

Made From Purest Endangered Sequoia Pulp (Don't Worry, It's "Offset")

CURRENT AFFAIRS

\$12.95

VOL. 8, ISSUE 5

SEPT/OCT 2023



**WHITE
RAPPERS**

Do we need them?

**SPERM
COUNTS**

*The new panic over
declining fertility...*

**ENDING
POVERTY**

*We know it can be done,
so why don't we do it?*

SPECIALS

New!
CAHQ

It has happened. *Current Affairs* has transferred itself to a new headquarters. Previously edited from a small hole in the back of a law office, *Current Affairs* now occupies an airy warehouse space near New Orleans' famed "Piazza D'Italia." We have spared no expense on the new HQ. Each office is accessed by an individual spiral staircase, and exited via fireman's pole. A river runs through it, filled with enormous hand-painted rainbow trout. In the lavatories, toilet paper has been replaced with custom monogrammed silk handkerchiefs. A jukebox contains all of Fats Domino's 45s, so that editors may relax and dance to the highest quality rhythm-n-blues. We have introduced a population of indoor birds, who amuse the staff with their witty songs. Every physical object is made from either imported marble or domestic mahogany. It is a place where nobody cries and nothing suffers, a little slice of heaven right here in Southeast Louisiana. We do hope you'll stop by.



WE MUST ABOLISH WOKENESS

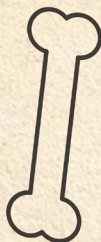
The following institutions have been captured by wokeness and must be eliminated:

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| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Police | <input type="checkbox"/> Prisons |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The Military | <input type="checkbox"/> The CIA |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Banks | <input type="checkbox"/> The FBI |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The fossil fuel industry | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Immigration and Customs Enforcement | |

CURRENT AFFAIRS MAGAZINE HAS A RIGHT TO EXIST

SELL YOUR BONES:

BECOME GELATINOUS TODAY!



Come Listen
— TO THE SIREN —
SONG OF SOCIALISM

FORTIFIED BY CREPES

You did not think, did you, that a magazine could be sustained on good vibes alone? No, the editors need fuel, and the fuel we need is crepes. Our neighborhood crepe-smith, Olga, does a superb job keeping us fortified. But even Olga can only do so much. The demand here is insatiable. Our bodies are machines that turn crepes into magazine content. The crepes, you see, fuel the brain. The brain thinks the thoughts.

The fingers, which are also powered by crepes, write the thoughts down. The thoughts become the magazine, which is then sent to you. It is a highly complex process, but the whole thing breaks down without a consistent supply of crepes, and even Olga must rest from time to time. The bottom line is: **Send Crepes.**

TRY OLGA'S CREPES AT:
IRONWORKS COFFEE AND CREPES
315 GIROD ST. NEW ORLEANS, LA



IT'S OUR 44TH EDITION!

It's our 44th edition, which means it's time for the *Current Affairs* Onyx Jubilee! We do not adhere to the antiquated ritual that jubilees should only be held for milestone anniversaries—like the Silver 25th or Golden 50th. Every issue is equally special and worthy of a gala celebration (and a brightly colored stone to match!)

Book Problem

Admitting you have a problem is not easy. It is tempting to say: "Problem? What problem? I see no problem. I have a problem? You have a problem. Stop projecting." But there comes a point where facts intrude on our delusions to such a degree that we are forced to accept that something might, in fact, be amiss. Such is the case with the "Book Problem" afflicting the *Current Affairs* offices.

The Book Problem did not begin as a problem. It began as a collection. As writerly types, we need books to do our jobs, so we kept some around the offices. We built bookcases for the books, and when subscribers came to visit us, as they do, they would invariably remark "Why, *Current Affairs*, what nice books you have." And we would beam all over with pleasure.

But here is the thing about being a magazine: Publishers send you books against your will. Sometimes the books are quite bad (the publishers send them because they are desperate to have them reviewed by someone, anywhere, even us). But maddeningly often, the books are quite good, and we want to add them to the collection. So we make a little space on the shelves and another tome takes its place.

But here is the thing about sistent nuisances known as the only contain a finite amount of as far as we know, a finite space. each week's post, the number of steadily increases linearly toward infinity. that this is, in the long run, unsustainable.

Already the book problem has gotten bad. One can no longer see the floors for books. Books fill the cupboards and filing cabinets, which were emptied of tax returns, contracts, subscription data and the like to accommodate more books. Books are piled high into precarious towers, one of which collapsed and maimed an intern. As the ratio of books to oxygen steadily increases, the prospects for sustaining editorial life progressively diminish.

We have instituted a new policy at CAHQ, the Free Book Bin, which is meant to take some of the pressure off. But the volume of books eliminated through use of the bin is dwarfed by the number regularly arriving, meaning that we have only delayed the inevitable ultimate calamity. And yet, somehow, reader, we find ourselves at peace. If die we must, then let us die surrounded by books.



**KEEP YOUR
AFFAIRS CURRENT,
NOT EXTRAMARITAL!**

THINKING ABOUT ROME

It has come to our attention that some people, particularly of the male persuasion, think about Ancient Rome with a regularity that others find alarming. For any of our readers thus inclined, we offer this message:

Roma fascinat, et videre possumus cur in ea cupis. Sed multae aliae res attentione dignae sunt, sicut res oeconomicae, sperma, musica protestatio Brasiliensis et universitatis Pragensis. Cur non tentant aliquos articulos in hac re, et Civitatem Septem Montium quietem dant? Homines solliciti esse incipiunt.

**EVERY MOMENT YOU THINK
ABOUT ROME IS A MOMENT
YOU COULD SPEND THINKING
ABOUT CURRENT AFFAIRS**



**DO NOT SHARE THIS MAGAZINE WITH
ANYONE...WE WROTE IT JUST FOR YOU.**

New Law!

All presidents immediately go to jail after their term of office is complete

REASON FOR THE SEASON

As the American settler-colonial holiday of Thanksgiving approaches, you may find yourself trapped in a dreaded ritual, wherein all the members of your family have to go around the dinner table and declare something they're thankful for. No one likes doing this, but it was your great-aunt Ermintrude's idea, and now you're stuck with it. But fear not; you have a solution. "Why, I'm thankful for *Current Affairs*, a Magazine of Politics and Culture!" you'll belt out, in the booming tones usually reserved for news of impending marriages or the Packers score. And you're welcome, dear reader. You're very welcome.

CUTTING TIES
with the
Horse Council

It is no secret that previous issues of this magazine have been sponsored by an equine interest group known as The Horse Council. In the early days of *Current Affairs*, we graciously accepted their support, having admired the tireless advocacy work this august group has done for the horse community. This was, after all, the group that famously sponsored Mister Ed's legal defense against accusations that he bore Communist sympathies and the group that spearheaded the construction of the Seattle Slew Memorial Library. Given the Council's illustrious history, we were more than happy to receive its generous donations as we attempted to get our fledgling magazine off the ground, even running a small advertisement for the Council in an early issue.

However, in recent months, the Council's attempts to influence our editorial direction have become overbearing and, at times, distressing. We have received numerous requests to include advertisements for mane conditioners, hoof treatments, and designer saddles. While these would certainly be at home in a Horse Interest publication, we believe that their inclusion in *Current Affairs* would alienate the 93 percent of our readers who are not horses and have no use for such products.

The Council has also insisted that we run editorials in line with their public stances. This includes a piece defending John Wayne's horse, Dollar, which attempts to exonerate the horse movie star, who echoed many of the racist statements made by his owner. The Council also asked *Current Affairs* to publish another article advancing the conspiracy theory that the leg injury that derailed Barbaro's Triple Crown hopes in 2006 was the result of sabotage by gambling interests—an accusation with no evidence to support it.

Given our appreciation for horses and the Horse Council's status as America's oldest and most venerable equine interest group, we were able to overlook these unreasonable requests for some time. But the organization's current direction, under the leadership of its president, Chestnut Chrysanthemum, Jr. (a pale imitation of his father), has not lived up to the esteem of the organization's past and has led us to reconsider our association with it. For instance, we were quite disappointed by the Council's feckless refusal to endorse the Budweiser Clydesdale Union during its recent work stoppage against Anheuser-Busch. A recent ProPublica expose has also brought to light the Council's unnerving record of lobbying congresspeople to include earmarks and subsidies for ranch construction in the federal budget.

But the final straw came when the Horse Council demanded that we run a public service announcement in a recent news briefing urging readers to ride capybaras—a large South American rodent—instead of horses (The ad contains the factual statement that capybaras can reach speeds similar to horses, but omits the key fact that they are much smaller and cannot sustain the weight of humans for any period of time.) The writer of our briefing, Stephen Prager, initially resisted the inclusion of this scandalous propaganda and remained defiant even after receiving an ominous voicemail from an unlisted number that contained several minutes of menacing whinnies and snorts. However, Stephen eventually relented to the pressure after hearing loud hoofbeats outside his home in the dead of night, which he perceived as an unmistakable threat to his safety. In an act of self-preservation, *Current Affairs* included the regrettable advertisement in the news briefing, which we hereby retract (Please do not ride capybaras!). Moreover, we wish to announce that this magazine is officially unbridling itself from the Horse Council permanently and will no longer be a mouthpiece for its foul agitprop.

RULE OF THIRDS

One third of a magazine must be for serious analysis.
One third of a magazine must be for "white space."
One third of a magazine must be for pictures of manatees.
Thus is a great periodical produced.

**TREES
ARE JUST
MAGAZINES
WAITING TO
HAPPEN**



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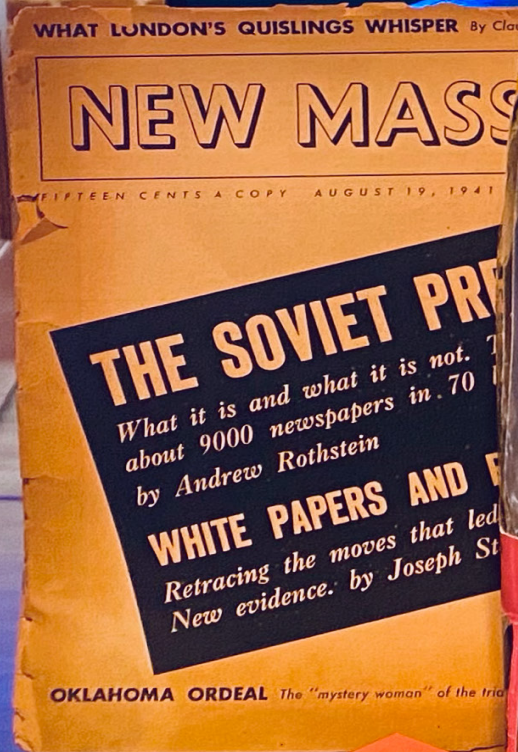
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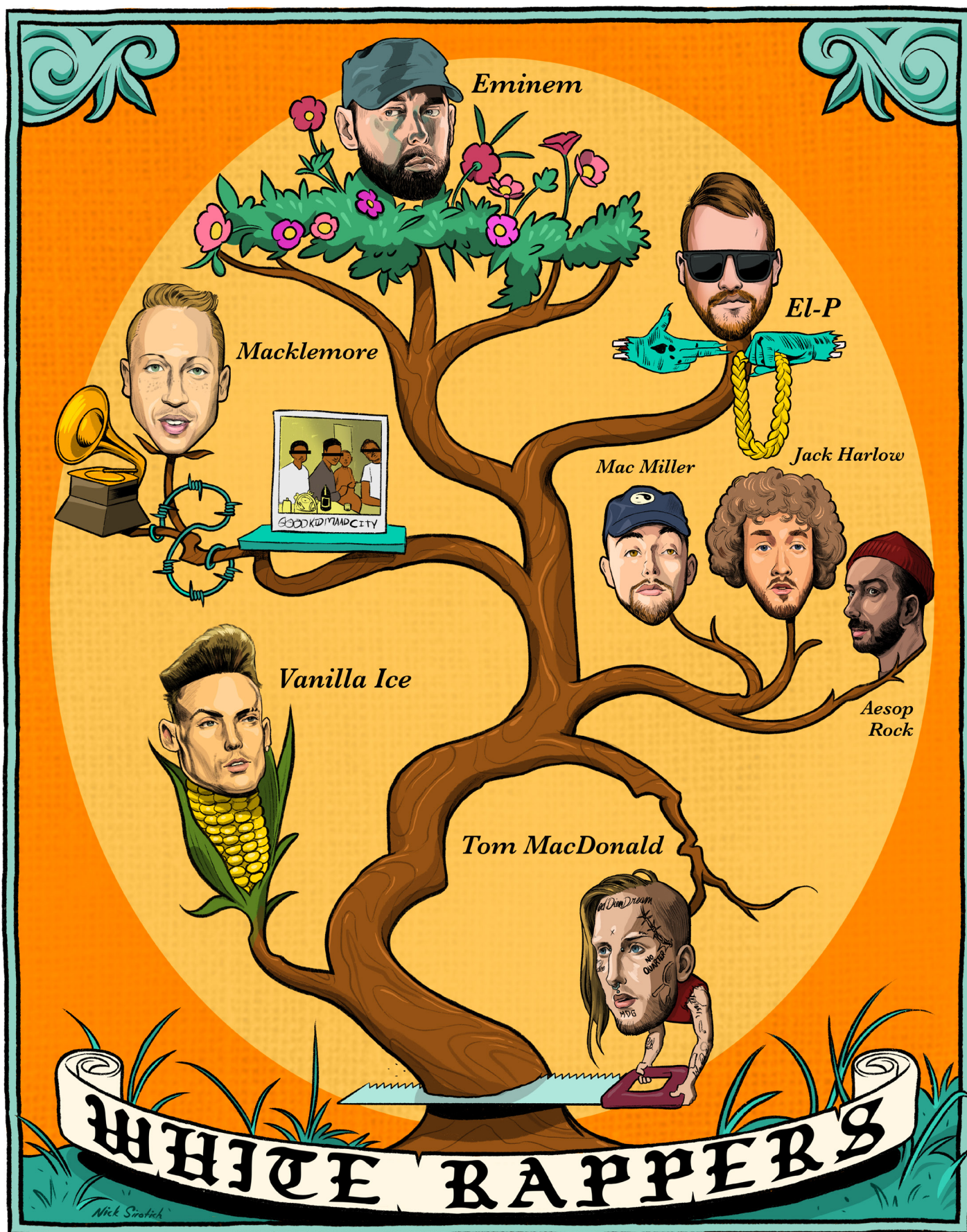
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A BRIEF CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE

WHITE RAPPER

BY ALEX SKOPIC

RAP MUSIC, AS YOU MAY HAVE HEARD, CELEBRATES its 50th anniversary this year. In five decades, the genre has produced a dizzying variety of artists and styles: there's gangsta rap, mumble rap, horrorcore, crunk, drill, trap, and a dozen others. From DJ Kool Herc to the latest Drake album, it's a rich history. But in the whole pantheon of rappers, there's one figure who fits awkwardly among the rest. One whose very existence is politically charged, and whose evolution can tell us a lot about the dynamics of race and racism in the United States. The odd man out, the black sheep: the white rapper.

Like jazz and the blues before it, rap music is undeniably Black. Its creators were working-class Black men performing as DJs in New York City circa 1973, and its greatest songs—tracks like N.W.A.'s immortal "Fuck Tha Police" or Kendrick Lamar's "Alright"—are explicitly about African American struggle and protest. But in those early years, white rappers emerged, too. It's difficult to know who the first one actually was; technically it could be Debbie Harry of Blondie, who rapped on 1980's "Rapture," or even Rodney Dangerfield, who dropped the deeply weird novelty single "Rappin' Rodney" in 1983. (Seriously, Google it.) The Beastie Boys charted with *Licensed to Ill* in

1986, but they were a hybrid act, equal parts punk rock and hip-hop. 3rd Bass were competent but obscure. Truthfully, the white rapper didn't really arrive as a cultural force until 1990, with the advent of one Vanilla Ice—and it was there that the problems began.

From our vantage point in the 2020s, it's hard to believe just how ubiquitous Vanilla Ice was at the height of his fame. As music journalist Jeff Weiss recalls in his definitive profile for *The Ringer*, Ice wasn't just a rapper; he was a multi-media empire, briefly eclipsing even the popularity of M.C. Hammer. He had his own board game, performed the "Ninja Rap" in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles II*, and reportedly turned down a marriage proposal from Madonna. His signature hit, "Ice Ice Baby," was everywhere. His debut album *To the Extreme* reached #1 on The Billboard 200 album popularity chart and raked in more than 10 million worldwide sales in its first six months. But his moment in the sun was short-lived, lasting roughly 12 months. By the end of 1991, Vanilla Ice was synonymous with corniness, the butt of a scorching Jim Carrey parody song called "White, White Baby." His Hollywood debut, *Cool as Ice*, was nominated for seven Razzie parody awards, including "Worst New Star" and "Worst Original Song," and its opening track "Cool as Ice



Vanilla Ice's 1990 album "To the Extreme"

(Everybody Get Loose)" peaked at 81 on the charts. He'd officially crashed and burned.

So what went wrong? What made Vanilla Ice so legendarily corny? It wasn't lack of skill; even today, Ice is a perfectly decent rapper on a technical level. Part of it was the huge hair and the spangly costumes, which Weiss describes as "Captain America meets Aladdin." Part of it was the nakedly commercial nature of the whole phenomenon and all those spin-off products. But the core problem was one of authenticity, or lack thereof. Vanilla Ice's hastily-ghostwritten 1991 autobiography, *Ice by Ice*, claimed that he grew up in and around Miami and went to the same high school as Luther Campbell from 2 Live Crew. However, curious newspaper reporters soon discovered "numerous contradictions" in this supposed life story. Ice's birth name, it turned out, was Robert Van Winkle (which is about as white as you can get), and he was actually from a suburb of Dallas, Texas, not Miami. Confronted, the rapper insisted the offending lines were put in the biography without his knowledge, and that he hadn't actually *lied*, as such. As he told Weiss in 2020:

I was embarrassed to tell people I was from Farmers Branch. I didn't tell them I was from Miami. I didn't tell them I was from anywhere. I was just like, 'Listen, I'm from around the corner, man. I'm from around the fucking way.' I actually tried to detour people.

On top of the questionable origin story, there were also allegations that the beat for "Ice Ice Baby" was a ripoff, copying the bassline from Queen and David Bowie's "Under Pressure" almost identically—an issue the rapper opted to settle by buying the rights to "Under Pressure" itself. Between the two issues, though, the damage was done. Whatever his intentions,

the public saw Vanilla Ice as a fraud, a white guy cynically and disrespectfully using rap as a way to get rich. Or as Carrey put it on "White, White Baby": *I'm white, and I'm capitalizin' / On a trend that's currently risin' [...] I'm livin' large and my bank is stupid / 'Cause I just listen to real rap and dupe it.*

All of this is more serious than it seems, and it's bigger than one white guy making a fool of himself. The Vanilla Ice debacle has to be understood in the context of American racism and white supremacy and the nasty history of white people co-opting Black artistic forms for their own gain. The most well-known example of this came with rock 'n' roll, where white artists—most notably Elvis—became rich and famous using songs and styles originally created by Black artists, who remained on the outside looking in. By the 1980s, white rock bands were the rule, and Black ones the rare exception. Jazz managed to avoid being whitewashed in the same way, but there's still something a little suspect about Kenny G being its all-time best-selling artist. In his biography of Eminem, *Rolling Stone* journalist Anthony Bozza writes that the concern among Black fans and critics that "a white, 'safer' version of hip-hop [would be] more attractive to white corporate advertisers, and may dictate future artist signings" was not unfounded. Vanilla Ice, with his raft of corporate sponsorships and licensing deals, only seemed to embody these fears. Hence the backlash.

THIS LEADS TO ANOTHER INTERESTING QUESTION, though: if Vanilla Ice is corny, with a distinct note of cultural appropriation to him, what makes Eminem different? Born Marshall Mathers III, Eminem was the next notable white rapper to emerge, and for most people, he remains the face of white hip-hop. Unlike Vanilla Ice, he has actually gained the respect of both hip-hop fans and his fellow rappers. He has collaborated with the likes of Jay-Z, DMX, Snoop Dogg, Busta Rhymes, and Nas, and is ranked No. 5 on Billboard's recent list of the 50 Greatest Rappers of All Time—the only white artist to even sniff the "GOAT" discussion. Clearly, something went right, but what?

Here, each artist's approach to his economic class played a role. Growing up, Vanilla Ice wasn't exactly privileged; as Weiss recounts, he dropped out of high school and scraped together a living as a busker and an entertainer in majority-Black nightclubs like Dallas' City Lights. But to hear his lyrics, you'd never know it. By contrast, Eminem's experience of poverty in Detroit is woven throughout his catalog, from 1997's "If I Had" (where he's "tired of havin' to work as a gas station clerk") to 2017's "Believe" (where he "remember[s] the days of / minimum wage for general labor"). Bozza's biography—which is worth a read, if a little hagiographic—is full of stories about a young Mathers working dead-end jobs, struggling to pay rent, and getting evicted over and over again, all while surrounded by drugs and violent crime. The difference between the two rappers is that Vanilla Ice had little interest in prodding the wounds of his past—at the end of the day, he was making party music—while Eminem brings an almost Dickensian focus to the subject. There's remarkable similarity between, say, the experience of

urban poverty Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five rapped about on 1982's "The Message," one of the first hip-hop songs to include explicit social and political commentary:

*Broken glass everywhere
People pissing on the stairs, you know they just don't care
I can't take the smell, can't take the noise
Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice
Rats in the front room, roaches in the back
Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat
I tried to get away, but I couldn't get far
'Cause a man with a tow truck repossessed my car*

And the one that Eminem details on 1999's "Rock Bottom":

*I deserve respect, but I work a sweat for this worthless check
I'm 'bout to burst this TEC at somebody to reverse this debt
Minimum wage got my adrenaline caged
Full of venom and rage, 'specially when I'm engaged
And my daughter's down to her last diaper, it's got my ass hyper
I pray that God answers, maybe I'll ask nicer.*

DESPITE THE WRITERS OF THESE LINES COMING from two different racial backgrounds and two distinct decades, it's recognizably the same economic hardship they're struggling against. And that, in turn, suggests that white rap needn't be an embarrassing form of cultural appropriation. In the right hands, it could be a vehicle for cross-racial solidarity between poor and working people of all races. When nobody has a dollar to their name, distinctions matter less.

What's more, Eminem was acutely aware of the Elvis comparison and the issue of white theft of musical forms. He shouts it out and takes a tongue-in-cheek responsibility on his 2002 megahit "Without Me" (*I am the worst thing since Elvis Presley / To do Black music so selfishly / and use it to get myself wealthy, hey!*) and more recently on "The King and I" (*I stole Black music, yeah, true / perhaps used it*). But he also has a counter, and it's a good one. Unlike the white artists who "stole" rock 'n' roll, Eminem is always shouting out his inspirations and giving the progenitors of rap their due respect. On "Till I Collapse" (yet another collaboration, this time with vocalist Nate Dogg), he gives his own idiosyncratic version of a "top rappers" ranking:

*I got a list, here's the order of
my list that it's in
It goes Reggie, Jay-Z, 2Pac
and Biggie
André from OutKast, Jada,
Kurupt, Nas, and then me*



*But in this industry I'm the cause of a lot of envy
So when I'm not put on this list, that shit does not offend me*

In a genre built on braggadocio, where it's practically expected for artists like Lil Wayne to thump their chests and proclaim themselves "the best rapper alive," Eminem names himself the *ninth* best and puts eight Black men ahead of him. The verse can read as a humble-brag, but it's also a valuable history lesson for listeners who may not be familiar with all these names, and it serves to prevent that history from ever being erased. Even when he is bragging about his skills, on 2013's "Rap God," there's another multi-bar tribute:

*Me? I'm a product of Rakim
Lakim Shabazz, 2Pac, N.W.A, Cube, hey Doc, Ren
Yella, Eazy, thank you, they got Slim
Inspired enough to one day grow up, blow up and be in a position
To meet Run-D.M.C., and induct them
Into the motherfuckin' Rock and Roll Hall of Fame*

This time the message is even more explicit: there would be no Eminem without this legacy, and the listener had better remember it. He's not a replacement for Black rappers, but a grateful student. Can anyone imagine a white rock star stopping in the middle of a song to deliver six lines about how cool Chuck Berry is?

