

From New Orleans, With Love

CURRENT AFFAIRS

\$12.95

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DEATH

*Should we think
about it more?*

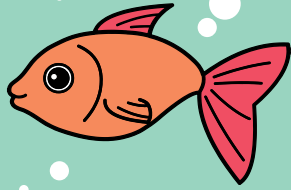
ANTHONY BOURDAIN

*Los Angeles through
the late chef's eyes...*

MEDICAL DEBT

Get rid of it all!

OVERTURE



**MONGER
FISH
NOT
FEAR**

AFFAIRS IN THE



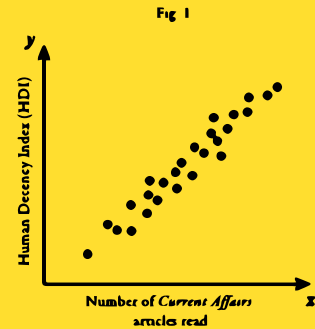
Current Affairs
will soon be distributed
via skywriting.

It's hard to make it in the independent publishing game. Margins are tight and inking and binding tens of thousands of copies of our magazine adds up. Our Number-Crunching division has crunched the numbers and determined that rather than spend the money to send each of our print subscribers a physical copy of the magazine, it would be more economical to present the magazine to them live at one singular location. However, we also feel that *Current Affairs* must keep with the whimsical spirit upon which it was founded. Therefore, we have devised a unique new way of transmitting the magazine to you, our beloved readers: We will enlist a professional pilot to painstakingly write each letter of each article using the smoke that billows from their plane's jet engine. At 8 a.m. sharp on [whatever day the magazine comes out] our followers should gather at these exact coordinates: 29.9256° N, 90.1287° W. Look up to the sky, and watch the magazine.

(NOTE: this will likely take several hours or even days, so we recommend bringing a snack and water.)

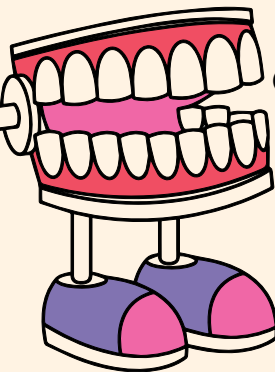
IT'S PURE SCIENCE

Current Affairs is the only magazine scientifically proven to make you a better person, according to cutting-edge sociological research. Take a look at the conclusive chart reproduced to your right. As you will see, the facts are simply beyond denial. For those who will protest that "correlation does not equal causation," that's stupid! Yes, it does. Of course it does. What did you think it equaled?



Alison L. Punchbagger, Timmets Q. Fikih, Thurston T. Talleyrand, and Cressida W. Almondpatch "Effects of Current Affairs magazine Consumption Upon Individual Morality" *Journal of Magazine Studies*, Vol. 87, Iss. 3 (August 8, 2023) 45-678

SOCIALIST PRODUCTS



CHOMSKY CHOMPERS

"Propaganda is
to a democracy
as the bludgeon
is to a totalitarian
state."

Wind them up for 100
inspiring quotes!

OUR TOP 5

Currents

Gulf Stream
—
Agulhas Current
—
Canary Current
—
Antarctic Circumpolar
Current
—
East Australian Current

OUR TOP 5

Affairs

The Iran-Contra Affair
—
The Bogdanov Affair
—
The Petticoat Affair
—
The Profumo Affair
—
Yorkshire Captaincy
Affair of 1927

THE BIG MOVE

Over the past six years, many of our beloved subscribers have dropped by the Current Affairs World Headquarters in New Orleans, Louisiana. These subscribers know well that CAHQ is a magical space, one with a character befitting the periodical housed within it. But as they say, everything eventually dies. All good things, even the best of them, fade away in time. But sometimes, occasionally, they are replaced by things even better. Such is the case with CAHQ. Reader: we are moving! And it's a good thing, too. We are expanding, hiring new editorial and design help, and have outgrown our present space. The new CAHQ will be even more beautiful and cozy than the present one, and we hope our readers will stop by and say hello. (It's just a hop, skip, and jump from the present location.)

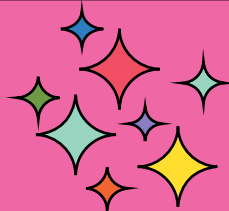
But reader, we also need your help. The new space simply must be furnished, and when we move in, it will be empty. So we have an exciting offer: For any of our readers who donate money to help us buy office furniture, we will name a piece of office equipment after you. It doesn't matter whether the donation is large or small. You can get anything from the [Your Name] Pencil Pot to the [Your Name] Colossal Industrial Shelving Unit. On the wall of the new office, we will have a giant poster listing all of the people with named objects and what those objects are. Consider it a way to purchase immortality on the cheap, or show a loved one you truly care (yes, you can have items named for other people).

Simply visit <http://currentaffairs.org/donate>, make a donation, and then email editor@currentaffairs.org with your name and the type of object you would like to have named for you once we purchase it. We will do our best to accommodate requests but if four people try to get the fridge named after them, someone might have to settle for the microwave. We might also not purchase whatever specific object you personally dream of having named for you. But we guarantee something in our space will pay tribute to your generosity. Thank you and we're excited to have you with us on this next phase of the CA adventure!



RAIN

Nature's way of saying,
'Stay inside and read
Current Affairs.'



Due to an unforeseen glitter
accident at *Current Affairs*
World Headquarters, expect
your next issue to sparkle
rather more than usual.



KIDS READ FREE!

There is literally nothing stopping you from letting your child (or any child in the vicinity) read this magazine.

LETTER

"I found a feather tucked inside my last issue. Is this a new subscription perk?"

Dear reader, it appears our avian intern has been leaving his mark. We apologize for any confusion. You may do what you wish with the feather and are under no obligation to return it.



ROGUE INTERN

Our legal counsel has advised us that we are obligated to use space here to warn the public that a rogue intern has fled the intern chamber and is running amok in the streets of the city. This intern has previously shown no signs of troublesome behavior, having diligently pursued their tasks of checking the mail for explosives, licking bookplates, and unlogging the editorial commode. But sometimes an intern's curiosity gets the better of their common sense: One afternoon, when the editor was off attending a function (the New Orleans Magazine Editors Society's annual Masked Ball & Awards Banquet, at which we received first prize for "Best Use of Confetti in a Serious Editorial"), the intern made their way into the editor-in-chief's office and purloined the Editorial Pen. Upon seizing the pen, the intern burst into the newsroom, jumped atop a desk, and bellowed "NOW I HAVE THE POWER OF THE PRESS," before scarpering. The intern apparently believed that the Editorial Pen confers the power to correct anything, including social/fashion faux pas, art crimes, and ugly buildings, and other general injustices. They have been caught attempting to scribble out brutalist buildings from the landscape and erase awkward pauses from the speech of passersby. Futile attempts have been made to explain to the rogue intern that the Editorial Pen has no powers other than those arising from its use by the editor in chief. The intern has shown no inclination thus far to return to the workplace. Readers should be advised, lest they be unexpectedly edited as they go about their daily lives. The intern should be considered armed and dangerous.

Current Affairs:
TWICE AS
STIMULAT-
ING AS FOUR
CUPS OF
COFFEE



THE MAGAZINE FORMERLY KNOWN AS CURRENT AFFAIRS

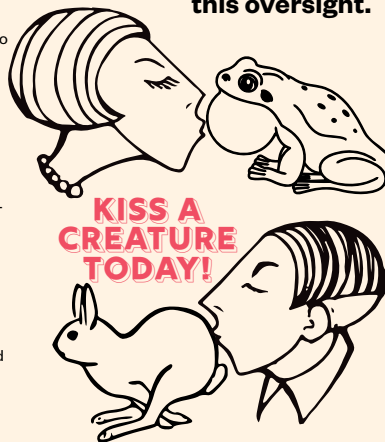
In his latest fit of genius, Twitter owner Elon Musk announced recently that the site has changed its name to "X." Soon we shall bid adieu to the Twitter brand and, gradually, all the birds," he tweeted (or rather, X'd.) (Sadly, this is not the only way in which the global rich are "bidding adieu to all the birds.") Now, most conventional marketing strategists would advise that when you have one of the most recognizable brands on the internet—one so well-known that it has led to the word "tweet" being added to the dictionary—you should probably not completely shred that brand recognition by changing to a name which could easily be mistaken for a porn website. But that's just the Conventional Wisdom. True disruptors know better! Musk also apparently wants to turn "X" into not just a social platform, but an "everything app"—according to CEO Linda Yaccarino, "X is the future state of unlimited interactivity—centered in audio, video, messaging, payments/banking—creating a global marketplace for ideas, goods, services, and opportunities." Elon has said that he thinks X will soon encompass "half of the global financial system." This, too, is a genius masterstroke. Generally, when your current enterprise is hemorrhaging billions of dollars, most financial advisers would suggest you undertake half-a-dozen extremely costly new ones.

We here at *Current Affairs* are inclined to follow the best and brightest business minds in the world. Thus we hereby announce that *Current Affairs* magazine will be changing its name as well. Henceforth, this enterprise will be known as "X." We believe this symbol encompasses the creative and whimsical spirit we hope to embody. We are still working out the details, such as how "X" will be spoken aloud (a question that has led to several heated arguments within the X company Slack), but we figure such a matter can be resolved at a later date. At *Current Affairs*, we built a brand with instant name recognition within the independent left publishing sphere—but in keeping with the business methods of Mr. Musk, for whom we have great respect, we feel it is important to periodically confuse and unnerve our core base of readers. As much as it pains us, we will also be following in X's footsteps and ditching our once-ubiquitous bird-related content.

In keeping with Musk's strategy, we will be moving beyond the publishing sphere and will be opening a series of chain restaurants, haberdasheries, private equity firms, and affordable family resorts. We believe that this combination of destroying brand recognition and undertaking several new, untested ventures at once cannot possibly fail. After all, Elon Musk is the richest man to walk the Earth, and it is core to the X worldview that one's net worth is directly proportional to their intelligence and value as a human being. Surely this bold step cannot fail—if it does, then it would mean that Mr. Musk is not in fact a transcendent business genius, and is in fact a clueless oaf with no idea what he is doing. This is, of course, impossible. If that were true, how could he be so rich?



We apologize to former U.S. Senator Saxby Chambliss (R-GA) for not including him in our list of ridiculous conservative names. We have received numerous emails from the senator protesting that his name is "absolutely absurd." We wish to correct this oversight.



KISS A
CREATURE
TODAY!

A MESSAGE TO FLORIDA READERS

Look out for mysterious parachutes! This magazine will surely be banned in your state in the near future—like virtually all other works of cultural value. But do not worry. In the event that this occurs, we have access to a series of military-grade aircraft (it doesn't matter why), which we will use to airdrop this magazine into occupied Floridian territory. So our parachutes are not confused with others carrying forbidden sexual education literature, unabridged Shakespeare plays, and AP Psychology textbooks, parachutes carrying *Current Affairs* will be adorned with an unmistakable fuchsia and gold damask pattern.

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who needs a
planet when
you've got
PROFITS

OMEN

If your magazine lands face up on your doorstep, expect good news. Face down? A shadow may linger longer at your window tonight.

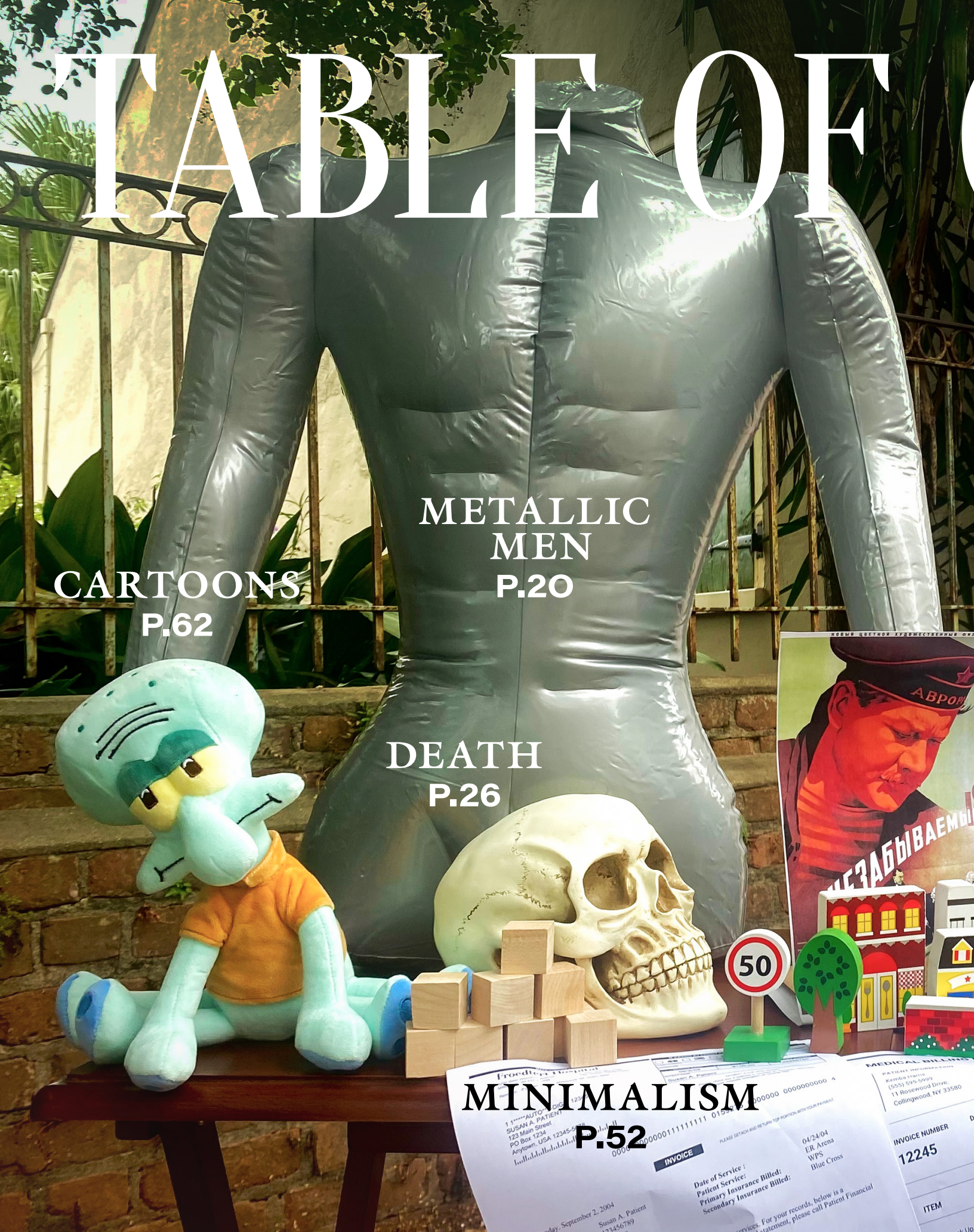


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INVOICE DATE: 07/01/23

DATE: 07/13/23

DESCRIPTION: Full body check up, Infection check due to inflammation

Professional Services

Date	Description	Charges	Pmts/Adjs	Patient Balance
12/14/22	Visit to Tacoma General Hospital on December 14, 2022	\$2,066.00	-\$1,116.06	\$949.94
12/14/22	Insurance Company Payments			\$949.94
12/14/22	Insurance Company Adjustments			
12/14/22	Your Responsibility	\$203.00		\$0.00
12/14/22				-\$150.50

John Doe's Visit to Tacoma General Hospital on December 14, 2022

Provider: Dr. [Name]

Visit #000000002



FINDING LOS ANGELES

with
Anthony Bourdain

“We might wonder if the movies have ever really depicted Los Angeles.”
— THOM ANDERSEN, *LOS ANGELES PLAYS ITSELF*

by Ryan Bedsaul

WHEN IT COMES down to it, I’m a pretty boring traveler. I finally realized this when my neighbors shared plans to drive a motorcycle one thousand miles up the Pacific Coast Highway with two hiking backpacks strapped to the sides to soak in the gorgeous California and Oregon landscapes before flying to Nepal and backpacking through the Himalayas for three weeks. The only proof I have of a comparably adventurous spirit is a short documentary about a time I spent in Morocco, which I completed for an undergraduate course and have since done my best to remove any trace of from the internet. For one segment, I assembled some footage of Chefchaouen, a gorgeous blue-painted city in the Rif Mountains, and paired it with a quote from Paul Bowles’ *The Sheltering Sky*, thinking this would give the images more substance than beauty alone could convey. The quote was this:

Whereas the tourist generally hurries back home at the end of a few weeks

or months, the traveler, belonging no more to one place than to the next, moves slowly, over periods of years, from one part of the Earth to another. Indeed, he would have found it difficult to tell, among the many places he had lived, precisely where it was he had felt most at home.

Even though my trip only lasted about 10 days—putting me squarely in the “tourist” category—I thought the quote accomplished something; it conveyed a level of seriousness that would separate me from the stereotypically aloof American waving a selfie-stick around UNESCO World Heritage sites and disrupting photos of awe-inspiring landmarks with one’s disembodied head. But when I revisited the project recently, what I found was more embarrassing than a folder full of selfies in the Marrakech markets. Not only had I not captured any of the wonderful people I’d met in Chefchaouen, but the monotone delivery and intellectual posturing of my voiceover track had drained all the pleasure out of the footage. Still, I couldn’t be too hard on myself: this all took

place well before I discovered Anthony Bourdain and his show *Parts Unknown*.

My obsession with the writer and travel TV host began one year after my Morocco trip, when I was staying with a friend in Los Angeles. The “Vietnam” episode was playing on the Vizio in his living room, and I caught it right at the following scene: the one of an exuberant Bourdain sitting on a “low plastic stool” with a cold local beer and a bowl of clam rice while the night life of Hue—scooters, street carts, steaming pots and pans—poured into the *mise-en-scène*. When he punctuated that segment with the line, “Fellow travelers, this is what you want. This is what you need. This is the path to true happiness and wisdom,” I found myself hooked.

I had been in Los Angeles that day for an interview with a major network, a position in their early-career program that I was hoping to use as a stepping stone to more creative roles in “the industry,” or, as it’s known on *BoJack Horseman*, “Hollywood.” Looking back, I can see why I would have been attracted to the entertainment industry; like many suburbanites with unlimited cable and a

flatscreen television, I'd formed my identity around preferences for certain American TV shows. Yet, during the thousands of hours I'd spent in front of a screen, I'd never come across Anthony Bourdain. I like to think if I had, I would have skipped the whole predictable journey out west and simply let my imagination expand outwards to lesser-known places. But alas, one week after my first exposure to *Parts Unknown*, I received a job offer and moved to Studio City to begin work as a lowly "Hollywood" assistant.



Anthony Bourdain in his natural habitat.

For a time, I was quite happy to have access to that world, though I was slowly discovering what a tremendous bore the "entertainment" industry could be. Minus my coworkers' inflated sense of the value they were adding to society (i.e., quality control for return-on-investment-friendly film and television intellectual property) and the gloss of celebrity proximity, the place was remarkably similar to other corporate environments I'd worked in: the productivity mantras, the rote conference room meetings, and the bureaucracy. It didn't help that in the evenings and weekends outside of the office, I was also learning what an overwhelming and dysfunctional city Los Angeles could be. The trendy brunch spots and hipster thrift shops abutted by blue tarp shelters offered a harsh contradiction to the paradisiacal images I'd been conditioned to associate with the place thanks, in large part, to the industry I'd taken up work in. Even in darker films like *Chinatown* (1974), one could not deny the beauty of Echo Park Lake, the Central Valley orange groves, or mission-style bungalow courts.

To process the gap between expectation and reality, I devoured all the Bourdain content I could get my hands on. I tore through *Kitchen Confidential*, the memoir that made him famous overnight in May 2000, then worked backwards through *Parts Unknown* (2013–18) and his web series *Raw Craft* (2015–17), followed by his eight-year Travel channel run with *No Reservations* (2005–12) and *The Layover* (2011–13), followed by his foray into television, *A Cook's Tour* (2002–03). Then I scoured YouTube for interviews. There was more content than it felt possible to exhaust, yet I consumed all of it—sometimes deeply, other times mindlessly, and often addictively. I enjoyed Bourdain's voice to the point that I felt his shows transcended criticism. They were raw in a way that excused all of their flaws, even when Bourdain, for example, indulged in navel-gazing segments about his jiu-jitsu practice for a substantial portion of an episode that was otherwise about Silicon Valley's moneyed invasion of the greater San Francisco Bay Area and the locals who were gradually being displaced by it.

The show and the man were inseparable, so it seemed to me that if you loved the man, you loved the show, even as his constant presence and vulnerability occasionally interfered with the otherwise inquisitive and outward reaching nature of the series. A little self-indulgence could be a good thing. Take the episode in which he travels through Quebec with truffle-loving chefs Dave McMillan and Fred Morin. There's a scene in which the trio go ice fishing then retreat to a tiny cabin atop the frozen lake to enjoy top-shelf white burgundy whilst downing Glacier Bay oysters and discussing tableware esoterica. Bourdain's voiceover comes in as McMillan serves the main course:

What's that you ask? An iconic Escoffier-era classic of gastronomy? ... The devilishly difficult, lièvre à la royale: a boneless wild hare in a sauce of its own blood, a generous heaping of fresh black truffle, garnished with thick slabs of foie gras, seared directly on the top of the cabin's wood stove.

Later, he puts the cherry (or shaved truffle) on top when he posits, "Is there a billionaire or a despot anywhere on Earth who, at this precise moment, is eating better than us?" As far as food cinema goes, I would rank it right up there with the *Goodfellas* scene in which Henry Hill and his fellow inmates assemble a homemade pasta sauce to the tune of Bobby Darin's "Somewhere Beyond the Sea." The best of *Parts Unknown* often warranted such comparisons as week after week the cinematography, the characters, and the editing added up to one of the most delectable viewing experiences on television.

BUT OF COURSE, THE SHOW WASN'T ALL gateau marjolaine and warm wool sweaters. For every episode with an auteur chef—Paul Bocuse, René Redzepi, Masa Takayama, to name a few—there were many others that dealt with serious political issues, including extreme poverty, gentrification, the aftermath of colonialism, the impact of U.S. military presence, climate change, intractable religious conflict, and political oppression. (Bourdain, who got his start in the food industry as a dishwasher and line cook working

alongside immigrants, was also outspoken about how crucial immigrant labor is to the restaurant industry. As he once said, in response to claims that Mexicans were stealing jobs from Americans, “[I]n two decades as a chef and employer, I never had one American kid walk in my door and apply for a dish-washing job, a porter’s position or even a job as prep cook.”) Despite Bourdain’s popular associations with the culinary world and his appreciation of cuisines ranging from the Lyonnaise dishes of legendary chef Paul Bocuse to the “deranged” fast food spaghetti at the Filipino chain Jollibee, food was often just an excuse to explore these issues across the dinner table. Sometimes it was entirely peripheral.

*Is there a billionaire or a
despot anywhere on Earth
who, at this precise moment,
is eating better than us?*

His “Laos” episode in season nine of *Parts Unknown* is a prime example. It opens with footage of lush mountains coated in the pink and purple light of dawn as Bourdain’s voiceover comes in to remind us of the American missions that devastated this quaint landscape 50 years earlier, confronting us with the fact that more bombs were dropped on Laos than on Germany and Japan in World War II combined, all in an effort to halt the spread of communism. The rest of the episode is primarily concerned with showing the impact of this horrific legacy on the Laotian people, more than 20,000 of whom have been killed or maimed by unexploded ordnance since the war’s end.

Over the course of 40 minutes, Bourdain eats with a local journalist, a hotel owner, and a former soldier (discussing topics ranging from the remnants of French imperialism to Obama’s aid for the removal of unexploded bombs), interviews a bomb removal squad working on the monumental task of safely detonating 80 million unexploded ordnance, and, eventually, shares a meal with a man who grew up during the war. When the man shows Bourdain scars from a bomb that injured him when he was a child, Bourdain asks him if he has any anger toward the U.S. as a result of this experience. Remarkably, the man does not seem angry and recalls the doctors at an American hospital who provided free medical care for his wounds. Then Bourdain, not quite satisfied with the man’s answer, asks a more difficult question: “All the bombing, all the suffering, all the death... what did [you] think it was all for?” The man responds, “I don’t know what the reason is.”

This is the final line we are left to contemplate in the last five minutes of the episode as footage of Boun Ork Phansa—a festival marking the end of Buddhist Lent, described by Bourdain as “a symbolic casting away of [one’s] sins”—plays out.

The dusk shots of Laotians launching fire lanterns down the Mekong river—some crafted in the shapes of boats and dragons, others as small candles—are beautiful to witness, but more so an opportunity for the audience to quietly consider the impact of U.S. foreign policy on the people gathered around the river. It gives the viewer space to ask questions like: What was the point of this secret war? What responsibilities do Americans have toward Laotians? Are similar atrocities being carried out by the American military today?

In his memoir, *In the Weeds: Around the World and Behind the Scenes with Anthony Bourdain*, Tom Vitale (*Parts Unknown* director) reveals this open-ended, confrontational approach to be a trademark of Bourdain’s style. There was nothing Bourdain despised more than “competent” or “workman-like” storytelling, and he often pushed the envelope to avoid anything resembling an easy news reporter-esque summation of his travels. One anecdote Vitale relays about editing the footage for the Madagascar episode with Darren Aronofsky reveals the attention Bourdain paid to the aesthetic limitations of his television format.

When their first edit of the episode hits a speed bump, Bourdain suggests Vitale fix the ending by repeating a scene from earlier in the show: a moment when Bourdain and Aronofsky get food at a train stop in the middle of the country. Vitale says he initially pushed back at this suggestion: “Doesn’t it kind of needlessly distract from the very serious issues we bring in the show and instead call attention to us?” To which Bourdain responds:

Exactly. What do we include, what do we choose to leave out? Either way it’s our choice. It’s about the moral quandary of travel and white privilege. The camera is a liar. Drawing attention to it calls into question our own reliability and shows our hands aren’t clean. I want to show how manipulative even “honest, tell it like it is” TV can be.

In the first iteration of the scene, we are told that the train station is their only food stop on their 18-hour journey. Bourdain and Aronofsky are hungry when they arrive, but when they find most of the serving platters picked over and a number of skinny children gathering about their waists, their priorities change. They buy what they can and hand it out before the train departs for their final destination. All of this footage is presented in a matter-of-fact way, acknowledging the apparent poverty and hunger without dwelling on it at length. We get the impression that this sort of scene is not uncommon in Madagascar. But at the end of the episode, when Bourdain asks Aronofsky how he would have depicted their train stop experience, a second version of the scene plays that offers an unsettling juxtaposition to Bourdain’s more reserved take. We see more fighting over food, more children begging along the sides of the train, and new close-ups on the weapons of police standing nearby, and we hear shouting and bickering that was less apparent in the previous edit.

The juxtaposed edits are startling because they reveal how poverty, while commonplace, puts people in dangerous situations. There is no proselytizing in this depiction, only an admission of the limitations of the men as storytellers that

confronts the audience with images of a country that they, more than likely, only ever associate with a colorful animated film of the same name. Of course, Bourdain's aesthetic prowess was hardly a solution to the very real problems affecting Madagascar, but finding solutions to these problems was never the point of *Parts Unknown*. The point was to reveal the impact of larger issues like poverty and environmental devastation on places like Madagascar, to talk with the people there and see what they were hoping (or planning) for the future of their country, and to make those images and conversations more personal for an audience that otherwise might live in ignorance of these issues.

