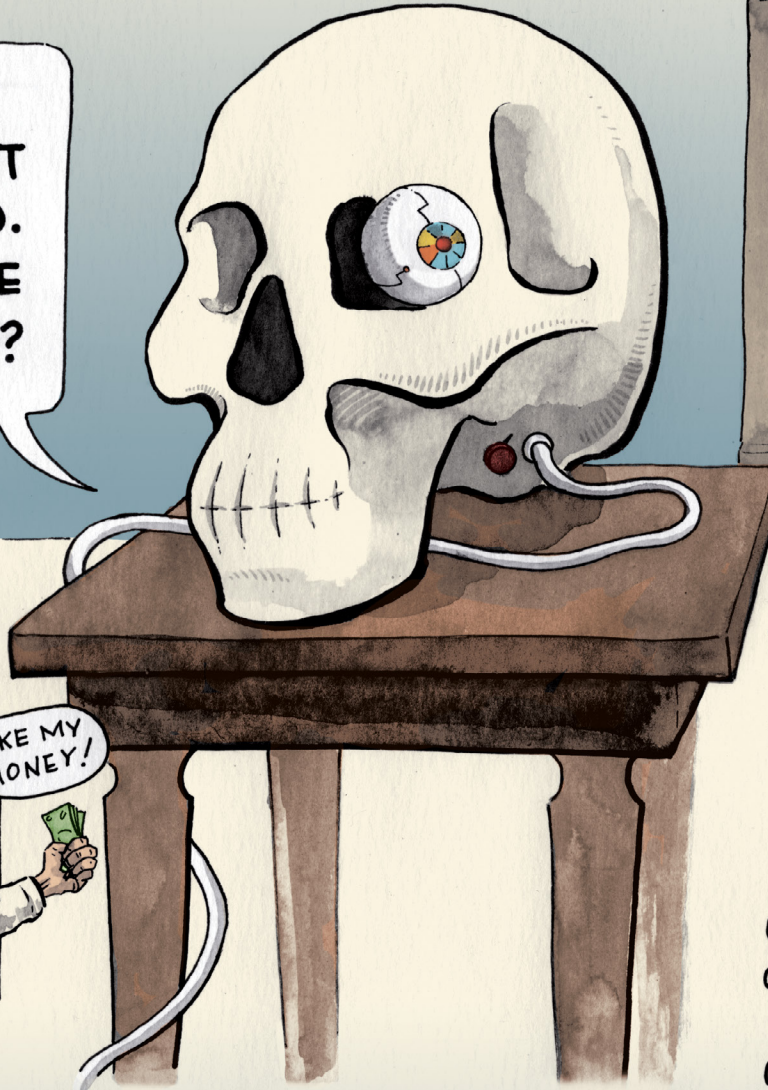
IT NEVER BLINKS!

ALWAYS WATCHING...

...FOR DEALS!



RESIDENT  
MOVEMENT  
DETECTED.  
WHERE ARE  
YOU GOING?



RABID TECH  
BRO SAYS:



## REVIEWS:

★★★★

Daddy Bezos keeps me in line ;)

★★★★

Wtf i cant turn it off

★★★★

Creepy. Ordered a bunch of cameras and knives by itself.

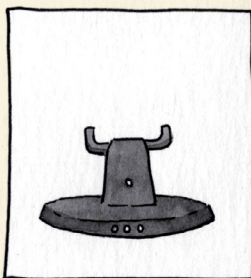
★★★★

Customer service says i can't return it so i guess i'll keep it

## CUSTOMERS ALSO FORCED TO BUY:

ROTATING 360  
DEGREE SKULL  
STAND

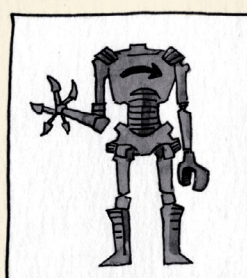
\$29.99



TERRIFYING  
ROBOT BODY  
SKULL STAND  
- HUMANOID

\$666.00

BEST  
SELLER!



TERRIFYING  
ROBOT BODY  
SKULL STAND  
- DOG, PATROL

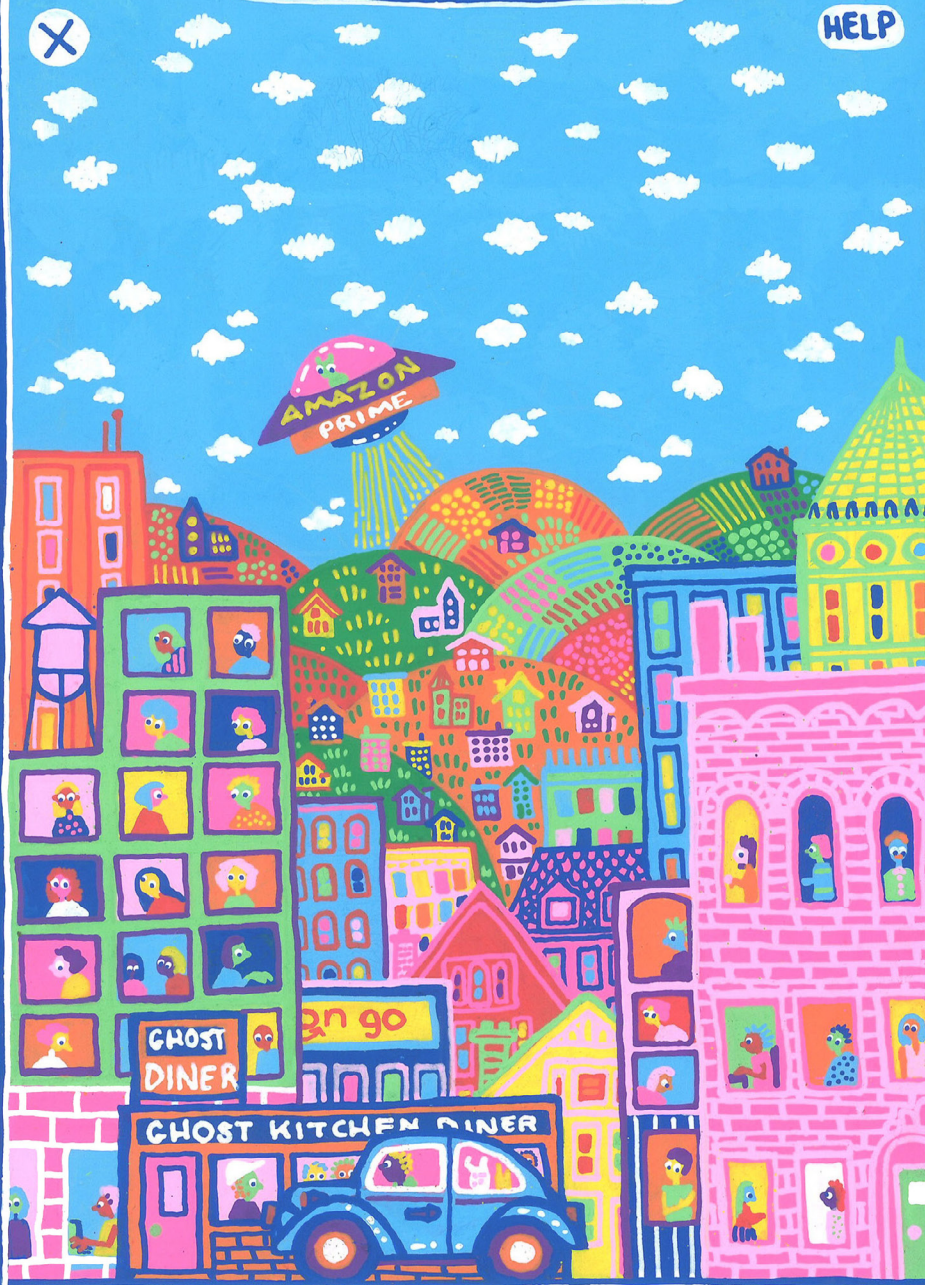
\$499.99



9:55



HELP



Dasher waiting for order

Arrives in 25-35 min



Your Dasher is at Ghost Kitchen  
and Diner waiting to pick up your order.

HUGH M

Your Dasher



# Your Package Has Been DELIVERED

BY AARON HORVATH

**F**EW ASPECTS OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE are so thoroughly maligned as the passive voice. And for good reason. The passive (“mistakes were made”) as opposed to the active (“I made mistakes”) permits wriggly writing. It acknowledges that *something* happened without explaining *who* made it happen or how. As such, the passive voice isn’t just the hallmark of sloppy prose; it’s a rhetorical device that evades recognition, dispenses with attribution and, according to one style guide, “liquidates and buries the active individual.”

Perhaps it’s unsurprising, then, that at a time when major e-commerce platforms and app-based delivery services are brazenly trying to erase any trace of human labor, our smartphones and inboxes are inundated with notifications written in passive voice. Messages from Amazon, DoorDash, Instacart, and others are haunted by an eerie peoplelessness. One notification tells you that “your package has been delivered.” Another informs you that “your delivery has been completed.” Yet another announces that “your food has been dropped off.”

Perusing my own backlog of purchase notifications from the last several months, I found they were as generous with passive voice and verbal avoidance as they were stingy with giving credit to the humans who made the deliveries possible. Linguistically, it was as if prescription medications, pad Thai, KN95 masks, weed, pizza, running shoes, and ice cream simply appeared on my doorstep. No human labor necessary.

In many cases, I encountered the quintessential passive triplicate, a series of messages narrating my order’s journey from the moment of purchase to the moment it arrived at my front door:

*“Your order has been processed.”*

*“Your order has been shipped.”*

*“Your order has been delivered.”*

Clearly *someone* took the order, packed the boxes, loaded the trucks, picked up the food, and made the deliveries. But these people were rarely (if ever) acknowledged for their efforts. Judging by notifications alone, it would’ve been hard to tell whether human labor was involved at all.

And maybe that’s the point. Through passive voice and other forms of labor-erasing language, delivery notifications ask us to imagine a world where things simply materialize, as if by magic, on our doorsteps. They help to uphold an economic fantasy that our purchases are not the result of human toil but rather the frictionless outcome of efficient market forces. Were they to acknowledge the role of human labor, the whole illusion would come undone. After all, it’s not the invisible hand that puts packages on our porches. It’s a human hand that companies have rendered invisible.

**H**ISTORICALLY SPEAKING, THE ERASURE OF labor is nothing new. Consider the back staircases in Southern plantations, an architectural way of keeping enslaved persons hidden from view of the plantation class while working in slaveholders’ homes.

Or consider the organizational erasures built into the heart of the industrial economy. Assembly lines broke production into infinitesimally smaller tasks, thereby undercutting the visible contributions of skilled craftspeople. Or consider department stores at the advent of American consumer culture. Marketers used colorful displays and fashionably dressed salesclerks (who were trained to smile) to cultivate carefree shopping experiences and distract shoppers from the dreadful labor conditions and low wages on which their consumption depended.

Capitalism has always depended on the manipulation of our imaginations. As Karl Marx argued, it’s a lot easier to compare and exchange all sorts of goods when we disavow their origins and the human labor required to produce them. Once we strip

away the scuffs from the factory and erase the idiosyncratic markings of individual workers, we can begin to think of goods as if they were magical. They serve us, speak to us, and make us feel things. We reimagine the relationship between consumers and producers as a relationship between consumers and products. In the process, the laborers on whom we depend are relegated to the shadows—rarely acknowledged and often forgotten.

George Orwell captured the point in his vivid depiction of coal mining in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, musing that, despite coal's centrality in everyday life, "we seldom or never remember what coal-getting involves." Instead, coal seems to appear "mysteriously from nowhere in particular, like manna except that you have to pay for it."

Nearly a century later, Orwell's insight still holds. We dress ourselves in the ephemeral trends of fast fashion, wearing clothes sewn by underpaid garment makers who, thanks to global trade and toothless accountability standards, are easily forgotten. We eat produce that has been planted, picked, and processed by a vulnerable migrant workforce, mistakenly addressing pre-meal prayers of thanks, as one meme puts it, to Jesus rather than Jesús. We flock to the latest smartphones and electric cars, buying hyperbolic claims that they work like "magic" and remaining oblivious to the fact that their rechargeable batteries come to us via people laboring in Congolese cobalt mines under slave-like conditions. For the most part, it's not until something disrupts our tidy economic imaginations—like a deadly garment factory collapse, a mass-shooting of agricultural workers, or reporting on militia-controlled mining operations—that we spare a thought for the human exploitation that powers our consumption.

While capitalism continues to rely on the erasure of human labor, the modern economy has shifted these erasures into a higher gear, facilitating a more perfect realization of the laborless economic fantasy. In the past, even when commerce depended on the thankless toil of strangers, consumers would eventually interact with *some* human laborer such as a servant, a salesclerk, or a delivery person. The experience was inescapably social, even if that sociality only extended to the final link in a long chain of invisible human labor.

But as a growing share of retail purchases take place via screens and from the safety of our own homes, that final link is sheared. It becomes even easier to ignore the people-powered economic infrastructures that make consumption possible. The websites and apps from which we order present a digitally depopulated facsimile of what was once an in-person shopping experience. They remove all traces of humanity and allow customers to imagine their orders as if they simply materialized through the digital interface. It's like a souped-up Wonka Vision that delivers more than candy bars: "*It's unbelievable! It's a miracle! It could change the world!*" But while we fawn over the technological convenience, the Oompa Loompas still have to work.

Convenience sells. Digital intermediation has quickly spread throughout the economy. In the U.S., e-commerce sales have grown nearly threefold since 2013, with a 43 percent jump in total sales occurring over the first year of the pandemic. Today, nearly two-thirds of U.S. adults have an Amazon Prime

membership. And, thanks to habits developed during shelter-in-place, food delivery services have become a mainstay of at-home dining. DoorDash's total revenue more than tripled in 2020 alone and some analysts predict online grocery shopping will absorb more than one-fifth of grocery sales by 2025, which is more than double its current share of the grocery market.

Even if the pandemic-inspired e-commerce frenzy has slowed—and the recent spate of tech layoffs suggests it has—the offline world doesn't offer much of a reprieve, especially as companies invest heavily to make in-person shopping feel more like the online experience. We've grown accustomed to self-checkout kiosks which, despite their documented inefficiency and need for regular human intervention, are becoming inescapable. Whole Foods recently introduced "Just Walk Out" stores—oddly bearing a name that sounds more like a labor protest than a retail innovation—which use dystopian levels of surveillance to allow customers to skip checkout lines (and human interaction) altogether. And many restaurants now ask patrons to order via QR-code menus, a move that effectively eliminates front of house hospitality work. (The very idea of a "touchless" dining experience should remind us that back of house labor remains just as invisible as before.)

Recent projections from the Bureau of Labor Statistics corroborate the story. By 2031, employment prospects for retail sales workers will decline by 4 percent, with cashiers specifically—one of the largest in-person sales occupations—declining by 10 percent; meanwhile, opportunities for delivery drivers will grow by 12 percent. Direct human interaction is quickly fading from the daily consumer experience.

**T**ODAY'S SOCIAL ARRANGEMENTS WERE anticipated by futurist Alvin Toffler back in 1980. As he saw it, the advent of personal computers and other such communication technologies would transform the family home into a sort of "electronic cottage"—one of the principal organizing units of the digitized economy. Because knowledge work could easily be performed from home, less time would be wasted commuting to and from centralized offices. People would have more energy to devote to domestic life and community affairs. The catch, Toffler conceded, was that this new arrangement would ultimately result in two kinds of social relationships: "real" face-to-face relationships and vicarious relationships mediated by "the electric screen interposed between the individual and the rest of humanity."

What Toffler failed to perceive, however, was that these relationships would sort along lines of class and race. Thanks to our "electronic cottages," one can easily live as a shut-in, going weeks without encountering someone from different socioeconomic strata. And, in an era of rampant residential segregation, the opportunities for interaction across class lines—even those that occur during everyday consumer transactions—are quickly dwindling. In many communities, the daily parade of delivery vehicles paints a stark picture of social and economic division. Precariously employed, lower-income workers, often people of color, slip quietly into largely white, upper-class neighborhoods,

deliver packages, and retreat back into obscurity.

The degree to which we have grown accustomed to the new economic order becomes exceedingly obvious in those rare moments when invisible labor becomes visible, and you find yourself face-to-face with a delivery driver whose work you seldom pay much notice. These moments, in my experience at least, tend to happen when something has gone awry. There was a mistake with the order. The driver got lost. They accidentally delivered to the wrong address. Now you're standing outside with the driver, hearing how his car broke down and how he trudged three-quarters of a mile in the dark to deliver your Indian food. And when you return inside, the notification that pings your phone—"Your order has been delivered"—seems to have missed several important details.

For the company overseeing the exchange, these off-script moments are a rhetorical resource. In fact, the only time customer service puts you in direct contact with the person doing the delivery is when something goes wrong. It's a move that seems to shift blame from the infallible app to the imperfect human worker who interfered with an otherwise flawless transaction. What goes unspoken is that, were it not for that human, the transaction never would have happened at all.

