

Soon To Be Adapted Into A Major Motion Picture

CURRENT AFFAIRS

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MAY/JUNE 2023



AOC

*Has she stopped fighting
the party establishment?*

RUPERT MURDOCH

*Has any living person
done more harm?*

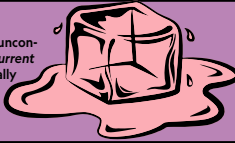
LIFE COACHES

How many are legit?

P R O L O G U E

ICE COLD TAKES for the hot summer months

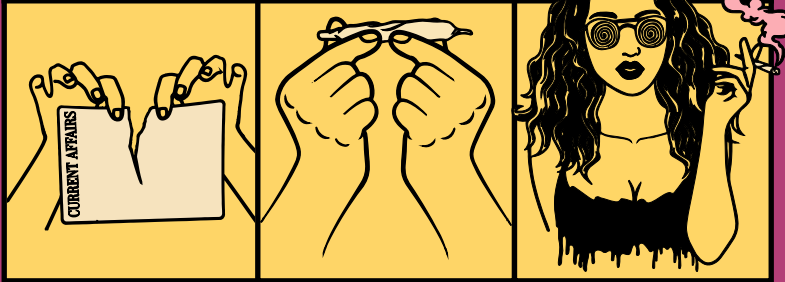
Other publications strive to produce hot takes. They'll give you opinion on the latest unconscionable thing Ron DeSantis or Boris Johnson has done in the last 24 hours. Here at *Current Affairs*, we recognize that you're already hot (thanks, global warming) and what you really need is a nice cold take on something everyone forgot decades ago. That's why you'll find the pages of this magazine stuffed with opinions on everything from Charlie Chaplin films to 1970s Puerto Rican revolutionaries, all served to you ice cold.



UTOPIA CONTEST WINNER

Congratulations to reader **Noah Prejean**, the winner of our "Utopia Contest," for his submission imagining the world of the year Seven Million. In his depiction, an ancient evil (in the form of billionaire capitalists) returns to haunt the land, and a society that has become enmeshed in resource squabbles and Twitter beefs is ill-prepared to deal with this demonic time-traveling presence. We particularly enjoyed the neologism "Muskitos" to describe the followers of a certain plutocrat. For Mr. Prejean's stellar work we are pleased to award him a free lifetime subscription to our magazine.

SMOKE THE MAGAZINE AND SEE THE FUTURE



reining in the FRANCHISEES

Anyone who has been to an airport in the last six months (and there are surely many of you) will know that many of the country's newsstands and magazine kiosks are now officially branded as "*Current Affairs* news & entertainment stalls." Some of you have written in to ask: Is this indeed official *Current Affairs* branding? Or is the term "current affairs" being used in the generic, e.g. "There are an awful lot of current affairs covered in this magazine." The kiosks are legit, friend. We have partnered with the Hudson News Company Incorporated to slather our name on over 400 magazine stands around the country and the world, having noticed that our arch-rival *The Economist* has been doing the same thing.

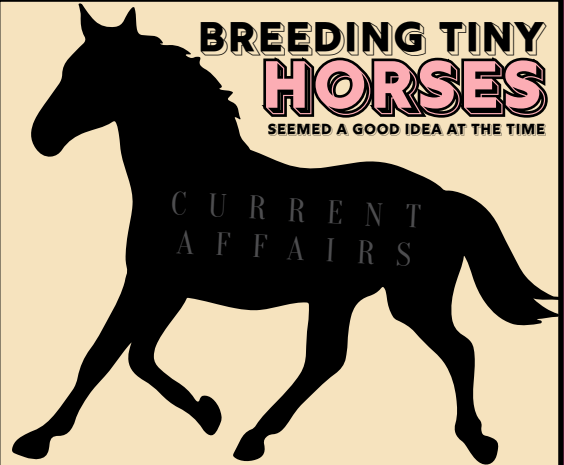
But like everything undertaken with noble purpose, the move has produced some catastrophic unintended consequences, which must be addressed here. It has come to our attention that operators of *Current Affairs* sales franchises have gone beyond their remit in the tactics used to procure new subscribers. It has become common for newsstand operators who fly the *Current Affairs* banner to inform passersby that "the penalty for not subscribing is death."

This is not true. This has never been true. The penalty for not subscribing has never been death. It has always been, and remains, a very mild electric shock. And since the shock is only delivered to those who present themselves in person at *Current Affairs* World Headquarters in New Orleans, the plain fact of the matter is that very few non-subscribers are ever given it. The cautions (some would say implicit threats) of the newsstand owners are therefore entirely unwarranted and we disavow them in the utmost. We are working on securing more robust contractual agreements with our franchisees in future that will prevent these unfortunate excesses.

Incidentally, before we go, a fun fact readers might not know is that internally at *Current Affairs*, the word "franchisee" is pronounced, "fran-CHEESY," because it's more fun that way.

BREEDING TINY HORSES

SEEMED A GOOD IDEA AT THE TIME



In a ruthlessly competitive media environment, ya gotta do what ya can to survive. For many publications, this means branching out into new product offerings. The *New York Times* does not just sell newspaper subscriptions. It also sucks people in with Wordle and a cooking app. The *Unfucking the Republic* podcast offers its *Unfucking* line of specialty coffee beans. The *New Yorker* does the tote bags. At *Current Affairs*, we consider ourselves pretty shrewd about the world of Business, so we knew it would be necessary to introduce some new lines of *Current Affairs* tie-in products. After much editorial deliberation (the magazine does not have a formal business department), we settled upon the breeding and sale of tiny horses, which would be genetically modified to have the *Current Affairs* logo imprinted as a birthmark upon their torso (known formally as the "horso"). Millions of dollars were poured into the breeding program, with unsatisfactory results—while a consistent birthmark was produced, typically it looked more like the words "Csrounnt Asststairs," and we knew our customers were unlikely to spend \$100,000 (the target price) on a horse with a mangled brand name. When they rode through the streets on such steeds, how would the purchasers signal to the public which magazine they most enjoyed reading? It was a disaster. Hundreds of horses had to be disposed of in the pursuit of an ultimately fruitless goal. It was thought at one point that the problem might be resolved if the horses were made tinier, so that they could fit in the palm of one's hand, or a shirt pocket. But this only made the text more unreadable. The whole program was eventually written off as a bad investment and we turned to selling mugs and hats like every other magazine. All of which is to say that *Current Affairs* is in uncommonly dire financial straits and your subscriptions and donations are more important than ever.

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Pattern Of The Month: PAISLEY



editor-in-chief IMPERSONATORS

Local authorities have informed us that a surprising number of impersonators of this magazine's editor-in-chief have been spotted around town. These individuals have gone to great lengths to make themselves physically indistinguishable from the editor-in-chief, and respond to all questions as if they are, in fact, the editor-in-chief. Readers should be aware that anyone claiming to be this magazine's editor-in-chief should be looked upon with great suspicion, because there is a 95% chance that the individual in question is one of the fraudulent imitators. To determine whether you are speaking with an authentic version, ask the purported editor what the lead articles in the next edition will be, then cross-check the list against the finished result. Some of the artificial editors will occasionally make a "lucky guess" on an article or two but it would be virtually impossible for the full contents of an issue to be anticipated in advance. Be aware that any promises made by fictitious editors-in-chief are not the responsibility of this magazine and we have no obligation to fulfill them. We are chagrined by the emergence of this peculiar phenomenon and pursuing whatever legal avenues are available to us to ensure its swift termination.

NEWS BRIEFING

Do you like news? Do you like being briefed thoroughly on everything that matters? Then you'll love our new *Current Affairs* News Briefing! Visit currentaffairs.substack.com for more information.

Before Taking Any Action Or
Voicing Any Opinion, Always
Make Sure To Ask Yourself:



Is This Exactly What Karl Marx
Would Have Said or Done?
If Not, Reconsider Your Choices!

VEGETABLES:

*They're
Fantastic!*

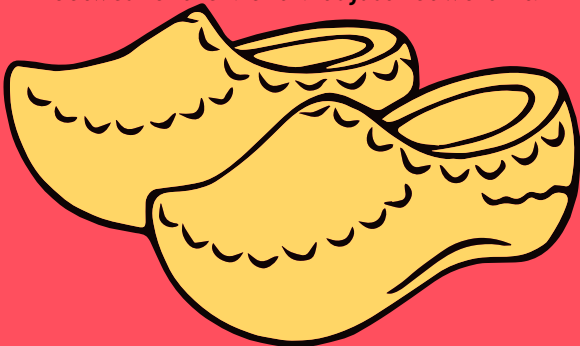


A Special HELLO to Incarcerated Readers

Current Affairs has a number of subscribers who are residents of state and federal penitentiaries. We realize that it is neither easy nor cheap to procure a magazine subscription in such a facility, and so we are gratified by those inmates who choose to take our magazine. We would like to extend a special message of appreciation and encouragement to those enduring stays in this country's punishment system. You will always have a friend and ally in *Current Affairs*.

FOOTWEAR OF THE MONTH THE CLOG

Don't get caught wearing footwear other than the
Footwear of the Month! It's just not worth it!



CONSERVATIVE PUNDIT OR PERSON WE JUST MADE UP?

Recently, a Turning Point USA influencer named Morgonn McMichael lit up Twitter with a bizarre rant about Chick-Fil-A. The mega-chain ran afoul (pun intended) of its conservative fans who had long praised the restaurant's donations to homophobic charities but were now fuming over its decision to hire for a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion position and are now launching a boycott of the brand in a similar fashion to those against Target and Bud Light. From the front seat of her car, Morgonn went off: "Chick-Fil-A, you are no longer the lord's chicken! You're actually the woke chicken, and I'm really upset about it as a Christian woman."

Many on Twitter had a good laugh at Morgonn's fried-chicken meltdown. But others took the opportunity to ask a deeper question: What the hell kind of name is "Morgonn" anyway??? Morgonn says her name is simply pronounced as "Morgan." But rather than clear things up, this simply adds to the confusion. Why would someone take a perfectly fine name like Morgan and mangle it to the point where it looks like something George R.R. Martin would have named one of the lesser Targaryen dragons? Were her parents trying to prank her for life?

But conservative politics and punditry have long been a repository for people with extremely silly-sounding names. From Trump Press Secretary and Fox News host Kayleigh McEnany (a tongue-twister of a name littered with extraneous vowels) to Republican activist Matt Schlapp (whose name sounds like an onomatopoeia for when an overbaked ham lands on hardwood). In government, there's Senator Tommy Tuberville and Congresswoman Lauren Boebert.

Don't get us wrong, there are plenty of liberals and leftists with goofy sounding names too (Philip Bump, Jeffrey Toobin, and Krystal Ball, for example)...but the libs certainly don't have a Hogan Gidley, a Madison Cawthorn, or anything close to a Morgonn. Conservative naming conventions are a form of art that is altogether different — to the point where coming up with goofy fake ones like "Trish Tunkins," "Chesney Mards", and "Clay Maddsley" is a long-running Twitter joke. With that in mind, we offer a quiz. Approximately half of the names on this list are those of real people who have recently worked in right-wing media or politics. The other half are fake names of people we made up. Your job, dear discerning reader, is to separate the real conservative warriors from the impostors and prove yourself a true American Patriot (with a name to match)! **Answers on page 70**

Carlin Schmear
Gunnar Thorderson
Sadie Lynne Buckwood
Ainsley Earhardt
Bo Hines
Kash Jackson
Grant Stinchfield
Robby Starbuck
Kat Timpf
Horatio Talmadge
Timon Prax
Paisleigh Stargill
Frank Ripper III, Esq.
Gabbey Gerbert
Ashlynnn Exeter
Jubilee Jones
Shialee Grooman
Todd Schnitt
Stan Burgle
Wayne Allyn Root
Clemlee Felcher
Holman W. Jenkins, Jr.
Myron Magnet
Josh Hammer
Grover T. Frimpp
Kaidyn Berryfield
Buck Sexton
Barton Swaim
Allie Beth Stuckey
Jackson W. Tebbins
Paxlynn Larsh
Tudor Dixon
Bradley Pinochet
Bartholomew Neesley

TABLE OF



THE BUTTIGIEGS
PAGE 20

LIFE COACHING
PAGE 6

YOUNG LORDS
PAGE 58

AOC
PAGE 26

AN

CONTENTS



**ANTICAPITALIST
TELEVISION**
PAGE 36

"WOKE" CITIES
PAGE 52

MURDOCH
PAGE 14

UTOPIAN SCHOOLS
PAGE 42

NIKE
PAGE 66



THE LIFE COACHES

by Ronald Purser

COACHING IS A \$2.85 BILLION industry where anyone with enough chutzpah can hang out a shingle, even a virtual one, and offer their services for a fee. Take Alyse Parker, a 29-year-old attractive blonde social media influencer whose Instagram site features photos of her blissfully smiling in a skimpy green bikini in front of a retro orange VW bus on a Hawaiian beach. Parker's life coaching business charges \$5,700 for six months of services. She brands herself a "Mindset Coach." Her YouTube videos include such fluffy titles as "The Ultimate Guide to Manifestation," "Five Ways to Level Up Your Life," and "My Views On Money." In the latter video, she advises her some 670,000 followers to see money as "merely a form of energetic exchange" and that the secret to making a lot of it is "the energy you infuse into it."

Long before the viral mania potential of the YouTube- and Instagram-fueled influencer economy, in the days of '80s TV infomercials, charismatic life advice giver and part canvas-tent revival preacher Tony Robbins became the world's most famous coach. Robbins never attended college and holds no professional training certifications, yet millions of people continue to flock to his auditorium-packed seminars and have bought his books. Under Robbins' supervision, Oprah Winfrey fire-walked across hot coals, a stunt which landed Robbins his own (very short-lived) reality TV series. (The outcomes were not always so positive. After one Dallas firewalking session, five people had to be hospitalized, and 20 people were treated on-

site for burns.) Even Bill Clinton and Donald Trump have footed the bill for Robbins' high-end coaching.

So, what *are* Tony Robbins' coaching credentials based on? Challenging life experiences. In his seminars, Robbins retells a "self-made" story. He pulled himself out of poverty, had a stint of homelessness, survived an abusive and alcoholic mother and pituitary brain tumor, and eventually worked his way up the motivational speaker ladder. Just as in the Horatio Alger novel *Tony the Tramp* (in which the title tramp molds himself into the Hon. Anthony Middleton, of Middleton Hall), Robbins' lucky break also came when a wealthy older gentleman, motivational speaker Jim Rohn, took on Robbins as his mentee and personal assistant.

The Robbins coaching formula is simple. If Robbins was able to face his fears and overcome such challenges, so can you. Victims are self-made losers. Poverty, trauma, abuse, and life-threatening illnesses can be reframed as badges of honor—opportunities to transmute life's lemons so one can become a winner. As Robbins writes in *Awaken the Giant Within*:

Through it all, I've continued to recognize the power individuals have to change virtually anything and everything in their lives in an instant. I've learned that the resources we need to turn our dreams into reality are within us, merely waiting for the day when we decide to wake up and claim our birthright.

Robbins charges \$7,995 for his six-day "Date with Destiny" course, which came under the scrutiny of a four-part 2018 *BuzzFeed News* investigation. Given his grueling

schedule of keeping participants awake until 2 a.m., a number of them became mentally unstable due to a lack of sleep, hydration, and food. In addition, the investigation uncovered numerous accusations of verbal and sexual abuse—from Robbins berating and screaming at a rape victim, to summoning a personal assistant to come into the bathroom of his hotel room where he was naked after coming out of the shower, to whispering in the ear of another staffer, "I wanna see you have an orgasm," along with a class-action lawsuit settlement by volunteers for unpaid hours.

Coaching immediately conjures up the realm of sports and gamesmanship with clear winners and losers. Dale Carnegie's best-selling self-help book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* not only had a major influence on Robbins, but also Donald Trump. When winning is the name of the game in a cutthroat competitive marketplace, it's no wonder coaching has caught on like wildfire.

Celebrities like Robbins, along with the new generation of social media influencers such as Alyse Parker, Marie Forleo, and Jay Shetty, are in the elite class of mass media coaches. Despite the fact that media star coaching advice amounts to a hodgepodge of vacuous pep talk affirmations, their massive global influence cannot be ignored. Robbins is fond of telling his audiences: "Success is doing what you want to do, when you want, where you want, with whom you want, as much as you want." With over 800,000 YouTube subscribers, self-help advice book author Marie Forleo assures her viewers and Twitter followers that "success doesn't come

from what you do occasionally, it comes from what you do consistently.”

At the top of the mass media heap, with 26 million Facebook followers and 7 billion video views, Jay Shetty tells his fans, “The biggest room in the world is the room for self-improvement.” And for a meager sum of \$7,000, you too can become a life coach by enrolling in the Jay Shetty Certification School. In an introductory marketing video, Shetty spouts that his vision is to “transform 1 billion lives” through the ripple effect of his certification school. Shetty is a millennial Deepak Chopra 2.0. Capitalizing on his cultural appropriation of Indian Vedic philosophy, and by milking the cachet of his brief stint as Hare Krishna novice monk, Shetty has monetized his so-called “viral wisdom.” His success is 90 percent high-powered social media marketing, and 10 percent message—and even the piddly drivel he delivers has been called out as repurposed content from others he fails to quote, give credit, or accurately attribute.

Such mass appeal and insatiable demand for personal development resonates with a cultural ideology of unrestricted self-development. Robbins preaches a gospel of “Constant Never-Ending Improvement,” a coaching tenet tied to a nonstop treadmill of perpetually having to become a better version of oneself. If you’re not moving forward towards the ever-elusive improvement zone, you must be either lazy or a failure.

Completely unregulated, the coaching industry landscape looks like the Wild West. There are executive, leadership, business, team, and career coaches. One can also hire a wellness, nutrition, athletic performance, intimacy, or parenting coach. Then there are the fringe self-help guru coaches for manifestation, aura enhancement, shamanism, meditation, and spiritual development. The life coaching industry is thriving, with over 99,000 life coaches worldwide. Even coaching certification programs have become their own cottage industry. As reported in *The Guardian*, Brooke Castillo’s “Life Coach School” raked in \$37 million in gross revenues during the first year of the pandemic.

There are no regulated government board of examiners as there are for licensing psychotherapists, psychiatrists, and physicians. Claiming to be the “gold standard” for the industry, the International Coaching Federation (ICF) is self-regulated and has no legal authority or government oversight for enforcing codes of conduct. According to the ICF, coaches in the United States charge on average \$272 for a one-hour session, while a seasoned Executive Coach is commanding \$450 per hour. With just 60 hours of training, one can receive an “Associate Coach” certification, and 125 hours of training will buy you the title of “Professional Certified” coach. That’s an awfully good deal considering a full-time undergraduate college student puts in 225 hours in just one academic semester, or the equivalent of 1,800 hours for a Bachelor’s degree, and can come away saddled with student debt. Krista Kathleen earned her ICF professional coach certification and now offers a three-day life coaching course which includes vision boards, yoga, and astrology, along with ecstatic dance sessions for the bargain price of \$1,000.

Googling the term “life coach” results in 1.3 billion hits, yet there is still no definitive consensus or body of knowledge that guides coaching practices. A cadre of social science academics have made research careers lamenting how the coaching industry is still not yet a legitimate profession. In their 65-year retrospective on the coaching industry, professors Anthony Grant and Michael Cavanagh at the University of Sydney write:

At present, the coaching industry is far from meeting the basic requirements of a true profession. ... While individual coaching organizations have developed accreditation systems and codes of ethics for their own members, coaching as an industry does not adequately meet any of these criteria.

It is no coincidence that the life coaching industry’s rapid growth spurt began after the 2008 financial crisis. During the recession, many displaced college-educated workers, out of desperation, scurried to reinvent themselves as independent contractors. Life coaching was seemingly an attractive opportunity.

HERE IS, HOWEVER, A FAIR AMOUNT OF hand-wringing among life coaches regarding the shadiness and scammy nature of their industry. Olga Reinholdt is embarrassed to even self-identify as a life coach. Her blog post describes the complete absurdity and cult-like training which she and many other life coaches have been taught. Many training programs abide by a set of axioms that coaches can never consult, never offer subject-matter expertise, and should never take the lead or make assumptions about their clients. The coach is to only ask questions, offer simple reflections, and “hold space for the client’s greatness,” which sounds more like a standard New Age workshop cliché. Reinholdt believes this dumbed down, formulaic curriculum is a “fool-proof” strategy for training coaches that can be easily sold and marketed.

Her insider critique does not appear to be merely anecdotal. Based on 50 in-depth interviews with life coaches and their clients in Israel, the sociologist Michal Pagis describes the coaching process as enacting an extreme delegation of personal responsibility back on to the client, where the coach “steps aside” in order to function essentially as a “shapeshifter” mirror, forcing the client to find their own answers. This coaching technique is a bastardization of the “active listening” techniques in person-centered therapy developed by the late psychologist Carl Rogers.

The practice of life coaching, however, appears to be bipolar. At the other end of the spectrum are life coaches who are all too eager to dish out advice. In an open letter of confession, Jason Connell, now a licensed therapist, bemoans how it’s common practice among life coaches to be overly directive and have no qualms in telling their client what they should do. As a former successful industry insider and frequently invited speaker at elite coaching conferences, Connell describes how life coaches overestimate their competencies and “don’t fully understand that they are providing mental health services.” A popular (and grossly oversimplified) rule of thumb in the industry is that therapy focuses on the past, whereas coaching focuses on the client’s future. Yet, as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s undercover investigation also revealed, it’s not at all uncommon to find life coaches overstepping their bounds and promising to “help” clients overcome their anxiety, depression, traumas, and addiction—and to even get them off their meds. Connell cites a litany of harms that overzealous advice-giving coaches have inflicted on their clients: instructing a rape victim to confront her perpetrator; bullying a client to share deeply vulnerable parts of themselves at a public seminar; assigning a client who suffered sexual abuse as a child a set of complicated affirmations; pushing clients to take “massive actions” and engage in risky decisions during times of major life transitions. The list goes on.

One way of putting lipstick on a pig to shore up legitimacy is to deliver coaching services via a luxury website and glitzy mobile app. Googling “life coach” produces a sponsored ad by the company BetterUp®. The search engine optimization tagline reads “Life Coaching That’s Personal: Get Matched With a Coach Now.” BetterUp is a San Francisco start-up that fuses the algorithmic tech and marketing power of Silicon Valley with a massive pool of virtual coaches available on demand. Not unlike the Tinder dating app, BetterUp makes access to a virtual coach just a couple of clicks away. Consumers respond to a few simple survey questions and BetterUp’s proprietary AI algorithm spits out nine potential coaches to choose from, each with their own snazzy cameo videos.

Having raised \$300 million in Series E venture capital funding in October 2021, BetterUp’s \$4.7 billion valuation makes this start-up the 800-pound gorilla of the coaching industry. And with an impressive investor portfolio supporting it, BetterUp has been able to assemble an amalgamation of Silicon Valley tech entrepreneurs, savvy social media marketers, and corporate salespeople, along with a small army of software engineers working on the back end. BetterUp’s online global reach extends to some 100 countries, with virtual coaching offered in 50 lan-

guages and offices in Munich and London. In addition, BetterUp targets its scalable digital executive coaching services to companies with more than 10,000 employees, including Big Tech cartel firms such as Google, Facebook, Airbnb, and LinkedIn.

Sophisticated digital marketing funnels are skillfully delivered to lure in those who want to become the best versions of themselves—whatever that means. Like any good marketing funnel, BetterUp's platform first entices potential customers with educational messaging content with the intention of stoking more interest. Snappy video tips are delivered as livestreams—for example, BetterUp now offers a quick and dirty “building a one-minute Inner Work® habit.” This mindless content is reminiscent of the 1980s bestseller *The One Minute Manager*, with an Instagram makeover. The animated mannerisms of the video hosts resemble zesty Zumba aerobics instructors coupled with small-town TV weather forecasters.

Once the first click is had, the teasers begin. High production quality testimonial videos follow of satisfied customers who have, of course, Bettered Up! It's strategically targeted to a Gen Z and Millennial-diversity demographic, but there are also a few photogenic white women with ethereal glowing smiles who have, one supposes, found their authentic selves. Further seduced, one moves down the funnel, clicking through a series of query pages with multiple choice responses. This is the “getting to know you” data-gathering phase—where BetterUp's proprietary algorithm does its matchmaking magic. “In what way would you like a coach to help you?” “How are you feeling?” “Are you ready to invest the time it takes to get the most out of your experience?” “Which coaching style works best for you?”

After the system has snatched your own demographic information and email, “It's time to pick your coach!” So, who are BetterUp's “highly qualified” coaches? BetterUp boasts that it contracts with only nine percent of those who apply to be in their global pool of some 3,000-plus coaches. Many of BetterUp's coaches (independent contractors) are former business school and psychology graduates; others come out of finance, sales, and marketing, all of whom have forged second careers by becoming “certified” by, you guessed it, the International Coaching Federation. And now BetterUp has partnered up with ICF to conduct “cutting-edge” research to advance the field of coaching.

NOT ONLY HAS BETTERUP USED ITS VC-FUNDED financial war chest to deploy the best predatory social media marketing and business development drones they can find, but Alexi Robichaux, BetterUp's CEO, also enticed Prince Harry into serving as their “Chief Impact Officer.” His celebrity status, huge media platform, and mental health advocacy was a business synergy Robichaux couldn't pass up. In one of their onstage bromance appearances, after giving Prince Harry a big hug, Robichaux tells the starstruck audience that his real concern for BetterUp “wasn't about the business, it wasn't about the customers, it wasn't about the market, it was actually about the world and how society views the role of mental health.” Robichaux was in “search of luminaries in the world” who care about mental health, and meeting Prince Harry “was a no-brainer.” It's curious that BetterUp describes itself as “the inventor of virtual coaching and the largest *mental health* and coaching startup in the world,” yet BetterUp does not offer mental health counseling with licensed therapists.

To provide a sciencey veneer to its coaching services, BetterUp has also recruited academic superstars—elite professors with *New York Times* bestsellers, viral TED Talks, thousands of Instagram followers, and stellar reputations. BetterUp's most prominent academic hired gun is professor Martin E. P. Seligman, founder of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania, who has served as a member of BetterUp's Science Board of Advisers since 2018. Given the anything-goes nature of coaching practices, Seligman's stature as the “father of positive psychol-



TOP: A Tony Robbins seminar BELOW: Prince Harry and Alexi Robichaux at a BetterUp event

ogy” and former President of the American Psychological Association (APA) is a brilliant strategic merger, where slick marketing meets Pollyanna science.

“I've tried many different ways in my lifetime of spreading the science (of positive psychology), and BetterUp is the single best substantiation of my life's work in the world,” is Seligman's testimonial appearing on BetterUp's website page for recruiting coaches. Seligman has built nothing short of a positive psychology commercial empire around him with books, apps, courses, and consultancy and training workshops (his fee for a single speaking engagement can be upwards of \$50,000). But it's Seligman's academic respectability, derived from his relentless branding of positive psychology, that allows BetterUp to distance itself from the flashy, charismatic social media influencers and fringe New Age manifestation coaches.

Ever since his presidential inaugural speech to the APA meeting in 1988, Seligman has been like a dog with a bone evangelizing the superiority of positive psychology—with its supposed backing of scientific rigor—going so far in his speech and other subsequent writings to outright dismiss psychological approaches that came before his reign. Helping people who suffer from trauma and depression, writes Seligman, “can be a drag.” In preparing for his speech, Seligman recollects:

Psychology now seemed half-baked to me. The half that was fully-baked was devoted to suffering, victims, mental illness, and trauma. Psychology had worked steadily and with considerable success for fifty years on the pathologies that disable the good life, which make life not worth living.

Positive psychology is perfectly compatible with life coaching because the focus is on future-oriented achievement, success, resilience, and performance, not on negativity, misery, and disabling pathologies. Remember, positive coaching psychology is about helping those who are willing to take personal responsibility—would-be winners—not the losers and whiners wallowing in negativity, those prone to complain about their oppressive social conditions or less-than-fortunate circumstances. So-called victims just haven't learned how to become more optimistic and resilient. Seligman has even gone so far as to claim that depression is episodic and that by practicing some of his simple exercises, such as the “Gratitude Visit” and the “What-Went-Well” exercise, you can “raise your well-being and lower your depression.” All a depressed or traumatized person has to

do is to learn how to “not focus on the negative” and simply look more at the bright side of things.

This “smile-or-die” psychology didn’t sit right with late investigative journalist Barbara Ehrenreich, author of the now classic book, *Bright-Sided*. Besides describing her contentious encounter with an evasive Seligman as she trailed him around the Philadelphia Museum of Art in an attempt at an interview, Ehrenreich, who earned a doctorate in cell biology, meticulously scrutinized the so-called “evidence-based” positive psychology findings hyped in the media. The widely touted and exaggerated claims in the field of “happiness science”—that positive disposition significantly influences longevity, health, immune function, and, of course, career success—were based on studies plagued by serious flaws, including inconclusive and mixed results, numerous methodological weaknesses, and positive reporting biases. “Most of these studies,” Ehrenreich writes, “only establish correlations and tell us nothing about causality: Are people healthy because they’re happy or happy because they’re healthy?” Even the longitudinal studies often cited frequently by positive psychologists that could shed light on these questions, Ehrenreich notes, are “not exactly airtight.” Ehrenreich’s exposé opened the floodgates. Other reputable scholars suspicious of this positive spin doctoring, such as Barbara Held, James Coyne, Edgar Cabanas, Nicholas Brown, and Harris Friedman, corroborated her assessment that the scientific veracity of positive psychology was more hot air and marketing puffery.

RESILIENCE, MENTAL FITNESS, AND POSITIVE emotions—essential concepts in a life coach’s tool kit—sound so positive that one would think these fundamentals were discovered from studies of optimistic individuals. But that’s not the case. Early in his career as an experimental psychologist, Seligman conducted laboratory experiments on mongrel dogs and cage-raised beagles—for the advancement of science, of course. The first dog hung restrained in a hammock-like harness and was administered a series of inescapable, six-milliampere electric shocks via brass plate electrodes that were taped to footpads of the dog’s hind feet. The dog had no way to control or terminate the shocks. Twenty-four hours later, after a single “treatment,” the dog was placed inside a two-compartment cage called a shuttle box. By jumping over a low barrier separating the compartments, the dog could easily escape and thus avoid the shocks from the electrified metal floor. These preshocked dogs, however, failed to make the jump. They whimpered and lay down in the box, not even trying to escape. Because the initial shocks were uncontrollable, Seligman reasoned, the dog had no incentive to try to escape. Nothing it did mattered. It had *learned helplessness*. In contrast, a second dog was also strapped in the hammock but could escape the shocks by pressing against panels to either side of its head. When this dog was later placed in the shuttle box, it quickly escaped the shocks by jumping over the barrier.