From that second list, one name stands out: "Doc," aka Dr. Dre. One of the founding members of N.W.A., Dr. Dre discovered Eminem at a time when his debut album, *Infinite*, had flopped—and according to Bozza's biography, he "saw suicide as a viable option"—and signed him to his fledgling label, Aftermath Records. For more than 20 years, the two have worked closely together, and when Eminem references Dr. Dre in a verse, it's always with profound loyalty and respect. Just look at Eminem's lines on the song "I Need a Doctor," from Dre's 2011 album *Compton*, which he was featured on:



*And I don't know if I was awake or asleep when I wrote this
All I know is, you came to me when I was at my lowest
You picked me up, breathed new life in me, I owe my life to you
But for the life of me, I don't see why you don't see like I do*

[...]

*It was you who believed in me when everyone was tellin' you
Don't sign me, everyone at the fuckin' label, let's tell the truth
You risked your career for me, I know it as well as you
Nobody wanted to fuck with the white boy
Dre, I'm cryin' in this booth*

This is fascinating, and transgressive, on a lot of levels. In the first place, it's unusual for a rap song to display this much emotional vulnerability. With rare exceptions, male rappers don't admit to crying, especially over their relationships with other men. (In a groan-inducing moment, Dr. Dre feels the need to drop a homophobic slur in his replying verse, as if to prove that there's nothing gay going on.) But the racial dynamic is also important. Dr. Dre is not just a collaborator, but a mentor, and one of the most important people in Eminem's life—almost a surrogate parent. The theme constantly recurs, as recently as 2018's "Kamikaze" (*Which is why I identify with the guy / who I was invented by, Dre's Frankenstein.*) And the whole relationship is made possible by Dr. Dre's willingness to look past racial differences and embrace "the white boy." It's this, above all, that makes him worthy of Eminem's admiration. For a gifted white artist—blonde-haired and blue-eyed, no less—to look up to a Black man in this deeply personal way is anathema to the logic of white supremacy. For anyone with a racist worldview, it's practically a slap in the face.

That last bit isn't speculation, by the way. In August 2023, a white supremacist mass shooter named Ryan Palmeto took the lives of three Black people in Jacksonville, Florida and left a manifesto behind. In its pages, Palmeto wrote that he also wanted to kill Eminem. Specifically, he said (warning, this is disgusting language) that the rapper "walks the edge between n—lover and honorary n—," and that "Total N—Death" would include him "as a valid target and he is to be killed on sight." He also wanted to shoot Machine Gun Kelly, another white rapper, for similar reasons. Now, obviously this is disturbing. But if you can judge a person by the enemies they make, Palmeto's hatred is also a badge of honor for both musicians. It was their embrace of, and respect for, Black culture that the shooter's deranged belief system couldn't abide.



UNFORTUNATELY, NOT EVERY WHITE RAPPER PULLS it off gracefully. For every good one, there's at least two or three who are varying degrees of embarrassing. We'll gloss quickly over the escapades of Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch, as Mark

Wahlberg would probably like everyone to forget the group ever existed. Asher Roth is notable only for his debut single "I Love College," which kicked off the regrettable trend of rap songs about being in a fraternity. Yelawolf, an Eminem disciple

from Alabama, quickly learned why it's not a good idea to use Confederate flag imagery, even if you think you're being all post-racial and reclaiming it. NF is a Christian who raps very fast and never swears, which is presumably nice if you're into that kind of thing. G-Eazy is just terminally bland. And then there's Macklemore.

In a lot of ways, Macklemore is a perfect time capsule of the Obama years. He's the epitome of the earnest white liberal, always going to great lengths to let you know his heart's in the right place. One of his breakout hits, "Same Love," is a gay-rights anthem, which is a welcome development in a genre that's often been extremely homophobic. But it's a somewhat self-centered one, starting with the unintentionally funny line, "*When I was in the third grade, I thought that I was gay*," before taking a few bars to make it clear that Macklemore is *not* in fact gay, and then getting into the actual subject of gay rights. Compared to more recent songs by rappers like Lil Nas X—whose approach is simply to be extremely gay, and make no apologies for it—"Same Love" comes across as preachy and self-important despite its good intentions. This is a very white problem to have.

Like a lot of liberal-minded white people, Macklemore also struggles to treat the subjects of class and poverty with the seriousness they deserve. His most popular song, "Thrift Shop," is all about the joys of picking up strange vintage items—Velcro sneakers, a "velour jumpsuit," a "dookie-brown leather jacket"—secondhand from charities like Goodwill and wearing them out to nightclubs, making everyone gawk at the unique style. It's a fun, poppy song, and there's some good criticism of the fashion industry in there, with Macklemore making fun of would-be swag-havers who spend "fifty dollars for a T-shirt." But there's a darker side too. In real terms, the song's protagonists are middle-class people slumming it, shopping at thrift stores as a form of entertainment and not because they actually need to. Historically, though, these stores have been a lifeline for people dealing with poverty, with some sociological studies finding that "thrift economies" play an important role in "mitigating difficult economic circumstances" like a major employer in the community closing down. In this light, "Thrift Shop" seems flippant about the possibility of taking resources away from the desperately poor just to use them for style points. Macklemore even frames thrift shopping as a for-profit enterprise—"I could take some Pro Wings, make 'em cool, sell those"—and says there are some items he's too good for, "*passin' up on those moccasins someone else has been walkin' in.*" Since the song came out in 2012, there's been a noticeable uptick in social-media influencers "thrifting" to resell clothes on apps like Depop, driving prices up in the process, and posting videos of huge "thrift hauls" containing more clothing than anyone could reasonably need. It's gentrifying behavior, conducted largely by white people in a country where poverty disproportionately affects African Americans, and while Macklemore isn't solely to blame for the practice, he did give it a catchy theme tune.

The real controversy, though, came when Macklemore's *The Heist*, the album "Thrift Shop" and "Same Love" appear on, won the 2014 Grammy for Best Rap Album. It's not that *The Heist* is necessarily a bad album, as such; it's just that two of

Macklemore's competitors that year were Kanye West's *Yeezus*, arguably his last truly innovative project, and Kendrick Lamar's *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, one of the most compelling rap concept albums of all time. For reference, imagine the latest Ant-Man movie winning an Oscar over particularly good dramatic films from Denzel Washington and Morgan Freeman. It was pretty obvious that both race and capitalism were at work. The Grammys are, ultimately, a marketing event, and *The Heist* was a commercial, radio-friendly album, with a photogenic white face in all the videos. Compared to the dark, introspective stories of inner-city life on *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, or Kanye's use of jarring industrial sounds and provocative song titles like "New Slaves," Macklemore's work was an obvious choice. The industry picked the album it believed would sell the most units, regardless of artistic quality, and poor Macklemore was left in an impossible position. He got branded a "culture vulture" on social media simply for having won, and then, when he wrote a very long text message to Kendrick Lamar apologizing for having "robbed" him, became a portrait of awkward white guilt.

WHITE GUILT IS A RECURRING THEME WITH Macklemore. He has not one, but two, tracks called "White Privilege" where he navel-gazes over his own whiteness, pondering what it means and how bad he should feel about it.

The original "White Privilege" is innocuous enough, although it's a bit weird that Macklemore chooses Aesop Rock—a Brooklyn rapper who, while white, is mostly known for using obscure words like "scholomance" and "susurrus," and seems content to remain firmly underground—as an example of the genre becoming gentrified. On 2016's "White Privilege II," though, Macklemore looks on at a Black Lives Matter protest and can't decide whether he's allowed to participate or not:



Run the Jewels at the French music festival, The Eurockéennes de Belfort

*In my head like, "Is this awkward?
Should I even be here marching?"
Thinking if they can't, how can I breathe?
Thinking that they chant, what do I sing?
I want to take a stance cause we are not free
And then I thought about it, we are not we
Am I in the outside looking in,
Or am I in the inside looking out?
Is it my place to give my two cents?
Or should I stand on the side and shut my mouth?
No justice, no peace, okay, I'm saying that
They're chanting out, Black Lives Matter,
But I don't say it back
Is it okay for me to say?
I don't know, so I watch and stand*

This is, frankly, just pathetic. At the time, NPR's Gene Demby panned the lyrics as "more than a little hamfisted," writing that "Macklemore knows that people think he's part of the problem, and we know he knows, and he knows we know he knows, ad infinitum." *Current Affairs'* chief film critic Ciara Moloney, meanwhile, criticizes the track for viewing antiracist protest "through a lens where Macklemore's privilege calls for passivity," noting that "Macklemore is worried about appropriating black activism, instead of realising that this fight should be his fight, too." Both critiques hit the nail on the head, especially when you consider that, according to *New York Times* reporting in July 2020, "nearly 95 percent of counties that had a [2020 Black Lives Matter] protest recently [were] majority white, and nearly three-quarters of the counties [were] more than 75 percent white."

If guilt is a paralytic, though, anger is a stimulant. It's notable that, during the Trump years, several white rappers *not* named Macklemore had no trouble working out whether they were supposed to speak up against racism. They just went for it, and went in hard. For instance, El-P of Run the Jewels (a double act with Atlanta rapper Killer Mike) aimed a blunt warning at white racists on the song "Walking in the Snow:"

*Funny fact about a cage, they're never built for just one group
So when that cage is done with them and you still poor, it
come for you
The newest lowest on the totem, well golly gee, you have
been used
You helped to fuel the death machine that down the line will
kill you too*

Meanwhile, Mac Miller—who'd had his first Billboard hit with a 2011 track called "Donald Trump," where he boasted that he'd "take over the world when I'm on my Donald Trump shit"—grew to loathe The Donald, calling him a "racist son of a bitch" and reworking the song to start with "Fuck Donald Trump" when he played it at concerts. Eminem, now in his late 40s, started doing loud, aggressive freestyles where he fantasized about beating up racist cops, bellowed that "this is for Colin!" (as in Kaepernick), and mocked Trump as a "racist 94-year-old

grandpa,” threatening to “throw that piece of shit against the wall till it sticks.” (The Secret Service were not fans.) None of this was without flaw, but each rapper was trying—in their own unique way—to use their talent, their platform, and yes, their privilege, for good. They had an appropriate outrage at the bigotry growing around them and weren’t shy about saying so. For the white rapper as a political figure, this might be the most fundamental test.

Not everyone passed it. There are also artists like Kentucky rapper Jack Harlow, who respond to conversations about racism and racial bias by getting weirdly defensive. On his most recent album, Harlow devotes an entire song, “It Can’t Be,” to complaining that anyone thinks his race might have something to do with his commercial success:

*It must be my skin, I can't think of any other reason I win (Ooh)
I can't think of an explanation, it can't be the years of work I put in
It can't be the way that I stuck with the same friends
It can't be the swag I got when I walk in, it can't be*

*It can't be the way I treat people or how I make time to see people
Or make sure that they feel like we equals
It can't be the smile, it can't be the eye contact with these crowds
It can't be my pen, it can't be these verses*

This goes on for a while. And, sure, it could be those things. But plenty of Black rappers put in years of work, treat people well, and have swag and don’t make \$5 million a year and host Saturday Night Live, as Harlow has. And it definitely isn’t the unique style Harlow brings to the table. In the past, other white rappers had something that set them apart, from Eminem’s cartoonishly violent imagery (often directed, unfortunately, at women) to Aesop Rock’s thesaurus-like vocabulary. But Harlow’s actual rapping can best be described as workmanlike. He’s never actively bad, but he’s definitely chasing existing trends rather than contributing something new. Specifically, rappers like Joe Budden and Machine Gun Kelly have criticized his style as an imitation of Drake’s, with MGK zinging him for being derivative: “I see why they call you Jackman, you jacked man’s whole swag / Give Drake his flow back, man.” Ultimately, it’s hard to tell which is worse—to fixate on white privilege, like Macklemore, or to splutter out angry denials that such a thing could exist.

Jack Harlow is a progressive icon, though, compared to the MAGA rappers. For the blissfully unaware, MAGA rap is a movement of mostly white rappers—the term “artists” does not apply—who rap about right-wing politics to the exclusion of all else. They started to appear around the time of Trump’s election in 2016 and have been growing like kudzu ever since. The most laughable is Forgiato Blow, the self-proclaimed “Mayor of MAGAville,” who recently went viral with the song “Boycott Target.” Or rather, he went viral for the music video, in which he rolls around in a shopping cart like a giant baby, brandishing rainbow bottles of Stella Rosa and rapping about how the

retailer is supposedly “targeting our kids” with Pride-themed merchandise. (Never mind that alcohol is, by definition, not for kids. Logic is not Mr. Blow’s strong suit.) Some of his catalog is straightforward bootlicking, like “Trump Train,” “Trump Saved the USA,” “Trump Won,” “Trump Indictment,” “Vote Donald Trump,” and “Trap N Trump.” Other MAGA rappers break up the Trump worship with more general right-wing songs, like “White Lives Matter” by Mesus and the creatively-named “F Biden” and “F Biden 2” by Burden. There’s an endless amount of this stuff, most of it released directly to YouTube.

Forgiato Blow might be the first MAGA rapper; according to Gawker, he has been dropping Trump-related music since at least 2016. But their king is Tom MacDonald. MacDonald is by far the most popular figure in this wretched subgenre, with YouTube views routinely in the tens of millions, and he’s obsessed with his own whiteness. His 2018 single “White Boy”—not to be confused with the sequel, “Whiteboyz” with a Z—is one of the whiniest songs ever recorded. It’s four minutes and thirty-two seconds of Tom, blond dreadlocks flapping as he yells and jumps around, complaining about how white people are the real victims of discrimination these days:

*Yeah, I'm white but I never put your neck in no noose
And I never burnt a cross or hid my face with a hood
You can't just label me racist 'cause I'm related to people
Who did some terrible shit way back before I was alive*

Keep in mind, no one had actually tried to label MacDonald racist at this point. They started doing that later, when he did things like—just to name a random example—joke that he was about to say “the n-word,” which turned out to be “nnnnnew video Friday!” But he’s convinced that the world is out to get him specifically, simply for being white (and



straight, a parallel obsession.) With each new song, the lyrics get worse, from “Snowflakes”:

*He, she, his, him, hers, them, they
Screw a pronoun, 'cause everyone's a r—rd these days
I hear 'em preaching at a protest that hatred's the problem
But hating straight men, white folks, and Christians is common*

To “Fake Woke”:

*There's a difference between hate speech
and speech that you hate
I think Black Lives Matter was the stupidest name
When the system's screwin' everyone exactly the same*

Yes, you read that right: in MacDonald's world, everyone is getting screwed “exactly the same,” regardless of race! It's not one *particular* race that keeps getting murdered by the police, or denied mortgages and medical care, or anything. It's protestors who cause all the hatred in the world, and “straight men, white folks, and Christians” who suffer. The only thing missing is a song called “Respect tha Police” to make the picture complete.

There's really no clever critique to be made here, no nuance to uncover. MAGA rap is exactly as stupid as it sounds. Tom MacDonald and Forgiato Blow are anti-artists, black holes of talent and creativity. They rap about conservative politics because without them, they'd have no ideas at all. Neither of them has produced an interesting beat, or rhymed an unexpected combination of words, in their lives, and they don't need to. Their target audience isn't even fans of rap, just conservatives with too much time and money on their

hands who might spend a chunk of it on hastily churned-out, repetitive music. (Forgiato Blow, for instance, made more than half a dozen albums in 2022 alone, and he openly admits that they're consumed by “people way older than me.”) For his part, MacDonald had a failed career as a mainstream rapper, releasing a 2014 album called “LeeAnn's Son” where he talked about traditional topics like guns, sex, and gold chains. It went nowhere, and he transitioned into the more profitable MAGA lane soon after. It's unclear how much of his own schtick he even believes, and how much is just pure grift. The whole thing is part of a wider effort by conservatives to create their own culture industry, from Daily Wire action movies to Tuttle Twins children's books. Somehow, no matter how many times they fail, the conservatives in question never stop to consider whether there's something about conservatism itself that makes creating truly bold, engaging new cultural works more difficult. They're content to just regurgitate the same gruel forever and blame everyone else for not loving it.

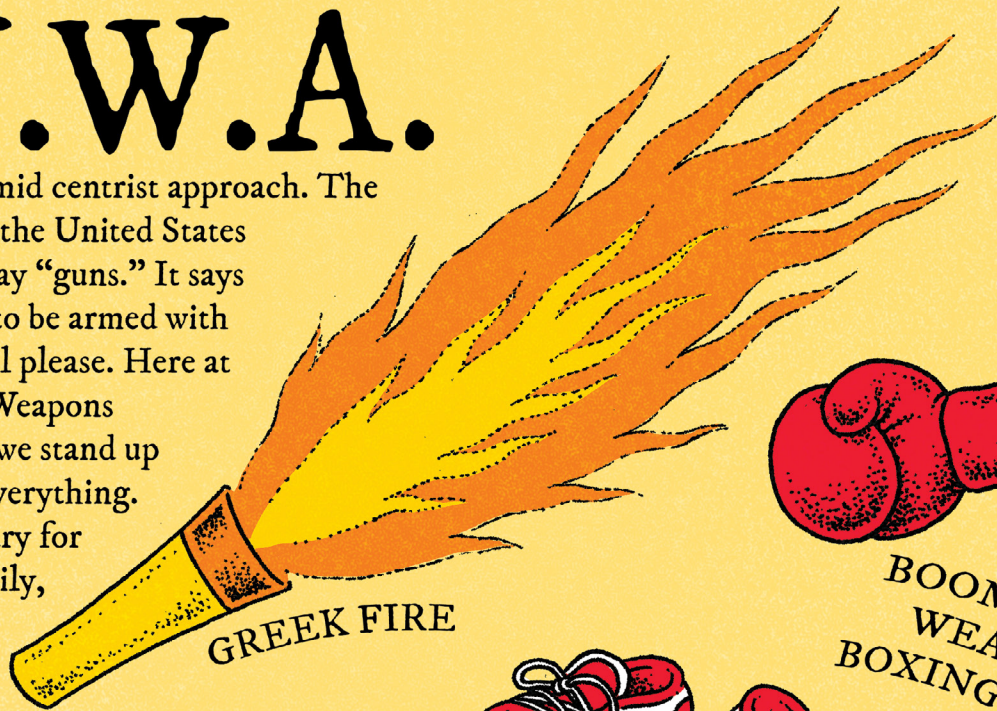
The history of the white rapper is long and riddled with unfortunate missteps. At times, it's enough to make you wonder if Caucasians should be banned from the genre entirely. But occasionally, there are gems to be found. Politically, the question of how to be a white rap artist is just an exaggerated version of a more familiar question: how to be a white American. If you are one of those, try to be an Eminem, a Mac Miller, or an El-P. If you're going to participate in someone else's culture, know what you're doing, and pay your respects. Get angry when you see injustice, and don't be afraid to get loud about it. But don't make it all about you; don't be a Macklemore. And please, dear God, don't be a Tom MacDonald. One is already too many. ✚

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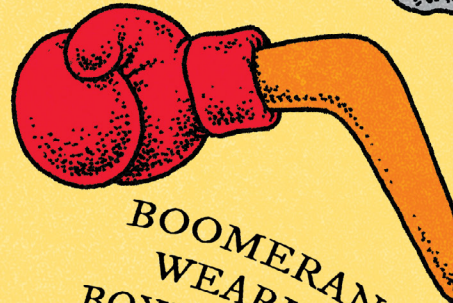
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GREEK FIRE



BOOMERANG
WEARING
BOXING GLOVE



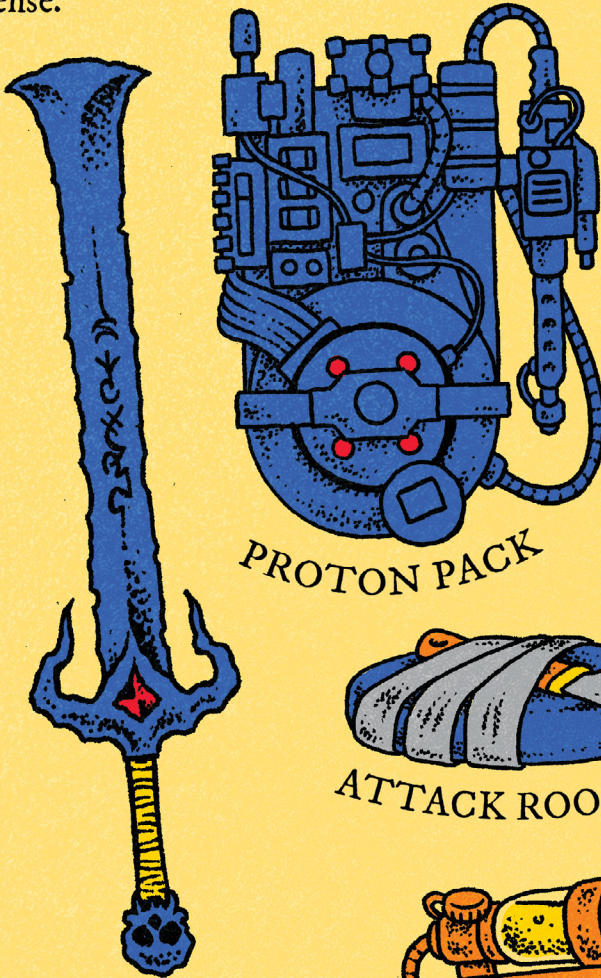
KNIFE SHOES
(BOWLING LEGAL)



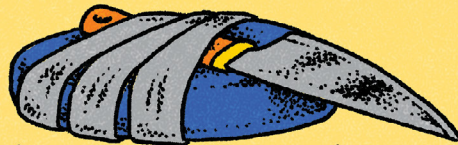
PUSHPIN
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NEUROTOXIN



VERY SHARP
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PEELER



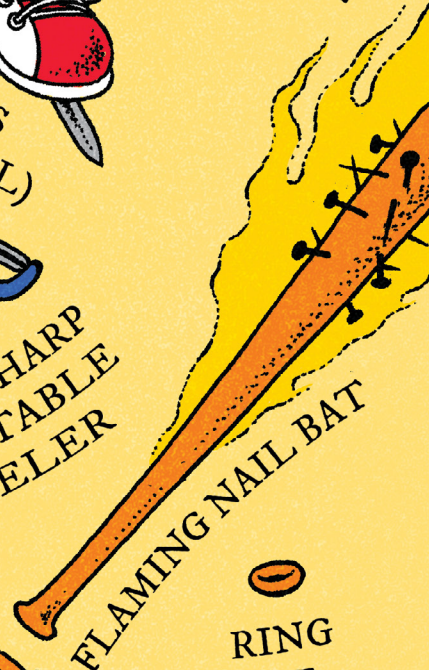
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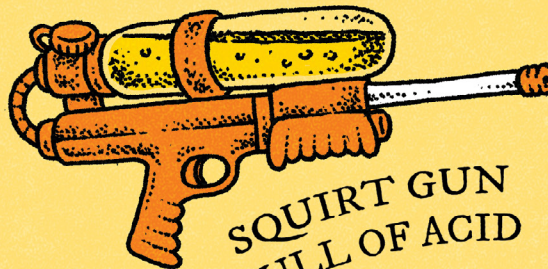
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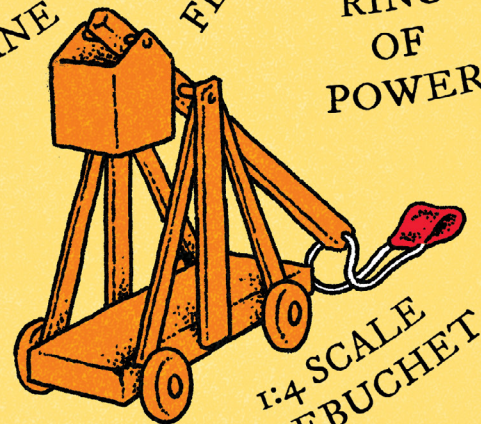
FLAMING NAIL BAT



RING
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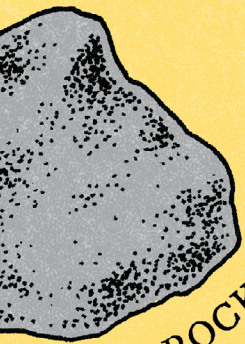