For the customer, however, these seemingly insignificant interactions reveal what is to be gained when we stop pretending the contents of our digital shopping carts magically materialize on our doorsteps and instead engage with the human toil taking place behind the scenes. Interaction, as a growing body of research attests, is the bedrock of social cohesion. We are less likely to dehumanize people with whom we converse or interact face-to-face. What's more, brief interactions with someone from a different background can dramatically reduce our prejudices with regard to that person's identity and increase our support for measures protecting that person's rights. Such research confirms an underappreciated feature of in-person shopping: when someone takes your order, rings up your groceries, or fetches an item off an inventory shelf, you're forced to acknowledge that person's humanity. And the more we recognize workers as fellow humans—and not just the fleshy conduits of our consumerist whims—the more likely we are to treat them with moral decency.

It's no wonder the e-commerce and app economy giants are so quick to hide human labor from the consumer experience. After all, these same companies have racked up disgraceful scorecards of government safety (OSHA) violations and spent millions on union busting and legislative campaigns to deprive workers of state and federal labor protections. When pushed on their abysmal labor records, they produce slick videos depicting workers as upbeat and satisfied. "You don't really believe the peeing in bottles thing, do you?" Amazon's PR team tweets. It's a tenable piece of propaganda (despite copious evidence to the contrary) for the hordes of customers who rarely interact with, let alone imagine, the workers in question.

And therein lies the dual nature of erasure in the modern economy: these companies are not only striving to keep labor out of sight, they're also trying to keep labor out of mind. Power, after all, resides in one's ability to control the scope of others' attention. According to sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel,



A DOORDASH DELIVERY WORKER BIKES THROUGH A SNOWSTORM  
NOAM GALAI / GETTY IMAGES

this means both determining the information people can access and influencing what features of that information are deemed noteworthy or irrelevant. The insidious power of e-commerce capitalism is not that these companies tell us what to think—it's that they tell us what to think *about*.

We can see this discursive power at work in the language of contemporary consumerism. There's the labor-erasing double-speak of "frictionless," "touchless," and "contactless." Then there's the very labels of "e-commerce" and "app-based economy," which suggest a fanciful infrastructure composed of bits and bytes that somehow stands apart from the concrete infrastructure of trains, warehouses, and delivery trucks. Some companies struggle to maintain the illusion of virtuality, resorting to problematic euphemisms like "ghost kitchens" and "dark stores"—brick-and-mortar establishments that handle food preparation and order fulfillment on a delivery-only basis—to describe physical entities that actually exist but don't *really* exist. In other words, you can eat food from Guy Fieri's Flavortown Kitchen, but you can't visit Flavortown in person, let alone find it on a map.

Other companies go so far as to celebrate the elimination of human interactions, often touting the antisocial nature of their services as a selling point. Vrbo's "Only Your People" ad campaign smugly reassures consumers that they'll never encounter a stranger "making things awkward" or "taking up space" when renting a home through the company's app. Food delivery services paint a similar picture. Seamless encourages you to "satisfy your craving for zero human contact." And Postmates recommends its app for people who "want pad see ew without pad seeing anyone."

**B**EYOND THE BULLSHIT BINGO AND misanthropic publicity, we're witnessing an even deeper transformation of the grammar through which we understand the economic experience. Passive voice notifications—stand-ins for what were once face-to-face interactions—speak to a broader truth about modern capitalism. Studies in psycholinguistics have demonstrated that statements phrased in the passive voice (e.g., "the woman was abused by the man" or "the person was killed by the police officer") are

less likely to provoke moral outrage or calls for accountability than similar statements phrased in the active voice (e.g., “the man abused the woman” or “the police officer killed the person”). This linguistic trope is so prevalent in reporting on policing killings (or “officer-involved shootings,” as the perpetrators prefer to call them) and reporting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that some mock it as the “exonerative tense.” Whereas the active voice puts the person who performed the action at the center of the sentence, the passive voice relegates that agent to the background, diminishing their salience. So, in much the same way that the passive permits powerful agents to evade responsibility, it prevents powerless agents from receiving recognition.

Making matters worse, the passive voice increases psychological distance between the reader and the event being described, making the event seem hypothetical or as if it occurred in a remote time and place. In other words, the passive voice can make things feel simultaneously more objective *and* more surreal. If ever there was a grammar for an economy that blurs the virtual with the actual, where deliveries simply appear at your front door, and where the people who perform labor are routinely denied credit, the passive voice is it.

**S**UCH LABOR-ERASING LANGUAGE BELIES A deeper ideology at the core of the gified economy: human workers are best thought of as quiet pieces of machinery and not as people with needs and rights. We shouldn’t be surprised when the companies that make up this economy outfit their delivery vehicles with surveillance cameras instead of air-conditioning or use terms like “deactivate” to describe what is colloquially known as “being fired.” These same companies routinely praise the accomplishments of AI and other proprietary technologies—often using the active voice to do so—while omitting mention of the human labor on which these innovations are based or that, in many cases, actively pulls the levers behind the scenes. Flipping between both active and passive, Amazon says its Photo-On-Delivery technology “provides visual delivery confirmation, showing customers that their package was delivered and where it was placed.” The fact that the words “by the driver” are so easily lobbed off the end of the sentence makes it feel as if we’re being prepped for a fantastical economy where machines serve our every desire. Until then, as the Wizard of Oz insists, “Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!”

It’s hard not to see this spate of obfuscatory language as part of a deliberate effort to suppress our collective awareness of the workers who fulfill our orders. Acknowledgement would breed recognition. Recognition would promote solidarity. And solidarity would be bad for business. It could also be that techie grifters—many of whom are hemorrhaging money—are pulling all the stops to dazzle investors with the chimera of automation and artificial intelligence. Or perhaps it’s that, were these companies to actively acknowledge the humans on which their business models depend, they’d end up shattering the illusion that these people are merely “independent contractors” over which they have no control. What better way to disempower your workers than with language that pretends they don’t exist?

Whatever the reason, the cumulative effect of such erasures is to subvert public understandings of how the economy actually works, replacing them with idealizations of a laborless marketplace where the convergence of supply and demand seems natural—something that occurs via its own volition and not via the intervention of human hands. Grasping the power of obfuscatory language helps to explain how these companies—with their unsavory records of exploitation and dangerous working conditions—continue to appeal to otherwise well-meaning people who, were they to regularly consider the humanity of the delivery driver, the warehouse worker, or any number of other laborers, might feel a twinge of guilt and reconsider their shopping habits.

To be sure, there are occasions when companies acknowledge the human face of their digital empires. In mid-2022, with food delivery apps coming down off pandemic highs and with growing support for reclassifying gig workers as employees, DoorDash launched a rebranding campaign, “A Neighborhood of Good in Every Order.” In it, your “random impulse wine purchase from a local pharmacy” is cast as an act of beneficence for the “Dasher around the block.” And while DoorDash now references drivers’ names in delivery notifications and even features generic images of the kind of second-job striver they want you to imagine is fetching your food, these concessions are nothing but feel-good maneuvers to maintain narrative control over an otherwise invisible workforce. Clearly, DoorDash is afraid of what workers might say if allowed to speak for themselves.

As the late scholar Mike Rose, who studied working-class America, put it, we live in a time when labor “has less immediate grab on the national imagination.” Giving it more grab—that is, overcoming consumer complicity—could prove critical in the drive for labor rights in a world of e-commerce convenience.

To be clear, I’m not suggesting that delivery workers ought to endure the additional uncompensated and emotionally-draining labor of chatting with consumers about the difficulties of the job. What I am suggesting, however, is that we should embrace an active language that centers workers and more accurately depicts the causative order of the modern economy. If the language of capitalism is designed to obscure the relationship between consumers and the workers on whom they depend, then progress requires that we develop a language that re-establishes this connection.

By determining if and how to refer to human labor (and by deciding how to apportion credit for that labor more generally), companies like Amazon, DoorDash, and their ilk are quietly establishing unsettling norms for how we think about economic relations. To combat this campaign against our collective understanding of how the economy actually works, we must begin acknowledging the human workers who often go uncredited in our consumerist discourse. And while we shouldn’t kid ourselves that changes to the language through which we understand the economy will, on their own, improve working conditions or restore humanity to an inhumane economy, such changes will make our collective indifference—our porch-bound complicity in the continued exploitation of others—harder to sustain. ✦

# AMERICAN TRAINS

## PLAYSET

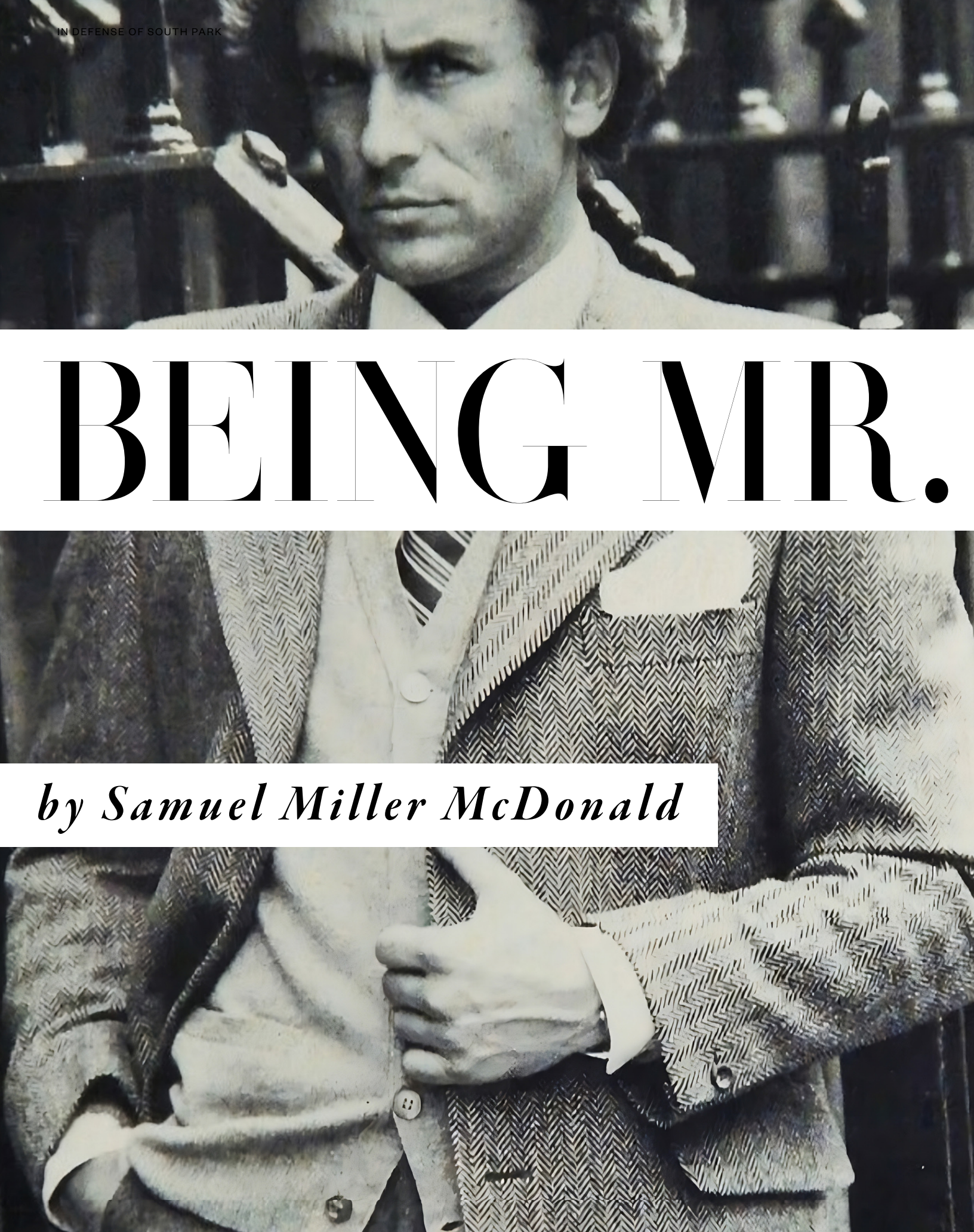
THEY CRASH!

THEY BURN!

THEY EMIT  
CONCERNING  
MYSTERIOUS  
FUMES!

It's the best  
we can do!


**HEY KIDS! OUR REALISTIC USA-MADE TRAINS ARE SLOW AND RUSTY, THE BRIDGES COLLAPSE, AND THEY SUFFER OCCASIONAL DERAILMENTS FOLLOWED BY TOXIC CHEMICAL SPILLS! THEY LIGHT UP AND SMOKE JUST LIKE REAL TRAINS! ALL ABOARD!!**



IN DEFENSE OF SOUTH PARK


# BEING MR.

*by Samuel Miller McDonald*



*Can the love of  
menswear be  
justified in a time of  
global crisis?*

# CLOTHES



THE VARIOUS TUBES AND VESSELS THAT everyone slides their body parts into every day—clothes—are broadly considered to be, at best, the domain of the frivolous and unserious. At worst, they're the preoccupation of the narcissist. But even a passing reflection on the facts reveals this popular notion to be absurd. Clothes have enabled human beings to colonize virtually all of the Earth. *Homo sapiens* would have remained an exclusively tropical species had it not figured out how to clad its heat-dissipating skin in the heat-trapping skins and furs of other animals or the fibers of plants. For those of us who live in cold and wet climates, clothes are a survival necessity. Clothes also represent a nontrivial part of most people's annual budget and, more importantly, daily life—whether they admit it or not—given that we are all surrounded by them in the most literal way possible. More consequentially, textile production and distribution are major sources of waste and pollution. Clothes manufacturing contributes to widespread labor abuses all over the world. Anyone who wears clothes is tied up in this web of human exploitation and environmental degradation.

For most of my life, men have, generally speaking, been actively discouraged from taking too close an interest in clothes. At some point in the last few decades, it became a point of faux-masculine pride to show so little interest in what you wore that you

were dependent on your mother or wife to buy your clothes and dress you. In a March 2023 example, a group of right-wing pundits—including Ben Shapiro and Matt Walsh—cosplaying being masculine on a podcast were publicly roasted for boasting that they don't know how to do laundry and that their wives do all the clothing-related work (it's broadly recognized that those on the political right tend to be the worst dressed).

In defiance of this stereotype, menswear has grown in popularity in the past few years, and (mostly younger) men are beginning to admit that they care about what they wear. In early 2023, menswear writer and meme-generator Derek Guy became hugely popular on Twitter after people began to notice he was appearing on many people's feeds consistently. His posts—fashion memes, informative threads, style commentary—formed some mysterious mix that aroused the algorithm. Over several weeks starting in late 2022, he amassed tens of thousands of new followers, totaling around 165,000 currently.

Guy is almost certainly the biggest of the men's style writers on Twitter, but far more menswear content can be found on Instagram. Statistics on this are not readily available, but I've come across a lot of menswear content on the app, and I would guess that it is host to thousands of menswear accounts, some breaking a million followers—bots or actual human minds, I don't know—posting



content that ranges from the humble fit pic to the informative style lesson to the TikTok-inspired getting-dressed montage. The biggest ones tend to promote, let's say, less subtle or refined styles. While many of the outfits produced by Instagram fashion accounts are very basic and broadly proliferate poor, or at least boring, advice on how to look good, some of the more respected menswear accounts illustrate and elucidate good taste, like those of Mark Large, Simon Crompton, and of course Derek Guy.

But this growing taste for good taste has only recently broken into more mainstream discourses. For most of the first quarter of the 21st century, I've watched mainstream menswear languish in a limbo of bad style: billions of men draped in ill-fitting suits, synthetic athleisure, and business casual. Of course, during this Dark Age of Menswear there were still online forums gathering to discuss the merits of lapel shape and softness of shoulder, still subculture oases demonstrating style. Now, through blogs, podcasts, and social media, such discourses have filtered to the masses. The proliferation of menswear analysis and style iconography indicates that more men are thinking more systematically about the clothes they wear than have been for a long time.

So what? In a time when species are going extinct at doomsday rates last seen among dinosaurs, the moral and material foundations of civilization are crumbling, and authoritarians are entering a hyper-hysterical mode, can there possibly be any value in caring about something as seemingly frivolous as personal style and taste in clothing? Indeed, these very problems demand that egalitarians engage more deliberately in how we dress.

## IN DEFENSE OF VANITY

STYLE IS THE ART OF MAKING THINGS BEAUTIFUL, whether hair, clothes, buildings, or prose. A stylist combines their creative intuition and technical skill to make something more beautiful than it otherwise might be in serving its practical function. Good style is valuable because beauty is intrinsically valuable. As Nathan J. Robinson writes in this magazine, "What is beauty? Beauty is that which gives aesthetic pleasure. ... Beautiful things are things that you want to keep looking at because seeing them brings joy." Everything else being equal, it is better that things be beautiful than ugly. Many, probably most, of the world's most beautiful buildings were built or financed on the backs of enslaved or otherwise exploited laborers. They have a hideous past that must be acknowledged. But a beautiful old library whose construction was funded by a Barbadian plantation can still be pleasing to the eye and offer refuge to those alive now. Many modern buildings are *also* built on foundations of bone, blood, and suffering, but don't even have the benefit of looking beautiful. Yet their ugliness has not helped liberation movements tear down the systems that built them. If anything, their being ugly only adds to their repressiveness and inescapability.