Some 25 years later, Seligman published his book, *Learned Optimism*, which generalizes findings from the dog torture experiments to human beings: those who lack motivation and incentive to change do so because they have engaged in negative explanatory styles, telling themselves that bad things always happen to them, that nothing is within their control. They erroneously blame their problems on their circumstances. Like the preshocked dogs, these people have also learned to become helpless. As Seligman states:

I was stunned by the implications. If dogs could learn something as complex as the futility of their actions, here was an analogy to human helplessness, one that could be studied in the laboratory. Helplessness was all around us—from the urban poor to the newborn child to the despondent patient with his face to the wall. ... It would take the next ten years of my life

to prove to the scientific community that what afflicted those dogs was helplessness, and that helplessness could be learned, and therefore unlearned.

Looking through the lens of learned helplessness theory, quiet quitters resemble Seligman’s caged lab dogs: they passively “resigned” in the face of uncontrollable adversity. In one of BetterUp’s educational videos, employees rotting at their desks are, according to Seligman, “languishing,” which is described on BetterUp’s website as a “passive feeling of blah-ness that dulls your motivation.” These slackers haven’t fallen so far down that they can be considered mentally ill, but they’re not well, either (translation: fully productive). Rather, languishers are stuck in the massive middle ground, making them prime candidates for BetterUp’s coaching services. BetterUp cites its own questionable “study” showing that, even pre-pandemic, 55 percent of employees “at any given time are languishing.” In Human Resources lingo, languishing is also known as the “employee disengagement” problem, which poses a very real threat to corporate profit-making. On a global scale, this growth in worker discontent amounts to \$7.8 trillion in losses, or 11 percent of the global GDP. And since the pandemic, the trend has worsened. According to Gallup’s 2022 indicators, only 32 percent of employees in the U.S. report being actively engaged with their work.

BetterUp’s website is awash with corporate cheerleading chants: “Go from languishing to thriving!” “The BetterUp platform delivers transformative coaching experiences to drive productivity, engagement, and retention at scale.” “Today, mental health and well-being must be a top business priority because a thriving worker is an engaged, adaptive, and high-performing worker.” However, the “thrive, flourish, and perform” coaching mantra extolled to employees assumes that mental health and well-being are completely determined by personal agency, so there is no need, as Seligman has argued, to consider whether their circumstance—such as poor working conditions, toxic corporate cultures, low wages, bad bosses, unrealistic job demands, a lack of health insurance and stable employment, and meaningless work—might explain why employees have become demoralized, burned out, and disengaged in the first place.

Positive psychology’s compulsory optimism is contingent upon a denial and disowning of what Seligman would consider negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, frustration, resentment, and sadness, which are supposedly mere impediments to mental well-being and human flourishing. Seligman’s “learned optimism” entails skillfully replacing negative feelings with positive ones, shrugging off setbacks or misfortunes by unlearning and rejecting anything smacking of pessimism. This demonization of the full range of human experience is a *toxic positivity*, a sickening, contemporary form of Pollyannaism. As the Ukrainian-born psychoanalyst Oksana Yakushko writes in her book, *Scientific Pollyannaism: From Inquisition to Positive Psychology*:

[T]he insistence on optimism and happiness as ideal states is viewed as reflective of cultural-political forms of social compliance, which requires denial of oppressive conditions and inequalities and which necessitates routine engagement in disassociation, disavowal, and splitting. These defenses are employed to maintain the individual insistence that, like Pollyanna, the person is always ‘glad for everything.’ Pollyanna is presented as a perpetually optimistic child, as someone who plays the ‘glad games’ no matter how much she suffers or what suffering she observes.

The peddling of toxic positivity is like a three-card trick. The first card shames the individual for feeling anything but positive emotions; the second, victim-blaming card insources responsibility for change on to the individual, inflating the amount of agency a person really has by downplaying the role of circumstances; the third card legitimizes the need for social compliance (via coaching), that is, to “better up” by learning to be more positive and mentally fit for corporate duty.

Pseudoscience “Happiness Formulas” and “Happiness Pie Charts” have been circulating among life coaches to persuade people that circum-

stances (such as race, age, sex, income, health, level of education, etc.) account for less than 10 percent of our happiness. For example, Seligman's dubious equation ($\text{Happiness} = S + C + V$) asserts that 50 percent of our affect is a genetic disposition, or our "set point range" (S); some people are simply lucky to have been born with the smiley genes. Why bother with social activism, unionizing, or calling for systemic reform if circumstances (C) account for only 10 percent of your happiness? And money doesn't buy you happiness—how convenient! If we are unhappy about being unemployed, losing our health insurance, and incurring massive debt through student loans, it is our responsibility to learn to be more positive and optimistic. This is where life coaching gets its traction: a whopping 40 percent of happiness is supposedly under our voluntary control (V).

Seligman's positive psychology ideological agenda is conservative, corporate friendly, and more than willing to accommodate itself to the status quo. It's no coincidence that Seligman befriended the late Sir John Templeton, a right-wing, evangelical Christian and highly successful global investor and prominent donor to conservative groups and Republican candidates, and eventually received \$2.2 million of philanthropic welfare from the Templeton Foundation for the flush funding of his Positive Psychology Center. And for all of Prince Harry's Royal Commando talk about the need for "mental fitness" (another one of BetterUp's signature coaching concepts), it's actually Seligman's brainchild—derived originally from the Penn Resiliency Program (PRP) and then adapted for application in the U.S. Army's \$125 million Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) program (Seligman's Positive Psychology Center was awarded a \$31 million "sole-source" contract by the U.S. Army). According to Seligman, the CSF program would "create a force as fit psychologically as it is physically," or in Department of Defense parlance, would "optimize warrior performance."

In fact, the CSF program was conceived as a psychological intervention that would "increase the number of soldiers who derive meaning and personal growth from their combat experiences." Under Seligman's supervision, his "train the trainer" program delivered skill-building modules in "master resilience training" and principles of positive psychology, cognitive restructuring, mindfulness, and self-regulation training to over 1 million soldiers. Not only did the CSF program ignore the moral injury to combatants, but it deliberately trained soldiers to temporarily override and cloak their negative emotions in the battlefield and to defer their pain and vulnerability to when they returned home. The program was discontinued due to its questionable evidence base, as well as ethical concerns voiced by the Coalition of Ethical Psychologists. A shadowy history also haunts Seligman's contested association with military psychologists who were key architects of the CIA's secret interrogation program, as well as his speaking engagements at the Navy's Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape (SERE) school.

Seligman certainly has good connections. BetterUp itself was awarded a sole-source contract by the Department of Defense to deliver its virtual coaching services to the U.S. Air Force and Space Force. Endorsing the coaching program, Lt. General Gina Grosso quips on a BetterUp promotional video that, "BetterUp provides an opportunity to put another tool in the tool kit that we don't have today to ensure that we have the world's greatest air and space force well into the future."

In order for any cure on offer to be perceived as a legitimate solution, the diagnosis of the malady must itself be legitimate. The coaching industry has manufactured a regime of truth that a languishing labor force has a motivation deficit problem. But this is a grossly self-serving misdiagnosis. Something much more is going on culturally than simply a case of the white-collar blues and motivational doldrums. Are employees languishing, as Seligman would like us to believe, or is their resignation more a reflection of a widespread cultural malaise, as well as a sane response to the crisis of work itself in a "post-pandemic" society? Beginning with

the 2008 financial crisis, the corporate demands to "do more, with less" were already wearing thin. Then came the collective pause of the Covid lockdown, which provided an unprecedented space of psychological distance for large swaths of the workforce who suddenly found themselves working remotely. This forced hibernation set in motion an unexpected sea change in mass soul-searching and values clarification, leading people to question the centrality and legitimacy of work itself. Going beyond the call of corporate duty at the expense of one's health, well-being, and relationships no longer felt like it was worth the personal sacrifice.

WITH BURNOUT LEVELS SOARING, turning to a life coach for help has become an appealing alternative to seeking a licensed mental health provider. The negative stigma associated with seeking a mental health professional has been a boon for the life coaching industry. Life coaching is upbeat and easy to access, and its framing as a positive brand for self-improvement involves less shame than seeing a therapist. People who are really needing professional help may be in denial about their untreated mental illness or deep-seated psychological problems. At the same time, it's not uncommon for some coaches to be deceitful or to overpromise "results" or overstep their bounds by practicing therapy without being qualified or licensed to do so. As freelancers and entrepreneurs, life coaches have invested in internet marketing and attractive websites that make onboarding smooth and painless for potential customers. And despite the fact that life coaching is not covered by health insurance and is unaffordable (\$272 on average for an hourly session) compared to seeing a licensed therapist, the coaching industry is booming.

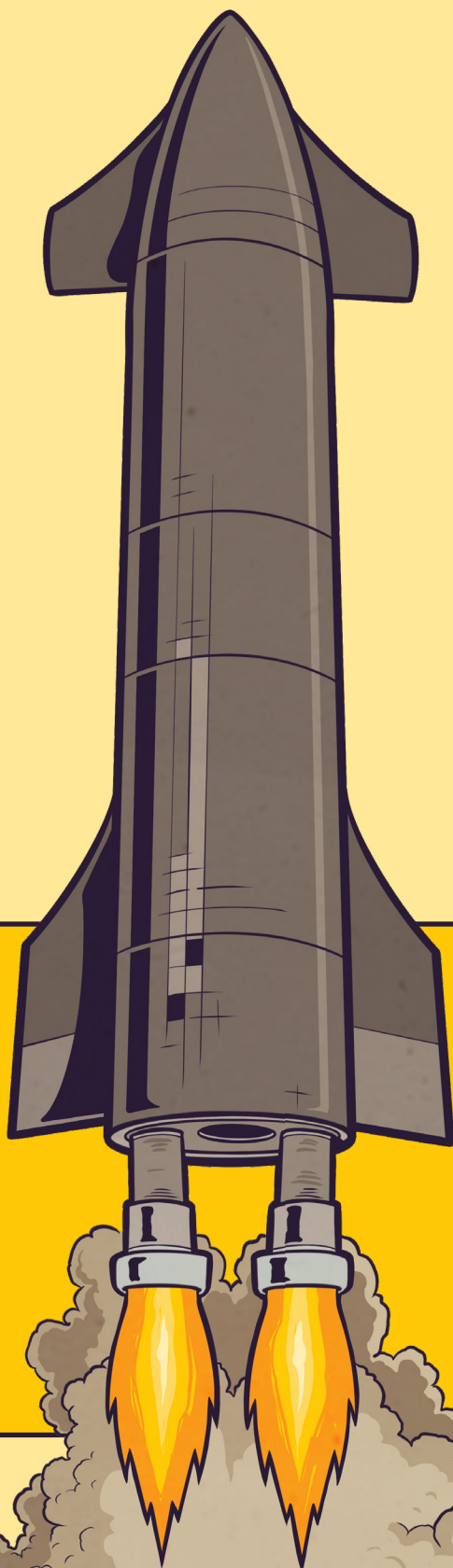
Managed healthcare providers have created bureaucratic obstacle courses to accessing licensed mental health providers that even the insured are not willing to navigate. Some 85 million Americans lack adequate health insurance, and, according to a study by the National Council for Mental Wellbeing, 42 percent of the population views cost and poor insurance coverage as key obstacles to accessing mental health care. Senator Bernie Sanders is introducing legislation that will greatly increase the number of mental health providers and increase funding to community mental health clinics. That's a commendable start, but what this country really needs is a universal, equitable, freely available mental health services system.

Finally, we must ask: why do people hire life coaches—paid strangers—in times of need? The cultural pressures to become a self-made individual have intensified at the same time that sources of social support that were once the domain of families, friends, churches and other civic and fraternal organizations have dramatically weakened. In the midst of what has been characterized as a "loneliness epidemic" in American society, even friendship is being commodified and outsourced to the market. Founded by SoulCycle entrepreneur Elizabeth Cutler, Peoplehood is a new "social wellness" company offering a "connection product" that trains empathic "guides" to lead and facilitate "gatherings." Commodified friendship and life coaching are symptomatic offspring of a society driven by competitive individualism and plagued by social media comparisons and increasing isolation. This huckster culture propagates a doctrine of continuous self-betterment, quick fixes, and inward-looking makeover schemes while blinding us to the systemic and structural causes of distress and cultural malaise. We have lost stable social anchors, which leads to festering insecurities and personal anxieties. To forge a self-made identity, we are ever more reliant on experts and the faux intimacy of commodified service providers, which the life coach will cheerfully provide. ✚

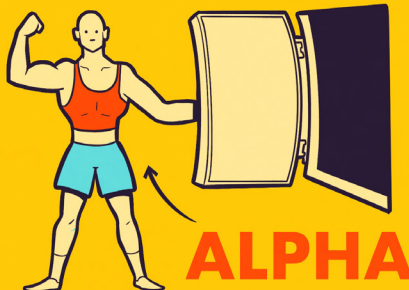
SAFETY INSTRUCTIONS FOR YOUR VOYAGE ON

SPACEX

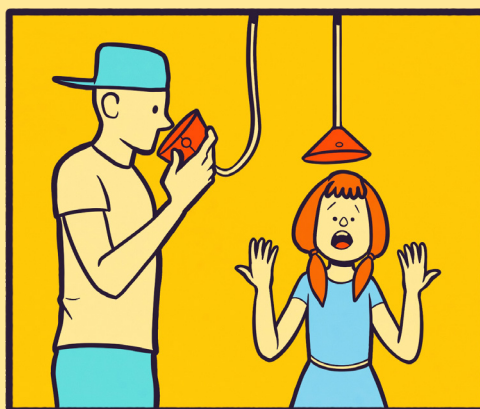
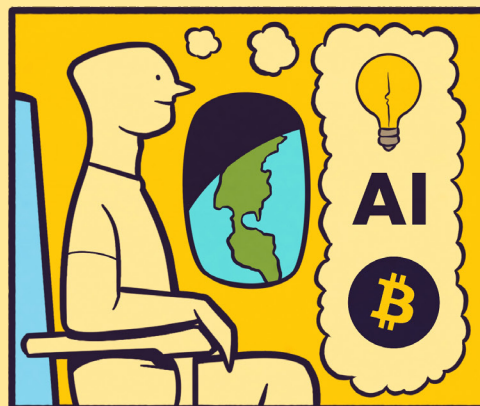
MoonShip-42069, Based-LMAO Model



EXIT ROW



The SpaceX Exit Row is for a big-picture thinker, someone who can take risks, and buck the system. If this role is right for you, you are a “disruptor.” You can handle a little “turbulence.” You look for “out of the box” solutions. In the event of imminent explosion, you think “Is there a better way to get out than opening the door?”



REMEMBER:

“Always help yourself before helping your children.”



NO ELECTRONICS



TEXT BY MICHAEL LODATO



Welcome Message from Our Founder:

"Thank you for trusting us to the Moon and back. Please read these spicy safety memes as we hurtle your fragile body into deep space."



WHAT IF A FIRE LOL

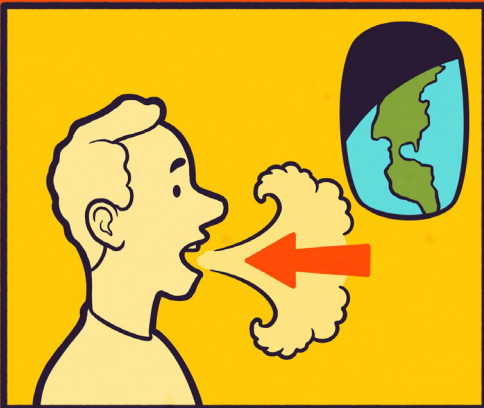


EMERGENCY LANDING INSTRUCTIONS

In the unlikely event of an emergency landing, your seat is equipped with two capsules, one of cyanide and one of DMT, the chemical component of ayahuasca. Godspeed. Or in layman's terms, "buckle up" 🙏🙏🙏. No but seriously, please fasten your seatbelt. There is a small chance human beings can subsist for a few hours within the Moon's darkest craters.

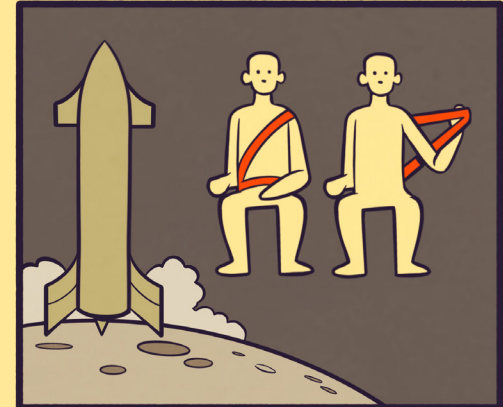
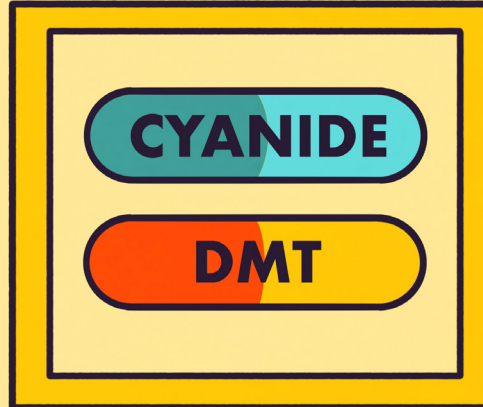
Instructions:

Try not to breathe too much of the oxygen, we will need it on the Moon. Take shallow chesty breaths. Peer at Earth from your porthole. Our cloudy blue home slowly becomes a tiny dot. Ahh, isn't that calming?



When We Arrive at the Moon

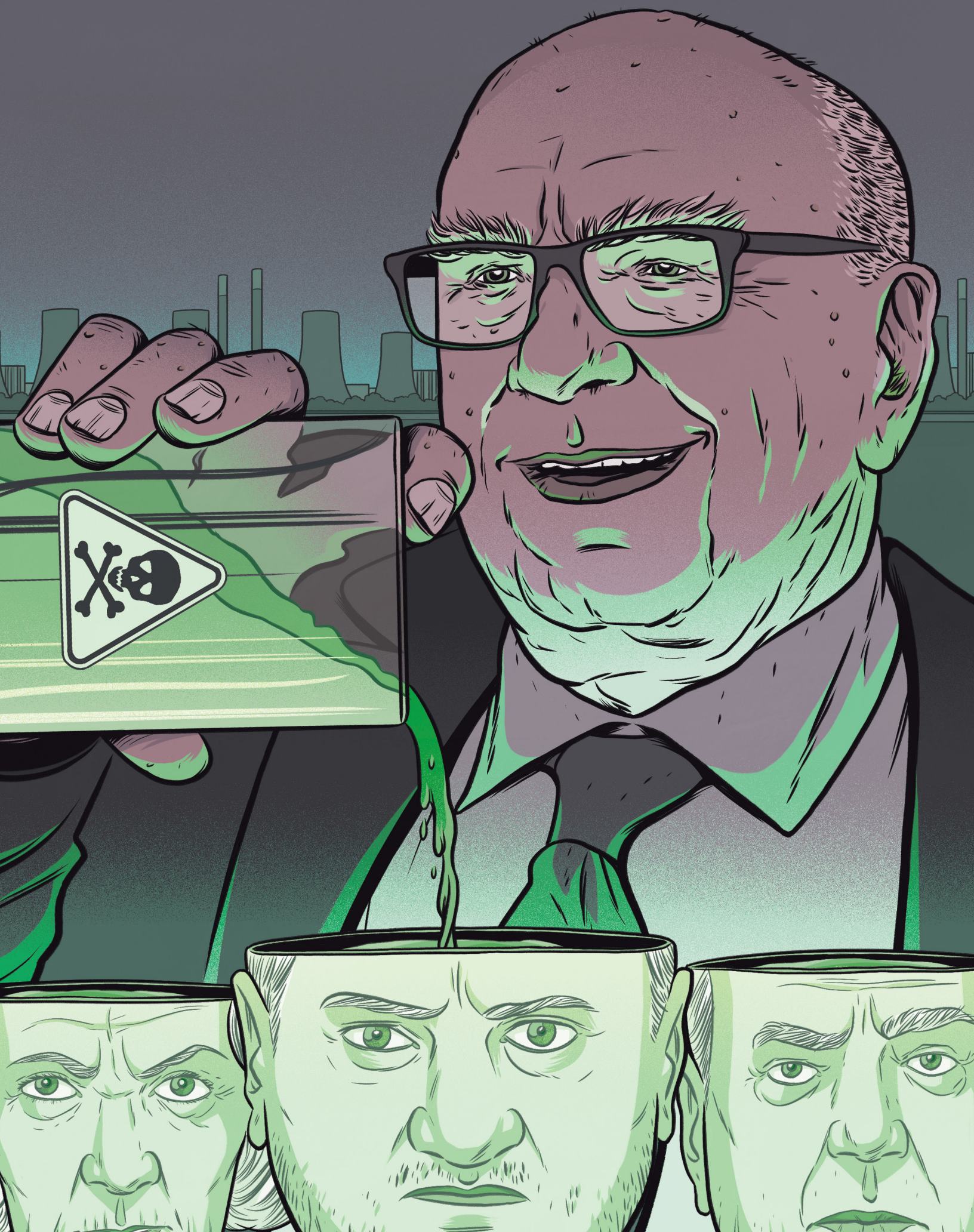
If we arrive at the Moon, you may unbuckle your seatbelt and warmly embrace your surviving companions. Get ready for 15 amazing days of rocks, rocks, rocks. You can even make a snow angel in the Moon dust, if we get there, which we totally will!



IN THE EVENT OF A GIANT EXPLOSION

**You will have been part of something super fucking cool.
And isn't that worth the four million dollars you paid?**





The Murdoch Empire

by
Nathan J. Robinson

APPARENTLY, WHEN TUCKER CARLSON was fired from his job as a host on Fox News in April of this year, he was “stunned” and “blindsided.” After all, he was the No. 1 rated host in all of cable news. He was talked about constantly, both by those who hated him and those who loved him. He seemed untouchable. He was clearly a major asset to the network; as soon as he left, ratings plummeted.

But Tucker Carlson had clearly forgotten who he worked for. He had assumed, like many others before him, that his job was to make money for the network, and if he was making money for the network, his position was secure.

This is not how it works. This might have been a rational assumption in an “Econ 101” world, where the capitalist looks only to maximize profits, and if you are a useful cog in the profit-machine, you can expect not to be replaced. But in the real world, corporations can operate a lot more like feudal estates than money machines. Whether your position is secure depends on whether you please the emperor who sits atop the organizational hierarchy. At Fox News, the emperor is Rupert Murdoch. And if you displease Rupert Murdoch, you’re toast.

As conservative commentator Andrew Neil explained in a 1996 book, recalling his time in Murdoch’s employ:

When you work for Rupert Murdoch you do not work for a company chairman or chief executive: you work for a Sun King.

You are not a director or a manager or an editor: you are a courtier at the court of the Sun King—rewarded with money and status by a grateful King as long as you serve his purpose, dismissed outright or demoted to a remote corner of the empire when you have ceased to please him or outlived your usefulness.

Carlson wasn’t the first network star to be unceremoniously ditched upon displeasing the Sun King. Years before, Glenn Beck had been a ratings powerhouse on Fox News. But Murdoch came to dislike Beck, whether because of his independence from the network or his controversy-courting clownishness (standing on his desk wearing lederhosen, drawing conspiracy diagrams on a blackboard, etc.), and so Beck was exiled. His national profile has not been the same since.

When Tucker Carlson pushed “white genocide” theory, or Glenn Beck argued that Barack Obama was a secret Marxist radical, or Bill O’Reilly viciously smeared a 9/11 victim’s son, the ensuing controversies surrounded the pundits themselves. What kind of influence is *Beck* on the country? Is *Tucker* whipping up fascistic hatreds? But these are the wrong people to analyze, because everything these men said was in fact the ultimate responsibility of one man, Keith Rupert Murdoch. It was Murdoch who built the network, Murdoch who put these men on the air, and Murdoch who decided whether they should stay or go. Whether Tucker Carlson would continue poisoning minds with tales of defecating “gypsies” and criminal immigrants depended entirely on whether Rupert Murdoch

wanted Carlson to go on doing this. Every single horrific thing said on Fox News is ultimately not coming from the performing puppets whose mouths it comes out of, but from Murdoch, who erected the theater and pulls the strings.

This isn't conspiracy; it's simple fact. Rupert Murdoch built the company. Rupert Murdoch is the one who hired Roger Ailes, the paranoid, psychotic sexual predator who turned Fox News into a mouthpiece for delusional right-wing conspiracies and culture war nonsense (and in the process, made it the highest-rated cable news channel in the country). Rupert Murdoch played a key role in establishing the rancid "gutter journalism" that dominates U.K. print newspapers. He owns the *Wall Street Journal*, which uses its widely-read editorial pages to push outright climate change denial and rabid opposition to every redistributive social program. Murdoch has probably been, over the last half century, the single most important figure in U.S. and U.K. media. No other person has had as much reach. Without Fox News, the Trump presidency would have been inconceivable. Two of Murdoch's U.S. papers (the *WSJ*, the *New York Post*) are among the top five most read in the country, and in the U.K. *The Sun* and *The Times* are among the leading papers. News Corp's HarperCollins is one of the "Big 5" U.S. publishers.

Yet perhaps the greatest trick Rupert Murdoch has pulled is to keep people from noticing just how powerful and influential he is. Murdoch keeps a low profile. He's not the one people get outraged at. To the extent that Murdoch himself makes the news, it is usually over the family drama about his marriages and his children. The question of which Murdoch child will inherit what, and how they handle their different pieces of the empire, has proved so fascinating to people that it inspired the popular HBO series *Succession*. (Personally, I cannot get into the show, despite its quality writing and acting, because I cannot bring myself to care in the slightest about the drama of what these rich sociopaths will be bequeathed.) It's understandable why the family stuff fascinates, especially the juicy tidbits about sociopathic personal behavior. (Murdoch told one of his wives he was divorcing her by sending an tersely-worded email that said, "We certainly had some good times, but I have much to do.") But we should step back and look at Murdoch's kingdom as a whole, and appreciate the sheer scale of his power. When we do, it becomes clear that many of the worst features of American political life today (climate denial, anti-trans panic, suspicion and fear of various Others) are being made much worse by a vast institution, News Corp, that is ultimately accountable to a single man. It is not accurate to say that Rupert Murdoch is mostly responsible for everything that is wrong with the world. But I think it is right to say that he is *more* responsible than any other living person. I don't think anyone else has personally done more harm or contributed more social toxicity. I won't go so far as ex-*New York Times* editor Bill Keller, who called Murdoch "the Antichrist." But if there is one person truly doing the Devil's bidding on Earth today, it is Murdoch.

KEITH RUPERT MURDOCH IS NOT EXACTLY a self-made man. He was born into one of the most influential families in Australia. His granduncle, Sir Walter Murdoch, was a prominent academic for whom Murdoch University (and the suburb, Murdoch, in which it is located) were named. His father, Sir Keith Murdoch, was a wealthy newspaper proprietor, and upon the senior Keith's death in 1952, Rupert inherited the family business. Rupert Murdoch had only just graduated from Oxford when he took over *The News*, an Adelaide newspaper that he used to begin the construction of a globe-spanning media empire.

The story of Rupert Murdoch's rise has been told in at least half a dozen books, and it's pretty easy to tell: in Australia, he bought newspapers, then used the money he made from those newspapers to buy more newspapers (he would eventually own 70 percent of Australian newspapers). Then he went to the U.K. and bought still more newspapers. (Murdoch would go on to destroy the power of the U.K. print workers unions.) Then he came to the United States and bought more newspapers before expanding into film and television through 20th Century Fox and Fox Broadcasting. Books about Murdoch are filled with the intricacies of his dealmaking, and a common picture emerges: Murdoch is ruthless and predatory, making promises and then breaking them, and has taken on infamously vicious fellow moguls and won. A lot of people who have worked with Murdoch bear lasting grudges, because he disposes of them as soon as they cease to be useful to him and is far more committed to his own power and his bottom-line than his word. Journalists with integrity can be horrified to find Murdoch has taken over their company. When Murdoch bought the *Chicago Sun-Times*, its star columnist Mike Royko immediately quit, quipping that "no self-respecting fish would be wrapped in a Murdoch newspaper."

Indeed, Murdoch's newspapers are infamous for the depths of their sleaze. Shortly after Murdoch took over the U.K.'s *The Sun* in 1969, the paper introduced the "Page 3 girl" feature, which was literally just a picture of a topless model on the third page of the paper. Some of the models were as young as 16. Despite the consistent opposition of feminists, *The Sun's* circulation doubled within a year.

For Murdoch newspapers, ordinary notions of journalistic ethics simply went out the window. As Ryan Chittum wrote in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, "Murdoch just never bought into—indeed, he sneers at it—the ethical edifice that journalism as an institution built up over the last half a century or so," and "few so aggressively laid bare their disregard for standards, both journalistic and societal." They openly practiced checkbook journalism, illegally bribing British police officers and other officials for sensational stories and gossip. Their paparazzi terrorized celebrities, making their lives a misery. Hugh Grant, in his



Some typical Murdoch tabloid headlines

ongoing lawsuit against *The Sun*, alleges that its reporters “used private investigators to tap his landline phone, place listening and tracking devices on his house and car, burgle his property and obtain his private information by deception.”

Murdoch papers used blatantly criminal methods to get stories. For years, they hacked into celebrities’ phones and listened to their voicemail messages. The illegal invasions of privacy were totally shameless; they even hacked into the phones of murder victims and the families of dead soldiers, all in the search for juicy tidbits to print in the tabloid papers. As evidence of the extent of Murdoch’s papers’ criminal activity mounted, there was outrage in the U.K. A number of Murdoch underlings were dismissed, a few editors were charged with crimes, the *News of the World* was forced to close, some big legal settlements were made, and News Corp issued some public apologies promising to Do Better. But the Godfather himself, Murdoch, escaped pretty much unscathed. He didn’t go to prison, he didn’t lose his empire, and he was able to successfully shift most of the blame onto others. A parliamentary select committee report found that Murdoch “exhibited wilful blindness to what was going on in his companies and publications” and said he was “not a fit person to exercise the stewardship of a major international company.” But while this sounds damning, it is actually unduly generous to Murdoch because it allowed him to get away with pleas of supposed blindness rather than outright complicity. (In private, Murdoch dismissed the scandal as being over “next to nothing” and claimed the criminal acts were standard tabloid practices.)