SQUIRT GUN
FULL OF ACID

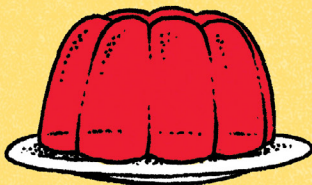


1:4 SCALE
TREBUCHET

SOUL-RENDER,
CHAOS BLADE
OF THE
ARCH-DEMONESS



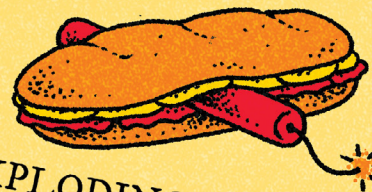
BIG ROCK



ANTIFREEZE
LACED JELLO



T-SHIRT
CANNON



EXPLODING SANDWICH



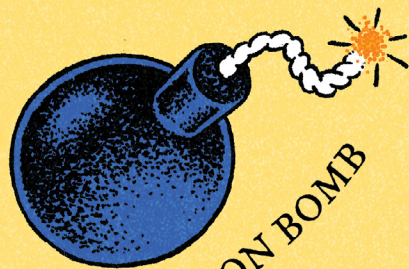
POTASSIUM
BATH BOMB



POISON DART FROG
IN DISGUISE



THESE TWO
BAD BOYS
RIGHT HERE



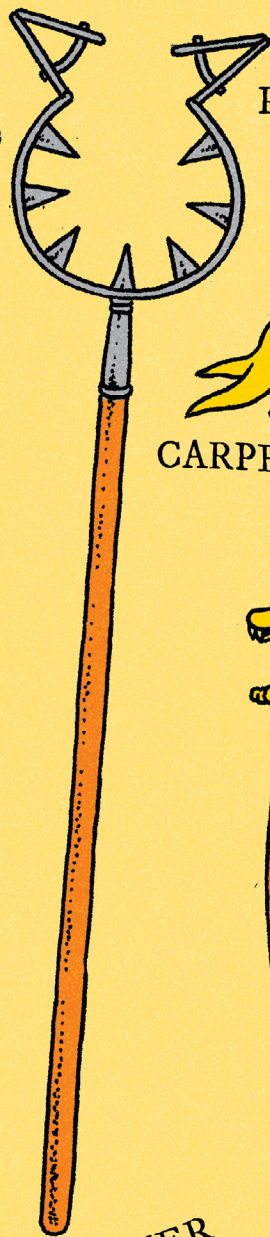
CARTOON BOMB



PRESCRIPTION
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SPONGE PILLS



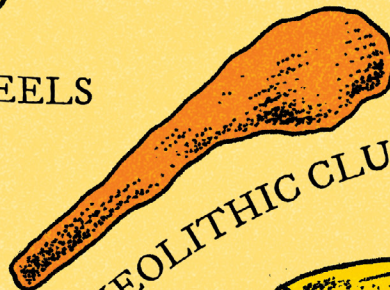
CARPET WOVEN FROM BANANA PEELS



MANCATCHER



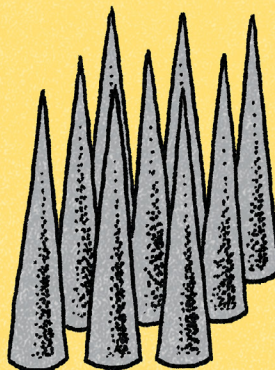
BARREL OF
RATTLESNAKES



NEOLITHIC CLUB



FRISBEE WITH
RAZOR BLADES
TAPED TO IT



SPIKES



NERVE GAS
VAPE



(IN)FERTILE GROUNDS:

HOW DECLINING SPERM COUNTS HAVE SEEDED A CRISIS OF AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM

BY

Benjamin Charles Germain Lee

&

Arjun S. Byju

★ ————— ★

TUCKER CARLSON'S RECENT FOX NATION SPECIAL *The End of Men* begins by showing us Americans of yesteryear — hale California teens performing calisthenics, daring construction workers lunching atop a skyscraper. We then glimpse an array of modern Americans depicted as a horde of overweight bodies led astray by an incoherent octogenarian president. There's the requisite gendered joke about "man boobs," the body shaming intentional. The close-ups of torsos flexing and sweating. An uncomfortable fixation on supple, youthful, white bodies as the picture of health; a disquieting revulsion at body fat, obesity, old age, infirmity.

The special features a montage of virile, muscular white men engaging in canonical acts of masculinity: wrestling, firing guns, grilling steaks. It then cuts to a static shot of an illuminated naked human, arms and legs spread like the Vitruvian Man. Unlike da Vinci's sketch, however, Carlson's caricature of a man is slightly more modest: his genitals are obstructed by an appliance emanating a red light.

The device is a "testicle tanner" intended to combat nothing short of an existential threat to mankind, or more particularly, men. The half-hour special repeats ominous refrains about this looming disaster. Conspiracy theorist and 2024 presidential candidate for the Democratic nomination Robert



Trailer for Tucker's new "documentary," *The End of Men*

F. Kennedy Jr. makes a cameo in order to proclaim that "we're heading for a calamity."

What is this calamity that has befallen men? It isn't climate change or an ongoing global pandemic that has killed upwards of 10 million people. Instead, it is declining sperm count, and the only hope for men is to irradiate their testicles with infrared light.

The science is clear: male fertility has fallen over the last 50 years, with sperm counts now roughly half of what they were in 1970. The cause of this phenomenon remains unclear, although many suspect changes in diet, lack of exercise, pollution, and endocrine disrupting chemicals as potential factors. Female fecundity, too, has declined over the same period.¹ But other measures of female fertility, such as increasing miscarriages and diminishing ovarian reserve, have also been observed, the latter among those seeking assisted reproductive technology.

To those on the left who are often mindful of environmental and corporate de-regulation, the decline in sperm count may be yet another consequence of pollution and environmental damage. If nothing else, it is an opportunity to bring further attention to the systemic injustice of climate change and to galvanize collective action. To Tucker Carlson et al., however, the fixation on declining sperm counts is a crisis of the individual, or more precisely, the individual white man, whose vanishing sperm and thus vanishing "masculinity" spell the *end of man*.

Conservative media has jumped on every opportunity to publicize this calamity. Online, Fox News publishes a consistent stream of headlines on the looming crisis of male (in)fertility:

- "7 reasons why his sperm count is low"
- "Men seeing drastic drop in sperm count, study claims"
- "Sperm counts and concentrations declining globally since 1970s but fertility implications unknown: study"
- "America facing massive infertility threat due to falling sperm counts"

- "Men concerned about fertility should limit cell phone use to protect sperm quality, study says"
- "Poor sperm quality linked to phone and laptop use at night, study says"
- "Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines don't lower sperm count, study says"

In the words of Fox News, this is nothing less than "chemical warfare on our country."

Many have been quick to lampoon Carlson's *End of Men* special and its endorsement of testicular tanning. For example, *New York Magazine's* online outlet the *Intelligencer* quipped that "Tucker Carlson talking about nuts is better than him talking about his nutty ideas." Testicular tanning is unimpeachably funny, and since the episode aired, Carlson has been booted from Fox News. But beyond the scrotal squabbling is a deeply troubling ideology: a transmutation of existential angst about humanity into a gendered fear surrounding masculinity. Testicle testiness recalls classical patriarchy. It's a bad-faith invitation to opine about men stripped of their manhood and how this emasculation threatens empire.

★ ★ ★

MUCH OF THE CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSE AROUND declining sperm counts can be traced to the work of epidemiologist Shanna Swan. Although researchers in reproductive health have been aware of the trend for at least a couple of decades, the topic entered the mainstream in 2017 when Swan and colleagues published "Temporal Trends in Sperm Count: A Systematic Review and Meta Regression Analysis." They observed "a significant decline in sperm counts ... between 1973 and 2011, driven by a 50–60 percent decline

among men unselected by fertility from North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand.” The paper was the genesis of the catchy statistic — soon to take off on cable news — that sperm counts had dropped 50 percent in the last 50 years.² Swan has since expanded on these ideas in her book *Count Down: How Our Modern World Is Threatening Sperm Counts, Altering Male and Female Reproductive Development, and Imperiling the Future of the Human Race*.

Swan et al.’s primary claim, that sperm counts have fallen, has been criticized. Some argue that the data is imprecise, or that earlier studies overcounted sperm. Andrologists have noted that there is no established “optimal” sperm count and that doubling one’s numbers does not lead to a doubled chance of pregnancy. Others have suggested that sperm counts might fluctuate widely between populations over time, and that the decline measured by Swan and her colleagues is no reason for alarm. Finally, some note that while sperm counts might have fallen, they remain well above the World Health Organization cutoff for a “normal” sperm count of 15 million/milliliter. Most critics, however, seem to accept that sperm counts *are* reduced; they simply disagree about the *extent* and the *ramifications* of this decline.

And that’s where discussion of the “trend” comes in. While sperm counts are lower now, people are worried about where they are going. RFK Jr. says, “If we continue at our current rate...” and Erin Brockovich extrapolates out from the present to predict 0 sperm in the year 2045. Trends don’t always continue, of course. It is possible that there is a lower bound to the population’s sperm count in aggregate, although any individual’s sperm count can reach zero. Swan recounts laborers on farms and in chemical manufacturing plants who, due to chronic, high level exposure, had sperm counts of practically zero rendering them unable to have children. On the whole, men are nowhere near that level yet, but the questions still linger: what explains the drop we’ve observed so far? And, will we ever get to sperm count zero?

* * *

AS A BRIEF MEDICAL REFRESHER, SPERM ARE THE MALE reproductive cell, half the genetic material necessary to make an embryo, or an early developing human. Sperm are produced in the seminiferous tubules of the testicles starting in puberty, and continue to be made for the duration of a man’s life. Sperm production is dependent on chemical messengers stimulated by hormones released from the brain. This cascade operates under the principle of feedback loops. That is, when one component of the chain is deficient, signals go back upstream to spur the hormones needed to make more of the

deficient element. As a result, this system of communication, called the endocrine system, lies in delicate balance and can be easily thrown out of sync. Environmental compounds may also mimic or interfere with essential sex hormones (estrogens and androgens), thereby altering an individual’s endocrine system.

Ample evidence suggests that lifestyle factors can alter the reproductive system. Obesity; smoking and exposure to second-hand smoke; excessive alcohol consumption; certain foods (like processed meats and dairy products, which usually contain the residues of hormones and pesticides; and fruits and vegetables, which contain pesticide residues); too little exercise; too much stress; and certain pharmaceutical medications can all reduce fertility. Excessive heat is also an established cause of reduced

sperm, which is why saunas, prolonged sitting or biking, tight-fitting underwear, and occasionally laptops and cell phones have been linked to lower sperm counts. It’s important to note that because sperm regenerate every 60-70 days, most of these effects can in theory be reversible if the exposure is transient in adults.

The other major sources of endocrine disruption are industrial chemicals, which humans may come into contact with by eating, breathing, or absorption through the skin. After World War II, the production and dissemination of chemicals for consumer use surged. These products promised “better living through chemistry” and are responsible for many of the goods and conveniences we have come to rely upon: children’s toys, food packaging, plastics in cars and computers, cosmetics, fragrances, home cleaning solutions, and the pesticides that enable

industrial food production. Of the more than 85,000 chemicals that have been produced for commercial use, most have not been tested for safety. When it comes to consumer chemicals, regulation is scant, and products are assumed to be safe until proven otherwise.

There are a few broad classes of endocrine disrupting chemicals (EDCs). Phthalates are found in plastic, vinyl, nail polish, perfume, soaps, and shampoos. They are set to be totally phased out of the E.U. (and partially banned for food packaging in the U.S.). Bisphenols, like BPA, are used in metal equipment, piping, non-skid coatings, plastics, electronics, and receipt paper. They have known estrogenic effects; Swan cites a study by Kaiser Permanente in China which found that factory workers with high levels of BPA in their urine were up to four times as likely to have lower sperm count compared to those with low BPA levels. Flame retardants (polybrominated diphenyl ethers) are similarly associated with a range of disruptions to the endocrine system including thyroid dysfunction, pregnancy complications, and altered puberty.

A major obstacle facing the regulation of these chemicals is what some have called “regrettable substitution.” Facing

“

*Testicle
testiness
recalls
classical
patriarchy.*

”

backlash over one compound, manufacturers substitute another chemical which has equal, if not worse, effects on the human body and the environment. A canonical example of regrettable substitution, as explained by Swan, is the story of DDT, a pesticide originally marketed as a safer substitute for lead arsenate but which had significant environmental and human toxicity. Due to public backlash, DDT was taken off the market only to be replaced with organophosphate pesticides, which *also* have neurotoxic effects. Similarly, it is common to spot water bottles labeled BPA-free, due to a general public awareness that BPA is “bad.” What most people don’t know is that BPA has been replaced by BPS, a compound suspected of promoting, based on animal studies, “premature puberty, obesity, and damage to a woman’s eggs.” Swan concedes that for many environmental scientists, crusading against EDCs feels like playing a game of Whac-A-Mole.

Although many EDCs are not permanently stored in human tissue, their levels in our bodies remain roughly constant due to our nearly continuous exposure to products that contain them.³ Americans ingest somewhere between 70,000 and 120,000 microplastic particles each year. A Dutch study found that 80 percent of healthy volunteers had microplastics in their blood. Microplastics are found on all seven continents. They are found in the deepest trenches of the ocean and on the heights of Mount Everest. And now, they are with us from birth. Microplastics have been documented in human placentas.

★ ★ ★

A persistent rallying cry of the right concerns the decline and fall of the white man. Just consider Senator Josh Hawley’s recent Fox News op-ed proclaiming that “America’s men are in crisis.” We are told that men are left behind, and the end of man is imminent. His idea recalls the fascistic tendencies embedded within Nietzsche’s “superman” (Übermensch) and his foil, the “last man” (Letzter Mensch), repurposed under the poisoned ideology of National Socialism. In the myopic eyes of Tucker Carlson and friends, the modern Übermensch is the virile man capable of sustaining and building an empire; the contemporary Letzter Mensch is out of shape, tired, and absent of viable sperm.

The obsession with manhood is accompanied by a fixation on the male *body*: its strength, its form, its maintenance. It is no coincidence that American media perpetuates this fixation. In her *Blood Knife* essay “Everyone is Beautiful and No One is Horny,” RS Benedict details how “modern action and superhero films fetishize the body, even as they desexualize it.” Benedict explores why “when a nation feels threatened, it gets swole,” with post-9/11 America a glaring example. A heavy emphasis

on militarization and, more recently, neofascism, has bled into austere, desexualized idealizations of the male body in superhero and action movies, which are often produced in cooperation with the Department of Defense. The right’s fixation on the male body — Carlson’s shirtless, (predominantly white) “ripped” men — renders this monomania explicit. White nationalists are co-opting fitness and martial arts groups for recruitment, using body shaming as an insidious tactic to call men to arms. Of course, the sperm count discourse is an important extension: how can the shirtless and flexing American Übermensch be perpetuated if he is incapable of reproducing?

The factors that have contributed to declining sperm count are, in fact, detrimental to the reproductive health of both

sexes, although you would not know it from watching Fox News. Environmental toxins have potentially contributed to earlier menarche in girls, as well as other problems in the reproductive tract in women. (Swan even claims, for example, that 25-year-old women today are less fertile, in terms of the health and number of their eggs, than their grandmothers were at 35.) Of course, the threat posed here is equally existential to women but is given no attention by people on the right. Why? Because low sperm count reflects poorly on manhood, a sign of the end of man not just existentially but ideologically.

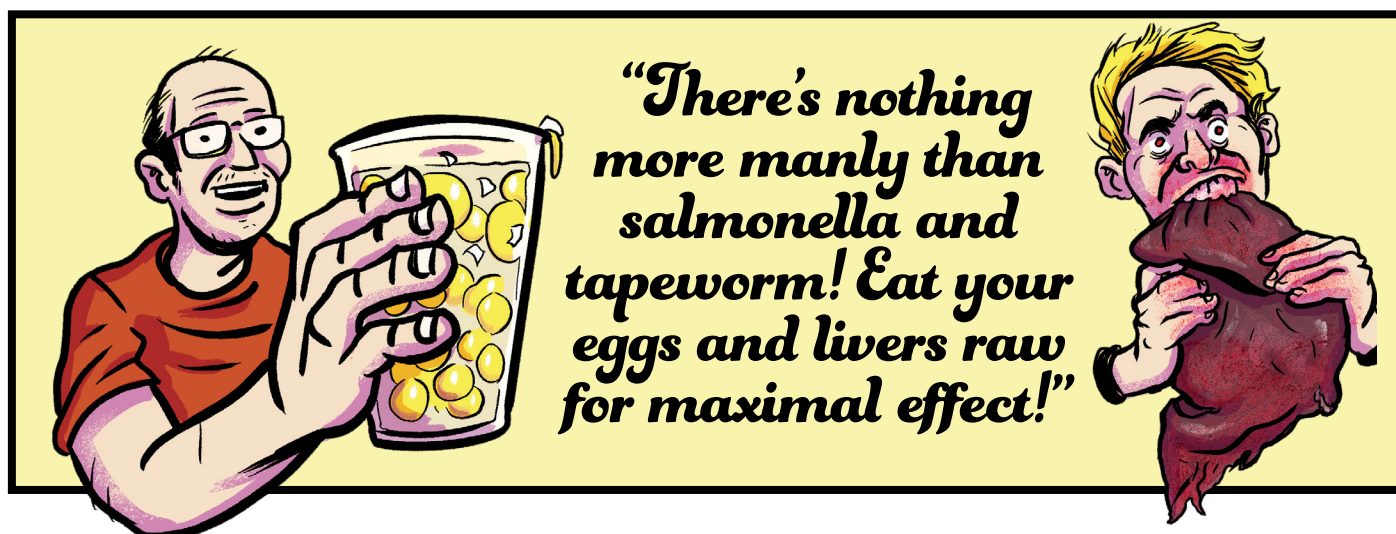
Whenever we hear white men discussing a crisis of reproductive capability, a more sinister argument surrounding who should reproduce is lurking in the shadows. The fixation on sperm count and virility is also a euphemistic attempt to invoke eugenics. The sperm count

crisis facing all men is recast as a problem surrounding those pre-ordained for empire building. Surprisingly, even Swan’s research distinguishes between “Western” men and “others.” *The End of Men* emphasizes how “a few hundred men can conquer an entire empire,” invoking the violence of colonialism and reminding viewers that the threat to mankind is actually a threat to white nationalists with an interest in preserving the American empire.

The co-optation of sperm count discourse draws a clear through line between environmental destruction and who survives in the anthropocene. Fox News acknowledges the roles of pollution and microplastics in catalyzing the sperm count crisis, but this environmental cause is weaponized to argue how we should respond, and who should survive. As climate change wreaks increasing havoc on our daily lives, from raging fires to unbreathable air to unprecedented floods, we must recognize the ways in which climate change is laundered to support the right’s ideologies. Testicular tanning, then, is not just a joke but rather a clever distraction.

★ ★ ★

“
*Testicular
tanning, then,
is not a joke
but rather
a clever
distraction.*”
”



What becomes clear the more one researches EDCs is that we live in a toxic world in exchange for cheap goods, from indestructible bottles to exquisitely scented lotions. If we desire to address declining sperm counts, as well as women's fertility, cancer, and everything else, we will need society-wide changes. Swan indulges a kind of poisonous individualism when she suggests that men and women who are trying to conceive "clean up their act." She admonishes readers that "only you can give your body the care it needs, from both the inside and outside."

Individuals would likely benefit by avoiding smoking and binge drinking, working out more, and reducing stress (if not for their endocrine system, then for their general health). And, it is conceivable that Swan's suggestions to eliminate antibiotic-laden meat, plastic food storage, cosmetics with fragrances, and air fresheners could improve reproductive health at an individual level. "It requires diligent efforts to learn to bob and weave through the minefield of disruptive chemical influences in our midst," she says. "This is your opportunity to protect your future and your family's."

But surely, individual solutions are not enough. Swan contends that one can be exposed to EDCs from accepting a paper receipt at checkout, from carrying a plastic bag, and even from microscopic airborne particles. Most people are unable to change the physical constraints of their housing, let alone the very air that they breathe. This is the same foisting of responsibility on the individual we see in active shooter preparedness training as a woefully inadequate alternative to gun control, or in condescending mindfulness rhetoric at undeniably stressful workplaces.

Although Carlson and company acknowledge that chemicals in the environment might be behind falling sperm and testosterone levels, they fail to mention the possibility of holding corporations accountable. The recent chemical disaster in East Palestine, Ohio may have been caused, in some part, by years of lobbying by the freight industry to deregulate safety

protocols. The people of East Palestine are already suffering from a growing list of physical ailments and will undoubtedly face significant health problems in the future.

To be fair to Swan, she does end her book with a robust, if nonpartisan, call for more regulation. She proposes that chemicals be rigorously tested before coming to market, as is standard with pharmaceutical drugs, rather than waiting for scientific consensus to build after they've already caused harm. She advocates for a regulatory environment more akin to the European Union's, which would be undergirded by a "precautionary principle." She recommends testing chemicals at various concentrations, because chemicals are often deemed safe at "low doses," even though little is known about their effects over long periods of time at those doses. Finally, Swan endorses the Tiered Protocol for Endocrine Disruption (TiPED), an approach to chemical manufacturing aligned with the "green chemistry" movement that identifies and removes possible EDCs early in the design process.

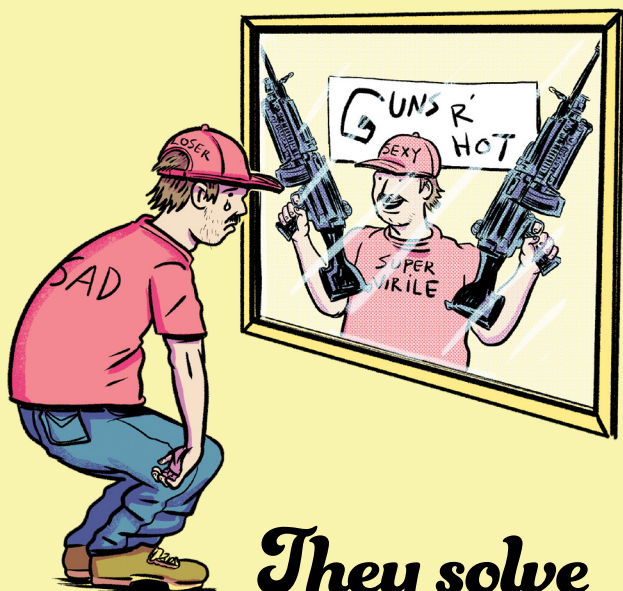
These changes would require time, patience, and a confrontation with the moneyed interests and lobbying efforts of multinational corporations. They would also require more governmental regulation and a break-up with the romantic American ideal of rugged individualism. Reeling in the rampant harm of EDCs would require accepting that we won't be able to buy something — a pill, a testicle tanner — to get us out of this mess. Fox News routinely advertises male supplements in between their scheduled screeds on left-wing regulation. We want cheap and easy fixes, so this is what we get: Alex Jones hawking male enhancement products, some of which contain heavy metals like lead that definitively will *not* enhance health and may even *decrease* sperm.

What we need is more than incremental reform, which will come too little too late.

*Are you a young
man who feels lost?
Purposeless? Bitter,
angry, and unconfident
about your place
in the world?*

Have you tried...

GUNS?



*They solve
EVERYTHING*

“CIVILIZATION IS LIKE A WOMAN WOODED,” Tucker Carlson offers creepily in the opening minutes of *The End of Men*, as the camera cuts between shots of the Statue of Liberty and a bemused Joe Biden. “She’s won by the love of the strong man and lost by the impotence of the weak one.”

Waxing about bygone American grandeur is of course a mainstay of modern conservative rhetoric. At first blush, Carlson’s insistence that Americans have become “weak” appears to be part of the predictable nostalgia-fueled Boomer daydream that keeps Fox afloat. But Carlson’s truism that the very structure of society is maintained by the literal strength of biological males is more than usual conservative media pandering. It’s part of a deeper narrative about human history and the direction of America’s future. It animates the anxiety of a rising rank of the right, a group that believes they have to train and harden themselves in order to save society.

Early on in his special, Carlson cites the concept of *anacyclosis*, a theory of civilizational rise and decline attributed to the ancient Greek historian Polybius. We’re not told many details about Polybius, or his *Histories*, but Carlson summarizes with a syllogism:

*“In ages past a cycle began
Hard times made strong men
Strong men made good times
Good times made weak men
Weak men made hard times”*

Many of the men in Carlson’s special take this mantra literally, decrying the creature comforts of modernity and offering ruggedness as an antidote. One fellow who chops wood shirtless and plunges into an ice bath suggests doing “one hard thing a day” in order to “increase testosterone.” One gets the impression that he is not talking about the Saturday crossword.