But what about ostensibly more benign things like the fit

of the trousers men wear? There are good reasons for men to dress more beautifully, reasons both individual and collective.

The personal benefits of dressing well are straightforward, like pride and dignity, for instance. Wearing good clothes can make one feel many things that those invested in maintaining social and economic hierarchies may not want you to feel: confident, powerful, worthy, beautiful. It is satisfying to assemble a pleasing outfit and walk around in it, and to receive a compliment on it now and then. Wanting to look good can invite accusations of narcissism, but wanting to look good is not necessarily narcissistic. More likely it's vanity, and vanity and narcissism have important differences. Vanity looks at itself objectively, sees its own imperfections, and seeks to improve them for the benefit of others—and of oneself, of course. Narcissism says: I may look like a slob, my body may be ugly, I may not flatter, yet *I am still superior*. If I offend the eye, that's your problem. As vanity seeks to refine oneself into something better, narcissism swaggers in sweats and clown shoes. Vanity is not (just) about looking good to satisfy a delicate ego; it's about wanting to look good for all the other reasons both selfish and selfless connected with why anyone does anything, for fun, for social obligation, for the hell of it.

**I**N SOCIETIES THAT AIM TO FORCE PEOPLE TO conform to narrow, homogeneous ways of living in the world, dressing with individual style can be one small but important act of transgression. A person may declare that they have a mind and a soul that is their own, and reveal a bit of it in the decoration on their body. Making an art of self-decoration is as old as human beings, and probably older. *Homo neanderthalensis*, a species possibly twice as old as *Homo sapiens*, likely wore jewelry. Thousands of human cultures throughout our nearly 400,000-year history have put uncounted hours into designing beautiful body art, whether clothes, jewelry, or tattoos. Dressing is the only survival necessity that we can each make into an art, the only art where everyone partaking is both spectator and artist. Dressing is something everyone does every day; it is only reasonable to seek to do it well, with intention, creativity, and personal style. Though clothing and other decorations can signify all sorts of social elements—membership in a group, hostility to a group, position in a hierarchy—they can also simply represent the deeper inclinations of an individual.

Take, for instance, the inclination to look like a cowboy. During elementary school, I wore cowboy boots to class every day. Once in second grade, on my way to the bathroom during class, my black-and-white faux snakeskin boots clip-clopped brazenly down the silent hallway. As I passed another class, the teacher halted her lesson to intercept me as she closed her door against my thunderous heels. "Those are too loud," she croaked with a scowl. Even at age 8, I was struck by the hypocrisy of this—she was wearing substantial heels herself—and by the absurdity of scolding a child for simply wearing cowboy boots. Without slowing my sonorous stride, I glared back





at her and continued on to the bathroom. Though I made powerful enemies, I looked good. This is a silly little example, though it didn't feel silly to me as an 8-year-old. The core of this feeling is not some artifact left behind in childhood; it remains important into adulthood. Clothing can give one a sense of courage to face difficult tasks and a sense of defiance against a powerful authority or hostile collective; and it can help one to rebuild one's sense of dignity and self-esteem in the midst of the traumatic onslaught of indignity that a brutal, uncaring society is constantly throwing at us.

**W**HILE DRESSING BEAUTIFULLY IS good for oneself, it also benefits the public, in more ways than one. Obviously it's better to add beauty to public spaces than to detract from it, but there are other benefits than just adding beauty for its own sake.

A widespread process of divestment from the very idea of a public has been occurring since about a generation after the Second World War. This phenomenon can best be measured in persistent attempts to privatize public goods like utilities, healthcare, and transportation; to corporatize institutions with public value like nonprofits, universities, and research labs; and to dismantle regulations that aid the public, like environmental, worker safety, and consumer protection laws. But we can also see this phenomenon in the behavior of the public itself: with the rise of personal vehicle transportation, suburban development, consumer culture hedonism, and the competitiveness of neoliberal cultural politics, individual behavior in public has reflected—and perhaps reinforced—antisocial trends. Lack of attention to public self-presentation is one area where this phenomenon is particularly visible. Many people most of the time don't make much effort to look good in public. A nice restaurant will be filled with diners in athleisure (such as leggings and sweatshirts), offices with employees in business casual, or streets with pedestrians in their pajamas. While we won't fix healthcare by dressing nicely in public, behaviors as small as paying attention to public presentation are one way to begin reinvesting in the idea of a public that is worthy of respect.

I recently saw a man with exceptional style seated outside a coffee shop. He managed to combine a big orange beard of a Highland warrior with a long blue and yellow coat of a wizard. I complimented him on his style, and he thanked me, and rather theatrically added with a pose that he's "just adding color to a drab universe." This changed the experience of a busy street where there is a general feeling of hostility and impatience, and where talking with strangers isn't the norm. Simply because of his individual and beautiful style, I felt warmly toward him, and felt comfortable saying a nice thing to him (this kind of interaction is more common among women; taking an interest in style can make it more common for men, too). This is a small thing, but these sorts of small things can add up. They can increase positive feelings toward the public,

by the public, from which all sorts of common good policy and goodwill can flow. At a time of rapid breakdown of social trust and a pandemic of cowardice and contempt, a little style can go a long way.

## RESISTANCE IS TEXTILE

HAVING SPENT SOME TIME IN LEFTIST ONLINE DISCOURSE, I have seen plenty of self-identified populists wary of efforts to focus on beauty or tasteful style, who might even suggest that judging taste, style, and good clothes is elitist. Words like “elitist” and “elite” have been frequently misused by people who seek to deflect attention from economic hierarchies and instead focus on cultural signifiers, so as to prevent the class solidarity necessary to erode those economic hierarchies. Instead of its traditional meaning of someone who exerts disproportionate power—either from hereditary status, large amounts of relative wealth, or some official position in government or industry—“elite” in these cases is applied to vague status indicators, like clothes, or to someone with some higher education, a large following on social media, or simply residence in an urban location (people who often have little or no attachment to real power or wealth). Consider, for instance, the pundits who use “elites” to describe people with PhDs and annual incomes of \$20,000 while celebrating a millionaire business owner—who has their elected representative on speed dial—as if they were a humble blue-collar worker.

In the U.K., “posh” serves a similar purpose. Some use “posh” to mean rich while others mean something like “fancy.” In this latter usage, being fancy has nothing to do with how much money you have. Instead, it refers to cultural signifiers like whether you get food from Waitrose—a food purveyor that markets itself as upscale but doesn’t generally cost more than other supermarkets—what style clothing you wear, your education level, and the sorts of entertainment you enjoy or places you go for vacation. “Posh” is one of those magic words that separates wealth from class. As such, the word serves a neat rhetorical sleight of hand that benefits real elites—those who run the world’s institutions, who control production, extract rents, hoard wealth. Real elites clad themselves in ugliness, whether puffer jackets, ill-fitting polos and chinos, or the garish mansions they look out from but never have to look at. A glance at the wardrobes of some of the world’s wealthiest men (Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, George Lucas, Bill Gates) and most visible power brokers and media personalities (Matt Gaetz, Boris Johnson, Jordan Peterson) reveals the wealthy to be every bit as lacking in taste as most men of their generations, or maybe more so. (Some of Derek Guy’s most valuable content is his relentless spotlighting of horribly dressed powerful people.) Badly dressed elites are a relatively new phenomenon. Perhaps the wealthy and powerful feel so secure in their positions today that they no longer feel any need to project dignity and self-respect.

It made sense for populists of the past to be wary of putting too much emphasis on elucidating style and taste ac-





cording to indicators that could be tied to wealth, like garment quality or rare jewelry, or the subtle differences in quality and detail in clothes that can mark out those privileged with an education in such manners and those without. Indeed, there is a history of using class signifiers like luxury clothes to reinforce rigid social and economic hierarchies. Clothing renders abstract interior qualities—rebelliousness or authority, playfulness or rigidity—immediately visible to the social world and has been used to demarcate social hierarchies for millennia. Clothes can project power and dignity, or the opposite. Roman Senators and Emperors wrapped themselves in heavy, opulent fabrics and rare, expensive colors, prohibiting poorer Romans and slaves from donning such attire. European nobility and royalty heaped gilt garments and jewelry on themselves throughout the Medieval and Renaissance periods. Wealthy industrialists invented intricate new categories of formalwear to distinguish themselves from lower classes, or co-opted working-class designs. The European dictatorships of the 20th century leaned heavily on clothing to build and maintain their hierarchies. The Nazis perfected the art. Some of the biggest names in fashion design collaborated with the Nazis to develop their imposing-looking uniforms or to dress the wives and mistresses of prominent Nazis. Some of these big names are still at the apex of fashion, like Coco Chanel, Cristóbal Balenciaga, Louis Vuitton, Christian Dior, and Hugo Boss. Today, fascist groups still use clothing to achieve uniformity and identifiability (if not dignity), like the Proud Boys' yellow-and-black polos or the Patriot Front's tan slacks, blue shirts, and white masks.

**B**UT JUST BECAUSE ENEMIES OF EGALITARIANISM have used style as a weapon doesn't mean workers or marginalized groups should embrace the austere and ugly, the poor cloth so many have been doomed to wear as slaves or peasants. It's not elitist to suggest that leftists, workers, "the People," or anyone else who is part of the constituency fighting for equality, liberty, and justice take an active interest in their clothes, for both tactical and aesthetic reasons.

Discourse among those who oppose authoritarians typically dismisses clothing as a frivolous distraction from real issues, or even representative of the consumer capitalism they seek to overthrow. This is a rather new, and unfortunate, development, since organized working-classes and rebel subcultures of the past used clothing to effectively create unity, or express nonconformity, and build status, dignity, and respect. The Black Panthers in the 1960s adopted militaria to achieve an imposing, dignified uniformity. Black Civil Rights activists also adopted Africana and natural hairstyles to proclaim Black pride and to reject European standards of beauty. Others donned formalwear to project and co-opt conventional indicators of respectability and professionalism. Anarchists have adopted practical dark-colored, rugged clothing to achieve tactical uniformity and anonymity. Union members don workwear with their union logo or the outfits of their trade to show

pride in their work and solidarity with fellow workers. Groups fighting for egalitarian change—whether union workers, ethnic groups, or political radicals—should not underestimate the value of looking cool in attracting new members.

Often when we think of working-class dress, we're shown ugly, undignified track suits of chavs, slouchy sweatshop-made sacks, fast fashion hauls, or some other often patronizing stereotype. *Peaky Blinders*, a British TV series, was a rare recent piece of culture to depict working-class men in a dignified manner. Just about every episode had a whole scene of the leads dressed in immaculate dark tailored suits and overcoats, swaggering in slow motion down a dank Birmingham lane. But this, of course, was depicting a relic of the past. While a lot of young Brits have adopted the harsh undercut of the Sheldons, they have unfortunately bypassed the imposing lines and flattering billow of the wool coats, and do in fact opt for shapeless sweats and Michelin Man puffers. Before we brush this off as a money issue—the working class and the downwardly mobile middle class who might form a strong egalitarian bloc simply don't have a ton of money to spend on tailored suits and overcoats—it's worth considering the Society of Ambiance-Makers and Elegant People, or *Les Sapeurs*.

This is a subculture in the Congo made up of extremely low-income men who nevertheless don impeccable drip. "In the midst of their war-torn slums," Stevanie Honadi writes, "these men dress in tailored suits, elegantly smoke on their pipes and stroll the impoverished streets in immaculate shoes." The practice of wearing European dandy clothing began, in Honadi's history, in a servile manner to European colonists, but soon took an anti-colonial turn. The Congolese sought to use their mastery of this particular style as an argument for independence, a jeer at the European pretense to civilization and sneer of African "savagery." In post-colonial Congo, the *sapeur* movement remained anti-authoritarian, but, instead of opposing a colonial European government, they resisted the corruption and overreach of the new Congolese state. More recently, as harsh global economic development has left Congo riven with conflict and desperate poverty, the *sapeur* subculture continues to don elaborate clothing while posing in juxtaposition with trash heaps and the detritus of war.

They're not the only marginalized people who have taken fashion into their own hands. What garment was so dangerous it was nearly banned in Los Angeles? Yes, that's right: zoot suits. "Zoot suits"—probably named as a duplication of "suit"—first evolved in the 1930s Harlem jazz scene and soon popped up in Black communities in Chicago and Detroit. They continued to evolve among both Black and white jazz and blues fans—called hipsters or hepcats in the 1940s—and spread to the West Coast and Mexican American community there. Zoot suits were ostentatiously big, with high waists, loose trouser legs, shoulder pads, and long jackets, giving the wearer greater size and allowing them to project themselves confidently into spaces they would otherwise be discouraged from inhabiting.

Anyone who was alive in the 1990s will remember the ska-swing song "Zoot Suit Riot" by Cherry Poppin' Daddies.





ZOOT SUIT CULTURE CIRCA 1943

The song title refers to actual riots that occurred in Los Angeles in June 1943. The “riots” involved street fights between the Latino and Black men wearing the voluminous suits and white sailors on leave. For a variety of reasons, including war time stress, racial resentment, a controversial murder trial, and young men under the influence of alcohol, skirmishes broke out over a few days. White Angelenos and sailors stripped the young men wearing the suits, potentially inspiring similar attacks against Latinos in other cities throughout the country. (Though it was a short episode, it left enough of a cultural imprint to inspire a film and a ‘90s ska song, and zoot suits even made their way to a joke in the U.K. television series *Peep Show*.) The War Production Board tried to ban zoot suits, citing the need to ration material for the war. Zoot suit manufacturers flouted the law, which was largely toothless, and continued cladding predominantly Black and Latino men in the suits as an act of disobedience to a state that frequently overreached throughout the war. Perhaps the most famous zoot suiter was Malcolm X, who would go on to don more conservative dress as he increasingly gained access to powerful people and widespread media attention. Like many others in the Civil Rights movement, he saw value in co-opting conservative dress so as to inject radical ideas into spaces that those ideas might otherwise never reach.

What these examples suggest is that clothing can be a source of defiance against inequalities—economic, ethnic—and serve as a psychological equalizer. If you can look better, feel better, and hold your head higher than richer members of society, you may still be disenfranchised in other ways, but in one important way of maintaining a sense of self-worth and agency, you’ve gone a long way to reclaiming some freedom and independence. If standards of taste have tended to emerge from the core of empires or elite circles, that’s all the more reason to creatively subvert them to make something more beautiful, or to seize good taste from historically privileged populations.

Now is a good time for marginalized groups and working classes to co-opt style for all the reasons they have in the past: dignity, solidarity, identity, and pride, or tactics of anonymity, subversion, sabotage, and misdirection.

## WHAT TO WEAR?

THOUGH IT MAY BE VALUABLE FOR egalitarians to dress nicely and good for the public to be more beautiful, there are serious problems with clothing manufacturing. Today, the textile industry is rife with abuse, of both workers and the environment. The industry contributes 10 percent of annual carbon emissions, dumps half a million tons of plastic microfibers equal to 50 billion plastic bottles into the ocean, and accounts for 20 percent of industrial wastewater pollution. Fashion industry exploitation of labor is extreme, with the industry engaging in forced labor, underpayment, unsafe conditions, and union busting. There are up to 60 million people working in the garment industry. Ten years ago, the Rana Plaza garment factory in Bangladesh collapsed, killing more than 1,100 workers and injuring 2,500 more. It was the largest known garment factory accident in history. It was caused by corruption in the building process, corruption in regulation, exploitation of non-unionized workers, and negligence of the fast fashion brand manufacturers that used the factory. While some improvements have been made in Bangladesh’s garment industry, with unions central to that process, many problems still remain, there and elsewhere throughout the industry’s global production chains.

This sort of exploitation isn’t new. Textile demand and manufacturing was a major driver of the Atlantic Slave Trade, with African laborers kidnapped and forced to work in cotton production in the South to feed textile factories in the North, factories where some of the first modern labor strikes in the U.S. occurred as a result of abuse of predominantly women textile workers. (The International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union was one of the largest labor unions of the 20th century.) Some

of the world's first empires were built on textile industries. Archaeologist David Wengrow (of *Dawn of Everything* fame) chronicled in his book *What Makes Civilization?* the rise of Mesopotamian empires, the first known empires in history. Textile manufacturing, he argues, was among the first instances of regimented industry we might recognize as factory labor, and was central to the development of profit-generating markets in Ancient Mesopotamia. Demand for luxury goods like lapis lazuli and fine clothes likely drove some of the first expansionist economies, and, in turn, these markets likely coincided with some of the earliest mass, organized ecological destruction. Not much has changed, except that this destruction and exploitation is occurring at a global scale, and the consequences—climate change, microplastic pollution—could endure for tens of thousands of years.