It’s very unlikely that Murdoch would be blind to *anything* going on in his companies. One thing made clear in various Murdoch biographies is that, unlike at many other giant corporations, where power is distributed across many executives, at News Corp Murdoch really does rule like a king. His aides call themselves “henchmen,” his board exercises little oversight, and, as Andrew

Neil put it, “outside of Rupert, there is no real management.”

And of course, none of the ruthless methods are in the service of producing public interest journalism. Murdoch is known to love “gossip,” and papers like the *Sun*, *News of the World*, and *New York Post* are stuffed with “who’s sleeping with who” news about famous people. “If you think we’re going to have any of that upmarket shit in our paper, you’re very much mistaken,” Murdoch told a *Sunday Times* journalist who had praised the journalism of rival paper *The Mirror*. Some of the stuff in Murdoch tabloids was fairly innocuous sensationalist fluff. (*The Sun*’s most famous front-page headline was “FREDDIE STARR ATE MY HAMSTER,” while the *New York Post* is known for “HEADLESS BODY IN TOPLESS BAR.”) But a lot of it is poisonous and hateful, appealing to readers’ prejudices about trans people, immigrants, Muslims, leftists, and whatever other minority groups the editors can make money from demonizing.

FOX NEWS, OF COURSE, HAS BEEN THE worst of the worst. One could compile a whole encyclopedia of its outrageous lies and distortions, from the “War on Christmas” hysteria to calling Barack Obama’s fist bump a “terrorist fist jab” to Geraldo claiming on the air that “the hoodie is as much responsible for Trayvon Martin’s death as George Zimmerman” was. Every week there is a new manufactured panic, from the New Black Panther Party supposedly intimidating voters to the “climate lockdowns” that environmentalists are plotting to use to keep people imprisoned in their homes. (The latest thing to be scared about is the rise of “trantifa,” violent transgender activists who will groom your daughter then burn down your city.)

The idiocies spoken on Fox News can make the mind reel. A *Fox and Friends* host once called Mr. Rogers an “evil, evil man” for telling children they are special. Leading host Greg Gutfeld has asked: “Isn’t fossil fuels the ultimate renewable energy? It’s renewed once. It used to be a dinosaur. Now it’s fuel. How is that not renewable?” When New York City recently became enveloped in wildfire smoke, a Fox pseudo-expert promised people that breathing smoke was fine, because “we have this kind of air in India and China all the time.”

Brian Stelter, in his book on the relationship between Fox News and the Trump presidency, says that producers make it clear they prefer “stories about undocumented immigrants killing Americans, stories about citizens standing up to the government bureaucracy, stories about college students disrespecting the flag, stories about hate crime hoaxes, stories about liberal media outlets suppressing the truth, and, whenever possible, stories involving attractive women.” Stelter reports that one staffer who had written a news story about White Castle introducing a vegan option was dressed down, because the story took a neutral stance on the change. “We

hate this,” said her superior. It’s part of the “war on meat.” “You need to say this is ridiculous.”

It’s not clear how sincere anyone at Fox News is about all of this. Stelter quotes a producer saying that “We don’t really believe all this stuff... we just tell other people to believe it.” But many of those other people clearly *do* believe it. There are plenty of harrowing stories of people whose loved ones have been transformed by watching Fox News. They claim that their relatives have gone from normal, fun-loving, tolerant people to paranoid, terrified, angry bigots. (The Kansas City man who shot a Black teenager on his porch earlier this year reportedly watched Fox News all day.) A 2017 study found that the presence of Fox News in a TV market causes “a substantial rightward shift in viewers’ attitudes, which translates into a significantly greater willingness to vote for Republican candidates.” Dylan Matthews of *Vox* concludes from the data that Fox is “more powerful than we ever imagined,” and is “actively reshaping American public opinion” to the point of possibly flipping election results.

The content of Fox News broadcasts is bad enough, but the internal company culture has also been accused of embodying the same sexist attitudes that gave us “Page 3 girls.” Bill O’Reilly, the network’s biggest star for many years, was a serial sexual harasser, and the network eventually had to pay \$13 million to settle five different sexual harassment lawsuits over O’Reilly’s conduct. Roger Ailes, Murdoch’s faithful deputy, was brazen in trying to get women to trade sex for career opportunities, and was only forced out of the network after the number of lawsuits and public scandals made him an embarrassment. (After Ailes’ death, Murdoch released a statement calling him “a great patriot who never ceased fighting for his beliefs.”) There is a “well-documented pattern of discriminatory—and, indeed, predatory—treatment of women employees” at the network that has led to over \$200 million in lawsuit settlements.

Then there’s the role of Fox in giving us Trump. Stelter’s book also shows convincingly that, while the relationship between Donald Trump and Fox News has had ups and downs, the Trump presidency and Fox were inextricably tied together. Fox helped build up Trump’s profile, star commentator Sean Hannity was working as an unofficial adviser to the Trump campaign,



and when Trump became president the two talked on the phone virtually every day. In the White House, Trump would watch up to eight hours of Fox News a day. This meant that Fox News often set the agenda for the president, acting as a kind of “cable cabinet.” Trump’s former press secretary said that “There were times the president would come down the next morning and say, ‘Well, Sean thinks we should do this,’ or, ‘Judge Jeanine thinks we should do this,’” referring to Fox hosts Hannity and Jeanine Pirro. Staffers “scrambled to respond to the influence of the network’s hosts, who weighed in on everything from personnel to messaging strategy,” Stelter explains:

Fox’s influence was constant. When he threatened North Korea and said he had a bigger “button” than Kim Jong Un, it was because of a Fox segment about Kim’s “nuclear button.” When he told Iran to “never threaten the United States again!” it was because of a Fox segment about Iran’s saber-rattling. Trump granted pardons because of Fox. He attacked Google because of Fox. He raged against migrant “caravans” because of Fox. He accused public servants of treason because of Fox. And he got the facts wrong again and again because of mistakes and misreporting by the network.

Fox’s influence is, of course, ultimately Murdoch’s influence. But one of the reasons that Rupert Murdoch’s hand in global affairs is hidden is that Murdoch himself keeps his distance. He isn’t making day-to-day decisions about what to air. But this is because he doesn’t have to. Instead, he handpicks underlings who he knows will do precisely what he wants, without being given direction. “What would Rupert want?” is reportedly a question constantly on the minds of those working in various parts of the Murdoch empire.

At the end of the day, all of it is Murdoch’s responsibility: the false claims of election fraud Fox repeatedly aired, the pushing of quack Covid cures, the moral panics over immigrant caravans and drag queens. Fox News is the originator of so much of the American right’s insanity, and while Murdoch keeps a careful distance from it, it’s ultimately all his baby. Hannity, Ingraham, Carlson, O’Reilly, Beck: the talking heads come and go, but they all push the same delusional, hateful worldview. You can tell it all ultimately comes from Murdoch, because it’s exactly the same across the pond in the pages of *The Sun*, and it’s exactly the same (albeit with a few refinements of vocabulary and style) on the *Wall Street Journal* op-ed page.

Rupert Murdoch is probably the most important media figure of the last century. But I don’t think the scale of his influence on our lives has yet been appreciated. He helped to give Britain Margaret Thatcher, and he helped give America Donald Trump. Having owned over 100 newspapers at various points, plus major book publishers and television stations, he is the William Randolph Hearst (or, if you like, Charles Foster Kane) of our time. But what’s strange to me is that one man could be so influential and yet so little noticed. We notice Carlson. We notice Trump. But we wouldn’t be noticing either of them if it wasn’t for the wizened Australian man behind the curtain. ✚

Life's Short, Don't Let Anyone Stop You From Wearing...

Big Hats



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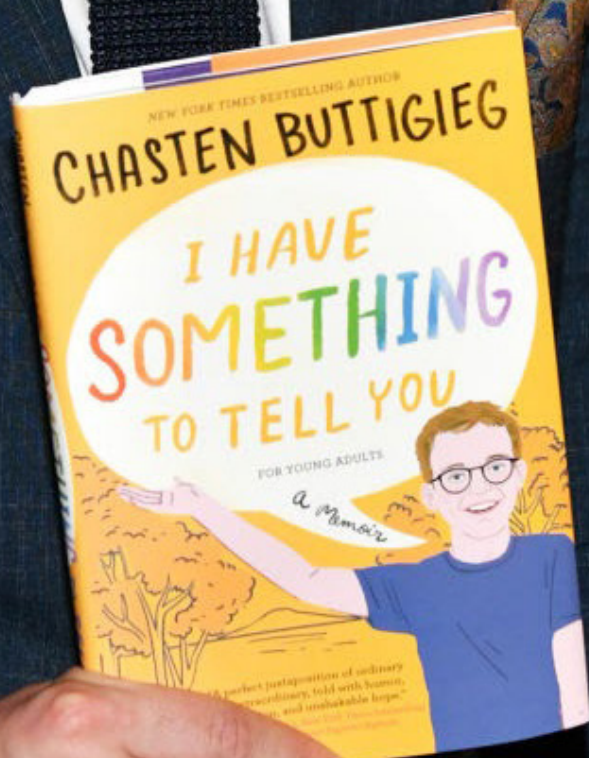
WHAT CHASTEN HAS TO TELL US

by Yasmin Nair

CHASTEN BUTTIGIEG, HUSBAND of Pete Buttigieg and once a candidate for the position of First Man, is 33 years old. So, of course, he has now fulfilled one of the two legally required conditions of what is known as the “Jesus year”: to write a memoir (the second is to create a podcast, undoubtedly on its way). These days, one needn’t have lived too long before one’s life is deemed, let’s coin a term, *memoirific*. Did you suffer some trauma growing up (keeping in mind that “trauma” is such an elastic term these days that it’s practically meaningless)? Does any part of your identity fall outside the conventional norms (white, hetero, cis, male)? Is your husband a constantly aspiring presidential candidate whose life looks like a meticulously written script for the movie, “Pete Buttigieg, First Gay President of the United States”?

Congratulations! You’re Chasten Buttigieg, and you’ve just published a memoir titled *I Have Something to Tell You*. Or, to be accurate, you’ve just turned your previously published memoir into a version for a Young Adult audience.

Chasten Buttigieg, *I Have Something to Tell You—For Young Adults: A Memoir* (Simon & Schuster), Adapted from *I Have Something to Tell You: A Memoir*



Why rewrite a memoir for young adults? might be the question. “Why not?” was clearly the answer over at Simon & Schuster, which had presumably seen the previous iteration of this book do well enough. Or, perhaps, the publisher saw the prospect of finding yet another lucrative market, the one targeted at the people henceforth referred to as “young adults.”

Make no mistake: Chasten Buttigieg’s memoir is in fact Pete Buttigieg’s memoir. It’s not just that being the husband of a prominent politician means that, of course, Chasten’s words will be scrutinized and evaluated as carefully as Jacqueline Kennedy’s white gloves and pillboxes. Rather, it’s that Pete Buttigieg has been preparing for the presidency since almost as soon as he could walk: one pictures him as a tiny tot, carrying a tiny briefcase with the words “Office of the White House” scrawled in a childish hand. (In fact, at the tender age of 11, he asked for a copy of John F. Kennedy’s *Profiles in Courage* as a birthday gift.) Pete’s life has been as carefully curated as a Spotify playlist, and his dogs, Buddy (also the name of Bill Clinton’s dog) and the recently deceased Truman (the Americana theme stretches every which way in this household), were clearly handpicked to promote the best vibes. Buddy is one-eyed, proving that the Buttigiegs are compassionate, and Truman was a houndish dog (their mostly inactive Twitter account is @firstdogsSB). Both were, of course, rescue dogs. During his campaign for the presidency, Pete even ran a campaign commercial, “Pete and Dogs,” apparently meant to demonstrate that dogs love him (the fact that it ends with Buddy snoring may not have sent the intended message).

Even their children could not be more perfect. For one thing, they are twins, and there are few things cuter than twin babies (besides cats, which are infinitely cuter). And these are biracial children, a handy defense when people bring up Pete Buttigieg’s troubled relations with his Black voters while mayor of South Bend, Indiana. As Nathan J. Robinson pointed out in an extensive review of Pete’s (first, so far) autobiography, *Shortest Way Home: One Mayor’s Challenge and a Model for America’s Future*, “South Bend African Americans make half of what South Bend whites make. They’re twice as likely to be in liquid asset poverty as whites. Their unemployment rate is nearly twice as high.” Buttigieg attempted to win over African American voters during

his presidential run, but it was too late, and he failed miserably in South Carolina: to his surprise, Black voters turned out to be smart people who knew his history. Given their talent for curation, it’s hard not to wonder if the Buttigiegs didn’t also choose their children as carefully as Melania Trump chose her outfits. This doesn’t mean that the pair don’t love their incredibly adorable children, but given that even Chasten looks like he was chosen from a catalog of “Good Gay Men,” it’s safe to say that even the most seemingly personal details of Pete’s life are carefully chosen. (The two met on Hinge, so there’s an element of catalog-hunting in all this.) Recall that this is a man who left his job as mayor of South Bend—a job that voters *elected* him to do—for seven months, just so that he could park himself in a safe, administrative military position in Afghanistan and thus, in later years, be able to declare himself a war veteran when he ran for president. As I pointed out in “Pete Buttigieg Is Still Playing,” even in his position as Transportation Secretary, Pete has so far been The One Who Does Nothing Until Compelled to Take Action—his inadequacy in dealing with crisis situations came to the fore during the Norfolk Southern train derailment disaster earlier this year.

Given all this, it’s unsurprising that *I Have Something to Tell You* is a political manifesto disguised as a deeply boring All-American story, in keeping with Pete’s entire political career so far. Pete Buttigieg’s life has been quietly and meticulously engineered to be the perfect embodiment of American values, just gay. Shorn of the kind of details that only seem special because of a historical accident—Chasten met Pete and they fell in love and married and live happily with their surrogate-born twin biracial children and two dogs—there is very little to recommend. It’s fine to be boring—most of us might wish for lives that are such, at least for periods of time, so that we can get some rest—but maybe don’t write a memoir. And then twist it around into a tale for “young adults.”

There is not enough time and space for an adequate history of childhood and “young adult” literature, except to point out that both are invented categories. Until the 19th century and when child labor laws were enacted (Charles Dickens, who had worked as a child in a blacking factory to support his family, was a major force behind them in England), the category of “childhood” was

largely unknown as a political demographic. As for fiction, while there were stories meant for children, the category of “young adult” is a relatively new one, invented by publishing houses in the mid-1960s as they looked for new markets. It’s a vague and capacious term—which explains, for instance, why Chasten Buttigieg’s book is listed as being for anyone from “12 and up.” That’s a really broad category.

So, who is this book for? And what purpose does it serve, besides being a rah-rah cheerleading song for the political career of Chasten’s husband Pete? And, in that context, what can we make of Pete Buttigieg’s life story as told through his loyal and devoted husband? What lessons might “young adults” learn from it? Should they?

CHASTEN’S EARLY LIFE

Born Chasten Glezman (he took his husband’s name), Chasten was born and raised in Traverse City, Michigan. There are some poignant sections here that remind us that while very, very few LGBTQ children growing up in very specific urban neighborhoods might feel safe and cherished as they express or explore their identities, a great number still live lives of relative isolation and pain. Chasten writes movingly,

“[A]s the truth grew clearer and clearer, I pushed it deeper and deeper into the closet. By high school, it felt as if my heart were on the outside of my chest: exposed, vulnerable, and easy to break.”

At one point, he writes, he was being beaten up by school bullies who only stopped because his elder brother intervened—but while the latter walked home with him, he never discussed the incident, then or after, something that had to be heartbreaking for a young boy. Chasten writes about often being reminded of such isolation when he meets older gay men still living closeted lives who are happy to see an out gay candidate with his partner on the campaign trail. He has very little to say about trans people, but that’s typical of a book that sees “gay” only in normative, cisgendered terms: like the mainstream gay community, which only takes up the issues of trans people as a way to drive donor funds, the Buttigiegs will doubtless turn to them only when convenient.

Unlike many other gay teens and despite the coldness of his brother, Chasten still grew

up in a loving family—upon coming out to his grandmother, she simply reached out to clasp his arm and said, “I know, Chassers. And I love you just the same.” Soon after he came out to his mother, he fled the house and spent weeks living in his car or on his friends’ couches because he was so convinced that his parents would reject him. (In a *Washington Post* profile, he recounts hearing one of his brothers declaring, “No brother of mine...” and it’s unsurprising that he felt unwelcome in his own home.) His parents worried about him and called and tried to get him to return, which he eventually did. His brother Rhyann has told the *Post* that while he loves Chasten, he does not “support the gay lifestyle,” a clearly homophobic reaction. Families are complicated—sometimes they change over time, and sometimes only in bits, but Chasten’s parents appear to be as supportive as they could be, even walking him down the aisle at his wedding to Pete. Of his father, he writes, “In many of the circles I was in, there was a very specific type of masculinity, or manliness that needed to be displayed in order to be seen as a ‘tough guy.’ He taught me that a quiet man is no weaker than the loudest in the room, and that love and tenderness and vulnerability aren’t things to be ashamed of.” His parents were not well off, and while they were able to keep Chasten and his two brothers fed and housed, they had to work multiple jobs to make sure they had money to pay the bills. This included selling Christmas trees every winter, an enterprise that included all the children helping with sales, in addition to their landscaping business. His mother took shifts as a nursing assistant to make more money.

Chasten writes about all this as signs that his parents were and are the best kind of Americans: hardworking people who throw themselves into every opportunity so that they might get by. This is hardly what we should want for our parents in their old age or, really, ever: to have to constantly grind away at multiple jobs just to be sure that there is *enough*—for clothes, food, heating—while always fearful of emergencies because even a child’s broken foot or tooth could send the family over the edge and into bankruptcy. But, of course, this is what liberal politicians like the Buttigiegs hold up as ideal—recall that Michelle Obama spoke approvingly of teachers working without pay to keep their unfunded schools going. There are signs that Chasten understands that such politics

are bullshit, especially as he acquires student loans after college, but in the memoir he constantly harps on the work ethics of his parents because, really, how could he not? Can a First Man really afford to take the view that the United States is a country that forces its not-rich to live draped on the grindstone of eternal work till they die, always afraid that a single medical emergency might send them into catastrophe?

AS FOR GAY POLITICS: Chasten’s politics are, unsurprisingly, conventional. Echoing many conservative gay activists, he cautions his young reader that “we have to get a place at the table.” He goes on, “If you have a seat at the table, then you get to be part of the conversation and decision-making.” Later, he writes about the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, “Because HIV/AIDS was affecting primarily gay people, the government was very slow to get involved, since it was unsupportive of the LGBTQ community in general.” In such bland terms, he erases one of the darkest eras of stigma—one that left millions unable to even find hospital beds or graves to be buried in. And he leaves out one of the richest and most explosive parts of queer history: when very, very angry queer people of groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation literally broke the table, as it were, and forced the government and pharmaceutical companies to create access to life-saving medications.

When it comes to public figures and cultural history, Chasten is similarly bland and regurgitates all the accepted narratives. About Ellen DeGeneres, he writes that she had been forced off the air because she came out as gay, and that Matthew Shepard had been murdered for the same reason. In fact, both stories are more complicated—DeGeneres actually never stopped working, even as an out lesbian, and her “coming out” episode on *Ellen* was the highest rated of the show, which continued for one more season. After *Ellen*, she was cast in yet another sitcom, titled *The Ellen Show* where she played... an out lesbian, and then went on to her talk show, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, which stayed on the air from 2003 to 2022. (By then, everyone and their grandmother knew of her gayness.) The show’s end had nothing to do with her lesbianism and everything to do with several complaints involving racism

and sexism in an extremely toxic work culture behind the scenes, belying the shiny, happy facade of the host.

Similarly, while Matthew Shepard was certainly brutally beaten, the causes behind his death have long been detailed as more complicated: JoAnn Wypijewsky wrote a famous 1999 piece for *Harper’s*, pointing out that the incident was deeply entrenched in a nexus of class, sex, and the shabby economy of Laramie, Wyoming. More recently, Stephen Jimenez de-mythologized Shepard’s life, bringing more evidence that the death was part of a drug deal gone awry. None of this excuses the murder, but the background of poverty and economics makes a simple tale of homophobia more untenable and locates sexuality within larger contexts.

Chasten Buttigieg pushes aside such complications surrounding living and dead public figures in favor of heroic narratives that present much simpler tales: brave gay people fighting against all odds and sometimes facing the worst consequences. And, certainly, the current political climate on LGBTQ issues is deeply troubling: recent anti-trans legislation has mushroomed across the United States, leaving trans children, youth, and adults under threat of attack and erasure (we will note, again, that Chasten makes no significant mention of trans people in the book), and gays and lesbians are hardly much safer amidst a rising tide of conservative politics.

But if a memoir about gay life and its possibilities is to be honest with its audience, it needs to be less afraid of the raw truths facing its readers.

In the “adult version” of his memoir (this is an awkward phrase, but we strain to find another for such a strange literary form), Chasten writes explicitly about a sexual assault he suffered at the age of 18. He was ultimately able to fend off his attacker, a man whose sexual advance quickly turned violent, but that experience left him feeling shocked, shaken, and suspicious of other people for a long while. This incident is left out of the “young adult” version.

It could be argued that children as young as 12 don’t need to read about sexual assault, especially in a book that’s designed to nurture their sense of self and safety as they think about their sexual identity. But what is the point of discussing *sexual identity* and not pointing out that it often involves moments of real danger? Why not use the incident to

highlight the complexities of navigating the world of sexuality and desire, to perhaps teach—as so much of young adult literature seems doomed to do—“youth” how to anticipate, prepare for, and handle awkward situations that might place them at risk of such attacks?

Instead, Chasten’s dominant message with this book is about “authenticity”—a meaningless word that is nevertheless taken up by gay activists and “allies” like Cyndi Lauper whose “True Colors” foundation makes a virtue of telling young LGBTQ people in particular to live in their “true” selves. We could argue that this is merely encouragement to be themselves. But authenticity, like “equality,” is a trap. Chasten writes, “I hope that by reading about my journey, you will feel compelled to keep sharing yours as authentically as you can.”

What does it mean to be authentically queer? In gay organizing, “authenticity” is code for “be *fabulous* and the kind of LGBTQ person who is easily recognized as such” and “make sure you find a life partner.” Towards the end, Chasten writes that the answer to the question, “If you could go back and tell your younger self one thing, what would it be?” is “You’re going to fall in love both with yourself and with someone else.”

But why? Why tell someone, potentially a mere 12 years of age, that “falling in love” is so important? What if the lesson were, “The world is actually, sometimes, a scary dark place, and here are the warning signs to look out for.” Or, “Never believe that someone’s validation of you is so important that you let them take you into a strange room.” Or, “The world has, historically, refused to give queers even a semblance of life itself and we only got what we needed by breaking a lot of things, including their dinner table, and screaming in the streets.”

Instead, Chasten offers up a vision of queer life for young people that is at best a series of affirmations born out of Gay Straight Alliance culture. Like his and Pete’s life together, it’s carefully calibrated to ensure that an imagined and very normative straight person won’t be offended by anything, like references to queer death or sex or anger or social movements that aren’t just about gaining access to the economic advantages of marriage. Youths are admonished to be happy, to be authentic, to believe in hard work, no matter how grueling their work might be—it will all work out, and a romantic interest will make it all go away.

WHAT REMAINS TO BE told? What would have been an actual “memoir” for “youth”? And is Chasten responsible for saying more?

In his essay “On the Moral Responsibilities of Political Spouses,” Hamilton Nolan looks at the life and politics of Cheryl Hines, the wife of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Kennedy—an anti-vaccine conspiracy theorist correctly described by Nathan J. Robinson and Lily Sánchez as a “Lying Crank Posing as a Progressive Alternative to Biden,” in these pages. Hines, well known for her role on *Curb Your Enthusiasm* as Larry David’s progressive wife, also named Cheryl, has been able to demur when asked about her political beliefs, but Kennedy has spoken often about her tremendous influence on him. While it’s customary to see political spouses as secondary, silent partners, Nolan asks, “Is Cheryl Hines willing to sit down with the children of someone who listened to RFK Jr. and decided not to get vaccinated and died—or with the mother of a depressed teenager who didn’t take their antidepressants and fell prey to suicide—and say to those people, ‘Your family had to die, so that I could have peace in my own family’?”

It’s more than likely that the liberal press will be soft on Chasten, just as it ignores the moral culpability of spouses like Hines: even mild criticism of a gay candidate and his (adorable, handsome) family can be dismissed as homophobic by the Buttigiegs and their supporters in a very, very powerful mainstream gay lobby. But Chasten can’t just be the innocuous gay man who brings a reassuring and Buttigiegistic worldview to the masses: “Yes, we’re gay, but fear not: we will unleash wars and ignore poverty, just like everyone else.” To use a phrase that originated in radical feminist and queer circles, the Buttigiegs enable a pinkwashing of American imperialism. The problem is not that their lifestyles are too normative, but that nothing about their vision for the world is a departure: their gayness provides a progressive cover for a politics that’s all about preserving the status quo. They could be men who walk around in leather chaps with multiple partners, and their politics would still be troubling: “alternative” lifestyles are no guarantee of radical or even mildly progressive politics, as anyone who has walked into any leather shop or bar in Chicago’s racist, classist, and

sexist gay neighborhood Northalsted can tell you (this is sadly true of the city’s entire gay scene, but that’s a different essay).

I Have Something to Tell You presents a gay life that, having overcome some obstacles, is nevertheless able to purposefully stride towards an apolitical “American” life. Along the way, it recasts vital parts of American and gay history. In this version of America the Gay, gayness is translated as either a tragic life to be overcome or as one that can only be happy when straight people first pity you and then allow you to marry. Inconvenient complications, like angry queers organizing around AIDS or demanding rights outside of marriage, are quietly brushed away. It’s an admonition to “youth” to only be a certain kind of gay. As a political manifesto, *I Have Something to Tell You* provides a blueprint for a gay constituency whose only challenge to American empire and capitalism is that our most oppressive institutions should be queer-affirming.

Chasten and Pete will serve as the Ken and Ken dolls on top of a wedding cake, obscuring any memory of a time when queer radical action meant demanding the seemingly impossible: universal healthcare, an end to poverty, housing and security for all. Chasten has something to tell us, sure, but it’s a well-modulated, soothing whisper, telling tales of good gay people sitting decorously at the table. Queer people have suffered and continue to suffer enormous harm not just because they’re queer but because capitalism only sees their worth when their identities can be deployed to further its own ends, and its spits out those too inconvenient to have around (angry radicals, trans queer youth demanding a say in their own health, and so on). But youth, across sexualities and whatever their age, deserve more and better. They deserve to know their radical history and that the world can be an exciting place for them, but they also need to know that they should avoid and ignore decorous gay men whose lives, fabricated across multiple, anodyne memoirs, serve to erase both the darkness and the rich complexity of real lives. ✦

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COMMUTE

THE GAME

Can you make it to work?
It might depend on
who you are!

WEED PLANTED
BY THE COPS!!

STOP

WILL YOU GET
STOPPED BY THE COPS?
YES!
NO!
MAYBE

SCENE SCENE
SCENE SCENE

GAS

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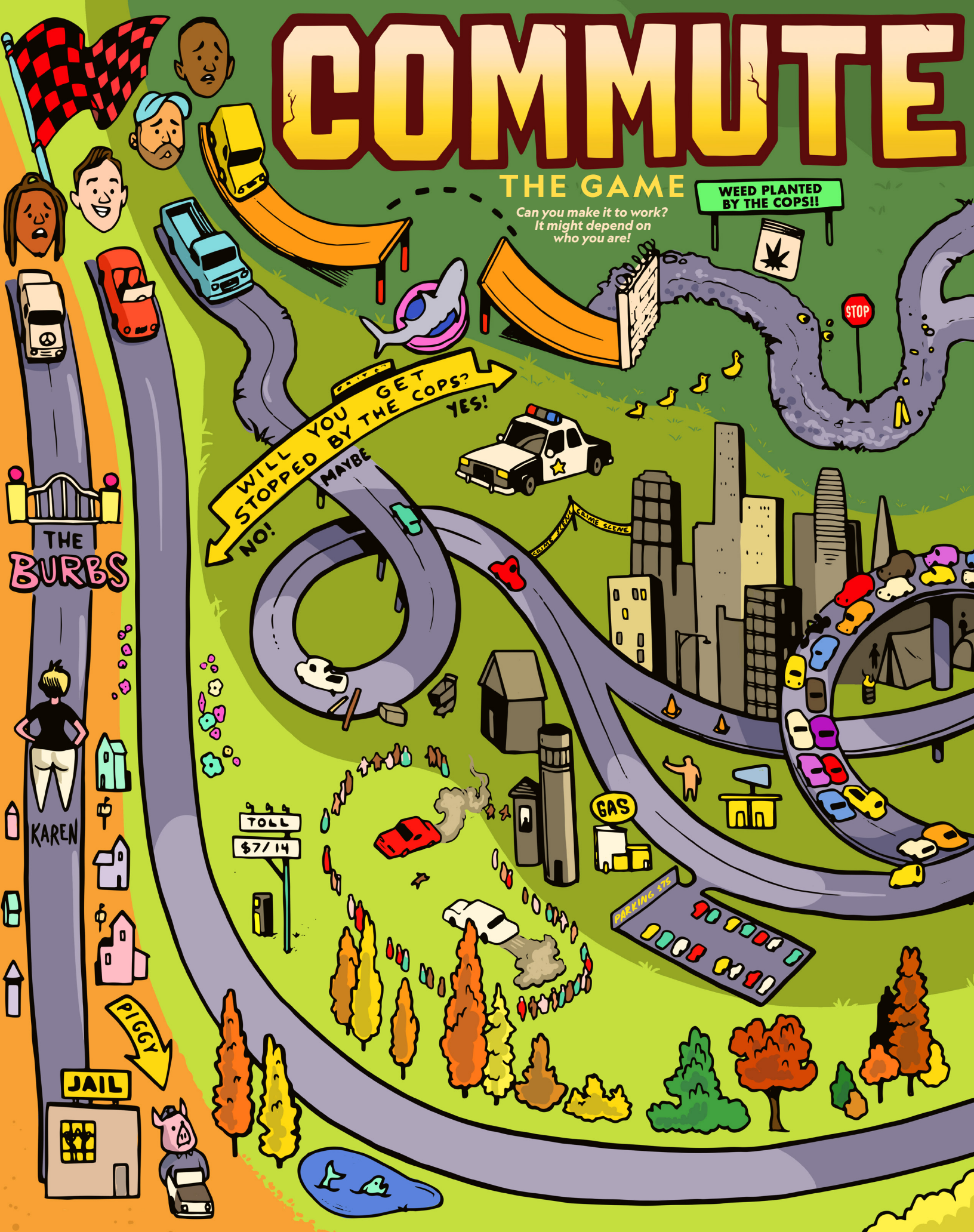
PARKING 150

PIGGY

JAIL

THE
BURBS

KAREN





HIGH
SPEED
RAIL

WIN!
WIN!
WIN!