BUT EVEN WHEN BOURDAIN more or less accomplished the impossible task of making compelling TV out of heavy subject matter, there were still ethical questions that lingered long after an episode aired. What impact did his show have on a place? In the "Queens" episode, he sits down to a meal with Sarah Khan, a local food journalist known for her remarkable reporting on the borough, and asks her if she ever worries that by reporting on these communities she is helping to destroy them. When she responds, "absolutely," Bourdain admits he feels the same about his own work—which, as the *Daily Beast* noted in 2018, has put many a restaurant on the map. In some episodes, Bourdain withheld the names of restaurants to protect them from too much attention from his audience or other would-be tourists.¹

Making episodes that were respectful of the people he met, mindful of the show's footprint, and aesthetically ambitious while grounded in his Western point of view, was a complicated task that weighed on him heavily. And when a shoot fell short of his storytelling values, he did not hide it from his audience. The Sicily episode is a good example of this. Also, in light of his suicide, it's one of the more difficult episodes to revisit today.

Early in the trip, Bourdain's Sicilian guide, Turin, takes him on an octopus fishing excursion off the coast of Catania. After Bourdain throws on his snorkeling gear and hops in the water, Turin decides to surprise him with some producing of his own, tossing several dead octopodes over the side of the boat to create an illusion of a success for the cameras, which, as any follower of the series might have guessed, does not sit well with Bourdain. The scene ends on an image of him floating amongst the withering cephalopods as his voiceover recounts the intense depression he spiraled into: "I've never had a nervous breakdown before, but I tell you from the bottom of my heart, something fell apart down there, and it took a long, long time after the end of this damn episode to recover."

According to a post-episode interview, after the snorkeling excursion, he abandoned the shoot and headed to a local bar where he spent the afternoon drinking *eighteen* negronis, which explains why he's blackout drunk in the following dinner scene. In voiceover, he admits he recalls nothing of the table conversation—a reality that becomes more and more apparent with every disapproving glare from his dining companions (the octopus tosser and his wife). Still, his breakdown comes across as somewhat sudden and confusing; the progression from fishing excursion Bourdain to dead-eye drunk Bourdain is jarring. I

remember rewinding the episode the first time just to make sure I didn't miss what had actually happened or why it was so upsetting to him. But it turns out my first impression was correct: absolute despair over a cheap trick.

At the time, I read the scene as an example of television's inability to capture interiority even with the most introspective and compelling voiceover commentary imaginable. Given what I've learned about depression over the years, I think that takeaway was misguided. The TV depiction wasn't flawed; Bourdain was. But my impression at the time nevertheless allowed me to overlook Bourdain's reaction and justify it as a more extreme feature of his character: a consequence of the standard to which he held the show instead of a symptom of a depressive personality.

As Charles Leerhsen observes in his "unauthorized" biography *Down and Out in Paradise: The Life of Anthony Bourdain*:

[Tony] often said he hated the word 'authentic'—his nearly two decades of world traveling having taught him the futility of striving for the unalloyed version of anything—but on a personal level, authenticity, in the sense of being the real thing and not a pretender, was his lifelong preoccupation.

No doubt Bourdain's preoccupation with being the "real thing" frequently manifested as a search for the "real thing[s]" that made every place he visited unique. The "real thing" could mean many things, from the overlooked legacy of America's secret war in Laos to the absurdly precious dining habits of two French-Canadian chefs, but what the show's many subjects had in common was the search that led to the "real thing": sharing meals with people around the world that led to conversations that revealed some essential truths about a place, according to the people who lived there. Unfortunately, one phony fishing excursion aimed solely at entertaining CNN viewers was a clear violation of the honest and unfiltered approach he took so seriously.

But it wasn't just the affront to the integrity of his process that set him off. It was also his struggle with depression, a struggle that anyone who read or watched closely enough could spot throughout his television run. His depressive tendency was even on display in an otherwise lighthearted Conan O'Brien interview in which he recounted an underwhelming meal at an airport Johnny Rockets that sent him into a three-day depression. But even with instances this glaring, I suppose I was caught up enough in what the show meant to me that I had overlooked what it did to him. His voice had become my escape from the phoniness of the corporate world I'd been groomed for and a catalyst for a new worldview. If anything my feelings leaned toward envy.

Over the past five years, many of the books and op-eds about the world traveler's legacy have attempted to account for this darker side of him, whether by providing firsthand insights into his behind-the-scenes personality (Vitale's *In the Weeds*) or by interviewing the people in his life in order to draw some narrative throughline from dishwasher to beloved television star to agoraphobic celebrity (Charles Leerhsen's *Down and Out in Paradise: The Life of Anthony Bourdain*).

The 2021 documentary *Roadrunner* was a sincere attempt to do both. Using interviews with family, close friends, and crew members, along with plenty of footage from the television shows, Morgan Neville (director) did his best to piece together a mosaic of impressions related to Bourdain's life and work, with the overall aim of contextualizing the suicide. There was a mission of public catharsis in the project as if it were a vehicle for processing the loss of a beloved television icon that many felt incredibly close to, or seen by, despite the distance between the man in reality and the man on screen. Along those lines, I think the film was a success. I watched it in a dark theater with other Bourdain enthusiasts. We laughed at his delectable soundbites while shedding plenty of tears in turn, and it was a special way of mourning such a great loss—a loss most fans likely found out about in isolation, whether via text, push notification, or cable news report. Still, in the past year, I've been yearning for another way of processing Bourdain's absence: an account of what made his work so meaningful to so many people who did not know him in the way those in the documentaries, memoirs, and biographies did.

For me, the ultimate gift of *Parts Unknown* was Bourdain's ability to show that there are—and continue to be—fascinating, underrepresented corners of the world that we ought to seek out and support as locals and travelers alike. As Bourdain said:

If I am an advocate for anything, it's to move. As far as you can, as much as you can. Across the ocean, or simply across the river. Walk in someone else's shoes or at least eat their food.

Back when I was feeling lost in Los Angeles with Bourdain as my guide, that's exactly what I did. I moved. I explored my new city with an open mind and an appetite. I familiarized myself with its limited and underutilized public transit system, traveling every direction off the metro line that city bus routes would allow. As I trekked farther and farther away from home, each stop introduced me to a new corner of the city, from the untamed stretches of the Los Angeles river to the thriving ramen shops off Sawtelle Boulevard.

Other weekends, I stuck around Studio City and spent hours walking my way up and down Ventura Boulevard—from Universal City all the way to the 405—which I found rewarding precisely because these areas are largely ignored by mainstream media and so I had not consumed any preconceived cultural consensus that might intrude on or direct my Valley adventures. No one talked about The Valley, let alone recommended exploring it. Yet, familiarizing myself with all those stucco apartment complexes, two-story strip malls, sushi lunch specials, and kitschy car washes was in many ways more interesting than bouncing around more obvious places such as the notorious hipster neighborhoods of Echo Park or Silverlake. I learned from those walks that there was pleasure to be had in drawing distinctions between places, in knowing street names, coffee shops, tree canopies, baristas, bartenders, and happy hour deals, not to mention the fantastic Cuban spot lying just beyond the next traffic light (*Here's looking at you, Versailles*). Thus, via the basic premise of Bourdain's show—implied in the title *Parts Unknown*—I got a grip on what

made Los Angeles a worthwhile place to explore. And the more I listened to his voice, the more he became a filter through which I reflected upon that experience.

On *A Cook's Tour*, when he observes that palm trees have never looked more menacing than they do in Southern California, I recalled my own first impression of the city on my bus ride from LAX to Studio City—the towering trunks and fronds leaning over the highway like sentinels surveilling traffic—and how I would later learn that palm trees are non-native, an “exotic” ecological lie I would come to associate with every other ersatz feature of the city.

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If anything my feelings
leaned toward envy.*

But the real highlight of that episode is a running bit in which Bourdain, beginning to understand the allure of Los Angeles, ponders the sorts of demoralizing things he would do to afford the Hollywood lifestyle. While enjoying a ride down Sunset in his rented convertible, he says: “God I love this car. I'm already thinking what outrage would I not perform, or commit, to hang onto this fine piece of material? Pauly Shore in ‘Hamlet’? Sure! I can write that.” It's a sentiment all too familiar to us “Hollywood” folks. But it isn't until *No Reservations* and *Parts Unknown* that Bourdain truly begins to see Los Angeles through its distinct neighborhoods and immigrant cultures: Koreatown, Little Ethiopia, Filipinotown, Boyle Heights, Tehrangeles, and even Santa Monica (aka Little Britain). In his final Los Angeles episode, Bourdain's voiceover begins, accompanied by images of a nurse, line cook, housekeeper, car washer, and produce workers:

Los Angeles. Maybe the most filmed, most televised, most looked at place on Earth. It's the landscape of our collective dreams. But what if we look at L.A. from the point of view of the largely unphotographed, the 47 percent of Angelenos who don't show up so much on idiot sitcoms and superhero films, the people doing much, if not most, of the hard work of getting things done in this town?”

If I've learned anything from Bourdain's work, this is the quote that embodies it: that we often can't help but imagine

places through the common images we've consumed of them. These dominant images shape our expectations, redouble our prejudices, and limit our notions of a place. Yet, when we are challenged by exciting, unsettling, or less familiar images of said places—from strip mall dim sum restaurants and Ethiopian coffee shops to vandalized “walk of fame” stars and charred Malibu mountainsides—we are forced to reckon with them and possibly even change ourselves in response. In the best episodes of *Parts Unknown*, that is what Anthony Bourdain and his crew accomplished. They reconceptualized the viewer's notion of the world through Bourdain's own reconceptualization of it.

Today, the majority of our collective media diet seems to encourage the exact opposite behavior. To photograph a particular place for social media—say, the Venice canals (L.A.) or the Walt Disney Concert Hall—is to verify that one is in the know about it as it continues to exist: undisputed in the cultural imagination. These popular photos are therefore a redundant, thoughtless act of consumption—a box to check, an unveiling of more of the same. Like the tourists at the “most photographed barn in America” from Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (the only significance of which is that it is frequently photographed), they amplify a tendency that has less to do with experiencing a place than with extracting its beauty. At its worst, this behavior can destroy a place (see the Antelope Valley poppy fields trampled to death by L.A. influencers) or displace the people who live there (see the other Venice canals, where tourists outnumber locals). At best, it offers no more than the lukewarm affirmation of “likes” and “follows.”

When I traveled through Morocco, I never felt as if I were that unwelcome or disruptive presence that seems foundational to influencer culture, but I know that, if I ever go back, there are other things I would do to more deeply engage with the people I meet. At the very least, I would be less concerned with developing my own narrative and more concerned with understanding the narratives of those around me, and that's largely thanks to the way Bourdain reoriented my attitude to the city I live in today.

After his suicide, I knew I would miss having his voice around. But I was also grateful for the work he left behind. As I continue to study Los Angeles, I do so with that Bourdainian drive to more fully engage with the Angelenos around me: the adventurous neighbors I mentioned earlier, the retired teacher in our building who regularly enlists me to move heavy objects about her apartment, a local bookstore owner fighting rent hikes in Santa Monica, the Italian restaurant owner who—for better or worse—can't resist a controversial political conversation, the American Cinematheque members who take film preservation, presentation, and enrichment more seriously than the big studios, and all the friends and coworkers who have showed me around their respective neighborhoods.

In Los Angeles, like many of the places Bourdain has visited, this is a never-ending task. It is a city full of contradictions that manifest in experiential extremes. One day the concentration of multi-million dollar homes and luxury cars is enough to make you cynical about the possibility of equality in a hyper capitalist landscape; the next day the announcement of a wild-life crossing has you optimistic about environmental progress in

a landscape defined by infinite sprawls of concrete and asphalt roadway. Another day “La Sombrita,” an expensive and ineffective system of ridiculously small shade- and light-providing constructs at bus stops (supposedly addressing gender equity issues in the transit system, as women experience violence and harassment there), has you wondering if Los Angeles will ever reach its utopian public transportation goals. The next day you're riding the Expo Line to the Festival of Books and attending talks with panelists who pose progressive solutions to the same problems while locating them in a richer historical understanding of the city's many commuter communities. Another day the city radiates the carefree energy of *La La Land* (2016) or the leisurely pace of a *Curb Your Enthusiasm* episode; the next day it feels like the police state in *Straight Outta Compton* (2015). Perhaps these extremes of experience are the reason why Bourdain continued visiting the city over and over again across his shows and, eventually, in his web series *Little Los Angeles*. The place is as enigmatic as Bourdain himself.

I'M NOT SURE WHAT CONCLUSIONS one can draw from the pain he endured while striving to make episodes reflective of the “real things” he absorbed or by doing the hard work of opening himself up to the lived experiences and histories of the people who hosted him. But I do know that what he gave through his work was enough to make me feel better about my immediate circumstances in Los Angeles. If Neville's documentary did anything to help me process those feelings, it was because of one particularly moving sequence: the one where Brian Eno's “The Big Ship” plays while Tom Vitale reflects on a comment Bourdain made. “[Tony] often talked about how, in an ideal world, he wouldn't be in the show. It would be his point of view, like a camera moving through space.” As Vitale speaks, Neville hits us with point-of-view footage from Bourdain's Instagram account along with clips from *Parts Unknown* sans Bourdain. As the footage jumps from West Virginia to India, Korea to Kenya, Marseilles to Myanmar, and so on, Bourdain's voiceover comes in: “Travel isn't always pretty. You go away, you learn, you get scarred, marked, changed in the process. It even breaks your heart.”

Without explicitly saying so, Neville conveys what it feels like to exist in a world without Bourdain. We can no longer watch him on TV, but as we travel we now have the gift of occupying his point of view and recalling his methods for engaging with the world: being a good guest, asking simple questions, pushing beyond mediocrity, and doing our best to empathize with the plights of people who, like the rest of us, are doing their best in the specific circumstances they find themselves in. Now on my walks across Los Angeles, I can picture him floating beside me like some ethereal projection, forever reminding me to stay curious and keep up an appetite for the strip mall around the corner. ✚

NOTES

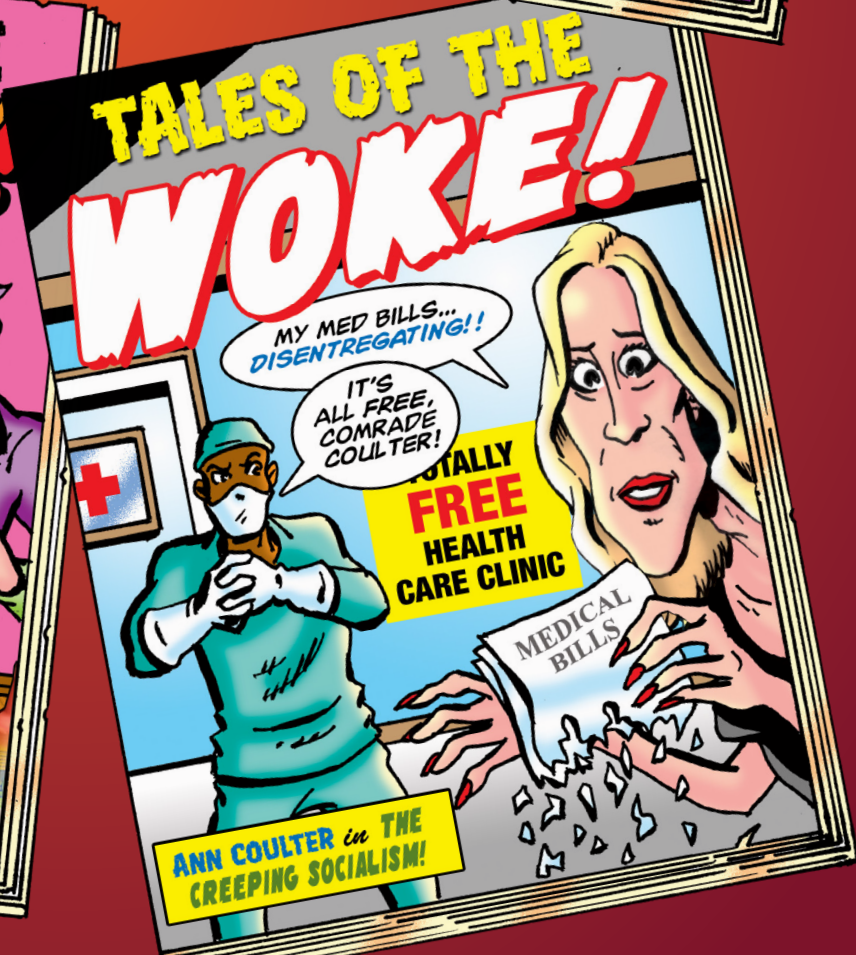
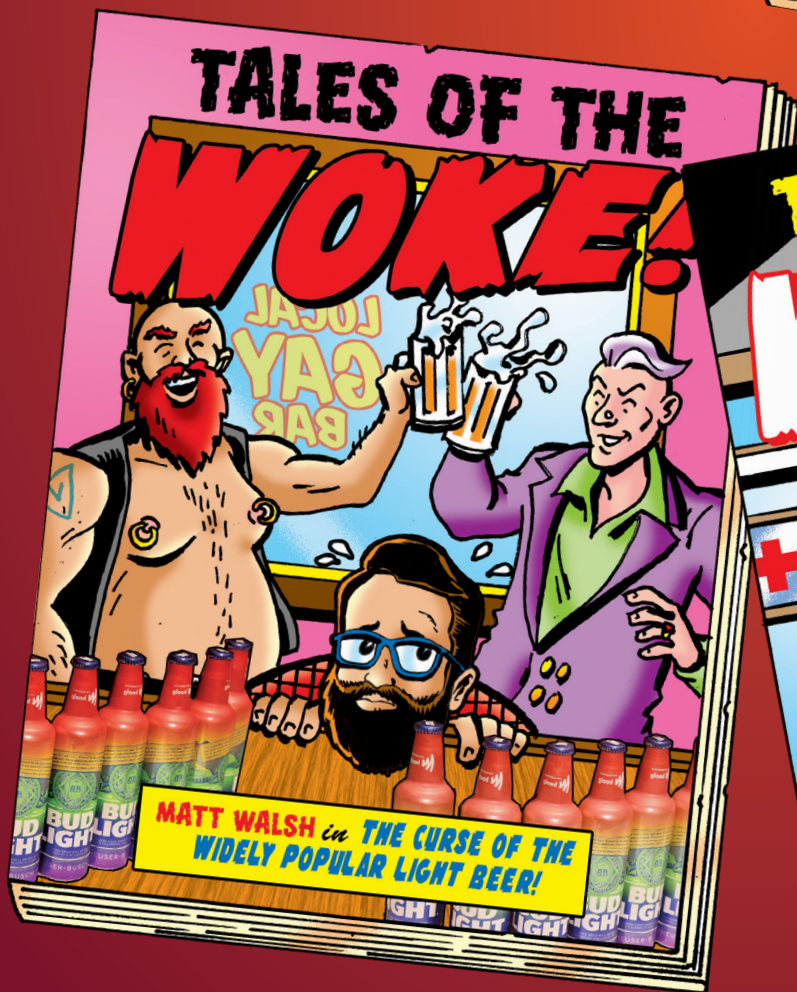
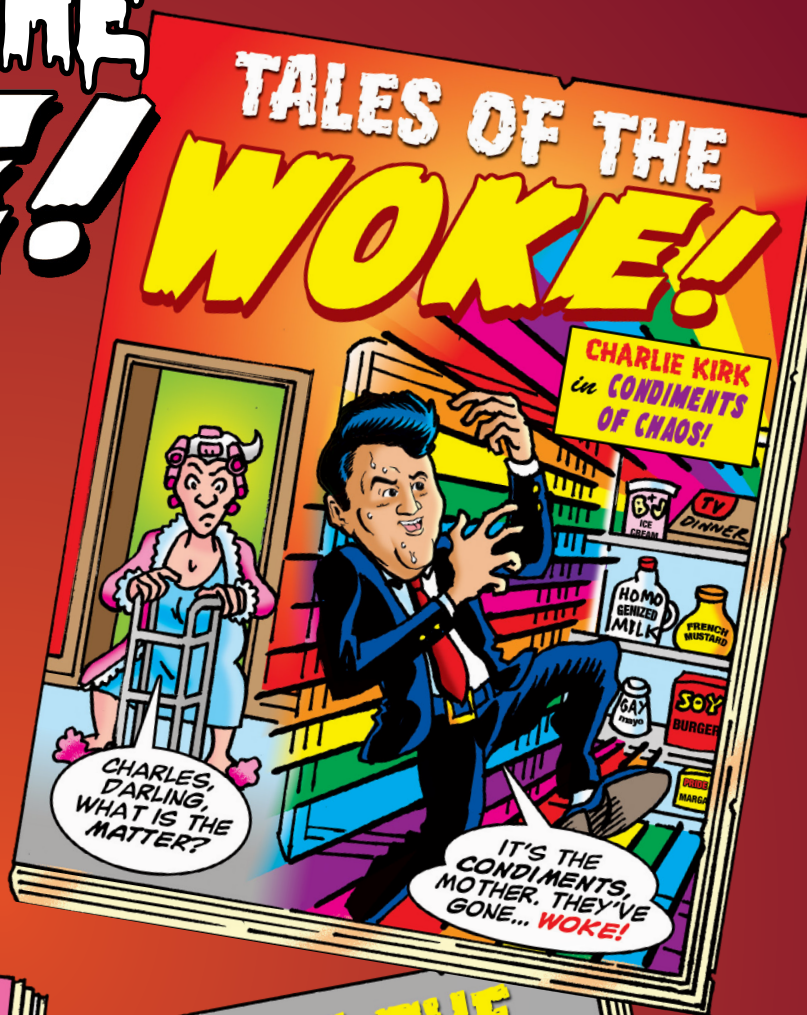
1. While showing a nonna-run pasta joint in his Emmy-winning Rome episode, Bourdain's voiceover relays: “Rome is a city where you find the most extraordinary of pleasures in the most ordinary things, like this place, which I am not ever going to tell you the name of.”

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THE POLITICS OF RANSOM

Why Medical Debt Forgiveness Drives Are Not Enough

by Luke Messac

IT WAS A HEARTWARMING STORY, something akin to the works of Charles Dickens or Frank Capra. During the Christmas season of 2012, 44 unsuspecting New Yorkers found a package with red wrapping paper in the mail informing them that their medical debts had been forgiven.

No doubt many of the recipients did not at first believe it. Was this some sort of prank or scam? Many owed thousands of dollars to local hospitals, debts that they, like millions of Americans, could not hope to repay. But this was no scam; the debts had been purchased by a small band of debt abolitionists who aimed to show that such debts could, and should, be canceled. Today, similar medical debt forgiveness drives are taking place in communities around the country. Churches, students, and even municipal governments are buying and forgiving the medical bills of local debtors.

But some of the radical hope of that first campaign has worn off. In fact, many of the very people who organized what they called a “Rolling Jubilee”—a reference to the biblical Jubilee, a moment of social renewal that included the cancellation of debts—now decry the persistence of privately-funded medical debt forgiveness campaigns. It is not, they claim, nearly enough.

The idea to buy and cancel debts was conceived in 2012 by Strike Debt, a group of writers, artists and other activists that grew out of the Occupy Wall Street movement. The Occupy gatherings had been awash in debtors. Americans underwater on their home mortgages or burdened by student loan or car loan or credit card payments spoke about the ways that debt was running—and ruining—their lives. After Mayor Bloomberg

and other city leaders across the country used police to sweep away the camps from public squares, the members of Strike Debt continued to meet to plot a way forward. They saw the existing system of consumer debt as a tool to keep people locked in soul-deadening jobs providing services to the wealthy few.

One member of the group, a sculptor named Thomas Gokey, had read about markets where traders bought and sold the medical debts of patients. There, buyers secured the right to collect debts, often by draconian means, including lawsuits resulting in wage garnishments, property liens, and even home foreclosure. Gokey proposed that Strike Debt buy this debt and—instead of trying to collect on it like every other buyer—cancel it, essentially tearing up the paper and telling the debtors that no one could ever ask them to repay it. The group was taken with this idea, not because it was a solution to the problem of medical debt—they knew they would only help a tiny portion of medical debtors, and people would continue to fall into debt anew after hospital stays or ER visits. But this cancellation would, in the words of writer and documentarian Astra Taylor and fellow organizer Andrew Ross, expose “the seedy underbelly of the debt system and the inequities it perpetuates” while allowing the group “a chance to offer others support and solidarity where the government has failed them.”

Convincing the group was the easy part, as buying medical debt was not a simple task. This was a market built on personal connections, and when Gokey took to online message boards to ask debt brokers to sell him medical debt, he was initially rebuffed. Eventually, through begging, cajoling, and persistence,



ABOVE: At the July 2021 March for Medicare for All in Washington D.C. (Probal Rashid via Getty Images)

he was able to make a small purchase of \$500 for medical debt worth \$14,000 in face value. Still, Strike Debt knew that if they wanted to make bigger buys, they needed an insider, someone the debt brokers would trust. The group found such an insider in Jerry Ashton, a longtime debt collector who had been inspired by Occupy Wall Street. When Gokey, Taylor, Ross and others approached Ashton with their idea to buy and forgive medical debt in a modern-day Jubilee, he agreed to help. Using the \$600,000 Strike Debt had raised in a telethon held in a Manhattan nightclub, Ashton and Craig Antico, another experienced collector, used their connections to purchase much larger amounts of medical debt. Together the group then mailed out the Christmas-themed packages containing cards announcing the cancellation to all those whose debts they had bought. Over the next year, they would forgive the medical debt of thousands of people across the country.

To the members of Strike Debt, this was to be an opening salvo in a broader struggle against an economic system built on unjust consumer debts. Their work would be focused on organizing debtors harmed by predatory lenders and the commodification of public goods like healthcare and education. In the next decade, Strike Debt organized a successful campaign for debt cancellation alongside students at for-profit colleges and helped to convince President Biden to propose student debt cancellation for tens of millions of Americans. Today, Taylor and Gokey and other members of Strike Debt have even broader aims, including organizing unions of debtors around the country “to build a world where college is publicly funded, healthcare is universal, and housing is guaranteed for all.”

But to Ashton and Antico, the joy of bringing immediate relief to so many people in debt was a revelation. “We were hooked,” Ashton recalled in an interview I conducted for my book. “We read the letters [from people whose debts had been forgiven]. We knew the impact we had.” In 2014, the pair went on to found RIP Medical Debt, a charitable organization that uses donated funds and consumer data from the credit reporting

agency TransUnion to purchase and forgive the medical debts of low-income Americans. Over the last decade, RIP Medical Debt has forgiven over \$9 billion in medical debt. When, in 2016, the producers of John Oliver’s HBO show *Last Week Tonight* aimed to “out-Oprah Oprah” by staging the biggest one-time TV giveaway of all time (even bigger than Oprah’s famous “Everybody gets a car!” moment from 2004), they turned to Ashton and Antico to help them purchase and forgive \$15 million in medical debt.

Thanks in part to the publicity from Oliver’s show, the approach has spread like wildfire. Churches and students organize drives to forgive the debts of people in their area, and RIP Medical Debt helps locate unpaid bills held by people in their neighborhoods. Today, using COVID-era funds provided to local governments in the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, cities and counties such as Cook County in Illinois and Toledo, Ohio, are working with RIP Medical Debt to pay off the medical debts of their citizens.