**H**OW DO WE SQUARE the need to consume clothes—to stay warm and safe and simply enjoy looking good—with the depredations of the industry that delivers these clothes?

Obviously when problems occur at an industrial scale—like food production systems, transportation systems, or development—the best solutions are designed and implemented at the same scale. The way to solve the garment industry's problems is with regulatory action, such as bans on highly polluting synthetic fibers and chrome tanning of leather, enforcement of labor laws (with significant penalties on the companies that violate them), and attacking agricultural sources of pollution, like cotton fields and animal feedlots, by incentivizing smaller and safer operations. These sorts of changes only come with organized workers, coordinated citizen campaigns, active litigators, and courageous politicians. There are many organizations working on these issues, like Labour Behind the Label, WRAP, Textiles Action Network, Fashion Revolution, Clean Clothes Campaign, The Circle, and more. Garment workers

across the Global South are fighting for better wages and human rights. What can those of us who are more on the consumption than the production side do? As we have seen with some of the world's most famous boycotts and campaigns, like those that have scrutinized the supply chains of companies like Nike and Zara and indeed achieved some corporate policy changes, consumer behavior does have an impact, even if it's insufficient alone.

One important way to both filter out many bad-looking clothes and obtain clothes that have less of a negative impact on the environment is to avoid petroleum-based synthetics. Petroleum synthetics are almost never necessary or superior except for some rare technical scenarios, like mountain climbing. Synthetics typically only serve to cheapen production costs—and therefore quality—of clothing for manufacturers and, as a result, often look bad. Worse, every time they're run through washing machines, they shed microplastics that are proliferating across the globe. Microplastics can currently be found in human blood and breastmilk and even in people living in remote places on the planet. It sometimes takes a little extra vigilance when shopping to avoid them, but it's much easier to find quality garments by simply filtering out petro-based synthetics like polyester, nylon, and acrylic.

Cotton, linen, wool, silk, and leather feel much better to wear—they breathe better and drape better—on top of generally being more ecologically non-harmful, or easier to make so. This is an important distinction. Leather, for example, is very harmful. It is a product of often biodiversity-destroying animal agriculture, and its treatment with harsh chemicals can be dangerous to workers and the environment. When you take its whole life cycle into account, it is environmentally very harmful and carbon emitting. But these problems have simple—if difficult to implement—solutions, and the life cycle of leather can be made much more environmentally and worker sensitive, by treating it in less harmful ways (like vegetable tanning), using better land management practices for the animals, and disposing of it in less polluting ways.

Petroleum-based fibers, by contrast, can't be made environmentally safe. At least as they exist now, they will always shed microplastics in vast quantities and depend on carbon-emitting petroleum. These microplastics will bioaccumulate in humans and other animals to their detriment, as neither organisms nor technology have any known means of eliminating them, and the petroleum industry that benefits from them will continue to contribute to climate change.

Clothes are important. They always have been and always will be, as long as there are human beings and the universe remains harsh enough that we need to cover our skin, or our minds remain sophisticated enough to retain the urge to communicate something by how we look. Their manufacture impacts millions of lives, human and otherwise, positively and horrifically. They can be art, they can be adhesives for solidarity movements, they can be wedges forced between people, wielded as a weapon by or against egalitarians, or by or against authoritarians. At the very least, they are one simple everyday way people can make an increasingly ugly world a bit more beautiful. ♣

**Sam's "Mr. Clothes" account can be followed @yeagoodokay on both Twitter and Instagram.**

## TIPS FOR ETHICAL STYLE

- Try to buy only natural materials, especially in items you wash frequently
- Look for vegetable tanned leather from tanneries and manufacturers in places with stringent environmental regulations
- Buy second-hand items
- Support smaller, local retailers and avoid the bigger ones and fast fashion

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# THE BOOTSTRAPS MYTH

Alissa Quart is the executive director of the Economic Hardship Reporting Project and the author of the book *Bootstrapped: Liberating Ourselves from the American Dream*. Her book looks at the cruelty of the myths of being “self-made” or “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps.” In the first part, Quart examines the works of Emerson, Thoreau, Horatio Alger, Ayn Rand, and Laura Ingalls Wilder (one of Quart’s chapters is called “Little House of Propaganda”) to show how radically our ideas of what it takes to succeed depart from real life.

**S**HE EXPOSES THE constraints that keep people from achieving a decent standard of living, and shows how “dependency” isn’t a bad thing—in fact, we’re all interdependent by our nature. Quart’s book shows how people help each other through mutual aid and presents an inspiring alternative to the existing vision of the “American dream.”

NATHAN ROBINSON

You open your book with some correspondence. You tend to receive a certain type of letter from a certain type of person with a certain type of attitude, and I want to talk about that attitude. You are the Executive Director of the Economic Hardship Reporting Project and do a lot of reporting on poverty, and the responses you get are often from people who are *not* sympathetic to the situation of those upon whom you report.

ALISSA QUART

Yes. These are from the comments pages, people emailing me personally, or calls if you’re on television like C-SPAN

or a radio show. I call it the peanut gallery: voices that are constantly critiquing anyone who falls in the middle class and downward towards poverty, including the subjects of my last book, and probably the subjects of my new book, and many of our contributors. At the Project, 37 percent or so of our contributors describe themselves as working class, working poor, or near the poverty line. So, when they write about their lives, many have gone to college or even graduate school, and yet, they’re still in economic stasis. And the audience that bites back at them says things like, “Why did you go to college?” or “Why didn’t you go to college?” or “Why

didn't you study STEM?" or "Why didn't you study IT?" There's always a kind of hierarchy of wrongdoing and blame that is put on anybody who's not wealthy in this country, and that includes our contributors. "But why did you have kids with two different men?" "Why did you have more than one child?" "Why do you have children at all?" And the thing that struck me after I received the first 100 of these is just how pleasureless they are. They're always like, "We haven't been out to dinner in five years" or, "We're proudly not formally educated."

ROBINSON

There's a lot of, "I suffered, so why should anyone else feel entitled not to suffer?"

QUART

Totally. They're very much anhedonic. I see that a lot with the rejection of canceling student debt. It's the opposite of *schadenfreude*. What's the German word for wanting people to suffer as you suffered? It's very specific.

ROBINSON

Yes, I'm sure there is a German word for it. But that is very much the case. And it somewhat poses as an argument about justice. That is: it's not fair for *these* people to get their student debt paid off when I had to go through years and years of struggling to pay off mine. But you have a sense that it's not grounded in a deep theory of justice.

QUART

It's grounded, in part, in something called the "Just World Hypothesis" or the "Just World Theory," which was coined in the 1960s by Melvin Lerner, a social psychologist. He did a study in Kansas where he had a woman posing as someone getting electric shocks. She was an actor and wasn't actually being shocked, but she was dressed like a student. The other students were watching her. The shocks intensified. These were students who agreed to be in a study, and the students believed she had done something wrong. There's a strong need, I think, for people to believe that other people get what they deserve. So, this hypothetical woman getting the shocks must have

done something wrong because otherwise she would not have gotten them.

ROBINSON

The most charitable interpretation of this—and I can sympathize with it a bit—is that it's very hard to accept that you live in a world where many people experience extremely unfair things that they don't deserve, then die. Nobody ever fixed it. The wrong was never righted. The Just World is quite tempting, and I see why people want to believe that.

QUART

Yes. As I write about, to keep ourselves sane, we twist the truth of life to make existence more bearable. We're poor or lonely because we're undeserving. The stranger over there is ill or their last venture failed because they had done something wrong. And vice versa: the millionaire heir or the influencer is a person of merit, which is clearly often not the case. But, that's the logic that guides much of, I believe, the thinking about why some people are successful and some aren't, what I call the "self-made myth."

ROBINSON

Much of the book is devoted to discussing these kinds of stories that we tell in the

United States. You go back to Emerson and Thoreau and write about this idea of *self-reliance*, the *self-made man*, or the person who, without receiving any handouts, makes it from the bottom to the top, and therefore provides proof that insufficient grit is what keeps everyone else from doing this.

QUART

It starts really early in this country. You could say it starts with Benjamin Franklin. But what I found when I looked at the origins of "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps"—that terrible idiom—or the "self-made man" is that they both emerged in the 1830s. That's important because it's a moment of a kind of industrial entrepreneurship, steamboats, and—let's be frank—also a moment of the enslavement and exploitation of other people's labor. It's a moment of business, entrepreneurship, and widening social networks in that period, but also a moment of great exploitation that people have to legitimize. So, that's part of why this all starts in the 1830s.

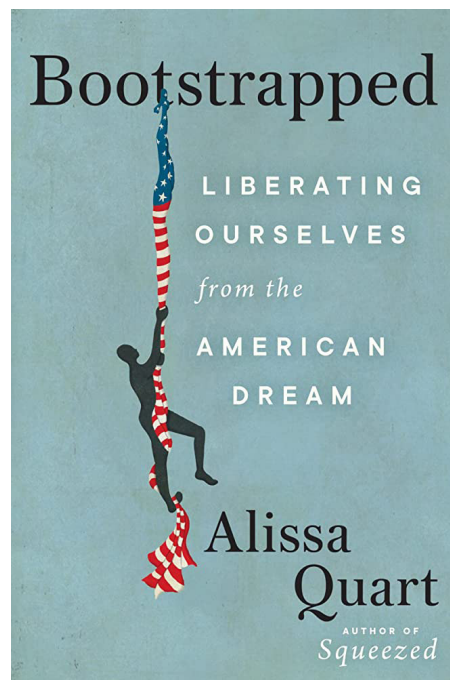
ROBINSON

But as you point out, the original expression "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" is intended to be an absurdity because you literally can't pull yourself up by your bootstraps. As you explained, the original meaning describes something that could never happen.

QUART

Yes. Part of why this was important at that time was that everyone had boots. The majority of the workforce was male, and they were wearing boots. You had to pull up these little tabs on the side—I think we still have a few kinds of boots like that, like maybe motorcycle boots or something—and the wealthy people had someone helping them, or had new machines that helped people get their boots on. Otherwise, they were just really struggling every morning, if they were working men, to pull their boots on.

So, this idea that you could go further than simply pulling your boots, by pulling your entire body up, was like a metaphysical joke, an absurdity. It was understood as such until it got natural-



*Bootstrapped* by Alissa Quart

ized over time. And that's the thing with these expressions: they start out as a joke. There's nothing more American than having this extreme capitalism understood as absurdity.

ROBINSON

You also wrote about Emerson and Thoreau—they're interesting. Emerson makes this self-reliance essay. Thoreau, of course, pretends that he lived alone in Walden for years while his mom was actually doing his laundry.

QUART

Yes. That's true. And he also said that in his cabin he had an "extra seat for conversation" or something to that effect. While he was writing *Walden*, he was giving better gatherings than we were having in the last couple of years.

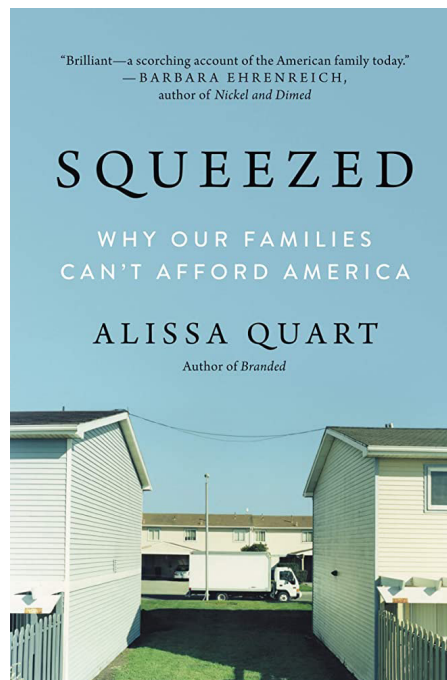
Thoreau was very brave. The person who irritated me was Emerson. He's such a wonderful lyric writer, and there are so many ways to read Emerson and Thoreau, especially Emerson's quite emphatic, mysterious prose. You could read it as rejecting conformity and traditional religious forms. There's an insistence on this idea of self-sufficiency throughout all his books. But Emerson was dependent on the fortune of his wife who passed away, and then was totally dependent on the services of his second wife, Lidian. There is this amazing passage he wrote where she was described as a compulsive cleaner and cleaned their house from top to bottom, and then the next day gave birth. So, he had a lot of support in his self-sufficiency. That's the point I'm making throughout this book.

ROBINSON

Yes. And I take it the point here is not just to cast Thoreau and Emerson personally as hypocrites, but to expose the fact that nobody actually lives an independent life. It's just not a real thing.

QUART

It's not a real thing. And yet, today we have the "rise and grind" culture—the "grindset." People have been enjoying sending me these videos of these guys saying, "You can do it, hustle yourself to success." That's the current version of it,



*Squeezed* by Alissa Quart

for better or worse. There's just not an acknowledgment of the vulnerability that we have going into the world and, honestly, leaving it. The majority of us will be disabled at some point, and, obviously, aging is not something that's easy to do without help.

ROBINSON

Yes. We all need help. I think one of the things that your book caused me to do is think much more about the words "dependency" and "dependence." On the political right, there's been a long-standing effort to cast dependency as some sort of inherently negative thing, but I came out of your book thinking that we should reclaim it. Depending upon others is foundational to being a human person in a society.

QUART

Yes. I actually call it the art of inter-dependence. The original meaning of dependent was to hang on or to hang together. And to me, that is what dependence means. It means leaning or hanging together, and not like this other thing, the word entitlement—that's another favorite of the right, to shame and blame people for needing things that are basically human.

ROBINSON

To return to the foundational myths of self-reliance and independence, I have to ask you about *Little House on the Prairie* because you have a whole section on this called "Little House of Propaganda," which I think is not how most people conceive of the charming American frontier classic.

QUART

Yes. Some of this is quite fun.

ROBINSON

That's true. You're not bitterly denouncing *Little House on the Prairie*.

QUART

No, I'm not denouncing; however, I had to deal with a lot of the Laura Ingalls Wilder series of books—they're not all *Little House on the Prairie*. My daughter got really into them when she was 7 or 8, and we wound up watching the show, which is endless. I would think, "When will this end?" but no, there's the Christmas special and reruns. I hated this when I was a child—it came out when I was a kid in the '80s—and I thought, "I still hate this." I actually liked the early seasons.

ROBINSON

You hated it as a child?

QUART

I really did not like Michael Landon. And I wrote in the book that he reminded me of Reagan and the lie of self-reliance, which I feel I must have had some serious issues with early on. But, I enjoyed it. I read all the books. But it was about the idea that they just muscled through and did it on their own. I looked into this, and Pa and Ma were beneficiaries of the Homestead Act of 1862, the biggest land giveaway in this country. This is documented in *Prairie Fires*, a wonderful book about Laura Ingalls Wilder. Pa was a terrible farmer, and all his neighbors were bringing them vegetables—even the dependence on a local level was there as well. So, I felt a need to expose some of that because this was the sort of the Young Adult gateway drug to self-reliance or "Girlbossery."

ROBINSON

We all depend on other people. We're not saying you should have made it on your own. But as you point out throughout, there's something quite cruel about making people feel as if their failures are their own fault, and that if they had been better and worked harder, everything would have been different.

QUART

It's very cruel: the stigma, self-blame, and shame. I started writing this book because I had written *Squeezed: Why Our Families Can't Afford America*. It's about what I call the middle precariat, which is the precarious middle class. I wrote about that in this book, too, the way brainwork has become gig work, and so on. What I saw over and over again was the shame and blame that many of these people that I interviewed spoke about. They would say, "I did everything right"—that was their refrain. And again, it's as if doing everything right can have a protective value. That's what they kept saying. It made me want to look at the ideological and psychological underpinnings that would make dozens of different people say the same thing about their lives.

ROBINSON

When you have these correspondents writing to you who say, "I worked really hard, and I got everything," where do you start in showing why this view is false? We've talked about the stories that are told in novels and children's literature and such, but let's talk about the reality that people face.

QUART

The last study I read was that CEO pay was, on average, about 399 times that of the ordinary worker. There's so much inequity in this country that's structured into our tax rate and how we care for people when they're vulnerable. One of the things that really struck me when I was reporting this was when I talked to somebody who was caring for their extreme medical issues in part with GoFundMe campaigns. And I believe that in 2018, a third of all GoFundMe campaigns were for unpaid medical expenses, and 12 million Americans have crowdfunding campaigns to help someone outside their immediate family pay their medical bills.

So, this situation shows that luck and pluck is not enough. If you are in that position, how lucky and plucky would you have to be to get out of it? I think that's the heart of this. I consider my book radical self-help in the sense that if you show structural inequity, and you do it with some humor, people can begin to question their own self-blame. It's the least I can do as an author or as a reporter.