NICK SIROTIKH



From Influencer to Influenced

The Evolution of AOC

by
Lily Sánchez

IN 2019, ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ, ONE OF THE MOST VISIBLE SELF-DESCRIBED democratic socialists in public office, narrated a short film in promotion of her signature resolution, the Green New Deal (GND). The film, called “A Message from the Future,” was set in a fictional speculative future and looked back on our own time to explain how the GND came about and transformed the world: *“The wave began when Democrats took back the House in 2018, and the Senate, and the White House in 2020, and launched the decade of the Green New Deal, a flurry of legislation that kicked off our social and ecological transformation to save the planet. It was the kind of swing for the fence ambition we needed. Finally, we were entertaining solutions on the scale of the crises we faced, without leaving anyone behind. That included Medicare for All, the most popular social program in American history. We also introduced the federal jobs guarantee, a public option, including dignified, living wages for work.”*

Well, the party *did* take the House, the Senate, and the White House in 2020. It turns out, however, that the difference between the Democrats of AOC’s fictional future and the Democrats of reality could not be more stark. There has been no transformation like the one AOC imagined.

A tired-appearing AOC had appeared on Instagram live in fall 2020 to encourage viewers to vote for Joe Biden, who had said just months prior that he would veto Medicare for All (during a pandemic, no less). “Voting for Joe Biden is not about whether you agree with him. It’s a vote to let our democracy live another day,” AOC advised.

Young voters and progressives, and especially Black voters, turned out to give the party the win.

In return, the party has failed to deliver on practically every promise made during the election campaign.

“BRINGING THE PARTY HOME”

AOC HERSELF SAID THAT SHE SOUGHT TO BRING ABOUT CHANGE within the Democratic Party. Two weeks before her election in the 2018 Democratic primary, she said, as quoted in the 2020 essay col-

lection AOC: *The Fearless Rise and Powerful Resonance of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez*, “We need new leadership in the Democratic Party and we need new leadership in the country.” In a 2018 interview, she said that the Democratic Party needed to “return to social advocacy and the working class,” and that Democrats needed to “break free” from corporate money in order to “survive.” In a November 2019 tweet, she wrote: “We’re not pushing the party left. We’re bringing the party home.”

Indeed, essay writers in the book AOC gushed over AOC’s potential significance to the Democratic Party. Erin Aubry Kaplan claimed that AOC was like a superheroine, “straight out of a Marvel Studios movie script,” and that she brought a kind of “chi, if you will, that’s been missing from the party and from the left for a long time,” infusing the party’s “bloodlessness with the truth about color.” Pedro Regalado, evoking New York City’s history of radical Puerto Rican activism (including the militant socialist group The Young Lords Party) wrote that “her victory provides a formula for how the Democratic Party can re-energize itself.”

According to the 2019 documentary *Knock Down the House* (about AOC and other Justice Democrat candidates) and AOC, AOC was nominated by her brother to the Brand New Congress, which, according to their old website, says they want to help elect “regular working people to Congress, who put people before party.” BNC vetted her and decided to help her run. Justice Democrats also supported her bid. According to their website, Justice Democrats (started by former Bernie 2016 campaign staffers) is a federal PAC funded by grassroots donations that is “working to transform the Democratic Party while building independent power. We do this by running primary challengers against out-of-touch Democratic incumbents and organizing to hold the party accountable to our issues.”

Timothy Shenk, a professor of modern U.S. history, in a piece titled “The Twisty Road from Eugene Victor Debs to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez” in *The Unprecedented AOC*, writes that AOC is part of an effort to “build a democratic majority committed to radical change.” He places her within the tradition of a “‘visionary gradualism’ that held up socialism as an ideal while accepting the Democrats as the lesser of two evils.”

Political theorist Benjamin Studebaker, in his 2023 book *The Chronic Crisis of American Democracy: The Way is Shut*, has concluded that AOC (and Bernie et al.) have been politically ineffective at the national level and are actually operating an industry of “false hope.” He writes:

What happens when a political movement is strong enough to win a handful of elections in fringe congressional districts, but not strong enough to produce anything like a governing majority? Its politicians have to find some way of appearing effective. They slowly shift the goalposts. They quietly abandon their transformative policy goals and instead offer their supporters the satisfaction of symbolic victories. Instead of fighting for big legislation, they fight to embarrass their opponents on television and on Twitter. They make viral videos. They work with the center of the party, because working with the center is the only way to win even small victories. They talk those petty victories up and present them as grand triumphs. Gradually, a symbiotic relationship forms between the Berniecrats in Congress and the Democratic Party establishment. The Berniecrats discipline the base voters, ensuring that they remain Democrats. By continuing to hang around,

the Berniecrats give Democratic base voters false hope that one day the Democratic Party will move in their direction. The Berniecrats critique the party from within, and their critiques create an impression of intellectual diversity and vibrancy within the party. They tell the base voters that they will push the party to the left. If the base voters just work hard to get them re-elected, and to elect more Berniecrats to congress, one day, they’ll have the numbers to move transformative legislation. The base voters are kept on a hope treadmill, supporting the Democrats in the hope that the Berniecrats will one day succeed in improving the Democratic Party from within. That day never comes...

Studebaker’s critique, or one similar to it, reverberates among the online left, some of whom, like Briahna Joy Gray, question the rationale behind “vote blue no matter who” or have left the Democratic Party entirely. I’m partial to looking beyond the party. I think that “false hope” is too polite. It’s *corrosive* to tell people—particularly those from groups marginalized by race, class, and gender—that they need to vote for a party that does not act in their interest.

LAUNDRY LIST OF POLICY FAILURES

HERE’S WHAT A 2020 VOTE FOR BIDEN HAS YIELDED US ON THE LEFT. The \$15 minimum wage, which was included in early Covid relief legislation, was killed by an unelected Senate parliamentarian—a technicality the administration could have disregarded but chose not to. Biden did issue a plan to cancel up to \$20,000 of student debt, but it remains in legal limbo. There is no public healthcare option. And, perhaps most egregiously, the \$2,000 stimulus checks that were promised during election season were instead issued for \$1,400.

Calls in late 2020 by Briahna Joy Gray and others for AOC and “the Squad” (a term coined by AOC in 2018 for four progressives including her and Reps. Rashida Tlaib, Ilhan Omar, and Ayanna Pressley, which now includes Reps. Cori Bush and Jamaal Bowman) to act like a voting bloc and force a vote on Medicare for All in exchange for supporting Nancy Pelosi as House Speaker were flatly rejected by AOC herself. She tweeted that there was an “opportunity cost to weigh” between a floor vote and doing other things in the future, including fighting for a \$15 minimum wage. When independent reporter David Sirota asked AOC recently why the Medicare for All movement had apparently stalled, her first response was that the health “insurance lobby is so incredibly powerful” and that “the insurance companies have a broader number of members that can be influenced by that.” This statement of fact, of course, has nothing to do with what *she* and other progressives who don’t take corporate money are doing (or not doing) on healthcare. AOC gave another reason for lack of movement on healthcare: the Senate filibuster. But the Democrats had all of 2021 to overturn the filibuster, and they refused.

What’s worse, as Sirota noted in the same interview, the Biden administration has actually lurched to the right. Some liberals initially proclaimed that “Biden [was] embracing his inner FDR.” The administration did manage to get through significant social spending on the pandemic welfare state in the form of stimulus checks and enhanced unemployment insurance. But we’ve since gotten horrible policies like approval of the Willow Project, an \$8 billion oil drilling project in Alaska; cuts in Medicaid and food stamp benefits for the

neediest; an expiration of the public health emergency designation for the pandemic in May; onerous work requirements for public assistance as part of the recent debt ceiling deal (itself a crisis entirely of Congress's own making); and a vote to preemptively crush a rail strike in December 2022—all on the Squad's watch. Sirota pointed out that AOC has voted 91 percent along party lines (the percentage is similar for all Squad members) and asked AOC point-blank why she and the Squad don't go against the party more or act as a voting bloc to advance progressive interests—particularly in the case of the vote on the rail workers. AOC's response was to blame everyone else: the *workers* wanted her to prioritize a vote on a sick leave provision (which, separate from the vote to make the strike illegal, failed in the Senate); the *workers* weren't ready for a wildcat strike; and some unnamed people on social media, she said, were invested in sowing conflict on the left.

The AOC of 2023 is defending a vote to stop rail workers—who work grueling schedules and have one of the highest rates of injuries of all occupations—from striking to obtain better working conditions.

Recall that one of AOC's first notable actions—just days after her election in November 2018—was to participate in the occupation of Pelosi's office with activists demanding a climate plan and that officials pledge not to take money from fossil fuel companies. Earlier that year, she'd told Cenk Uygur on *The Young Turks* that she'd support forcing a “budget showdown” in order to fight for immigration legislation. Scroll through AOC's social media timeline from 2018-2019 and you see heavy references to Martin Luther King Jr. and a serious expression of moral commitment to fighting injustice. What happened to the militant AOC of pre-2018, the one who said, “If you're a one-term Congress member, so what? You can make 10 years' worth of change in one term if you're not afraid”?

THE WELL-TRAVELED PATH

IN AOC, NATHAN J. ROBINSON WROTE ABOUT “THE DEMOCRATIC Socialism of AOC” and made a prescient assessment:

Of course, many reformers mellow once they get into power, and those on the left who admire AOC sometimes worry that she will succumb to political pressure to moderate her positions. [...] A cynic might expect that AOC would follow the well-traveled path from 'youthful radicalism' to 'acceptance of the status quo,' as she finds out 'how Washington really works' and 'learns to make compromises.' If that is indeed what happens, it would be disappointing, because AOC is remarkable and compelling precisely because of her 'youthful radicalism' and her refusal to make the usual compromises. She is independent minded, daring, and says what has been on the minds of many but too few have been willing to say. If she tones it down, we will all be poorer for it.

The media has attempted to answer the question of why AOC seems to have *toned it down*. As *New York Times* explained in September 2019, AOC had come in as a “divisive outsider”: two of her staff members had been quite outspoken against the party establishment, particularly on social media; there were hints that she might support a primary challenge to Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, who is now the House Minority Leader and was rising in the party at the time; and she and the other three Squad members had voted no on a border aid

package which led to some unflattering public remarks about them by Nancy Pelosi. But now, with her two outspoken staff members gone, and after having had a private (presumably sobering) meeting with Pelosi, AOC was learning how to “balance her twin roles as a dissident and a member of Congress.” The article summed up:

But after nearly nine months, with her eyes now wide open to the downsides of her revolutionary reputation and social media fame, Ms. Ocasio-Cortez has tempered her brash, institution-be-damned style with something different: a careful political calculus that adheres more closely to the unwritten rules of Washington she once disdained.

A more recent profile in *Puck* from March of this year reports that AOC has become “more subdued and party line toeing,” inviting speculation that she's either “playing three dimensional chess” or “diligently earning her stripes on the Hill.” *Puck* quotes an anonymous Democratic congressperson claiming that “she's come to realize that you cannot be an agitator as a congressperson.”

But what these articles fail to capture is that there is no “careful political calculus” or “three dimensional chess” game for an official—certainly not one who calls themselves a socialist—working to advance the interests of ordinary people against a government that mostly serves the rich and corporations. And all movements attempting to make fundamental change—not superficial reforms—depend on agitators to win. A more “subdued” AOC is simply an ineffective, not “strategic,” AOC.

As Jordan Bollag argued in *Current Affairs* last year, progressives have failed to act confrontational enough to win an agenda that is popular with the public (such as Medicare for All, student debt cancellation, \$15 minimum wage, and more). “The left will never win through backroom-deal politics. That's the establishment's turf. We will only win with grassroots social movements and organized labor working alongside our allies in office to mobilize their base,” he concluded, citing the example of the movement work by Socialist Alternative and Kshama Sawant (Seattle's open socialist and Marxist city council member since 2014), which has resulted in wins at the local level such as a \$15 minimum wage, a tax on Amazon, and a city ban on caste discrimination.

As inspiring as the rise of AOC and other Squad members has been, it's clear that they remain bound by a party that refuses to address the most pressing issues of our time.

In his 2020 essay about AOC, Robinson discussed AOC's politics. He acknowledged that it seemed uncertain how “anti-capitalist” the self-described democratic socialist actually was. He concluded, “For the moment, it is enough to say that [her] socialism would create a very different kind of American economy from the one we have now, one that would be far more egalitarian and humane.” That's a reasonable assessment—and, I think, enough of a reason for people to have gotten behind her campaign at the time.

But sometimes AOC says things that I don't think are helpful to the political project of socialism. For example, in November 2021, she was interviewed about the then-upcoming general election for mayor of Buffalo. India Walton, a Black woman, an organizer, and a nurse, was running openly as a democratic socialist on a platform of criminal punishment reform, public safety, and tenant rights. AOC was a vocal supporter of Walton and stumped for her in Buffalo. She and Walton were interviewed by a local TV station, and the anchor

mentioned that both women identified as democratic socialists. AOC said, “When you talk about capitalism, socialism, et cetera—these are very high-minded debates. I think what’s important is we say ‘Where’s the beef?’ What are the policies each candidate is actually proposing?” This comment actually resembles what a Democratic Rep. who supported Walton’s opponent had to say about Democrats going too far left in that election: voters “don’t want pie-in-the-sky philosophical debate.”

Why would a socialist say something like that? Why not take the opportunity to highlight the left critique of capitalism? Why not take the opportunity to *highlight* the contradictions between what mainstream politicians are offering and what a democratic socialist would offer?

I’m not sure that AOC was ever strongly attached to the label or identity of “socialist” to begin with. According to *Take up Space: The Unprecedented AOC*, a 2022 book by the editors of *New York Magazine*, AOC only joined the Democratic Socialists of America in early 2018, “around the same time she was seeking its endorsement.” The book also notes that AOC said:

I don’t read a book and decide what I am. ... I’m like, These are my goals: Health care. Housing. Education. If my belief that housing is a human right ... if that makes me a socialist, then all right, I guess I’m a socialist. ... Some people may really disagree with me on the left, you know, you have to be, like, really pure and all this stuff, but for me, it’s more tactile. What am I trying to accomplish? This is what I’m trying to accomplish. You can call that whatever you want to call that, but these are the things that I want.

In another instance, she’s quoted as saying, “I didn’t know this [socialism] was a political way of being. I just thought it was a moral way of being.”

Now, I happen to have come to socialism through a moral lens myself because it seemed commonsense to me. But I don’t think we’re going to win socialism through appeals to the goodwill of the billionaire class and the corporate executives—or the politicians bankrolled by them. Why? Because it’s not in their *interest* for us to enact Medicare for All, a Green New Deal, a higher minimum wage, public housing, better funding for education, and so forth. As Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton wrote in their 1967 book *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, “Politics results from a conflict of interests, not consciences.” So if the main justification for your policies is moral, where do you get your theory of change from? Where does your political strategy come from?

What an elected official calls themselves does seem to suggest their underlying political analysis and strategy. Kshama Sawant, for instance, has explained her and Socialist Alternative’s idea of a “fighting” socialist strategy. As she has explained: “It’s a question of, do you have the courage to take on a clash with those who are in power in the interest of those who need you to fight alongside them and for them?” Additionally: “If you are not facing absolute hostility from the ruling class and their political representatives, then you’re not doing what needs to be done for the working class.” In other words, this is class war. It just doesn’t seem like AOC and her Squad comrades are willing to wage it.

JUST AS STUDEBAKER DESCRIBES, AOC (AND THE Squad, to a lesser extent) has risen to the status of celebrity politician and influencer.* AOC is the 10th most popular politician according to YouGov, and she’s one of the most popular politicians on social media, with 13.4 million followers on Twitter and 8.6 million on Instagram. Her celebrity began soon after her primary win, when she stunned the political establishment by defeating “Queens Machine” Joe Crowley in the Democratic primary and went on to win the general election in New York’s 14th Congressional district to become, at age 29, the youngest woman elected to Congress. Just a few months later (*before* the general election), in October 2018, she was being photographed in her Bronx apartment for *Vogue* by Annie Leibovitz and being called an “anti-Trump,” a principled, working-class brown woman as the foil to the sleazy rich white president from the same city.

She’s known for her quick comeback tweets to reptilian right wingers like Ted Cruz and Ron DeSantis, among others, and her IG livestreams, where she does everything from assembling IKEA furniture while talking about the economy to zesting a lemon for her dinner prep while discussing stimulus checks to revealing her personal trauma in the context of the Jan. 6 Capitol Riots in 2021. Over 400,000 viewers once tuned in to watch her and Rep. Ilhan Omar play a video game on Twitch in 2020. In the *The Unprecedented AOC*, Andrew Rice credited her with having effectively killed, via a series of tweets, Amazon’s (popular with the public, he says) 2018 bid to establish a second headquarters in Queens.

She has also taught other members of Congress how to use Twitter as an “effective and authentic messaging tool to connect with their constituents” while also emphasizing “the importance of digital storytelling.” Charisse Burden-Stelly, a professor of African American studies, has said that AOC and contemporaries are “more influencers than politicians, because of this very idea of the power of celebrity.” She explained:

“They have their fuckin’ platitudes on social media, ... ‘this is what we need to do,’ [and] it’s like, do your job! Every time I’m on Twitter, you on Twitter! ... I’m a civilian! ... The U.S. is constitutively a celebrity culture, but I do not think we can afford to run our politics that way.”

Burden-Stelly’s analysis aligns with something Charles V. Hamilton wrote in his 1992 afterward to *Black Power*. What he writes about pop culture could easily apply to influencer culture today:

We are in an era of tremendous influence through the pop-culture medium, where many become politicized not through long, hard study and organizing, but through the passionate portrayal of our struggle through television documentaries, emotional speeches, movies, and television and radio talk shows. For many younger people, this is understandable, but not particularly efficacious.

Indeed, today’s parasocial relationships—developed through AOC’s pointed tweets to Ted Cruz or her telling of a dramatic personal story on a livestream—may make viewers feel validated and may

* AOC has an impressive ability to raise a lot of money when she wants to. She raised \$5 million online, for instance, in 2021 during Winter Storm Uri, which left some 70 percent of Texans without power due to the shoddy state electrical grid.



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politicize people. Further appeals in the social media space to identity politics* (including what Studebaker calls the “activist rhetoric” of AOC) may also build viewer support. But this is not the same as a political movement. It’s not political strategy. And it’s “not particularly efficacious” by any number of metrics we might look at: membership in the Democratic Socialists of America is down (however imperfectly this group serves as a kind of proxy for interest in socialism); the left has no other mass membership based group around which to organize; the Squad is towing the line for the Democratic Party; and we will all be told once again in 2024 to vote for the Democratic Party as usual. Sanders’ early endorsement of Biden for 2024 makes things even worse.

AOC’s celebrity and influencer status, then, is more about who she is to us than what she’s *doing* as a politician. As writer and activist Yasmin Nair puts it:

What should your politician do for you and what should your politician be to you: those are two entirely separate questions. Only in the U.S are we so completely obsessed with the latter as we forget the former.

To think about what a politician might “do for you” is to think about the very strategies they use—and how you might alter your support for them when they fail to deliver.

* Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor has written about “Black faces in high places” and questions whether Black elected officials can truly be committed to improving the lives of ordinary Black people. There is “significant doubt” that Black elected officials are a “viable vehicle for Black liberation,” she concludes, noting that Black people overall still face unacceptable levels of housing, food, and job instability as well as poverty despite increasing numbers of Black elected officials over the last few decades. This raises the question of whether the Squad simply represents, to echo a similar sentiment articulated by Ture and Hamilton, a “powerless visibility” of people of color.

CLOSING RANKS: “FRAUD SQUAD” AND THE CPC

WRITING FROM THE BLACK RADICAL TRADITION CAN HELP US THINK about political strategy on the left. In *Black Power*, the authors argue that “groups with particular identities and interests need to ‘close ranks.’” What they mean is that “group solidarity is necessary before a group can operate effectively from a bargaining position of strength in a pluralistic society.” Applying this logic to AOC and the Squad means that, politically, they should act as a bloc to advance the *interests* of the working class and marginalized people at large. The Congressional Progressive Caucus ought to do the same. But both groups suffer from a fatal lack of solidarity and discipline.

Some background on the Squad is useful. Recall that the Justice Democrats started the movement to get these progressives elected in 2018. Their website uses the Squad as a marketing tool for their cause. Executive Director Alexandra Rojas says in a website video, “the squad is still growing.” In the same video, Jamaal Bowman says that they are “transforming the Democratic Party.” Even Shahid Buttar, who ran against Nancy Pelosi twice as a Democrat in 2020 and 2022, used the Squad to sell himself as someone who wanted to help “expand the squad.” Hearing these words and seeing the image below, you’d *think* the Squad acted as a bloc politically. (Not pictured here are other Justice Dems such as Reps. Ro Khanna, Raúl Grijalva, and Congressional Progressive Caucus Chair Pramila Jayapal. Pictured near the center are the newest Reps., Summer Lee and Greg Casar.)

Clare Malone wrote in the *The Unprecedented AOC* that Corbin Trent, fellow Justice Democrats founder and former AOC aide, “said ‘the Squad’s not a thing.’ To him it’s more a mirage of the media’s creation.” The facts would suggest that the Squad is indeed “not a thing.” (I’ve borrowed the term Fraud Squad from Briahna Joy Gray because I think it accurately reflects the way that many of us on the left feel about the Squad’s performance in office.)

The original Squad came about when AOC posted on Instagram a picture of the four women during House orientation and tagged it as “squad.” AOC and Pressley are said to have bonded over commonalities in their life stories, and AOC has talked about the “sisterhood” among the women. While it’s completely understandable that women of color who are socialists (Ayanna Pressley does not identify as a democratic socialist) operating in a very white and very male institution would band together for support (the four have been targeted viciously by Donald Trump, who told them to go back to the crime-infested places they came from), what’s telling is how they respond when challenged as a group.

For example, the original Squad voted against bipartisan border legislation in 2019, prompting Nancy Pelosi to make comments to *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd about how the group has “their



public whatever and their Twitter world. ... But they didn't have any following. They're four people and that's how many votes they got." This triggered a barrage of media coverage, AOC implied that some of Pelosi's comments unfairly singled out women of color, and CBS's Gayle King got the four women on an interview to talk it out. In that interview, the women made it clear that they were not acting as a bloc in any way politically. In fairness, King was fairly hostile at times to them. But their answers were not inspiring.

When King pushed, saying that it didn't seem like the women were on the same page as their party, Pressley emphasized that the group just "happened" to land the same way on immigration and were merely representing their districts with their votes. She added, "There is no insurgency here. ... There is nothing [conspiratorial]." "We take those votes alone," was perhaps the most damning thing Pressley said. AOC added: "We're still united as a [Democratic] caucus." And Pressley topped the whole thing off with the idea that they're just part of a larger movement. "The Squad is anyone dedicated to building a more equitable world," she said. Cori Bush echoed those words at a gathering of socialist officeholders this month. "This movement is big. When people tell us, 'The Squad is six people'—no, the Squad is all of us. We can't do this alone." But again, the question is what *they* are doing in Congress since *they* hold positions that average people don't.

The CPC itself is another problem. As Pramila Jayapal details in her 2020 book, *Use the Power You Have: A Brown Woman's Guide to Politics and Political Change*, the Caucus came about in the 1990s under Bernie Sanders and Maxine Waters initially as a social group to discuss progressive ideas. Jayapal's priority, upon her arrival to Congress in 2017, was to build "infrastructure" for progressives. Jayapal comes from the nonprofit world, so perhaps it isn't surprising that she wants to build institutions. She and other members built a staff, instituted dues, and created a 501(c)(3), the Congressional Progressive Caucus Center (has anyone ever heard of this?), and a PAC. She and her co-chair at the time, Mark Pocan, determined that "we did not want to be compared to the Freedom Caucus, which was in our mind a caucus of 'NO' while we were a caucus of 'YES.' But the challenges of figuring out how to flex our progressive power while not shutting down our own Democratic majority was complicated and required organizing..." She admits that the caucus is "very large and diverse." And when the Squad voted against the immigration bill in 2019, she laments: "This was a legitimate position to take, and probably one I would have joined with had I not been co-chair of the CPC."

All of Jayapal's words here run counter to the idea of closing ranks and building an effective and disciplined caucus willing to take a stand when it's uncomfortable to do so. You don't need a "large and diverse" caucus. You need to establish some criteria for entry (for starters, no person who accepts corporate money can join) and some enforceable consequences for not adhering to those criteria. Currently the Caucus has a bloated 100-person House membership (plus Bernie Sanders in the Senate) including Shontel Brown, whose GOP-backed campaign defeated progressive Nina Turner in Ohio and Sylvia Garcia, a Houston representative who doesn't even support Medicare for All. Numbers are an obvious but perhaps unnecessary preoccupation with the Caucus. A 2022 *Daily Beast* article detailed how Jayapal wants to grow their ranks to push the Democrats left. But this is the same logic as "growing" the Squad. At what point does either group feel it has the "numbers" to try to leverage power? This question is never answered. To repeat Studebaker, that day simply never comes.

DEFENDERS OF PROGRESSIVE LEGISLATORS IN THE Democratic Party often point the finger away from progressive missteps, arguing that all hopes of transformative policies have been dashed by the presence of two right-wing Democrats, Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema, in the Senate. The usual explanation of unsavory compromise is that it emerges out of "political constraint," i.e., that nothing else could have realistically been done given the existing arrangement of power. (This was the false explanation given when Barack Obama's centrist policies left progressives feeling betrayed.) But we can test the theory by looking at moments where there clearly *was* an opportunity to act differently.

In the case of AOC and the other members of the Squad, for

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instance, there was a clear opportunity in 2020 to strategically refuse to vote for Nancy Pelosi for Speaker of the House until she granted major concessions to the progressive wing of the party. Some argued at the time that this method should be used to get Medicare for All voted on, thereby forcing legislators to either support universal healthcare or demonstrate to the U.S. public that they were in the pockets of the insurance industry. The strategy was not used; all Democrats, including AOC, lined up behind Pelosi. (This was reminiscent of when AOC called Pelosi “mama bear” and posed with her on the cover of *Rolling Stone* in early 2019.) Pelosi, who despises both the Green New Deal (“the green dream or whatever they call it” and Medicare For All (she has assured insurance executives they don’t need to worry about Democrats pushing it) was not forced to advance either policy. And the opportunity to galvanize the public around free healthcare during a pandemic was lost.

At the time, some doubted that withholding a speakership vote *could* get concessions from the leadership for a minority of the party. But the moment Republicans took the House this year, that’s precisely what the hard right did: they refused to vote for Kevin McCarthy until he gave them all the items on their wish list. It worked. But it required a confrontational stance toward the party leadership, a willingness to treat them as adversaries.

AOC is on the record talking about creating a sub-caucus within the CPC to get things done. After she won her primary, and before the 2018 general election, she talked about how she and other progressives could leverage power as a *small bloc*. As Ryan Grim wrote in the *Intercept*:

“The thing that gives the caucus power is that you can operate as a bloc vote in order to get things done,” Ocasio-Cortez told Daniel Denvir, host of Jacobin’s “The Dig.” “Even if you can carve out a sub-portion, a sub-caucus of the progressive caucus, even if you could carve out that, even a smaller bloc, but one that operates as a bloc, then you could generate real power.” [...] “If you can even carve out a caucus of 10, 30 people it does not take a lot, if you operate as a bloc vote, to really make strong demands on things,” she said. What Ocasio-Cortez is floating—a progressive mirroring of the Freedom Caucus—has been flirted with in the past in Congress.

But remember, Jayapal is against progressives doing anything like wielding power like the right wing—even though it was the Freedom Caucus that successfully maneuvered to oust House Speaker John Boehner in 2015. They started out as an invitation-only group of around 40 right-wing members. As distasteful as the far right’s policy priorities may be, they know how to leverage power in small numbers.

At the same time as the fight over the speakership was going on, Democrats including AOC were voting in lockstep for Pelosi’s chosen successor, Hakeem Jeffries, a former corporate lawyer who is one of the staunchest Democratic supporters of Israel’s apartheid regime and who has openly led opposition to progressives who challenge centrist incumbents. AOC, rather than seeing the Republican pressure tactics as an example of how to wield power against the leadership, said that Republican behavior simply showed how comparatively “reasonable” progressives were for being compliant and unified with their party.

When challenged over the last couple of years by leftist interviewers, AOC’s responses have not been good. In a 2021 DSA interview, she was asked to respond to leftists who might think that “no progress is going to come out of the Biden administration.” Her response:

Well, I think it’s a really privileged critique. We’re gonna have to focus on solidarity with one another, developing our senses for good faith critique and bad faith critique. Because bad faith critique can destroy everything that we have built so swiftly. And we know this because it has in the past, and it’s taken us so many decades to get to this point. We do not have the time or the luxury to entertain bad faith actors in our movement.

When David Sirota asked about the strategy behind the vote to prevent the rail strike, she said:

[U]ltimately there there are moments where there are going to be internal disagreements about strategy. It is so important, especially among the left, that we develop a discernment between when there are differences in strategy. Sometimes they are intense and sometimes they are rigorous and vigorous disagreements verses equating that difference in strategy with somehow a 180 change in commitment to our vision and our principles.