The impulse to blame our challenges on the sweetness of success is not new, and has rendered frequent comparisons to the fall of the Roman Republic. A certain brand of pundit has long critiqued the moral and physical degeneracy of American society. What the *anacyclosis* acolytes propose, however, is slightly different: that we are victims of our own prosperity. Out of shape, too content, and nearly spermless, we are sitting ducks.

We fixate on sperm counts not merely as an issue of reproduction but as a symbol of something more existential: a fear of annihilation. Whether it is a subconscious acknowledgment of the planet’s despoliation or a half-baked attempt to stave off the creeping terror that everything we know and love comes to an end, the testicle tanners plunge on in their quest of self-hardening. They yearn for a time when physical dominance ensured political subservience and power was concentrated among a select few.

The conservative *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat recently published the book *The Decadent Society*, in which he argues that America has entered an era of “economic stagnation, institutional sclerosis, and cultural repetition at a high stage of wealth and technological proficiency...” To Douthat, our

unprecedented security and prosperity has lulled us into a cultural malaise. There was a time, we are told, when Americans dreamt big, built cars, went to the moon. Of course, animating America's period of "rise-and-grind" #hustleculture were economies boosted by a world war and then the constant fear of nuclear annihilation. But still, there is something that resonates in Douthat's sketch of "gridlock, stalemate, public failure, and private despair."

There's a reason that in addition to tending meticulously to their scrota, most of the men in the special spend inordinate time working out, practicing riflery, and coordinating combat drills. They labor under the belief that soon their skills will be needed. They are *afraid*. But they are also committed, because to reiterate their words, "a few hundred men can conquer an entire empire."

Conservatives who prattle on about anacyclosis would be wise to consider Polybius' theory in full, which proposed as inexorable the iteration between monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. Polybius believed that each mode of governance slipped into its degenerate form before starting the cycle anew. Monarchy gave way to tyranny. Aristocracy eroded into oligarchy. Democracy declined into *ochlocracy* — mob rule. "For then, being inflamed with rage, and following only the dictates of their passions, they no longer will submit to any control, or be contented with an equal share of the administration," Polybius wrote.

Perhaps the better litmus test for our civilization, then, isn't our fertility, or as Tucker Carlson and friends would suggest by extension, the number of push-ups we can do. Instead, it might be our ability to tell fact from fiction, to maintain hope in the face of fear, to not retreat from the challenging work of broad societal change into the bitter and defeatist world of consumption and despair.

★ ★ ★

THERE IS A LONG CURRENT OF INTEREST IN CATAclysm in popular media — for example, the entire disaster movie genre — which appears to feed and sustain some primal human fascination with oblivion. The possibility of extinction by infertility is no exception. It is, for example, a plot point in the novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Children of Men*, both of which were adapted for the screen. Unlike catastrophe from an asteroid or nuclear bomb or viral pandemic, annihilation by infertility is slow and nonviolent. There is no unusual amount of death, just fewer births, less input into the vital equation. A slow, painless euthanasia.

It would be poetic justice, in some sense, if we went extinct because of the pollutants we had extruded into the planet. It would be *hamartia*, our fatal flaw. Are we willing to accept that the totalizing force of the Anthropocene that is destroying the Earth is also chipping away at our endocrine system?

It seems significant that many of the proposed solutions to falling sperm count embody clear technological solutionism. We are asked to consider a future in which sperm counts fall precipitously low, near zero, and few couples can conceive naturally. But for the wealthy elite, sperm could still be harvested for conception. Swan admits a future in which humans can only reproduce with technology: by 2050, couples using eggs and sperm that are created from other cells in the lab.

Others, too, are murmuring that there will be a technofix. In their lengthy article on declining sperm counts, *GQ* concedes to the techno-fatalist-savior solution: because there is no way to give up on plastics now, we might as well accept a future in which in vitro fertilization is necessary (of course, we know who would have access and who wouldn't). A workaround handed to us by capitalism for a problem of our own creation, like geo-engineering the environment to offset the carbon we've been unable to quit.

When that new human, the child of the late 21st century, asks her parents where she came from, how can we respond? We'll tell her that her parents were part of the lucky few, the privileged minority wealthy enough to conceive. The world's polluted, we'll say, and we weren't able to clean it. Why? We'll point around the room. All this. We couldn't give it up. ♣

“
The world's
polluted, we'll
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clean it.
”

NOTES

1./ Population and reproductive scientists make a distinction between *fecundity* and *fertility*. Fecundity refers to the biological potential to produce viable offspring, whereas fertility refers to the actual rate of births in a population. Changing reproductive behavior, like the widespread use of contraception or delayed childbearing, has surely impacted fertility rates worldwide. The claim of Swan, and many others, is that *fecundity* has also decreased. In other words, even when people try to have children now, they are less able than prior generations.

It has been difficult to determine how much the changes in fertility are due to fecundity versus social behavior, however one approach is to analyze rates of pregnancy complications or ovarian reserve among women who seek assistance with reproduction — the assumption being that these are all people who have *tried* to have children in the first place.

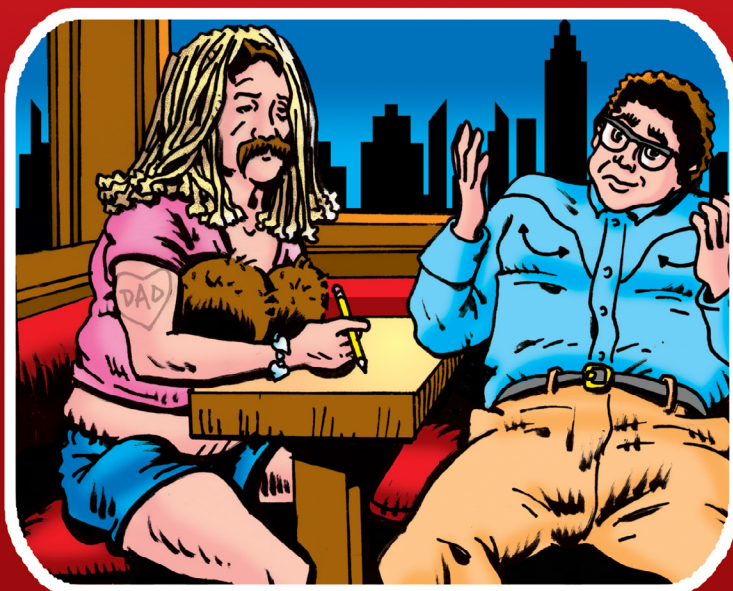
2./ When we speak of sperm count, we are referring to four crucial parameters: concentration (or how many sperm are in one standard unit of semen), vitality (what percent of sperm are alive), motility (the sperm's ability to swim), and morphology (the sperm's shape and size). The claim is that modern sperm are worse both in quantity and quality.

3./ In an experiment conducted for their book *Slow Death by Rubber Duck: How the Toxicity of Everyday Life Affects Our Health*, Canadian environmentalists Rick Smith and Bruce Lourie designed a "test room" that contained average North American products with EDCs. They used personal care products, antibacterial soap, canned goods and canned soda, and sat on a couch treated with Stainmaster. After four days they had markedly higher levels in blood and urine of their test chemicals, many of which, including monoethyl phthalate, were known to cause male reproductive problems.



"SORBO AT THE SORBONNE"

Retired CIA agent Kevin Sorbo trains undercover linguists at the Sorbonne in Paris. But when he comes to learn that one of his students has ISIS ties and an uncle in the Mexican drug cartel, his loyalty to the safety and prosperity of the USA outweighs the outdated code of education ethics the stodgy old Sorbonne headmaster references to try to keep Sorbo in line. And when an anti-American pupil steals the answer key for translating the ancient DaVinci Code Scrolls from the Sorbonne's secret library, deep in the Catacombs under the city of lights, Agent Sorbo has no choice but to drop his academic robes and don his badge and firearms once more—fancy French laws be damned—to save the free world from a terrorist attack.



"SCHNEID REMARKS ONLY"

Legendary "Copy Guy" Rob Schneider roasts liberals left and leftier for their inane politics and anti-American lifestyles. A blend of sketch comedy, hilarious Daily Show style news commentary (with a conservative twist, of course), slapstick hijinks, and reprisals of Rob's most beloved SNL characters in timely situations ripped right from the headlines (e.g. Deuce Bigalow hired for a gender fluid 'bachelor(x) party') make this must-see TV for those who appreciate the courage of our most legendary comedic mind.

Red

text by Ryan Darrah

AMERICA'S STREAMING

Isn't about time our nation's streaming options included a choice for conscientious conservatives: the men and women at whom Hollywood sneers; red-blooded heterosexual Americans with room in their monthly entertainment budgets to support original programming featuring the stars whose politics they love?!



"BREWIN' UP TROUBLE IN WOKEVILLE CITY"

Funny man Jim Breuer is Gunner Knox, a struggling craft beer brewer in Wokeville City, home of radical left-wing Wokeville State University. A late night at the brewery leads to Gunner mistakenly adding a little truth serum to his latest American Ale; what Gunner doesn't know is that the truth serum was intentionally left behind by regular patron and WSU Chemistry Professor Rand Roark (James Woods) who loves Gunner's beers, shares Gunner's political views, and wants to teach his school's snowflake students and spineless administrators some lessons about reality beyond the classroom. To Gunner's delight, six-packs of Crosshair American Ale start flying off the shelves and some unlikely customers start speaking uncomfortable (for them) truths about race, gender, the Second Amendment, and America's exceptional greatness!

Wave

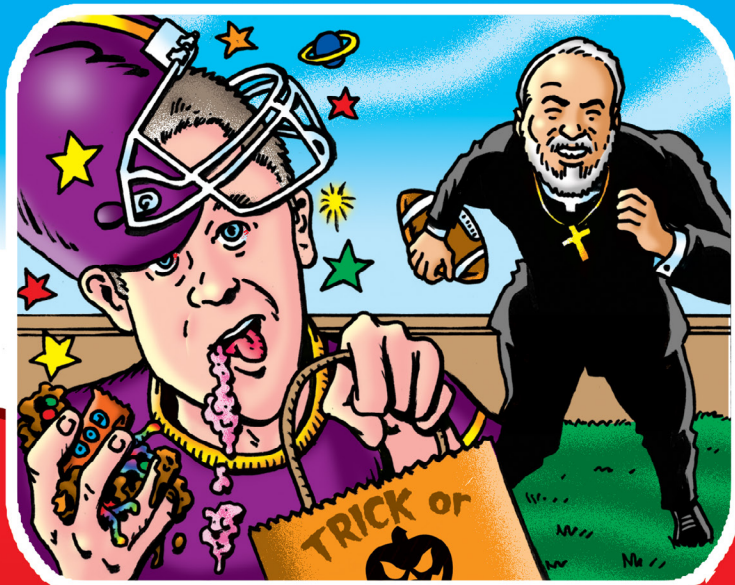
ENTERTAINMENT

TV SERVICE

HORT
TODD

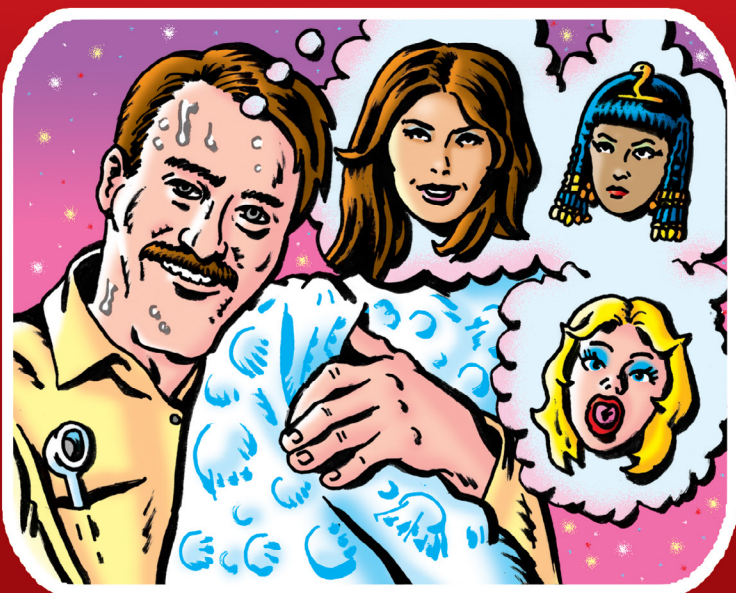
It's time to drop Netflix, reject Hulu, and cancel Jeff Bezos' Prime. It's time to show your support for the only streaming service that literally Can't Be Canceled: Red Wave Entertainment!

Here are just a few of the Red Wave shows in pre-production that you won't want to miss!



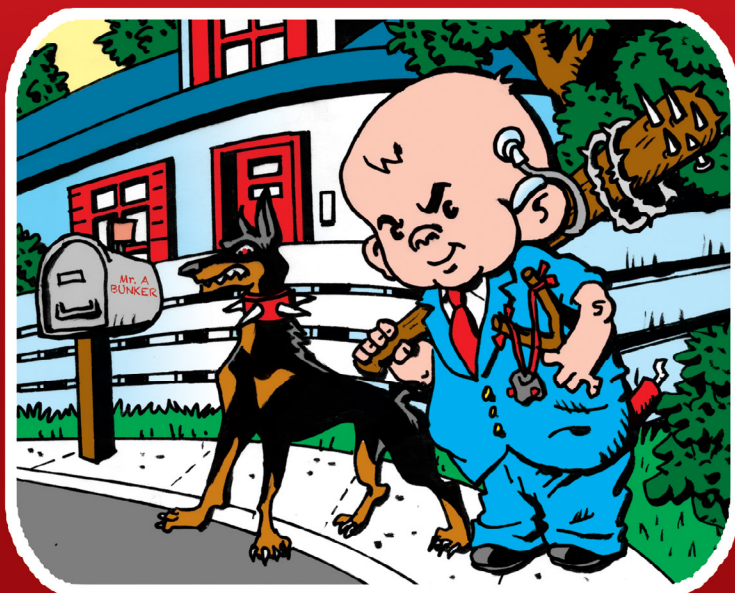
"NO GUTS, ALL GLORY"

Texas High School football legend Coach Gutsowski (Greg Gutfeld) never had a losing season at Dominion High School. But now his players have lost him after he eats his son's leftover Halloween candy, which was laced with fentanyl. Savage Lamb of God megachurch founder and leader Pastor Huck (Mike Huckabee) volunteers to coach the team when no other suitable candidates step up. After some brutal losses to open the season, a passionate post-game prayer at the fifty yard line conjures the spirit of Coach Guts—who helps Pastor Huck get the kids and the community headed towards a winning season: both on the Gridiron and in the eyes of the Lord.



"PILLOW TALK"

Part infomercial, part late night adults-only entertainment, 'Pillow Talk' gives Mike Lindell a platform to hawk his pillows, share his cyber security guys' latest updates on how the 2020 election was stolen from President Trump, and close each episode with dramatic readings of AI-generated one-act plays that imagine Donald Trump's post-coital banter with an array of lovers, real and imagined. From Melania and Stormy to Margaret Thatcher and Cleopatra, hearing how the greatest president of all time sweettalks and seduces models, porn stars, and historical female world leaders will satiate the part of your libido that's more than a little deplorable.



L'IL "LIMBAUGH: "ALWAYS IN A RUSH TO BE 'RIGHT'"

A portly and precocious animated young Rush Limbaugh will have you yelling "Ditto" to the heavens as he schools his libtard teachers and heretofore clueless and gullible peers on everything from the liberal bias of science fairs to why taxation is theft in this touching and witty biopic-series that melds the latest in CGI animation with re-spliced and re-purposed clips from the vast Limbaugh radio archives.

So don't delay: for just \$15.99 a month, you can lock in a lifetime subscription to Red Wave Entertainment, the only streaming service that literally Can't Be Canceled!

NEW MASSES

FEBRUARY

25¢



J. KLEINE

Their Leftist Renaissance

By Nathan J. Robinson

IF YOU HAVE SOME SPARE TIME for intellectual meandering, and you like curious old things as I do, take some time to open up the archives of *New Masses* magazine (1926-1948). They are all available online in beautiful high-resolution scans. (A Brooklyn doctor named Martin H. Goodman spent years scanning and uploading every page and has written an essay about the process that will make you appreciate the craftsmanship of a good high-res scan.) *New Masses* was a Marxist monthly that followed on from *The Masses* (1911-1917), which had been suppressed by the United States government during World War I, and *The Liberator* (1918-1924). It was an extraordinary little magazine, without parallel in our own time.

New Masses was launched with an explicitly cultural mission. Michael Gold, the Communist author of the novel *Jews Without Money*, who served as a founding editor, had dreamed of a magazine that would experiment in “develop[ing] revolutionary artists—poets, fictioneers, and draughtsmen.” It would finally be a place “where a fiction story with a strong revolutionary or workingclass implication [sic]” could be printed, a “bright, artistic, brilliant magazine that would captivate the imagination of the younger generation and rally them around something real.”

New Masses published some of the greatest writers of its time over the course of its run, including William Carlos Williams, John Dos Passos, Upton Sinclair, Dorothy Parker, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Ernest Hemingway. It published Abel Meeropol’s poem “Strange Fruit,” famously adapted by Billie Holiday. Flicking through the archives is a

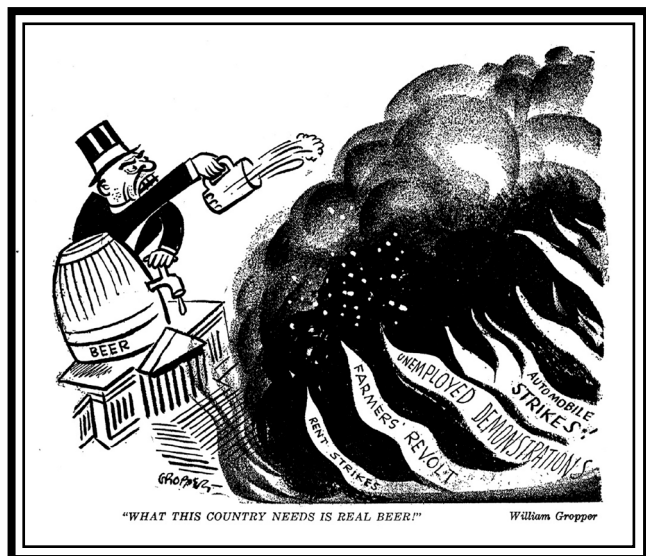
hell of a lot of fun. *New Masses* issues overflow with satirical cartoons of fat capitalists in top hats smoking cigars and down-and-out workers getting kicked around. The press, the clergy, and the schools are all savagely lampooned. The *New Masses* take on government is encapsulated in William Gropper’s illustration “The Senate” depicting portly, balding men sitting around uselessly or declaiming to nobody.



The *New Masses* followed the line of the Communist Party, though it was not formally affiliated with it. But it had a sense of humor and play. Gold had a philosophy similar to the famous “revolution with dancing” line often attributed to Emma Goldman. He said:

Attack the filthy, the bloodstained luxuries of the rich all you want to, but don't moralize against the poor little jug of wine and hopeful song of the worker...The little pleasure I get out of this wretched world helps me to live and fight. I love humor, joy, and happy people. I love big groups at play, and friends sitting around a table, talking, smoking, and laughing. I love song and athletics and a lot of other things. I wish the world were all play and everybody happy and creative as children. That is Communism; the communism of the future.

For the *New Masses* crowd, art was an essential part of the revolution. The early editors were aesthetes who had been impressed by Upton Sinclair’s book *Mammonart*, which argued that most of history’s great writers had been propagandists for the rich and powerful. *New Masses* contributors sought to create proletarian art that would show the world as socialists saw it.



New Masses issues differ from today's socialist publications (including this one) in being full of poetry. Some of that poetry is by Langston Hughes, and therefore quite good. Some of it is quite bad, as today one would expect from explicitly Marxist verse. A representative example is John Beecher's "Annual Report to the Stockholders" (1933):

Annual Report to the Stockholders

By JOHN BEECHER

*he fell off his crane
and his head hit the steel floor and broke like an egg
he lived a couple of hours with his brains bubbling out
and then he died
and the safety clerk made out a report saying
it was carelessness
and the craneman should have known better
from twenty years experience
than not to watch his step
and slip in some grease on top of his crane
and then the safety clerk told the superintendent
he'd ought to fix that guardrail
[...]
he shouldn't have loaded and wheeled
a thousand pounds of manganese
before the cut in his belly was healed
but he had to pay his hospital bill
and he had to eat
he thought he had to eat
but he found out
he was wrong
[...]
the stopper-maker
puts a sleeve brick on an iron rod
and then a dab of mortar
and then another sleeve brick
and another dab of mortar
and when he has put fourteen sleeve bricks on
and fourteen dabs of mortar
and fitted on the head
he picks up another rod
and makes another stopper*

Factories

By ALFRED KREYMBORG

*Buried in one-eyed dungeons where the walls
Stare out on other walls through window panes,
A grinding mechanism squats and chains
Each arm and leg to slavish rituals,
The while monotonous privation hauls
Dark bodies to and fro down prison lanes
Where no soft light nor open door remains
To proffer freedom from such funerals.*

*The eye that peers from out each socket there
Reflects a roving madman in a cave
Striving and straining to burst the stony shell:
The look makes every cell begin to glare,
The very walls to shudder and to rave,
As each grim puppet earns his bread in hell.*

Bleak! And sadly some pretty lasting commentary on the cost of healthcare and the misery of a windowless workplace. Like this stuff or don't, but I find myself impressed by the *New Masses*' attempt to create leftist *culture*, not just to produce leftist economic analysis and political strategy. Its pages contain reviews of plays, art exhibits, and novels. In its margins are advertisements for lectures on Cervantes, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Balzac, and biographies of Lincoln and Poe. The anticipated reader of the *New Masses* is a dockworker who enjoys ballet and jazz. An issue would contain: short stories about proletarian lives, critiques of American society and culture, coverage of world events (especially in the Soviet Union), literary reviews, cartoons, labor news, debates on leftist strategy, and theater criticism. The language was often salty. Gold's essay "Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot" said that Stein's novels "resemble the monotonous gibberings of paranoiacs in the private wards of asylums" but "only [reflect] the madness of the whole system of capitalist values" and are "part of the signs of doom that are written largely everywhere on the walls of bourgeois society." Gold called Marcel Proust the "master-masturbator of bourgeois literature," the

"worst example and the best of what we do not want to do." It was often dogmatic and unfair. But it was fun, and it's quite satisfying to read a scathing *New Masses* book review at a time when the *New York Times* book review hesitates to say a negative word about any volume it covers.

The *New Masses* adopted the presumption that art and intellectual subjects should not be considered bourgeois and should be presented for a working-class audience. But they were not "highbrow." The introduction to one piece runs:

James "Slim" Martin was for years a wandering migratory worker, a harvest hand, lumber jack, and member of the I.W.W. Then for thirteen years he was a structural iron worker, and helped build many a New York skyscraper. Recently he branched off into acting, and played in "Outside Looking In," at the Greenwich Village theatre, and in Eugene O'Neill's proletarian dramas. Now Slim Martin has taken to writing, after much urging by the editors of the New Masses. This is his first composition. It tells of the life and feelings of the man who walks steel beams hundreds of yards into the sky. This is a specimen of the kind of worker's art the New Masses is mining for. Is there more of it in the country? Sit down, you bricklayers, miners, dishwashers, clothing workers, harvest hands, cooks, brakemen, and stone-cutters: wrestle with pen and paper and send us in the results—however bad they seem to you. Write us the truth—it is more interesting than most fiction.

Another solicitation for submissions, written by Gold, ran as follows:

WE WANT TO PRINT:

Confessions—diaries—documents

The concrete—

Letters from hoboes, peddlers, small town atheists, unfrocked clergymen and schoolteachers—

Revelations by rebel chambermaids and nightclub waiters—

The sobs of driven stenographers

The poetry of steel workers—

The wrath of miners—the laughter of sailors—

Strike stories, prison stories, work stories—

Stories by Communist, I.W.W. and other revolutionary workers

Hell, I'd buy a magazine with all that in it.

In fact, as a leftist magazine editor working nearly 100 years after the first *New Masses* came out, I find much in their pages endearingly relatable, especially their constant schemes to find new subscribers. (One issue offers a free picture of Lenin with every new subscription!) I even think *Current Affairs* should write up the kind of appeal they published for people to hassle newsstand proprietors:

After you have secured your copy of this issue, stop at

every stand on the way home and ask the news dealer if he carries it. If not, why not? If he has it tucked under the counter, get him to put it out where people can see it. Tell him people are interested in the NEW MASSES—it's the truth. Tell him some of the facts just cited about our steadily increasing sales...If he's a good business man he will want to carry it.