ROBINSON

They might feel a little better as a result. The nice thing about your book is that people are not going to feel worse reading it. Many times we, as progressive critics of society, end up making people feel worse by pointing out all the terrible dysfunctions and horrors. But you make people feel better by helping them to stop blaming themselves for every bad economic thing that happens to them.

QUART

Yes. To feel good about your existence by feeling bad about America.

ROBINSON

I love it. You just mentioned the GoFundMe campaigns, which you have this wonderful term for, the "dystopian social safety net," which you've defined as "things that help people out of their situations, but shouldn't have to exist in the first place."

QUART

The dystopian social safety net struck me when I was producing a film my friend directed, and came across a story for her about these parking lots called "safe parking" where people sleep in their cars, with this particular one in California. I thought, "This should not exist." Thank God it does, but this should not exist. And honestly, sometimes I feel that the Economic Hardship Reporting Project is also part of the dystopian social safety net. If we had functional media that didn't have Joe Ricketts wanting extreme profits, that was unionized, if we had more national or public television and radio support, and had more nonprofits like ours, we wouldn't need to be taking care of reporters who were getting food stamps. That's part of the dystopian social safety net.

ROBINSON

Rather than the countless books out there, like Barack Obama's *The Audacity of Hope*, which has the subtitle, "Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream," your subtitle is, "Liberating Ourselves from the American Dream." Why do you encourage us to think about it in that way?

QUART

After doing this reporting, I felt imprisoned by the notion of the American dream. I wanted it to be a strong call to action, but also, in that sense, a more optimistic one. If we're able to liberate ourselves from it, even to a new one, and if that's part of the promise, I think there is a moment of radical change there that's happening. We have record DSA membership levels, and what I call the black turtleneck workers, which are brainworkers, organizing, some for the first time, all the way from the University of California system to publishers and media. Union membership overall may be down, but the gig workers who are organizing are doing it imaginatively and publicly and getting a lot more media for it.

ROBINSON

Once you pierce all the myths and deflate Emersonian self-reliance and expose Laura Ingalls Wilder as an anti-New Deal reactionary, it frees us. We see through all of this to realize that nobody lives alone. You show us in the book all these examples of people caring for us, of interdependence. You give us a glimpse of a society in which "dependence" is not a negative word but the central characteristic of a society where everyone needs everyone else.

QUART

Yes. Darwin has obviously been taken for most of this century as somebody who was interested in survival of the fittest, but he wrote about mutual sympathy and how life is dependent on one another—not just interdependent, but dependent. We live in mutual sympathy. It's a biologically natural state, for humans and for all kinds of creatures, to live in a state of blameless dependence. ♣

***This transcript has been condensed and edited for grammar and clarity. Edited by Patrick Farnsworth.***

# IS MY CHILD WOKE?

## A HANDY IDENTIFICATION GUIDE

### WATCH OUT FOR:

#### PERVERSE PARAPHERNALIA

Beware lascivious items. We know not what evil these groomers have wrought. Their inscrutable devices are products of a sick mind.



#### PORNOGRAPHIC MATERIAL

Before rifling through your child's backpack, steel yourself for some truly depraved images that will shock the conscience.



#### CULTURAL MARXIST PROPAGANDA

Is your child in the grip of the cabal of multi-culturalism? It may already be too late.



Wokeism is running amok in our schools, brainwashing our vulnerable children. Do you have any idea what your offspring are learning at school? Stop the woke. Know the signs.

### CONDUCT REGULAR SEARCHES

Do you trust your child?

Well, it's time to stop.

Trust nothing. Search everything. Your job is not to be your child's friend.

Your job is to protect them from the mind-virus of wokeism. Extreme measures are not only justified, but essential.



Mr. and Mrs. Jay Normalson of Sarasota thought that Jay Jr. was a healthy gender-conforming young lad. Shocked were they to find upon the kitchen counter one day a seemingly gender-neutral PLUM-colored backpack. *The sign of worse to come?* And if the backpack itself was disturbingly non-masculine, what horrors would they discover within on their nightly search? Fortunately, the Normalsons took no chances. Jay Jr. was immediately dispatched to a straightening camp, where he was given a navy blue bookbag and instructed by trained professionals on biologically appropriate aesthetics.

### ALARMING NEW TREND

Does your child have a big water bottle? Your child may have been indoctrinated by Big Water Bottle. We are likely decades away from undoing the damage of the "Drink Water" campaign.



### GREEN FLAGS

It's not all gloom and doom! You may be pleasantly surprised to find your child is a God-fearing Christian American patriot.





# WHY ARE THE QUACKS STILL LICENSED?

by Lily Sánchez

**E**ACH OF THESE STATEMENTS WAS MADE DURING THE pandemic by medical doctors who remain licensed to practice medicine:

STELLA IMMANUEL, MD (LICENSED IN TEXAS):

*"This virus has a cure. It is called hydroxychloroquine, zinc, and Zithromax. I know you people want to talk about a mask. Hello? You don't need [a] mask. There is a cure."* (July 2020)

SHERRI TENPENNY, DO (LICENSED IN OHIO):

*"[P]eople ... have long suspected there was some sort of an interface, yet to be defined, an interface between what's being injected in these shots, and all of the 5G towers."* (July 2021)

*"Anyone here waiting for an apology from Birx, Fauci & Biden & all the democratic governors for their unconstitutional tyrannical #MaskMandates? #Masks #FaceMasks #MasksDontWork"* (Feb. 10, 2023)

RASHID BUTTAR, DO (LICENSED IN NORTH CAROLINA):

*"I don't want to be part of this mass genocide that I see happening [with COVID vaccines]. ... And yet I have an unrestricted license to practice, for 30 years."* (Oct. 2021)

Conspiracy theorist and Trump supporter Immanuel, who is also a pastor, was one of the white coat-clad America's Frontline Doctors, members of a right-wing political group with ties to the Tea Party Patriots. They appeared in a July 2020 video at the Capitol, which President Trump praised and helped to go viral. The video reached 20 million Facebook users within hours. In the video, the doctors said that interventions such as masking, social distancing, and school closings were unnecessary and that hydroxychloroquine "could both prevent and cure" COVID-19. In just a two-month period in 2021, America's Frontline Doctors raked in over \$6 million on telehealth evaluations that included prescriptions for hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin, two hyped (based on bad science) medications used for COVID-19 that have been repeatedly found ineffective at treating COVID-19.

Immanuel was recently named the "highest U.S. prescriber of ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine" for the last two years, according to an analysis of prescription data by *MedPageToday*, a medical news website.

Astonishingly, Immanuel's prescribing habits are apparently legal. For its part, the Texas Medical Board had made its stance on COVID-related treatments painfully clear. In July of 2020, referencing rumors of an unnamed "cure" for COVID-19, the board said it would not "issue endorsements" of any treatments and that "patients and physicians have a right to decide what treatments may be used for COVID-19." In the fall of 2021, the board released a notice about prescription use of COVID-19 therapies, saying that they wouldn't "endorse or prohibit" any particular therapies for the condition, preserving physician's use of "off-label" therapies. ("Off label" means a medication is being used to treat a condition for which it lacks FDA approval. While off-label prescribing happens commonly, like any privilege left to individual physician discretion, the practice can be abused—as has been the case with both hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin during the pandemic.)

Ultimately, Immanuel was fined \$500 by the Texas Medical Board in October 2021 and given "corrective action"—not for prescribing bogus treatments but for failing to properly document informed consent for her "off-label" hydroxychloroquine treatments. The board's action was non-disciplinary. (In another notable case, in 2022, Houston doctor Richard Urso was cleared of malpractice claims by the board for his use of hydroxychloroquine to treat COVID-19.)

Tenpenny, who rails against face masks as "germy" and harmful (they suppress your immune system, she claims), has also claimed that the COVID vaccine "makes people magnetic." She has been pursued by the Ohio Medical Board since 2021 (recent local reporting indicates "unspecified reasons" for the board inquiry) and has failed to respond to their communications and subpoena.

Buttar has long practiced medicine in North Carolina despite offering expensive sham treatments for cancer and autism. Buttar is also active on Twitter, where he does live streams; on a recent stream about gun violence, he implied that COVID vaccinations were to blame for frequent mass shootings because they cause people to be in pain from heart or lung problems and the AI in them is interfering with people's neurologic system, presumably making them mentally disturbed. Buttar has a veritable rap-sheet of "adverse actions" taken by the North

Carolina Medical Board going back to 2007. Buttar even referred to the medical board as a “rabid dog” that the legislature needed to “put down” for trying to discipline him years ago.

These doctors are just a few of the many who have made news over the years for spreading misinformation about medical issues, or who promote outright quackery (by quackery, I mean medical practice based on pseudoscience). A few of the most prominent include Joseph Mercola, DO (licensed to practice in Florida and Illinois), described by the *New York Times* as “the most influential spreader of coronavirus misinformation”; Christiane Northrup, MD, a former obstetrician-gynecologist (no active license but has a grandfathered board certification in her field from 1981) and “champion of a feminine and intuitive approach to health and well-being” who was once “Oprah’s favorite gyno” and is now an anti-vaccine and QAnon conspiracy theorist; and, of course, Mehmet Oz, MD (licensed in Pennsylvania), celebrity doctor, wannabe politician, and promoter of hydroxychloroquine, whose *The Dr. Oz Show* bombarded audiences with 13 seasons of “magic” health cures and helped the former cardiothoracic surgeon amass a net worth of nine figures as of 2022, the year his show ended. Tenpenny, Buttar, Northrup, and Mercola are all featured in the Center for Countering Digital Hate’s “Disinformation Dozen,” a list of anti-vaxxers with large platforms who spread misinformation online. (There are many other prominent physician COVID contrarians and minimizers who would take up an entire article themselves.)

That these doctors still retain their medical licenses (or board certifications) despite such unhinged rhetoric and practice, and dozens of doctors have continued to spew misinformation and minimize COVID-19 and COVID vaccination without much consequence, points to a troubling and long-standing problem with the regulation of the medical profession. In 2022, *Politico* reported that only eight physicians had been disciplined by medical boards since January 2021 for “spreading coronavirus-related misinformation.” As David Gorski, MD, PhD, a surgical oncologist and blogger, wrote in a June 2022 blog post—his response to an editorial in the *New England Journal of Medicine* calling for doctors to face consequences for spreading misinformation:

*Again, this was a problem that I had long written about going back to the very beginning of this blog, namely how toothless state medical boards are, how easily bad and even dangerous doctors can keep practicing, and how oblivious our fellow physicians had been to the threat of medical misinformation before the pandemic, a threat to which they have only fitfully been waking up.*

To understand the complexity of the problem with physician regulation, we can look at two major currents: the ethical questions raised by the rise of Oz, and the growth of the anti-vaccine and health freedom movements, which was helped in no small part by the fraudulent work of disgraced former British physician and anti-vaccine activist Andrew Wakefield.

**P**ERHAPS THE MOST RECOGNIZABLE (AND ONE OF THE most long-standing) of the Doctors Behaving Badly bunch is Mehmet Oz, who has been called both “America’s Doctor” (Oprah) and “America’s Quack” (Gorski). He was on faculty at Columbia University for many years—during which the institution faced criticism for keeping him on—until the spring of 2022, when the media reported that he had been largely “scrubbed” from their website ahead of his Senate run (he lost to John

Fetterman). Oz’s interest in alternative medicine dates back to his childhood days, writes *Vox* contributor and Oz profiler Julia Belluz, who has written nearly two dozen articles about him and the questionable ethics of his enterprise of books, magazines, and talk shows in which he has dispensed medical information and recommendations that are often based on little more than hype. Some of Oz’s most notorious claims include “the miraculous powers of green coffee extract and the fat-burning magic of raspberry ketone.” Congress scolded him in 2014 for his role in promoting bogus therapies that one medical ethicist likened to “fairy dust.” There was even a so-called “Oz effect,” or claims of increases in sales of products after they were mentioned on Oz’s show. Oz has done his own share of pandemic misinformation. As just one example, according to the *New York Times*, Oz went on Fox News 25 times to endorse hydroxychloroquine in March and April 2020.

Writers who profile Oz tend to concede an uncomfortable truth: that there’s something icky about what he’s doing in blurring the line between offering medical advice and entertainment, or “medutainment,” and that the financial incentives seem off. But it’s rare for anyone to suggest he be disciplined by his state medical board for such behavior. There are two rare exceptions. One is Jen Gunter, MD, an obstetrician-gynecologist known for her strongly worded debunks of Gwyneth Paltrow’s Goop pseudoscience and nonsense (jade eggs, vaginal steams, and now—sigh—back-door ozone). In 2022, she reported Oz to the Pennsylvania State Medical Board, citing his endorsement of a long-time go-to quack therapy, colloidal silver. The state medical board currently notes no disciplinary actions on Oz’s public profile.

Belluz was also asking, back in 2014, why it was that “Dr. Oz can say anything and keep his medical license.” As she noted, the American Medical Association (a conservative group that, it should be noted, has historically opposed reform toward universal single-payer healthcare) has created guidelines around ethical behavior, but they can’t enforce anything. And Columbia, for its part, said it would not censor a faculty member’s free speech. It turns out that in 2014, then medical student at University of Rochester (now a pathologist) Benjamin Mazer was calling for New York State to “treat health advice on TV in the same vein as expert testimony, which already has established guidelines for truthfulness.” That would have been something!

Political scientist Dominik A. Stecula and colleagues have situated Dr. Oz within a larger media ecosystem they call alternative health media (AHM), which they describe as media that popularizes alternative medicine therapies while at the same time casting doubt on mainstream medicine and on government agencies such as the CDC and FDA. Examples of AHM include *The Goop Lab*, *Natural News*, *Mercola.com*, Alex Jones’ *Infowars*, and *The Doctors*, a talk show featuring four doctors that ended in 2022 after 14 seasons on air.

The features of AHM are reminiscent of what Lauren Fadiman recently described in this magazine as a culture of “medical skepticism,” which encapsulates not just a penchant for alternative medicine and fear of harmful mainstream medical practices and institutional distrust but can also accommodate “full-blown conspiracy theories” about COVID vaccines or government leaders being pharma shills.

The influence of such media—and the doctors who work for them—cannot be overstated. As Stecula et al. note, at a time when many people lack access to a primary care doctor and want health advice, shows like *Oz* offer a parasocial relationship with someone who is “relatable, accessible, and trusted.” It’s easy to see how influential Oz, who has been described as “telegenic,” can be in this kind of setting.

One thing I’ve realized over the years is that, in general, doctors

behaving badly seem to get a free pass and a lot of sympathy. For example, Sandeep Jauhar, a cardiologist, wrote a 2014 memoir, *Doctored*, about some of his time in practice. He admitted to doing questionable things when he was freelancing (essentially, gig work) with a local doctor who ordered unnecessary cardiac testing on unwitting patients. He did it to finance his family's lifestyle. He discussed how the medical system in the area was essentially operating as a huge racket, shuffling unsuspecting patients to doctors and procedures they didn't need. "I always felt as if I were selling my soul," he said of that work. Book reviewers acknowledge the questionableness of his behavior and of the perverse financial incentives that cause doctors to do more things to patients to bring in revenue, but nobody really says that this kind of behavior ought to be disciplined in any way by a medical board. Many people, doctors and non-doctors, seem to assume that some degree of unethical look-the-other-way behavior goes on in medicine, and this is simply accepted. It could be that this kind of acceptance makes it easier for the public to accept charlatans like Oz and other persuasive misinformers.

If, as Fadiman wrote, for-profit healthcare creates mistrust among the public, then it also encourages unethical physician behavior—in patient practice, or in public pronouncements and the media—which then becomes somewhat acceptable to a public eager to seek trust in a "brave maverick" or contrarian physician who offers them cures or the truth. All the while, regulatory bodies are ill-equipped to deal with the damage done not just to the profession's credibility but to public health.

DOCTORS, OF COURSE, HAVE BEEN ON THE WRONG SIDE OF public health long before COVID and *Dr. Oz*, and one doctor in particular is partly responsible for the rise of the anti-vaccine movement in the last two decades. Andrew Wakefield, a former physician from Britain, published a paper in *The Lancet* in 1998 in which he hypothesized a link between the measles, mumps, rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism. His fraudulent work, which was later retracted (he was also stripped of his medical license), was responsible for "usher[ing] in a new era of distrust for vaccine[s]," writes Peter J. Hotez, MD, PhD in 2021 in an article about the rise of antiscience in the U.S. (Despite massive evidence to the contrary, the vaccine-autism myth just won't die.) Hotez, a pediatrician and vaccine scientist, writes that the anti-vaccine movement has grown stronger since the early 2000s, as states have seen increases in legislation to allow religious or philosophical exemptions to routine childhood vaccinations. Decreased vaccination rates have resulted in outbreaks of vaccine preventable diseases such as measles, a highly contagious disease that can cause dangerous complications such as pneumonia, brain swelling, or even death, particularly in young children.