HOW CAN YOU NOT FEEL GOOD about these stories? These days, Astra Taylor doesn’t. “There is a problem with subsidizing this industry. We don’t want to be raising funds and then basically buying the portfolios of debt collectors,” she explained. Taylor never believed buying debt was a satisfactory answer. It was “a spark—not the solution,” she argued in *The Nation* in 2012. She readily acknowledged critiques of the buying-and-forgiving approach, including one by Yves Smith, who writes about finance on her blog *Naked Capitalism*. Smith argued there should be an “instinctive revulsion to a plan that perpetuates and enriches the participants in abusive practices. I don’t think you’d see such enthusiasm, say, for a plan to deal with trafficking in women by raising funds to buy a few of the victims from the sex slave traders and free them. But the economic relationship to a predatory system is similar.”

Ultimately, debt forgiveness drives like RIP Medical Debt enrich the debt collectors themselves, fueling the revenues of an industry built on extracting the meager funds of the destitute sick. Paying collectors for debt so that it can be forgiven is akin to paying a ransom. The victim might be set free, but the kidnapper still comes out ahead.

While acknowledging this conundrum, Taylor has longed believed the function of the initial debt purchases was to open people’s eyes to possibilities beyond perpetual debt bondage; she has sought to “move people to the next level of engagement instead of doing this trick over and over again,” as she said in 2021 on the *Current Affairs* podcast. John Oliver himself seemed to get the point. As he announced the debt forgiveness on air, he marveled at the very existence of “this debt that I cannot fucking believe we are allowed to own.”

These critics of debt forgiveness point out that it makes the debt collector’s work even more profitable. Medical collection is challenging because most debtors simply cannot pay. An analysis of 2018 Census Bureau survey data found that 79 percent of medical debt is held by American households with zero or negative net worth. While some people can be bullied into paying off their debts with credit cards, most know that they simply

cannot afford to pay, and so they don't, even when it means that the debt collectors could ruin their credit scores or take them to court. Huge dollar amounts of face value of medical debt can be purchased for so little (the \$15 million in debt purchased by Oliver's show cost just \$60,000, less than a half-penny on the dollar) because the total amount of debt is unlikely to ever be collected. Even the most aggressive debt collectors often cannot collect much of the debt they buy, as debtors tend to live in financial precarity. When RIP Medical Debt buys these debts, then, it is saving collectors the cost of the legwork of trying to receive payment on these often uncollectible debts.

Debt collection is an industry that has been neither neutral nor benign in the long twilight struggle over the right to healthcare in America. Its nature is not entirely clear to the casual observer, for seasoned industry professionals tend to cloak their work in obscure language. After critical press, including scathing attention from John Oliver, the Debt Buyers Association (a trade group that lobbies for the interests of debt buying companies) renamed itself the Receivables Management Association. The trade group representing debt collection agencies in Washington, D.C., was founded in 1939 as the American Collectors Association but today it calls itself ACA International. Industry documents intended for public consumption refer to their work not as debt collection, debt buying, or litigation, but as "revenue cycle management." In their advocacy, debt collectors try to portray their purpose as a service to healthcare providers and even to patients. For instance, in one online advocacy statement, ACA International argued that reporting medical debt to credit bureaus should not be curtailed through proposed new federal laws or regulations. While consumer rights advocates and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau have long claimed this practice does undue harm to patients' credit reports, preventing many Americans from owning homes or even getting jobs that require solid credit, ACA International counters that "credit reporting can be the best way to alert consumers of their outstanding debts." Lowering a debtor's credit scores is, in their telling, a favor to debtors.

Debt collection firms are less likely to be coy about their work when they market their services to hospitals. One debt litigation firm, Account Recovery Services (which I learned about because they filed lawsuits against patients on behalf of the hospital where I completed my emergency medicine residency training), promises on its website that the firm's legal staff "brings decades of experience in debt collections litigation to bear swiftly and effectively when needed." This was no false boast: when I searched local court records, I found the firm had sued single mothers, people living on fixed incomes, and other vulnerable patients. "I am a full-time student and did not have medical [insurance] at the time," wrote one defendant in the suit. "I am on social security disability and already spend \$200 a month on medical expenses," wrote another. The real work of debt collection is visible in overseas call centers, in small claims

courts filled with patients, and in earnings calls touting aggressive debt collection tactics.

Recognizing the contradiction between its intent to relieve debt and its effect of enriching debt collectors, RIP Medical Debt has attempted a shift. Now, whenever possible, the group tries to purchase debt directly from hospitals instead of from third-party buyers. Though this does cut out one profit-seeking middleman from a charitable endeavor, it still absolves hospitals of one of their historic responsibilities. Non-profit hospitals, which account for the majority of community hospitals in the United States, justify their tax-exempt status in large part on the basis of their provision of financial assistance (also known as charity care) to low-income patients. But they do a poor job of it: though these hospitals are now required by law to have financial assistance policies, they are, for the most part, free to offer as little as they would like. Many hospitals take advantage of this freedom by imposing stringent income criteria, requiring onerous applications, and attempting to convince patients to pay up front even when they qualify for free care. Three-quarters of nonprofit hospitals spend less on community benefit programs like charity care than they receive in tax breaks. RIP Medical Debt's new approach may not subsidize debt buyers, but it does fill the coffers of palatial hospitals with high-paid executives (the top 10 highest paid executives at nonprofit health systems each made at least \$7 million in 2017) who are not doing nearly enough to keep their patients from going into debt in the first place.

Still, it is hard to deny the imperative to relieve suffering in the here and now, even in the absence of broader social and political transformation. Time and again, the harms of medical debt have been demonstrated: medical debt leads Americans to rack up credit card debt, to go bankrupt, to delay or forgo lifesaving procedures, and to distrust the healthcare system. It drives people to the most desperate of acts, even suicide. Ashton and Antico were understandably touched when they received letters from people who found, to their shock and relief, that their debts were no more. One recent note, posted on RIP Medical Debt's website, highlights what a difference the debt relief can make: "As a single parent, I've done everything I can to stay away from debt. Hopefully with this relief my credit score will go up and we can finally get our own place. Thank you!"

But this mode of debt forgiveness is not, in its current incarnation, revolutionary. Fundraisers who forgive medical debt do undeniable good for the people they benefit, but they also help to perpetuate a system of profound injustice. Initially, the idea of buying and canceling debt was intended to highlight the absurd and horrific fact that one can trade in human misery through the sale of debt incurred through the misfortune of falling ill. But today, debt forgiveness has been institutionalized. It funds the work of debt collection while functioning as a salve over the festering wound that is our present system of healthcare financing. As Astra Taylor often points out, even the very notion

“
it is
hard
to deny the imperative to
relieve suffering in the here
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”

of “forgiveness” implies that the debtors have done something immoral, that the ultimate fault lies with them instead of in the institutions seeking to exact money from them or in the broader social structure that makes this reality seem normal.

This is not to say that debt forgiveness—or, as Taylor and others prefer, cancellation—cannot be a part of a larger solution. In 2019, as he stood near the top of the polls for the 2020 Democratic presidential primary, Senator Bernie Sanders proposed a two-part plan to end medical debt for good. The first was the cancellation of all existing past-due medical debt in the country, then estimated at \$81 billion. Sanders explained that he planned to negotiate a price with hospitals, physicians’ offices, and debt collectors who currently owned the debt, though he did not say how much the federal government would pay for it. Craig Antico estimated that the entirety of this outstanding debt could be purchased for \$500 million, roughly 1/100th of one percent of federal spending in 2019.

By itself this measure would relieve Americans of the burden of medical debt, but only for a moment. The treadmill would not stop, and new overdue bills would be sent to collections the next day. To put a halt to the production of medical debt, Sanders proposed a national single-payer health system without co-payments, deductibles, co-insurance, or any other patient payments at the point of care. And because everyone would be covered by the plan, there would be no more uninsured patients expected to foot the full cost of their care. Through this stepwise process, Americans would be relieved of any existing debts, and freed from the dreaded prospect of incurring such debts in the future.

Much of the discourse about single-payer healthcare (known by the moniker Medicare for All, or sometimes Improved Medicare for All, as Medicare in its current form does require some patient payments) focuses on the difficulty of passing legislation to make it a reality. It is fashionable to express support for the idea in theory but throw one’s hands up at the impossibility of its political prospects. President Obama did this with great frequency in town halls during his 2008 campaign. Even Bernie Sanders said “we ain’t gonna get it” when lamenting the near-term chances for passage of Medicare for All in February of this year.

The pessimism stems, in large part, from the entrenched financial interests that benefit from the current arrangement. While for-profit insurance companies are, quite rightly, the major focus of this attention, debt collectors also have a stake in maintaining the status quo. As early as 1993, hospitals were the source of more business for the nation’s debt collectors than any other industry; in 2017, medical debt was still the most common reason why Americans were contacted by collection agencies. Influential collectors include major figures in business and government, from Tom Reed, a former member of Congress, to Tom Gores, the billionaire owner of the Detroit Pistons. The prospect of the abolition of medical debt, is, to debt collectors, an existential threat.

So, would change be hard? Undoubtedly. But clear-eyed understanding need not pave the way to nihilism. It is true that the road to a more just system of healthcare finance will be very

difficult. Organized medicine (and, in particular, the American Medical Association), the hospital lobby, pharmaceutical companies, and the private health insurance industry have used immense sums to lobby and run public relations campaigns against single payer health insurance in the United States for a century. Yet history shows that while entrenched interests do not sit quietly, they are not invincible. When, for instance, the Labour Party launched the National Health Service in 1948, the president of the British Hospital Association claimed the new system was one of “mass murder.” When the Baptist minister and socialist politician Tommy Douglas was elected premier of the Canadian province of Saskatchewan in 1960, he proposed a single-payer healthcare program. The day it began, doctors in the province rebelled, staging a short-lived strike before relenting. But in countries that have established a national healthcare system, the rewards have been great. Healthcare that is free at the point of service—that is, medical care without medical debt—is deeply popular among the people who have the most experience with it. A half-century after the doctors’ strike, voters in a survey conducted by CBC Television chose Tommy Douglas as “The Greatest Canadian.” Even in the midst of funding cuts by a conservative government in 2018, British respondents ranked the National Health Service as their favorite “British thing,” far ahead of the royal family, the armed forces, and British food.

THE DEBATE OVER DEBT FORGIVENESS repeats arguments—about reform versus revolution, about pragmatic aid versus unintended consequences, about working within the system versus building something new—that liberals and leftists have debated for centuries. Both Taylor and Ashton are both dedicated to the immediate relief of human suffering. They are both acting in good faith and struggling with the contradictions inherent in their work. They have both already done so much for so many. They have shone a light on the absurdity and brutality of our current system, and they have proven that medical debt is not an inevitable feature of American life. In the closing pages of a book titled *End Medical Debt*, Ashton offered cautious support for Medicare for All. But despite their shared understanding of the harmful effects of medical debt and even the solutions to it, the advocates of forgiveness and abolition have taken divergent paths forward. Along one path, acts of generosity aim to relieve individual misfortunes. On the other, acts of solidarity aim to bring an end to a deadly injustice, and to insist that healthcare is a right and not a commodity.

In the end, though, we must reckon with the bounty hunters of medicine: the debt collectors who haunt the lives of the millions of Americans who cannot pay for their medical care. Any solution that leaves intact an industry that profits off the financial captivity of the poor cannot credibly be called just. It is time to build a future without medical debt, or its collectors. ✦

*Luke Messac is author of *Your Money or Your Life: Debt Collection in American Medicine* (Oxford University Press, 2023).*

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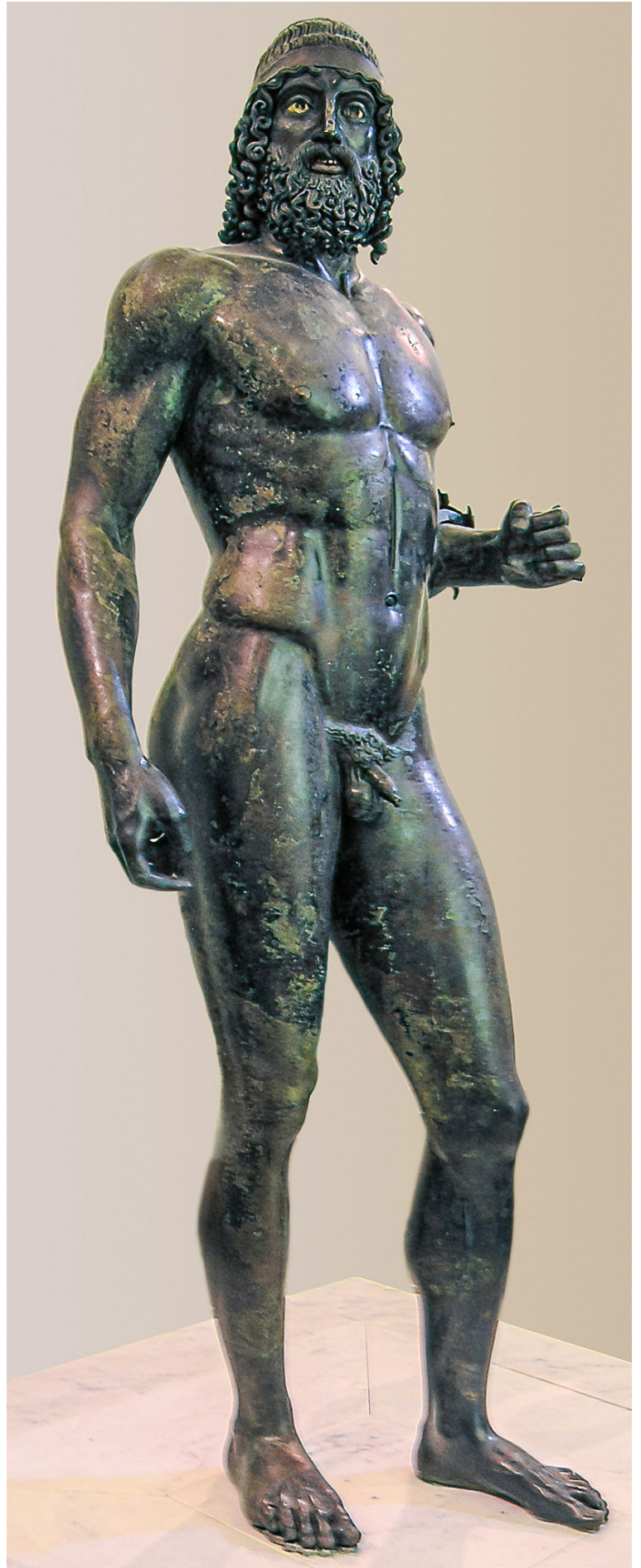
ESSENTIAL
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Mike Sienick

THE TEMPTATION

TO THINK YOU'RE BETTER
THAN EVERYONE ELSE



TEXT BY
NATHAN J. ROBINSON

ON THE UGLY
FASCIST
NONSENSE
OF COSTIN
ALAMARIU,
THE “BRONZE
AGE PERVERT,”
AND WHY
OBJECTIVELY
HORRIBLE
IDEOLOGIES
SOMEHOW FIND
ADHERENTS.

IN 1940, GEORGE ORWELL published a review of *Mein Kampf* in which he considered an obvious question: given that Adolf Hitler was open about his desire to create a miserable oppressive dystopia, why on Earth would anyone be drawn to his doctrine? As he puts it:

What [Hitler] envisages, a hundred years hence, is a continuous state of 250 million Germans with plenty of “living room” (i.e., stretching to Afghanistan or thereabouts), a horrible brainless empire in which, essentially, nothing ever happens except the training of young men for war and the endless breeding of fresh cannon-fodder. How was it that he was able to put this monstrous vision across?

Orwell argued that the appeal of Nazism went beyond its tapping into deep-seated anti-Jewish bigotry. Hitler, he said, also offered his followers a chance to feel like they were part of something great, a titanic historic struggle against everything wrong with the world (decadence, depravity, weakness, etc.). What Hitler understood, Orwell argued, is that “human beings don’t only want comfort, safety, short working-hours, hygiene, birth-control, and in general, common sense.” They also long for “struggle and self-sacrifice, not to mention drums, flags, and loyalty-parades.” Orwell observed that “whereas Socialism, and even capitalism in a more grudging way, [has] said to people ‘I offer you a good time,’ Hitler has said to them ‘I offer you struggle, danger, and death,’ and as a result a whole nation flings itself at his feet.” It’s a similar point to the one made in William James’ “The Moral Equivalent of War,” which argues that while pacifists may be right to try to end war, they are going to find it difficult to offer anything equally inspiring because war has a powerful appeal. It offers the promise of a vigorous, purposeful, exciting existence—even if the *reality* of war is quite different. What war actually offers is the sight of children getting their limbs lopped off in explosions, human bodies that are “so blown apart they have to use two or three body bags to contain them,” and lifetimes of trauma for those who have to pick up the pieces. But the life of the warrior can seem pretty romantic from a distance.

It was hard not to think of Orwell and James as I perused a fascistic manifesto from our own time, *Bronze Age Mindset* by Costin Alamariu, a Romanian-American right-wing internet personality and Yale Ph.D who styles himself the “Bronze Age Pervert.” With a ludicrous extremism that seems like it has to be ironic (but probably isn’t, for the most part), Alamariu exhorts his readers (who are assumed to be men) to become godlike warriors, rising above the world’s *Untermenschen* (whom he calls the “bug men”) to achieve Napoleonic greatness. It’s not quite clear what Alamariu’s vision of an ideal world is (he says it involves releasing all the most ferocious creatures from city zoos so they can tear the weak to shreds). It appears to involve small groups of men with ludicrously oversized egos taking to

the mountains to work out and become pirates, then descending into the stinking hell of human civilization to conquer the rest of us and impose martial law. To the extent that I understand it, I hate it.

Alamariu has attracted a cult following among young men on the right. The latest issue of *The Atlantic* has a long article about him, arguing that while he is obviously racist, anti-Semitic, fascist, homophobic, and misogynistic, he offers “a vicious kick to the liberal immune system” and “that is not entirely bad.” *The Atlantic* quotes former Trump official Michael Anton, who claims that “in the spiritual war for the hearts and minds of the disaffected youth on the right, conservatism is losing. BAPism [Bronze Age Pervert-ism] is winning.” Nate Hochman, the DeSantis staffer who was fired after promoting fascism through the candidate’s social media feeds, told the *New York Times* that “every junior staffer in the Trump administration read *Bronze Age Mindset*.”

★ ★ ★

AT THIS POINT, MY ATTITUDE toward right-wing “thinkers” is one of weariness and boredom. I put “thinkers” in quotes because, as *Current Affairs* contributor Matthew McManus has pointed out, many on the right are quite open about being *anti*-thought, prioritizing feelings (such as nationalism, masculine rage, the bitter blaming of society’s weakest groups for the problems of its strongest groups) over facts. Alamariu, like Hitler, does not attempt to make logical arguments.

“Oh God, not another one of these m’fers,” I thought when someone recommended I discuss the “Bronze Age Pervert.” For seven years now, I’ve been meticulously debunking right-wing figures. They inevitably reveal themselves to be intellectually unserious, never refuting or even engaging with the serious counter-arguments I offer. Jordan Peterson scurried away from a debate he promised to have with me. On the rare occasion when I get to confront one of these people face-to-face, as I did recently with anti-Critical Race Theory crusader Christopher Rufo, they offer ignorant inanities that any person remotely educated on the issues



The Riace Bronzes

can see through. (Rufo said the problem of climate change was nothing more than *complaining about the weather*.)

I'm reluctant, then, to engage with another of these daffy texts, especially a particularly fringe and deranged one. But preventing the ascent of hideous political philosophies requires understanding what might cause them to win support, and I do think a brief look at *Bronze Age Mindset* can give us a better understanding of how contemporary fascism works.

To articulate Alamariu's philosophy is not easy, because he does the classic alt-right thing of "maybe I'm a fascist or maybe it's just a joke, and if you earnestly treat it as fascist, I'll laugh at you for not getting the humor." The idea of letting wild animals loose in the street makes me think of something John Ganz says, which is that at various points it's hard not to think of the book as "some kind of elaborate Dadaist ruse." *Bronze Age Mindset* is listed under "Humor" on Amazon (also under the category Ancient Greek History, where as of this writing it ranks #4). Much of the writing is a deeply irritating, deliberately ungrammatical internet troll-speak ("wat" for "what," etc.). But a lot of it is clearly Alamariu's genuine view of the world.

Alamariu, like all the best manifesto writers, promises to let his readers in on deep secrets about the world that have been hidden from them until now:

I was roused from my slumber by my frog friends and I declare to you, with great boldness, that I am here to save you from a great ugliness. ... I wanted to expose the grim shadow of a movement that is hidden behind events of our time and from before. This is a great power that acts like a ghost. It hides in its own darkness and it has been absorbed by the lands and the peoples so that you can't really see it anymore. ... Spiritually your insides are all wet, and there's a huge hole through where monstrous powers are fucking your brain, letting loose all your life and power of focus. You don't see yourself as you really are, but maybe some nightmare can show it to you. I am here to show you the way out.

The way out of this "great ugliness" is, insofar as it can be understood, to join with other men, get really buff, and form a warrior-caste that alternates between reading Heraclitus and waging war on the "bug men" (the rest of us). Alamariu tells us that "life is at most basic, struggle for ownership of space" and tells us that the higher organisms "master matter in surrounding space. Successful mastery of this matter leads to development of in-born powers and flourishing of organism, which allows it to master more matter, to marshal the lower to feed the higher." (Apply a mental [sic] to every grammatical mistake in quoted passages, since they are all a deliberate affect.)

It's hard not to hear this talk of "mastering space" and think of the concept of *Lebensraum*, and Alamariu does not even attempt to reassure readers that his idea is different to the extremely similar Nazi concept. (The only mention of Nazism in the book is Alamariu's assertion that he likes to "troll gay bars with Hitler mustache [sic], and outraged [sic] the patrons there with stories of how the National Socialists started out as a gay-rights movement in a basement in Munich, and how this is admirable.")

Alamariu celebrates the male physique, and on his social media accounts he posts beefcake pictures from both ancient and modern times. He says that when he posts "powerful, beautiful images of male models of unbelievable vitality and youth, our enemies gnash their teeth in envy and hatred, while we are exalted and inspired." He says that "nationalists must present a healthy alternative to the eternal rule of ugliness in our time: promote nature, beauty, physical fitness, the preservation of high traditions of literature and art." "Most of mankind is the walking dead," Alamariu says. We live in a "decrepit, cancerous, and fetid world," filled with human insects. We are a bunch of insipid slaves (yes, a lot of this is rehashed Nietzsche for the Twitter age), a blob of gross fleshy feminine yeast, while the gods have giant pecs and breathe mountain air:

[A]esthetic physique has the most cosmic significance, and it is because of what I have said so far that aesthetic bodies are a 'window to the other

side,' because they are the pinnacle of nature. The gods that surely exist but remain hidden have the most beautiful bodies we can imagine—they appeared to the ancient Greeks in dreams. Contrary to this exists the surfeit of flesh we see on the obese and in general the lassitude, the spiritual obesity, not only of modern life but of many historical forms of life as well, the domestic life of the village, of the village sewer, of the fetid valleys, of matriarchy and domestics, of slaves, the pollution of cities built on filth, the life of the swamp, the life of the human animal collapsed to mere life, life for the sake of life, as it devolves to the yeast form aesthetically, morally, intellectually, physically. ... On the other side is the life of the immortal gods who live in pure mountain air, and the sign of this life, where energy is marshaled to the production of higher order, is the aesthetic physique, the body in its glorious and divine beauty.

Yes, there are echoes of Hitler here, who aspired to produce “a body of young men who had been perfectly trained in athletic sports, who were imbued with an ardent love for their country and a readiness to take the initiative in a fight,” and who promised that “bodily efficiency would develop in the individual a conviction of his superiority and would give him that confidence which is always based only on the consciousness of one’s own Powers.” (As I compiled my notes for this piece, I had to keep double-checking that the Alamariu quotes were not getting mixed up with the Hitler quotes, as it was so hard to tell the difference.)

THESE ARE NO REAL arguments, and very few facts, in *Bronze Age Mindset*. “I hardly have anything to say to most who aren’t like me, still less do I care about convincing,” Alamariu admits at the outset. Instead, there is just a rambling exhortation about how everyone is weak and disgusting, but you can be among the strong and powerful and take part in a grand struggle. You’ll get to be a pirate rather than an insect, to exert the dominance that is the natural aspiration

of any organism, to have living space, to rule over your inferiors. Alamariu’s obscurity and jokes are all part of the pitch. Obscurity is a common technique of charlatans, because the reader who can’t understand what the author means feels they must be intellectually inferior, and as they put in the hard work of trying to grasp the real meaning, they feel they must be uncovering an incredible secret, which the writer assures them is exactly what they are doing. (It’s like convincing someone there must be something really valuable behind a door by putting dozens of locks on it.)

A lot of the power of a work like *Bronze Age Mindset* comes through deploying words that have appealing connotations, rather than by presenting a clear case for what you think ought to happen in the world. “Vitality.” “Primal.” “Struggle.” “Beauty.” Versus: “Ugly.” “Garbage.” “Slavishness.” “Weakness.” “Bug men.” The things that sound good versus the things that sound bad.

As Ganz writes, all of this ultimately does restate *Mein Kampf*, albeit with fewer (not zero) references to Jews and the absence of a particular narrative about avenging Germany’s national humiliation at Versailles:

Suffice it to say, “BAPism” is simply fascism, repackaged and re-marketed. And perhaps not even fascism, but Nazism. Its combination of biological racism, antisemitism, misogyny, celebration of male vitality, embrace of the aesthetics of the brotherhood of combat, conquest and war, demand for ‘living space,’ as well its fusion of bombastic elitism and vulgar populism are unmistakable. It is not even particularly coy or evasive on this account.

No, it isn’t, but Alamariu doesn’t care to reckon with the fact that the last time there was a movement that pitted the physically fit superior men against the “insect” people, it resulted in the “superior” beings shoveling millions of those they thought of as “bugs” into gas chambers.

Because an ironic-but-not-ironic work like *Bronze Age Mindset* is so evasive about what it’s actually advocating (Does he actually want people to take to the seas

and become pirates? Is he just encouraging them to work out more?), I think a critical part of any effective response is to demand that those who like it spell out *precisely* what they believe in and want. Forget all the weird little aphorisms and the “wat.” Speak plainly and cut the shit. Do you believe in sterilizing the weak? Do you believe in taking away the right to vote from some people? Do you believe in putting people in camps? Exterminating them? How will extra “space” be acquired and from whom? Alamariu praises the

❧
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Japanese Empire as an example of the kind of culture he admires. So, then, how does he feel about all the atrocities of that empire? The fascist vision is capable of appealing to people in part because the uglier aspects of what it would mean if taken seriously are simply not discussed.

I should also re-emphasize a point I make here a lot, which is that these kinds of horrible visions can take hold in part because we on the left are not offering a compelling alternative. Tara Isabella Burton is correct to note that “What Peterson and even Bronze Age Pervert understand is that people fundamentally need stories of meaning, and that in an increasingly secular age, those stories are not necessarily culturally present. It’s just a shame we don’t have better storytellers.” I am an unabashed utopian who considers it an important part of the left’s work to inspire people to believe in a world of solidarity and sisterhood/brotherhood

where we do not look down on others as inferiors but join with them in the joyful pursuit of “liberty and justice for all.” (An excellent recent example of this can be found in Hamilton Nolan’s response to a right-wing anti-welfare country song in which Nolan warmly explains to the singer who his real enemies are. My own latest attempt to showcase what a good future looks like—a world that is based on left values but isn’t boring—can be found in my book *Echoland: A Comprehensive Guide to a Nonexistent Place*, purchasable in the *Current Affairs* online shop.)