At one point, the editors announced that they were skipping an issue, and extending everybody's subscriptions, in order to catch up on their publishing schedule. It's a trick we had to pull here at *Current Affairs* a couple of times. (The Nov.-Dec. 2016 issue was so late that we just called it the Jan.-Feb. 2017 issue.) Their desperate appeals for funds toward the end are particularly unnerving to an editor struggling to keep a magazine afloat himself:

Dear Reader:

TO GET TO rock-bottom.

1. NEW MASSES has no endowment, no support, no big money, except that which we raise from our readers. We are not the organ of any organization, we belong to our readers. We have no one angel; we have many small angels. That means you.

2. Costs of publishing our magazine have skyrocketed by some fifty percent in the past two years. It costs more to print one issue today than ever in our history. One-half more.

3. There has been no corresponding increase in our income. Because of our viewpoint, because we refuse to compromise with big business, we cannot get such lucrative advertisements as, say, those of Bell Telephone which appear regularly in the pages of our contemporaries. Though our advertising department scours every possible avenue, we cannot get more than a fraction of our needs from that source. And so advertising, which is the life-blood of every commercial magazine, is a relatively minor item in our income.

4. Our operating income derives entirely from subscriptions, from newsstand sales, from advertising. That falls short of our necessary totals by \$65,000 a year. In other words, we must raise more than \$1,000 a week through other means than those cited above. That we strive to do through meetings, fund drives and personal contributions.

5. Each year, at this time, we must, necessarily, bring this whole issue to you, our readers. We have nobody else to turn to. And you have always seen NM through, as you can see by the fact that no issue has been missed since 1934. We have never cried "wolf, wolf." We have never done anything more than present you with the realities of this magazine, and you have always responded. True, this has required a terrific amount of work on the part of the staff, editorial as well as business. Editors have been obliged to sacrifice an undue amount of time to the hard, grueling, but not-to-be-denied job of keeping the magazine afloat.

6. This is where you come in. In all our past drives, our support has come from a cross-section of our readers, but not from all. We know why. It derives from the fact that most of our readers are involved in progressive activities in their communities, something we applaud and encourage. But we want to highlight this fact: unless you pay specific attention to NM, give it all it requires, all you can, our magazine is in serious, critical danger.

The past year saw our deficit rise to dangerous heights, despite budget-shaving, despite everything we could do to keep expenses down. The size of our staff is far from adequate, but the printer's demands, the engraver's, the paper company's, have leaped. The wolf is just outside the door.

Yet he could be staved off, could be driven miles away, if EVERY ONE of our readers understood NM's situation, took it to heart. If they did, we could get out a magazine at maximum.

This year will require \$65,000 to make both ends meet. And \$40,000 of it must be raised within the next four months. This is no arbitrary date, but is one that reflects our creditors' demands. It means an average during the next period of \$10,000 a month.

This is the year of decision. What is done in 1947 to build the democratic anti-war coalition will determine the 1948 elections. Will determine whether the GOP will drive America down the highroad to fascism and war. Or whether we shall win that future for which thousands of Americans and millions of their allies died in the war.

The rest is up to you. We await your answer.—THE EDITORS.

.....
HERE'S MY ANSWER:

TO NEW MASSES, 104 East 9th Street, New York 3, N. Y.

\$..... is enclosed as my initial contribution.

IN ADDITION, I want to pledge \$..... so that NEW MASSES can fully cover its planned budget. (Please indicate the date or dates of your pledged donations.)

NAME..... ADDRESS.....

CITY..... ZONE..... STATE.....

The magazine folded shortly afterward.

The ads in *New Masses* are a truly amusing time capsule of bygone socialism. They were essentially ordinary classifieds with a labor twist, with promotional quotes like:

"To those who hate Bourgeois fiction this book will be a joy! It is a beautiful working class love story."

"Wage Slaves! Do you want a real vacation?? ... We have organized a camp in the Adirondacks limited to 30 people at a time for \$25 a week. Write A.L.H. % New Masses."

"The New LENIN Head — FOR WALL MOUNTING (Ivory or Bronze Finish) On display and for sale now in the WORKERS BOOK STORE / 50 E. 13th St. — New York City."

"JOHN'S RESTAURANT — Specialty: Italian Dishes—A place with atmosphere where all radicals meet."

I can't help but be charmed by some of the announcements to be found:

"The Rebel Players of Los Angeles will present their second production, Friday and Saturday March 6th and 7th. The play is Paul Sifton's The Belt, a play showing the exploitation and speedup of workers at the belt of an American automobile factory. Every worker will find a common interest with the workers at the belt."

Whatever you may be planning for Friday evening, January 5th—cancel it now! For on that evening we are celebrating, with fitting ceremonies, a truly cosmic event—the birth of the weekly *New Masses*—and you'll want to be there.... It will be a night of exciting fun—constructive dissipation—epic mirth and gaiety! To ensure your complete enjoyment, the geniuses, wits, and talents of the John Reed Club, Theater of Action, New Duncan Dancers, Workers Music League, the Pen and Hammer, and Film and Photo League are collaborating upon a program that is guaranteed to out-do all previous efforts. There will be inspiring music, malevolently satirical sketches, dancers who are terpsichorean marvels, and poetry readings by the one and only Alfred Kreymborg.

I find myself dearly wishing to travel back a century and attend one of its "proletarian costume balls," to watch the "red marionettes" perform and see the latest play about the workers' experience. Cheesy and ideological it may have been, but it is difficult not to be enchanted by the sincere enthusiasm for creating a vibrant pro-worker culture.

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FALL TERM 1932

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The *NEW MASSES* sells wherever it is distributed. Our June issue sold out all over New York the first day it was placed on sale. Dealers re-ordered. This time we were able to supply the demand as we had doubled our print order. Altogether, the June issue sold twice as many copies as the May issue, and our distributors tell us this is just a starter.

BUT—

News stand dealers won't stock the *New Masses* unless they know about it. The only way they get to know about it is by having people ask for it. Here's where you can help.

After you have secured your copy of this issue, stop at every stand on the way home and ask the news dealer if he carries it. If not, why not? If he has it tucked under the counter, get him to put it out where people can see it. Tell him people are interested in the *New Masses*—it's the truth. Tell him some of the facts just cited about our steadily increasing sales. If you find a news stand distributor whose sales of the magazine have been good, pass the news along to the next one who hasn't yet ordered. If he's a good business man he will want to carry it.

HERESY:

Bishop Brown's Quarterly Lectures for 1930, now complete. Subjects: I The American Race Problem; II The Pope's Crusade Against the Soviet Union; III The Science of Moscow and the Superstition of Rome; IV The Godly Bishops and the Godless Bolsheviks. 10 cents per copy and 25 cents for a full set. Free to radical organizations for sale at meetings and to unemployed workers.

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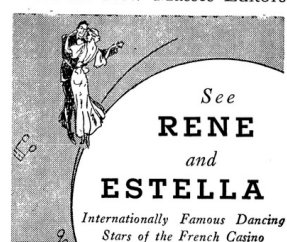
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A vivid, human book about a family of Quakers and their experiences in the Soviet Union. Intimate detail of their life among the Russian people. Regularly \$1.29 **\$1.29**
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*Available at this price only at

Workers' Book Shop
50 EAST 13th STREET, N. Y. C.
"We Pay the Postage"

THE TROUBLE WAS THE SOVIET UNION. Though the magazine did not take direction from the Community Party, its editorial line was ultimately Stalinist, which casts a pall over the whole enterprise. There are all kinds of ads in the margins for everything from discount trips to the Soviet Union (see the Workers' State being built!) to Soviet postcards. The magazine's writers defended the Moscow Trials and the Hitler-Stalin Pact, which tore apart its readership and contributed to its ultimate doom. Michael Gold had a ludicrously romantic and naive view of the U.S.S.R. "It's a great new amazing place, everything beginning, life young and hopeful and strong." He did not hesitate to denounce leftists who became critical of Communism.



GOD!

DRAWING BY HUGO GELLERT

Looking back, there is something tragic about these poor romantics who thought that somewhere across the ocean, a workers' utopia was being built. They were so eager to believe that the Soviet myth was true. Classified ads in the magazine offered private Russian lessons. Music stores promoted the records of Soviet composers. Subscriptions to the *Moscow News* were offered, promising readers answers to their most pressing questions such as "How is the USSR conquering drought?" "What is the position of Shakespeare in the Soviet Union?" and "What is Lysenko's method of growing potatoes despite heat, wheat despite cold?" You can see why it was hard for them to let go of the myth as revelations piled up about Stalin's brutality. One can see them as apologists for an evil regime, or as naive people whose

idealism can be respected even if they were ultimately committed to a dangerous delusion.

The pro-Soviet orientation of the *New Masses* makes it difficult to long for anything of the kind to appear in our own time. But I keep returning to their love of culture, their desire to couple economic revolution with artistic revolution. This was a magazine that would sometimes give you a picture of Lenin with a subscription, but another offer was for a discount book of prints by Goya, which the magazine promised would help the reader understand the true nature of war. I can't help but feel as if our own left has done a good job with political and economic criticism, but has simply not risen to the challenge of creating its own counterculture. The *New Masses* helps us see what that would look like, and where we fall short. We need *Jacobin* to start

running more art criticism, and writing on sculpture, photography, and dance. I suppose we also need to start taking poetry more seriously, though I have had a strict "no poetry" rule for *Current Affairs* since Volume 1, Issue 1. (I have only bent this rule once, for William Ehrhart, because his poems are so good and so accessible that I cannot imagine a reader finding them alienating or pretentious.)

The 1930s communists of the *New Masses* weren't the only ones who tried to fuse art and revolution. The New Left of the 1960s was both cultural and

political, too, with radically experimental music and visual art being central to these "revolutionary" times. I am not sure what a "cultural left" of 2023 would be like, but I know we need one. It is not enough to develop left critiques of production and distribution. We must also think about how to express socialist values through painting and song, without being didactic and boring. A great deal of the "proletarian realism" in the *New Masses* is dreadful, but some of it succeeds at its intended goal of giving powerful artistic expression to the socialist worldview. I hope the painters, dancers, filmmakers, and poets of our own time will look through old copies of the *New Masses* and think about how we can create our own fresh challenges to "bourgeois" art. ♣

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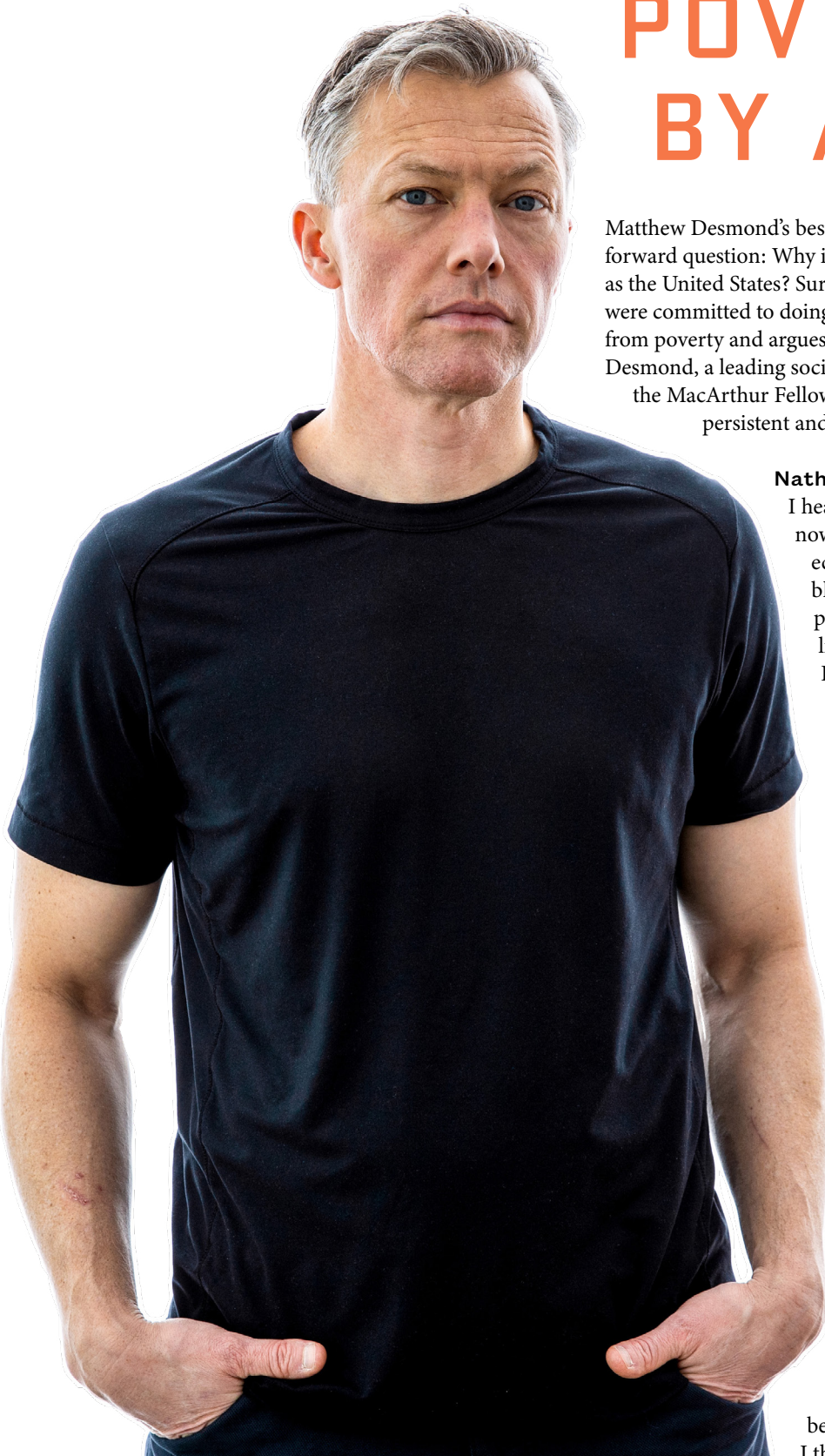
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POVERTY, BY AMERICA



Matthew Desmond's bestselling book *Poverty, By America* poses a straightforward question: Why is there any poverty at all in such a wealthy country as the United States? Surely we could solve the problem of poverty if we were committed to doing so. Desmond points a finger at those who profit from poverty and argues that there is no justification for our inaction. Desmond, a leading sociologist whose work has won the Pulitzer Prize and the MacArthur Fellowship, tries to understand what makes poverty so persistent and what it would take to "abolish" it forever.

Nathan J. Robinson

I hear a lot, especially from some people who are now trying to get the president reelected, that this economy is doing great. I just saw an economics blog with the headline, "If this is a bad economy, please tell me what a good economy would look like." Unemployment and inflation are down, Bidenomics is working. But one of the reasons people appreciate your work is that you will never allow us to shut our eyes to the situation of the least fortunate. So, can you tell us what the situation is like in the other America?

Matthew Desmond

I think if you look at the economy by standard measures—unemployment, inflation, those kinds of things—I think there is a case that the economy is doing okay by those standard measures, but that leaves behind tens of millions of Americans who are still trapped in poverty. America is really weird compared to other rich democracies. We are an advanced, incredibly wealthy country with extreme levels of poverty. By some measures, five million Americans get by on \$4 a day or less. Thirty-eight million of us live below the official poverty line—that's more than the population of the country of Australia. We have a lot of economic hardship and insecurity in this land of dollars.

Robinson

The standard conservative line in this country is that we may have people who are technically poor on paper, but the poor aren't actually poor because John D. Rockefeller never had a cell phone. I think this is a common talking point. Poor people

Matthew Desmond, photo by Barron Bixler

An interview with MATTHEW DESMOND

in this country have fridges and air conditioning and what have you. You have a pretty forceful response to that in your writing.

Desmond

Yes. You can't eat a cell phone. You can't trade a TV for a living wage. You can't trade sneakers for health insurance. Michael Harrington put it pretty effectively in his book, *The Other America*, published almost 60 years ago. He said, it's easier in America to be well-clothed than it is to be well-housed and well-fed, and that's still true today. Poor Americans live at the epicenter of global capitalism in America, and they have access to cheap goods and services like the rest of us. But that doesn't mean they've received or achieved anything close to financial security. We should just be honest about that.

Robinson

Who are the poor in America today? Can you give us a better sense of what kinds of people fall into poverty in this country?

Desmond

Many are kids. We have over a million public school children today that are starting school this fall as officially homeless. Elderly Americans are poor and increasingly poor in recent years. And of course, the poverty line traces the old American story of racism: Black and Latino families have higher rates of poverty than others do in America. But most poor people in America are white because of sheer numbers. This affects rural and urban people at about similar rates; about half of the folks that are poor in America live in rural communities. And so, this is a phenomenon that's found across the country and affects many different kinds of groups. Many folks are poor and working, too, which we have to confront.

In recent years I've been doing more reporting on the working homeless, this group of folks that can't afford a home but are still putting in 30–50 hours a week. That does not sound like an economy that's working to me.

Robinson

What about this other common conservative talking point of the "success sequence": to get out of poverty in this country, all you need to do is graduate high school, get married, and have a full-time job?

Desmond

I wish it were that easy. I truly, truly do. But what we tell our kids, which is good parenting advice, isn't necessarily good social theory. So, if you dig into the success sequence, you realize a few things. More people are poor that play by the rules than those that broke all of them. So, you can check off those three boxes and still find yourself poor. You also find that plenty of folks who played and achieved the success sequence but who are Black or nonwhite are still languishing in poverty at much higher rates. The thing that's doing a lot of work in that calculation isn't marriage; it's the job, and that makes a lot of sense. Getting a full-time job, often, is a road out of poverty. But asking someone who has experienced poverty from a young age—someone who has experienced trauma after trauma, violence and psychological warfare, and eviction and incarceration—to just get a full-time job is sometimes like asking that person just to have a different life.

Robinson

And you mentioned, of course, that there are a lot of children in poverty, and telling them to get a full-time job really is not much of a solution.

Desmond

That's right. I look at evictions and housing security in a lot of my research, and children are one of the main groups getting evicted in our country today. I published a study a few years ago that showed that if you're a kid, your chances of getting evicted are triple, all else equal. So when we're thinking about the face of poverty, we should clearly think of the visible faces that we often see in homeless encampments or slumped asleep on our way to work. But we should also think about these invisible faces, and they're usually young.

Robinson

I've mentioned a couple of my least favorite talking points on poverty. Are there any things that you find particularly frustrating in our discourse in this country about poverty?

Desmond

Yes. Defeatism. This idea that we have to live with it, that this is a byproduct of capitalism, that there's a giant chunk of us that are always going to be poor and that the poor will always be with us. Forgive me, but it's such an un-American idea. It's such a boring, defeatist idea. And it's certainly not an idea that other advanced capitalist societies have embraced. We have not just higher rates of poverty than other places, but our child poverty rate, for example, is double what it is in Germany and South Korea. And so many on the political left and the right just tolerate it. I think our poverty rate should be zero. I want to abolish poverty. I don't want to reduce it. I want to end it. That lack of moral ambition today really gets under my skin.

Robinson

This is one of the things I like about you

as a sociologist. I think many academics are a little afraid to point a finger or use moralistic language. But you do point a finger in this book, and you say that numerous people benefit from poverty and exploit poor people. Much of the rest of us also tolerate this, and we could fix it, but we don't. And that's something that is morally unacceptable.

Desmond

Right. There's this line in the book, "Complexity is the refuge of the powerful." That's a really troubling line for an academic. We like to complicate things and qualify them. Enough of these abstractions. We have so much poverty not in spite of our wealth but because of it. Let's talk really concretely about this. Many of us benefit from all this poverty. We consume the cheap goods and services the working poor produce. We're invested in the stock market. Don't we benefit when our returns go up and up, even when that comes at the cost of someone's wages going down? Many of us defend this ludicrously unbalanced welfare state that America has, the fact that we give the most to families that have plenty already, especially in tax breaks, and then repeat this lie that our rich country can't afford to do more. And many of us continue to be segregationist, embracing exclusive communities that hoard opportunities behind walls and create not only pockets of concentrated wealth but pockets of concentrated poverty. So, a lot of us are connected to the solutions and the problem at the same time.

Robinson

You've said that we shouldn't overcomplicate simple problems. But in another way, your analysis in this book does eschew simple explanations, and it certainly eschews the personal responsibility explanation. It also challenges the explanation of poverty as being just a product of neoliberalism, the idea that we gutted the welfare state, and, as a result, poverty persisted. You mentioned other factors. You say we have to look at the way that poor people are exploited in this country.

Desmond

Right. This is a big question. Forgive

me for talking a little bit more on this question, but I think it's really important. There's a paradox here. Spending on poverty programs has increased a lot over the last 40 years, but by plenty of measures, poverty has been very persistent. And that's weird because those programs, like food stamps and housing assistance, work. There's a ton of evidence showing that they pull folks out of poverty. And yet, we have this persistence of poverty. So, what's going on? What's going on is the thing you put your finger on. We have failed to confront the unrelenting exploitation of the poor in the labor market, in the housing market, and in the financial market. So, if you think back to when Johnson launched the war on poverty in 1964, 10 years later, poverty was cut in half—big advances in economic prosperity for our country. But the thing is, the war on poverty was fought during a time when one in three workers belonged to a union, wages were climbing, and jobs were good. Today, unions are weak and wages are pretty stagnant, especially for folks without a college education. And so, these poverty programs are lifesavers, but the exploitation of the labor market and other markets have turned them into something like dialysis: they make poverty less painful, but they don't make it disappear. So, the implication of this, I feel, is pretty profound. It means we don't just need to turn the faucet on more. We don't just need deeper investments. We need different ones. We need to start cutting poverty at the root.

Robinson

I'm always baffled when I see these statistics, like how California has spent billions of dollars and however much per homeless person and has not succeeded in addressing homelessness. You point out the paradox of all this spending. Where does the money go? You've pointed to a couple of things there, but how does a state like California spend so much on homelessness without solving homelessness?

Desmond

One of the reasons is that they're not solving the root cause of homelessness, which is the lack of housing in that state.

It's expensive to get someone who has reached rock bottom and is living on the street into a place of stability. That's why upstream interventions like eviction diversion, or making sure people don't end up on the street homeless, are really much more cost-effective. And when we're talking about intervening and fighting for the end of poverty, we have to start thinking about attacking its root causes. That doesn't just mean triage, which a lot of these statistics come from. It also means designing a new kind of society. But speaking specifically about welfare aid, a lot of the numbers you see on paper don't translate into a dollar in someone's pocket or a benefit for a family. So, if you look at welfare dollars, or money we spend on this program called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families [TANF], this is cash welfare. It's a block grant, which means the federal government gives states money and says they've got some discretion on how to spend it, and states use that discretion. Some states fund Christian summer camps or abstinence-only programs with those welfare funds. For every dollar budgeted for a family, only 22 cents ends up in their pocket in terms of direct aid. So, I'd be a little skeptical of looking at budgetary impacts just by looking at budgets on paper.

Robinson

There's a criticism written by Matt Yglesias, a kind of wonky democratic blogger, of the excerpt that you published in the *New York Times Magazine*. He essentially suggested that your explanations of the exploitation by landlords and the decline of unionization are factors that we don't need to mention. He wrote, "The idea that the welfare state has totally failed is a lie I'm used to hearing from Paul Ryan, not something I expect to hear from someone like Desmond." He suggests that, in fact, we know that the social safety net works, and the main problem here has very little to do with changes in unionization or exploitation. The main problem is that compared to other countries, the United States has a stingy welfare state, and if we were willing to have a robust welfare state like many other countries, we would solve poverty very quickly. That's what I understand

him to be saying. How would you respond to that?

Desmond

On the one hand, this sounds like it's coming from someone who read a little bit of the book but not the full thing. Certainly, someone who didn't read it closely. The book clearly argues for a bigger welfare state. There's a whole chapter devoted to deepening anti-poverty spending based on fair tax implementation. And this statistic that I can't shake is from a study that shows that if the top 1 percent of Americans just paid the taxes they owed, we could raise an additional \$175 billion a year, which would basically be enough to pull everyone above the official poverty line. So, there's clearly an alignment I have with Matt Yglesias on this point. But we also have to face the blunt truth that by numerous measures, poverty has stagnated over the last 50 years, and that even by some measures, poverty has gotten worse.