“Privileged.” “Bad faith.” “Discernment” between legitimate and illegitimate criticism. These sound like the words of someone who has, as the *Times* put it, “learned to play by Washington’s rules.”

THESE HAS BEEN SPECULATION ABOUT AOC’S political trajectory over the years. Would she primary Chuck Schumer in the Senate in 2022, or Kirsten Gillibrand in 2024? No and no. In an interview with *GQ* earlier this year, the subject of a presidential run came up, but the conversation turned into whether a woman of color like her *could* be president rather than whether she would run. (AOC’s answer was basically, *It’s complicated*.) AOC said that she is always re-evaluating how she might be the most effective, whether that’s in elected office or not. I often think she might be more effective as a leftist *outside* of office.

Activist and scholar Cornel West, who is seeking the 2024 presidential nomination of the Green Party, said in a recent interview that candidates for office can act as catalysts for larger movements. AOC, as part of the movement catalyzed by Bernie Sanders in 2016, has had her moment as a catalyst. How will she maneuver in 2024? I’m not particularly excited about the prospect of AOC or any progressive or leftist endorsing a vote for Joe Biden. And while I’d like to think that AOC and the Squad could pivot to act differently than they have, their established patterns of behavior would suggest otherwise.

Young people today tend to reject capitalism in favor of socialism. But socialism can’t just be a negative rejection of capitalism in rhetoric and a synonym for a kind of generic “progressivism” as limited by the Democratic Party. As AOC said in a 2020 interview with Ta-Nehisi Coates, “We don’t have a left party in the U.S. The Democratic Party is not a left party.” Just as the Democratic Party is not a left party, the DSA is not a political party. We have to build an independent working class party.

Black Panther Fred Hampton put it best when he said, “You don’t fight capitalism with no black capitalism. You fight capitalism with socialism.” We on the left need to do better than the Democratic Party line and the politics of compromise. If our elected “socialists” like AOC and others aren’t willing to do this, we know which way to vote. We can, and should, close ranks. ✚

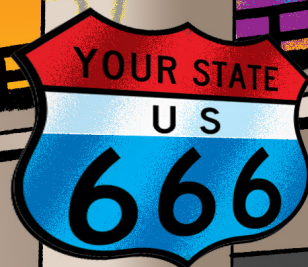
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Anti-Capitalism as *Entertainment*

BY SEAN MCDOWELL

LIKE SO MANY KIDS INFLUENCED BY THE 1977 film *Star Wars: A New Hope*, I once wanted to grow up to be a Jedi. The age-old battle between good and evil, the Force, the badass space-laser swords—all of it convinced my 7-year-old self that the life of a Jedi was something worth striving for. Even after coming to the galaxy-shattering realization that this probably wasn't a viable career choice (although I'm still holding out), I have maintained a general interest in the film series all the way into adulthood.

It's no secret that George Lucas loosely based the original trilogy on the American war in Vietnam. In *The Return of the Jedi*, the wicked Empire battles against the forested planet-moon Endor, whose inhabitants use guerilla-like tactics. However, it's also true that Lucas' main cast of characters, including Luke Skywalker, Obi-Wan Kenobi, and Princess Leia, aren't exactly the every-people of the galaxy. Leia, of course, is royalty, and Luke and Obi-Wan are the wielders of overwhelming unnatural abilities as well as arbiters of justice. Allusions to American imperialism aside, *Star Wars* was always about those miraculously "chosen" to save and lead the common folk. This is the *Star Wars* I grew up with.

Imagine my surprise, then, that Disney's latest addition to the *Star Wars* universe, *Andor*, contains no Jedi, no magic powers, and focuses on a group of relatable, everyday people. Over the course of the series, we watch the titular character Cassian Andor struggle against the oppressive systemic structures of life under the Empire. On his home planet of

Ferrix, he and his allies clash with an inter-planetary corporation that receives police and military aid from the Empire in an all-too-real depiction of the cozy relationship between capital and the state. Over the course of the show, Cassian is slowly radicalized, and he openly joins the Rebellion in the final episode.

The Walt Disney Company is one of the largest and most powerful media conglomerates in the world. Its shareholders rely on the stability of the status quo to receive a return on their investment. So what interest would Disney have in portraying and criticizing capitalism and state brutality? Quite simply, profit—the one true aim of a capitalist media studio. Disney has jumped at the bit to cannibalize popular sentiments in the name of shareholder interests.

Unsurprisingly, *Andor* is not alone in its defiance. In recent years, household streaming services have released swaths of content critical of capitalism and its vestiges, colonialism and imperialism. *Succession*, *The White Lotus*, and *Beef* are all examples of the very latest in leftist media. Beyond TV series, film examples abound: *Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery*, *Infinity Pool*, *The Menu*, and *Sorry To Bother You* all espouse similar attitudes. Each has been a large scale production, with budgets in the millions of dollars, complex set design, and lengthy run times. Vast amounts of resources are being poured into projects that call into question some of the fundamental underpinnings of modern life.

There is a distinct sense of class antagonism in this type of media. The poor clash with the decadently rich, those with opportunity step over those with none, and the economically

disadvantaged suffer the consequences of wealthy people's actions. In *Succession*, meek cousin Greg has his last \$20 taken from him by his billionaire cousin for a couple of Cokes and candy bars in the hospital waiting area. At first, he's nothing but an errand boy, a pawn in the game of succession who is ostensibly homeless while he clamors for a little bit of goodwill from his distant relations. Similarly, you can look to the character of Kai in *The White Lotus*. Kai, a Native Hawaiian, is convinced by a more privileged resort guest that it is a good idea to steal from the safe of an empty room in the name of "getting back at the colonizers" and helping his struggling family. When the attempted theft goes wrong, Kai is escorted to prison and isn't seen or heard from again for the rest of the show. It's implied that he will pay for this act for years to come. In both cases, the wealthier characters impose dire consequences on someone of a lower standing. These types of situations occur daily in the U.S. and are a product of an unequal distribution of wealth and privilege.

Another strand of commonality that runs through each of these works is the concept of discontentedness. To put it succinctly, *no one* is happy in these shows. From the mental health crises and ideations of suicide in *Beef*, to the desperate familial battle for power and approval from the Roy patriarch in *Succession*, to the internal turmoil and dissatisfaction in the hearts of each of the wealthy guests in *The White Lotus*, alienation worms itself inside their thematic cores. Given today's own mental health crisis, it's no surprise these series are pointing to a general dissatisfaction with modern life, which includes loneliness, uncertainty, and nepotism.

At their essence, these streaming products tell stories of life under capitalism. They challenge their viewers to ponder the contradictions and destructiveness of the system. That is why they can be considered anti-capitalist. The companies that green-light, bankroll, and platform these series rely on and support the tenets of capitalism for continued profit, yet are producing content that would appear to foster direct opposition to their interests. Why?

SURELY, NO ONE FLIPPED A MAGIC SWITCH that suddenly transformed streaming studios into capitalism-hating idealists overnight. If the incentives for producing any type of content have remained constant, then what has changed? The audience. The viewers that companies are attempting to appeal to has shifted: the goal isn't to have mom and pop stick around after their favorite nightly cable news program for whatever version of *NCIS* is having its moment, and to have them watch as many advertisements as possible. Demographics and political leanings have metamorphosed, and if media conglomerates are going to maintain profitability, they better figure out how to appeal to this new audience, and fast. The

proliferation of anti-capitalist streaming content is a trend, the same as the variety of true crime shows your parents watch every night or game shows offering large cash prizes that your grandparents adore.

The reality is that anti-capitalist media is plugging itself into a lucrative market: that of people ranging from 18 to 35. There are two key pieces of evidence that highlight *why* streaming companies have been incentivized to fund and distribute anti-capitalist media. First, data from the Pew Research Center indicates that 6 in 10 young adults primarily use online streaming to watch television. Gone are the days of adjusting the TV antenna, setting the DVR, or 3-minute long local commercial breaks. Of course, young people are only going to continue to pay the monthly subscription fees if they feel the available media is relevant.

This brings me to research from Data for Progress, which tells us that younger voters are more likely than older voters to be progressive and therefore possibly skeptical of capitalism. Additionally, the old truism touted by suburban dads across the country that "you'll become more conservative as you get older" appears to be rapidly diminishing. So, not only do streaming platforms see it as their best interest to green-light anti-capitalist content *now*, but they will continue to do so in the future. Buckle up for a lot more arrogant rich people and space communism, folks.

As it turns out, there's as much profit (if not more, currently) in anti-capitalism as there is in pro-capitalism (or simply not addressing its existence at all). Ironically, anti-capitalism, in fact, is its own market! Why would a capitalist actively contribute to the popularization of anti-capitalist sentiment? As has been written in this magazine before, this is because "the only actual capitalist value is generating and accumulating profit." Why would the CEO of Netflix be bothered if a piece of media chronicles the ways greed corrupts the rich and degrades the poor if it generates shareholder value? In their eyes, they're simply doing their job, and doing it well.

It's important to note that this is not the first time market forces have incentivized corporations to cannibalize counterculture in the name of the almighty dollar. In fact, such cannibalization is intrinsic to the nature of capital itself. In his book *The Conquest of Cool*, Thomas Frank explains that following the popular radicalism of the 1960s and the spring of originality it inspired, corporations co-opted those very ideas to "sell T-shirts." Personal liberation became synonymous with fashion and a sense of uniqueness attained by purchasing the correct products. While the style may not be as universally "in" as it once was, it's possible to dress "punk" by shelling out hundreds of dollars to a variety of designer brands. The original punk aesthetic, which was achieved through plenty of second-hand thrifting and DIY trial and error, has been mainstreamed into a sanitized, corporate-approved bastardization of the authentic concept.

When this lens is applied to media, as Frank teaches us, we find that “commercial fantasies of rebellion, liberation, and outright ‘revolution’ against the stultifying demands of mass society are commonplace almost to the point of invisibility in advertising, movies, and television programming.” Take two of the 1980’s most admired mainstream films, *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* and *The Breakfast Club*. They’re classic tales of rebellion against the authority of adults and finding a sense of identity amid the drollery of everyday teenage life. These “commercial fantasies” harnessed the dissatisfaction of life in the super-sized shopping malls of 1980s America and the desire to have a greater purpose than that of a cog in the machine. Today, modern streaming studios have taken a page out of the same

pay, for instance—not only degrade the quality of your favorite weekly series but also affect the very *writers who create that media*.

Following the television industry’s shift from its cable-only model to one that includes streaming, studios’ compensation policies for residuals were not updated. Residuals, or the payment writers receive for their work when it is rerun or used elsewhere, are close to nonexistent now. Studios have refused to equate the number of times a show has been streamed with some form of residual pay structure. The call for parity between broadcast and streaming residuals is no less than a call for fair treatment and profit sharing. What was once a job that guaranteed a reliable income has severely atrophied in the

*"The play
is the same:
assimilate
rebellion and
the desire for
change, and
turn a profit."*



SUCCESSION (HBO)

book and are producing content critical of the failures of modern capitalist society, albeit from a more structural perspective. The play is the same: assimilate rebellion and the desire for change, and turn a profit.

THE CORRELATION BETWEEN anti-capitalist media and corporate profitability does not represent the phenomenon’s entire interrelational web, though. The multiplicity of anti-capitalist streaming media has coincided perfectly with the largest Writers Guild of America action since 2008. On May 1, the WGA, which represents nearly 12,000 writers in the television, movie, and radio industries, began to strike. The strike shows that the conditions that have generated interest in anti-capitalist media—general economic precarity and unfair

last ten years. Writers’ pay has decreased by 23 percent over the last decade, when adjusted for inflation. Meanwhile, the CEO of Warner Bros. Discovery, David Zaslav, received a pay package of nearly \$250 million in 2021.

On top of a downward slide in residual payments, the last ten years have borne witness to the increased gig-ification of the screenwriting industry. Like the taxi or food delivery industries, screenwriting has transformed from a stable job boasting a guaranteed reliable income into a one-time contract ridden crapshoot. As the number of episodes in a given season has decreased, and the wait in between seasons has increased, writers have learned to expect their periods of employment to be shorter and shorter. Writer’s rooms are more and more commonly staffed by freelancers than by full-time employees. The atmosphere which gave *30 Rock* its spirit almost 20 years ago has nearly disappeared.

Additionally, with the recent rise of language-based AI

models such as ChatGPT, there are escalating concerns that streaming studios will use AI in the future to write parts of scripts, thereby cutting down on available work for screenwriters. In its list of demands, the WGA seeks to limit such invasive usage. In many ways, WGA's fight mirrors the battles Uber drivers and DoorDash deliverers are waging against Silicon Valley. Like workers in these already "disrupted" industries, screenwriters are facing off against an ever-increasing tide of cost and corner cutting in the name of shaving a little bit more off the top for investors.

It's no coincidence that a spike in anti-capitalist streaming has coincided with an enormous WGA push for fairer working conditions. Like everyone else, screenwriters have been swept up in the enormous swell of rising income inequality. Like millions of Americans left in its wake, the writers of the WGA are hurting. Simply put, writers are creating shows with anti-capitalist themes because these themes reflect the problems they themselves face and the pervasive struggles they perceive others to be dealing with. If you've ever worked in the service industry, then you know what it feels like to be treated poorly by entitled, rich customers and paid a pittance of whatever they just spent. Myriad people grapple with that every day, and it's reflected in the rage-inducing actions of the ultra-rich in shows like *The White Lotus*, *Succession*, or *Beef*.

If media companies are incentivized by profit to release anti-capitalist media, and the screenwriters are incentivized by modern economic and social conditions to create them, then what we have is a perfect storm of willingness on both ends. One side is attempting to tell stories about life under capitalism, and the other is trying to turn those creations into corporate cash cows. It's quite the catch-22 for our allies in the screenwriting industry. There exists some further irony in the fact that the more these companies profit and expand their powers, the easier it is for them to uphold capitalist conditions. Capitalist conditions, of course, will inspire more anti-capitalist media and on and on in a seemingly never-ending loop.

THE CULMINATION OF ALL THE EFFORT, time, and money set aside by writers and their corporate backers to create anti-capitalist media products is that they are quite entertaining to audiences, and well regarded by critics. Taken as a group, the four series boast an average 83 percent audience score, and a 95 percent critic score on Rotten Tomatoes. Due to their popularity, it's likely that even if you haven't watched a single one of these series, you've heard of them via social media or the internet broadly. Now more than ever, people are being exposed to anti-capitalist themes and sentiments in extremely mainstream packages.

It's my belief that this is a good thing. Art has always been a



ANDOR (DISNEY+)

vehicle for learning, and the more people who come to understand that our economic and political systems were designed by a slim minority, for a slim minority, the better.

However, it's important to note that typically, these stories are presented in a manner that is *descriptive* rather than *proscriptive*. At the end of the first season of *The White Lotus*, there is no call to action. At the end of *Succession*, the Roys may end up unhappy, but there is no hope of an end to the Waystar Royco enterprise itself. There is never a roadmap for what to do. Instead, you're left with a less than flattering depiction of the rich and the ways in which they heave their personal baggage onto the shoulders of those paid peanuts to cater to them.

What does that leave us with, then? Their description of life under capitalism is meant to be entertaining. This is, surely, the point of a television show. One of the ways this category of TV entertains is by manufacturing feelings of outrage, anger, and hopelessness. It's easy, and possibly quite satisfying, to be frustrated with how unbelievably out of touch the Roy family is in *Succession*, or at how tragic it is that Danny's immigrant family can't catch a single break in *Beef*. You feel *indignant* at the end of an episode, but you aren't given a useful way to direct your indignation. Because of the passive nature of TV consumption, it's almost effortless to allow episode after episode pass you by in a thoughtless binge-fest.

The answer is to direct these feelings towards action. Watch these series with friends and family, and talk about what can be done about the problems presented in them. Organize. Show up and support the WGA at the picket line. Read the collected works of Noam Chomsky. If someone you know is being exposed to leftism through these pieces of media, provide them with a purpose.

Whatever you do, be part of the struggle against faceless corporations that profit off of stories about the inequalities they themselves are guilty of advancing. ✦

*Overheard
at the office...*

"Why, Angela, you know so very many things about what's going on in the world. How on earth do you keep up?"

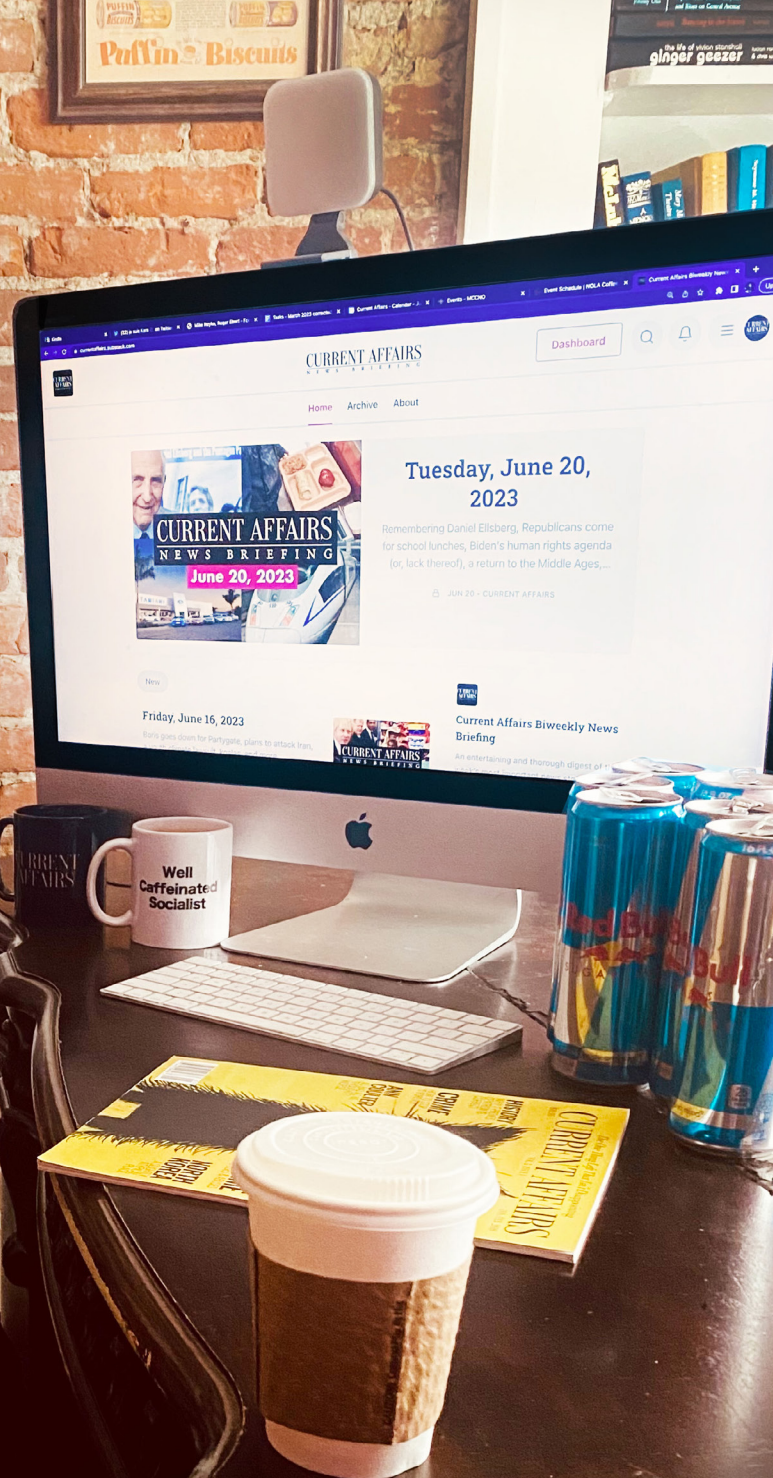
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Remaking the School

by Lauren Fadiman

While only mere decades have elapsed since President Bill Clinton's go-to defense of education was, "What you learn depends on what you ... learn," a truism so benign as to seem inherently bipartisan, some renegade Republicans have spent the spring of 2023 asking whether learning actually gets in the way of earning—in the sense that time spent in school could be better spent on the farm or the factory floor. Of course, the sentiment itself is not new: the think tank Foundation for Economic Education published a rosy defense of 20th century child laborers on their blog in 2016. "Think about their inner lives," libertarian author Jeffrey Tucker encourages readers, linking to a *Washington Post* gallery of photographs of "children at work" from 100 years ago. The photographs, by Lewis Hine, helped push the country to change child labor laws. But Tucker sees something different. "They are working in the adult world, surrounded by cool bustling things and new technology. ... They are being valued for what they do, which is to say being valued as people. They are earning money." The image of the industrious young worker is juxtaposed with that of the indolence-promoting 21st-century classroom, what Tucker describes as "30 kids sitting in desks bored out of their minds, creativity and imagination beaten out of their brains, forbidden from earning money and providing value to others, learning no skills ... desk after desk, class after class, lecture after lecture, test after test, a confined world without end." What is new is this sentiment going quite so mainstream as to make its way into legislation that has rolled back child labor laws in a number of Republican-led

states, including Arkansas, Iowa, and Ohio.

Kids themselves might concur with some aspects of Tucker's description of the modern classroom experience: in a 2020 survey of more than 20,000 American high schoolers, the three words that appeared most frequently in their descriptions of their educational experience were bored, tired, and stressed. "Bored" and "tired" also topped a similar Gallup survey of teens in 2004. In the 2000s, as in the two decades before, school appears on screen as a veritable hell: in films like *The Breakfast Club* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, every high school is a small authoritarian country unto itself, dominated by faculty who hate children; in others, like *Heathers* and *Mean Girls*, it is kids themselves who—malicious, even murderous, by nature—make their own lives so miserable.

But it hasn't always been taken for granted that education must be unpleasant and irrelevant, nor that schools must maintain martial law in order to facilitate that education. In fact, throughout the 20th century—and, indeed, into the present—alternatives have abounded: modes of education that exchange order for independence, rote and repetition for spontaneity, curriculum for exploration, and so forth. Many look like traditional schools from the outside, but their internal operations are so different from the mainstream as to seem entirely foreign: kids call their teachers by their first names, come and go at will, participate in hiring their own instructors, receive no grades, take no tests, and run their schools as democratic institutions, with discipline decided by a judicial committee consisting of both students and staff. It has been said by some observers that the students of Sudbury schools—which are

predicated on the idea that the "consent of the governed," aka kids, is necessary for a school to operate effectively—are in a state of "perpetual recess." "Nothing disturbs visitors to Sudbury Valley School more than the sight of children of all ages playing freely all day long," claims the website of the first Sudbury school, still in operation in Framingham, Massachusetts, today. They play with toys, instruments, arts and crafts materials, video games, gymnastics equipment; they leave the building to play outside by themselves or with friends—in nature, in town; and days' worth of play engender days' worth of conversations, debates, arguments, and more.

But there is a method to the madness. Daniel Greenberg, founder of the Sudbury method, explained the purpose of a less rigid approach to education in a 1991 speech. "It seems rather difficult—in fact, close to impossible—to have people grow up in what is basically an authoritarian environment until they're 18, and then suddenly have them transform into effective citizens of a democracy," he said. "There's no hope for this being a really democratic society in the way most of us would like it to be—of people really living together in brotherhood and making decisions together and participating and having a voice in their own fate—unless it happens from the earliest age."

A similar sentiment is shared by the students and staff of the Brooklyn Free School, a private school founded in 2003. The school (which was born in true Brooklyn fashion with an ad in *The Linewaiters' Gazette*, which is published every three weeks by the Park Slope Food Coop) has exchanged Greenberg's focus on producing "effective citizens of democracy" for something more contem-

porary: raising “agents of social change.” The school has called many parks, libraries, and rentals home over the years—it is now located in Bedford-Stuyvesant, tucked between an outpost of the Brooklyn Community Pride Center, the International African Arts Festival, and an Applebee’s Grill and Bar. But it has held fast throughout this time to the vision of a school where play is centered and children are free to be themselves.

The students at BFS exert enormous control over its operations. Their executive director Monique Scott smiles ruefully while explaining that the BFS is actually a bit more rigidly scheduled day-to-day than most free schools—but only because the kids have voted in favor of structured mornings spent focused on the core subjects of reading, writing, math, history, and science. But once the textbooks go away, the kids come out to play—and that play is itself a form of learning, explains a BFS parent. Because the kids aren’t solely remembering “to the test,” what they learn “can’t be shaken out of them,” she says. An overnight camping trip far from the concrete jungle of New York City is an opportunity to study the natural sciences; meanwhile, the school’s drama instructor is continually trying to use the annual schoolwide musical as a way to supplement instruction in other areas, like literacy. The kids have packed their daily schedules full of electives one would be hard-pressed to find in a public school: a wall-sized weekly schedule includes group classes on botany, fashion, the Mali Empire, chess, tae kwon do, real estate, finance, cooking, climate change, as well as any number of independent pursuits. The extensive projects produced by the dozen-or-so kids studying paleontology this year begs the question: *What if instead of merely indulging kids’ perennial interest in dinosaurs, we took that interest seriously?*

Taking seriously the playful and treating playfully the serious seems to be a guiding, albeit unofficial, ethos for the school. Kids of all ages partake in courses called “Social Justice and Revolution” and “LGBTQIA Liberation and Revolution,” then apply their learning in wide-ranging ways. Two musicals ago, the students adapted the script of *The Little Mermaid* to reflect its queer origins. The social justice dimension of the BFS model—born of the belief that the original free school vision, when unmatched with a focus on social justice and without a clear intention to target patterns of oppression, would inevitably reproduce those patterns—sets it

apart from the Sudbury schools and other democratic peers. Transcripts (in which students reflect alongside their instructors) include not only academic progress but also notes about student leadership and participation in democratic decision-making and the broader community.

But free schools are not free in *that* sense. BFS charges tuition on a sliding scale, making it affordable to interested families of all socioeconomic backgrounds—but enrollment in a Sudbury school costs around \$10,500 per child, and other types of alternative schooling (like Montessori) far more. Indeed, even the most Charles Fourier-esque (Fourier being a utopian socialist of the early 19th century) vision of a school is apt to be part of the problem: the pay-to-play of nearly

"It hasn't always been taken for granted that education must be unpleasant and irrelevant."

every alternative mode of education, barring public magnet schools, charter schools, and homeschooling.

Today, radical alternative educational approaches originally developed for the everyman have been appropriated to enhance the upbringing of the elite, largely in private settings. Meanwhile, the students of American public schools—who would most benefit, no doubt, from educational modes that treat them as students and people, rather than statistics-in-the-making—languish under draconian restrictions: they enter their schools through airport security-style bag check queues and must dutifully request permission to use the bathroom; once granted permission, they are expected to walk there in silence, past rows of barred windows, on color-coded lines painted across the linoleum floor.

“There is no lack of people who are convinced that there’s something seriously wrong with the educational system,” said

Greenberg in that same 1991 speech. “Even the most devoted advocates of traditional schools can’t help noticing that the system gobbles up incredible sums of money at an ever-increasing rate, which nevertheless rarely seems to produce satisfactory results. But it’s much more difficult to go from there to a completely different worldview which concludes that the whole traditional way of looking at education is wrong.” It is as necessary now as in 1991 to remember that the walls of the school have not always been so impenetrably thick as they are today. Indeed, a mere four decades ago, pedagogues tried to do away with them all together.

CLASS IN THE CLASSROOM

By rejecting many conventions of mainstream education, free schools take aim at the very social and political categories of “child” that have produced mainstream education as such. The Italian educational philosopher Maria Montessori—creator of the eponymous Montessori method, which is famous for its hands-on learning at a child-led pace, though it has been misappropriated in recent years as a justification to grossly hike the price of wooden blocks and puzzles—famously referred to the child as the “forgotten citizen,” the “neglected citizen.” Children as a class are functionally bereft of the key rights that comprise citizenship by virtue of their legal subordination to adults, particularly their parents: as much as that status protects children, it also renders them both politically voiceless and economically disempowered—not that the GOP’s efforts to revive child labor are the answer. “Children and young people make up a vast population,” Montessori declared before the UNESCO Institute for Education in 1951, “a population without rights which is being crucified on school-benches everywhere, which—for all that we talk about democracy, freedom and human rights—is enslaved by a school order, by intellectual rules which we impose on it.” Even before the genesis of what is now called the “school-to-prison pipeline,” by which schools are gradually militarizing, Montessori identified a key fact about mainstream public education: that, whether by design or due to stress on the system, it is less about the liberatory power of knowledge than the maintenance of one-two-three-eyes-on-me classroom discipline.

In its most extreme form, this school order functions as a literal extension of the

criminal punishment system. In school as on the streets, youths of color are overexposed to law enforcement, incarnate in the classroom as “school resource officers”—complete with resources like guns, tasers, handcuffs, and the occasional drug-sniffing dog. The number of cops serving as hallway monitors has increased precipitously since the Columbine shooting in 1999: while only 1 percent of schools reported hosting an officer in 1975, more than 50 percent do in the present day. And in many schools, these security officers have displaced other key service providers: according to the ACLU, 1.7 million American students attend schools that host cops but no counselors, 3 million attend schools that host cops but no school nurses, 6 million attend schools that host cops but no psychologists, and 10 million attend schools that host cops but no social workers. By allocating resources thus, American public schools enact a pattern of discipline in which Black and Latino students in particular are far more likely than their white peers to be suspended, expelled, or subject to in-school arrest; children as young as 6 have been taken into police custody, fingerprinted, and photographed in jail. Many are treated with violence that would be unacceptable even if the victims were adults, as when a North Carolina police officer repeatedly slammed an 11-year-old boy’s head into a hallway floor. These students are subsequently at increased risk of encounters with the wildly abusive juvenile justice system, which, in turn, make them more likely to spend time behind bars as adults; those who evade further imprisonment find themselves at inordinately high risk of depression, suicidality, and poor health as adults.