I know that people captivated by these “will to power” type stories are difficult to dissuade with rational argument. It’s a lot less sexy than a story about how you are awesome and born to rule and everyone else is a disgusting little worm who can go eat shit. One side offers you, as Orwell said, common sense and short working hours. The other side lets you be a *pirate*, plus you never have to think about anyone else’s feelings. How can we poor pitiful socialists compete with *that*?

I don’t like to give “selfish” justifications for being a socialist—that is, for believing in a society that guarantees basic goods, services, and care for everyone. We need to build this kind of society because it is right, regardless of whether it is in the particular self-interest of each individual. But the idea of the “super-man” inevitably runs into the reality of what it means to be mortal, which is that *all* of us are closer to insects than gods, no matter how much we’d like to pretend otherwise. Your “bronze age mindset” can’t make you a demigod; it can only make you an asshole. So to any young fellow who is tempted to adopt the “Bronze Age Mindset” (or, theoretically, young lady, though Alamariu thinks it was mistake to give women the vote), I have one simple point I’d like you to try to remember, namely:

YOU, TOO, WILL AWAKE ONE DAY AS A GIANT INSECT

WE ALL GET OLD. We all wear out. Parts of you will start aching and creaking. And that’s if you’re fortunate enough to make it to old age. (Those who push themselves too hard can also die trying to achieve Alamariu’s

physical ideal, and life expectancy in the U.S. has been declining, a sign that there is something very inadequate about our commitment to caring for each other.) At some point, you are probably going to need other people to care for you. This is a lesson Jack London learned. In an important essay called “How I Became A Socialist,” London says that early in his life, he was a thoroughgoing Nietzschean individualist, proud of his strength and contemptuous of his lessers:

This was because I was strong myself. ... I had good health and hard muscles. ... I looked on the world and called it good, every bit of it. Let me repeat, this optimism was because I was healthy and strong, bothered with neither aches nor weaknesses, never turned down by the boss because I did not look fit. ... [E]xulting in my young life, able to hold my own at work or fight, I was a rampant individualist. It was very natural. I was a winner. ... To adventure like a man, and fight like a man, and do a man’s work (even for a boy’s pay)—these were things that reached right in and gripped hold of me as no other thing could. And I looked ahead into long vistas of a hazy and interminable future, into which, playing what I conceived to be MAN’S game, I should continue to travel with unfailing health, without accidents, and with muscles ever vigorous. As I say, this future was interminable. I could see myself only raging through life without end like one of Nietzsche’s blond-beasts, lustfully roving and conquering by sheer superiority and strength. As for the unfortunates, the sick, and ailing, and old, and maimed, I must confess I hardly thought of them at all, save that I vaguely felt that they, barring accidents, could be as good as I if they wanted to ... and could work just as well. ... [I] was proud to be one of Nature’s strong-armed noblemen.

London was cured of his individualism by seeing how other people’s lives worked. He says that he went “tramping” and found himself in places where jobs were scarce and poverty was rampant. The scenes he saw disturbed him.

I found there all sorts of men, many of whom had once been as good as myself and just as blond-beast; sailor-men, soldier-men, labor-men, all wrenched and distorted and twisted out of shape by toil and hardship and accident, and cast adrift by their masters like so many old horses. I battered on the drag and slammed back gates with them, or shivered with them in box cars and city parks, listening the while to life-histories which began under auspices as fair as mine, with digestions and bodies equal to and better than mine, and which ended there before my eyes in the shambles at the bottom of the Social Pit.

What London realized was that he was damned lucky to be able-bodied and have satisfying work, and that there was no reason he couldn’t be the next one to have an accident and end up “distorted and twisted out of shape by toil and hardship and accident.” He could get sick and need to be cared for. Or economic trends beyond his control could force him out of work. He could only be a godlike “blond-beast” under particular favorable conditions, and there was no reason for it to last forever.



AS FOR ME, I’LL TAKE solidarity over individualism any day. I want to care for others and know they’ll care for me when I need it. Alamariu’s vision, that “the superior specimens are going to find each other and leave this civilization,” repulses me. I’m inspired by those who instead say “I’ve got your back” and are willing to fight for someone they don’t know. And I suspect the fascists will find that any world they build is intolerable, far uglier than anything that exists today. I worry that these kinds of ideologies could grow, because they have grown before and resulted in the extermination of millions of people. Preventing that from happening requires understanding why these absurd stories about *Untermenschen* compel people and both exposing those stories’ inanities and offering a compelling alternative based on principles of humanism and compassion. ♣

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Why I'm Preparing to Die and Why You Should Too

BY
JENNIFER DINES

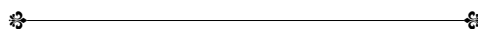


ILLUSTRATION
BY
C.M. DUFFY

I LOVE THE ILLUSION OF IMMORTALITY. The \$18 billion anti-aging market gets a portion of my weekly paycheck, and the belief that I just might stop my biological clock from ticking quashes any qualms I might have about spending my hard-earned money on a bevy of beauty products. I slather on sunscreen—atop layers of self-tanner, of course—to keep my skin from wrinkling, avoid both alcohol and sugar to keep the weight off, and practice pilates to keep my spine young and flexible. Despite the increasingly popular gray-hair trend, I treat my locks the old-fashioned way: I line my hall closet with boxes of bleach-blond drugstore hair dye and avoid looking at my roots under bright lights between colorings.

Keeping death at arm's length in modern America means not only keeping its markers off the body, but its specter far from the home. A mere century and a half ago, American funerals were mostly family affairs, the body displayed for visitation in the parlor of the home and then buried on family property or in a nearby churchyard. It was only when embalming became popular—following the two-week cross-country viewing of President Abraham Lincoln's body after his untimely assassination in 1865—that dealing with death became a professional

affair, the purview of the undertaker, mortician, and funeral home. Norms shifted accordingly, and by the early 20th century, even the *Ladies Home Journal* took a stance against death being allowed in the domestic sphere. The publication's editor banished Victorian-era front parlors from the magazine's pages and rechristened those spaces as "living rooms" meant for interaction with anyone *other than* dead family members. Parlors were "perceived as dark, gloomy, and oppressive," according to one architecture professor in a 1995 *Washington Post* article about the evolution of living rooms.

Of course, no matter how hard we try to stop the clock or to sweep the shadow of death from our doorsteps, the human body will not last forever. Each and every one of us will die, and, when we do, someone—if we haven't made arrangements—will have to deal with our funeral expenses. So, despite how uncomfortable people may feel about contending with their eventual death, pre-planning for the end of your life will save your loved ones from facing the distress of making huge financial decisions at a time of loss and grieving. A few simple steps and family conversations can go a long way in preventing additional stressors.

IN THE PAST FEW YEARS, I've faced the deaths of several family members, including that of my 94-year-old grandfather, who struggled with dementia at the end of his life, in January 2017, followed by that of my 67-year-old father-in-law in August 2019. How their deaths were handled could not have differed more.

My grandfather, a lifelong Baltimore Catholic, passed away in a hospital. He had pre-planned for his funeral arrangements, which followed the schema of practically every funeral I have ever attended. The funeral parlor embalmed, made up, and laid out his body. My family members and I hosted visiting hours at the funeral home for two days to greet mourners and spend time together looking at photos of my grandfather's life. Each of us approached the kneeler in front of his casket one by one to pay our respects. On the second day, a pastor from my grandfather's parish led a service, which included readings by my mother and her sister. The attendees then headed to their cars and followed the hearse for the procession to the cemetery where, after a few words from a religious official, we watched the coffin get lowered into the ground. These final ceremonial moments in the proximity of my grandfather's body allowed for sufficient grieving and provided me with a sense of closure about the end of my grandfather's life. Afterwards, we gathered for lunch at a waterfront seafood restaurant.

But when my father-in-law Rob died unexpectedly, everything felt terribly wrong. His neighbors in Oregon—across the country from where my husband and I live in Massachusetts—found his body after he failed to walk his dog for several days. The police in Oregon made the required calls to reach my husband, Rob's next of kin, in order to make the arrangements. Over the next few days, in the throes of bereavement, my husband juggled the many challenges that come with laying to rest someone who hadn't left behind any instructions for the living for how to handle their death.

Unlike my grandfather, Rob had no money set aside to pay for his arrangements. No one in the family knew how he wished to be memorialized. And even if we had known his wishes, we did not have much money of our own to spend. His body ended up at the Pacific View Memorial Home in Lincoln City, Oregon. My husband and his brother paid \$1,095 for his cremation and \$15 for a cardboard box for the remains. I stayed home in Boston with our three young daughters while my husband went to clean out Rob's trailer and receive Rob's ashes, which he released from a cliff into the ocean below. I still grieve the fact that I never got to say goodbye.

The shame of how poorly Rob's life ended causes my husband and me pain to this day. On our most recent anniversary, we avoided looking at our wedding album because seeing photos of Rob felt too painful. We cried in one another's arms,

discussing how he deserved not only more time to live, but a far better memorial. Reflecting on these two deaths convinced me that I needed to make a plan to ensure that my family will know what to do when I die. But I had no idea how to actually take action. I put the item "death planning" on my long term to-do list, alongside items like "kids' college savings" and "look into solar panels"—you know, the type of things that can always "wait until later" (whether that's true or not) compared to more pressing matters, like putting food on the table, paying the bills, driving the kids around, and everything else it takes to keep a young family afloat.



IT SEEMS
THAT MOST
PEOPLE
DON'T WANT
TO THINK
ABOUT
DEATH
PLANNING.

THE MOST TERRIFYING VISION OF death I can conjure has nothing to do with, say, violence or disaster. Instead, in this rather banal vision, my husband passes away before me in a hospital bed. A flat green line appears on a monitor accompanied by a long piercing beep—and I am left to live without him for the first time since we met when I was 21. Between this unnerving thought and the fact that I really had no idea where to begin, no wonder I postponed death planning—everything from legal documents to funeral arrangements—over and over again until, finally, last spring, a lawyer set me straight.

"You have three minor children and no will?" he asked, sounding more than a little incredulous. I felt taken aback by

his tone but quickly understood the urgency when he explained that, without this document in place, our children would be put in the hands of the Massachusetts legal system if we passed away. I found the thought of my school-aged girls being at the mercy of the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families absolutely horrifying given this institution's history of overlooking and even enabling sex trafficking and child abuse.

The attorney I hired to write my will also emphasized the importance of term life insurance. I had previously thought of life insurance as a way to cover burial costs and funeral expenses, but during this appointment, I came to understand that these policies would cover my children's basic expenses until they become financially independent adults. I see how society treats those in need. If I don't plan for my children's living expenses, I know that no safety net out there will catch them.

The day after my meeting with the lawyer, I began the process of taking out a \$1 million life insurance policy. This seems like an overwhelming amount of money, but it's what would be needed to provide for our children—their food, clothing, extracurricular activities, preventative health care, and more—until my youngest, now seven, turns 22. My husband and I will pay about \$1,000 a year for this policy, but it is necessary in a country where family is made to be the strongest social safety net.

All in all, I tried to keep these conversations businesslike and non-emotional, but tears came to my eyes and my voice cracked more than a few times. I feel like I have done my duty as a mother in ensuring that our children get at least some financial stability if I cannot personally take care of them.



WITH THE WILL AND INSURANCE out of the way, I could finally get to the “fun” part: contemplating my own funeral and burial. I might not know when my life will end, but I can at least plan my memorial service and decide where my body will rest.

Even prior to starting this journey into serious pre-planning, I had a place in mind: Forest Hills Cemetery in Boston. This 275-acre garden, features a rolling landscape, Victorian and contemporary sculptures, historic markers, and a central lake. It may sound strange to modern ears to spend one’s leisure time amongst the dead, but I have always considered Forest Hills less of a graveyard and more of a park, and I go walking there at least weekly. And, in fact, that’s what its designers intended: during the mid 19th century, garden cemeteries like Forest Hills not only solved the problem of crowding in urban churchyard burial grounds but their beautifully manicured grounds also made them a “regular gathering places for strolling and picnicking.”

Because Forest Hills serves as the final resting place of many of Boston’s elite, I assumed this option would be out of my financial reach. But I decided to make an appointment with the cemetery office to find out what it would take to land my dream burial space.

For the first part of my visit, I joined the Assistant Director of Operations at Forest Hills to get information on all of the available options. Burial spaces range from \$3,950 for a grave with a flat marker—perhaps, perversely, the most affordable route to land ownership in Boston’s exorbitantly priced and low-inventory real estate market—up to \$60,000 for above-ground internment in the exclusive Dearborn Pavilion. Full-casket burials cost \$2,300, while cremation burials are set at \$1,500; adult cremation alone, sans burial, costs only \$435. My visit—which was, dare I say, delightful—ended with a tour of the grounds, during which my guide pointed out the burial sites of the cemetery’s most famous denizens.

None of these prices set off alarm bells. I learned that financing is much like a mortgage. We could put a third down for a plot and pay the rest later. For basically \$1,300, my husband and I can secure a shared spot for two urns, one for my remains and one for his. If we buy our plots in advance, we can absolutely afford to place our remains in Forest Hills, a place that has brought us great joy in life.

But before the burial comes the funeral, which—like any good party—comes at a price: the funeral home, the site for the embalming, the casket, and the cosmetic treatment of the body can all add up. I definitely want the royal treatment when I die—ideally, my mourners will find me looking youthful and gorgeous with a perfectly made-up face and a Victoria’s Secret model body, laid to rest in an elegant satin-lined casket à la Stephanie Seymour in the Guns N’ Roses “November Rain” video—but I realize that my money may be better put to use in life than in death.

How much might my dream funeral cost? At the funeral home nearest me that actually had prices listed online, a “complete traditional funeral service” including visitation, embalming, body preparation, and hearse costs \$5,795. (While the Federal

Trade Commission is currently considering making online price lists the law, many funeral homes still want the customer to get in touch with someone who will persuade you to spend a little bit more on your loved one’s arrangements than you had initially planned.) That \$5,795 package does not include a casket, though the funeral home does provide a price list for caskets, ranging from \$850 for a flat cloth-covered particle board to an \$8,690 solid bronze model. Since the funeral home cannot legally require me to purchase a casket from their stock, I could also shop around on my own, perhaps even through Costco or Amazon.

Technically, no one even *has* to use a funeral home, at least in my state of

Massachusetts. But even if I elect the more fiscally conservative option of having my body cremated at Forest Hills Cemetery, bypassing embalming and viewing entirely, I still need transportation from my place of death to the crematorium. For example, if I pass away in a nursing home, the facility would expect someone to quickly remove my body from the premises. My friends and family can legally take care of this themselves to save a few bucks, but do I really want them to have to find a sizable container and vehicle on the fly when funeral homes have workers on call 24/7 to take care of this?

I hope that, by the time I die, I have made all of these arrangements, so my family can focus on dealing with their emotions and then getting on with their lives. Despite all my planning, the uncertainty of death itself still frightens me.

Will my mind simply shut off, like the black screen at the end of the series finale of *The Sopranos*? Will I turn into a ghost, perhaps floating above my body and then hovering around the spaces I inhabited in life? Will a Virgil-like figure guide me through Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso? What scares me the most? Not knowing how my last breath will feel. Will I gasp, trying to hold on, or will I feel relaxed? I like what *True Detective*’s Rustin Cohle, who spends many of his work hours—and a great deal of personal ones as well—looking at

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photographs of the deceased, puts forth: “They welcomed it. Not at first, but right there in the last instant. It’s an unmistakable relief. See, cause they were afraid, and now they saw for the very first time how easy it was to just let go.” I hope it’s easy.

It seems that most people don’t want to think about death planning. Victoria J. Haneman, a professor of trusts and estates, has noted that an estimated 70 percent of deceased people are found not to have done estate or burial planning. And this creates the perfect storm when emotions take hold during the aftermath of someone’s death. Without such planning, many families are put in a precarious financial situation.



HANEMAN’S 2021 ARTICLE “Funeral Poverty,” published by the *University of Richmond Law Review*, lays out the financial impact of the American funeral on families. The average cost of an adult funeral with a viewing exceeds \$9,000. This fact is all the more remarkable, Haneman points out, considering that 40 percent of American families say they would struggle to cover an emergency \$400 expense. Whatever their finances, the bereaved are in an emotional state that makes for a “vulnerable consumer who is unlikely to be price sensitive and is susceptible to emotional manipulation” at the time of purchase. After all, who wants to cheap out on a particle board casket for a beloved relative—especially at a time when you are probably thinking on a loop about how much you loved them, how much you will miss them, or perhaps how poorly you feel for not treating them better or spending more time with them? In a society that often equates spending with love, financing an elegant funeral may symbolize affection or atonement for the bereaved.

But what if you simply can’t afford it? Haneman writes: “When all potential resources have been exhausted ... the last remaining options are to beg, borrow, or surrender” the body. In recent years, online crowdfunding has become a popular means of fundraising for funeral expenses. GoFundMe staff even coaches people on how to make their pleas go viral. Prior to learning the true cost of funerals, when I would see these campaigns on my social media, I didn’t understand exactly why families needed the money. Now, I make a small donation whenever I can.

Another option is borrowing, either via credit card or, for those with bad credit, a loan with an interest rate of up to nearly 36 percent (for comparison, interest rates are around 7 percent on average for a home mortgage or 20 percent for a used car for someone with a low credit score). Families can also surrender the deceased, a situation which, depending on the state, results in either cremation or the burial of remains in a common grave. It’s one thing to surrender the body to the state; in some cases, bodies are never claimed by anyone. While the United States does not track the burial of unclaimed bodies, the *Washington Post* reported in 2021 that these indigent burials are the fate of tens of thousands of Americans each year.

Desperate and grieving families may become vulnerable to a far less savory option: non-transplant tissue banks. While organ donation for transplants is closely regulated, these unregulated “chop shops” dissect the bodies, sometimes even dismembering them with a chainsaw, then sell the parts, for profit, to medical researchers and even unspecified “other buyers.” A 2017 Reuters investigation detailed the corruption endemic to the commercial market for bodies. They solicit the donation of a corpse, promising that, after organs and cadaver tissues head to medical facilities, they will cremate the rest of the body and return the ashes to the family. But sometimes families don’t get back what they expected from these fraudulent companies.

What solutions exist to mitigate funeral poverty and debt? In 2021, FEMA dedicated \$2 billion in funeral expense reimbursement to those who lost a loved one to COVID-19. With proper documentation, families can receive up to \$9,000 in relief. (Compare this to the \$255 death benefit—a maximum dollar amount that has been capped since 1954—received by the spouse of the deceased from Social Security.) The FEMA funeral benefit appears to be ending in September 2025.

Birth and death constitute the two life events that all people, since time immemorial, have in common. Since the public currently provides funding for nearly half of all births, why not socialize the cost of funerals for everyone? While some states provide financial assistance for low-income people, these funds fall far short of the national average funeral cost of \$9,000. Why should anyone go through financial distress because of the death of a loved one? When mourners can gather together at a funeral and move through the grief cycle together, they can more readily move towards acceptance and continue on with their lives.



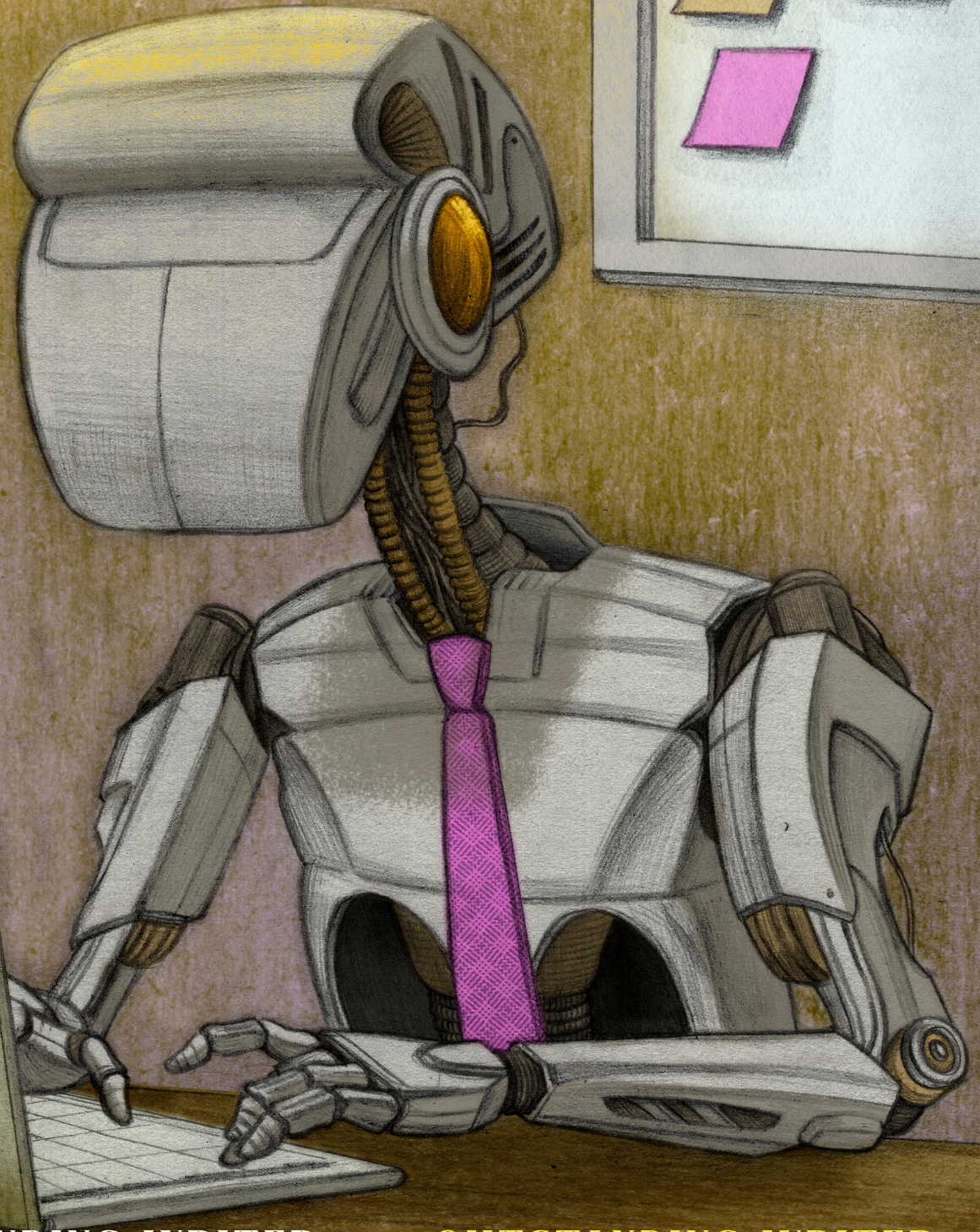
FUTURE CORPSE. A black T-shirt with these two words in capital letters across the chest lies at the back of my dresser. I bought it a year ago but have yet to muster the courage to wear it.

I purchased this provocative piece of clothing from the Order of the Good Death, a group whose stance is simple: “Everyone deserves a healthy relationship with mortality grounded in accurate facts, science, and history.” The group promotes awareness of and advocacy for meaningful and affordable death experiences for “your own death, the death of those you love, the pain of dying, the afterlife (or lack thereof), grief, corpses, bodily decomposition, or all of the above.” As a frontrunner in the international “Death Positive” movement, the Order encourages people to, at the very least, have conversations about death, including informing family and friends about end-of-life wishes. Looking back, I see that an hour-long conversation with my father-in-law could have saved so much of the pain I continue to endure because of his loss.

While I hope to work up the courage to wear my tee in public, perhaps in the meantime I can begin to wear it around the house when making my calendars and to-do lists. With my death planning mostly done, I want to get back to living. ☘

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GETTING TO KNOW SOVIET CINEMA

by Ciara Moloney

At the height of the Cold War, the film industry played a key role in propaganda for both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. This is often talked about in a simplistic way: that American films advocated for American interests, and Soviet films advocated for Soviet interests (with the relative nefariousness of each depending on your political leanings). But that kind of simple, direct propaganda—straightforwardly advocating for your own interests while demonizing your enemies—is hard to maintain across 50 years: it’s the stuff of hot war, geopolitical enemies that are more visceral than existential. At the most extreme, a *Two Minutes Hate* stretched to Ninety. Direct propaganda doesn’t exclude the possibility of art—*Casablanca* is a propaganda film and one of the best films ever made—but the cinematic propaganda of the Cold War operated at a more subtle level, as a kind of meta-propaganda. Direct propaganda contains its message: capitalism is bad, or good, depending on who’s arguing. Meta-propaganda is where the existence

of the film is the message. The U.S. sought to prove that it was possible to make great art under free market capitalism. The U.S.S.R. sought to prove that it was possible to make great art under centrally planned communism. They were both right.

My interest in Soviet cinema sometimes prompts raised eyebrows. These could be raised eyebrows of baffled ignorance—did they make movies in the Soviet Union?—or the classic Anglophonic disinterest in cinema made in a non-English language. I have the most sympathy for a certain hostile skepticism—are these movies whitewashing the Soviet regime’s crimes?—which is especially reasonable in the context of the successor Russian state’s current crimes. I have no desire to be associated with the minority of contemporary leftists who romanticize the U.S.S.R. simply because it was communist—or romanticize the resolutely capitalist Russian Federation, seemingly out of habit. At best, these people are embarrassing. More often, they’re actively destructive, to history, memory, and their own political project, either by associating socialism with

Soviet-style totalitarian communism or through (wittingly or unwittingly) entering alliances with the extreme right. There is a widespread preconception, whether conscious or not, that Soviet cinema is for tankies. Tankie is pejorative for a certain type of communist, coined to describe British communists who defended the Soviet use of tanks to crush the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and the 1968 Prague Spring uprising. More broadly, it describes communists who, with their last breath, will deny, defend, or even endorse the crimes of Joseph Stalin, Mao Tse-tung, or Pol Pot. For them, the human rights abuses of even the most nominally communist authoritarian regimes, like China, are simply capitalist slander. There aren’t many of these people, but if the version of Soviet cinema in your imagination is staid propaganda about how much the U.S.S.R. rules, it’s hard to imagine why anyone else would enjoy it. And if it’s not for tankies, it’s probably dry, serious, inaccessible. Homework. Definitely for “film bros.”

The shifting stereotype of the film bro is a cultural bogeyman of the



ABOVE: *Ivan the Terrible, Part I* (1944)

internet. Once conceived of as a guy who loves Quentin Tarantino and Christopher Nolan without interest in what's outside of the male-dominated canon, the film bro is now mocked daily on TikTok as someone who enjoys anything outside of ultra-mainstream Hollywood fare. These posts turn the world upside down to cast Marvel movies as cinematic underdogs that are perpetually dismissed in favor of black-and-white European art films. The film bro meme "mocks the idea of enjoying anything experimental, complex, old, or foreign," Gavia Baker-Whitelaw writes in the *Daily Dot*. "In turn, this solidifies the idea that certain films are only 'for' annoying white guys and/or intellectual snobs, discouraging people from exploring the diversity of non-Hollywood cinema." Soviet and Eastern European cinema are natural targets, not giving the game away like mocking, say, Indian cinema would: a way to launder your anti-intellectual

hostility to other cultures without the risk of being labeled racist.