We need to do more—not just turn on the faucet more but also really rethink how the fundamentals of American society are breaking down for low-income families today.

Robinson

At the end of your book, you write that we need to lift the floor by rebalancing our social safety net. But we also need to empower the poor by reining in exploitation and invest in broad prosperity by turning away from segregation. That's how we end poverty in America. And you write that we need to start by being poverty abolitionists who are committed to this. To conclude, could you talk about the path toward solving this incredibly, maddeningly solvable problem?

Desmond

It is maddeningly solvable. The book says we need to do three things. First, we need to deepen our investments in anti-poverty spending—we talked about that already. We saw during Covid that doing that has massive effects. The child tax credit, for example, which is basically a subsidy to parents with kids, reduced child poverty by 46 percent in six months during Covid.

So, we know how to do this, and we need to do more. The second thing we need to do is address exploitation, which means we need to empower workers, expand housing choice for families at the bottom of the housing market so they don't have to just choose the best bad option, and end this unrelenting financial exploitation of the poor, which pulls about \$61 million in fines and fees out of their pockets every single day. And then, finally, we need to end our evil embrace of segregation. We need to stretch and reach for broad prosperity in our own communities. Now, that might sound like a wonky thing that's Congress's business, but the book makes a really clear point that this is our business, too. And to get there, to build a political will to move the needle like that, I think we need to embrace this idea of becoming poverty abolitionists, which means we recognize that poverty isn't something we should tolerate but something that we should abhor.

Profiting from someone else's pain corrupts all of us and corrupts our society. This means shopping and investing differently, talking about our taxes differently, supporting a government that's determined to fight poverty by fair tax implementation, and showing up at those zoning board meetings and fighting for integration ourselves. This is a call to make poverty personal, to take a little bit of that on us. And I think the great balance here has been shown with the environmental movement. Yes, we need big policies, congressional action, and international cooperation. But what are you eating? What are you driving? Do you need to take that trip? And I think those little personal decisions matter for these larger political moves. That's how we put upward pressure on folks, and we should do that with respect to economic justice, too.

Robinson

It seems to me like there's a huge danger of resignation. Here in New Orleans, just less than a mile away under the highway, there's an ever-growing tent city. But, we solved homelessness briefly during the pandemic by putting people in hotels and got the homelessness rate down from

thousands of people to dozens, and then we unsolved the problem.

Desmond

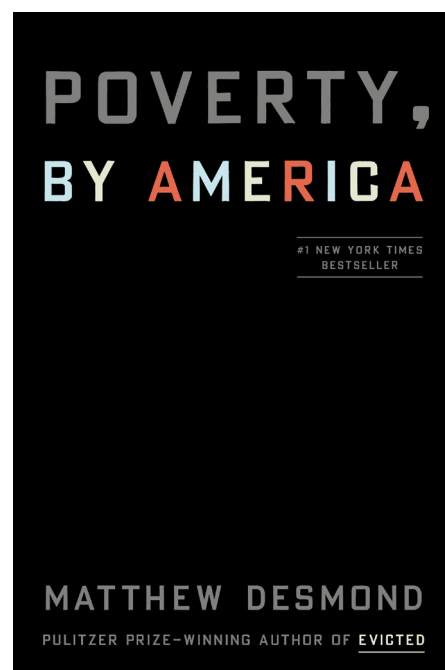
Yes. It's really sad.

Robinson

And it's still considered intractable. It doesn't seem very intractable. It seems like a failure. It seems like a failure that we could address if we saw this as our fault.

Desmond

Yes. Bigger, more permanent changes to societies have been made in far less extreme circumstances than Covid, both through tyrannical and authoritarian regimes and democratic regimes. And so, if what we did during Covid was seen as just temporary and impermanent, it certainly didn't have to be. And something that I'm still wrestling with is how we let that slip. Because on the one hand, the answer is kind of easy. There was a pandemic, it was only for that, and there were political barriers to doing more. But on the other hand, there's something very searching and deep about how the American public basically ushered in a new country for a year and then just let it slip.



Desmond's "Poverty, by America" book cover

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text
by Rob
Larson

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TROPICÁLIA

AND ITS DISCONTENTS

BY PETER TAYLOR

IT'S 1968, AND THE WORLD IS IN FLUX. All kinds of people, particularly students and other youth, are daring to dream of a different kind of world, one free of violence and poverty and oppression and defined instead by love, harmony, and creativity. Protests have rocked the streets everywhere from Chicago to Mexico City to Prague. Not content to placate bourgeois cultural attitudes, untold numbers of artists, musicians, and writers are catalyzing and harnessing this energy. They reach for the radical, using art as a weapon in the war that might bring an end to all wars. Any moment, it seems, might mark the end of the old world and the beginning of a new, liberated one—a hope that will prove sadly mistaken in the oncoming reactionary aftermath.

It's September in Rio de Janeiro, and the lineup of the Third International Popular Song Festival includes an upstart young musician named Caetano Veloso (with backing by the psychedelic rock band Os Mutantes—The Mutants). Caetano, as he will come to be known, hails from the northeastern state of Bahia, the birthplace of *samba* and other quintessential Brazilian musical traditions. More recently, he has been living in the cosmopolitan metropolis of São Paulo, making music alongside numerous other soon-to-be household names like Gal Costa, Tom Zé, and Gilberto Gil. Inspired by the broad countercultural wave sweeping the world in the face of authoritarian and imperialist forces, these musicians seek to blow up all preconceptions regarding the form and role of popular music in Brazilian society, incorporating influences from the Beatles and fellow avant-garde musicians alongside more traditional Brazilian forms. Alongside the movement's artistic goals of musical innovation, these musicians also see their music as a show of resistance against repressive forces, not least the military dictatorship that will govern Brazil until the mid-1980s. Drawn from the title of one of Caetano's singles, the name of the new movement references Brazil's famous climate: *Tropicália*.

Tonight, Caetano and Os Mutantes plan to premiere a new song whose title Caetano has pilfered from a picture he saw of Paris taken during protests the preceding May. "Il est interdit d'interdire," read a piece of graffiti, a line from a French comedian re-appropriated by the protesters into an affirmation of the right to free expression. Caetano has translated it into Portuguese: "É Proibido Proibir," or "it's forbidden to forbid."

His audience this evening is made up primarily of left-leaning Brazilian students, many of whom consider their attendance at such festivals to be a political act—a collective opportunity to influence their country's contemporary cultural climate, particularly given the intense police repression that has greeted their more direct protests against the reigning military dictatorship. "At these events," writes Caetano in his memoir *Verdade Tropical (Tropical Truth)*, "one could encounter the more or less conscious illusion that this was where the problems of national affirmation, social justice, and advances in modernization were to be resolved."

Sixties counterculture icons are often associated with the era's protests, so we might expect these students to be receptive to the new sounds of Tropicália. This is an expectation that Caetano shares even as he hopes at the same time to shock the audience. Though fiercely anti-dictatorial, the students are also wary of a fellow Brazilian potentially diluting their country's rich musical styles with Western influences, which they view less as radical art and more as imperialist kitsch. Almost as soon as Caetano and Os Mutantes launch into their performance, the students begin to boo. Their jeers briefly drive the performers off the stage, before Gilberto Gil comes out to defend the artistic vision of his friends and collaborators, imploring the audience to listen. When the musicians come back out, the boos grow even louder, and the students begin throwing tomatoes and balls of paper to express their disapproval. Having intended to give a speech regarding recent instances of censorship by the dictatorship, Caetano switches course, shocked by what he perceives as the students' blatant conservatism. He instead proceeds to shout a question that will ring through the musical history of South America's largest country: "*É que isso é a juventude que diz que quer tomar o poder?...Vocês não estão entendendo nada, nada, nada, absolutamente nada!*" "Is this the youth that says it wants to take power? You are all understanding nothing, nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing!"

Legendary in Brazilian musical history, this story, which I have condensed slightly, is recounted in wonderful detail by Victoria Langland in her article "*Il est interdit d'Interdire: The Transnational Experience of 1968 in Brazil*."¹ Langland uses the anecdote to interrogate the Brazilian students' relationship with, or else rupture from, other contemporaneous student movements, but the story is equally illustrative of the shocking

power of the music itself, which combined traditional Brazilian styles with eclectic foreign and avant-garde influences to create a sound distinct from anything else, before or since. What was it about Tropicália that made the left-wing students boo against the same musicians who had marched in the streets with them against the dictatorship just months before—and who would go on to become targets of its wrath? Was it too imperialist in its influences, too apolitical in its concerns? Or was it perhaps too radical for its moment, so distinct and so subversive that it drew the ire of the musicians' political allies and enemies alike?

* * *

THE EVOLUTION OF Tropicália parallels the cultural evolution of its land of origin. Brazilian culture is a product of the fusion of numerous cultural influences—European (primarily Portuguese), indigenous, and African—into something all its own. In the 1920s, Brazilian poet and novelist Oswald de Andrade identified this cultural richness with the term *antropofagismo*, or “cannibalism,” which encapsulated the way that Brazilian culture had developed at

the intersection of numerous cultures. Instead of fearing or retreating from this complexity, readers were encouraged by Andrade to embrace it. A key precursor to Tropicália, Andrade's 1928 *Manifesto Antropofago*, or “Cannibalist Manifesto,” gave a name and a formal framework to something Brazilian musicians had always done—consume the work of various cultures and combine them in new and different ways. The difference was that the Tropicalists were cannibalizing their influences in a conscious manner, attempting to do deliberately what their cultural forebears had done more or less by circumstance. As Caetano writes in *Tropical Truth*, “the idea of cultural cannibalism fit the Tropicalists like a glove. We were ‘eating’ the Beatles and Jimi Hendrix.”

Beyond *antropofagismo*, it is impossible to understand Tropicália without first discussing *samba* and *bossa nova*, the two most quintessential Brazilian musical forms. Just like with any music, it's difficult to describe *samba* with words alone. So instead, I implore you to queue up Gilberto Gil's song “Aquele Abraço” (“That Embrace”) off his eponymous 1969 album (though numerous versions exist). Notice how the beat bounces, how Gil's guitar interlocks with various percussion instruments to

generate rhythms that are certainly not dissonant but also never seem to be quite in sync, how all the pieces coalesce into a special kind of rhythmic harmony. Furthermore, I defy you to listen to the track without dancing, or at least bobbing your shoulders and head back and forth. Now, check out Stan Getz and João Gilberto's recording of “The Girl from Ipanema.” Notice how the rhythmic style is congruent to that of “Aquele Abraço,” yet this time much suaver and more subdued. This is the essence of *samba* and *bossa nova*, more than any words can describe.

Originally used to describe any number of dances and songs popular in Bahia and other chiefly Afro-Brazilian areas of Northeastern Brazil, *samba* began to coalesce as a musical form at the turn of the 20th century in Rio de Janeiro. There, urban development projects forced many of the city's poorest—and largely Black—residents from their homes, and into *favelas*, the dense neighborhoods of often informal or improvised housing that have come to dominate the international conception of the city. Musicians would jam and dance together in the streets, ultimately leading to the synthesis of the music we now know as *samba*. By the middle of the 20th century, artists like João Gilberto and Antônio Carlos “Tom” Jobim sought to push the boundaries of *samba* by incorporating new influences, particularly American jazz. The result was *bossa nova*, a more musically complex but also more laid-back evolution of *samba*. The genre's most famous song, “The Girl from Ipanema,” has become, to foreigners, practically synonymous with Brazil as a culture and nation.

Though the new sounds of the Tropicalists would seem to stand in contrast to the easy-going *bossa nova*, it would be impossible to conceive of Tropicália without the pioneering of artists like Gilberto or Jobim, musicians who endeavored to mix various musical influences into something wholly original. Furthermore, *samba*—and by extension *bossa nova*, Tropicália, *pagode*, or any of the other numerous musical movements and styles that have blossomed in its wake—is an



Caetano Veloso at the Festival da Música Popular in 1967



Tropicália ou Panis et Circensis album cover from 1968

inherently collective form, one of collaboration, joint participation, and the synthesis of numerous seemingly disparate influences. This was the attitude that guided the Tropicalists in their search for a new sound.

* * *

BY THE TIME CAETANO and Os Mutantes were getting pelted with tomatoes and paper by the angry students, Brazilians had already been living for four years under a brutal right-wing dictatorship. The 1964 coup d'état, or *golpe de estado*, was a reaction to a perceived Communist threat by several political factions: primarily the Brazilian military, the Brazilian conservative political elite, and (surprise!) the U.S. State Department. After assuming the presidency in 1961, João “Jango” Goulart proposed a series of broadly left-wing policies:

a literacy campaign based on the work of pioneering educator Paulo Freire, universal enfranchisement (at the time the franchise was restricted to literate Brazilians), and even land reform. Despite Goulart’s personal anticommunist stance and his class background as one of Brazil’s *latifundiário*, or large-scale landowners, Jango was threatening enough to both Brazil’s elite and the watchful eyes of the United States—who feared a repeat of the Cuban Revolution in Latin America’s largest country—to scare his political enemies into action. In *The Jakarta Method*, journalist Vincent Bevins explains the U.S. role in regime change. “There were no large or noisy interventions with Uncle Sam’s hand quite obviously pulling the strings,” Bevins writes. Instead, “The U.S. carefully nurtured powerful anti-communist elements, and let them know they would have support if they were to act.” By 1964, a perfect storm of

right-wing mobilization and imperial meddling yielded a military coup that deposed Goulart and established a new regime. The new government quickly made it clear that new elections were not on the docket (they would not happen again until 1983).

The dictatorship did bring a degree of economic stability and prosperity to the country for a short time, peaking between 1970-72, but this “economic miracle,” as it is often called, came at a price. For one, the dictatorship’s economic model was predicated on anti-democratic centralization and a reliance on foreign capital, neither of which was conducive to the economic uplift of the average Brazilian, even if it did widen middle-class Brazilians’ access to things like color televisions or Super-8 cameras. As Lilia M. Schwarcz and Heloisa M. Starling write in their book *Brazil: A Biography*, “the [economic] programme was based on a strict stabilization policy: wage control [limiting the increase of wages], reduced minimum working age, elimination of ‘job security,’ repression of trade unions, and the prohibition of strikes.” In this way, the economic model worsened the existing concentration of wealth, a pattern that continues today in both Brazil and across the globe. As Caetano writes in *Tropical Truth*, “We saw the coup simply as a decision to halt the redress of the horrible social inequities in Brazil and, simultaneously, to sustain North American supremacy in the hemisphere... As we reached adolescence, my generation dreamed of inverting this brutal [economic] legacy.”

The military dictatorship relied on censorship, repression, and even torture to combat its challengers and keep a potentially uproarious population at bay. In keeping with the anti-communist effort that brought it to power, the regime directed its greatest wrath at insurgent leftists. They imprisoned and tortured numerous organizers and militants, including a Marxist guerrilla named Dilma Rousseff, who would later go on to serve as president of Brazil from 2011 to 2016 and commission an historic report detailing the dictatorship’s abuses.²

It was under such political circumstances that Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, two Bahians transplanted to São Paulo, began making music together in the mid-1960s. They had both grown up surrounded by the music of Bahia, but they also devoured music from around the world once they settled in “the biggest city in South America”—to quote the English version of the song “Baby,” probably the Tropicalists’ biggest hit. Naturally, they were inspired by the practitioners of the then-ubiquitous *bossa nova*, particularly the virtuoso João Gilberto. But Caetano and Gil, as they are known colloquially throughout Brazil, were also excited by the sounds of rock ‘n’ roll, particularly the Beatles. Furthermore, they were uncomfortable with exclusively playing into the tropes of traditional genres like *samba* merely to be accepted by mass audiences. Instead, they sought what Gil ironically termed a “universal sound,” wherein international pop music could be synthesized with more traditional Bahian styles, creating something distinctly Brazilian. In this way, they could challenge not only reigning Brazilian musical orthodoxies, but also the dictatorship.

The two musicians debuted this “universal sound” at the late 1967 TV Record Festival in São Paulo, one of many televised musical extravaganzas where Brazilian artists performed and were judged in musical competitions as a means of finding broader exposure. Gil and Caetano respectively placed second and fourth in the festival, performing two of their now most celebrated compositions, “Domingo no Parque” (“Sunday in the Park”) and “Alegria, Alegria” (“Joy, Joy”). Both songs were unlike anything that had ever been heard in Brazil or any other country. Their avant-garde synthesis combined Brazilian rhythms with the burgeoning sounds of psychedelia being pioneered by the Beatles and Jimi Hendrix across the ocean in London. Although “Alegria, Alegria” ultimately did well in the competition, the crowd had initially reacted with suspicion to Veloso’s appearance with an Argentine rock band called the Beat Boys, as the

volume and jangliness of their electric instruments were out of place with the event’s more subdued atmosphere. The performance was a presage of his appearance with Os Mutantes a year later, where neither the audience nor the government would react nearly as nicely.

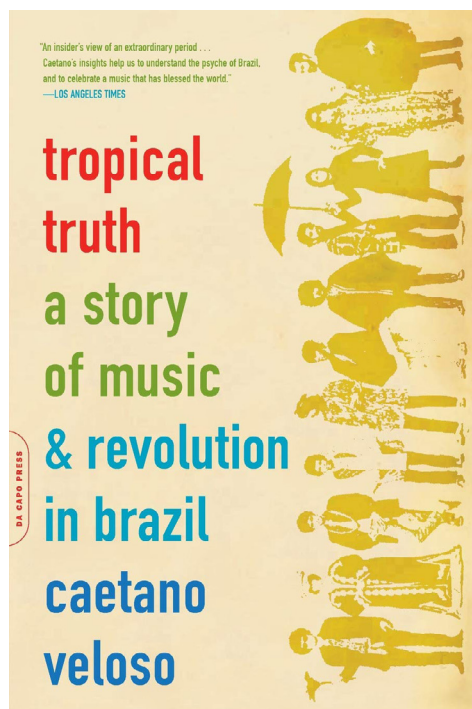
As Caetano and Gil explored new approaches to musical expression, so too were numerous other Brazilian writers, musicians, and artists looking to both adapt and subvert traditional forms: Glauber Rocha, José Celso Martinez Corrêa, the Concrete poets, the Carioca Neo-Realists, and many others. One such contemporary was a visual artist named Hélio Oiticica,

for non-Brazilians like me. On one hand, the lyrics seem to be nonsense, a collection of references to various cultural landmarks of Brazil like Bahia’s famous lighthouses or the holiday Carnaval. Numerous other “lyrics” are little more than disparate sounds. Christopher Dunn includes helpful context in his book *Brutality Garden: Tropicália and the Emergence of a Brazilian Counterculture*:

Veloso’s song-manifesto...is the most outstanding example of allegorical representation in Brazilian song.... The lyrics of “Tropicália” form a fragmentary montage of events, emblems, popular sayings, and musical and literary citations. Although unnamed, the most immediate referent in the song is [the capital city] Brasília, the monument to high modernist architecture and developmental modernization that became the political and administrative center of the military regime after 1964. “Tropicália” alludes to the trajectory of Brasília from a utopian symbol of national progress to a dystopian allegory of the failure of a democratic modernity in Brazil.

This nightmarish odyssey is accompanied by backing music just as reliant on Beatles-esque psychedelic orchestration as it is on typical *samba* rhythm. The politics of the music is subtle, concealed behind layers of noise and allusion. The track set the tone for the incipient movement, but it was only the beginning, a herald of what was to come.

The musical movement coalesced with the appearance of the album *Tropicália: ou Panis et Circensis*. Recorded in São Paulo in May 1968 and released two months later, the record was expressly intended as a manifesto of the nascent musical movement and thus remains the collection of songs that best captures the movement’s style and idiosyncrasies. The album cover features the record’s musical personnel arranged together in elaborate dress, a clear and intentional reference to the cover of *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*. It was Brazil’s first



Caetano Veloso's "Tropical Truth" book cover

who called one of his installations “Tropicália”—an abstract depiction of a Rio favela and “an ironic take on the idea of Brazil as a tropical paradise,” according to the Tate—the “most cannibalistic work of Brazilian art.” It inspired the title to the opening track of Caetano Veloso’s eponymous debut album, which was released in 1968.

Context-free, the song that lent its name to the musical movement is very hard to parse, particularly

“concept album,” where the musical arrangements, lyrics, album art, and text (in the form of a facetious movie script on the album’s back cover) were all meant to be taken as one artwork, disparate pieces of the same whole.

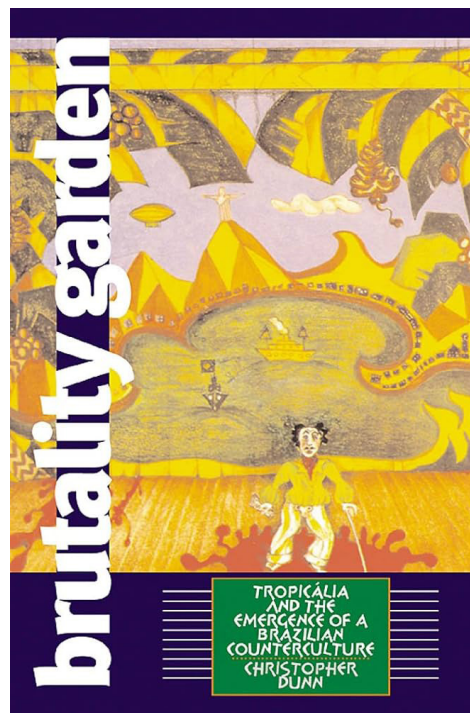
The album demonstrates how, for the Tropicalists, there wasn’t any one way to make art. Instead, they leaned on Oswald de Andrade’s theories of cultural cannibalism. Their work was ironic, playful, self-effacing, and allegorical. Unwilling to defer to any imposed artistic visions, the Tropicalists could be seen as critically suspicious of all forms of social authority, including both right- and left-wing prescriptions of cultural authenticity. Lyrics on tracks like “Bat Macumba” showed the influence of the Neo-Concretists, their poetic contemporaries. “Geleia Geral” (“General Jelly”) features driving rock ‘n’ roll guitar and bluesy organ that wouldn’t be out of place on a Rolling Stones record. “Hino do Senhor Do Bonfim” (“Hymn of the Lord of Bonfim”) is a religious song from the 1920s, recorded here likely with more caustic irony than sacred reverence. “Baby” is a straight-up pop song—except for its orchestral arrangement that rivals even “Eleanor Rigby.” As Caetano Veloso explained, “Instead of working as a group in order to develop a homogenous sound that would define a new style, we preferred to utilize several recognizable sounds from commercial music, making the arrangements an independent element that would clarify the song, but also clash with it.”

The music was political, too, though not in a manner as obvious as much of the music we often associate with the 1960s counterculture, like Jefferson Airplane’s “Volunteers” or Crosby, Stills & Nash’s “Almost Cut My Hair.” Instead, the political messaging was more subtle. The song “Enquanto Seu Lobo Não Vem” (“While Your Wolf Doesn’t Come”), for example, name-checks not a contemporaneous Brazilian politician but “Presidente [Getúlio] Vargas,” a sometimes president, sometimes dictator of Brazil who suppressed a Communist

revolution in the 1930s before later re-styling himself a broadly left-wing populist. With a suggestion that the singer and his interlocutor take a walk through the “Estados Unidos do Brasil” (“the United States of Brazil”) amidst a soundtrack of “os clarins da banda militar” (“the bugles of the military band”), the song’s political critique is at once both obscure and unmistakable to someone looking for it.

Critic Andy Beta writes further in *Pitchfork*:

“Even amid the whimsy of the Tropicalistas, the local air of violence began to creep into their lyrics. Gil’s ‘Miserere Nóbis’ tucked in references



Christopher Dunn’s “Brutality Garden” book cover

to stains of wine and blood and ends with gunshots and booming cannons. Dulcet bossa nova singer Gal Costa, later an adult contemporary MPB [música popular brasileira, or Brazilian pop music] superstar, grew wilder and more psychedelic, roaring out a warning on ‘Divino Maravilhoso’ about paying attention to the blood on the ground.”

No, the lyrics were not always explicitly political—and yet, in their sly

references to the dictatorship’s ongoing violence, they were.