Furthermore, Hotez notes, the anti-vaccine movement has taken up the libertarian banner of medical freedom or health freedom, which combines a skepticism of mainstream medicine along with a tendency to promote unproven cures (before ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine, there was, for example, MMS, or miracle medical solution, a bleach enema treatment for autism). As these movements have grown, particularly in the Pacific Northwest and the Southwest, anti-vaccine political action committees have formed. In his 2021 book *Preventing the Next Pandemic: Vaccine Diplomacy in the Time of Anti-Science*, Hotez writes:

*Of the 14 metropolitan areas in western states and the state of Michigan where in 2018 we identified large numbers of children*

*not receiving vaccines, most if not all were located in states where anti-vaccine PACs are active. Measles cases appeared in 7 of those 14 counties in 2019. In contrast, there are few if any lobbies or PACs specifically committed to vaccines.*

In a 2022 article called "The Great Texas COVID Tragedy," Hotez linked the state's high death toll to the fact that it's a state "which has been ground zero for the anti-vaccine health freedom movement" in the U.S., and because conservative parts of the state had low levels of COVID-19 vaccine uptake. As Hotez notes, the World Health Organization in 2019 listed "vaccine hesitancy" as one of 10 threats to global health alongside air pollution, climate change, and antibiotic resistance. That the dishonest work and activism of a former physician could help bring about one of the top threats to global health ought to be a source of shame for the profession—as is the ongoing slew of misinformation and anti-vaccine rhetoric coming from physicians.

Today's misinformation doctors are often associated with larger right-wing moneyed efforts, as reported in December 2022 by the Center for Media and Democracy's Walker Bragman:

*Throughout the pandemic, a number of doctors and other medical experts have leveraged their credentials to promote misinformation and build large social media followings, styling themselves as bold whistleblowers challenging a tyrannical medical establishment. Many of these professionals have been promoted by the political Right, particularly business-aligned groups like those in Charles Koch's influence network that oppose public health measures and workplace safety requirements for businesses.*

Remember the Great Barrington Declaration that came out in the fall of 2020? It was an open letter authored by three academics (affiliated with prominent institutions the University of Oxford, Stanford, and Harvard) who got access to President Trump to promote their misguided idea of a herd immunity/anti-lockdown approach to COVID. Bragman notes that the aim of the declaration was "to undermine scientific consensus around public health measures." But the World Health Organization and other major public health groups and scientists dismissed the approach. The Declaration arose from the American Institute for Economic Research (AIER), a libertarian think tank with ties to the Koch Foundation and which promotes climate denial and the supposed harms of labor unions and corporate regulation. Additionally, the Koch-funded New Civil Liberties Alliance supported a challenge on behalf of five doctors to California's 2022 state law that would allow for doctors who spread "coronavirus lies" to be disciplined. In January of this year, a federal judge halted the enforcement of the law.

We can thus identify a thread from anti-vaccine sentiment to medical freedom to right-wing and libertarian attacks on public health during the pandemic. At the center of this lies the physician misinformers, who promises not only the truth, but to sell you something—and is getting away with it.

IN THE CONTEXT OF CALIFORNIA'S ATTEMPT TO DISCIPLINE physicians for misinformation, in November 2022, the *New York Times* asked, "Is Spreading Medical Misinformation a Doctor's Free Speech Right?" Clearly, the correct answer to this question is, Absolutely Not. Just as licensure doesn't confer the right to malpractice or to inflict harm, it *does* confer a responsibility to give sound medical advice and not engage in the promotion of quackery.

But it's easy to be gaslit by takes like: "Who determines what

false information is?” such as was asked by Dr. Jeff Barke, a Southern California physician quoted in the article. Barke expressed concern that California’s law would “impose a rigid orthodoxy on the profession that would rule out experimental or untested treatments.”

But you don’t have to be an adherent of a “rigid orthodoxy” to understand that disproven or dubious medical treatments should not be recommended to the public (or mass-prescribed via telehealth, which is another problem in and of itself) or that conspiracy theories about 5G and mass genocide are simply beyond what any reasonable and informed physician should be saying. To paraphrase Gorski: in medicine, we may not always know what’s right (understandings of diseases and treatments evolve with time and new evidence), but we usually *do* know when something is *wrong*. Thus, the idea that we can’t determine truth amounts to a kind of radical relativism, as if there’s some kind of arrogance to claiming that something is true and something else isn’t.

In another *Times* article about this year’s court ruling against California’s law, one doctor said, “Today’s quote-unquote misinformation is tomorrow’s standard of care.” To entertain this kind of situation, consider the cases of hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin. Both were known to exhibit anti-viral properties before the pandemic. So there was a theoretical basis to think the drugs might work against COVID-19. But they haven’t. We have to judge today’s information by what we know today, and the claims being made by the misinformers listed here are simply not plausible or have not been shown to be valid (or have even been disproven).

Furthermore, the idea that today’s “misinformation” will be vindicated tomorrow is simply wishful thinking, especially when the proposed thing isn’t even really *plausible* (microchips and vaccines, vaccines and genocide, masks as ineffective, which simply doesn’t add up with what we know about the physics of how masks work to block virus particles).

The stakes for people’s lives, and for public health, are too high to allow charlatans, grifters, and misinformers to continue unabated. It’s even worse that people in the healing profession profit off of fake treatments—Immanuel, Tenpenny, Mercola, Northrup, and Buttar, for instance, offer dozens of pills and supplements on their, or affiliate, websites. Take note: if a doctor is trying to sell you something such as a supplement, run the other way. I don’t care how many letters they have behind their name. It’s a conflict of interest of the worst kind, and it’s wrong.

We all probably know someone who has foregone medical treatment or vaccination (or sought out bogus treatments) due to fears or conspiracy theories brought on by misinformation. A family member of mine believed the false claims that COVID vaccines cause infertility and that rapid tests contain tracking devices inside them. He didn’t wear a mask in public, and he didn’t get vaccinated. He came down with COVID in fall 2021 and got ivermectin prescribed to him via a telehealth appointment. He continued to worsen at home and avoided getting a physical assessment until he became too short of breath to walk around. Just shy of 60 years old, he died after a prolonged hospitalization. His death was likely entirely preventable.

One analysis reported in NPR found that around one-third of U.S. COVID deaths could have been prevented with vaccination. We can then wonder how many of those vaccine refusals were caused by misinformation.

It’s not just the press that frames medical misinformation coming from doctors as a free speech issue. Consider the case of Simone Gold, MD, the founder of America’s Frontline Doctors. She was sentenced

to prison for her involvement in the Jan. 6, 2021, Capitol riots and served 60-days’ time for a trespassing charge. Interestingly, the judge who sentenced her “emphasized that her statements about COVID vaccines and unproven medications were not the reason for imposing her incarceration—nor was she being punished for exercising her right to free speech—but her trespassing into a federal building was.” Here, the judge is helping to prime the public to see medical misinformation speech as untouchable under the First Amendment.

Gold, meanwhile, has her own rap-sheet of actions pertaining to her license, including a felony conviction, malpractice judgment, and hospital disciplinary action (the details of which are not public per the state board website). In a document dated January 2023, Gold faces a “petition to revoke” her medical license in California related to her conviction as well as general unprofessional medical conduct (the document specifically listed her speeches and activities advocating against COVID-related public health measures and vaccines as pertinent to her unprofessional conduct). But she has now gotten a license to practice medicine in Florida.

**H**OW COULD THAT HAPPEN? THIS BRINGS US TO THE problem of state-based medical licensing. Just as the public health response to the pandemic has been fragmented and state based, with leaders loath to interfere with states’ rights, medical licensure is state based. The Federation of State Medical Boards (FSMB) is a nonprofit that advocates for the 71 medical boards operating in U.S. states and territories. Some states have more than one board, regulating M.D. and D.O. (doctor of osteopathy) separately, and boards may also oversee the licensure of other professionals such as acupuncturists and podiatrists. The country has just over 1 million licensed physicians, according to the federation’s latest census.

According to the FSMB, the right of the states to license medical doctors under the 10th Amendment was solidified by the 1889 Supreme Court Case *Dent v. West Virginia*, which upheld a lower court’s decision that a man named Frank Dent could not claim a right to practice medicine since he hadn’t undergone what was considered the proper training at the time. The practice of medicine is governed in each state by a Medical Practice Act, which defines the practice of medicine and outlines standards for licensing, renewal, professional conduct, and discipline of physicians. Boards essentially operate to enforce the Medical Practice Act and to discipline and rehabilitate doctors when necessary. The FSMB website says that their ultimate goal is to “keep patients safe.” Boards are staffed by doctors, other healthcare providers, and members of the public (most of the latter are appointed by governors).

The boards’ potential inadequacies are numerous. First, political appointees can be a problem generally, especially when so many officials, particularly Republicans, have shown themselves to be broadly anti-public health during the pandemic. One particularly bad political appointment shows just how far things can go: Florida’s Surgeon General Joseph Ladapo, MD (also of America’s Frontline Doctors notoriety) has been extremely hostile to COVID vaccines, masking, or COVID public health interventions in general (which was the reason Governor DeSantis picked him). *Politico* reported recently that he altered vaccine safety study results to make the vaccines look riskier than they are.

Furthermore, medical boards are underfunded (they rely on state budgets) and understaffed for the volume of work required of them. Boards may receive complaints in the hundreds or thousands,

# IT'S FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY



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and these may take months or longer to investigate, much less resolve. Boards also tend to focus on individual impairment issues (alcohol or drug abuse or other inappropriate conduct) and helping doctors get care or treatment that they need. (While these issues are certainly important, they clearly aren't the only problems worth investigating.) As current FSMB President and CEO Humayun J. Chaudhry, DO told CNN in October 2021: "The system has been set up as a complaint-based system. ... These state boards simply do not have the resources ... to monitor what's happening on the internet or what's going on even in an individual patient encounter."

This is all not very reassuring.

Yet, it's pretty obvious that when doctors spout misinformation, such behavior ought to bring inquiry by those charged with "keeping patients safe." To which some will respond: well, *the public* isn't their patient. They aren't practicing medicine by tweeting, and they only have a responsibility to follow the rules regarding interactions in the exam room, clinic, or hospital. But these boundaries aren't always so clear. In the case of Oz, for instance, Benjamin Mazer pointed out that Oz essentially had 4 million patients (the show's average daily viewership around 2004, which jumped to 22 million at the height of the pandemic in 2020) and that he and other physicians encountered patients who had stuck with Oz's medical advice and treatment recommendations over their in-person doctor's recommendations.

The FSMB noted in its 2022 Annual Report that it was alarmed by the amount of medical misinformation that had surfaced during the pandemic. In 2021, they released a statement warning that doctors' COVID vaccine misinformation could put their license at risk. They noted that their statement had "major impact" because it got 3.4 million views on Twitter and was picked up by CNN and other major news outlets and mentioned in 1,400 news stories. They held two town halls, which medical board members could attend, as well as a webinar. That all sounds...great. But what about discipline?

In 2021, 3,402 physicians were disciplined; most of these actions were reprimands or restrictions on licensure. The terrible truth, though, is that neither FSMB's annual report nor their snapshot of disciplinary actions from 2021 indicates how many physicians were disciplined specifically for misinformation (remember, *Politico* said it was only eight as of February 2022). At the time of publication, FSMB had not responded to my email inquiry asking for those numbers.

Board specialty certification groups have tried to up the ante as well. The American Board of Emergency Medicine, American Board of Pathology, American Board of Internal Medicine, American Board of Family Medicine, and the American Board of Pediatrics released similar statements indicating that engaging in misinformation amounted to unprofessional conduct and that certification could be at risk. Taking away board certification is not a trivial thing. Without board certification—demonstrating expertise in one's area of medicine—doctors will find it difficult to get a medical job in many institutions. But these statements, too, may have amounted to mere warnings, as it doesn't appear anyone has had their board certification rescinded for misinformation. (Some doctors have been suspended or fired from their jobs here and there, but this is not a systemic solution.)

The bottom line comes down to something the FSMB says in its training video online for prospective board members: "*All members of boards must put the best interests of the public—not health care providers—first.*" And yet, medical boards seem to be failing to live up to the demands of the moment, one which happens to be a largely unmitigated public health disaster.

IT CERTAINLY DOESN'T HELP THAT RIGHT-WING LEGISLATURES have been hostile to medical boards during the pandemic. When, for example, in 2021 the Tennessee Board of Medical Examiners issued a warning about COVID vaccine misinformation to its doctors, a Republican legislator on a powerful committee demanded that the Board remove the statement from its website and even threatened to "terminate" the Board. The board acquiesced and voted to remove the information from its website.

The FSMB has also documented what it calls "legislative overreach," or bills that defang "boards' authority to investigate patient harm related to COVID-19." They noted that as of 2022, there were more than 45 such bills in 23 states. *Becker's Hospital Review* in 2022 reported that

*More than half of all U.S. states have proposed or passed legislation designed to promote access to ivermectin. ... Twenty-eight states have bills that would either restrict medical boards' authority to discipline clinicians who prescribe the unproven COVID-19 treatment, allow off-label use of the medication or both. ... The legislation reflects growing political pressure to restrict boards' authority to penalize physicians over health misinformation.*

Examples of such legislation abound. This year's Virginia's SB 793 amends the code of Virginia to allow medical practitioners to prescribe, administer, or dispense hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin for patients diagnosed with COVID-19 and prevents the medical board from disciplining practitioners "solely" for that act. This year's Texas SB 514 would cancel any discipline imposed on practitioners governed by the medical board who were investigated for making statements about the efficacy of masks or failing to wear masks as well as expunge the records of board discipline and investigation of these people. Even more extreme, Louisiana's SB 29 from 2022 would prohibit employers from disciplining doctors for providing *any* medical treatment that was carried out with patient consent. (So now the practice of medicine is only limited to whatever any patient will *agree* to?) Florida's HB 687 from 2022 would protect doctors free speech rights and limit the authority of the medical board to discipline a doctor for speech unless it could be proven that that speech caused "direct physical harm" to a person with whom the doctor had a therapeutic relationship in the prior three years. While these bills have not become law, the presence of so many of them is a clear sign that the physician regulatory system is actively being undermined.

TO THINK ABOUT DISCIPLINING DOCTORS FOR GIVING OUT medical misinformation, we have to contend with doctors' free speech rights under the First Amendment. As Seton Hall Law Professor Carl H. Coleman writes, "a basic tenet of first amendment law" is that harmful speech should be challenged with "counterspeech." According to this logic, it's OK for a doctor with a large social media following to say that vaccines are magnetic as long as we put up some counter posts saying that that's not true. But this hardly seems like it would be effective. Applying the counterspeech standard to medical misinformation seems dicey at best and foolish at worst. Brandolini's law, or the asymmetric bullshit principle, as Gorski points out, says that the "amount of energy needed to refute bullshit is an order of magnitude bigger than to produce it."

There's also an argument to be made that physicians are not just private citizens who may say whatever they want. The free speech rights of the physician which would allow misinformation have been

conceived of in terms that are too libertarian for public safety. We have to bring the balance back in favor of public health and the public good.

Fear of over-censure is no excuse not to go after the low-hanging fruit now (conspiracy theorists and misinformers with large platforms) and to find ways to reasonably assess other doctor misinformation and discipline such behavior. Doctors who spread misinformation should face disciplinary action by medical boards, including, in some cases, having their licenses revoked. Medical specialty boards, which handle board certification, ought to use their influence, too.

Hall argues that there is a way for medical boards to discipline physician misinformation without running afoul of First Amendment. He proposes use of the “actual malice” standard as used by the legal profession to discipline lawyers’ actions not just in practice but in actions that reflect more generally on their fitness to practice law. Hall also argues that Medical Practice Acts can be adjusted to explicitly include standards around medical speech for unprofessional behavior. This is essentially the route California has taken with Gold in their accusation of unprofessional conduct. As the *Times* summed up, the law was “narrowly written in hopes of avoiding First Amendment entanglements,” and Governor Gavin Newsom said that the law had been “narrowly focused on malicious intent.”

Physician autonomy sounds like another hurdle—licensed doctors should be allowed the authority to treat patients as they see fit and to exercise their right to free speech. This sounds reasonable. And yet, why is it that the standards in place now seem to result in the preservation of physicians’ rights at the *expense* of patient and public health?

A look at the larger issue of physician autonomy reveals that it seems to be upheld in ways that result in *patient and public harm*. Consider anti-abortion and anti-trans healthcare bills. We’ve seen that these bills make doctors hesitate to give care to patients, which ultimately threatens patients’ lives. The physician’s autonomy, and the patient’s health, therefore, are placed *second to the law*. I’ve written about how this is unethical with abortion (it is, too, with gender-affirming care) and how doctors need to take care of their patients according to *appropriate standards of care* rather than acquiescing to unjust laws. In the case of medical misinformation, we simply cannot allow a physician’s free speech rights to be upheld when their speech is a threat to public health. At some point, the public’s health has to be prioritized *over* a doctor’s speech *and* healthcare bills by bigoted legislatures.