It breaks my heart. To cut yourself off from art this way is to self-inflict a tragic wound. Art is how humans tell each other stories that make sense of the world and truths that are too raw to articulate in speech, how we take darkness and boredom and isolation and fill that space with laughter and beauty and connection. It is, above all, terribly human. Soviet cinema, like all art, was made by people—people who were pushed by and pushed against censorship, people who had their own complex internal lives irreducible to, or actively hostile towards, Soviet orthodoxy, and who lived under a totalitarian regime and still made art. Each work made under such conditions is precious. Consider Kira Muratova, a Jewish Ukrainian director who made her films in the U.S.S.R. and was constantly subject to political repression. She took her name off *Among Grey Stones* (1983) because it was edited without her approval. Or the 1967 film *Brief Encounters* (1967). A beautiful, aching drama in an Italian neorealist (and not socialist realist) vein,

Brief Encounters is rich in metaphors I can't quite parse, saying things about the Soviet Union—and Ukraine's place in it—that I can't articulate but was made to feel.

Soviet cinema is a vast, varied landscape, much too large to grasp in your hand. But some of my favorites, presented here, will give you a glimpse beyond secondhand stereotypes—and a reason to stop cutting yourself off from so much great art.

IVAN THE TERRIBLE, PART 1 (1944) AND PART 2 (1958)

Sergei Eisenstein is probably the most famous and acclaimed Soviet filmmaker. Even if you've never seen the Odessa steps sequence in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), you've seen it a hundred times in parodies and homages and allusions, in everything from *The Godfather* to *Naked Gun 33 1/3*. And even if you haven't seen direct references to Eisenstein, his mark is deep in cinema's DNA. He pioneered the editing technique of montage, a core part of the filmic vernacular.

The only Soviet filmmaker as likely to have an entry on a list of the greatest films of all time is probably Andrei Tarkovsky, director of *Solaris* (1972), *Mirror* (1975) and *Stalker* (1979). But where Tarkovsky had a loudly antagonistic relationship with the Soviet film authorities—defiant, in particular, of the U.S.S.R.’s policy of state atheism—and eventually left Russia altogether, Eisenstein is more closely associated with official Soviet orthodoxy. *Battleship Potemkin* is a masterpiece, but it is overt, simplistic propaganda for the Russian Revolution, elevated to something greater than itself by its ground-breaking style. *October: Ten Days That Shook the World* (1928) was also conceived as a propaganda film, celebrating a decade since the October Revolution, though Soviet officials criticized Eisenstein’s final product for its excessive “formalism” and demanded that references to Leon Trotsky be removed. By the 1940s, Dwight MacDonald was writing in the *Partisan Review*, against the idea of the artist “defying the gods of totalitarianism in the name of Art and Culture,” that when “the artist-intellectual has remained within the totalitarian borders, he has reacted pretty much as Eisenstein has, submitting in aesthetic as well as political matters.” Defiance, MacDonald argues, is most safely delivered from a distance.

In the same essay, MacDonald preemptively dismisses Eisenstein’s then-forthcoming *Ivan the Terrible* biopic, putting it firmly in the category of historical, patriotic, and safe. A retreat into Mother Russia’s womb. But Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible* would turn out to be anything but.

Like Shakespeare’s history plays, *Ivan the Terrible* combines sweeping national epic with intense personal psychodrama. It is a closely observed study of the blurry line between good king and brutal despot. Nikolay Cherkasov plays Ivan with crazed intensity: my brain instinctively sorts it into a category with many of my favorite silent movie performances, because it’s the kind of film acting that went south with the invention of synchronized sound. Cherkasov’s performance, like the movie

around it, is all big swings, in a way that could—maybe should—be off-putting, but overwhelms all doubt. As Roger Ebert wrote in 2012, *Ivan the Terrible* “proceeded directly to the status of Great Movie without going through the intermediate stage of being a good movie.”

Stalin was a huge fan of Ivan the Terrible, with whom he strongly identified and who he viewed as a national hero. And he was a huge fan of *Ivan the Terrible Part 1*, the first of a planned trilogy. In *Part 1*, Ivan is, broadly speaking, the “good guy”: the legitimate tsar who wealthy elites want to overthrow for someone they can control and who will be more favorable to them instead of the people. To which, you know, what could Stalin say but “wow, he’s just like me!”?

Eisenstein finished production on *Part 2* in 1946, but it wouldn’t see the light of day until 1958. Stalin was incensed by it, banning the film and halting production on *Part 3*. In *Part 2*, Ivan goes all in on secret police and mass executions: “I’ll be exactly what you say I am,” he tells his political enemies, “*Terrible*.” If Stalin identified with Ivan’s nobility in *Part 1*, then he was confronted with identifying with Ivan’s brutality in *Part 2*.

The hints—more than hints—were all there in *Part 1*, even if Stalin missed them. Ivan is the people’s champ, but in a way that’s more akin to Julius Caesar or Napoleon Bonaparte than some genuine avatar of the proletariat. Ultimately, he serves at the altar of power for its own sake, not the people. While you don’t root for Ivan’s enemies, it quickly becomes a matter of weighing up the lesser of two evils, and the film leaves you uncertain which is lesser. After being in black-and-white, the film shifts into color for some sequences in the final section of *Part 2*, and it feels like the scales falling from your eyes. You see Ivan not as a besieged hero or even tragically flawed but as a moral monster ready to crush in his fist anyone who gets in his way. Or anyone who he imagines is getting in his way.

It is a direct critique of Stalin’s regime, in a film he ordered into production. Defiance without the safety of distance. In 1964, six years after *Ivan*



ABOVE: Film Poster for *Ivan the Terrible, Part I*

the Terrible Part 2 was finally released, Elem Klimov directed *Welcome, or No Trespassing*, a proto-Wes Anderson movie set at a kids’ summer camp that doubles as a loopy, sharp send-up of the U.S.S.R.: “The children own the camp, but they’re not involved in any of the decisions!” Nineteen years after that, Georgian filmmaker Eldar Shengelaia directed *Blue Mountains, or an Unbelievable Story*, in which a novelist must navigate the labyrinth of Soviet bureaucracy. It’s a blistering satire that, like so many of my favorite Soviet films, begs the question, “How did they let him make this in the U.S.S.R.?” I don’t know, but I’m so glad they did.

DERSU UZALA (1975)

A major feature of Soviet filmmaking—a result of its meta-propaganda effect—was the willingness of the Soviet studios to make it rain money, providing productions with lavish budgets. The U.S.S.R. had one of the only film industries outside of Hollywood that was flush with cash. *Waterloo* (1970), a Soviet-Italian co-production starring Rod Steiger as



ABOVE: *Dersu Uzala* (1975)

Napoleon and Christopher Plummer as the Duke of Wellington, has battle scenes on an unsurpassed scale, comparable only to the CGI-heavy battles in *The Lord of the Rings*, but without any special effects. The Soviet army provided 17,000 soldiers to appear as extras for free, and it still was one of the most expensive films ever made.

In the 1970s, Akira Kurosawa was being denied funding by the Japanese film studios. *Dodes'ka-den* (1970) flopped, contributing to his suicide attempt in 1971. But then along came a project that he'd been interested in since the 1930s: an adaptation of Russian explorer Vladimir Arsenyev's memoir about his friendship with Dersu Uzala, a trapper native to Russia's Far East. Kurosawa had given up on the project since it seemed so unlikely that the U.S.S.R. would allow him access to the taiga region to film it. But in this difficult period of his life and career, they invited him to finally make it. The Soviets wanted him to cast his frequent collaborator Toshiro Mifune as Dersu, but Kurosawa knew better.

Dersu Uzala has a legitimate claim to being the best film ever made. Maxim Munzuk, co-founder of the Republic of Tuva's national theatre, plays Dersu Uzala. Yury Solomin plays Arsenyev, his face cracking open with love in an echo of the way his younger brother's does as

Dr. Watson in the delightful Soviet TV adaptation of Sherlock Holmes. Captain Arsenyev embarks on a topographic survey expedition near the Russian-Chinese border in the early 1900s, where he meets Dersu, a hunter who knows these forests inside out. The Captain has an instant, abiding respect for Dersu because of his knowledge, intellect, and kindness. Dersu has the resourcefulness to build them shelter and the compassion to leave behind essential provisions for future travelers. He and Arsenyev form such a special connection, a soul bond that transcends their radically different backgrounds. Arsenyev's men, meanwhile, are smug, racist idiots. They dismiss Dersu's expertise. They question where Dersu is from—China? Korea?—because the answer—*here*—doesn't fit with their suffocatingly narrow conception of what "Russians" look like. It's not—or not precisely—colonialism, but it is a stinging reminder of the imperial core's ignorance to its own periphery. But these men, too, learn to respect Dersu. It's hard not to.

The film's first half—where you see this beautiful friendship take shape—would be a satisfying whole, leaving you full and sated and overjoyed. The leads are so perfectly cast that the idea of Mifune in the lead role seems patently absurd. Kurosawa shoots the forest in a rich color palette that words like "green"

and "brown" don't do justice to. *Dersu Uzala* picks up again five years later, when Arsenyev leads another expedition to the region. He buzzes with the hope of seeing Dersu again, his every nerve ending alive at the thought. Upon seeing their meeting, I punched air. The men on this expedition all respect Dersu instantly without having met him before, and it is obvious that the Captain must have talked about him all the time.

But the world to come isn't built for Dersu or for men like him. He ends up accompanying Arsenyev back to town, and although Dersu is a genius, in the town he's useless and frustrated. He sees no convenience, only confinement. It's less that the march of progress has left his knowledge and skills unneeded, and more that things are just *different* here. He gets arrested for cutting down a tree. He is furious at the idea of people selling firewood or water. (The implication, although he doesn't say it, is that you cannot sell what no one can rightfully own.) The tragedy of it is that the audience knows the future looks a lot more like this town than Dersu's forest. Right from the opening scene, Arsenyev tells us that a village will be built over Dersu's grave, the trees that mark it torn up, a willful destruction of nature, a way of life, and this brilliant man's memory. It's inevitable. It's devastating.

OPERATION Y AND SHURIK'S OTHER ADVENTURES (1965), THE DIAMOND ARM (1969), IVAN VASILIEVICH CHANGES PROFESSION (1973)

Cinema had a meta-propaganda function in the U.S.S.R.—establishing the capacity of communism to produce great films—but the primary target there was international audiences. Back home, they still had to pump out crowd-pleasing entertainment pictures. And nobody did that better than the comedy director Leonid Gaidai.

Gaidai is little known outside the former Soviet Union, but inside the Soviet Union, his comedies consistently topped the box office throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s. *The Diamond Arm* (1969) sold 76.7 million tickets in the U.S.S.R.. But international audiences

have probably never heard of it. Gaidai's Wikipedia page argues (without citation, admittedly) that this is due to his films' rootedness in Russian culture, which international audiences can't understand or appreciate—but all the Gaidai films I've seen are total crowd-pleasers, whatever language you speak. *The Diamond Arm* is a silly slapstick crime caper that's also kind of a musical. Early on, a title card announces that we are watching Part 1: during the film's climax, when you've forgotten all about there being parts, a title card randomly announces Part 2, a closing stretch of maybe five minutes. In *Ivan Vasilievich Changes Profession* (1973, aka *Ivan Vasilievich: Back to the Future*), Shurik (Aleksandr Demyanenko) builds a time machine, and he accidentally sends the superintendent of his apartment building back to Ivan the Terrible's time, and Ivan the Terrible forward to 1973 Moscow. (Hijinks ensue.) Demyanenko originated the role of Shurik in *Operation Y and Shurik's Other Adventures* (1965), an anthology film built on a stylish mix of silent comedy, farce, and live-action renditions of classic cartoons. It's a winning alchemy. A monument to Shurik reading



ABOVE: *Operation Y and Shurik's Other Adventures* (1965)



ABOVE: *Ivan Vasilievich Changes Profession* (1973)

class notes over a girl's shoulder was erected at Kuban State Technological University in 2012.

Gaidai's movies are really, really funny. They have a classic comedic sensibility that alternately reminds me of Buster Keaton, *Looney Tunes*, *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*, and American comedies of the 1980s like *Ghostbusters* or *The Blues Brothers*. I love them for that alone. But they also give an insight into Soviet life—a society gone with the wind—that no amount of the most profound historical writing really could. Something that goes beyond information and into ineffable insight. The U.S.S.R. was a totalitarian dictatorship, a society that cannot and should not be understood without secret police and show trials, without gulags in Siberia and man-made famine in Ukraine. But they still laughed. They still piled into the cinema with their kids to see *Kidnapping*, *Caucasian Style*.

Totalitarianism is dehumanizing, and so when we think of the people subject to totalitarianism, we must actively work to re-humanize them. To not let them be numbers in a statistic, no matter how horrifying. To remember that they also fought with their parents, kissed their grandmother's cheek, hugged their kids, and fell in and out of love. The numbers killed or tortured or otherwise denied the fullness of human freedom

under communist regimes aren't points on a political scorecard, which is how Republicans and many Democrats treat them. They went to slapstick Leonid Gaidai movies, and they laughed.

In the American film *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), a comedy director wants to make an important sociopolitical drama and sets out to live as a tramp as research. After a bump on the head, he ends up at the bottom, an amnesiac prisoner serving hard labor. The pastor of a poor Black church describes him as the "less fortunate." And here, at the bottom, he doesn't learn what to put in his big important drama—he learns why comedy matters. The Black churchgoers and the prisoners watch a Disney cartoon, and they laugh their asses off.

"There's a lot to be said for making people laugh. Did you know that that's all some people have?" he says at the end. "It isn't much, but it's better than nothing in this cockeyed caravan." They could have written it on Leonid Gaidai's gravestone.

BELORUSSIAN STATION (1971)

For me, no film represents the ineffable insight a Soviet film can give you into Soviet society quite like *Belorussian Station* (1971). Twenty-five years after they served together in World War II, four men reunite to attend the

funeral of their friend who was the only one of the five who stayed in the army. You can draw a straight line from *Belorussian Station* to later American films about baby boomer reunions like *The Big Chill* (1983) or *Return of the Secaucus 7* (1980): like those movies, *Belorussian Station* is a hangout movie, full of the bittersweet joy and painful nostalgia that reunion entails. It's a film about parsing the beauty of being together again from the useless longing to return to the past. It's about knowing that the next generation cannot return to the past, either, and so will never truly understand what you've been through. It's a movie about going out drinking with the lads. *Belorussian Station* is fun and sad and, most often, both at once.

Those who defend the U.S.S.R. often frame it as a more equitable society than exists under capitalism. I think a lot of people buy that in general, even if they think Soviet human rights abuses are not a worthwhile trade-off. But I think that in truth much of the evils we attribute to capitalism are bigger than capitalism, that capitalism is the current version of an underlying behemoth that has maintained itself across feudalism, capitalism, and communism. It's not, as the right would have it, human nature: it's too big, too systemic, for that. It is a will towards a class system that has found expression in different historical



ABOVE: *Belorussian Station* (1971)

conditions, sometimes stronger, sometimes weakened, but never defeated. I am a democratic socialist in part because democratic socialism seems like the most effective tool against this shape-shifting monster.

In the U.S.S.R., the class system of capitalism (or feudalism) wasn't abolished; it was simply recreated in the Soviet image. In *Belorussian Station*, the four guys are Ivan Prikhodko (Yevgeny Leonov), who works in the sewers, Nikolai I. Dubinsky (Anatoli Papanov), a civil servant, Viktor S. Kharlamov (Aleksey Glazyrin), the director of a

factory, and Aleksey K. Kiryushin (Vsevolod Safonov), a writer. This classless society has sharp class delimitations. Ivan, the sewer worker, is proletarian. Nikolai, the civil servant, is middle class, a worker outside Marx's proletariat/bourgeoisie dichotomy. Viktor doesn't technically own the factory, but he *runs* the factory, squeezing his workers for the sake of the bottom line and complaining about excessive regulation. Aleksey, a writer, sits a little bit outside of the class system, and sits a little bit outside of the movie: he's more thinly characterized, instead acting as a narrator to bring us into this story. All of the characters are distinctly aware of their different stations in life, and their class differences—once absorbed into the uniform of the Red Army—lead to conflict between them. They would never have hung out if they hadn't fought alongside each other all those years ago—except maybe so Viktor could lobby Nikolai to give him government contracts.

But it would be a disservice to present *Belorussian Station* as a sociology lesson. It's a human drama. That's where the ineffable comes in. In one of the film's final scenes, Raisa (Nina Urgant), former frontline nurse, sings a song from the war:

**Birds don't sing here,
Trees don't grow,
And only we—shoulder to shoulder—
grow into the ground here.**



ABOVE: *The Diamond Arm* (1969)



ABOVE: *Operation Y and Shurik's Other Adventures* (1965)

**The planet is burning and spinning,
There is smoke above our
Motherland ...
And, therefore, we need one victory,
One for all of us—for any price.**

The men, overwhelmed by the weight of memory, cry. And I cried, too. I cannot know what men like these went through in the war, but *Belorussian Station* zooms in on the specific because that is how you express the universal. I connect with *The Big Chill* even though I'm not an American boomer because it uses American boomers to tap into what transcends demographic: grief and friendship and history and music. And in the same way, *Belorussian Station* uses the generation of Soviets who fought in World War II to tap into what transcends, into grief and friendship and history and music. It plunges its fists into nostalgia knowing that half of nostalgia's etymology is pain. It is, in short, what the movies are for.

There is a will towards a class system that has expressed itself through different economic systems, different historical conditions, different parts of the world. It has underpinned feudalism, imperialism, capitalism, communism—a fundamental split between the haves and have-nots, in which people's position in society (more often than not, hereditary) is defined according to their labor. This existed in the U.S.S.R. as it has existed almost everywhere. Soviet cinema is often a reminder of that, leaving you vigilant against unjust romanticism but also, at times, feeling bleak and hopeless. It makes the horror of it seem all the more inescapable.

But another universal constant also existed in the U.S.S.R.: a will towards beauty and truth and laughter and song that rages against the limits of any class system. This will, like the one towards the class system, finds different expressions in different conditions: sometimes it's sneaking around the back, sometimes

it's kicking and screaming and asking for trouble. It was there in Hollywood at the height of the Hays Code, when free market capitalism turned out to be as censorship-happy as anybody else and film artists figured out how exactly to follow the letter of the law but not the spirit. It was there when my grandmother would somehow get her hands on books banned in 1950s Ireland.

And it was there in the U.S.S.R. in spades. If Soviet cinema sometimes reminds us of the bleak, hopeless inevitability of the class system, it always reminds me of this other constant. It's close to what I would call a synonym for the human spirit, and it loosens the hopelessness in your chest just a little. ✚

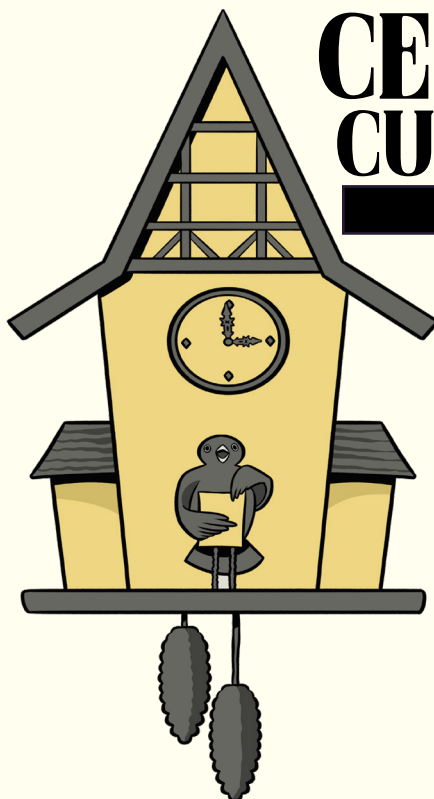
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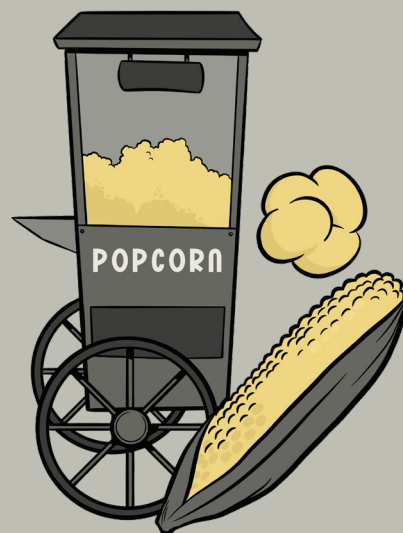
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In a world of overconsumption, why not slow down and savour the moment? This popcorn maker is designed to pop only one kernel at a time, a stark reminder of the importance of mindful consumption in our daily lives.



REFUNDS ARE BOURGEOIS

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This isn't just any campfire kit. As the fire grows, so does the drone of a lecture about the structural inequalities inherent to capitalism, thanks to a special sound-emitting log. As the flames crackle and the stars twinkle overhead, you and your friends can ponder the socio-economic structures that govern our society.



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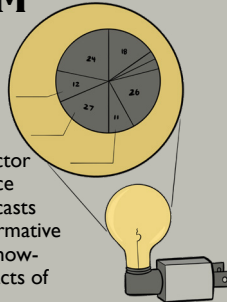


LABOR RIGHTS LADDER

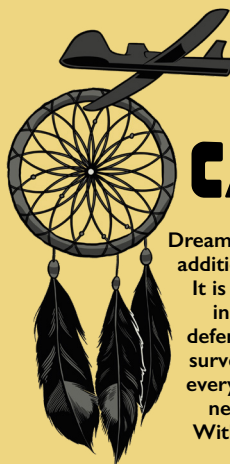
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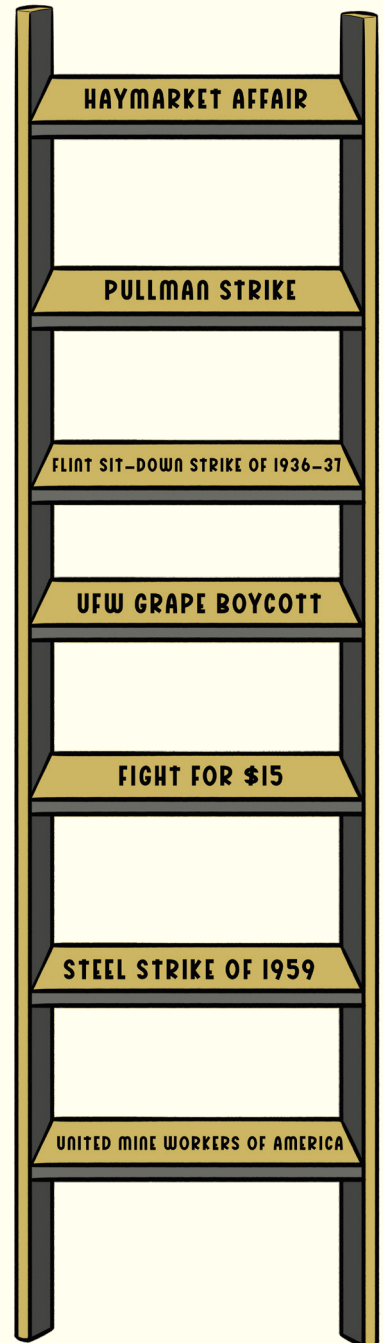
Bid goodnight to ignorance with our Neo-Liberalism Facts Nightlight! This isn't just a device to keep the darkness at bay; it's a projector of enlightening insights. Once switched on, the nightlight casts detailed pie charts and informative statistics onto your walls, showcasing the far-reaching impacts of neoliberal policies.



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CONSUME - CONSUME - CONSUME

ON STRONG TOWNS

by
Allison Lirish Dean



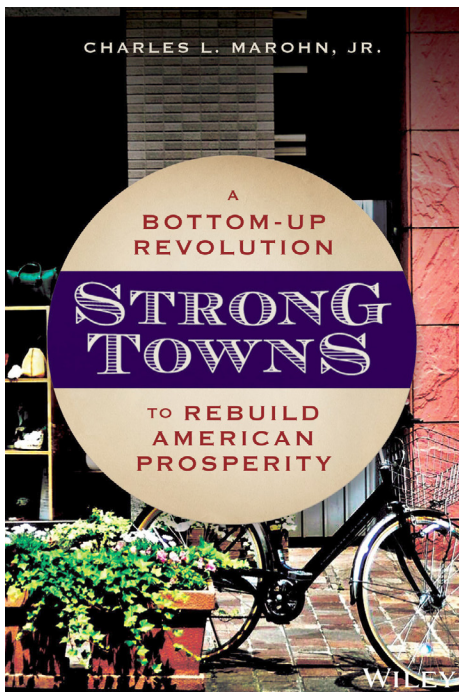
LIKE MANY AMERICANS, I LIVE IN A PLACE with a lot of “stroads.” We’ve all seen stroads: highway-like commercial strips lined with fast-food restaurants, big-box stores, and parking lots. A stroad is trying to be a street and a road simultaneously and doing neither well. Slower-moving vehicles entering and exiting a stroad in order to patronize stores (the “street” use) conflict with vehicles trying to get somewhere fast (the “road” use). Stroads are awkward, dangerous, and, like the word itself, ugly.

“Stroad” was coined by civil engineer and urban planner Charles Marohn Jr., who started the nonprofit Strong Towns as a blog in 2008. Strong Towns wants to transform American urban planning and advocates for a “bottom-up revolution to rebuild American prosperity.” Prosperity means *financial* prosperity, which is relevant to urban planning because tax revenue is affected in the long term by the way we build and develop places.

Strong Towns wants to end what it views as our financially reckless approach to growth and development—in short, what it calls the “growth Ponzi scheme.” This approach has, over decades, subsidized the creation of car-dependent suburban sprawl, which is disastrous for public health, safety, and the environment.

Marohn is open about his past as a “free market ideologue” and has written four books about urban planning, including *Strong Towns: A Bottom-Up Revolution to Rebuild American Prosperity* and *Confessions of a Recovering Engineer: Transportation for a Strong Town*. Strong Towns boasts three podcasts and an academy (where paid courses cost up to \$395), and its website, according to Daniel Herriges, the editor in chief of Strong Towns, attracted 2 million unique readers in 2022. Its podcast and social media audiences are in the tens of thousands. Bloomberg News has called Marohn a “powerful ally” to communities fighting bad planning.





ABOVE: *Strong Towns* by Charles L. Marohn, Jr.

There's a genuine radicalism in *Strong Towns'* calls to end the growth Ponzi scheme. This radicalism is couched in accessible rhetoric that speaks to elements of progressivism. But a deeper look at *Strong Towns* reveals that some of its key proposals are simply right-libertarianism dressed up in progressive garb. These proposals ultimately reinforce harmful ideas about government and much-needed comprehensive urban planning and deny the importance of guaranteeing public goods and services for all.

STRONG TOWNS' MAIN CONTENTION is that in the post-war period, America adopted a radically new approach to development that it dubs "the suburban experiment." This experiment gave us the suburban sprawl—embodied by the ubiquitous stroad—that dominates American landscapes and fosters car dependency. As the story goes, we embraced this new development pattern because it generated growth, created jobs, and built the middle class. *Strong Towns* argues that the main problem with this kind of development is that it's a financial pyramid scheme. Here's how it says that works:

New suburban developments require expansion of water, sewer, highways, and roads. Cities initially benefit from new construction fees and increased tax revenue, but sprawl is both expensive to keep up and revenue poor. Over time, cities end up with what *Strong Towns* calls a "ticking time bomb of unfunded liability for infrastructure maintenance." City leaders' response is more growth, more sprawl, and more debt, perpetuating a never-ending cycle of short-term financial gain followed by long-term financial pain. This is the aforementioned growth Ponzi scheme.