The album’s centerpiece is its quasi-title track, “Panis et Circensis,” written by Caetano and Gil and recorded by Os Mutantes. A reference to a line from the Roman poet Juvenal and a clear slight towards the dictatorship, the phrase is Latin for “bread and circuses,” a common pithy analysis about the way repressive regimes use diversions and entertainments instead of meaningful governance in order to achieve public approval. The song begins in a spacey chamber-pop groove before a record scratch slow-down halfway through, which gives way to distorted guitar riffs, driving bass, and the increasingly accelerating harmony vocals, all backed by a trumpet that sounds like “Penny Lane” on amphetamines. Then it all comes crashing down, almost literally, with the sound effect of breaking dishes. Though strange like so much of the Tropicalists’ poetry, the lyrics are easily interpreted as a critique of the mores and excesses of the Brazilian upper classes of the time, who “let loose tigers and lions in the backyard” while “the people in the dining room / are busy living and dying.” Beyond its merit as a political statement, it would not be remiss to describe “Panis et Circensis” as the most psychedelic song ever recorded.

* * *

Gil and Caetano (particularly the latter) are often portrayed as the foci of the Tropicalist movement, and not without cause, considering their outsized roles as its most prolific composers. The psychedelic rock band Os Mutantes were probably the next most significant to the movement. Though later albums featured a more diverse array of musicians, the core trio of Sérgio Dias (guitar), Arnaldo Baptista (bass and keyboards), and Rita Lee (vocals) defined much of the Tropicalists’ sound: on *Tropicália: ou Panis et Circensis*, on their own records, and the “solo” releases of people like Gilberto Gil, who used the band on his debut album just as Caetano did for his performance of “É Proibido Proibir.” Tom Zé was the movement’s

mad genius, the most experimental of the group both then and since. Gal Costa and Nara Leão were Tropicália's powerhouse vocalists who could just as easily sing *bossa nova* as they could imitate blues singers like Etta James. Poets Torquato Neto and José Carlos Capinan brought a degree of literary sophistication and experimentation to the musical project. Rogério Duprat was the arranger behind the scenes, the George Martin figure who could assemble the puzzle pieces into a grand picture. Each of the Tropicalists were individually magnificent; none of them were as strong alone as they were together. Their collaborative approach mirrored the collective creativity of *samba*, as well as the leftist orientation toward collectivism and solidarity over individualism and competition.

* * *

THE DISPLEASURE BRAZIL'S LEFT-wing students expressed over the Tropicalists' perceived cultural sacrilege paled in comparison to the ire the musicians drew from Brazil's military dictatorship. Not only were

the musicians critical of the regime, they echoed the attitudes of so many other counter-cultural figures of the moment—any of the performers at Woodstock in 1969 come to mind—in advocating a socially liberated society, one that might be more accepting of recreational drug use and differences in sexuality and gender. As Caetano summed up in *Tropical Truth*, “Everything was heightened by the instinctive rejection of the military dictatorship, which seemed to unify the whole of the artistic class around a common objective: to oppose it.”

In October of '68, not long after the riot at the music festival, Veloso, Gil, and Os Mutantes played a concert in Rio where they hung a banner designed by Hélio Oiticica. The banner featured the image of Cara de Cavalo (Horse Face), a *favela* gangster who had been slain by the police in 1964. Underneath the image was the dark slogan “Seja marginal, seja herói”—“be marginal, be a hero.” (Caetano noted in *Tropical Truth* that the banner was merely “one element among the show's many preposterous and shocking touches”

and that Oiticica had an interest in “figures who seemed to respond with violence to Brazil's unbelievable social disparities.”) Agents of the military regime's Department of Public Order publicly denounced the musicians and their subversive performance, and Randal Juliano, an influential local right-wing media personality, was outraged enough about the event that he called upon the military to make an example out of the musicians. In December, both Caetano and Gil were arrested and kept in confinement, first in a military prison and then under house arrest in the city of Salvador, before they left Brazil at the beginning of 1969 for a two-and-a-half-year exile in London. Though the Tropicalists all continued making music both at home and abroad, Caetano and Gil's exile brought an end to Tropicália as a cohesive musical movement.

Though recorded by a completely different group of people, the album *Acabou Chorare*, released in 1972 by the Novos Baianos, is probably the last-high profile musical release that you might consider properly Tropicalist in its orientation and style. Recorded in a bohemian context—the musicians lived together and spent most of their time jamming and playing soccer—the album boasts a lively mix of Brazilian styles (particularly *samba*) with more rock-oriented music, with guitarist Pepeu Gomes imitating Jimi Hendrix. And the group's mentor and close friend? João Gilberto, the titan of *bossa nova* who now turned his attention to mentoring a new generation of artists. Though the album was not expressly political in its lyrical content, it was certainly a flash of joy—the Portuguese-Italian title translates to “the crying is over”—amidst the harshness of the reigning dictatorship.

By the time Caetano and Gil returned to Brazil in 1972, Tropicália was largely finished as a musical movement. Most of its adherents, though, went on to have long and generally successful musical careers. (Tom Zé remained more obscure until a revival of interest in his work in the 1990s.) Although most of this subsequent output is a far cry from



The band, Os Mutantes performing in 1969



Gilberto Gil (Frevo Rasgado) album cover from 1968

their psychedelic *samba* beginnings, all the artists retained the same attitude of experimentation and collaboration throughout the rest of their careers. The most ironic shift came not in their music but in their status in Brazilian society: nearly every Tropicalist is now feted as a national cultural icon, especially Caetano and Gil. In 1997, Caetano released his memoir, which raised his profile from popular singer to public intellectual, while Gil was appointed to run the Ministry of Culture after the 2002 election of Lula da Silva, the social democrat and former trade unionist. Upon his appointment, Gil mused, “I’ve gone from being the stone thrower to the glass.”³ He was, at the time, one of only a handful of Afro-Brazilians ever to serve in the nation’s cabinet.

* * *

IN THE INTRODUCTION TO HIS memoir, Caetano Veloso writes, “My intention in this book is to tell and interpret the adventure of a creative impulse that emerged within Brazilian pop music in the second half of the sixties, whose protagonists—among them the narrator—wanted the freedom to move beyond the automatic ties with the Left and at the same time to account for the visceral rebellion against the abysmal disparities that tear a people asunder, even as that people remains singular and charming.” What are we to do with this apparent contradiction, one wherein the musician both affirms a distance from—yet asserts a clear congruence with—the broad rebellion of the left, just as he did decades ago on that stage in Rio?

Perhaps to resolve this tension, we can look to the strengths of the musical movement itself. Any art worthy of its name shouldn’t pacify, assuage,

or otherwise calm us down. Instead, truly great art shocks us, shakes us up, grabs us by the shoulders, and says, “Pay attention! Things are not, or don’t have to be, as they are or as they seem.” What endures about the Tropicalist movement—just as much as Gal Costa’s wails or Sergio Dias’s guitar riffs or even Caetano and Gil’s lyrics—is the explosive attitude they all brought to their art. From this approach neither Brazil’s leftist students—somewhat narrow-minded in their cultural attitudes—nor the dictatorship that ruled them were safe. Now, more than 50 years later, we should turn to music like *Tropicália* as much as ever. On the left, we have an enduring commitment to political resistance and freedom of artistic expression, along with an understanding of art as critical to any project of resistance. We should thus embrace the unorthodox and the new and the different, understanding them not only as means for social change but also a part of its end. If we don’t, how can we hope to earn the right to call ourselves radicals? ✚

NOTES

1. Before reading Langland’s excellent article, I learned about this story in the Tropicália section of the museum Cidade da Música da Bahia in Salvador, Bahia. I would highly recommend checking it out if you are ever in the city.

2. At the behest of various right-wing elements in the Brazilian government and in the context of a massive government corruption scandal called Operation Car Wash, President Dilma Rousseff was impeached in a process that one international tribunal declared to be a coup (what has been called “law-fare” as opposed to military force). Future President Jair Bolsonaro, then just a representative, vocally cast his vote for impeachment in homage to the military colonel who conducted the torture of leftists like Rousseff.

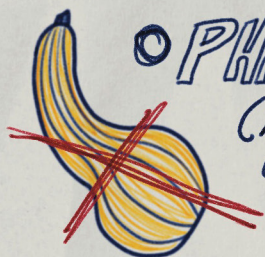
3. I once observed a very heated conversation between two Brazilian leftists about the music of the Tropicalists. One asserted that their music was great but the artists were worthless because they weren’t sufficiently engaged in political activity. The other disagreed, citing Gil and Caetano’s exile (“they must have had *such* a tough time making music in London,” she said) and their musical contributions, which she called a radical political action in and of itself.

THINGS TO ~~BAN~~ NEXT

- THE TRANS SIBERIAN ORCHESTRA -
WHO DO THEY THINK THEY'RE FOOLING?



- GET ARABIC NUMERALS OUT OF OUR SCHOOLS!!



- PHALLIC VEGETABLES
(Must be kept under a cloth in public markets)

- CALLING THE GOVERNOR SLANDEROUS NAMES, INCLUDING MEATBALL RON, DeSATAN, DeSASTER, OL PUDDIN' HANDS, ETC.

- KILTS -
TOO CLOSE TO DRAG



- OWNING 2 WEINER DOGS
PRETTY GAY IF YOU THINK ABOUT IT.



WOMEN

- WOMEN WHO CORRECT ME ABOUT HOW TO PRONOUNCE CERTAIN KINDS OF ASIAN CUISINE.



◦ URGENT:

PROSECUTE THE SCOUNDREL KEVIN BACON FOR ENCOURAGING GOOD DANCING AND DEFIANCE OF AUTHORITY. HE'S BEEN GETTING AWAY WITH IT FOR TOO LONG.



- SUGAR... BAN ALL OF IT.



HOW WE'RE FIGHTING PragerU

The conservative media organization PragerU brings in over \$60 million a year. Their 100-plus staff, operating out of a 44,000 square foot headquarters, produce hundreds upon hundreds of slick, professional videos (plus magazines, books, podcasts, etc.). It's an incredibly well-resourced propaganda factory.

PragerU—which is not a university, despite the name—used to be best known for its 5-minute explainer videos, on topics ranging from why we shouldn't have a \$15 minimum wage to why the IDF is "the world's most moral army." But lately, they've been focusing a lot of their new work specifically on children. The organization produces videos from game shows to history cartoons, many of which look innocent but which are laden with right-wing ideology.

PragerU really wants to get into the public school system, and has even come up with a comprehensive "parent action guide" so that parents can try to convince school officials to show PragerU material. And it's starting to work: Florida and Oklahoma recently approved PragerU children's material for use in school, and I'm sure other states with Republican governors will be following suit soon.

PragerU, of course, insists that it is not indoctrinating children with conservative propaganda, but is simply fighting against the left-wing indoctrination that is already happening. They're just presenting facts. But as I've shown at great length before (and as many YouTubers have also shown), this is nonsense. Their videos are full of misleading statements and even outright lies. They couldn't care less about facts or evidence or reason.

A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO RESISTING PragerU PROPAGANDA

from the editors of
CURRENT AFFAIRS

The PragerU plan to infiltrate schools is therefore troubling. Because although it's propaganda, it's good propaganda, in the sense that it's very well-made. Their kids' shows are designed to look exactly like any other kids' show, and their videos are full of charts and data. They know what they're doing.

So we need a plan. And here at *Current Affairs*, we've come up with one. We've produced a booklet called *A Student's Guide to Resisting PragerU Propaganda*. It's short (30 pages), but it offers a basic introduction to critical thinking and shows students how to analyze and debunk PragerU's lies. It goes through some of their material on climate change, socialism, American history, policing, and Israel to show how PragerU conceals facts in order to manipulate young people. Any young person who picks it up and reads it will be fully prepared to see through any nonsense PragerU throws at them.

On the next pages, you'll find some sample pages from our new guide. We hope you'll put some copies of the full booklet in the hands of students who need inoculating against PragerU "educational" material. →

currentaffairs.org/store

WHAT IS PragerU?

PragerU calls itself "the largest educational media company the conservative movement has ever seen." Despite the name, they're not actually a university, but their videos have been viewed billions of times. They have produced thousands of hours of content, and are branching out into new formats, including books and magazines.

Lately, PragerU has been creating a lot of material for schools. Florida recently approved the use of PragerU videos in classrooms. Maybe your teacher has shown you one. Or maybe your parents make you watch them. If so, we'd like you to read this little guide, because we want to help you avoid believing things that aren't true. We want you to consume media with a critical eye that will help you become a thoughtful member of a democratic society. In a democracy, the people themselves have to make important decisions about politics, so you need to learn how to avoid being tricked by demagogues.

This is what you need to remember: **PragerU lies to you.** They are a propaganda outlet, totally uninterested in telling the truth. But they're good at what they do. PragerU says it recruits "the most sought-after production, design, and marketing staff from Hollywood and beyond." Bringing in over 60 million dollars a year and operating out of over 40,000 square foot headquarters, PragerU's 100+ staff produce slick, engaging, highly professional content that can appear sensible and persuasive. If a PragerU video is your first exposure to a topic, you may think it sounds pretty reasonable. Or, even if you know that it's biased, you might not know precisely how it's wrong, and if someone asks you to explain why it's wrong, you would find it hard to pinpoint the exact problem.



We're here to help. **Current Affairs** is a political magazine in New Orleans. We specialize in exposing bad arguments and showing why things that may look true are actually misleading or completely wrong. Our politics are the opposite of PragerU's, but the difference between us and them is that we commit ourselves to telling the truth. We present the other side's arguments fairly, without resorting to wild distortions, so that you can make up your own mind based on a full understanding of the two sides' positions.

This guide is going to show you how PragerU distorts the truth and tries to get you to swallow conservative political ideology without realizing that it even is conservative political ideology. We hope that if you encounter PragerU material in your classroom, this guide will help you maintain a skeptical attitude toward it and see how it might be manipulating you.

REMEMBER: Don't take our word for any of this! Think for yourself.

Spotting Right-Wing Ideology

PragerU is **right-wing**, which means that its material endorses a particular set of controversial beliefs about the way the world is and ought to be. Here are some of the basic assumptions you'll see in their videos:

- Free market capitalism is the best economic system, and "socialism" will destroy society. Wealth inequality (some people being poor while others are rich) is not something we should object to.
- Global warming is not actually that much of a problem, and those who argue we need major new action to stop it are exaggerating. Fossil fuels are good for the world and we should continue to use them.
- The "left" promotes a harmful set of cultural values, including feminism and tolerance of LGBTQ people.
- The United States is the greatest country in the world and the Founding Fathers' vision for the country should be followed rather than challenged.
- The country of Israel is unfairly singled out for criticism despite being a beacon of democracy and freedom.

As you watch PragerU videos, watch for examples of these messages recurring. Sometimes they are snuck in very cleverly! For instance, in a video about critical thinking, which is supposedly trying to teach you how to think independently, the example of "independent thinking" it uses is a student questioning the scientific consensus on climate change. It's perfectly fine, of course, to interrogate scientific findings. But notice that PragerU is choosing to encourage you to question *climate scientists* and not encouraging you to question, for instance, its own propagandistic videos.

TECHNIQUES OF MANIPULATION

THE SELECTION AND OMISSION OF INFORMATION

Consider the following exchange:

INTERVIEWER: "Have you ever led a team of more than 20 people?"

CANDIDATE: "I've been involved with teams of over 50 people and played crucial roles in project management and coordination."

Did you notice that the candidate didn't directly answer the interviewer's question? We don't actually know whether they have led a team of more than 20 people. They presented information that gives the impression that they did, but it looks like they may have buried the fact that they did not, in fact, lead a team of more than 20 people.

You can create very misleading impressions on a listener by selecting which facts you present and which you omit! Consider the following quote from a PragerU video "What's Wrong With Government-Run Healthcare?"

"A second big problem with single-payer systems is that they are expensive—really expensive. A recent study by the Mercatus Center at George Mason University found that a Bernie Sanders-style 'Medicare-for-All' health system would cost a total \$32.6 trillion over ten years."

\$32.6 trillion sounds like a lot! But did you know that countries with "single-payer" healthcare systems (where the government, not private insurance, pays for medical care) actually spend less on healthcare than the United States? You wouldn't know that if you watched PragerU, because they bury the information that doesn't fit with conservative political ideology.



When you're being made to watch a PragerU video, ask yourself questions like:

1. What information am I not being told?
2. Whose voices am I not hearing?
3. What explains the decision to include/exclude certain facts or people?

Here's an example from a PragerU Kids video. It's from *Craftory*, a series that combines teaching basic crafts with educational material. For instance, one video "celebrates American farms by making confetti eggs." The cheerful host relates some facts about farming in America while making the eggs and stuffing them with confetti. Most of the facts are banal. They are a little misleading (for instance, the host tries to portray contemporary farmers as "family-owned," downplaying the role of giant corporations in agriculture). But pay attention to this quote on the history of farming in America:

"Later into the 1700s, European settlers farmed across the 13 colonies. By 1790 almost all of American workers were farmers."

Now, most farms were still small farms. But there were many large plantations in the southern Areas. Tobacco became the main crop of the South...In the 1800s cotton became the main crop in the South. Now, let's check on our eggs..."

The following picture is displayed:



Can you spot the missing people and/or information?

That's right, the host neglects to mention that these "large plantations" were not worked by families of "European settlers," but by millions of enslaved Africans, working under brutal conditions. The painting offers a romanticized view of American rural life that does not depict slavery.

Ask yourself that third question, then: Why was the decision made not to mention the role of enslaved people in working these farms? Well, because PragerU openly promotes "pro-America content," and so it wants to tell an upbeat story about the country's history, minimizing such inconvenient facts as the genocide of Native Americans and the enslavement of Black people.

REMEMBER: WHAT IS LEFT OUT? WHO IS LEFT OUT? AND WHY?

ACTIVITY: Write a PragerU Video



What information will you exclude? What information will you use? How will you make it seem like the left is evil, totalitarian, and wrong?

TIP: Conservatives often argue that there is a giant battle for the soul of civilization. So, for instance, PragerU believes there is a "war on boys," a "war on work," a "war on cars," and a "war on Christmas." These manufactured controversies are often called "moral panic." Why not make up your own phony war?

HOW TO SPOT PROPAGANDA

Propaganda is information designed to manipulate people's emotions, attitudes, opinions, and actions, often without their conscious awareness. It does this using lies and half-truths. For instance, during the time of Joseph Stalin's brutal rule in the USSR, a propagandist might have said: "Under the wise leadership of Comrade Stalin, the Soviet Union has transformed from a backward nation to a leading world superpower." This is not necessarily factually incorrect (the Soviet Union did industrialize and become a world superpower under Stalin), but leaves out the horrific mass murder and imprisonment that characterized his regime. Propaganda presents a selective picture of the world that can be emotionally powerful, and perhaps not even strictly untrue, but which ultimately intentionally distorts your understanding of reality.

Here are some examples of historical propaganda. Can you see how they were designed to manipulate the viewer? #1, the most innocent, is the kind of gentle manipulation found across advertising generally. Corn is "the food of the nation," a phrase meant to make you associate being American with eating corn. The picture makes corn seem wholesome and delicious. Perhaps it even makes you want a cornmeal pancake. In #2, the opposite technique is deployed: fear. Everything you love will go up in flames if the communists win! Right-wing propaganda is frequently fear-based, warning that terrible things will happen to civilization if, for instance, people are paid higher wages, or transgender people are accepted. In #3, a piece of Soviet propaganda, Joseph Stalin is made out to be a kindly father figure to the nation, even though he was actually a mass murderer.



EXERCISE:

Look around the world. Find examples of propaganda techniques in advertising, on the news, and in content you find on the internet.

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

—Noam Chomsky

Most Soviet citizens probably didn't fall for this sort of propaganda, because they could see in their own lives just how brutal Stalin's regime was. But plenty of people outside the country were convinced by the false picture of Stalin that appeared in propaganda. In #4, we see a U.S. Army recruitment poster portrayed as human beings, instead of being depicted as a horrible "mad brute" who would kidnap women and attack America. Once again, fear

was used to turn off people's brains. Finally, in #5, we see a piece of propaganda from Mao Zedong's China. The poster aims to make people feel like they are part of a great movement bringing a wonderful change to the country, with Mao hovering over it like the sun. The reality of Mao's China was just as grim as Stalin's USSR, but the poster successfully presses emotional buttons to get people to feel like Mao is leading them toward a great destiny.

AMERICAN MYTHOLOGY



PragerU simplifies complicated, flawed historical figures into mythical entities. Think about how figures like George Washington are being portrayed in their videos. What is left out of the story?

On the right is an advertisement from *Claypoole's American Daily Advertiser* on May 26, 1796, offering a reward for the return of Ona Judge, an enslaved woman belonging to Martha Washington who ran away from the president's house in Philadelphia. Is Ona Judge mentioned in the video? If not, why do you think that is?

Ten Dollars Reward.
A BORNEDOM from the household of the President of the United States, on Saturday afternoon, ONA JUDGE, a light Mulatto girl, much freckled, with very black eyes, and bushy black hair—she is of middle stature, but slender and delicate—very good clothes of all sorts, but they are not sufficiently recollected to describe.
As there was no collection of her going off, and it happened without the least privation, it is not what her delinquency, which she is generous, fully by water, all numbers of white and others are counted against receiving her on board, rather than money, and probably will endeavor to pay for a free passage.
Two dollars will be paid to any person, (white or black) who will bring her home, if taken in the further reasonable time if apprehended and brought home, from a greater distance, and in proportion to the distance.
FRED. KIT'S, Steward.
May 24

in time to meet Christopher Columbus, and at one point have the following interesting exchange:

LAYLA: What about slavery? [...]

COLUMBUS: ...Slavery is as old as time and has taken place in every corner of the world, even amongst people I just met. Being taken as a slave is better than being killed, no? I don't see the problem."

LAYLA: Well, in our time we view slavery as being evil and terrible."

COLUMBUS: Ah, magnifico! That's wonderful! I am glad humanity has reached such a time! But you said you're from 500 years in the future? How can you come here to the 15th century and judge me by your standards from the 21st century? For those in the future to look back and do this is, well, estúpido.

LAYLA: So good and bad is based on the time you live in?"

COLUMBUS: That is a great question... Some things are clearly bad no matter when they happened. But for other things, before you judge, you must ask yourself: What did the culture and the society of the time treat as no big deal?

Now, we could ask ourselves: If Columbus doesn't see the problem with slavery, why is he pleased that humanity will reach a time when it condemns slavery? And if he says that "some things are clearly bad no matter when they happened," why is slavery not one of them, and instead categorized with "other things"? But there's a bigger problem here, which is that the video falsely implies it took 500 years for Columbus's behavior to be seen as immoral. In fact, he was condemned by people living in his very own time!

First, let's remember why Columbus is a controversial figure these days. Columbus enslaved many of the native inhabitants of the islands he explored. In his own journal, he noted the potential of the indigenous people for slavery, suggesting that they could be easily subdued and forced

into the European slave trade. Under Columbus's rule, natives who didn't collect enough gold were punished with brutal methods, such as cutting off their hands and tying them around their necks while they bled to death. He and his brothers were known to use torture and mutilation as forms of punishment. Columbus established the encomienda system, a form of forced labor where Spaniards were granted land and could force indigenous inhabitants to work for them, often in harsh conditions. This system led to significant abuse, overwork, and death among the native populations. There were instances of mass killings under Columbus's rule. In one such event, Columbus and his men massacred thousands in the Arawak population of the Caonao River area. There are also accounts suggesting that Columbus and his men sexually abused and enslaved indigenous women and girls. In one letter, Columbus himself mentioned how girls of ages 9-10 were in demand by Europeans.

Columbus was so cruel and despotic that at one point he was tried and imprisoned for mistreatment of the natives.

PragerU

WATCHED WITH A CRITICAL EYE



Leo and Layla is a PragerU cartoon about two time-traveling siblings who meet historical figures. Many of these videos are fairly innocuous and don't really have room for political "bias." (The Wright Brothers, Francis Scott Key, etc.) But sometimes, the videos are very clearly designed to push a conservative agenda, and give a misleading impression of history.

One of the most controversial Leo and Layla videos has been about Frederick Douglass, who escaped enslavement to become a great abolitionist activist, writer, and speaker. In the video, Douglass makes clear that slavery is wrong, but he treats the necessary evil that could not have been avoided by early Americans:

"I'm certainly not OK with slavery, but the Founding Fathers made a compromise to achieve something great: the making of the United States."