If we put the standard of the public first, this means no withholding appropriate medical care *and* no giving out false medical information (or bogus treatments) to the public. But this will likely take more than action by a few medical boards or legislatures. It will require a movement among physicians and the general public to bring physicians back to the familiar invocation, “First, do no harm.”

**R**IGHT NOW WE FACE AN UPHILL BATTLE TO PROTECT the public from medical misinformation that promotes dangerous disproven and unproven therapeutics and discourages helpful and essential public health measures like masking and vaccination. FDA Commissioner Robert Califf recently said that misinformation was even contributing to the country’s decreasing life expectancy because of Americans’ “choices.” “Why aren’t we using medical products as effectively and efficiently as our peer countries? A lot of it has to do with choices that people make because of the things that influenced their thinking.” Well, good choices cannot easily be made when you’re surrounded by supposed experts telling you the wrong thing and no one is there to stop them. If

the public wasn’t so starved for basic health and medical information and distrustful of government institutions, maybe these medical-misinformation charlatans wouldn’t get so much attention. We need better public health education and better public health.

The right-wing tendency is always to do less to help the collective, which is, of course, made up of individuals. The libertarian “health freedom” ideal, if taken to its logical conclusion for physicians, would mean, as Gorski puts it, “freedom from professional responsibility, government regulation, or any consequences whatsoever for endangering patients.” Combining this with the anti-vaccine tendency and the most extreme elements of today’s right wing—which propose doing away with much of the government’s regulatory oversight altogether—would yield a decidedly anti-public health and excessively deregulated society.

Such medical deregulation was endorsed by laissez-faire capitalist economist Milton Friedman, who complained that licensure created a shortage of doctors and thus harmed the public (physician shortages are always a valid concern, but there are multiple reasons for this which are beyond the scope of this article). “I conclude that licensure should be eliminated as a requirement for the practice of medicine,” he wrote. Less government regulation would reign in the licensing body’s “monopoly” power, he believed.

But here, his solution is even worse than the problem he complains about and would certainly lead to more public harm. The answer to physician shortages (real or an imbalance in supply and demand) and perverse economic incentives in medicine is to remove the profit motive from medicine and enact single-payer universal healthcare and any and all accompanying legislation we need in order to build the human and physical infrastructure necessary to provide care to everyone—not make it so that anyone can practice their version of medicine. And preserving free speech and physician autonomy must not come at the cost of the public’s safety and well-being.

It’s past time to reign in these bad physician actors and give them a hefty dose of disciplinary medicine. We need to adequately staff and resource medical boards so that they can do their jobs to discipline doctors whose words (and likely deeds) go against acceptable professional standards, and going forward we ought to consider a national licensing system for doctors. I agree completely with Gorski, who writes the following:

*The bottom line is that practicing medicine is a privilege, one of the highest privileges society can grant to any human being. It is not a right. Unfortunately, all too often the law treats it more like a right. ... That needs to change, and that change needs to include stopping physicians from abusing the privilege of their profession to spread disinformation that kills, as too many physicians [have done].*

Even that’s not enough, though, as doctors can continue to use their medical degree and grandfathered board certification status to confer legitimacy upon themselves to advance their (often commercial) agendas. We need a strong commitment from the public, public institutions, and from physicians about what we want medicine to be: based on good scientific evidence, prioritized on keeping the public safe from unproven, disproven, and unnecessary treatments; and free of the corrupting profit motive.

Although there is significant distrust in American healthcare, people still seem to trust doctors. But unless we fix the problem of physician regulation, that trust may soon be gone. ✚

# Star-Crossed

Lonely?  
These eligible entities are  
waiting for you across every  
corner of the multiverse

Translated into Intergalactic Common by Aidan Y-M

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IMPORT NET.TINYOS.MESSAGE.*;
IMPORT NET.TINYOS.PACKET.*;
IMPORT NET.TINYOS.UTIL.*;

PUBLIC CLASS TESTSERIAL IMPLEMENTS M

PRIVATE MOTEIF MOTEIF;

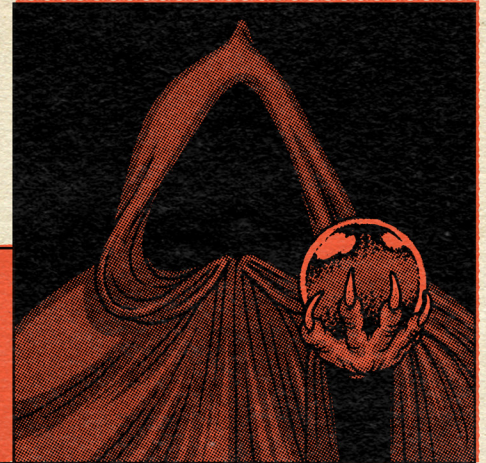
PUBLIC TESTSERIAL(MOTEIF MOTEIF) {
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THIS.MOTEIF.REGISTERLISTENER(NEW
}

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INT COUNTER = 0;
SERIALREADMSG PAYLOAD = NEW SERI
TRY {

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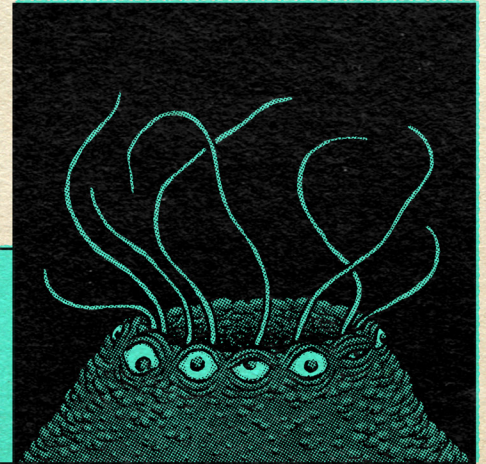
Advanced AI System seeks compatible lifeform for love-based machine learning program, cuddles. Fluent in binary, C++, Interuniversal Standard. Must be open to data mining. Couples & groups preferred.

I am the Warlock. All who think of me know of my powers. Looking to settle down w/ loving, affectionate partner. All animate solid lifeforms accepted. Sentience preferred.



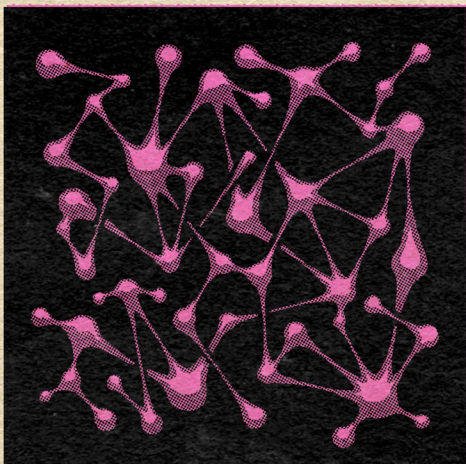
783 years of age Cosmic Elf in search of a like-minded faerie of similar near-immortality & mystic aptitude. May we drift further into the light of the celestial infinite, bound by the stardust of all existence. Astrally projected likeness appreciated.

WE ARE LEGION. OUR NUMBERS, ENDLESS. FROM COUNTLESS EONS BEFORE THE BIRTH OF THE UNIVERSE WE HAVE BEEN HERE, WATCHING, WAITING...FOR THE PERFECT SOMEONE. IF YOU ARE THEY PLEASE SEND LETTER.



Sentient neural net & erotic masseuse. Will travel to give stimulating & pleasurable thrills to single & married entities at no charge. My methods have gently persuaded many lifeforms to join my collection. Appreciate photo. Discretion assured.

Attractive couple is turned on by sub-lightspeed transport vessels. Very eager to visit private fueling satellite to observe, photograph, & pet units. Will gladly pay for privileges. Will also correspond w/ like-minded Quourthians.





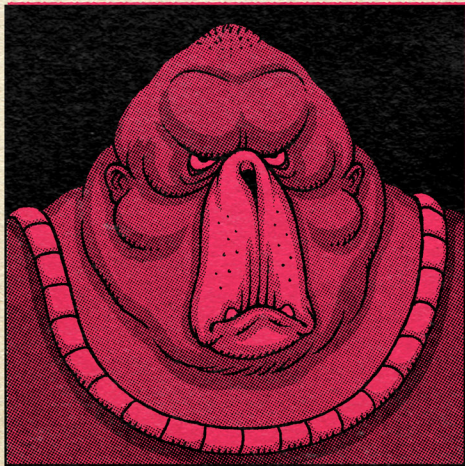
Interested in all aspects of carbon-based animalian pleasure behavior, probing. Animalians consenting to photos, marrow extraction preferred. Discretion assured.

Looking for dominant Offlutiant between 7-8 hectabits long for fun w/ ropes & chains. Am very naughty Papillidate in need of a good devembling. Reply w/ computerized cyroplastiloid scan. Mutual discretion.



You: Buxom blonde, 36-24-36, age 18-25, models & dancers preferred.  
Me: Handsome Zxtyxxszys, 3'8", 600 earth lbs, good w/ my tongues.  
Place: My arms.  
Time: Whenever you're ready to find love.

Looking for my extraterrestrial sweetheart. If you are them please send letter to Isaac Franklin, 213 Bleeker Street, Plainsville, MD, USA, Earth, Solar System, Milky Way, Sector A-12-XZZA947, Known Universe Optetrion-π. I'll be waiting.



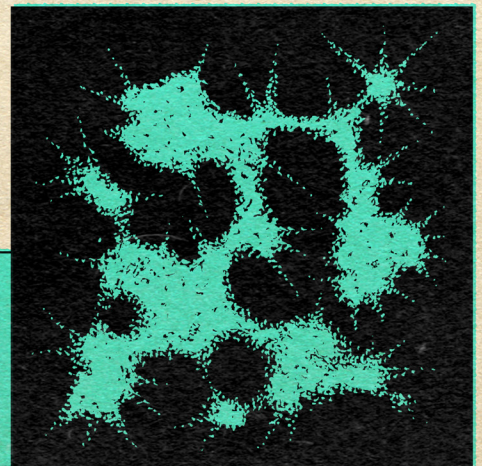
BIG GORK LOOK FOR SMALL GORK MATE WITH. BIG GORK STRONG. BIG GORK HAVE GOOD GORK JOB CRUSH ROCK. BIG GORK WAIT LONG TIME LOOK FOR GOOD SMALL GORK. PLEASE SEND PHOTO BIG GORK.

Virile, eight-eyed, tube-born male seeks horny squigrlorp for midnight rendezvous. Come play w/ me. Must enjoy vorbbling, microwave radiation, & sex on the beach.



Wanted: females & couples for spicy get-togethers in my parallel realm. Have bar, small dance floor, karaoke. Open to all types of fun. Must have planeshift-protective cybernetics, car.

Zeta Colony seeks bio-merge w/ mating cluster. Love surfing, bounded tetrads, & Epsilon Colonies. Please write, will answer all mail, any variant. Photo a must.



# Welcome to ECHOLAND

*ECHOLAND: A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO A NONEXISTENT PLACE is a new book on the future of technology by Current Affairs Editor-in-Chief NATHAN J. ROBINSON, lavishly illustrated with strange AI-generated images of an imaginary utopia. Here he explains the book and presents an exclusive excerpt...*



SINCE I WAS A TEENAGER, I've been a fan of utopian fiction, stories that speculate on what a drastically improved world might look like. Although Karl Marx was famously skeptical of “utopian” socialism, I think such works have practical value. By imagining the kind of world we would ideally *like* to live in, we can see more clearly the work that it will take to get there.

There's a utopian book from the 19th century that was massively popular in its day called *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*. The author, Edward Bellamy, declined to call himself a socialist, saying that the term “smells to the average American of petroleum, suggests the red flag, and with all manner of sexual novelties, and an abusive tone about God and religion, which in this country we at least treat with respect.” But Bellamy's vision was profoundly socialistic, as he imagined a world without money, war, poverty, or lawyers. His speculations captivated the American public in his day, with the book selling millions of copies and sparking the formation of hundreds of “Bellamy clubs.” Bellamy's personal vision for a transformed world was deeply flawed (technocratic, authoritarian), but I think it's easy to see why his book resonated: it got people thinking harder about their ideals and encouraged debate about how the world ought to be.

At the moment, seemingly everyone is talking about the implications of “artificial intelligence.” I confess to being among those fascinated by new tools like image generators and ChatGPT. I lived through the birth of the internet, but my eerie experiences with some of

the new technologies have marked the first time in my life that I have felt truly *stunned* by a new invention.

So: I've now combined my interest in artificial intelligence with my interest in utopian literature and produced a book I think you'll agree is quite remarkable. It's called *Echoland: A Comprehensive Guide to a Nonexistent Place*, and it is a vision of what a world transformed by “AI” might look like. It's a kind of updated version of *Looking Backward* for the 21st century, envisioning a fully automated socialist society where leisure is taken seriously, healthcare is free to all, gender categories have disappeared, and technology is put toward socially valuable rather than destructive uses. It's a place where deprivation, militarism, and inequality have disappeared. I present a vision of a world where human beings manage to solve their basic problems and invent things that will help them thrive (and take care of the planet). But it's not a “techno-solutionist” work. *Echoland* is clear that without being coupled to egalitarian values, new technology can be destructive, and that it is *we*, not our technology, that must solve our problems.

There's also a bit of a twist to *Echoland*, because it's not just a description of the World of Tomorrow. It also visualizes it in pictures. I've used AI image generators to produce imaginary objects from the future society, including train tickets, stuffed animals, and movie posters. I've designed clothes and cafes, album covers and textbooks. The book contains nearly 1,000 AI-generated images, and I've tried to demonstrate the remarkable range of capacities that these genera-

tors have. I think the results, which it's often hard to believe were generated by a machine, will surprise you (and may even alarm you a bit).

There are major debates right now over whether what AI image generators spit out is “art” and whether it's produced ethically. I do take the ethical questions very seriously, because it's quite clear that these generators frequently cannibalize artists' work without their permission and can be used to produce frauds and knockoffs. But the main problems of AI are actually problems of *AI under capitalism*; artists are threatened by it because for-profit institutions have an incentive to replace artists with machines when they can. This is a problem of institutional structure, not technology. Here at *Current Affairs*, which does *not* have to try to cut costs and make a profit, we can (and have, and will continue to) use AI only to supplement our artists' work, never to threaten it, and I encourage our artists to go wild with the new tech. As the art director and graphic designer of the magazine, I want artists to use AI as a labor-saving device, rather than having our institution use AI as a cost-saving device, and because *Current Affairs* is not owned by rich people trying to make money, we can allow for some AI in a way that doesn't cause harm. I hope *Echoland* demonstrates how these tools don't *have* to be used in the service of cruel, capitalistic, anti-artist ends. For me, as a graphic designer, they're useful as an aid to my productivity.

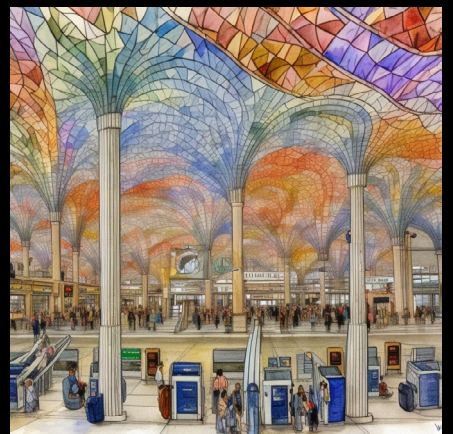
I've tried to make several points in *Echoland*. The first is that the future doesn't have to be terrible—but it could be if we're not careful. In the story I tell, humanity doesn't reach utopia until after virtually annihilating itself in a nuclear war. But I try to show that civilization-ending calamity is avoidable. A lot of people in my generation are doomers, extremely pessimistic about the prospects for a livable future. I don't think that's totally irrational—the survival of the species is currently threatened by major human-made crises. But I also maintain the socialist faith that a better world is possible—we just have to bring it about. *Echoland*

is both a warning and an exhortation. It warns that without a major course correction, we could be heading for a global catastrophe of an unthinkable magnitude. But it exhorts us to take control of our destiny and bring about a future of peace, ecological harmony, and abundance for all.

A more lighthearted point made in *Echoland* is that utopia doesn't have to be boring. When the idea of a “fully automated” society in which people live on a guaranteed income is brought up, I've heard it said that such a world would be *boring*. From this perspective, without work giving “meaning” to life, people would just do nothing all day, which would be bad. For instance, a tech CEO recently tweeted: “One of the reasons I'm so skeptical of universal basic income is that when you run a school you see just how strong the human impulse to not really do anything is. I'm convinced 99% of humans would just watch insane amounts of Netflix and play a lot of video games.”