Strong Towns' thesis speaks to me. For instance, my city of Greensboro, North Carolina, has strengths that include an historic downtown, great parks, a greenway system, and a rich array of educational institutions that serve as social and cultural hubs. But decades of sprawl-driven development has carved up its landscape and segregated its neighborhoods. Excess parking and urban expressways blight and divide the city. Among North Carolina's larger cities, Greensboro ranks worst in car-related crashes. Pedestrians and cyclists must navigate treacherous roadways, and bus transit often involves long waits and suboptimal routes.

Nevertheless, the state continues to pour millions into widening Greensboro's roads, which doesn't relieve congestion. In fact, it does the opposite. Planners sell these projects for their purported economic benefits, which *Strong Towns* rightly critiques as hocus-pocus. I've found *Strong Towns'* impassioned calls to stop the growth Ponzi scheme useful. *Strong Towns* asks us to tell our leaders that we're not going to build another multi-lane stroad to Walmart because doing so would be financially reckless. This is a real political statement, because there are entrenched interests invested in this way of doing things.

And yet, *Strong Towns* promotes itself as politically agnostic. But few things are more politically charged than urban planning, which shapes every aspect of human life, from where we live, work, and play to how we get around. While *Strong Towns* sometimes takes positions that could be called progressive, its overall politics are deeply conservative. This is evident in its approach to history, money, and planning.

Strong Towns' historical narratives are often oversimplified in ways that encourage hostility toward government and ignore long-standing patterns of racism in the real estate industry. It blames big government for the suburban experiment, for example, while ignoring private interests' arguably greater role in engineering it. As housing expert Gene Slater shows in his 2021 book *Freedom to Discriminate*, beginning in the early 20th century, an increasingly powerful cadre of organized realtors systematically fueled and fought to uphold racial segregation in previously integrated housing markets. By the time of the New Deal, these realtors' political influence was so formidable that they were able to directly shape racist housing programs by working inside the government to establish, staff, and operate the Federal Housing Administration. FHA policies drove the postwar proliferation of suburbia and white flight from urban cores—with realtors at the helm. These truths are expunged from *Strong Towns'* storyline of the strong, villainous state, in which the evils of parking minimum mandates and postwar suburban sprawl stem from "socialism" and "incredible levels of centralized coordination." Such narratives evoke Ronald Reagan's 1986 quip about the nine most terrifying words in the English language—"I'm from the government and I'm here to help"—and encourage pessimism about the potential for public action to yield benefits.

Strong Towns depoliticizes money, asking that we simply #DoTheMath when assessing an infrastructure investment's viability. Government solvency is important, and as *Strong Towns'* spotlight on the growth Ponzi scheme shows, we're wasting scarce resources. *Strong Towns* is correct that we've often invested in

the *wrong* things (like parking lots and stroads) at the expense of maintaining our most productive existing infrastructure. But we also need big investment in the *right* things, like a Green New Deal for transportation, which will rapidly decarbonize the transportation sector—which emits more carbon pollution than any other sector in the U.S. economy—and improve and expand public transportation as well as bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure. Strong Towns rejects such big plans, arguing that cities are broke with no help in sight and will soon be forced to abandon the infrastructure they can no longer afford to maintain. For Strong Towns, the “brutal math” of municipal budgets is too often a neutral fact divorced from broader political and ideological matters of, for example, taxation. Strong Towns does mention economic development subsidies and local property tax inequity but is silent about relentless federal tax cuts for the wealthy, which do as much if not more to facilitate wealth concentration at the expense of necessary public investment. Strong Towns would have us believe that cities turn to the growth Ponzi scheme because of top-down planning, but when elected officials refuse to properly tax the wealthy, it’s one of cities’ few remaining strategies.

Finally, Strong Towns eschews most large-scale, long-range government planning and public investment. It insists that big planning fails because it requires planners to predict an inherently unpredictable future and conceptualize projects all at once in a finished state. Strong Towns’ remedy is development that emerges organically from local wisdom and that is therefore capable of responding to local feedback. This requires a return to the “traditional” development pattern of our older urban cores, which, according to Strong Towns, are more resilient and financially productive.

Strong Towns argues that historically, traditional urban cores unfolded incrementally as a series of “small bets,” evolving from popup shacks to Main Streets and so on. But historical reality is more complex. As historian Richard Foglesong writes in *Planning the Capitalist City: The Colonial Era to the 1920s*, “many of our major cities were established and for a time developed in accordance with an overall plan.” Savannah, Georgia, for example, was planned by James Oglethorpe, a member of the British military and former member of Parliament who envisioned it as a “city of squares” in which resources were allocated equitably, land speculation was shunned, and growth would proceed in a controlled, organized fashion. Strong Towns celebrates Savannah as an embodiment of its incrementalist, localist approach. But early town planners who built cities like Savannah were not local (they were beholden to the British crown), were not capitalists, and operated in a social context in which, as Foglesong writes, it was “taken for granted that government or other collective institutions ... should seek to provide for the common good.” Thus, Strong Towns’ view that good urbanism materializes only when big government “stays out of the way” is fundamentally ahistorical.

Nevertheless, Strong Towns pushes the idea that market-based localism and incrementalism deliver benefits that central planning can’t. Small investments over a broad area over a long period of time, it contends, are the only way to restore the market feedback loops that government planning has distorted

and build real wealth for communities. Incremental development—or, the “emergent wisdom of the crowd”—is Strong Towns’ version of the invisible hand of the market.

We do need planning that’s attentive to local needs, and small-scale development can be preferable to sudden, large investments that transform neighborhoods overnight—what the urbanist Jane Jacobs (one of Strong Towns’ heroes) has called “cataclysmic money.” Indeed, Strong Towns’ emphasis on incrementalism sometimes leads to good ideas, like preserving and adapting existing buildings rather than demolishing and replacing them. Or, for example, a city that needs bike lanes can quickly implement them with cheap, simple materials like chalk and cones, testing what works before investing in a larger network. This sort of rapid prototyping or “tactical urbanism” can be done by residents on the block level.

But there are dangers in pushing a localist, incrementalist approach hewn to “brutal math” while vilifying big government planning. First, it risks reinforcing and exacerbating entrenched social inequities; if not all localities have the same resources, localism is going to look very different on the rich and poor sides of town. Second, it legitimizes austerity and the retreat from a shared responsibility for public welfare at a time when we need the opposite. And third, we simply can’t adequately address the biggest problems we face primarily via localism and incrementalism, let alone Strong Towns’ market-based libertarian version. To see why, let’s take a closer look at how Strong Towns’ approach plays out in the context of three of our biggest problems: inadequate transit, aging water infrastructure, and the housing crisis.

TRICKLE-DOWN TRANSIT

IN *CONFESSIONS OF A RECOVERING ENGINEER*, Marohn says that transit in America is failing “because it exists without being tied to any discernible or measurable purpose.” For example, in the following passage, Marohn criticizes Springfield, Massachusetts’s bus loop, which

...departs from Union Station roughly every 40 minutes, a frequency not conducive to convenient travel planning. It passes through the core of the city and provides stops at such places as the MGM Casino (twice), the Basketball Hall of Fame, and the LaQuinta Inn. The entire round trip is about 2.5 miles, which means that it is nearly always quicker just to walk to your destination rather than wait for the bus.

Marohn barely disguises his contempt for this bus loop’s destinations. But why are they on the route? Are they places of employment for riders? He doesn’t say. And while it does sound as if this service lacks frequency and could be better, there’s no evidence here that it lacks a purpose, only that it lacks what is for him the *right* purpose, which, he explains, is to accelerate wealth:

The goal of transit as a wealth accelerator is to create feedback loops where a successful place creates demand for transit, which creates more demand for development,

which creates demand for more intense transit, and so on and so forth.

Marohn writes that “the hard work of building a place” must be done “long before a significant transit investment.” In other words, localities get transit only when they generate enough private wealth to pay for it. This means “smaller and more targeted projects,” for which Marohn wants capital costs—including trains, buses, stops, and shelters—to “always be paid by capturing part of the wealth created.” “Value capture” funds a project with a share of the value the project produces and is a vital part of many transit regimes. But it’s generally a local strategy that is not expected to cover all capital costs. Transit projects are expensive. Using value capture to generate even a fraction of the cost of, say, a major rail system, would require projects to spur massive amounts of new, taxable construction, necessitating aggressive up-zonings.

In addition to insisting that transit be developed only in places affluent enough to afford the initial capital expense, Marohn wants transit operations and maintenance to be “funded through the fare box.” But this is unrealistic. As Nicholas Dagen Bloom shows in his 2023 book *The Great American Transit Disaster: A Century of Austerity, Auto-Centric Planning, and White Flight*, transit in early-20th-century American cities did subsist on fares, and was even profitable. But we’re a long way from the urban density that made that possible. Dagen Bloom traces how, as ridership and fare collection declined with suburbanization, transit systems became financially distressed. At this critical moment, leaders and voters in many American cities refused to make the necessary public investment to save transit, enacting what amounted to an austerity program.

Marohn denies that transit’s problems are due to a lack of public commitment. But as Dagen-Bloom documents, a *lack of public commitment* to transit was precisely what wiped out once-great transit systems from Chicago to Baltimore. New York City, San Francisco, and Boston were notable exceptions: these cities brought private transit “under the public tent,” a legacy reflected in these cities’ relatively robust systems today.

At best, Marohn’s transit finance proposals might be viable in small towns, and to the extent that Strong Towns encourages such places to develop in more compact, transit-friendly ways, its program has real value. But building transit in larger cities, where most of the U.S. population is concentrated, requires big capital projects, a fact Marohn’s proposals effectively rule out as if everyone could live in a small town. Excellent urban transit can exist alongside car use, as European and Asian cities prove, but that requires active central governments willing to fund both capital costs and operations. In a podcast episode that touches on the virtues of the Dutch transit system, Marohn wonders what’s going on “behind the scenes” in the Netherlands that “delivers more of a complete product” than we have in the U.S. The discussion ignores the elephant in the room: the direct and substantive funding the Dutch system receives from the Netherlands’ social-democratic federal government.

Marohn decries massive public expenditures on rail lines

that go to cornfields and refurbished train stations surrounded by parking lots and stroads. These are evidence, he declares, of the failure of top-down planning. He’s right that U.S. transit investments don’t always catalyze thriving communities, but the problem isn’t that they’re too big or too top-down; it’s that they aren’t connected to a sufficiently comprehensive planning process informed by a broadly shared conception of public welfare. On the contrary, they’re often driven by fragmented, unaccountable interests with little expertise in building transit. Detroit’s QLine streetcar is a prime example. Pushed by Quicken Loans founder Dan Gilbert and the Ilitch family, owners of Little Caesars Pizza, the QLine has failed to address the Detroit region’s major transit deficiencies.

The point isn’t that everything should be centrally planned; but we need at least some planning that matches the scale and scope of the transportation challenges we face, especially since they increasingly stem from the interconnected crises of climate change and wealth inequality, the consequences of which transcend local boundaries. Marohn praises Disney World’s transit system—with its frequent, reliable system of monorail, buses, and boats—as one of America’s best. But Disney is a premier example of highly centralized (if private) planning. In his book *Married to the Mouse: Walt Disney World and Orlando*, Foglesong shows how its executives eschewed the usual chaotic, conflict-ridden process of city building for “top-down decision making by can-do military men, armed with expertise and an appreciation for hierarchy.”

IN THE U.S., WHERE COMMUNITIES ARE highly segregated by income, Strong Towns’ recipe of broad wealth creation boils down to developing transit only in relatively affluent areas. Even when people in low-income neighborhoods manage to build wealth, real estate speculation and gentrification often push them out, denying them the improvements for which their efforts set the stage. They often end up in suburban communities, trading the problem of expensive housing for insufficient transit, the growing expense of car ownership, and diminished access to jobs and services. Marohn tells transit advocates to “give up” on serving low-density places with publicly-funded transit because it’s economically unsustainable and an “ineffective” way to help the poor.

But we shouldn’t abandon people who can’t drive or afford to live in the transit-rich cities that we’ve allowed to become playgrounds of the affluent, because, for one thing, we know that transit *does*, in fact, alleviate poverty. Take Clayton County, Georgia: majority black with a near-20 percent poverty rate and close to half the population density of nearby Atlanta, Clayton County eliminated its bus service in 2010 under “budget pressures.” Researchers found a direct link between the loss of bus service and “substantial increases in poverty and unemployment rates.”

Moreover, running transit successfully in lower-density suburbs is possible, because viable transit isn’t always just about density; it’s also about how space is organized—what transit researcher and writer Alon Levy calls the “structure of density.” In suburban Stockholm, Levy writes, the Swedish government

“built public housing simultaneously with the Metro,” putting it near transit stations. Density is arranged to “grade down from the station,” facilitating robust transit ridership that is set to expand.

With distributional justice and better planning, we can emulate Stockholm’s example and that of many working-class suburban communities globally that are served by good transit. This will require both sprawl repair and ensuring that transit is planned together with housing, schools, workplaces, and essential services. We can’t escape the complicated reality of the landscapes we’ve built. But an approach whereby communities get help only when the solution fits an ideology of incrementalism and free market capitalism simply leaves a lot of people out.

WATERING DOWN THE PUBLIC GOOD

CONSIDER MAROHN’S SIMPLE “HACK” of the Flint, Michigan, water system. In 2014, in an effort to cut costs, state officials switched Flint’s water supply from Detroit’s system to the Flint River. The new system delivered contaminated water, causing a major public health crisis. Weighing the “\$1.5 billion repair cost” against Flint’s median house value of “just \$29,000” and low household incomes, Marohn deems a “conventional” approach “not viable.” He proposes building a smaller, separate system for drinking water, and leaving the existing system intact with untreated water for fighting fires. Marohn, highlighting his engineering background, asserts that U.S. water systems were never designed for drinking water, but for fighting fires. To use potable water for things like washing clothes and floors, he declares, is to “pour caviar all over the ground.”

Marohn elaborated on his idea for Flint in my interview with him:

If we could ... get out of this equity trap where we limit ourselves and our options to what seems fair ... and actually ask a different question: How do we help people in Flint become really, really successful? A system that gave them really quick, on-the-cheap drinking water that was safe and jobs to maintain and take care of the system, and extra capital that they could then put into things that matter to them, seems a much more respectful approach.

While it’s great that Marohn wants safe drinking water for Flint’s citizens, his suggestion that equity is an obstacle to “success” is concerning. Flint’s water was poisoned in the first place because the state prioritized financial issues over equity. Moreover, equity is essential to rebuilding our eroded belief in the concept of the public good. Local planning needs to be linked with basic questions: What standards should water systems meet in every community? How can we build local wealth but at the same time create a society that shares wealth broadly? The appeal of local control is understandable given state corruption in Flint, but localism divorced from questions of broad public welfare entrenches existing spatial inequalities. Sure, the poor community gets to plan for itself, but so does the rich community, and the

former stays poor while the latter gets richer.

On top of that, Marohn’s “simple” idea is not realistic. Professor Marc Edwards, a civil and environmental engineer at Virginia Tech and an expert on Flint’s water crisis, told me that dividing the city’s water system would be risky and expensive. U.C. Berkeley environmental engineer David Sedlak echoed Edwards, calling the idea of two separate systems a “nonstarter” and adding that sending non-potable water into people’s homes would be dangerous to public health and undermine trust in the water supply. Even if it’s not drinkable, water used for washing clothes and flushing toilets must still meet higher standards than that used to fight fires. And untreated and potable water systems can accidentally cross-connect, increasing the risk of disease. (While some early water systems were divided, it was rare. Our modern system was designed for “dual use” and must meet constraints for both firefighting and potable water.)

We should not revert poor communities’ water systems back to the 19th century—that is a recipe for Bantustans. What we need is a vision for a comprehensive system of public infrastructure that prioritizes 21st-century human needs over the vicissitudes of the private market. With Strong Towns, it’s important to recognize what’s simply right libertarianism and austerity politics masquerading as social justice.

HACKING THE HOUSING CRISIS

SHELTER IN THE U.S. IS INCREASINGLY EXPENSIVE and out of reach, and we have rampant housing insecurity as a result. Strong Towns’ solutions to the housing crisis expose the limits of a localism and incrementalism uncoordinated with larger state intervention. It blames housing scarcity on federal policy and regulation (like zoning), as well as “financialization,” which has “driv[en] up the price of real estate as an asset class to the detriment of those who need it as shelter.” Promising ideas include ending single-family zoning and permitting a wider variety of building types. Strong Towns also wants property owners to be able to freely expand a single-family home, for example, by adding additional rooms, floors, or outbuildings on a lot. All of this, it contends, would lower housing costs by increasing supply.

Strong Towns also wants to revive small-scale development, and is working to “unleash the swarm” by encouraging ordinary people to become “incremental” developers. One way an unfettered swarm of small developers would ease the housing crisis is by building a greater variety of building types—for example, accessory dwelling units (ADUs), which are small residential units situated on a property that includes a separate primary residential building, often a single-family home. Strong Towns cites a report by right-libertarian think tank R Street trumpeting ADUs as a “low-profile, free-market solution that requires little from government actors beyond getting out of the way.”

But that assumes these units actually make it into the housing supply. An ADU investment can typically be recouped faster on Airbnb, discouraging long-term rentals. Some cities, like Santa Cruz, have responded by restricting short-term

rentals. Such restrictions may provoke fierce opposition from property owners or get struck down by the courts, as in the case of New Orleans' attempt to restrict short-term rentals. But even when ADUs do rent long-term, the tenants are often relatives or friends, not low-income individuals or families. California already lets ADUs count toward the state's affordable housing requirements, but lacks regulation to ensure they fulfill the acutest housing needs. A recent report revealed how affluent cities in San Mateo County are using ADUs to avoid constructing multifamily low-income affordable units.

Activists have tried to help single-family homeowners in low-income neighborhoods develop ADUs, but they're a major investment, necessitating state or private assistance. When I asked Marohn how these homeowners might also participate, he explained how building wealth in lower-income communities looks different than in affluent ones. As an example, he described how, in Santa Ana, California, you might find a Latino family of two parents, two kids, two cousins, an uncle, and a grandma living in a "traditional" arrangement under one roof as a strategy to pool resources and build wealth.

But is this a "traditional" family structure or eight people crammed into a two-bedroom house out of economic desperation? Santa Ana, which is 76 percent Hispanic and has long had a problem with overcrowded, dilapidated housing, topped a list of cities with the most hardship in the early 2000s. Families like the one in Marohn's example face structural barriers to decent housing that are rooted in income inequality and racism. But Marohn would have us disregard what he calls the "equity trap" and instead re-imagine families crowded into sub-par housing as wealth-builders who can achieve financial success through entrepreneurial grit.

Indeed, for Strong Towns, entrepreneurship is constitutive of community itself. The goal is "real estate development as a form of community organizing." Small developers are urban "pollinators" that combine to form an "ecosystem," and the neighborhoods they target are "farms." The culture of incremental development is portrayed as diverse and inclusive, thriving on a willingness to try unorthodox things. Strong Towns' vision of entrepreneurship lifts people out of poverty and tackles gentrification, too. The key is cultivating small developers who, because they truly love a place, can be trusted to carry out projects that serve community needs.

While some small developers may be genuinely interested in alleviating housing insecurity, Strong Towns' rhetoric romanticizes small developers to a ridiculous degree, seamlessly equating their interests with those of "the community" and conflating individual wealth accumulation with benefits to the larger group. Two thousand small-scale developers, one article states, can "produce emergent answers to questions like, 'How much housing does this city need?' or, 'What's the right mix of commercial and residential?' or, 'What's the right mix of single-family and multi-family housing?'"

But historically, small-scale developers' class interests often conflicted with those of other groups, as was the case with the Brooklyn "Brownstoners" of the mid-20th century, an analog to Strong Towns' incremental developers who fought against top-down, Robert Moses-style projects and celebrated traditional development by slowly rehabbing old housing stock. But as Suleiman Osman documents in *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn*, they were frequently at odds with the borough's poor, and their agenda "often unintentionally, though at times purposely, served the process of gentrification."

Indeed, small developers are often the first signal that an area is ripe for larger investment and gentrification, and they are often just big developers in embryonic form. There's no guarantee they'll stay that way.

But even if they did, it wouldn't be sufficient to satisfy the existing need, especially for low-income housing. For Strong Towns, though, a system that leaves a significant percentage of people behind is an acceptable tradeoff—simply necessary to

nurturing the kind of artisanal market capitalism represented by small developers. In such an ideological context, bad ideas start to look like innovation.

Take the recent debate over reviving windowless bedrooms. In the spring of 2022, New York City Mayor Eric Adams proposed reconsidering long-standing laws requiring windows in bedrooms. Empty office space has proliferated since the pandemic as more people work from home, and this legal tweak, Adams

argued, could help developers convert empty office buildings into apartments, alleviating housing market pressure. In our interview, Marohn admitted that the idea was unappealing but then asked, "What's your choice then? What are you proposing?"

The obvious answer is public housing. Strong Towns acknowledges that public housing hasn't been the "failure" it has been made out to be and even seems open to it, but this just underscores the slipperiness of its politics.

Marohn is wary of public housing because it is government-run. In his analysis, the marketplace would be meeting a majority of people's housing needs today had the government not enacted policies that distorted it. The government thus *created* the need for public housing in the first place, so why should we trust it to be the purveyor of solutions? (Marohn criticizes the government's sanctioning of financial products like mortgage-backed securities, the proliferation of which led to the 2008 financial crisis, as a recent example of the government's market-distorting influence.) Putting our hopes in public housing is, for Marohn, a bit like expecting to dismantle the master's house with the master's tools.

But note what Marohn does here: he collapses "government" into a monolith, obscuring the fact that the American government has embodied vastly different ideas and approaches across historical eras, depending on who was in power. A government that prioritizes the provision of shelter through public housing programs insulated from the profit motive is

**“ Small developers
are urban ‘pollinators’
that combine to form an
‘ecosystem.’ ”**

worlds away from one that abets a finance sector-led scheme to capture government and turn housing into commodities “as tradable, and impersonal, as stocks, bonds, and baseball cards,” as journalist Alyssa Katz put it in her 2009 book, *Our Lot: How Real Estate Came to Own Us*. In the 1930s, for example, the Roosevelt administration built well-designed, well-constructed public housing with amenities like children’s play structures that doubled as public art, childcare, employment counseling, and more. By the 1980s and ’90s, the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations were accelerating public housing’s decline while increasingly taking their cues from the finance boys to solve the nation’s housing problems. During this latter period, racialized media narratives helped manufacture the popular perception that public housing was failing on its own merits when, in fact, public policy deserved much of the blame. By failing to distinguish between government acting in the public interest and government acting at the behest of private interests at the public expense, Marohn lumps the range of government action into a single baddie to be avoided.

Strong Towns’ adherence to conservative principles of self-help, self-reliance, and market solutions can sometimes lead to progressive positions. Marohn views tent settlements, for example, as a potential starting point for the formation of a self-sustaining community. But while slums are better than sweeps, public housing is even better. Marohn concedes that there might be a role for the government in building housing, but endorses it only as a transitional solution for those who can’t get housing through the private market: public housing that’s anything but transitional, he suggests, is a sign that “we’re losing part of the mobility of America,” and that “something else is broken in the system”—as if the current system isn’t already broken by design.

Why prolong people’s suffering or settle for slippery-slope ideas like windowless bedrooms (which, if allowed, could quickly become the standard for housing the poor) when we could embrace public housing, a solution with demonstrated success around the world? Strong Towns is full of excuses—public housing isn’t a “magical Get-Out-of-Jail-Free card for the failures of the market” or “we can’t just copy-paste Vienna.” In a self-fulfilling prophecy, Strong Towns doubts there is “the political will anywhere in America for the billions and billions of dollars of subsidy required to fund social housing at a scale.”

But there’s nothing mysterious about public housing. As a form of direct subsidy, it can be an efficient way to provide affordable housing. Not only do we know how to fund and scale it, we already have the basic infrastructure—over 3,000 existing public housing authorities—to get started again. Some places are already doing it, like Montgomery County, Maryland, and Seattle, Washington, which are embracing the cross-subsidy “social housing” model proven successful in Europe. With this model, public housing is open to everyone, not just the poor, and more affluent tenants subsidize more affordable units for those with lower incomes. Universal access not only helps finance public housing in hot markets but provides broad social benefits. However, the cross-subsidy model tends to produce units that may still be unaffordable for extremely low-income

people, particularly in expensive urban markets. Therefore, some ongoing government subsidy will still be necessary. Strong Towns is right to want the market to provide more housing, and more types of housing, but it’s a partial solution at best.

ARE THERE LEFTIST VERSIONS OF STRONG TOWNS? Certainly progressives tend to support public transit, safe water, housing for all, and ending sprawl. But the imperative of beating back the far right may have made these issues less of a priority. That must change. If, like me, you’re a progressive and distressed about the state of our cities, you will like a lot of what Strong Towns has to say. But its approach is ultimately undergirded by a right-wing ideology that does little to alter the political status quo and further naturalizes austerity and infrastructure inequality: communities get what they *deserve* based on their ability to build wealth through entrepreneurship, not what they *need* from a system that prioritizes human rights and the delivery of universal public goods.

Strong Towns also neglects the whole notion of the public realm. Public works like social housing, transit, and water infrastructure certainly provide tangible material benefits, but they also convey and reinforce a sense of human unity and solidarity over individualism and profit. Strong Towns likes to talk about places built by “many hands,” which is a beautiful image but is largely limited to small developers and individual entrepreneurs toughing it out—often as a side-hustle—in a system ruled, above all, by market signals. Moreover, the “many” in its equation refers to particular do-ers over the beneficiaries of development.

The New Deal, whatever its shortcomings, is the best starting point we have for enlarging our sense of the public realm, and for grasping the kind of planning needed to rebuild and nurture it. As sociologist Robert D. Leighninger Jr. writes, one of the biggest obstacles to good public works is the conviction that “the locals know best what their problems are and should be left alone to deal with them.” But what people don’t usually realize, he argues, is that states and localities are often less responsive to local problems than the federal government: they “may also pay less attention to certain segments of the electorate, particularly urban dwellers and minorities” and lack the professional and management expertise that federal bureaucrats have historically supplied.

As Leighninger explains, the New Deal simultaneously *expanded* the federal government and *decentralized* decision-making by strengthening localities. Localism acted in co-operation with a state empowered to properly tax, redistribute wealth, and deliver broadly beneficial programs. Healthy localism also requires a strong labor movement that can defend and expand worker protections so that overworked Americans have time to attend public meetings and build the “bottom-up” revolution Strong Towns purports to nurture.

The biggest problem with Strong Towns is that it sells us individual responses to collective problems. Even its motto, “keep doing what you can to build a Strong Town,” lacks any sense of a collective “we.” A big part of the work ahead is about putting that “we” back into the process of creating the strong towns, cities, and communities we all deserve. ✚

REPUBLICANS REACT TO THE PLAGUES OF EGYPT

A.Y.M. & M.L.

The Lord is
displeased.
Dost thou
feel His
wrath?

RIVERS OF BLOOD

"The Lord is displeased. Dost thou feel His wrath?"

LISTEN LIBERAL,
IT'S CALLED WEATHER.