The life-altering consequences of the school-to-prison pipeline are compounded by what might as well be called the school-to-poverty pipeline. Because public schools receive nearly half of their funding from local property taxes, unequal resourcing of public education is one legacy of how property values have been historically tethered to race. While straightforward segregation stratified housing below the Mason-Dixon line, Northern neighborhoods found their own ways to enact legal discrimination: by redlining, a practice wherein services like mortgages were denied to the minority residents of “hazardous” areas—thereby entrapping them in decaying inner-city neighborhood—and racist housing covenants, which prevented certain properties



THE SUMMERHILL SCHOOL / PHOTO BY AXEL KÜHN

from being sold to nonwhite owners. When all else failed, white residents fled for suburbs ever further afield. In the present, this race-based differential in property values directly affects how much public school teachers have to pay out-of-pocket to make a classroom functional: in 2019, EdBuild found that predominantly nonwhite school districts receive \$23 billion less annually than predominantly white school districts. On average, that works out to an additional \$2,226 per student that predominantly white school districts have and predominantly nonwhite school districts do not, though in some places the gap is far greater. These funding disparities have a direct impact on student outcomes: high quality early childhood education, rigorous curriculum, and well-trained instructors are costly investments, but key to student achievement. And student achievement—no matter how rigged the game may be—has immense bearing on college acceptance, which, in turn, actualizes higher earning potential. As dated as Bill Clinton’s assurance that what-you-learn-dictates-what-you-earn sounds to contemporary ears, the average college graduate earns more than \$1 million more in a lifetime than the average high school diploma holder.

But even the less explicitly punitive and impoverishing dimensions of mainstream public schooling are pernicious: the mode of teaching that undergirds most schooling—

which the formidable Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire refers to in his 1968 classic, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, as the “banking” method, in which students are treated as, functionally, empty vessels needing to be filled with information—reproduces, by means of its inherent power differential between student and teacher, inequality and injustice more broadly. For intellectuals like Montessori, Freire, and other later interlocutors, including bell hooks, the traditional school system is a veritable engine of oppression. Freire describes it as “suffering from narration sickness,” its “outstanding characteristic ... the sonority of words, not their transforming power.” Students are expected to be the passive recipients of knowledge bestowed on them by their teachers, the blank slates onto whom are projected “absolute ignorance ... a characteristic of the ideology of oppression [that] negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry,” says Freire; education becomes instead a matter of creating automatons who will perpetuate an unequal and unfair society—ideally without question.

Freire cut his teeth as a teacher educating the illiterate poor of Brazil, where—until 1985—it was illegal to vote if one could not read. He was not the only midcentury leftist militant to engage in pedagogy as a form of political practice, nor was he the only midcentury leftist theorist to write books about the ideology of “hitting the books.” The contemporaneous French philosopher Louis

Althusser includes schools in his theory of ideological state apparatuses, those civil society entities (including churches, clubs, even the family) that use nonviolent means to reproduce the status quo. “One [such apparatus] certainly has the dominant role,” he writes, “although hardly anyone lends an ear to its music: it is so silent! This is the School.” For Althusser, everything taught in schools is either explicitly ideological, like ethics and civics coursework, or more subtly so, as in the case of literature and the sciences—and the function of state education is, quite simply, to provide the student with an ideological framework suitable to his or her function in society. “The reproduction of labor power requires not only a reproduction of its skills,” writes Althusser, “but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order.” The purpose of the school is to create more workers: docile subjects who enter the workforce and perform jobs that are low-paying, brutal, repetitive, and unfulfilling.

But the status quo is a two-way street—and just as future workers must be trained in docility, future bosses must be prepared for dominance. The flipside of the education in submission received by the working class is an education in how to “manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for ... exploitation and repression.” Those destined for power wind their way through private alternative institutions: preppy Country Day Schools and well-heeled college preparatory schools—which offer wide-ranging elective courses, opportunities for independent projects, and extensive extracurricular offerings—with parents often shelling out hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of tuition before their offspring have even set foot on a college campus. Where public schools teach the so-called “liberal arts” under the most illiberal of circumstances, students whose families can afford boarding school receive a world-class liberal education. For the low, low price of \$64,789, students at Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire, have the privilege of never again encountering the banking method described by Freire; instead, they are educated via the Harkness method—an updated equivalent to the Socratic method that encourages, above all, critical thinking.

The problem is not merely that students from different socioeconomic strata can afford different educations; it is that those educations then reinforce—materially, intellectually, emotionally, psychologically—one’s

place in the capitalist system, all the while peddling the false promise of social mobility by way of “meritocratic” achievement. The practice of “tracking,” by which students are sorted into classes based on achievement, has been controversial in the U.S. since its advent in the early 20th century; but the most pernicious and profound form of tracking is that which determines students’ achievements based on their class.

PARTY PEDAGOGY

When Freire, Althusser, and others argued in the 1960s and 1970s that the pen would be at least as important as the sword in bringing about a more equal world, they were dialoguing with leftists going back hundreds of years. The problem of education—and, more accurately, the lack thereof among so much of the working class throughout time—has plagued the Left since its nascence in 18th-century France. Philippe Buonarroti (a veteran and chronicler of the Conspiracy of the Equals, an abortive 1796 coup d’état) went to his grave believing that the way to the rule of the people could *only* be paved by the success of elite (meaning, in part, well-educated) conspirators, whose temporary command would serve as a necessary transitional stage toward a system run by workers. Later, the pre-Marxist socialist Louis-Auguste Blanqui would echo Buonarroti in his belief that any viable socialist revolution would necessarily be helmed by a small band of conspirators, organizing in obscurity against the forces of capital.

But as later leftists would realize, revolutionary power lay not in secrecy but in size. Karl Marx and those writing after him, especially Rosa Luxemburg, would exchange the notion of the conspiratorial cadre for the mass movement—a revolution from below, made possible not by proletarian ignorance of the behind-the-scenes machinations of the elite, but proletarian *initiative* in their own right, born of the learned ability to see clearly and strike at the sources of their oppression. Social democracy begins with the education of workers in class struggle, and proceeds with political activity that workers themselves direct. “In order to be able to overthrow [absolutism],” writes Luxemburg in *The Mass Strike*, “the proletariat requires a high degree of political education, of class-consciousness and organization. All these conditions cannot be fulfilled by pamphlets and leaflets, but only by the living political school, by the fight

and in the fight, in the continuous course of the revolution.” She herself taught for several years in the German Social Democrats’ national party school; contemporaneous anarchists, including Peter Kropotkin, were on a similar wavelength.

Luxemburg and co. took for granted that there would necessarily be a pedagogical component to fomenting the proletarian revolution—alas, a fact far more easily identified than acted upon, then as now. Freire felt, acutely, this paradox, posing the following: “If the implementation of a liberating education requires political power and the oppressed have none, how then is it possible to carry out the pedagogy of the oppressed prior to the revolution?” He tentatively concludes that it necessitates educational approaches that emphasize dialogue, cooperation, unity, problem-posing, organization, cultural synthesis—as opposed to the division, domination, repression, manipulation, and cultural indoctrination that are par for the course in most American classrooms. Only through collaborative and culturally-engaged education could students develop what Freire calls “critical consciousness,” an awareness of the social, political, and economic conditions under which one lives, and the ability to confront it head-on.

While the mainstream was distracted by the sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll that came to define the counterculture, a contingent of leftists and fellow travelers began putting these pedagogical approaches into practice. Even before Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* made its way into an English translation in 1970, a range of leftists—from Civil Rights activists to hippies—had already followed in Luxemburg’s footsteps and refocused their attention on that too-often-overlooked political subject: the “forgotten citizens,” the “neglected citizens.” Many still students themselves, they heard the far-off bell ringing and headed back to school—this time, as teachers.

OLD SCHOOL COOL

The landscape in which the forebears of the Brooklyn Free School found themselves was far different from the landscape in which Luxemburg once taught. Practically all of the pedagogical innovation that has happened in the United States happened during the 20th century, particularly in the five decades after Luxemburg’s 1919 death. After hundreds of years of education by way



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FROM AN IDEA BY ALLISON LIRISH DEAN

of rote and repetition, the convergence of a number of social and economic factors at the turn of the century inspired a shift toward more “student-centric” methods of instruction. The education historian Larry Cuban highlights, in his seminal work *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1890–1990*, an unprecedented amount of immigration as a major driving factor in the first wave of reform. School administrators, charged with educating not just children, but future American citizens, introduced a new goal to their schools, says Cuban: namely, “helping children discard their ethnic cultures in order to embrace what educators saw as American ideals and habits.” Of course, when those children grew up and had children of their own, the pendulum swung in the opposite direction, as Jewish and Italian communities agitated for some degree of cultural preservation in public schools.

One effect of this demographic shift was a gradual pivot toward more student-centric and community-oriented educational tactics. Progressive schools allowed their students to select some of their own classes, including language instruction; forgo individual recitation for a growing range of group activities, including in-classroom dramatizations, discussions, and projects of various sorts; and express themselves as individuals through arts education. Some progressive institutions began to debut the principles of democratic schooling as well: the first iteration thereof in the U.S. was the Antioch School in Yellow Springs, Ohio—affiliated with Antioch College, which was, at that time, under the leadership of the progressive education reformer Horace Mann—where students to this day participate in the governance of the school. None of this should sound fantastic to modern ears, of course, because many of the progressive tactics first implemented in the first half of the 20th century are practically ubiquitous today: everything from student government to clustered desks to field trips to elective classes has its roots in this era of reform.

But for other early-20th-century educational theorists, reform was not ambitious enough. Anarchist and libertarian thinkers in particular questioned the basic dominant assumptions about the nature of children—proposing, for practically the first time in history, that they might be inherently *good*—and called for a more substantial reimagining of modern education. Most overtly political, the

Ferrer movement came stateside in the early 1900s following the execution of the Spanish anarchist pedagogue Francisco Ferrer, whose short-lived La Escuela Moderna offered a secular, libertarian alternative to Catholic education in Spain. In 1911, Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, and other New York City anarchists convened the Ferrer Association and opened the Ferrer Center, which operated the Ferrer Modern School (later Stelton Modern School) until 1953. While the Ferrer Modern School was not quite so radical as Ferrer’s own La Escuela Moderna, it offered a powerful progressive education to working-class children. In the latter half of the 20th century, when the Modern School movement experienced a resurgence, some of its alumni would themselves pioneer ventures in radical alternative education.

That wave of innovation would prove even more ambitious in its divergence from both traditional and progressive educational tactics. Of particular influence in the U.S. was the autonomous Summerhill School, which had been in operation in Suffolk, England, for four decades by the time its founder, A.S. Neill, published *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Childrearing* in 1960. The book details the principles and practices of the still-operant Summerhill School, centered around Neill’s oft-repeated maxim of “freedom, not license.” At the height of Neill’s 50-year tenure at the helm of Summerhill, classes were optional, discipline and top-down direction nonexistent, decisions made by direct democracy during weekly meetings, and “the most frequent remark [made by] visitors ... [was] that they cannot tell who is staff and who is pupil,” wrote Neill. A large number of that staff was involved with the Socialist Party and Communist Party of Great Britain, as many Summerhill students would later be; Neill himself was a fellow traveler, though foremost an educator and (extremely amateur) psychoanalyst.

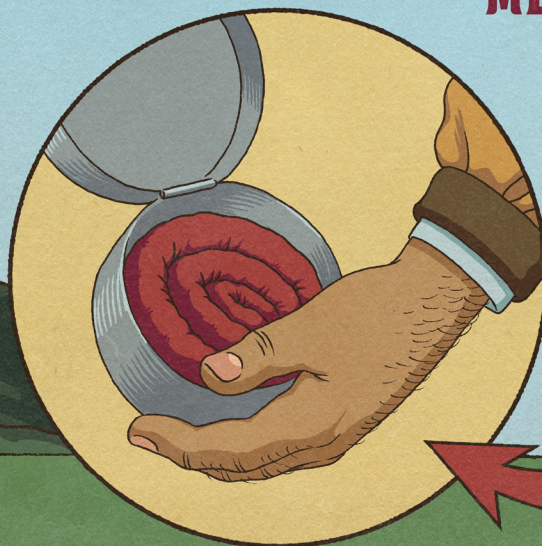
Summerhill sold millions of copies and spurred the so-called “Summerhillian” movement in the United States, though Civil Rights activists had already come to similar conclusions about what was missing from American education—and especially the education which was available to Black students in the South. While British kids ran amok in Suffolk, thousands of Black students—rang-

ing in age from child to senior citizen, though averaging about 15—enrolled in Freedom Schools, which employed proto-Freirian tactics to supplement the public education available to Black students and prime those students for participation in the events of the Freedom Summer (a 1964 volunteer campaign to register Black voters in Mississippi) and beyond. Questioning was the core instructional tactic of these classrooms: “[Black students] have been denied the right to question,” says a pamphlet distributed to Freedom School teachers, most of whom were themselves college-aged students. “The purpose of the Freedom Schools is to help them begin to question.” While critics joked that reading was a rare skill at Summerhill, the Freedom Schools focused on literacy and other key skills that Mississippi public schools failed to teach effectively. For the Freedom Schools, reading, writing, and ‘rithmetic were inextricable from the revolution: the “Introduction to the Academic Curriculum” suggests that “if, for example, the group of students plan to canvass, the language arts phase of the program could concentrate on an appropriate verbal skill, the social studies area could be devoted to the study of the population to be canvassed in terms of economic, social, religious factors and the implications of those factors, the math area could be given over to statistical breakdowns, charts, etc.”

While Summerhill was primarily a psychological intervention and the Freedom Schools a delimited political undertaking, most alternative education in the 1960s and 1970s existed somewhere on the spectrum between the two extremes. Though limited in number, the ranks of alternative schools came to include everything from specialized magnet schools (like the Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts in New York City) to democratic free schools (like the Sudbury Valley School, home of the eponymous Sudbury method, in Massachusetts, and the Brooklyn Free School) to schools-without-walls (like the literal School Without Walls High School in D.C.), all of which have persisted into the present—the former as a mainstay of mainstream education, the latter two as something like oddball cousins: accepted, even beloved, but held at a distance. Nonetheless, some of the ideas that these oddball schools pioneered—like open-plan classrooms—became commonplace the following decades. As with so much of the legacy of the counterculture,

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informal education tactics were castigated by contemporaries as failures and farces—and yet subsequently made their way into the mainstream, their radical roots obscured by time.

What has perhaps actually vanished since the 1970s is the spirit of educational experimentation that drove these radical interventions. Cuts to educational funding under President Richard Nixon and the implementation of standards-based educational reform under both Presidents Bush made alternative education difficult, if not untenable, to finance and sustain. At this point, alternative education became the prerogative of the privileged (as in Montessori Schools that charge upwards of \$30k annually for full-time enrollment) or—with few exceptions—quickly fell prey to funding shortages, further centralization and standardization of public education, and (no surprise for any endeavor of the Left, alas) internal ideological dispute. Radical education seems as dead as a doornail: even as a sense of educational crisis has mounted in the United States, no widespread call for educational experimentation has risen from its New Left-era grave.

WHEN PUBLIC GOODS AREN'T GOOD ENOUGH

No doubt grandparents have been complaining about falling educational standards since they themselves were walking barefoot, uphill both ways, to school while their own grandparents griped at home about the simultaneous snow, sleet, hail, and blistering heat that plagued their own walks back in the day. But there is more than a little truth to the claim that public education is seriously failing its students: according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress—the test that has classrooms across the country in a chokehold—conducted in 2019, the present state of American education, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, was not particularly robust. Among high school seniors, a whopping one-third read below NAEP Basic standards, and only a quarter were at or above NAEP Proficient in mathematics.

Liberals and leftists—the former known for their faith in reform, the latter for their supposedly revolutionary disposition—are odd bedfellows in their shared diagnosis of the causal factors at work here. They may point fingers at lack of funding, lack of teachers, lack of space, lack of parental

involvement, lack of technological access—and, of course, more recently, the glut of school shootings that is gradually transforming ever more primary and secondary schools into state-of-the-art juvenile detention centers. But no matter the intervention, and no matter the issue those interventions seek to address, the test results remain dire—so dire that one must wonder whether throwing money at the problem is enough to adjust its outcomes. After all, SmartBoards and iPads—despite studies indicating that technology can be a real boon in the classroom—have done seemingly very little to raise NAEP reading or math scores on standardized tests. In fact, seniors performed either roughly the same or worse on these tests in 2019 than they did in the 1990s and early 2000s, long before computers had come to dominate the classroom.

Of course, funding is important: improved student-to-teacher ratios, enhanced materials, the reintroduction of long-lost arts and physical education classes, and perhaps more beautiful campuses (or, at very least, buildings with windows) in which students might spend their compulsory 8-hour days are all interventions that—at scale—would no doubt improve educational outcomes. But the problem is no doubt curricular as well: not only does most American education fail to prepare students for life in a changing labor landscape, but it also fails in many cases to provide an intellectually rich learning experience. Most curriculum is bound to (possibly well-intentioned, certainly poorly-implemented) standardized testing requirements, which themselves are a political pawn. And the same government that giveth and taketh away much-needed money also calls certain key curricular shots: during the vitriolic curriculum wars of the 1990s, the Senate condemned (99-1) the Bush administration-funded *National Standards for United States History* on the grounds that it was, in short, un-American: that is, it called for history curriculum to address slavery, colonial conquest, and race- and gender-based disenfranchisement. In the present, states like Florida make headlines for placing major restrictions on what can and cannot be taught in the classroom.

The underperformance of public schools renders the entire system vulnerable to right-wing calls to deregulate and even privatize public education—and according

to some educational scholars, that's why the GOP has an interest in, in fact, *encouraging* underperformance. In 1981, just a year after the Department of Education came into existence, President Ronald Reagan was already calling for its dismantlement. His effort fell flat largely because of stiff resistance in Congress, but that cannot be taken for granted, especially as a growing number of representatives around the country express willingness to send kids back to work. This March, 161 Republican congressional representatives voted in favor of the (failed, thankfully) Parents Bill of Rights Act, which would have terminated the Department of Education's administration of anything pertaining to primary or secondary education, no doubt including federal support and protection for students with disabilities, immigrants, and other vulnerable and underserved populations. "I personally think the Department of Education should not exist," said former Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos at a Moms for Liberty summit in Tampa, Florida, last year.

While the cherished fantasy of the American right might be the abolishment of the Department of Education, they seem willing to settle in the meantime for taking advantage of the federal government's relative lack of control over public education to erode and propagandize curricular materials across the country. A *New York Times* analysis of a popular social studies textbook in California and Texas found telling differences between the two editions: in the Texas edition, resistance to Reconstruction is attributed in part to tax increases and, on the same page where the California edition highlights the experiences of a Dominican immigrant to the U.S., the Texas edition features a quote from a border control officer. Time and again, national standards are bent toward the lowest common denominator. Conservative bluster about the dangers of "cultural Marxism" and "critical race theory" turned curricular as the College Board revised its AP African American History course to assuage criticism: on the chopping block were subjects including the last two decades of Black struggle and writers like bell hooks.

"Education is about the pursuit of truth," Florida Governor Ron DeSantis tweeted in January, "not the imposition of ideology or the advancement of a political agenda." It was doublespeak, of course. Where education is concerned, the absence of certain information is as ideological as its inclusion.

PROPAGANDA 101

The Moms for Liberty (M4L) summit where DeVos issued her damning indictment of the DOE was none other than a multi-day seminar on how to skew school rightward, helmed by the “moms” behind the Parents’ Bill of Rights Act, the “Don’t Say Gay” legislation in Florida, nationwide book banning and bounty hunting of liberal educators, and even the now-presidential-candidate Ron DeSantis himself—the Four Horsemen of the educational apocalypse. M4L’s tactics have proven canny: its members—who number, according to the group’s leaders, more than 100,000, spread across 195 chapters in 37 states—run and endorse candidates for school boards across the country, an estimated 200 of whom won their elections in 2022. Once elected, they can exert substantial influence over the education offered in their district, such as hiring and firing administrators, managing district budgets, making sure schools are adhering to state and federal standards, and shaping curricula.

The Left needs to remember what the Right—grappling with an aging electorate—clearly knows: that public schools are the ideological battleground of the future. “The war will be won in education,” said none other than Florida’s own Commissioner of Education in a 2021 lecture. It is possible to dismiss creeping authoritarian restrictions on everything from the books on library shelves to the signs on bathroom doors as vote-mongering meant to appeal to the most socially conservative of Republican voters. But regardless of their tactical purpose, the result is always the same: what Freire and Althusser describe as the indoctrination of students into the maintenance of an oppressive status quo. While mainstream education masquerades as a relatively neutral public good—fueling accusations from both sides of the political spectrum that the other is imposing ideology on education—the “banking” method described by Freire is inherently ideological. It is, after all, the selective introduction of information to a captive audience. The essential problem is thus a variation on the theme first composed by poet and civil rights activist Audre Lorde: that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”

But there are tools that can—and the dissemination thereof has always been at the heart of radical education. “There is very

little if anything that you can teach [Black students] about prejudice and segregation,” reads the “Notes on Teaching in Mississippi Freedom Schools” pamphlet distributed to Freedom Summer teachers. “They know. What you can and must do is help them develop ideas and associations and tools with which they can do something about segregation and prejudice.” The demand for tools persists today, and leftists are well-suit-

"Public schools are the ideological battleground of the future."

ed to rise to the occasion in a moment such as this. Post-pandemic, negative views of capitalism have reached highs of 54 percent among 18-24-year-olds. But feelings of political inefficacy, namely a sense that “political involvement rarely has tangible results,” have also shot up to 36 percent among 18-to-29-year-olds. Here again, the Freedom Schools provide a valuable referent. Even under the exceedingly adverse circumstances of the Jim Crow South, students bound by their experience of radical education managed to organize, picket, boycott, and protest with unprecedented success during the summer of 1964. “The legacy of the Freedom Schools suggests that despite the best efforts of the architects of the Jim Crow system,” writes historian Jon N. Hale, “community-based efforts taught students to act as historic change agents.”

There is good reason, therefore, for leftists to start now to take back the American school system—not through programs like Teach for America, which sics largely untrained, prestige-hungry Ivy League grads on rural school districts, but in the old-fashioned ways: by becoming tutors and teachers, joining school boards, advocating for greater federal oversight of education. And—where the political environment is hostile to critical pedagogy—perhaps even taking matters into the Left’s hands and founding alternative schools. There are

fight to be had on many fronts: against a GOP insistent on degrading public education; against extant federal standards that, in practice, enforce what the critical pedagogue Henry Giroux describes as the “deskilling” of teachers; against anti-teacher and anti-teachers’ union propaganda, as rampant in liberal cities as conservative towns, deployed with the goal of subjecting schools to ever-greater parental purview; against neoliberal solutions for failing and underfunded schools, such as the circus of edtech startups which hasten the slouch toward privatization and the Uber-ification of teaching; against the pervasive (and often racialized) culture of suspicion and disdain for children that has, in recent decades, transformed schools into ever-more-repressive and punitive institutions; against private schools that hoard intellectual and material resources for the benefit of the rich; and perhaps even against children themselves, indoctrinated at such young ages into apathy and resentment for education that they, too, might need to be convinced of its liberatory potential.

If ever radical education proper has been ripe for reinvigoration, it is this moment of flux, as public schools lose students to private, parochial, and charter schools—and even, in fact, homeschooling—and few Americans seem content with the current system, least of all students themselves. A new path from K to 12 need not be built from scratch. The enormous body of theory produced by radical pedagogists during the 20th century awaits contemporary interloction. And, as many such theorists have vowed, the upfront costs are low because this kind of pedagogy can take place anywhere: “Provide teachers and use the city itself as the school,” writes social theorist Paul Goodman, “its streets, cafeterias, stores, movies, museums, parks and factories.” Indeed, if it is the world that leftists seek to reinvent, they must educate their students in that world—because, says Giroux, “The new illiteracy is about more than not knowing how to read the book or the word; it is about not knowing how to read the world,” how to articulate one’s place in it, how to act with agency against its many injustices.

It’s often said that those who can, do, and those who can’t, teach—but that is itself an insidious piece of ideology. Education is in the midst of an ideological battle royale, and for the sake of America’s children, the Left needs all hands on desk. ✦



THE AMERICAN CITY IS IN DISORDER. Demented homeless people roam needle-strewn streets. Shoplifters smash windows in broad daylight. Soft-on-crime prosecutors let dangerous criminals walk free. And radical, far-left policy elites let it all happen.

So claim conservative media and politicians, who never miss an opportunity to promote Law and Order. “Crime infests our cities,” claims Ron DeSantis’ campaign announcement video, which is soundtracked to horror movie-esque pizzicato strings. Donald Trump’s proposed second-term agenda consists of mandatory stop-and-frisk, instituting the death penalty as punishment for drug dealing, and sending the military into big cities to fight street crime. (They’ll stay there “until law and order is restored.”)

In a campaign ad titled “We Need to Restore Sanity Across This Country,” filmed in San Francisco, a perturbed-looking DeSantis describes scenes of open-air drug use and public defecation, bemoaning that the city has “really collapsed because of leftist policies.” This notion—that American cities have been driven to the brink by a cabal of radical, “woke,” police-defunding, city-ruining “far-left Democrats”—is central to the larger narrative about the decay of America’s cities. It has even made some headway among moderate Democrats like Bill Maher and New York City Mayor Eric Adams: it allows them to blame the left for the moderate center’s decades-long policy failures.

But these cities’ issues with homelessness and crime aren’t the left’s fault. Instead, they’re the direct consequence of policies inflicted upon these cities by fundamentally conservative leadership over the course of decades. These people have a specific ideology guiding their policymaking: that policing, austerity, and the free market are one-size-fits-all solutions to a city’s every problem. And that dogma has had severe consequences.

According to the likes of Fox News, the Heritage Foundation, Donald Trump, and the *New York Post*, the cities most harmed by the radical left include Portland, San Francisco, New York, and Chicago, among many others. It’s a narrative anathema to progress, and one rapidly becoming a fixture of American politics, both on the right and the center. While so many leaders are quick to make electoral hay out of public health and safety crises—and mobilize that sentiment in favor of the very politics that caused them—we must instead address these crises with humane and just policies. And we must put this false, left-blaming narrative to rest.

TROUBLE IN “WOKE-TOPIA”

Portland, per the Trump Twitter Archive, is the subject of 80 Trump tweets. It’s a famously progressive city, branded a “woke-topia” by “woke-less sports reporting” magazine *Outkick* (fun fact: they’re owned by the Fox Corporation). As the narrative goes, Portland was the “crown jewel of the West Coast” until woke mayor Ted Wheeler defunded the police, gave carte blanche to window-smashing leftist mobs, and let a zombie horde of homeless people terrorize the city. Now, the average day in a Portlander’s life consists of “dodging stray bullets, losing catalytic converters to thieves, and sidestepping tents.” According to Bill Maher, the school

PHOTO: In May 2020, the San Francisco city government decided that instead of finding housing for the homeless during the COVID-19 pandemic, it would erect a special sanctioned, socially distanced encampment as a “safe sleeping area” in front of City Hall itself. (Getty Images)

How Moderates Destroyed Blue Cities

by Alex Bronzini-Vender

curriculum is “woke.” According to Fox News, the justice system is “woke.” Even the police department, per anonymous internal feedback on a training program, consists of “Marxist ideologues.”

I recently visited Portland and found myself neither dodging stray bullets nor losing car parts to thieves. Like many major U.S. cities, Portland experienced a rise in violent and property crime in the first year of the pandemic, which appears to be (also like many major cities) returning to pre-pandemic levels; its crime rate is nowhere near that of America’s most dangerous cities. Despite the right’s hyperbole, however, Portland undoubtedly has a homelessness crisis. County-level data recently showed 6,297 homeless Portlanders, and the city ranks 12th among the cities with the largest homeless populations in America. In the face of these facts, one would expect a progressive, “woke” mayor to, say, make even the slightest attempt to house people. Not so.

Ted Wheeler’s response to Portland’s homelessness crisis has consisted of making homelessness illegal, and then sending the cops to sweep encampments. Wheeler’s sweeps are inhumane, traumatizing, and fundamentally ineffective: forcing people out of sight, rather than housing them, doesn’t actually solve anything. Multnomah County data also shows that, of the roughly 1,700 Portlanders swept from encampments over a 10-month period ending in February 2023, only 11 percent are currently in temporary shelter—just 1 percent have been permanently housed.

And, according to one Portland civil rights lawyer, the city’s sweeps are also criminal: contractors have been caught stealing swept belongings and taking them to the dump, in flagrant violation of Oregon law. In one case, the family of a 57-year-old woman who died after a sweep of her campsite sued a city contractor for wrongful death, claiming that loss of medication in the camp sweep led to the woman’s death.

Much of Wheeler’s response to the homelessness crisis has been contracted out to unaccountable private security firms, which rule Wild-West style over “Enhanced Services Districts” encompassing vast swaths of Portland. A 2020 city audit found that the city “provides little oversight of [these] privately funded public services” and, at the time of writing, had never received or reviewed budgets, internal audits, or incident reports from these private security firms. (It has taken the city *three years* to respond to the audit, an effort which appears to be stalling into nonexistence.) Advocates say that homeless people living in ESDs are subject to a level of ar-

rest for low-level offenses as much as 22 times higher than in other parts of Portland: their *raison d'être* may very well be to allow for the more efficient harassment of Portlanders for the horrible crime of taking a nap in public.

The result, predictably, is a humanitarian crisis spiraling out of control, as Wheeler piles on false promises while repeatedly displacing an already struggling homeless community. None of this sounds particularly progressive. This, of course, begs the question: what does the actual progressive response to homelessness look like?

Thankfully, there are answers. Housing First policies like those implemented in Helsinki, Vienna, Columbus, Salt Lake City, and Medicine Hat, Alberta have a near-universal track record of dramatically reducing homelessness. Their conceit is simple: that the solution to homelessness is to immediately, unconditionally, and permanently house people, rather than dragging them through a quixotic network of shelters, jails, and hospitals. Although implementing a policy like Housing First is harder in America than in a country with a robust social safety net like Finland or Austria, if Portland were to implement Housing First, it certainly wouldn't be the first major American city to do so. Lack of resources isn't an excuse in Portland: Columbus's city budget per-capita is far tighter than Portland's.

FURTHER COMPLICATING THE NARRATIVE OF Portland as a “woke-topia” is Wheeler’s police department’s inexcusable conduct toward the very protestors the right would consider “woke.” Even prior to the Trump administration’s effective occupation of the city beginning in July 2020—under the pretense of protecting federal property from “anarchists and agitators,” which generated an endless stream of hellish images of violent repression—the Portland Police Bureau’s own conduct against peaceful protestors had hardly been different. Under Wheeler’s tenure, and beyond, Portland police have long demonstrated a bias against left-wing, anti-fascist protestors, while turning their backs to right-wing violence. As Itchy Trigga, a local rapper and organizer, told *Jacobin*, “The Portland police was coming with the same types of brutality. ... The only difference is there are more feds.”