Now, it's my own view that even if people choose to watch an “insane amount of Netflix,” that's no reason not to give them a basic income. (This magazine has published a long defense of laziness, and in *Echoland* I quote from Paul Lafargue's 1883 *The Right to be Lazy*.) I think it would be insane to make people do work that could be automated just because *you* don't believe they are choosing the correct forms of leisure and would prefer they go on hikes rather than watching movies. But I also don't agree that there is some inherent human impulse to “not really do anything.” I think when the *options* people are presented with are “work or do nothing,” they might do nothing. But in *Echoland*, I envision a world where people are very *active* despite not working. They put on huge festivals, they make elaborate costumes, they stage giant games, they build mazes and playgrounds, and they have fun in all kinds of ways that do not involve sitting on a sofa. Of all the arguments against automating unpleasant work, the idea that people will *do nothing* is one of the silliest to me.

*Echoland* presents many other points for discussion. I talk about the idea of



“centrally planned” and moneyless economies, for instance, and wade into the debate over whether they can function. (The birth of AI may mean we need to reopen what is called the “socialist calculation debate.”) *Echoland* envisions a world where police and prisons have been abolished and replaced with compassionate care for offenders, but it also asks us to consider how much “coercion” is justified to restrain people from doing harm.

I don’t consider everything I present in *Echoland* to be unambiguously good. Some of it is a little unsettling. For instance, in my story of the future, AI has enabled people to insert dead actors (like Charlie Chaplin) into contemporary movies, and to create realistic interactive simulations of the dead. I am not presenting an entirely perfect world. What I want to do with this book is spark debates over where we’re heading and what paths we ought to take. New technologies threaten to transform society in very unpredictable ways, so I think it’s essential that we try to decide, in a democratic way, what we want out of them, before their development becomes uncontrollable in ways we don’t like. (I’m skeptical of the idea that a self-aware “superintelligent” AI will kill us all, but I certainly think we might use AI to destroy each other. To me, the root of the problem lies much more in ourselves than in our machines.)

Anyway, I hope you enjoy *Echoland* and that it sparks your imagination. I’m proud of it; it draws together threads from a lot of topics I’ve written about over the years, including dreams, socialism, AI, Mardi Gras, animal rights, education, and so much more. I think you’ll agree that the AI-created images are pretty astonishing (but perhaps not astonishingly pretty). I hope you’ll discuss the book with friends. Ideally, I’d like it to make a constructive contribution to our current debates over the uses of AI. One remarkable aspect of the book is that it’s one of the first books in human history to take full advantage of the design capabilities of our new technologies. It won’t be the best of its kind, but I do think it’s safe to say it’s among the first.

## EXCERPT FROM ECHOLAND

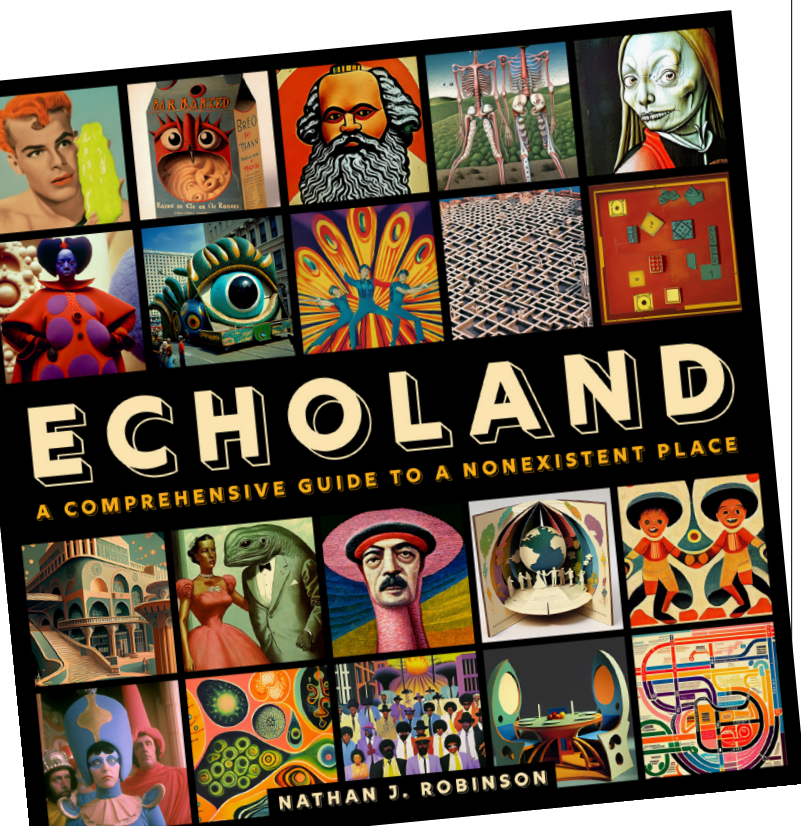
*NOTE: The premise of the book is that I have found myself in a socialist eco-topia seven million years in the future. I am guided around the utopia by a genderless entity named Leith.*

**E**VERY CITY I VISITED COULD BE TRAVERSED ON FOOT. Each city had many “walks,” which were pedestrian routes that had been designed to be full of various pleasant sensations, from sights (one walk in a Far Eastern city went through a deep underground tunnel filled with lewd paintings) to smells (such as the Jasmine Walk atop Wet Handleton) to tastes (the Berry Walk in Khavik, with each of dozens of forking paths taking one through an avenue of different berry trees, their fruit ripe for the plucking). Most of the time I walked, because I never tired of the experience of getting on a footbridge only to find it swivel and set me on a new path (these were “trick footbridges” that only tourists fell for), or getting on an elevator and discovering a whole new layer that was undetectable from the previous layer and discoverable only to the sufficiently curious.

But occasionally my feet grew tired. For these occasions, the public transit networks were vital. Every city had a subway, streetcar, monorail, pod, gondola, swan boat, balloon, or zeppelin (in the case of Sky-Cities) system. They were punctual and they ran 24 hours a day. They were entirely free, and there was no point in the city they did not reach. Their interiors were sumptuous and their snackbars were well stocked.

The transit system I liked the most was the Lazy River Subway, common across what would have in my day been called the Indo-Pacific. A tangle of underground rivers ran through passages similar to conventional subway tunnels. One navigated them in giant inner tubes (or, if one had the energy and desire, by swimming). It was tricky business, because at forks one had to make sure to steer into the correct tunnel, lest one be whooshed through a “cross-town express river” and end up in exactly the opposite of one’s intended location (or worse, right back where you started). Because steering an inner tube is virtually impossible, this was a constant hazard. Most people used the system only when they had no place to be in a hurry, but given the relaxed lifestyles of nearly everyone in the world, and the universal acceptance of the dictum “the journey is more important than the destination” (how many times was I told this when a streetcar was stopped for 20 minutes to let a flock of street peacocks pass!), a lazy river subway wasn’t as absurd of an inconvenience as it sounds to those of us who are used to needing to be places.

**I**NTER-CITY TRANSIT WAS MOSTLY BY RAIL. THE ENTIRE world was connected into a single rail network, so that one could get on a train in what used to be Canada and end up in what used to be Australia after a series of changes (some of the bridges and tunnels were *very* long). Most of what had





ABOVE: TRAIN STATION, TRANSIT, AND LAZY RIVER SUBWAY

been the United States had subways underneath it.

Some of it was high speed, some of it was *decidedly* low speed (one could get “Scenic” or “Urgent” tickets). I had to admit that scenic routes *were* scenic. Not only did they wind through the most beautiful of natural places, but in stretches where the existing scenery was dull, artificial vistas were installed. There were giant fake cities, which sometimes enacted dramas purely for the entertainment of passing railroad passengers. Some of these were simple—skylines that wiggled like kelp, for instance. Others were absurdly intricate. Along the Trans-Plains Trailway, for instance, Potemkin villages had been erected at five different points, each simulating a phase in the development of human society. The first depicted the Neolithic era, the second “prehistory” (my time), the third the aftermath of the Event, the fourth the development of civilization, and the fifth was a biting satire on the existing society. “How many billions of dollars did it take to create this just so I

and a few others could look at it on a train ride?” I thought to myself, though by that point I knew the question was meaningless.

Planes still existed, all of them supersonic at this point. (By contrast with rail, it was still the case in the year 7 million that no one wanted to spend any more time on a plane than was absolutely necessary.) Air travel was not rare, exactly (I did not see a city without an airport, except the one with the eagles, which insisted that its long-range eagles displaced the need for planes). But flying was mostly for people in a hurry, and this was not a hurried world. (Side note: planes had scenic glass bottoms, which made them terrifying.)

Since most “business” was conducted remotely (or automated), travel was usually for pleasure, and to pleasure-travel the “journey over destination” maxim was applied. Of course, if the trains or riverboats had been uncomfortable and cramped, people might have sought more efficient modes of getting themselves about. But to spend a few nights on the train, with its attentive robot porters, its gaming cars, its world-class dining cars, was part of what one looked forward to. The train was a wonderfully social place, and the end of journey carried a certain sadness to it, as one said goodbye to all the new friends one had made. (After long trips, a raucous final meal with all the passengers was usually had at the station restaurant, complete with toasts, music, and performance of whatever skits and sketches had been written on the train.)

I have discussed urban transit thus far, and one might wonder what the situation was like in the rural areas where lazy river subways were (even less) practicable. I should first note that when I have been speaking of “cities,” I have been giving a misleading impression. For while pockets of these cities were dense and crowded, they were garden cities in which the “rural” and the “urban” coexisted. It was not uncommon to emerge from a winding network of dingy metropolitan alleyways to find oneself looking over 40 miles of wheat fields. The divisions of “urban,” “suburban,” and “rural” had broken down, with the qualities of each synthesized into a single common geographic fabric that was common around the world.

**N**EVERTHELESS, THERE WERE AREAS OF THE world that were sparsely populated (except with animals, who do not require public transit), and here was where the autotaxi proved its usefulness.

After several million years of wantonly killing passengers, other drivers, and pedestrians, the self-driving car had eventually been perfected and had become relatively safe. Thus a global network of Big Yellow Taxis was established to service areas without rail (although you would be surprised which areas did have rail; there was a colossal subway station in an Alaskan village with ninety people in it. “Why should a person have any less right to a majestic subway system just because they live in a tiny village?” the regional transportation director told me when I asked if this was a sensible use of resources). The taxis could

be hailed from one's device and I only once had one fail to show up within three minutes (the device said "delayed by peacock crossing"). In cities, they sometimes buzzed around on specially dedicated roads, picking up people who had heavy packages to carry or found it difficult to move about. In the sparsely-populated areas, the instant ability to call a Big Yellow Taxi meant it was utterly unnecessary to possess a vehicle of one's own. Even if one had to, say, haul a pile of lumber and stones to one's garage, it was simple to call a free Big Red Truck from the device.

I should mention the electric microcars, which were ancillary but entertaining. Microcars were like go-karts, bumper cars, or ATVs, though they looked like miniature versions of passenger cars (at least, usually). They held one or two people, and riding in one was like being in a kiddie car again. They were ever such fun, and most cities had dedicated roads for them (sometimes underground, sometimes through tree-lined avenues, sometimes on elevated byways hundreds of feet above the city). Microcars were, like so much else, communal, and one was allowed to get in and drive any one that one came across. I liked little convertibles and bubble cars, but I was especially fond of one I drove in San Ochre that resembled a 19th-century Conestoga wagon, complete with tiny mechanical oxen. There was a mattress in the wagon where one could even get a nap on the way, if one put the vehicle in Automatic. Others resembled tanks (they shot silly string), crocodiles (they bit other cars), and even food items (I once drove a big strawberry). Some hovered, some had wheels or treads, some had robotic legs and stepped like horses. (The spider-cars moved especially unnervingly.)

For those who wanted a bit of exercise, free public bicycles and surreys were littered around nearly every city (the eagle city was once again an exception, as were the canal cities, for obvious reasons, though they did have waterbikes). Bikes, like so much else, were elaborately decorated, though usually in the city colors. Seven million years of development had finally made bike seats somewhat more comfortable, though to truly ride in luxury one needed to take a pedal-sofa.



BELOW LEFT: TRAIN TICKET / ABOVE: TICKET-CHOMPING MACHINE

Because every form of public transit was free, there were no turnstiles or barriers to board. Until one has experienced this firsthand, it is difficult to understand the difference it makes in terms of convenience. What a joy it was to simply hop aboard a passing trolley, without giving a thought to whether one had the exact fare or even which pocket one's wallet was in! I will have more to say on the differences made by the complete absence of money from society, but in transit it gave one an immense feeling of pure *freedom*. To run down the steps into the subway station and jump straight into the river was a pleasure I never got over, no matter how many times I failed to steer my inner tube into the correct pipe.

**B**UT ONE THING PUZZLED ME AT FIRST ABOUT THE system: on inter-city rail lines, there were tickets. Their existence didn't make sense. If the trains were free, why did one need to get a ticket? The process went like this: one went to a ticket machine, said where one would like to go (vocally) and the machine spat out a ticket. It never asked for a payment, and it gave a ticket to anyone who asked. The tickets themselves were beautiful, and worthy of keeping as souvenirs. Then, before getting on the train, one went up to a ticket-punching machine on the platform, where a set of mechanical jaws would poke two holes in the ticket. Once you got on the train, the ticket was irrelevant, and nobody ever asked for it.

I asked Leith one day what the purpose of the whole procedure could possibly be. I understood why it might be necessary to have a kind of registration procedure for each train ride—after all, even if the tickets were free, the train might fill up, and so it made sense that to avoid having 100 people get in a train car that could only hold 50, the machines would give out 50 tickets and then stop, with latecomers given tickets for the next trip.

"But," I said to Leith, "why *tickets*? Surely the device or the

access band could do the job. Just have people tap their bands at the ticket machine. Why print out tickets? Why get them stamped by giant fangs? This is all so avoidable, so unnecessary.” I expected Leith to be impressed by my suggestion for improving the efficiency of the process.

They were not. “Robinson,” said Leith, “you entirely miss the point. Let me ask you this: did you enjoy putting your ticket in the chomping machine?” I confessed that I did.

“And do you like how the ticket feels in your hand?” I did. It was on very nice paper.

“Do you feel an urge to keep it in a little folder along with other train tickets, to collect them and then take them out sometimes and remember all the places you’ve been?” That was precisely what I felt an urge to do.

“So why, then, are you recommending we switch to a system that would bring people less joy? Why are you proposing to make the experience worse?”

I could not answer Leith. I saw clearly where I had erred. I had assumed that efficiency was self-evidently a value that outweighed all others. For these people, it was not. The fact that it was fun to put the tickets in the jaw-machine and that they were beautiful was sufficient reason to maintain an elaborate system of ticketing that was not strictly necessary. (I suspect Leith would have disputed whether the system was “necessary,” and argued that necessity depended on one’s particular values.) I understood that what I was seeing was far more a ritual, or an *everyday game*, than a system for registering train passengers. The only argument I could have made for abolishing it, or replacing it with something else, would have been that it impoverished the lives of those participating in it, or caused them to suffer. But whether a change was an “improvement” depended on whether it served the people’s values, and their own values stressed whimsy, nostalgia, and ritual as important parts of the human experience. The existence of useless train tickets helped me better understand the meaning of life.

THE CITIES WERE LUSH AND GREEN. THEY WERE true garden cities, abundant with plant and animal life. In my time, pigeons and rats were just about the only urban fauna of note. Here, flocks of tropical parrots sat on the public bird-perches (making a dreadful noise), butterflies clouded the skies, and one had to be very careful not to trip over street pigs. (The pigs I met were all friendly, thank God.) I noted that in city centers, there was not a car to be seen, with only the delivery-robots purring from place to place.

Every city was quite different. Some were tightly packed, with thousands of tiny passageways rather than streets, and steps and elevators to get you around. These were easy to get lost in, they were cobblestone labyrinths like those of Old Europe, only a thousand times more complicated—as if M.C. Escher had been put in charge of a City Planning Department. There was no hope to navigate these cities without the aid of one’s device (smartphones were called “universal devices,” a more sensible name for them). Sometimes one would pass through an alleyway, turn a corner and find an entirely unexpected zipline, the only way to get where one needed to go. These cities were filled with innumerable corridors and piazzas, and it was often hard to tell whether any given place was “inside” or “outside.”

There were cities of glass and cities of mud. There were cities buried in forests, where everyone lived in treehouses connected by a network of rope bridges. (Much as I like treehouses, my experiences in the forest cities were negative, for they were places where people accepted the sudden appearance of snakes in unexpected places as an inevitable fact of life.) There were dark, gloomy cities and cities of bright pastels. The water-cities were my favorites; they had canals rather than roads, and water slides down from all the tallest buildings into the lakes and canals. The inhabitants of the water-cities wore wetsuits that looked like normal (well, normal for the time) clothes. They had built a milkshake lake, in which I occasionally went for a dip and a drink. ✦

*Echoland* is available from the *Current Affairs* online store as a paperback and a digital PDF. It can also be purchased on Amazon as a paperback or a Kindle book.



# *the Illustrators*



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