FROGS

WHAT IS THE
SEXUALITY OF THE
FROGS??

DON'T TREAD ON ME

"Cower in fear. The Lord will not be ignored.
Excuse me, I said cower in fear!"

BOILS

IT'S JUST THE FLU.

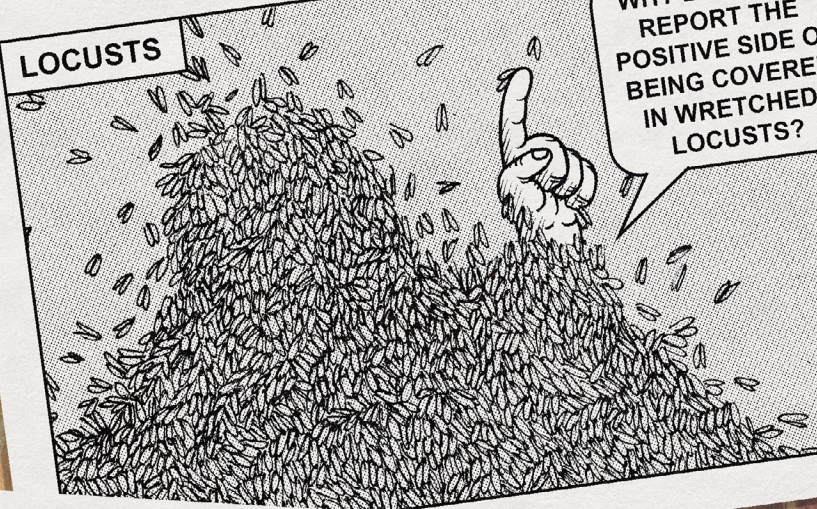
VAXXED?

THUNDERSTORMS OF FIERY HAIL



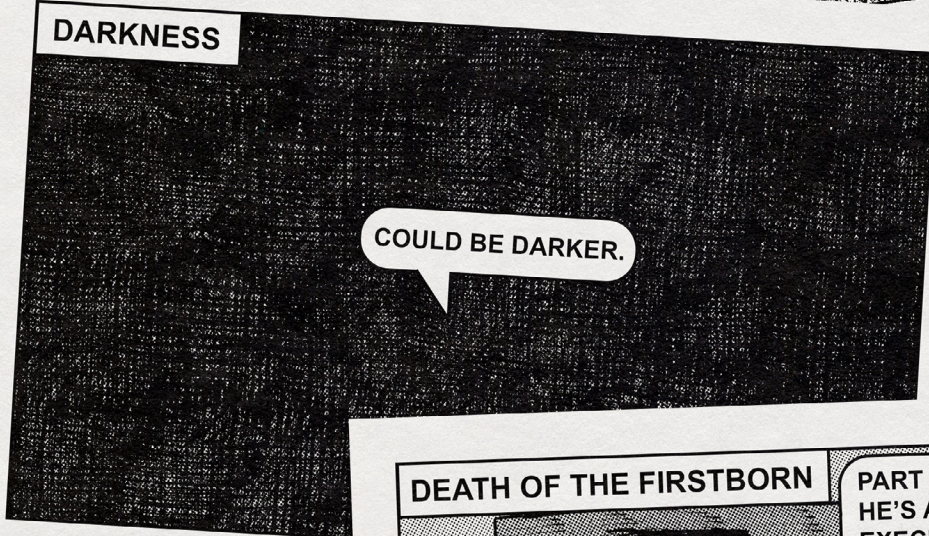
ONE HOT DAY AND LIBS
CRY CLIMATE CHANGE.

LOCUSTS



WHY DON'T YOU
REPORT THE
POSITIVE SIDE OF
BEING COVERED
IN WRETCHED
LOCUSTS?

DARKNESS



COULD BE DARKER.

DEATH OF THE FIRSTBORN



PART OF TRUMP'S MASTER PLAN.
HE'S ALWAYS WANTED DON JR.
EXECUTED.



Kyle Chayka is a cultural critic and staff writer for the *New Yorker*. Kyle's book *The Longing For Less: Living With Minimalism*, is a delightful, profound exploration of the idea of "minimalism." Beginning with the Marie Kondo phenomenon, Kyle tours world history and culture to discuss everything from Thoreau's cabin to John Cage's music to Japanese rock gardens to the sculptures of Donald Judd.

DO WE NEED MINIMALISM?

TODAY KYLE JOINS TO talk about why there have been periodic movements stressing the importance of having "less." We talk about how contemporary Instagrammable minimalism can actually be quite expensive. We ask whether Jesus was a minimalist. We probe the mystery of why Agnes Martin's minimalist paintings are so mesmerizing. Nathan is on the record as being a proud "maximalist" who loves ornamentation and chaos (he has even written an article called "Death To Minimalism") while Kyle

is sympathetic to the minimalist instinct, even if he highlights some of its more absurd manifestations (such as the glass walls in the Apple headquarters that were so "minimalist" you couldn't see them, leading employees to constantly bonk their faces on them).

But the important questions are: what leads us to want to reject the very things that supposedly make our consumer society so "abundant" and fulfilling? What's behind the Thoreau-like instinct to chuck it all away and do without luxury or adornment?

Is the minimalist instinct the right response to a civilization of wasteful excess? If it is, however, how do we determine what is "enough"?

Nathan J. Robinson

We're here today to talk about minimalism. One of the blurbs on your book says, "Kyle Chayka, in the longing for less, peels back the commodified husk of minimalism to reveal something surprising and thoroughly alive." Before we get to the thing you reveal that is "surprising and thoroughly alive," let's discuss the commodified husk. What are they referring to there?

Kyle Chayka

I think the commodified husk at the time that I wrote the book, which was circa 2018-2019, was the specter of Marie Kondo. I was definitely responding to that moment of her total media saturation, which included the Netflix show and the books that were everywhere. This is also peak Instagram era aesthetics. Minimalism was everywhere. And then, from the Marie Kondo perspective, it meant cleaning out your house and getting rid of all of your stuff.



Marie Kondo.

Robinson

I never saw her show, so I saw the moment and didn't like the sound of her project to the extent that I understood it. She had some things to say about books, and not keeping too many. I, as a person who is surrounded—

Chayka

Getting rid of books—you could have 40 books.

Robinson

40?

Chayka

I think it was 40. That's what I remember.

It could have been less. But, I probably have 300 books around here.

Robinson

I'm surrounded by books to the point that they're a safety hazard. There are towers of unstable books all over the Current Affairs offices. I always wondered, though, whether I resented her (to the extent I understood her) for reasons that were rational, or whether what I didn't like was that she was pointing out something that was true. What did you feel?

Chayka

I think she hit a nerve. The books wouldn't have sold so much, and she wouldn't have been so popular, if there wasn't some element of truth to what she was saying. By all of her press coverage accounts, she was way more popular in the United States than she was in Japan. So, there was this image of a very austere Japanese woman coming from this cliché East Asian spirituality background telling you that you didn't need all the consumerist crap in your house. There's something deeply appealing about that and almost archetypal. I think Americans at that moment were coming out of this phase of peak internet consumption; everything felt new online at that time, circa 2016-2019. Direct to consumer products and Instagram advertising were everywhere, you could suddenly buy anything you wanted to buy online, and I think that caused a hangover after a few years. Everyone just suddenly realized they were addicted to getting stuff on Amazon, and then looked around and saw their full apartments and houses and wondered what the fuck they're doing and what to do with all this stuff.

Robinson

Why wasn't she popular in Japan?

Chayka

I think because there was an overflow; that market was already served in Japan. She was a professional cleaner and was trained in a particular kind of cleaning in Japan already. There was already this wider class of people in a genre of books about tidying up, and so she wasn't as unique in that space.

Robinson

To the extent the minimalism of the period that you are discussing here, is it just a general belief that we order too many things on Amazon and should be a little more thoughtful about what we buy, why we're buying it, and whether it's bringing us any joy, or was there something more to it, like an aesthetic of its own or a certain prescribed lifestyle? Tell us more about what this was and is.

Chayka

I think it was this kind of movement or lifestyle idea. It did go far beyond Marie Kondo. There are a bunch of American bloggers as well who are talking about minimalism, living with less, and getting out of the consumerist mindset. That kind of lifestyle minimalism emerged and bled into the aesthetic of minimalism that had also become more popular, a kind of aesthetic of minimalism. The artistic heritage of it stretches back to the 1960s, which we can talk about, but I think in the 2010s it was a native aesthetic to the multimedia heavy internet, where everything on Instagram looked very austere and minimalist. Clothing design from the generic Everlane and Uniqlo brands was very minimalist. Sneakers, makeup, and furniture were minimalist. It was just the trendy digital idiom of that time. I think plenty of people were attracted by that for quite a while, but then also started to become repelled by it by the late 2010s.

Robinson

I have very mixed feelings about it because on the one hand, I consider myself something of the embodiment of a maximalist. You can't see here, but I am surrounded by what can only be described as tchotchkes from every part of my life: little old postcards, toys, artifacts, flags, old advertisements, books, and magazines. And yet, for all of my maximalism, there is that anti-consumerist and even pro-ecological in the sense that we consume too much—it's unsustainable and destroying the planet—that I sympathize with. Help me work through how I should feel about this.

Chayka

Yes, it's a weird paradox. The most ironic

thing that I found about the “20/20 rule” minimalism was this idea that you could buy new products that were minimalist, and thus you would feel better about yourself—you could buy the minimalist lamp or t-shirt that you would only need one of. This is added consumption that gives you the veneer of somehow consuming less, probably through the aesthetic. So, when I think about tchotchkes, kitsch, antiques, and stuff like that, it’s all stuff that already exists—it’s material and physical objects that have been circulating through humanity for years or decades and building up a kind of patina that’s not really minimalist, but has a history and a presence. It’s not adding to the environmental damage that manufacturing a new t-shirt or ephemeral furniture will cause, so I do feel it’s ironic that minimalism gives the aesthetic of consuming less, but you’re actually consuming more new stuff.

Robinson

Thank you, you’ve exonerated me here because I would claim that I have caused fewer new things to be brought into the world and use fewer resources due to my consumption of vintage and old shit, than some of these minimalists.

Chayka

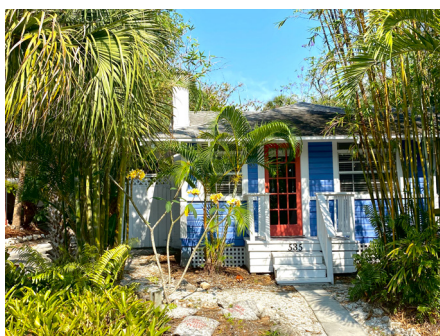
I always think of the architecture fact that demolishing a building causes more environmental damage than rehabbing the building that already exists. There’s less damaging consequences in keeping what’s already around you rather than buying new stuff, no matter how minimalist it is.

Robinson

Yes. Every time I go back to my hometown of Sarasota, Florida, another 1920s Florida House—I love these old houses—has been flattened, and a giant white cube has emerged in its place, which is the fashion now. If you go into these houses, people have polished concrete floors and very little furniture. But, there was already a house there!

Chayka

I have a lot of sympathy for the minimalist aesthetic. I love it. It’s my taste to begin with. But the cement floors are just beyond the pale for me. It’s uncomfortable,



Houses in Sarasota, Florida. Above, a traditional house, circa 1920s. Below, the kind of minimalist building that is replacing many of the old houses. Note the presence of a minimalist Christmas tree on the balcony. Photos by Nathan J. Robinson

so austere, and just seems completely absurd. That’s totally the modern minimalism versus what it might have meant decades ago. The generic glass box that’s pre-made and plopped onto anywhere in the United States is cliché now. It’s not minimalist at all, really.

Robinson

Minimalism is not really one thing, so I want to be careful about making general statements, but I feel there’s a belief that form follows function. Minimalism is about stripping something down—what is needed in order for it to function—but sometimes it’s an illusion. I think of the bathroom that I had in my previous apartment, which was a very minimalist and pure white. First, the white got dirty very fast, but second, the beautiful shower had just one glass pane, no door, and made a mess. You minimize so much that you minimize the door away, and it turned out you needed the door on that shower.

Chayka

It looks beautiful, but doesn’t fulfill the function that it’s supposed to. That’s breaking form follows function—the function does not exist. It’s all about that beautiful form of the single glass pane, and it’s actually not efficient or functionalist in the slightest.

Robinson

You cite in your book the very amusing fact that when Apple built its new headquarters, they put in walls of glass that were so beautifully transparent that everyone bonked into them.

Chayka

Yes, and I think they had to put sticky notes on them so people didn’t run into the glass walls. That was just pure aesthetic over architectural function. This kind of vocabulary comes from modernist architecture, like Le Corbusier or Mies van der Rohe. When you look back at their buildings from the 1940s, 1950s, or 1960s, they aren’t as extreme as what we see now. They aren’t full of glass walls, and the bathrooms don’t look like your minimalist bathroom does. They did have a functionalist purpose in mind originally, but it’s just become, over time, this hyper aestheticized style that people consume rather than thinking about the meaning or function behind things.



The shower in Nathan’s old apartment.

Robinson

Didn’t Le Corbusier did want to flatten half of Paris and put up these beautiful, simple towers?

Chayka

That’s true—the “Towers in the Park” urbanism theory. It did not work out so

well, I would say, but I do think his other great quote, “The house is a machine for living,” has certainly turned out to be true and what people look for now. They’re just not very good machines, like your minimalist bathroom.

Robinson

I don’t like that “machine for living” stuff. I want my house to be a cozy glove I can slide into. I want a cocoon. What we’re touching on right now is the idea that some minimalism can be an illusion. You mentioned Apple products and that they make these beautiful, simplified designs, but that minimalism can hide the messy infrastructure that is necessary to make a lot of these consumer goods possible.

Chayka

Yes, like the fact that Apple devices become infinitely flattened, thin, and wide over time. The glass phone looks like nothing, and yet, you can’t use it without all the infrastructure behind it. Your device may look minimalist, but the whole mass of undersea cables, server farms, aluminum mines, and factories is not minimalist at all. That’s all the infrastructure and mess that supports the illusion of your perfectly minimalist phone. I think we don’t think about that stuff enough because the design discourages us from thinking about it. We don’t think about the fact that there’s a battery in the phone because we can’t replace it and don’t interact with it. It’s just this pristine block of steel and glass.



Apple products.

Robinson

It’s ironic. As I understand it, some of the tendencies and big demands in 20th century architecture was that architecture, at least, should get more honest and expose its innards. There’s the Pompidou Center,

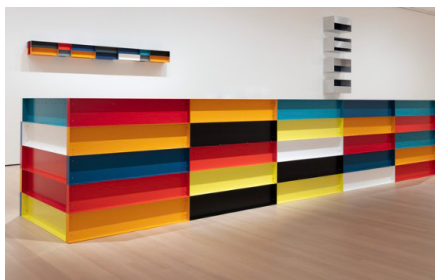


Pompidou center.

where you can see what the building is because we don’t want to lie to people.

Chayka

Part of minimalism and the artistic movement in the 1960s and 1970s was to actually expose the bare material of a thing. So, whether that was an architectural form or a steel box that Donald Judd made, it was about getting down to the actual material of a thing and confronting the rawness of it in a very brutal way. Whereas the iPhone, I think, doesn’t do that; it doesn’t confront you with its materiality. Instead, it just helps you disappear into the digital world.



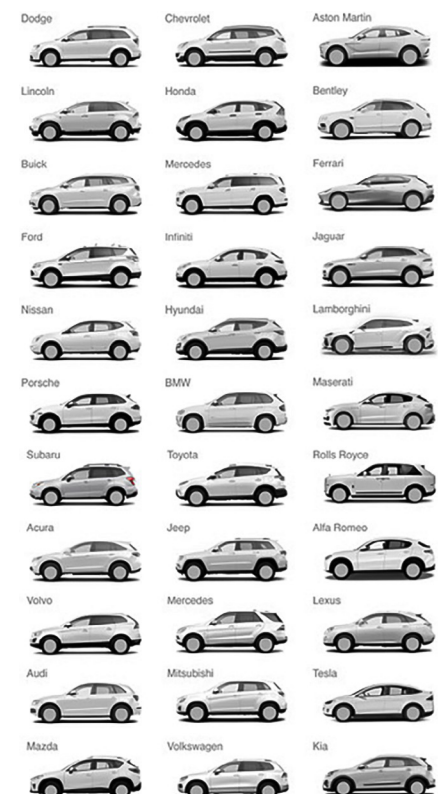
Sculpture by Donald Judd.

Robinson

There are some ways in which, by this desire to strip everything down to its essentials, we may lose sight of some things. We think we’re getting down to the essentials, but we’re actually taking away things that gave us pleasure and delights, and we didn’t realize it. I think of GeoCities websites and blogs versus Substack. Substack is very minimalist compared to old web design, which was messy, cluttered, and ugly. Substack is sleek and beautiful, but it loses a certain kind of element of personality. It homogenizes.

Chayka

It totally homogenizes everyone’s internet presence—this is a subject of my next book. So many of the digital platforms we use are very minimalist—they follow this modernist idea of empty white space and perfect geometric design, and they force everyone into using those same templates. Substack follows Medium, which was designed to be the perfect writing tool on the internet, and now everyone’s blog looks the same. You can choose which color you want, and maybe choose a few different fonts, but on GeoCities, you could stick a random GIF of a construction worker working on an “in progress” sign—wherever you wanted. You could build weird frames and add and subtract pages. In some ways, I feel like the Internet has become less messy and personally creative. Even in 2011–2012 with Tumblr, it felt like it was more of a personal form of expression and was customizable. You designed your page to evoke your own personality and tastes, and now we just have a series of homogenous templates that we’re forced into.



Cars all look the same now.

Robinson

One of my problems with contemporary architecture has always been the loss of the filigree and the ornament, the stuff I love that's whimsical and totally unnecessary. People have pointed out that there are many areas in which aesthetics might have become slightly more boring over time. I don't know if this is an illusion, but I've seen diagrams showing the convergence of car design, showing that all cars have started to look the same. I do worry there's a homogenizing effect where everything has become clean and antiseptic, and reached a perfect state of nothingness. Where do you go from there?

Chayka

Yes, it was asymptotically moving toward nothing for quite a few years in the 2010s, particularly. You can see that with cars, which were more homogenous and the same few colors were more popular. You can see it with fashion brand logos, which all became generic sans serif with plain black text on white background. You could see it with clothing, this kind of semi-preppy minimalist blankness, and everything was converging and coming together to a single theoretically perfect point of taste. But then, all of a sudden, it became insanely boring. I think taste is a pendulum swinging back and forth, and when we reach one extreme, we automatically want to go to the total opposite. We craved noise, chaos, difference, and diversity. The pandemic was coincidental timing, perhaps, but it definitely catalyzed everyone feeling very bored and over this minimalist aesthetic and the sameness because suddenly things were the same every day, for everyone, and so no one wanted more of that.

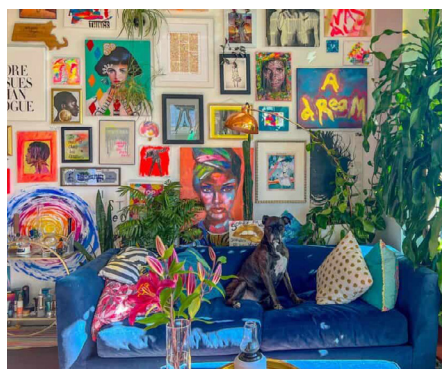
Robinson

Do you sense that there is a general shift in the zeitgeist since you began this book?

Chayka

Yes, I think so. There are a bunch of articles already about Gen Z maximalism and how the next generation prefers much more decor, filigree, chaos, and visual engagement. But, is that because of TikTok? Is our Instagram minimalism just becoming their TikTok maximalism, and everything

And now for some... MAXIMALISM!



needs to move, ooze, and stretch, and be blobby and weird? My theory has been that digital platforms caused homogenization; everyone being on the same Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter homogenizes so many things. And so, I think the homogeneity might stay the same even if the style is changing. We moved from generic Instagram minimalism to generic TikTok boozy bright color maximalism.

Robinson

I've wanted to put a word to you and ask you how it relates and plugs in to your thinking about minimalism, and that word is "utilitarian". Do you think minimalism tends to be utilitarian?



A Donald Judd chair.

Chayka

I think so. It depends on what aspect you're looking at, I'd say. It makes me think of Donald Judd's furniture. Judd was the classic minimalist artist in the 1960s in New York. When he moved to Marfa, Texas, he started making his own furniture from these very plain, pre-cut chunks of wood: the most severely geometric chairs and tables. In one way, they're very utilitarian in that they are simple to make; it's a simple design, and they fulfill their function perfectly. It's a chair, it's a table, but they're horrifically uncomfortable. Sure, you can sit in it. It's a 90 degree plywood chair, but you might not want to sit on it for too long. It's not fulfilling the function of comfort, but it is fulfilling the function of a thing to sit on.

Robinson

His chairs sound a little bit like my shower, which is pseudo-utilitarian: it looks like you've boiled it down to its function, but you've forgotten what the actual thing is for.

Chayka

Yes, pseudo-utilitarian, I think, is a great way to describe the consequences of this minimalist aesthetic: things that look like they should fulfill their function, but actually don't.

Robinson

I feel like I have taken you in a direction so far that emphasizes criticism of various aspects of the minimalist aesthetic and the ways in which it can be fraudulent. I will say, however, that your book is very much not the case against minimalism. In fact, reading it, I developed an appreciation for some things that I didn't appreciate going into it, like rock gardens and the paintings of Agnes Martin. You realize that there are many ways in which this simplifying instinct can take us towards an appreciation of things that we would overlook if they were just cluttered together with other things.

Chayka

That's very nice. The point of the book was to draw people away from this aesthetic of minimalism, and hopefully bring us back to some of these artistic principles. I think the fundamental principle of minimalist art was that you can find beauty in any sensory perception, especially if you focus on it enough and allow yourself to perceive something. So, an Agnes Martin painting that's just a grid of painted lines confronts you with your own ability to perceive things, even though it's so simple and there's not that much to perceive. It's a very fundamental idea that Agnes Martin is putting in front of you, or similarly, like a John Cage musical composition. The classic 4'33" is John Cage saying that the piano doesn't have to create the music, the sound that you can enjoy is all around you. You should focus on perceiving whatever there is to perceive, and you don't need the artist to make something dramatically beautiful and perfect for you. You can just perceive what you perceive,



Thoreau's cabin.

and that's great. So, in that way, I think it's a very democratic or accessible idea of art because you can find art in whatever you want to, really.

Robinson

I've never found myself grinding my teeth at the idea of John Cage's 4'33", but I will say that I don't think many people put it into their Spotify playlists.

Chayka

No, I think it works best as a conceptual joke. Minimalism and humor are not paradoxical, and I think they can both co-exist. I find a lot of John Cage's work very funny. 4'33" is a grand joke on the idea of art, and some of his chance-based compositions are just noisy—they're chaotic, not pleasurable, noisy sounds that were "fuck you, listen to this," and I find that very funny. It's a way of joking and making fun of art as much as anything, and I always enjoy that. Seeing the joke in it is part of the fun.

Robinson

We've started to look back in time, and one of the things that you emphasize in your book is that this longing for less and this feeling that we would be better off living the simple life certainly did not begin when Marie Kondo came over from Japan and asked us if our tchotchkes sparked joy. It has a long history. What's the earliest kind of articulation of this feeling, this longing, that you found?

Chayka

Yes, it's tough. I think you can go back to ancient Greek and Roman philosophy and talk about the Stoics and the acceptance of what's around you and of your fate in

a certain way, and that feels minimalist to me. One of my favorite examples and one I've thought a lot about the Chinese I Ching, which is this fortune telling system that was made up of these very plain grids and lines that represented the fractures on burnt tortoise shells as a way of predicting fate, and that feels minimalist and certainly inspired future forms of minimalism. But also, I think you can track a path through Christianity, like Francis of Assisi, and American transcendentalist like Thoreau.

Robinson

You have a quote here, "Jesus is the original minimalist."

Chayka

I don't know if I agree with that one, but that was from a Christian minimalist lifestyle blogger who called Jesus the original minimalist. I don't know what his fashion sense was like, or how he decorated his house. Certainly, he seemed to live a very simple life. But yes, I think the philosophy has a long history. The idea that civilization or consumerism is too much, too obsessed with material gain, is a perennial human theme, and likely will recur as long as humanity exists.

Robinson

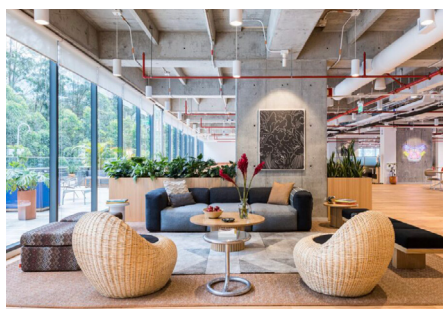
Yes, of course. You cite Thoreau: I need to simplify, I need to purge, but I still want someone else to do my laundry or whatever. That desire of: What if I just had four walls, a chair, and my thoughts?

Chayka

Yes, like things you make yourself: "I'm going to produce everything around me and simplify my life down to things that I can control and manage, and I will be the heroic protagonist of Western civilization." I think, in some ways, it's philosophically minimalist, but also egotistically maximalist.

Robinson

There is this sense that it's about authenticity. Often, there's an implicit idea of the world around us and the society that we're in, that something has been built atop the authentic, true human self—the essence of existence—and we have to strip away the inauthentic to reach the authentic.



A WeWork office.

Chayka

Authenticity is the thing that we're always pursuing. Even though we don't know what it means, things feel inauthentic when they're too much, too abstract, or too distant from their sources. In the 2010s, you could say that the internet caused plenty of people to feel inauthentic, that "too much of my experience is online—it's too immaterial and abstract for me." That could cause a certain desire for minimalism, which is physical simplicity and things you can understand and touch.

Robinson

The longing for less is something I totally grasp. I think we can all get this feeling. This is going to sound conspiratorial, but I worry that we will be told you don't need to own a house, and instead, you can live in a bunk bed with six other people, spend \$3,000 a month on it, and be living your true authentic life because you won't be surrounded by all of these material things you can just donate.

Chayka

I think that's true, though. It looked like it was going to happen, certainly in the late 2010s, with WeWork and WeLive.

Robinson

That's a minimalist thing.

Chayka

Yes, totally. It's a scalable, efficient vision of authentic life that depends on the city for its meaning. There was no meaning to your dwelling, it was all about what you were doing out on the street or something. But again, I think the pandemic totally proved the lie to that stuff. All of a sudden, you're trapped in your WeLive dormitory,

and you have nothing but minimalist furniture and your weird cafeteria to survive on, and that didn't work out for many people. So, I think there has been this retreat away from that idea, and hopefully more people directly involved in their own life for something. I don't see it as homesteading quite, but I do think the pandemic caused a big flight out of cities and a greater interest in rural lands, growing your own food, and making your own staff, which can be good.

Robinson

You associate some of the minimalist instinct of our own time or the time immediately before our own time—things have changed somewhat over the past few years—with anxiety and crisis. You write: "Minimalism is a communal invention, the blank slate that it offers an illusion, especially given its history. It is popular around the world, I think, because it reacts against a condition that is now everywhere, a state of social crisis, mixed with a terminal dissatisfaction with the material culture around us that seems to have delivered us to this point, though the fault is our own. When I see the austere kitchens, bare shelves and elegant cement walls, the dim vague colors and the skeletal furniture, the monochrome devices, the white t-shirts, the empty walls, the wide open windows looking out onto nothing in particular, minimalism as a meme on Instagram, as a self-help book commandment, as an encouragement to get rid of as much as possible in the name

of imminently buying more, I see both an anxiety of nothingness and a desire to capitulate to it. Like the French phrase for the subconscious flash of desire to jump off the ledge lapel divvied *The Call of the Void*."