In 2018, police fired explosives and chemical weapons upon a peaceful crowd counterprotesting the far-right Patriot Prayer group, prompting a lawsuit by a woman who received third-degree burns from an explosive device. Her case is one of many filed by the ACLU against the city on behalf of peaceful left-wing protestors, who have been disproportionately brutalized by Portland police. In one case, police abruptly and without warning knocked multiple protestors to the ground, inexplicably singling out and beating a woman with a baton. In another, cops beat a man who was already handcuffed. And, in another high-profile case, police tackled a peacefully protesting 5-foot-1 grandma to the ground, leaving the woman with a broken nose and bloodied face.

Later, Wheeler’s police crowd-control liaison, Jeff Niiya, was caught colluding with Patriot Prayer leader Joey Gibson, sharing logistical details about upcoming left-wing protests. (In response to the incident, the mayor’s instinct led him to suggest, at first, that the police bureau—don’t laugh—*investigate itself*.)

I defer to your judgment as to whether a supposedly “woke,”

“leftist” mayor’s police department would display a clear pattern of bias against left-wing protestors while letting the far-right off nearly scot-free.

“THE BULLSHIT THAT HAS DESTROYED OUR CITY”

Right-wing thinkpieces on the supposed demise of San Francisco at the hands of the woke mob are a dime a dozen—the “Woke Mind Virus Destroys San Francisco” op-ed is practically its own genre of pseudo-journalism. They all follow roughly the same formula, titled something like “San Francisco is Decaying” or “How San Francisco Became a Failed City” or “San Francisco Falls Into the Abyss,” and repeat a similar narrative about crazy left-wing leadership ruining America’s greatest metropolises. As Nellie Bowles, who writes for *The Free Press* alongside founder and outspoken critic of “wokeness” Bari Weiss, put it in *The Atlantic*, “progressive leaders here have been LARPing left-wing values instead of working to create a livable city.” (For readers uninitiated in the verbiage of the terminally-online, “LARPing” is a derogatory phrase essentially meaning to act as something one isn’t, particularly in an exaggerated way.) The result, as these commentators claim, is a city chronically plagued by homelessness, crime, and impotent prosecutors supposedly unwilling to lock up dangerous criminals.

An attentive reader will notice that, aside from the recently-oust-ed progressive San Francisco District Attorney Chesa Boudin, it’s tough for the commentators to actually name the all-powerful progressives who are supposedly responsible for the city’s malaise. (To be fair to Bowles specifically, she actually *does* name and shame a handful of school board members. It remains unexplained, however, how three school administrators single-handedly ruined a city.)

These commentators are unable to name the supposed progressives ruining their city for a simple reason: they don’t exist. San Francisco Mayor London Breed is the latest in a long line of outspoken moderates who wield extraordinary power by way of San Francisco’s strong mayor system. Breed, who famously said during a press conference in late 2021 that the solution to crime was to be more “aggressive” with policing and not to tolerate the “bullshit that has destroyed our city,” controls the city’s budget, appoints replacements to all vacant elected positions, and hand-picks a majority of all major commissions. While the city’s Board of Supervisors can, in theory, check the mayor’s power, it requires an eight-vote supermajority to do so—and, if the mayor disagrees with the supervisors’ budgetary priorities, the mayor can just *not* spend on them. The result is that the left wields no meaningful power in the city. (If there’s one thing the right has no shortage of, it’s imagination.)

Bowles dedicates much of her piece to the city’s homelessness crisis, which she blames upon “empathy-driven progressivism.” That crisis, however, began under Mayor Dianne Feinstein (1978-88) and has continued under the leadership of every moderate mayor since. (The only remotely progressive San Francisco mayor since the ’80s has been Art Agnos, whose mayoralty lasted a mere four years, from 1988-1992.) These mayors enthusiastically welcomed gentrification to San Francisco, offering generous tax credits and millions of square feet of new office space to tech companies willing to set up shop in the city. Predictably, their high-paid workers can pay far more than existing residents, and—in the absence of proper protections—many found themselves forced out onto the streets.

Maybe San Francisco's homelessness crisis could've been avoided if the city's moderate leaders had heeded the progressive demand to, say, require some portion of luxury development be set aside for affordable housing. The moderates, however, chose to leave housing to the free market, and even today, London Breed needs to be dragged, kicking and screaming, to take even the most incremental steps toward taming San Francisco's housing market. In 2021, the Board of Supervisors passed a measure to direct \$64 million of city funds to fund rent relief, public housing, and to take vulnerable properties off the speculative market. Breed fought the measure tooth and nail—when it finally passed, she simply ignored it. Breed also opposed in 2019 an update to the jobs-housing linkage fee, which charges a fee on commercial development in order to fund affordable housing. When the Board of Supervisors passed such a measure, she “expressed her opposition to it in a letter, and returned it unsigned,” said Matt Haney, a Supervisor at the time, in a tweet.

Forty years after the start of San Francisco's homelessness problem, it hasn't quite clicked for moderate Democrats that, to stem gentrification, and thus homelessness, new development must be linked to new affordable housing. The result is that 70 percent of homeless San Franciscans once had housing in the city—a statistic that neither the Bowleses nor the Breeds of this world have any interest in contending with. The city's cost of living, meanwhile, continues to climb with no end in sight.

The June 2022 recall of progressive DA Chesa Boudin is an event of near-mythological proportions for “anti-woke” types. Conservative commentator Josh Hammer declared the recall an “Inflection Point in the Fight for Civilizational Sanity.” Some, like Hammer, even believe it to be The Moment when the tide turned against “gender ideology” and “urban anarchy.” It was when David, the silent majority of pissed-off commonsense moderates, defeated the all-powerful woke Goliath.

Boudin, among the only San Francisco progressives to hold any meaningful city-wide power in the last four decades, had become something of a supervillain in the right's imagination. Unmistakably an activist DA, Boudin ended his office's use of cash bail, established a commission to review all wrongful convictions, sought alternatives to incarceration to tackle substance use, and restricted the use of sentencing enhancements under California's “Three Strikes” law. This earned him a number of high-profile enemies in city politics, including Silicon Valley magnates, venture capitalists, and hedge-funder and Republican mega-donor William Oberndorf. This roster, which immediately began organizing to recall Boudin, scapegoated him for an imagined urban crisis—never mind that violent crime actually *fell* during his tenure.

The ultimate irony of the situation is that, despite the conservative hand wringing about Boudin's soft-on-crime, impotent progressivism, his replacement has fared no better at taming San Francisco's crime rate. Since Boudin's ouster, in fact, violent crime has *risen* in San Francisco. These are the wages of the urban moderate-conservative alliance.

San Francisco isn't a “woke city” because a right-wing blogger's local gentrification-spawned coffee shop has a pride flag on the

wall. Its story isn't one of a crazy left running the city into the abyss: moderate Democratic leadership, after decades of hegemony, has hit a brick wall.

ANNUAL AUSTERITY MODE

Marjorie Taylor Greene recently visited New York City. She wasn't a fan. Choice adjectives used to describe the city during her subsequent *Tucker Carlson Tonight* appearance included “absolute chaos” and “smells bad.” Carlson quipped back, saying: “Mayor Adams described New York as his ‘home.’ How did his home look? Pretty neat and tidy?” MTG responded: “His home is disgusting. The streets are filthy, they're covered with people basically dying on drugs. They can't even stand up. They're falling over. There's so much crime in the city. I can't comprehend how people live there.” If one took the likes of MTG at their word, they'd presume that

NYC's mayor must be a police-defunding radical leftist. They'd be incredibly wrong. New York's mayor is not a blue-haired raging Social Justice Warrior, but Eric Adams, an ardently moderate ex-cop. If you tune into an Eric Adams speech on any given day, you might hear the mayor claim that the city is being “destroyed by the migrant crisis,” tell “woke” people to leave NYC, or declare war on socialism.

Adams, a proud crusader against all things leftist, revels in his anti-progressive stance. His fellow travelers include former Independent Democratic Conference members (a breakaway faction in the state Senate which caucused with Republicans, handing the GOP control of the body in 2013 and 2014), pro-Trump billionaires, a fraudster Brooklyn church leader, real estate executives, and several noted homophobes.

The Adams agenda is essentially a laundry list of various public institutions he believes should be defunded. Adams' 2024 budget, ironically dubbed the “Working People's Agenda,” proposes \$169 million in budget cuts to the city's public university system, almost \$1 billion in cuts to public schools, and a blanket 4 percent budget cut to all city agencies, including sanitation, homeless services, and fire departments. Also on the chopping block is NYC's universal 3-K preschool program. Perhaps most controversially, Adams floated a nearly \$42 million budget cut to public libraries before extreme opposition forced him to back off in late April. (Adams's current proposed budget still leaves public libraries with a \$36 million deficit, which library leaders say will need to be made up by cutting hours of service, programming and classes, and opportunities for underserved New Yorkers.) Nonetheless, the NYPD's multi-billion dollar budget has remained nearly flat, as it has only recently been included in the group of city agencies asked to cut public spending. The Adams era has no shortage of heavy-handed symbolism.

These cuts are just part of Adams's latest annual austerity push. City agencies are still reeling from the previous three rounds of the “Program to Eliminate the Gap,” whose achievements included a \$479 million cut to city schools, a \$615 million cut from homeless services, a blanket budget cut to all city services, and ordering city agencies (which already struggle to retain staff, given previous budget cuts) to eliminate half of all vacant positions.

“We must put this false, left-blaming narrative to rest.”



PHOTO: In August 2020, the bridges along the Chicago River are raised to "prevent violence" (Shutterstock)

Meanwhile, Adams is gutting the social services that *actually* help build safe communities. It's a well-established fact that college enrollment reduces crime, and that increased investment in public schools directly leads to lower adult crime. Evidence also indicates that public libraries, which provide young people with activities, education, and opportunities, also reduce local crime rates. And after-school programs provide activities that mitigate juvenile risk factors.

All these budget cuts come at a time when they couldn't be more unjustifiable: New York City revenue is up. In fiscal year 2023 to date, the city collected \$55.4 billion in tax receipts, \$5.3 billion over that collected during the same period the year prior. The city's cash balances averaged \$9.8 billion, an over \$2.6 billion increase from last year. And, from March 2022 to February 2023, sales tax revenue surged by 18 percent. The comptroller's office writes that "the City has seen record-high cash balances in Fiscal Year 2023" and that "the continued rebound of New York City's economy since the pandemic has led to year-over-year increases in tax receipts." Eric Adams seems to be doing austerity just for the hell of it.

And, in lieu of an actual solution to NYC's homelessness crisis, Adams, like his West Coast counterparts, has adopted a policy of "out of sight, out of mind." Among Adams's first moves as mayor was to ban homeless people from taking shelter in New York's subways; in the period between March and October 2022, his administration swept 3,198 encampments, or 14 a day. Almost everyone displaced in said sweeps remains homeless—only 115 swept New Yorkers in that period accepted shelter—just without personal belongings like Social Security cards and birth certificates, which sanitation workers have a reputation for sending to the dump.

Sweeps are, ostensibly, a measure to move homeless people off the streets and into temporary shelter. Unfortunately, Adams is cutting that, too. In May of this year, Adams issued an executive order kneecapping NYC's decades-old right-to-shelter law, which "obligates the city to provide a bed to anyone who asks for one," as noted in *Gothamist*. Homeless families, too, no longer have access to a legally-mandated bathroom, kitchen, and refrigerator.

New York's shelter system is deeply flawed—there are good reasons why many homeless people forgo it nightly—but the right to shelter is a basic safety net not seen anywhere else in the United States. It's the legal groundwork of a system providing secure housing to tens of thousands nightly. There's a particular cruelty,

then, to Adams's attempts at replacing it with mass involuntary commitment. In December 2022, the Adams administration issued a directive that "expanded the scope of behavior that could result in forced psychiatric evaluation from 'likely to result in serious harm' to the much broader criteria that the individual 'appears to be mentally ill, and displays an inability to meet basic living needs,'" as explained in *The Nation*. Worse, the individuals issuing these psychiatric judgments need not even be psychiatrists. It could mark the beginning of a disturbing return to the era of mental asylums—institutions that didn't rehabilitate people, but removed them from society.

ADAMS IS, IN HIS DEFENSE, NOT THE ONLY MAYOR OF New York City unwilling to contend with the basic realities of homelessness. Former Mayor Bill de Blasio was also an eager contributor to the criminalization of homelessness: his Department of Sanitation conducted nearly 10,000 sweeps throughout his term, with some even personally called in by the mayor. And this is just scratching the surface of de Blasio's extensive failures, with the "affordable housing" built under his tenure disproportionately *unaffordable* to those with the most urgent housing needs.

His predecessor, Michael Bloomberg, similarly failed to take on homelessness, leaving behind a crippled and insolvent public housing authority unable to make basic repairs. And, while Bloomberg's wide-ranging rezonings are often praised, many of those rezonings were actually downzonings, making it *harder* to add density—and many upzoned neighborhoods happened to be gentrifying, working-class communities. Inclusionary zoning, another much-touted flagship Bloomberg policy, aimed to incentivize developers to build affordable housing in exchange for an increase in maximum allowed density; according to a report from the Association for Neighborhood and Housing Development, it "fundamentally failed," creating fewer than 3,000 affordable apartments in an eight-year period. By the end of Bloomberg's third term, New York's median rent had risen 19 percent. In turn, NYC shelters' nightly population rose by 69 percent. (For homeless families, that number surged 80 percent.)

New York's current crises are, through and through, the product of decades of failed moderate leadership—leadership which not only refuses to solve existing problems, but also insists upon creating new ones.

“WORSE THAN AFGHANISTAN”

In May and August of 2020, in the name of promoting public safety and limiting property destruction, then Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot ordered the Chicago River’s bridges raised. For weeks, every night, Chicago was quite literally divided in two. The city’s North was no longer accessible from its South, the road connections between its wealthy and its disinvested neighborhoods severed for the night. Workers living on the South Side (disproportionately people of color) suddenly found their mobility decimated.

Longtime Chicagoans told *ProPublica* that they can’t recall a mayor ever before raising the bridges like literal drawbridges over a castle moat. Yet, this is how things have been, for decades, in Chicago. It’s America’s most segregated major city, one severely stratified along racial, ethnic, and class lines. The city’s Black poverty rate is triple that of its white poverty rate—and its racial wealth gap appears to be growing.

To the American conservative, Chicago is the very image of the failing blue city, run into the ground by the soft-on crime radical left. “It’s embarrassing to us as a nation,” proclaimed Donald Trump in 2019. “All over the world, they’re talking about Chicago. Afghanistan is a safe place by comparison, it’s true.” The truth, however, would tell a different story.

As recently-elected Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson told *Jacobin*, former Mayor Lori Lightfoot—who was on the receiving end of Trump’s attacks—was one of many figures in Chicago politics who “run like Frederick Douglass, and then they govern like Jefferson Davis. They take on this platform of equity and justice for the people, and then try to convince people that these things aren’t possible.” Lightfoot carefully cultivated her image as a *realistic* progressive, one willing to make both tough calls on Law And Order and to challenge Chicago’s status quo. Far from being, in conservative parlance, “soft on crime,” Lightfoot drew criticism from the left for reneging on her promises to steer Chicago’s approach to public safety away from a dogmatic reliance upon policing.

Lightfoot’s conception of due process was one in which cops and prosecutors were to be the jury itself. She insinuated that looters had been emboldened by a lack of consequences for their actions, and that it had simply become too easy for offenders to get out of jail easily. Allowing people charged with violent crime out on bond, she said, “undermines the legitimacy of the criminal courts.” Judges, then, shouldn’t allow those charged with violent crime out on bail because it can be assumed that “these people are guilty.” This was not merely a stance against the progressive demand for ending cash bail: Lightfoot opposed the very practice of granting bail itself, and the justice system’s *basic presumption of innocence*. A year on, these words—even from the mouth of a figure like Lightfoot—remain shocking.

Lightfoot’s policy approaches tiptoed around anything that might upset corporate bottom lines: there’s no better example of this than the “Housing Solidarity Pledge,” a compact between a group of landlords and lenders purportedly aimed at managing Chicago’s housing crisis. Conspicuously absent from the negotiating table were tenants’ rights organizations, or any form of housing rights group—nor would it have mattered, for the pledge was non-binding and unenforceable to begin with. Predictably—and, as Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor wrote in *The New Yorker*, “as if to make the point of tenants’-rights activists”—a signatory violated the pledge almost immediately. This, somehow, was supposed to be a flagship Lightfoot achievement, touted as an example of bold

leadership in the face of impending crisis.

When the federal government allocated millions of dollars to the city through the CARES act, the mayor proposed an ordinance granting herself extraordinary control over the funds. She clashed with council members who pushed back against what they described as the mayor’s “power grab” and demanded that the mayor’s response keep to the principles of racial equity she campaigned upon. The mayor’s remarks toward democratic socialist alderman Carlos Ramirez-Rosa, who led the charge against the ordinance, were particularly severe, as she declared herself to be “personally embarrassed” by him.

The concerns that a progressive, equitable response to Covid was not a priority for the mayor were almost immediately vindicated. Lightfoot’s hand-picked Covid recovery task force was co-chaired by persistent Republican donor Samuel Skinner, who had previously served in various positions under George H.W. Bush. (As H.W.’s Transportation secretary, he used his power to defend Exxon Mobil’s abrupt abandonment of the Exxon Valdez oil spill cleanup.) Other appointments included Richard Edelman, CEO of a PR firm with a major gig in helping fossil fuel companies plan astroturf campaigns. (In other words, an individual who, in a just world, would be nowhere near power.)

Despite posturing as a progressive, Lori Lightfoot’s sympathies were persistently with the right—and this is to say nothing of her harsh 2020 austerity budget, much less her immediate post-election shift towards advocating against taxing Chicago’s rich.

Lightfoot’s style of governance is how it has always been in Chicago—yet conservatives insist they lack responsibility for any fate that befalls the city. Asked on the campaign trail why prominent Republicans had donated to his campaign, failed mayoral candidate Paul Vallas portrayed himself the defender of Law and Order *contra* Lightfoot’s irresponsible progressivism. “The city’s in trouble [and] crime is out of control,” Vallas said. “I think I’m getting the support from the business community because ... I’m the one best equipped to deal with those issues.”

Brandon Johnson’s recent election certainly signals that voters are tired of that status quo, and want a real rupture from conservative leadership. One can only hope that rupture will materialize.

IS THE CONSERVATIVE STORYTELLING ON AMERICAN CITIES the product of ignorance, malice, or both? I couldn’t tell you—but the reason it’s irresistibly appealing to conservatives of both Democratic and Republican stripes is quite clear. For Republicans, leftist-induced urban malaise is a seemingly concrete, visceral argument for their policy agendas of “backing the blue” and being “tough on crime.” And, for conservative Democrats, it allows them to ignore the fact that, for decades, they’ve held political power in America’s largest cities—and have left behind only long legacies of failed policy. The present crises faced by the communities they’re responsible for are transformed, in their telling, into new and unique beasts brought about by a radical fringe, rather than outcomes decades in the making. And, most conveniently, this false narrative pins the blame for said crises upon burgeoning progressive movements, forcing them to answer for problems they bear no responsibility for.

In reality, conservatives have led America’s cities to a place they simply can’t lead them out of. The tools of their trade—austerity, criminalization, and simply leaving it to the free market—have hit a dead end. Their only way out, seemingly, is to lie to your face. ✚



Learning From The Young Lords

Johanna Fernández is a historian of social movements and the author of *The Young Lords: A Radical History*, a deeply researched history of one of the most vibrant and fascinating social movements of the 20th century. From their origins as a Chicago street gang in the early '60s, the Young Lords became an effective grassroots radical movement, the Puerto Rican counterpart to the Black Panthers. They helped produce an early version of the “patient’s bill of rights” in medicine, organized lead testing for children, protested inadequate garbage collection, and demonstrated a model of how to fight for the rights and dignity of a marginalized community.

THOUGH SHORT-LIVED, the Young Lords offer a great many lessons for those in our own time who want to work on the same kinds of issues. In this interview, Prof. Fernández recounts the history of the Young Lords to show us how they succeeded and why they ultimately fell apart. It’s an important story that everyone who wants radical social change should be sure to familiarize themselves with.

NATHAN J. ROBINSON

The subject of the book is the Young Lords. Not only is your book a compelling story of a 1960s revolutionary social movement, but the Young Lords offer a wealth of practical lessons for today’s organizers. You write: “*Their intrepid organizing campaigns, literature, bold political analysis, and media savvy reclaimed the dignity of New York’s hardest working and most exploited workers and replaced stereotypes with powerful images of radical, strategic, and articulate militancy.*” If you want to understand the lessons of organizing in the past for organizing in the present, you should turn to *The Young Lords: A Radical History*.

JOHANNA FERNÁNDEZ

Yes. Social movements change history, but the freedoms we enjoy in society today are the product of struggle by ordinary people. Something that we take for granted today is the Patient Bill of Rights. It’s something that we assume has always been a right of human beings and Americans in particular. Few people know that the first known Patient Bill of Rights was written by the Young Lords. It was drafted during a struggle at a hospital in the Bronx alongside hospital workers, nurses, doctors, and people in the community demanding that doctors properly, carefully, and patiently explain health problems to patients and see them

as partners in their care. That was a new concept in the 1960s.

Part of what I do in the book is outline their brilliant strategies as a kind of primer for activism. So, what did they do? They identified problems, often by consulting the community. They organized a strategy around it which aimed to stop business as usual—for example, the operation of a hospital. They engaged in an enormous amount of political education. They wanted to know: What are the root causes of this problem, how can we educate the public about it, what would we best imagine as the solution, and then how can we organize a campaign and a series of demands around those solutions?

ROBINSON

It's striking to look at the original Patient Bill of Rights that was drafted in 1970 by the Young Lords and others. You listed them in your book. There are things we now take for granted, like having access to your medical chart. But you also see unfinished work, like demand number 10 to receive free healthcare, which is something that we still don't have.

FERNÁNDEZ

That's the demand that is most urgent—free healthcare for all—especially in the aftermath of the biggest national crisis we've seen in 100 years, the COVID-19 outbreak. It's the thing that connects us all to our deepest humanity. When we're sick, we're in need of dignified care that's accessible and won't put us in a hole financially. So, yes, that is unfinished business for sure.

ROBINSON

In going back to the agenda of the Young Lords, one does get the sense that, in many ways, we really ought to pick up where they left off. But, I want to go back to the start. I think for our listeners and readers, it would be helpful if you could explain the origins of this group, and perhaps even before that, the context in which this group originally arose. The Young Lords comes, as you note in the book, out of the mass migration of Puerto Ricans to the mainland United States.

FERNÁNDEZ

The Young Lords formed as part of a larger

movement in the 1960s that we know as the New Left. And the New Left is, essentially, a movement composed mostly of young people, many of them college students, but many not, such as the Young Lords, who accomplished three major things. The New Left radically changed the relationship between white people and people of color in the United States through the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Brown Power movements; challenged the country's assumptions about issues of gender and sexuality through the women's movement; and made it acceptable to question how the United States government conducts U.S. foreign policy, accomplished through the movement against the Vietnam War.

There was a generation of young people reared in the 1950s during the Cold War that were alienated by these drills that were constant in public schools warning of the possibility of the dropping of atomic bombs on our soil, especially among white students who were reared in the suburbs for the first time in the history of the country, and folks who were people of color migrating to the cities in large numbers. In the aftermath of World War II, there was a great migration of Black Americans to

cities in the South, like Montgomery and Birmingham, but also to the North to Chicago, New York, Detroit, and Philadelphia. You also have Puerto Ricans migrating in the post-World War II period out of the island to cities like New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia as a result of U.S. economic policy on the island by the name of Operation Bootstrap, an industrial project that displaced more farmers than could be absorbed in the emerging industrial economy. The program had a contingency plan, and that was migration.

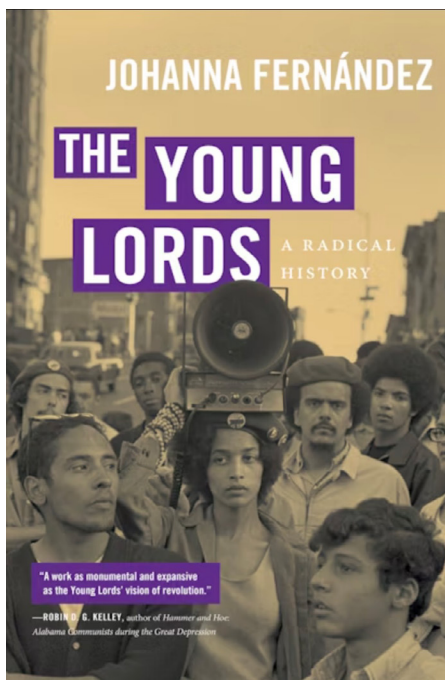
So, a third of the people of the island were displaced to cities like New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, and during this period, Chicanos or Mexican Americans were also leaving rural areas to go to cities like Los Angeles, Austin, Dallas, and beyond. Mexicans were coming from Mexico, and Native Americans were also becoming urbanized during this period. For people of color, this was the big moment of their urbanization, and it was that movement of people of color from rural areas to cities that transformed their power politically. Economically, they became part of the working class for the first time and got a sense of their power in numbers in the cities.

ROBINSON

One of the fascinating things about the Young Lords is that it began as a street gang.

FERNÁNDEZ

That is one of the most fascinating elements of this history, and it's the subject of the first chapter of my book. Gangs were a fixture of life in urban centers like Chicago, New York, Detroit, and Philadelphia. The preexisting gang formations were built by white working-class youth, and they had been around for at least 200 years in cities like New York and Chicago when people of color began to migrate to the cities in the North en masse. Young people were forced to replicate these preexisting formations for self-defense because they were not welcomed, unfortunately, by their white ethnic neighbors. They were literally driven out of parks and pools and playgrounds. And the scuffle between white kids and Black and Latino kids in the playgrounds and in the streets is the form that racism took. The Young Lords is one of these many



The Young Lords: A Radical History
by Johanna Fernández

gang formations led by Puerto Ricans and Mexicans that emerged in Chicago, but it was transformed by its leader who was imprisoned in the late 1950s and early 1960s. He was politicized in prison by reading Martin Luther King Jr.'s book, *Where Do We Go From Here?*, but also *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and even the biography of Thomas Merton, a Catholic monk. He decided that when he left prison, he was going to transform his gang into a political organization.

ROBINSON

You document that in the early 1960s, in the first years of the Young Lords, most of the gang's activities were things like stealing cars and getting into rumbles. There is a fascinating thing you mentioned: "The Young Lords ran roughshod through de facto white spaces, and over the course of many rumbles, succeeded in opening up spaces that their parents had been afraid to enter." They didn't consider themselves to be civil rights activists, certainly, but they almost had that effect through establishing strength in numbers and going into places where they wouldn't have been able to go if they hadn't been so tough and menacing.

FERNÁNDEZ

I know! That was one of the most amazing findings. Essentially, they went to the beach in Chicago. I remember interviewing José "Cha Cha" Jiménez, the leader of the Young Lords, and he said, "Because of de facto segregation in urban centers like Chicago, we had to go around the world to get to the beach because we couldn't go to the beach that was just a mile away because it was segregated. One day, we decided, you want to go to the beach? Yes, I want to go to the beach. Do you want to travel two hours to get to the beach? No? Well, let's go." And they got into a rumble with the local white gang at the beach, and after that, Puerto Ricans and Black Americans waltzed into the beach that had been segregated as if it had never been. That happened with playgrounds and other urban spaces.

We think of the Civil Rights movement as something that was orchestrated from on high by leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference that he led. And it was a product of that, for sure.

But it was also a product of the migration and urbanization of people in mass numbers and their aspirations to live better lives in a free America.

ROBINSON

You mentioned the politicization of Cha Cha Jiménez, and one of the most fascinating things is how he managed to start turning what had been a gang mostly interested in hanging out with women, driving cars, and getting into fights into a radical

"It became a school where people read, debated, and discussed the root causes of social problems, the origins of racism in the United States, and a strategy for transforming society for the better."

political organization. Can you discuss the transitional moment for this group and how it turned into such a different organization over a couple of years?

FERNÁNDEZ

There's the personal story of Cha Cha Jiménez. He's my favorite Young Lord to this day. He's got such a big heart, so humble, and is just a real authentic human being. I'll tell you one story that really touched me deeply. His mother was a Catholic and was part of the administration of the local Catholic Church—she might have been the secretary—and somehow got Cha Cha a scholarship to attend Catholic junior high school. He told the story of how parents in the school had traditionally organized a kind of celebration or prom independently of the school, and he didn't know that until he bumped into one of his friends who referenced the party to which he was not invited because

his family was Puerto Rican, and the party was organized by mostly Irish and Italian parents. He said to me, "I was devastated. This was the ultimate sign of rejection. This was my friend. How could he have not told me about this? How was I not invited?" He said, "This was the moment that I turned to the streets. The hell with school and the adults. I'm going to find my people and home in the streets."

He proceeded to get arrested that summer, he said, five or six times. Once you're on the cops' roster, you get picked up over and over again. It was in one of these moments of imprisonment that he encountered some migrants who had been in prison in one of these roundups by the Immigration and Naturalization Service that happened at the same time as the riots in Chicago in the aftermath of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. There were urban rebellions, and people were rounded up, or immigrants from Mexico were rounded up, and everyone was put in prison. The Mexican immigrants were being abused by the guards, and Cha Cha was called to translate for one of them. He said, "I felt responsible. These people reminded me of my parents. I knew that they were hardworking and should not be in prison, and I felt like I needed to protect them. The least I could do was translate." And he said, "I was called by something higher than myself for the first time," and that really began his study of what was going on in the country: the Civil Rights and Black Power movements.

He started reading Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. His mother had high hopes that he would become a priest, and he had a profound sense of guilt about his petty crimes and read Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*. When he left prison, he found that the neighborhood had changed dramatically and that Puerto Ricans had been driven out of their homes by urban renewal, which was that period's huge gentrification project sponsored, unfortunately, by the U.S. federal government. He was approached by a housing activist, who encouraged him to bring together the members of his gang to stop the next round of displacement of Puerto Ricans from the outskirts of a white neighborhood. And he said, "I thought this crazy woman was a communist, and I called

her a f-ing communist b—. She persisted, and I paid attention to her because I could see that the neighborhood had changed in the short time that I was in prison, and it seemed that my parents were next on the chopping block and were going to be displaced.”

So, he proceeded to talk to all of his guys in the gang, one by one at the bar where they hung out, who also dismissed him and made fun of him for being all political now that he'd been in prison. He prevailed in the end after an enormous amount of persistence. They landed at the Office of Urban Renewal, where the plans for eviction of a new wave of working people were being discussed. In gang form, they busted up the meeting and started throwing around chairs. So, they weren't having a political conversation with the Office of Urban Renewal, but that began the process, which was arduous, of politicizing and educating these young people who were tough. And then, one of them was killed by the cops, and that, he said, really was the clincher. He wasn't there at the party where the Young Lord was killed by a police officer, but for those who were arrested, the first person they called was Cha Cha. They knew that he was onto something, and that this was such a miscarriage of justice. This was a tragic loss of one of their peers, and they were going to have to mount a fight back.

ROBINSON

There's something remarkable about the Young Lords' history and transformation. We somewhat associate gang activity with hopelessness or a feeling that, being very much on the margins of society, you can't participate in it or do anything to change it. And then, not only is there a development of a political consciousness, but anyone who becomes an organizer has to feel as if they have a certain power that they could change things. How do they come to feel that it is worth being part of a political organization that could alter their circumstances?

FERNÁNDEZ

The film *West Side Story* was launched in theaters right around the time that they became a gang. They were inspired by it and said that that was the first time they saw the conflict between Puerto Ricans and

white ethnic gangs on the big screen and felt affirmed. So, they took on the colors of the Puerto Rican gang in *West Side Story*. And for them, gang membership was an affirmation of their identity as Puerto Ricans, but also, it was about a reclamation of their right to the city. The gang and its members were engaged in petty criminal activity, but were also in community building activities, like organizing a party, and designing sweaters and jackets. If it was happening and cool, they were wearing it and figuring out how to raise money to purchase them. So in many ways, the Young Lords in Chicago were successful in their other campaigns because they had established pretty wide and deep networks in the community that, when mobilized, showed up to the march against the killing of Manuel Ramos. And they also met the Black Panther Fred Hampton, who was the chairman of the Chicago chapter of the Black Panther Party, at a conference known as the Third World Students Conference in Chicago that was held in 1969. When Fred Hampton heard about the Young Lords, who were Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, he thought this was a real coalition that could be called the Rainbow Coalition. That political transformation came about by the Black Panthers, but also the intervention of housing activists and many others who came together and transformed the Young Lords from a gang into a political organization and also into the university of kids who had dropped out of high school. It became a school where people read, debated, and discussed the root causes of social problems, the origins of racism in the United States, and a strategy for transforming society for the better.

ROBINSON

We've been discussing the Young Lords and their origins in Chicago, but the organization spread. Most of the campaigns that you focus on in granular detail in the book take place in New York City and over quite a brief span of time, despite being pretty impressive. Could you tell us about this activism that took place among the New York Young Lords in the early 1970s?

FERNÁNDEZ

The Young Lords in Chicago made a big splash when they occupied McCormick Theological Seminary. Cha Cha told me,

“White students were occupying buildings and making demands, challenging the Vietnam War on college campuses, but I knew that if we were going to be relevant, we needed to deploy that strategy in our communities.” During one of the marches against the killing of one of their own, Manuel Ramos, many people showed up, and spontaneously, they entered and occupied McCormick Theological Seminary and put forth a series of demands against housing displacement experienced by Puerto Ricans especially, but also for better schools and affordable housing that was attractive. They didn't want the projects, for example, to be the model of housing that poor people had access to. They demanded housing that would allow for the building of their communities.

The Black Panther newspaper interviewed Cha Cha, and a bunch of kids in New York City in East Harlem read the interview. Cha Cha captured their imagination because they were trying to organize Puerto Rican youth in East Harlem, so they hopped in a car, drove all the way to Chicago, met Cha Cha and his peers, and asked for permission to start a chapter of the organization in East Harlem.

That summer, they started with an epic garbage dumping campaign. They asked the community, “What's the biggest problem before you?” They thought that the community was going to say police brutality or the segregation in schools, but the community said to forget about all of that: it's the garbage. Look at the disaster that the sanitation leaves behind. They take half the garbage and leave the rest strewn. The kind of garbage that cities were producing was epic because this was the moment of the rise of consumer capitalism. The golden age of American capitalism in the 1950s was organized around consumption, and unfortunately, the sanitation systems in urban centers had not caught up with that level of production of garbage that we are so very well aware of today with all of our Amazon boxes that we don't know what to do with. So, the Young Lords in New York started picking up the garbage and organizing it neatly for the sanitation department to pick up over the course of many days and a number of weeks. The sanitation department didn't pick it up. They decided that they were going to throw the



Loisada.org / ¡Palante, Siempre Palante! (1996)

garbage into the streets, get the community involved, and burn the garbage.

Traffic was stopped for 30 blocks on end in the middle of a major thoroughfare out of the city and to the suburbs. Immediately, they got coverage from the *New York Times* and other local press. They became so popular that their numbers grew, and they decided to rent an office in East Harlem and professionalize their operation. They did an enormous amount of work around lead poisoning. They went door-to-door alongside technicians and doctors to test children for lead poisoning from the chips of paint that fell off walls and that children put in their mouths. They discovered that a third of the children they tested were lead positive, and lead is toxic to the nervous system and can cause permanent brain damage. They occupied a church in East Harlem, inspired by the action of the Young Lords in Chicago, and finally, they occupied a hospital to dramatize the horrific conditions of health of the Black American and Puerto Rican communities in the South Bronx. The hospital was built in a different epoch and was falling apart and couldn't meet the needs of this ailing community.

ROBINSON

We mentioned at the beginning that the Young Lords offer plenty of practical lessons for organizers today by taking on the everyday demands of the community on pretty mundane things, like the garbage, or like not having our children poisoned by

lead, and to have people treated well in the hospital and have decent hospitals. Taking their cues from the needs of the people, they were there to serve, and this really helped make them quite successful and popular in a short amount of time.

FERNÁNDEZ

Absolutely, and I think you hit the nail on the head. Issues of quotidian life that everyone is concerned about. Is my neighborhood clean? Do I have access to a hospital that will save my child in an emergency? Lead poisoning disfigured the lives and learning possibilities of children and is a problem that people cared about. These issues had been debated and discussed in New York City and in other cities for some time, but no organization had mounted a political education campaign around it and a strategy to force the city to respond.

So, part of what the Young Lords did, when they discovered that a third of the children they tested were lead positive, was to organize a series of press conferences—literally, the media—exposing the city and its inactivity. They also occupied the office of the head of the health department of the city of New York and didn't leave until he offered a series of solutions to the problem. And in 1974, the *American Journal of Public Health*—this is what I discovered over the course of many years of research—credited the Young Lords' muckraking and militant activism in the streets for the emergence, for the first time in the history of the city, of the bureau of lead poisoning

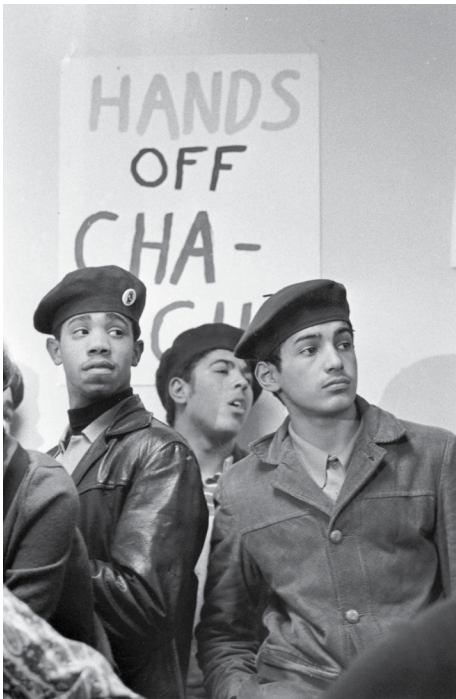
and anti-lead poisoning legislation that forced landlords to strip down the old lead paint from tenement buildings or be fined exorbitantly. The youngest Young Lord was 13, and the oldest in New York was maybe 20, and the actions of these young kids influenced public policy in the cities of Chicago and New York. They were also active in Philadelphia, Hartford, and beyond.

ROBINSON

As one reads your book, the prevailing feeling is excitement and inspiration, seeing, as you said, these perfectly ordinary young kids who are raised in very difficult conditions finding their power, getting together, and organizing to accomplish real meaningful things for people. They succeeded, and it's incredible. But then, after these really innovative actions and good results, the Young Lords come to an end rather quickly. There are obviously many practical lessons for how movements should operate if they want to extract concessions from those in power, but there's also certainly a lesson here as to what movements need to do to avoid dissolution and decline. Could you tell us why, after having so much success in organizing, the Young Lords faded away?

FERNÁNDEZ

Grassroots organizing and connection to communities is something that new generations of organizers and activists have to take seriously. The Young Lords were connected to their neighborhoods, to their



View of three members of the Young Lords Organization (YLO) during a meeting with Police Commander Braasch in the 18th district, Chicago, Illinois, 1960s. (Photo by Paul Sequeira/Getty Images)

families, and to their communities, and they did the rounds. They held meetings in their buildings, churches, and schools. They also sold their newspaper *Palante*, which means “forward in struggle,” which, fascinatingly enough, they published regularly and sold in the community, and each Young Lord had a paper route. They sought to regularly engage people in the streets, bodegas, and churches. And it was through those consistent, meaningful conversations with people in the community that people took them seriously and trusted them. So, trust is one of the building blocks of organizing and activism. To establish trust in the community, you have to be consistent, honest, and determined.

The Young Lords also had a political worldview, an analysis that identified the structural roots of social problems. They were self-proclaimed socialists who were inspired by the revolutions that were happening around the world against European colonial rule. They also engaged in campaigns and developed well-thought-out strategies that were not always spontaneous. They thought through how to get the city to respond, and they understood that they needed to use militant action. When they stopped consulting

the mothers, the fathers, the old ladies, and the grandpas—when they started disconnecting from the community—they made themselves vulnerable to attacks by the counterintelligence program of the FBI, known as COINTELPRO. But also, their decline is connected to the broader decline of the movement.

They emerged in the late 1960s at the height of radicalization when a significant minority of American society had, I would argue, a pretty sophisticated analysis of what was wrong with society, and this had been acquired over the course of almost two decades of struggle in the Civil Rights, Black Power, anti-war, and women’s movements. So, the movement was experiencing exhaustion by the early 1970s. That combination of disconnection to the grassroots, the persecution of the organization by COINTELPRO, and the fact that the broader movement had reached its zenith and now was on the decline, together led to the decline of the organization. But, I can’t overstate the level of repression that all the movements confronted.

ROBINSON

It’s easy to look at these organizations’ failures, but then also Fred Hampton, mentioned earlier, was murdered by the FBI. We know why Fred Hampton’s organizing didn’t succeed, which is because he was killed by the state. So, the decline is a tragedy. Some things can be averted through the choices of movements, and sometimes movements just get suppressed. Is there anything you want to add to the question of why people today should read about, study, and understand the work of the Young Lords in the 1960s and 1970s?

FERNÁNDEZ

If you’re interested in transforming society, you need to understand it. It’s important to walk into the struggles of this period with knowledge of the struggles that came before you and their successes and failures. Unfortunately, history and its study, as you well know, is under attack across the United States. But, there is a rich tradition of struggle in the working class, unions, and communities, and many of the issues that young people and a new generation of organizers are mounting today were issues that folks fought for just four decades ago, or even a

decade ago. These histories, foremost, inspire, educate, and offer political theory and analysis of the problem because ultimately, what we want to do is to win. We need to equip ourselves with all the tools we can get our hands on to mount a struggle against injustice for the purposes of winning. Strategy, strategy, strategy, strategy is important.

Coalition building beyond your very narrow issue is important, as is connecting your narrow issue to the broader problems of society and figuring out: How is it that this issue is connected to structural inequality? There are so many reasons. Reading history independently of struggle, and whatever you might be doing today in terms of organizing, is a profoundly satisfying endeavor. It helps you situate yourself in the country’s trajectory. It helps answer, at least for these young people and other people of color and their descendants, the quintessential existential question: Who am I? What’s my relationship to this nation? What can I do to expand the definition of democracy and freedom as others have in the past?

The Young Lords were Puerto Rican activists, all working class, who connected the crises in urban centers—like police brutality, deteriorating schools, joblessness, deindustrialization—that began and hit communities of color first in urban centers before disfiguring working-class white communities across the country. They connected these problems of permanent joblessness, poverty of the schools and of the hospitals, and racism to the United States’ quiet imperial project on the island of Puerto Rico. They believed in Puerto Rican independence and that these struggles were connected. It’s a rich history that was being written every day of the 1960s.

When all oppressed working-class people come together to fight for a different world and assert their rights as working people, we have a better chance of winning. Fred Hampton was so dangerous because he identified this coalition. He said we need to come together on the basis of shared class interests. And yes, we need to fight against racism, and understand the role of racism in society and its roots, but ultimately, we are all suffering. And the question is, how can we come together to continue to expand the meaning of freedom in this country? ✚

Transcript edited by Patrick Farnsworth.

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The Labor Politics of *AIR*

by
Ciara Moloney

THERE HAS BEEN AN EXTREMELY WEIRD trend in Hollywood movies this year: the rise of the corporate biopic—the “brandopic,” Darren Mooney calls it. (Sadly, they’re not movies starring Marlon Brando.) *Tetris* is about the race to license the video game Tetris in the sunset years of the Cold War. *Flamin’ Hot* chronicles the invention of Flamin’ Hot Cheetos, the truth of which is dubious. *BlackBerry* charts the rise and fall of the late smartphone brand. *Air* is about the origin of Nike’s Air Jordan sneakers. These films take “the cinematic language traditionally reserved for important historical figures or true events,” Mooney writes, “and applies them to the origin of a consumer product.” It’s been half a century since *Star Wars* pioneered selling toys based on movies (promoting the movies via the toys and the toys via the movies); it has been decades since “product integration” became endemic in film and television. But this trend still feels like a new level of brazenness. Ads have presented themselves as “short films” for years—the Gillette ad about toxic masculinity was a big one—and now they’ve come for features, too.

And yet, I loved *Air*. I didn’t want to—I wanted to find it crass and dumb, roughly equivalent to FIFA’s hagiographic propaganda movie *United Passions*. But it won me over, over and over

again. And the more I thought about it, the less it seemed like a Nike hagiography and the more it seemed, quietly, like something with real teeth.

It’s 1984, and though Nike is a billion dollar corporate behemoth, its basketball division is flagging. Sonny Vaccaro (Matt Damon), a habitual gambler, wants to blow the division’s budget on a rookie who was third in the NBA draft—some kid called Michael Jordan. Viola Davis plays Jordan’s mother, Deloris, who negotiates on her son’s behalf; Affleck appears as Nike CEO Phil Knight; Chris Tucker, Jason Bateman, and an understated Marlon Wayans round out the cast. (Jordan himself is never seen face-on: the camera glimpses his shoulders or the back of his head, like Jesus in *Ben-Hur*.) To seal the deal, Sonny requests that Peter Moore (Matthew Maher), the designer down in the basement, create the greatest basketball shoe ever conceived. And they’ll put Michael Jordan’s name on it.

In some ways, *of course* I loved *Air*. I have an instinctive affection, endemic to those of us raised on 1990s indie movies, for any Ben Affleck/Matt Damon collab, and *Air* stars both and is directed by Affleck. It’s got a sharp, tight script and a stellar cast. Without lapsing into pastiche, it feels like a certain type of movie they made in the 1980s: an underdog business comedy, a pseudo-genre ranging from *The Secret of My Success* to *Weekend at Bernie’s*. This type of movie can be slyly satirical or nakedly

*AIR* (Amazon Studios)

capitalist, but either way, I will love it with pure, uncomplicated love, the love of a kid sitting cross-legged in front of the TV until her eyes go square. An actual '80s movie would probably have Tom Cruise or Michael J. Fox in a younger, yuppie version of the Damon role. But the core is the same. *Air* is about landing the big account or losing your job, but the shiny happy face of Reaganomics assures you that the latter is not remotely an option—the same way you know a western ends with a shootout, or a romcom ends with the leads finally getting together.

Still: as good of a time as I had watching *Air*, something twisted in my gut. The movie expects you to root for Nike, one of the biggest, most evil corporations going, as the underdog in their competition with Adidas and Converse. To be clear, Nike is not just generically evil, the way any for-profit business is likely to be: as Naomi Klein outlines in her book *No Logo*, Nike began producing its sneakers in Asian sweatshops in the early 1970s. Nike sub-contracted to factories, based on the lowest bid and without reviewing the working conditions, initially in Korea and Taiwan, and later in India, Pakistan and Indonesia. There has never been any reason, any benefit, anything to justify this, but greed. “They’re turning kids into slaves just to make cheaper sneakers / But what’s the real cost?” as Flight of the Conchords once put it, “Cause the sneakers don’t seem that much cheaper / Why are we still paying so much for sneakers / When you got little kid slaves making them / What are your overheads?” (Due to public outcry, the company began to make improvements in

2005, allowing human rights groups to inspect their factories.) Simultaneously, as Klein outlines, Nike built its brand around commodifying Black culture, merging the style of working-class Black youth with the endorsements of prominent Black figures from Michael Jordan to Spike Lee. *Air* elides the former almost entirely, and romanticizes the latter. It is, ultimately, about synergy between two brands: Nike sneakers and Michael Jordan, who, Klein writes, secured his place as the branded entity *par excellence* in an ever more branded post-Reagan world, a *super-brand* through which sponsors and endorsements flowed.

Air is, almost inarguably, an advertisement. I idly thought about buying some Air Jordans afterwards, until I came to my senses and decided to continue wearing the old beat-up Nikes I bought second-hand until they finally finish their ongoing falling apart.

THE MOVIE GOT GOOD REVIEWS, BUT MANY critics share that discomfort. Kevin Fox Jr. for *Paste* calls it “a feel-good movie that relies on viewers identifying with and rooting for a billion-dollar corporation”, adding that *Air* “is about getting—or keeping—us on the side not just of Nike, but of capitalism as a system, circumventing or ignoring its exploitative nature.” Aisha Harris for NPR panned it as “nothing more than a craven exercise in capitalist exaltation.” Mark Kermode took a more apathetic position, presenting *Air*

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IF IT'S NOT
YOU'RE NOT
SPENDING
ENOUGH ON
SHOES



not as evil, but merely pointless: he questioned whether trying to license someone's name to *sell a shoe* is "enough" for a movie to be about—because, ultimately, so what?

But as much as I wanted to dismiss the movie on that basis, my mind kept returning to one small scene: Rob Strasser (Bateman) tells Sonny that he'd been listening to "that new Bruce Springsteen song," "Born in the U.S.A.," getting psyched about freedom and so forth, until one day when he really listened to the words: and "Born in the U.S.A." isn't about how great America is, not even close. It's about a guy who comes back from Vietnam and can't get a job. That moment is the key that unlocks the movie: that we should look beyond the shiny surface, and really listen to the words. And when you do, there's a built-in skepticism there—emerging to the surface in the last act, but maybe clearest, like a Monet, at a distance.

Despite myself, I was rooting for Nike, the way you naturally root for underdogs in movies. And then the film shifts, in a way its 1980s progenitors never did. Deloris Jordan accepts Nike's deal—with one additional term: Michael gets a revenue share of every shoe sold. It's got his name on it, after all. Sonny is sure Phil Knight will shoot the idea down in a heartbeat.

"Every once in a while," Deloris tells Sonny, "Someone comes along that's so extraordinary that it forces those reluctant to part with some of that wealth to do so. Not out of charity, but out of greed. And even more rare, that person demands to be treated according to their worth because they understand what they are worth."

Suddenly the movie isn't about—or just about—landing the big account. It's about athletes being compensated for the use of their names and likenesses. It's about workers' entitlement to the fruit of their labor. If the stakes were almost absurdly low—who cares about selling sneakers?—they quietly become substantial. It clarifies the choice for *Air* to be the first film produced under the Artists Equity banner, Ben Affleck and Matt Damon's new production company which seeks to share profits with artists.

Nike pays Michael Jordan what he deserves for every shoe with his name on it. Not out of charity, but out of greed. Because they stand to make truly grotesque amounts of money, even if they shave a bit off the top for Michael. The epilogue tells us that Phil Knight has donated \$2 billion to charity. "Born in the U.S.A." is playing, and you're forced to question what feels like a happy ending. We've just been told that Air Jordan generates \$4 billion sales for Nike *annually*. Out of context, how much Knight donates to charity sounds like a compliment. In context, it sounds damning. (If you decide to scratch the surface when you get home, it gets worse: Knight once rescinded a donation to the University of Oregon because they joined the Worker Rights Consortium. Charity, too, can be driven by greed.)

Because Michael is such an extraordinary talent, with such a shrewd and determined woman in his corner, he's in a position to demand what he's worth. But the movie is littered with people who don't get the compensation they deserve. Pete *designs*

the shoe, names it, creates the iconic silhouette—which appears on "every Air Jordan product"—but Pete is a guy in the basement with a speech impediment who took up skateboarding in middle age and spends his whole life thinking about basketball shoes. He doesn't have Michael Jordan's leverage. The shoe he created makes \$4 billion a year, and Pete cashes his salary at the end of the month. The woman who designed the Nike swoosh is less lucky: Phil Knight bought the design from her for 25 bucks. Eighty percent of Nike's shoes are made in South Korea and Taiwan, Strasser says in the "Born in the U.S.A." scene, and rest assured that they're not getting a cut of the profits of every shoe they sew together.

"Nowhere to run," as Springsteen sings, "Ain't got nowhere to go." Nike pays Jordan what he deserves out of greed, but so few are extraordinary enough that Nike wouldn't make more money screwing them over. And when it comes to shoe profits, \$2 billion in charity is a drop in the ocean. ♣

Answers to CONSERVATIVE NAMES QUIZ p. 3

The following conservative pundits are living human beings:

Tudor Dixon — 2022 Republican Gubernatorial Candidate in Michigan

Ainsley Earhardt — Co-host of Fox & Friends

Gunnar Thorderson — TPUSA Ambassador and host of Firefight on a streaming network called Today is America

Bo Hines — North Carolina football wide receiver-turned North Carolina Republican Representative.

Kash Jackson — 2018 Libertarian gubernatorial candidate (who later went to jail for four years after threatening the lives of two judges amid divorce proceedings).

Grant Stinchfield — Former primetime Newsmax anchor

Robby Starbuck — TPUSA guy who ran as a write-in candidate in Tennessee's 5th congressional district

Kat Timpf — Panelist on Fox News breakout comedy program Gutfeld!

Timon Prax — former TPUSA Midwest regional manager forced to leave after making offensive tweets about Mormons, Jews, and Muslims

Myron Magnet — Longtime editor of City Journal given the National Humanities Medal by George W. Bush

Holman W. Jenkins, Jr. — Wall Street Journal columnist

Barton Swaim — Wall Street Journal columnist

Shalee Grooman — Another TPUSA employee who left after tweeting several homophobic and racial slurs

Todd Schnitt — OAN host and drive-time conservative radio DJ in the Tampa Bay area

Wayne Allyn Root — Author and self-described "Angry White Male" who wrote a book with that title. Also the author of The Great Patriot Boycott and Trump Rules.

Josh Hammer — Federalist Society member and national conservatism-minded editor at large for Newsweek

Buck Sexton — Former CIA intelligence officer best known as the co-host of the popular "Clay Travis and Buck Sexton Show." Also a previous fill-in host for Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity.

Allie Beth Stuckey — Host of Relatable on BlazeTV, who has called LGBTQ people "Pronoun predator[s], rainbow recruiter[s]...and kid creepers."

SCORING

20% correct or less: You are a traitor to the cause of freedom! Face the wall!

Your name: MIKE JOHNSON or EMILY BRADLEY

21% to 40% correct: You're clearly a globalist coastal elite. We've got our eyes on you! Your name: JEREMY McNEIL or ERICA CARLISLE

41% to 60% correct: You're a bit of a RINO, but you're not beyond saving.

Your name: HUNTER GILMARTIN or BAILEE JO PEPPERS

61% to 80% correct: You've got some learning to do, Patriot. But you're on the right track! Your name: CLINT TURNBUCKLE or EMMYLOU GASHER

81 to 99% correct: You are a true American, ready to do battle for this great nation. Your name: CULVER CRAMDILLY or HARLEIGH GULCH

100% correct: You are our savior, the one true light. Your name: JAXTON PALANQUIN or CORDELIA MUSSOLINI-FUDGE

—Quiz by Stephen Prager

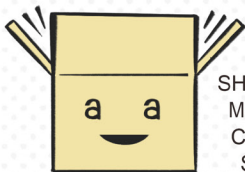
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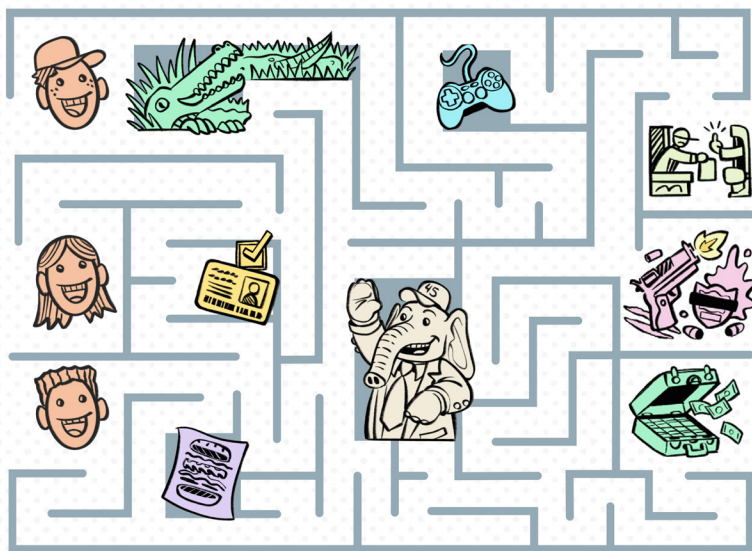
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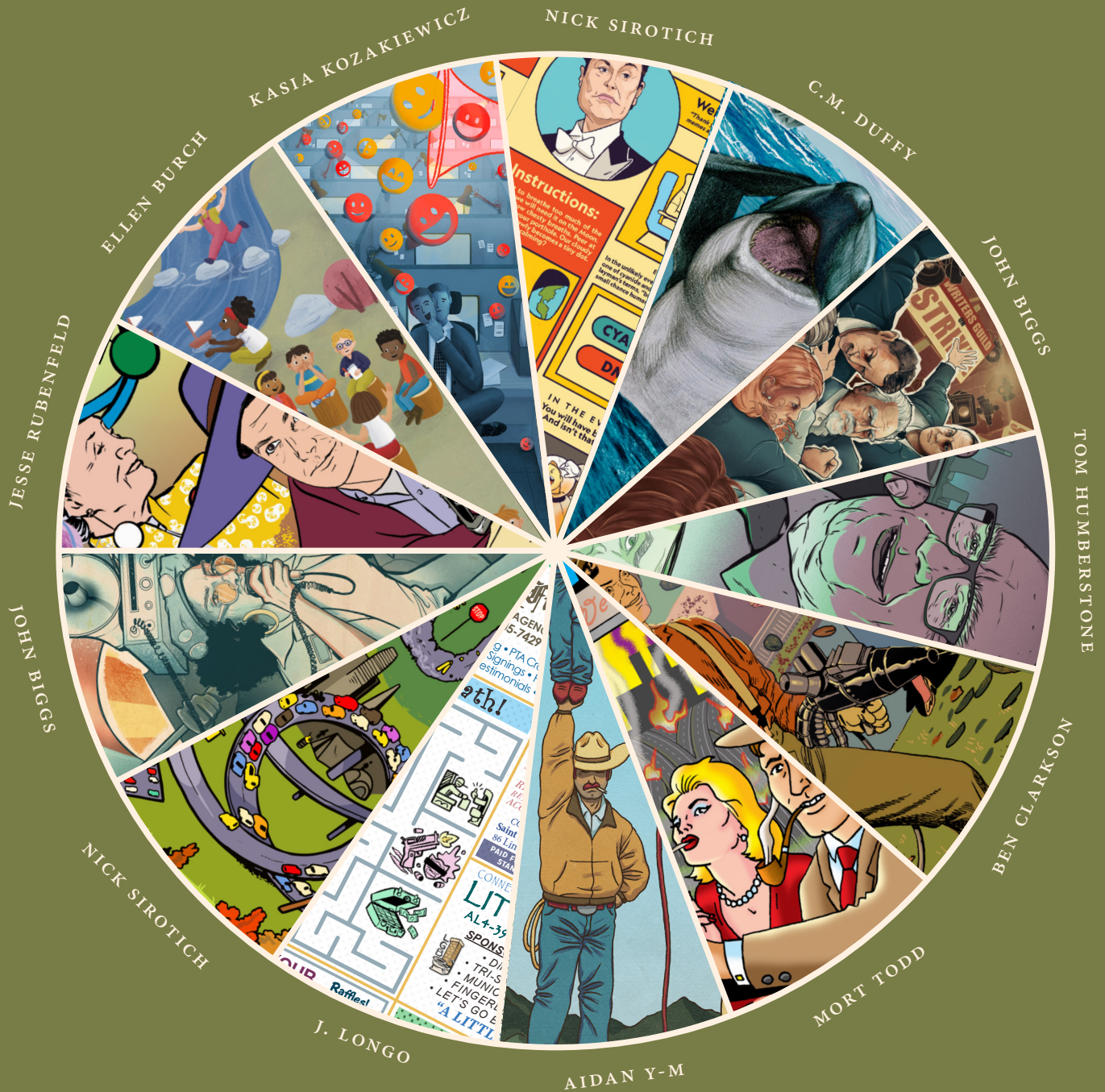
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M O N S A N T O N
A R W B P I J N I
R F A C E B O O K
S K O C H M F C E
N E S T L E L O S
S P A C E X M A N
B L A C K R O C K

CAN YOU FIND 13 COMPANIES THAT WANT TO HIRE YOU?

the Illustrators



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