Chayka

I remember writing that, and it really was the climax of the book—it comes toward the end. I think by meditating on this stuff for so long, I was very much in that mind-set of, "Maybe we should just embrace nothingness. Maybe this is the answer." But, it's paradoxical: it is this eternal longing that we have to throw it all away and embrace the void. I came to the conclusion by writing the book that you have to find that for yourself. You don't buy a t-shirt, a lamp, or a chair, or you don't paint your apartment walls white—that isn't how you indulge in that desire for the void or how you resolve it in yourself. You have to actually go back to your own sensations and understand what your own perception of beauty and what your own reality around you is. I think the aesthetic of minimalism is often a distraction from that. I always think back to this insane photoshoot that the Times did of this woman's house, which was a complete white void: the floors and walls were painted white, and the furniture was white. It just seemed like no human being could exist in the space, and yet it was being upheld as the height of luxury and perfection. I feel that totally speaks to the absurdity of that moment that the most money in the world bought you was a white vacuum.



Johnson's "glass house".

Robinson

One of the problems that I have is that when I'm in spaces that are made in accordance with a minimalist aesthetic, I feel like as a human being, I'm a problem: I'm killing the perfection of the space with my stench and hairiness; I am not perfect; I am not a machine; I don't belong here; I'm ruining it.

Chayka

Ruining the vibe of this minimalist room. It's not a livable aesthetic, and it's very hard to find yourself in those spaces. There is a Philip Johnson quote that I have in the book—Philip Johnson being the architect of the Glass House, a semi-famous, semi-reformed Nazi. The modernist tastemaker of America said, "You can be comfortable in any space that's beautiful," and I think that's actually not super true.

Robinson

You went to the Glass House and saw that it was beautiful and also unlivable.

Chayka

Yes, exactly. The Glass House is just a small glass box with a tiny bedroom area, a little kitchen, and one beautiful 18th century French painting, that was not livable. It was always a facade and an image. Philip Johnson built these other buildings on that campus to actually sustain his life: an enclosed bedroom with only one small window, a beautiful library/studio, and a weird neoclassical pavilion on a pond. That perfect modernist image was not ultimately sustainable for a living.

Robinson

I got a Kyle Chayka quote to read you on that very subject:

"Minimalism can be oppressive. The style can make you feel like you don't belong in this space unless you conform to it, as in upscale cafés or severe hotel lobbies. Being in the Glass House among the handful of high design, high art objects that Johnson deign to allow, doesn't really feel like freedom but entrapment and someone else's vision. Its sparseness might seem luxurious, but it's also expensive and finicky, a facade of simplicity."

Chayka

There we go. I repeat my own word, facade. But it is finicky. If you have to have everything be in its perfect spot and immaculately compose your living space, then that's not flexible. That's not human and not very functional. I always thought it was amusing to compare that to Donald Judd's home spaces in Marfa or Soho, which were cluttered. He was the ultimate minimalist artist, and yet he kept piles of books on every single surface that he resided. He would have little seashells, sculptures, odds and ends, and materials everywhere, and was totally anathema to Johnson.

Robinson

Did he sit in his own chairs?

Chayka

Yes, he did. I think there's a good quote of his writing, in which he says, "In a chair, you're supposed to be uncomfortable"—it should keep you awake, essentially. When you're working, you can sit in a chair, and when you're hanging out, you can lay in a day bed. So, the day beds are for contemplating, and the chairs are for active working.

Robinson

I just suspect that he was in the day bed more and his guests were in chairs more. I think you do a fairly good job in the book of withholding a little bit of your personal judgment and how your own relationship to minimalism ended up. I was trying to judge from what you're wearing, and what I see behind you, whether you are, in fact, a minimalist or not, and I still can't tell.

Chayka

Yes, I still am a minimalist. Writing the book and thinking through these aesthetics so deeply, I was more appreciative of this more fundamental message, which is that you should engage with what's around you and know and understand your own tastes and appreciate the things you appreciate, rather than just mindlessly accepting one style or another. So, I like to think that everything that's in our house is something that we understand and appreciate. I think we do write books to exercise certain thoughts from our minds or get

over a subject, and I think I am happy that I've said everything about minimalism that I feel like saying.

Robinson

Sorry to make you say it again.

Chayka

I love that I had all these thoughts already. And so, I feel like I fully digested this, and now I can kind of live my life beyond it.

Robinson

My last book on right-wing arguments was very much like this. "I just need to write my definitive responses to all these arguments so I never have to think about them again."

Chayka

Exactly. It's intrusive thoughts that you have to then spend two years obsessing over, and then they're gone.

Robinson

I will say that this book did make me really want a rock garden.



A Japanese rock garden.

Chayka

Rock gardens are beautiful. I would love one in my house. I think my girlfriend would not really appreciate it. It would be really heavy, and I always wondered if it would break the floor or something.

Robinson

Ah, yes. Rocks.

Chayka

Big rocks! That's a lot of rocks for an apartment, but they are very beautiful. ♣

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DOWN AND OUT IN CARTOON LAND

by Alex Skopic

IF YOU CONSUME ANY NEWS AT ALL, you’ve probably noticed that the United States is pathologically cruel to its homeless citizens. This May, the brutal killing of Jordan Neely—who was strangled to death, at the age of 30, simply because he was unhoused and shouting on the Manhattan subway—captured the national spotlight, but it was just one of many such cases of unprovoked violence. In January, two cops reportedly kidnapped a homeless man in Hialeah, Florida, drove him to an “isolated and dark location,” and beat him unconscious. That same month, art dealer Shannon Collier Gwin faced battery charges after he sprayed a homeless woman with a hose outside his San Francisco gallery, barking “Move! Move!” at her. (Predictably, Gwin got a lenient plea deal, serving just 35 hours of community service.) Elsewhere in the city, homeless San Franciscans have been attacked with chemical bear spray on at least eight occasions. Other assaults have been more impersonal, but no less vicious. On July 14, the city of Houston abruptly closed its only public cooling center in the downtown area, potentially condemning anyone without shelter to suffer heatstroke in 90-degree weather. Among the property-owning class, the phenomenon of hostile architecture—sidewalks with spikes that stab anyone who tries to sleep, benches with iron bars, and the like—has become *de rigueur*. The widespread callousness and lack of compassion are both infuriating and hard to comprehend. How on Earth, we might ask, did things get this bad?

For answers, we can look to a surprising source: cartoons. Cartoons often rely on shared cultural assumptions and stereotypes for their humor, and you can tell a lot about how a society

views social and political subjects from the way they’re represented in animated form. In the Chilean book *How to Read Donald Duck*, for example, Marxist writers Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart argue that the globe-trotting adventures of classic Disney characters reflect the perspective of U.S. imperialism toward the rest of the world—in his comic strip incarnation, Donald is always visiting exotic new countries and rescuing hapless locals who hail him as a white (feathered) savior. (The book was banned by the Pinochet dictatorship; apparently they were staunch defenders of the Duck.) Of course, this type of analysis can be done badly—the world has too many long-winded YouTube videos with titles like “The Secret Neoliberalism of *Shrek 2*”—but at its best, a political critique of cartoons can provide genuine insight. If we turn a critical eye on animated depictions of homelessness and how they’ve changed over time, we may learn something valuable about the growth and spread of anti-homeless ideology in the United States, and even find ways of combating it.

Looking back at older cartoons, one of the things that stands out immediately is the *absence* of negative attitudes toward the homeless. In fact, during the Golden Age of animation, creators seemed to have a real affinity for the poor and unhoused, often placing their most iconic characters in that role. There’s a wonderful 1948 Warner Bros. short called “Riff Raffy Daffy,” in which Daffy Duck is looking for a place to sleep—first on a park bench, then a trash can, and finally a furniture display in a shop window—and has to dodge the harassment of the police, as represented by Porky Pig in a little blue uniform. (Literally, the cop is a pig!) Or, in the 1950 cartoon “Homeless

Hare,” Bugs Bunny’s rabbit hole is destroyed by a new construction project, leading him to unleash his usual slapstick mayhem against the developers until they put it back. In these cartoons, homelessness is something inflicted on people by outside forces—gentrification and the real-estate business, in Bugs’ case—and something which can be successfully resisted. Even Disney cast a homeless dog as a romantic lead in 1955’s *Lady and the Tramp*, contrasting Lady’s sheltered naivety with Tramp’s superior knowledge of the world. The title invokes the memory of Charlie Chaplin’s “Tramp” films, which similarly brought dignity and humanity to the role of a homeless man. (Bugs Bunny, too, takes inspiration from Chaplin, and multiple Warner animators have drawn him as the Tramp.) In 1961, Hanna-Barbera’s profoundly underrated *Top Cat* followed the adventures of a gang of wisecracking Manhattan alley cats, who, like Daffy, are always outwitting a meddling policeman. At worst, classic cartoons may trivialize the suffering and danger associated with homelessness—there’s a certain recurring image of the carefree hobo carrying a bindle, which paints the whole subject in a romanticized light—but the homeless themselves are rarely disparaged or made the butt of the joke. Quite the opposite.



Riff Raffy Daffy.

IN LIGHT OF THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT, we can make some educated guesses about how and why these early, sympathetic portrayals came to be. In the '50s and '60s, the cultural memory of the Great Depression was still fresh, and a significant number of people—both in the cartoon-viewing audience and the creative industries—would have either experienced homelessness firsthand during the '30s or had friends and family members who did. Cartoons themselves (shown in movie theaters before the advent of home TV) gained popularity as a cheap form of entertainment for working-class audiences, and many of the pioneering Hollywood animators came from economically precarious backgrounds. Warner Bros. animator Chuck Jones recalled in a 1993 interview:

I came out of art school in 1931, right in the worst of the Depression, two years before Franklin Roosevelt came in. The whole United States was flat. To expect to get a job when three out of every ten people were unemployed was ridiculous, particularly for a kid without any experience in anything. I had worked my way through art school by being a janitor, ... and I wasn't sure I was capable.

Jones' experience was typical of the era. Before becoming an animator, William Hanna of Hanna-Barbera fame had actually lost his job as an engineer to the Depression and resorted to working in a car wash to get by. At the time, people who *hadn't* experienced some form of financial hardship, up to and including the loss of their homes, were the exception rather than the rule. As a result, there was a common understanding—as there's beginning to be again, in the COVID era—that poverty and destitution can happen to anyone, at any time, through no fault of their own. It's no surprise, then, that this historical moment was reflected and embodied by the artists it produced. To paraphrase a famous Marx line: *Men make their own cartoons, but they do not make them as they please; they do not make them under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.*

With succeeding decades, though, the narrative changed. The '70s and '80s saw the dismantling of the New Deal economic order, and with it, the idea that poverty and homelessness were shared social problems at all. Instead, the pernicious “bootstrap” doctrine, always present in American discourse, intensified to new extremes. Free-market ideology became a dominant force: if anyone was suffering economically, it was their own fault for failing to hustle hard enough. In one infamous interview, Ronald Reagan aimed a rhetorical blowtorch at the homeless, insisting that they were responsible for their own fates:

What we have found in this country, and maybe we're more aware of it now, is one problem that we've had, even in the best of times, and that is the people who are sleeping on the grates, the homeless who are homeless, you might say, by choice.

What a bald-faced lie! Reagan, still the patron saint of certain branches of the GOP, had the nerve to look directly into a camera and say that homeless people *wanted* to sleep on the street. In reality, it was Reagan's own choices that forced them to. During his tenure as president, the U.S. government slashed spending on public housing programs from \$26 billion to just \$8 billion and gutted welfare under the pretext of reform, using the racist stereotype of the “welfare queen” to justify financial austerity. Rather than being seen as neighbors and fellow-citizens, the homeless were recast as an undesirable subclass of humanity, lazy and morally unworthy of having their basic needs met. The United States had a new mythology, and it was a brutal one, soon to be disseminated throughout the nation's cultural products.

It took a few years, but cartoons caught up to the Reaganite turn. In episodes from the '90s and early 2000s, there's a palpable

shift in the way homeless characters appear compared to earlier decades. The perspective is different: we're now seeing them through the eyes of comfortably housed characters, rather than their own. Often they don't even get proper names. In a 1996 episode of *Hey Arnold!*, we're introduced to a man known only as "Grubby," who seems to live in the subway and yells at passengers to "Get out of my house!" In a cutaway gag from *Family Guy* (the show is ongoing since 1999), Peter Griffin says he hates his job "almost as much as I hate homeless people asking me for money," before mocking a homeless man he calls "Raggy." And in *King of the Hill* (1997–2010), there's a recurring character called "Spongy" who can be seen scrounging for cans to recycle or eating cat food. Grubby, raggy, and spongy. Adjectives, not nouns. This is what the United States now thinks of its homeless. Notably, *King of the Hill* actually calls out Reaganomics as a key factor, with Spongy saying that he's "been here since Ronald Reagan kicked me out of my mental hospital" in a 2006 episode. He's referencing the repeal of the Mental Health Systems Act of 1980, which eliminated thousands of hospital beds and left patients struggling with mental illness nowhere to go *but* the street. But at the same time, the show has patriarch Hank Hill deliver a bunch of self-righteous platitudes about the virtue of hard work, and how "if you're relying on handouts, you're not in control of your life." Somewhere in hell, old Ronnie smiles.

This trajectory leads us, perhaps inevitably, to *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Since the character's debut in 1999, SpongeBob has taken on the cultural role that Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse occupied in the 20th century. He's not only a universally recognizable icon of animation, but of American pop culture more broadly. As early as 2009, *SpongeBob* was the most popular children's program in 15 major Chinese cities, despite being banned from broadcasting before 9 p.m. When the U.S. assassinated general Qasem Soleimani in 2020, an Iranian cleric mockingly wondered if Iran should "take out" SpongeBob in return; that's how prominent the series has become worldwide. While it might seem faintly silly to talk about the political dimensions of *SpongeBob* cartoons, this dominant cultural status makes the series unusually significant to understanding U.S. ideology. If there's a common cliché, trope, or assumption in American culture, it's probably replicated somewhere in *SpongeBob SquarePants*, and from there, spreads outward to a generation raised on Nickelodeon. What's more, the series often riffs on topics like money, labor, and exploitation, with overtly political episodes like "Squid on Strike," where SpongeBob and his coworker Squidward organize a protest for better wages. In the 2002 episode "Can You Spare a Dime?," meanwhile, the show delves explicitly into the issue of homelessness. In a sparse ten minutes, it provides a valuable case study in how reactionary talking points can manifest themselves in the most unexpected places.

"Can You Spare a Dime?" is, to put it mildly, tonally bizarre. In its opening moments, Squidward gets accused of stealing a dime by his comically greedy boss, Mr. Krabs, and quits his job in a fit of outrage. We then flash forward to see Squidward, now bedraggled and unshaven, living in a cardboard box on the street and begging for change. He looks genuinely miserable,



SpongeBob SquarePants, Can You Spare a Dime?

and it's hard not to feel sorry for him, even as the show makes absurd jokes about his predicament. (He apparently tried to make a living as an artist, but no one bought his paintings, so he "had to eat them.") Mercifully, the ever-cheerful SpongeBob gives Squidward a place to stay—but the moment he's safely off the street, Squidward turns from a sympathetic victim of circumstance into a lazy, entitled freeloader, straight out of a Reagan speech. He makes no effort to find work and loafs around SpongeBob's house for ages, as indicated by the series' trademark title cards: "THREE WEEKS LATER," "MANY MONTHS LATER," and "SO MUCH LATER THAT THE OLD NARRATOR GOT TIRED OF WAITING AND THEY HAD TO HIRE A NEW ONE." All the while, Squidward expects SpongeBob to cater to his every whim, making increasingly ridiculous demands for snacks, drinks, massages, and entertainment. To use the ugly Reaganite term, he has become a welfare queen (or king), leeching off the hard work and misguided benevolence of others. Eventually, an exasperated SpongeBob writes "GET A JOB" in his alphabet soup, before shoving him (bed and all) back to work at the Krusty Krab.

For what it's worth, all of this basically works as comedy. The unsavory political subtext can be overlooked if you view

the episode as a reflection of Squidward's character traits in particular and not a commentary on homeless or jobless people in general. Canonically, Squidward can be a bit of a jerk. Still, looking deeper, there's a definite streak of Reaganism running through the plot. In the first place, Squidward's homelessness is essentially his own doing, since he could have put up with Mr. Krabs' ranting and raving about the missing dime and kept his job. He is, as Reagan put it, "homeless by choice." Importantly, though, Reagan and his acolytes never provided any actual evidence that "homelessness by choice" exists on a large scale. The whole concept should be interrogated and challenged, but instead it has wormed its way into the fabric of American culture, to the extent that it pops up in cartoons about talking sea creatures. Not only this, but "Can You Spare a Dime?" frames Squidward's decision to quit as impulsive and ill-advised, rather than a perfectly sensible reaction to being berated in the workplace for something he hasn't done. The episode resolves by returning him, suitably chastised, to a job where his boss shouts at him. In one sense, this is insightful, showing how the threat of homelessness and starvation is used as a weapon to keep workers in line. For the show's young audience, though, it's completely the wrong message. If working people are to have any dignity, the Mr. Krabses of the world need to be defied, not appeased.

Worst of all, though, the episode suggests that homelessness can be solved on an individual basis if the people in question simply stop being lazy and "GET A JOB." This is the biggest myth of all. In 2021, a statistical analysis by the University of Chicago found that 53 percent of people in homeless shelters, and 40.4 percent of unsheltered people, *do* have jobs. The problem is that their wages are too low and rents are too high. According to statistics from the same year, it's impossible for someone working a full-time, minimum-wage job to afford a single-bedroom apartment in 93 percent of U.S. counties, and there are no states in which someone can rent a two-bedroom space on the current federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour. In other words, homelessness has little or nothing to do with personal responsibility, or lack thereof. It's a consequence of large-scale economic decisions made by landlords and bosses. It's not that the creators of *SpongeBob SquarePants* necessarily intended to push bourgeois propaganda on their viewers, of course. They were just trying to make the funniest cartoon they could from the premise "Squidward becomes homeless." Rather, these free-market narratives about housing and labor have become so pervasive that, without a conscious effort, it's hard for a viewer to perceive them as ideological at all.

Things get weirder on *South Park* (ongoing since 1997), with the 2007 episode "Night of the Living Homeless." A parody of George Romero's zombie movies, the episode sees South Park overrun by dozens of homeless people who appear suddenly overnight, shambling around the streets and muttering "chaaange" in the stupefied groans usually reserved for "braaaains." When Kyle, Stan, Kenny, and Cartman investigate, they discover that the nearby town of Evergreen has exported all of *its* homeless to South Park, having received them unexpectedly from San Antonio, Texas in the first place. So the boys rig up

a *Mad Max*-style armored bus and blast a parody version of Tupac Shakur's "California Love" ("In the city, city of Santa Monica / Lots of rich people, giving change to the homeless") from the loudspeakers. Thus equipped, they lure the crowd away to yet another new city, where the cycle will presumably begin again.



South Park, Night of the Living Homeless.

In a recent article, *Current Affairs*' Ciara Moloney described *South Park*'s creators, Trey Parker and Matt Stone, as "dead right about half the time" and "about as wrong (as are all principled libertarians) as you can be" the other half. This is a perfect description of "Night of the Living Homeless." In certain moments, the episode skewers wealthy liberals' patronizing non-solutions for the problem of poverty, as seen when a member of the South Park town council suggests that "we could give the homeless all designer sleeping bags and makeovers. At least that way they'd be pleasant to look at." Or, as Stan's dad Randy bizarrely suggests, they could "turn the homeless into tires." "That's like recycling," another character chimes in. It's not hard to imagine a politician like Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler—known for his sweeps of homeless encampments—proposing ideas in this sublimely useless vein. If the episode exaggerates, it isn't by a lot.

Then, too, the practice of shuffling homeless people from city to city without actually addressing their needs is a real one. As a 2017 *Guardian* investigation detailed, cities like San Francisco "view free bus tickets as a cheap and effective way of cutting their homeless populations" and issued at least 21,000 such tickets in the years 2011-2016. But while the practice is convenient for city administrators, it's devastating to the actual homeless people involved, who find it difficult to restart their lives from scratch in an unfamiliar place—and who are often banned, for life, from returning to shelters in their original cities as a precondition. ("They stabbed me in the back is what they did," reflected one traveler interviewed by the *Guardian*, and he's not wrong.)

When it comes to its main characters, *South Park* has two basic modes: there are the episodes where the boys are sharp-eyed critics calling out hypocrisy and the episodes where they're just selfish assholes like everyone else in town. With its ending, "Night of the Living Homeless" puts them firmly in asshole mode, and, by doing so, sheds light on a deeply inhumane real-world phenomenon.

This still leaves the "as wrong as you can be" half, though, and it's linked directly to the episode's use of zombie imagery. On the political right, equating homeless people with zombies has become something of a cliché. In 2020, GOP Representative Devin Nunes said that "the situation out here in California with the homeless population" reminded him of "zombie apocalypse." In 2022, Dr. Mehmet Oz described Philadelphia's homeless residents as "addicts walking like zombies into the street" during his abortive Senate campaign. In 2023, Fox News host Jesse Watters declared that "the zombies are taking over" Portland because there are tent encampments there, billionaire Michael Moritz described neighborhoods with a large homeless population as "zombie zones," and Elon Musk repeated the "zombie apocalypse" description about downtown San Francisco. The rhetoric is chilling to hear because it dehumanizes homeless people in a very direct and blatant way. By definition, a zombie is an inhuman monster, a thing to be destroyed rather than a person to be engaged with. The least subtle of the bunch, Watters explicitly advocates for violence against the homeless, saying that the appropriate solution would be to "get tough and clean stuff up and knock heads together and institutionalize people and clean up the streets." This is the

“ Reagan, still the patron saint of certain branches of the GOP, had the nerve to look directly into a camera and say that homeless people wanted to sleep on the street. . ”

sort of thing that becomes easy to justify once you no longer see certain types of people as fully human. The truly obscene part of "Night of the Living Homeless" isn't any particularly crass joke, but the way the episode simply accepts the framing of the homeless as a monstrous threat. It lacks a crucial scene, one which might reveal that *South Park*'s residents just *perceive*—ignorantly—their homeless visitors as the undead. In the text we get, the homeless actually *are* zombies, and the whole narrative revolves around the need to get rid of them by whatever means are available. Beyond Reaganism, we've now crept into something that could be called proto-fascist.



Rick and Morty, Anatomy Park.

Similarly worrying themes pop up again in *Rick and Morty*, with the 2013 episode "Anatomy Park." (Yes, *Rick and Morty* has been going for ten years. I feel old too.) Here, Rick Sanchez—the show's mercurial genius/insufferable egomaniac protagonist—brings Ruben, a homeless man dressed as Santa Claus, home to his family for Christmas dinner. However, what seems like an act of sincere kindness is soon revealed as something much darker: Rick has built a miniature theme park inside Ruben's body, where visitors can be shrunk down to microscopic size and go on rides like "Spleen Mountain" and "Pirates of the Pancreas." The rest of the episode turns into a *Jurassic Park* parody, as Morty—Rick's grandson and longsuffering sidekick—has to shrink down, explore Anatomy Park, and dodge various infectious diseases that have run rampant through Ruben's system. Eventually, for complicated reasons, Ruben dies, expands to gargantuan size, and explodes, showering the entire continental United States in blood and offal. (Did I mention that this is a Christmas episode?)

Clearly, there's a lot going on here. *Rick and Morty* has always been a slightly mean-spirited show—one early episode sees Rick launch into an enthusiastic defense of the r-slur, for example—but "Anatomy Park" might be the furthest it ever goes into purposely offensive shock humor. As viewers, we're expected to find it *funny* that Rick has conducted hideous human

experiments on a homeless man (who seems barely aware of his surroundings), and later that he desecrates his corpse, shoving a big red bundle of dynamite into Ruben's abdomen in order to free Morty. And the sick part is, it almost works. From a purely technical perspective, "Anatomy Park" is a well-constructed script, and concepts like "Pirates of the Pancreas" are so absurd that it's hard not to laugh at them. But the episode only functions comedically if you grant Ruben no humanity whatsoever and view him simply as a prop. If you think for a second about what it would be like to actually *be* him, the whole thing just becomes terribly depressing. In its basic structure, the cartoon relies on its audience to treat its homeless character as a disposable human being, interesting only insofar as he furthers the plot.

The really fascinating part of all this—and something that I only realized after looking at the episode's script online—is that the word "homeless" is never actually spoken. It's in the Wikipedia and IMDb listings, and in contemporary reviews, but not in "Anatomy Park" itself. Instead, Ruben is legible as a homeless character solely from visual cues. He has sweat-stained clothing, a ragged beard, a string of drool on his lower lip, and so on. With a few variations, they're the same visual markers that define the homeless Squidward in "Can You Spare a Dime?," or characters like Grubby in *Hey Arnold!* But this shorthand is troubling, because it implicitly associates homeless people with dirt and filth. The *Rick and Morty* animators understand that, when their viewers see a character who looks a bit unhygienic, their first thought will be "Oh, that's a homeless guy." They don't need to spell it out, because the prejudice is already baked in.

In turn, the episode's heavy reliance on gross-out humor reflects a belief that Ruben and people like him are, fundamentally, *gross*. As it goes along, "Anatomy Park" reveals that Ruben is an alcoholic (he has a "Haunted Liver") and carries a full menagerie of viruses and bacteria, including gonorrhea,

hepatitis A and C, tuberculosis, E. Coli, and even the bubonic plague. These are drawn as big fanged monsters, the dinosaurs in the *Jurassic Park* analogy, who chase the miniaturized Morty around. In this way, Ruben's homelessness is equated not only with dirtiness, but with the threat of disease. Ruben himself is essentially a contagion. Historically, that's always been a dangerous association to make about particular types of people. Like the zombie metaphor, it's a form of dehumanization, and when it becomes common enough, it can lead directly to violence against those perceived as carriers of illness. Recall Jesse Kelly, fuming that people need to "clean up the streets" by "knocking heads together." Recall Mr. Gwin and his hose. The operative word is *clean*, and it springs from the conviction that the homeless are *unclean*, a disease on the body politic. From there, it's one short, tragic step to Jordan Neely lying dead on a subway floor.

There is an alternative. As we've seen, cartoons—like every cultural artifact—shape our understanding of the world, but they're also shaped by the material world around them. As the politics of housing shift, so do the cultural representations of unhoused people. Degrading stereotypes about the homeless have a rich environment to thrive when the dominant political narratives are all about personal responsibility, the free market, and bootstraps. But another, entirely opposed form of politics is rising. With the growth of the "Housing First" movement, there's a new understanding that you solve homelessness by simply providing homes, markets be damned. With increasing demands for rent control and tenant unions, people are banding together to fight the domination of landlords and real estate investors, and striking at the heart of the inequality that generates homelessness in the first place. Slowly, but inexorably, the scales are falling from our eyes. When the children of the future look back on our popular culture, they'll shudder to think we could ever have accepted things as they are now. Indeed, they'll find it hard to believe such a thing as "homelessness" ever existed. ♣

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