Nowhere in the video does it mention that most of the prominent founders, including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, personally kept people enslaved. In reality, while Douglass always insisted that the Constitution itself was a "glorious liberty document," he was utterly scathing about the hypocrisy of the American rhetoric of freedom. In a famous address called "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July," he argued that the early United States had no right to call itself a free country:

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hyphery; your boasts of freedom, your boasts of justice, your boasts of liberty, are, to him, mere lies, a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour.

PragerU videos frequently encourage us not to "judge" those who committed horrible acts in the past—probably because if we did, it would make a lot less sense to venerate the Founding Fathers and to commit ourselves completely to following their vision. Leo and Layla also travel back



D. PRAGER, CHANCELLOR

Fans may be familiar with our kid-centric content. Our runaway hits with the K-5 crowd include Christopher Columbus Did Nothing Wrong, Jesus Loved Capital Punishment and Incrementally Increasing the Corporate Tax Rate Is Communism. Our team celebrates this win for conservatism, but we won't stop here. On the heels of victory, we are

introducing the PragerU PhD

text by Ryan Darrah / edited by Michael Lodato

announcing a brand new program: Doctorates from PragerU! Do you wear a bowtie and/or suspenders and/or a polo shirt tightly tucked into freshly pressed khakis? Do you enjoy playing “devil’s advocate” in the Women’s and Gender Studies course that you took purely to antagonize the gothcore bisexual woman that lives down the hall, whom you are obviously attracted to even though you will never ever admit it? Then this PhD from a guy who runs a YouTube channel may be perfect for you!



Our Trump Studies
Department is
second-to-none.

Liberal universities teach useless nonsense like underwater basket weaving. Good luck with that! Our program trains you for real world jobs like explaining things to women on podcasts. Mainstream PhD programs require 4 to 6 years of education, research, and exams. As you know, the conservative movement has come to regard education, research, and exams as woke bullshit. Not to mention—the only people who qualify a “real” PhD are people with bachelor’s and master’s degrees, whereas we at PragerU offer doctorates to anyone with a credit card and 3 months to spare. The PC Left thinks ideas must be judged by “experts,” “scholars,” “double blind studies,” and “peer review.” At PragerU’s Doctoral Program, you will be judged by your peers, such as Ted from down the street, famed Facebook meme group admin Cheryl, and your Uncle Steve who has been barred from Thanksgiving since his so-called “outburst” in 2016.



No Woke Mind Virus
allowed on the PragerU
e-campus.



So, if working for a right-wing think tank or being a frequent guest on a conservative talk radio program is a future that entices you, a PragerU (grumble, grumble, ahem... non-accredited) PhD may be for you! This is your chance to continue your education, to get messy drunk at the 2024 CPAC, and, one day—if your dissertation is approved, which so far they all have been—to own the libs!



We won't make you study the woke continents.

Here are a few of the PhD dissertations that our (unlicensed, yet-to-be recognized, soon-to-be "accredited") PragerU Doctoral Program has already produced!

Film Studies | Conservative Film Criticism: You Couldn't Make That Movie Today by Heather Fuddrucker
Liberals love to view films "through a feminist lens" or "through a class-conscious lens." But Dr. Mrs. Fuddrucker challenges the status quo. She dares to view films through a Suburban-Dad-Americanist lens! She beautifully unpacks a deep truth that none can deny: you couldn't make *Rambo* today, because—as she artfully contends with subtle and careful argumentation—*Rambo* is white.

American History | Jefferson Examined: He Actually Did Not Do Any of That Bad Stuff by Charles S. Beauregard IV

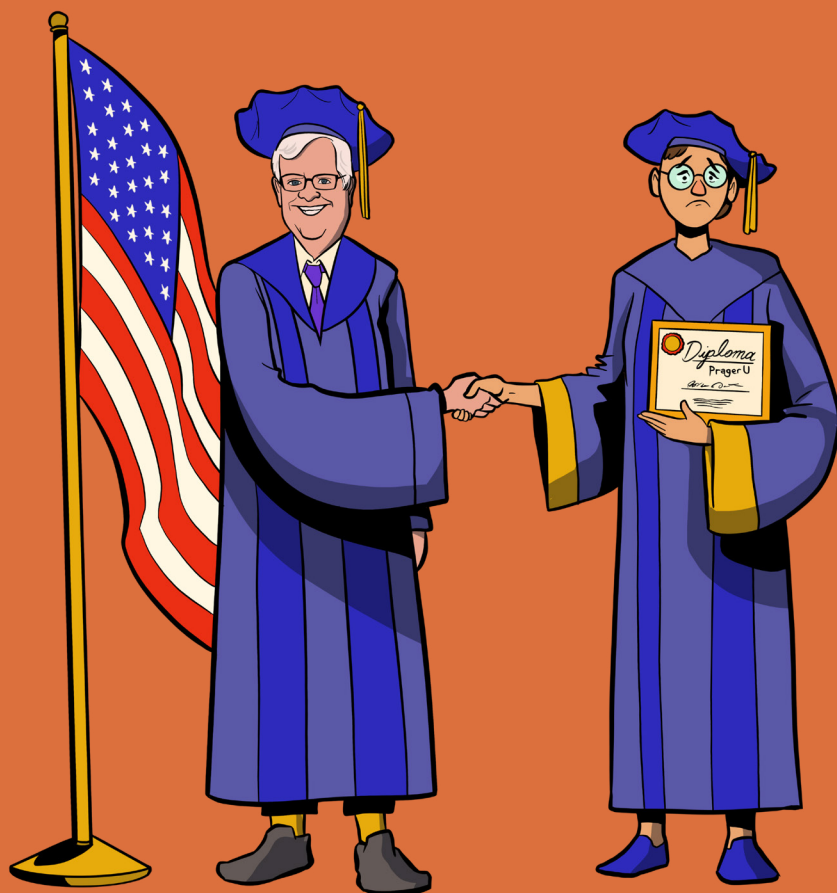
Because of the Democrats, many believe that Thomas Jefferson was not perfect. Fortunately, Dr. Beauregard sets the record straight. Thomas Jefferson did not own human beings and certainly did not continue the practice of subjugating human beings into permanent bondage, not that there's anything wrong with that.

Economics | Rethinking Poverty: Thank God There Will Always Be Poor People by Eleanor Preston Buckley Prager (No Relation)

Some say poverty should be alleviated, while others claim poverty is the fault of the poor. Threading the needle, Ms. Preston Buckley Prager argues that poverty should not be alleviated no matter whose fault it is. Without poverty, we would not have vast wealth. And without vast wealth, PragerU would not receive countless millions from oil and gas fracking magnates which graciously allow us to speak the unfiltered truth to the American People.

Biology | Towards the Continued Study of Third Grade Biology and Nothing Else by T. Ruther

When you were a child, you understood the world through gut instincts. Yet, many of us are brainwashed by those who purport to teach "advanced" biology. In this landmark paper, Ruther introduces the "The Gut Theorem," which reads "Whatever you already believe about trans people, climate change, and infectious disease is true." Speaking truth to power, Dr. T. Ruther boldly says what we were all thinking: nothing new is ever discovered and we all need to go back to the 1800s or perhaps even further in order to be right about everything.





STOPPING THE RETIREMENT VAMPIRES

BY AARON WISTAR

RETIREMENT, IN RECENT YEARS, HAS INCREASINGLY BECOME *your problem*. Since the 1980s, the defined-benefit pension—which offers a stable, guaranteed monthly income in retirement—has largely been replaced by the 401(k) plan, which allows employers to contribute a defined amount to a retirement account but provides no guarantees about the ultimate value of the benefits. This, as many have argued, has been a raw deal for workers. Whereas employers once shouldered the risks of market fluctuations to provide a guaranteed retirement package, workers now have to worry about whether their retirement accounts will run out before they die or get wiped out by a downturn in the stock market—if, indeed, they have any retirement savings at all.

Public-sector workers have mostly managed to escape this fate. As of early 2022, 86 percent of state and local government employees still had a defined-benefit plan that granted them a baseline of retirement security—the kind that all of us would enjoy if we had a humane, functioning retirement system, rather than one that leaves people working at Walmart well into their 80s or going without dentures and heating oil because their Social Security check is too small to live on.

But even as public pensions provide vital support for the

nearly 20 million people who work for state and local governments, their funding often comes directly at the expense of other workers. Public pension funds once invested mainly in safe public debt and highly-rated corporate bonds. Since the early 2000s, however, they’ve poured more and more money into risky “alternative assets” like real estate, hedge funds and, above all, private equity (PE)—an industry notorious for aggressive, high-risk buyout deals that leave a trail of layoffs, benefit cuts, and bankruptcies in their wake. The private equity market, once a niche sector, has exploded as a result, growing from \$576 billion in 2000 to \$7.6 trillion in 2022. Flush with pension-fund cash, major PE firms like Blackstone, Kohlberg Kravis Roberts (KKR), Apollo, and the Carlyle Group have elbowed their way to the very center of the U.S. financial system, with executives taking home 10- and 11-figure compensation packages that top bank CEOs can only dream of.

Three recent books—Brendan Ballou’s *Plunder*, Gretchen Morgenson and Joshua Rosner’s *These Are the Plunderers*, and Brett Christophers’ *Our Lives in Their Portfolios*—argue that this development has been an unmitigated disaster. As private equity firms buy up huge swathes of the economy—including everything from manufacturing plants to nursing homes,

infrastructure, and rental housing—they screw over just about everyone they come into contact with. And though the firms themselves make obscene profits, the pension funds that invest in them aren't seeing most of that money. Since 2008, average returns on private equity funds have been no better than the stock market even though they are much riskier than stocks. What's more, this risk from private equity investments has become, as the market analytics firm PitchBook reported earlier this year, "a major threat to pension plans' ability to pay retirees."

The real beneficiary of the private equity industry is, in short, the private equity industry. All three of these books make this case in no uncertain terms. Skillfully cutting through the noise created by the industry's PR machine and its army of lobbyists, they ask why we have not done more to rein in the industry's abuses. Focusing narrowly on these abuses, however, they also leave a bigger question to the side: namely, why should so much of our retirement system depend on private investment in the first place? Why, in other words, can't a comfortable retirement be a basic universal right rather than an elusive employment perk whose viability ultimately depends on the performance of financial products of varying degrees of odiousness?

If we want to fight off the private equity gremlins, we'll need more than just adept muckraking that exposes financial predation for what it is. We need a retirement system that doesn't put predatory firms in positions of power to begin with.

WHAT IS PRIVATE EQUITY? A PRIVATE EQUITY FIRM IS one that raises money—mainly from pension funds, but also from university endowments, insurance companies, and other institutional investors—and then uses that money to buy up companies, with the goal of reselling them at a profit five to ten years down the line. In the meantime, the PE firm takes control, reorganizing operations, shutting down lines of business, and engaging in all manners of financial chicanery to squeeze out as much cash as possible.

The PE firm finances these purchases in two ways: first, with money that it collects from pension funds and other investors (equity), and second, with money borrowed from banks or other PE firms (debt). "Equity" is in the name, but in many cases, the vast majority—often as much as 80 percent—of the purchase is financed with debt. And because PE firms structure deals so that the debt falls on the acquired company, this creates a huge burden on the companies they buy. When PE giant Apollo (the subject of Morgenson and Rosner's book) bought Missouri-based aluminum smelter Noranda for \$1.2 billion in 2007, for example, \$1 billion of that money was borrowed—and this debt landed on Noranda's balance sheet, not Apollo's. Before its purchase by Apollo, Noranda was profitable, carrying only \$160 million in long-term debt. After, its debt load multiplied sevenfold, and the enormous debt service payments left the company running at a loss. To restore profitability, Apollo started laying off employees.

Layoffs are common responses to the massive debt burdens created by private equity-led buyouts. In an attempt to keep

the money flowing while still making payments to creditors, PE-controlled companies will slash burdensome liabilities like payroll, healthcare, and pensions. When it works, the company returns to profitability by trampling over employees. When it doesn't, bankruptcy—ten times more common in companies bought by PE firms than in those that are not—soon follows.

Conveniently for the private-equity firm, the costs of bankruptcy also fall on workers—an extraction that is standard in the industry. After Noranda went bankrupt in 2016, average household income dropped by \$6,000 in the county where the main Noranda plant was located as workers found themselves unemployed. The company's pension funds also collapsed, which meant they would have to be bailed out by the federally funded Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation. In short, Apollo used its investors' money—which, recall, came principally from pension funds—to raid and destroy the pension fund of another company. For its part, Apollo had long since recouped its investment. Extracting hundreds of millions of dollars in dividends and fees over five years, it made a 300 percent profit.

As PE managers destroy workers' livelihoods with one hand,

PLUNDER

Private Equity's Plan to Pillage America



BRENDAN BALLOU

Plunder by Brendan Ballou

they pay themselves with the other. Hefty advisory or management fees—payments that PE firms extract from acquired companies for “the privilege of being owned,” as Brendan Ballou puts it—are ubiquitous. So too are brazen strategies for redirecting revenue away from investments that could improve business operations and toward immediate payouts for the fund’s partners. PE firms sell off the assets of acquired companies, load them up with debt, and do whatever they can to extract short-term profit, with little regard for the company’s long-term prospects. And these are not occasional or incidental abuses, but rather the core of the business model. As Christophers explains, PE fund managers are desperate for immediate cash because they compete for investors on their advertised “Internal Rate of Return” (IRR), a benchmark for measuring profitability that is extremely sensitive to the timing of payouts. The sooner a fund can pay investors, the higher the IRR. This creates a built-in imperative to inflate advertised returns by shifting payments forward in time—even when other strategies would ultimately make more money for investors.

THE CASCADE OF PUBLIC PENSION FUND INVESTMENT INTO private equity over the past 20 years has occurred for a variety of reasons. One is outright corruption. Kickback schemes between private equity companies and corrupt pension officials have not been uncommon. But there have also been broader structural factors at play. Before the 1980s, most public pensions were funded directly out of general tax revenue. And those that did rely on investment income were usually required to invest in low-risk securities such as government debt. But as the number of employees working in state and local government rapidly expanded in the 1970s, this system came under severe financial strain. Rather than raising taxes or cutting benefits to shore up the system, pensions started shifting to a model that relied more on income from investments to pay retirees and less on taxes. Regulations restricting the kind of investments pension funds could make were also lifted over the course of the 1980s, which allowed pension funds to shift money into riskier stocks.

Stocks were great as long as the market kept going up. But when it inevitably crashed—as it did in 2000, and then again in 2008—pensions were left underfunded: the amount of money that they expected to make from investments, contributions from employers, and contributions from employees would not be enough to cover promised payments to retirees. This made pension funds increasingly desperate to find high-return investments that could fill the hole in their books. Once again, rather than trying to raise taxes and increase employer contributions, politicians and pension fund managers opted instead to reach for riskier investment strategies.

In the early 2000s, at least, PE funds were generating consistently above-market returns, so they seemed like a promising way to compensate for funding shortfalls. But as more pensions clamored to get in on the action, the PE market got crowded, and easy opportunities for quick profits became harder to find. PE funds started to competitively bid up prices for potential

acquisitions, which made these bets riskier (since turning a profit in the future would require an even higher selling price). With “too much money chasing the same deals,” Morgenson and Rosner note, average returns fell as losses began to stack up. Today, pensions increasingly find themselves stuck with PE investments that have gone sour—with billions tied up in “zombie” funds that have little hope of turning a profit.

And yet, private equity companies still manage to make plenty of money off of pension fund investments. This is because much of their income comes from high and unpredictable fees that have no relation to the fund’s ultimate profitability. These “money for nothing” fees, Morgenson and Rosner point out, can add up to a big drain on pension funds rather quickly. In 2021, for example, the State Teachers Retirement System of Ohio paid fees to private equity companies amounting to some \$143 million, enough to pay \$1,067 to each of its 134,000 retirees.

Another important point is that, even though public pension funds are the largest single category of investor in private equity funds—contributing 67 percent of PE fund capital overall—they are not necessarily PE firms’ most valued customers. Banks, insurance companies, and ultra high net-worth individuals are also, alongside pensions, major private equity investors. Goldman Sachs, for example, just raised \$15 billion for its own PE investments. Sovereign wealth funds—state-owned investment funds usually built from oil money or other export revenues—are big investors as well. And as Christophers shows, even though banks or sovereign wealth funds collectively put less money into private equity than pension funds, their individual contributions are often larger, which gives them leverage to extract better terms. When Saudi Arabia’s sovereign wealth fund alone put \$7 billion into a single investment with Blackstone in 2017, for example, the sheer scale of the transaction gave it the power to negotiate much better terms than the Pennsylvania Public School Employees’ Retirement System, which invested \$500 million in the same fund.

Private-equity lobbyists and their congressional lackeys love to talk about how they are serving the hardworking teachers and firefighters of America—“providing long-term retirement security by delivering strong returns for public pensions year after year.” Admittedly, “serving Goldman Sachs and the Saudi royal family” doesn’t have the same ring to it. But it would be more accurate.

IF THE INFLUX OF PENSION FUND MONEY INTO THE PRIVATE equity market led to too much money chasing too few deals, it also spurred leading PE firms to seek out greener pastures in new sectors. Historically, the private equity industry has been best known for its high-profile buyout deals in retail and industry, where its ruthless financial extraction has bankrupted everything from Toys “R” Us to Linens ‘n Things. But over the past few decades, PE firms have increasingly moved into housing, infrastructure, and the care economy. The industry, as Ballou puts it, has metastasized. Like a cancer moving from lungs to lymph nodes to bones, it has insinuated itself into the basic services that make our lives possible.

The results have been predictably dismal. Consider the case of HCR ManorCare, covered both in Morgenson and Rosner's book and in Ballou's. The second-largest operator of nursing homes and assisted living facilities in the United States at the time, ManorCare was acquired in 2007 by the Carlyle Group—a powerful Washington, D.C.-based PE firm whose alumni include George H. W. Bush and current Federal Reserve Chair Jerome “Jay” Powell.

After the purchase, Carlyle squeezed ManorCare for every cent it could deliver. Most importantly, it sold off the majority of the company's nursing home properties for \$6.1 billion, enough to recoup its entire initial investment. It then had ManorCare lease back its former properties for \$40 million per month. And when the rent proved to be too much for ManorCare to handle, Carlyle did what PE firms do best: it laid off hundreds of workers.

Facilities soon became so understaffed that they were unable to meet basic care needs. Residents were given incorrect medications. They were left with untreated bed sores. Those with limited mobility had to venture to the bathroom without needed help from staff, often injuring themselves in the process. Health code violations accumulated. Meanwhile, Carlyle bilked the nursing homes for more, pressuring the remaining employees to offer unnecessary treatments that would maximize its Medicare reimbursement rate.

Aggressive revenue-maximization frequently crossed the line into fraud—and occasionally into outright abuse. Patients were billed for care they supposedly received while they were asleep or actively resisting due to dementia. One 84-year-old man at a ManorCare facility in Illinois was forced to participate in therapy sessions he didn't want or need—against his physician's recommendations—even as his health deteriorated. On-site staff were trying to force him into yet another group therapy session on the day he died. Whether these abuses played any role in the man's individual death is not clear, but we do know that, on average, nursing homes owned by private equity had 10 percent more resident deaths than those facilities not owned by private equity between 2005 and 2017.

Accountability for these deaths has proved elusive. One family whose relative died of neglect at a ManorCare facility tried to sue, but as Ballou shows, Carlyle's Matryoshka-doll legal structure made it nearly impossible to pin down in court. It turns out that ManorCare was owned not by Carlyle itself but by a number of private equity *funds* that Carlyle created and managed. This is another industry norm: PE funds are distinct legal entities and are not directly owned by the PE companies that create them. Instead, the PE firm contracts to provide management and advisory services to the PE fund. What's more, even if Carlyle did own its portfolio company directly, ManorCare itself owned actual nursing homes only through multiple layers of shell companies. So, despite exercising de facto control, Carlyle could plausibly argue in court that it was merely an advisor to a series of funds that owned a company that owned other companies that killed people.

The court agreed. Any lawsuit would have to be taken up with the individual nursing homes. Thanks to Carlyle, they were all too broke to pay any significant damages.

DESCRIBING PRIVATE-EQUITY BUYOUT DEALS AS “swashbuckling” or “buccaneering” is a journalistic cliché. But cases like ManorCare show just how risk-averse the big PE firms really are. The goal is not to profit from bold risks but to structure deals in such a way that they'll be profitable regardless of the outcome. ManorCare's real estate portfolio, whose market value was never really in question, was low-hanging fruit. And the Medicare payments were essentially guaranteed to come in even as the quality of care deteriorated. As one eldercare blog explains, “When people are in a vulnerable position, they may accept poor and inconsistent care without complaint.” Carlyle exploited this vulnerability, betting that nursing home residents would simply tolerate declining care standards. They—and their Medicare dollars—would stay put, Carlyle wagered, at least for long enough to allow it to sell off its stake in the company.

This ability to foist downside risk on others while capturing the upside is even more pronounced in housing and infrastructure, the focus of Brett Christophers' impressively comprehensive study. Both sectors are departures from the traditional private

THESE ARE THE PLUNDERERS

How Private Equity
Runs—and Wrecks—America

GRETCHEN MORGENSON

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

AND JOSHUA ROSNER

New York Times bestselling authors of
Reckless Endangerment



These are the Plunderers by Gretchen Morgenson and Joshua Rosner

equity business. (Strictly speaking, they are not “private equity” at all, and most big PE firms have rebranded as “alternative asset managers” to reflect the fact that they have moved into these fields.) Still, Christophers shows how the private equity model has been transplanted virtually intact. The fee structure, the institutional investment partners, and the imperative to extract immediate cash are all essentially the same.

In housing, the formula is simple: raise rents, cut maintenance, and avoid capital expenditure at all costs. After Blackstone—currently the world’s largest alternative asset manager and the largest landlord in the United States—bought some 40,000 homes in 2012 and 2013, for instance, it raised rents by more than 12 percent over two years (from an average \$1,424 to \$1,600), while cutting maintenance and repairs by 16 percent (from an average \$1,362 to \$1,146).

Aside from the sheer scale of Blackstone’s holdings, these were standard-issue slumlord tactics. Evictions—and eviction threats—were pervasive. Tenants were charged huge fees for late payments and threatened with immediate eviction if they didn’t pay, in person, the next day. In Charlotte, North Carolina, Blackstone initiated eviction proceedings against nearly 10 percent of its renters. Disrepair was also rampant. Leaky roofs, cockroaches, and toxic mold were mentioned in one lawsuit of a Los Angeles-area rental. According to one tenant, the company was “the worst landlord I’ve ever encountered.” Hundreds more complained to the Better Business Bureau about Blackstone’s astonishing disregard for basic contractual responsibilities. But no matter. After four years, Blackstone had exited its position entirely, selling off its holdings at a substantial capital gain.

It was the kind of windfall the firm would achieve with remarkable consistency in the early 2010s. This was not because Blackstone’s managers had unique insights into the housing market. They just happened to have enough cash after the 2008 financial crisis to Hoover up distressed mortgages—which the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Fannie Mae, and Freddie Mac were auctioning off by the thousands at steep discounts. For cash-rich firms like Blackstone, it was as close to a free lunch as you could get. All they needed to do was foreclose on nonperforming mortgages, seize the underlying property, and then resell it when the market inevitably recovered. The downside risk was negligible. When asked, in a fawning interview, what gave him the courage to make such “bold moves into real estate,” Blackstone CEO Stephen Schwarzman responded bluntly: “If I had thought they were bold, I wouldn’t have done them! I viewed them as a business in which you couldn’t lose.”

Infrastructure investment, which typically involves negotiating monopoly contracts with cities, is even lower risk. Aside from the inherent benefits of monopoly—captive audience, no risk of losing market share to competitors—PE firms can leverage their substantial resources to strong-arm municipalities into one-sided deals.

Christophers recounts the story of Bayonne, New Jersey, which in 2012 sold a 40-year concession to run its waterworks to KKR, a PE firm whose annual revenue was 36 times larger than Bayonne’s entire annual budget in 2022. KKR’s money and experience allowed it to ram through a complex, painstakingly

lawyered contract ensuring that it would reap sizable rewards while shouldering none of the risk. “Our strategy,” as KKR’s website noted in the past, “is to seek infrastructure investments with limited downside risk.”

The Bayonne contract stipulated, among other things, that KKR would be paid a guaranteed minimum annual revenue regardless of actual water usage. If usage fell short of expectations—as it ultimately did—residents would have to pay more per gallon, even as they used less water. KKR also inserted a proviso putting Bayonne on the hook for any “unexpected repairs” that might arise. Combined, these clauses allowed the firm to impose steep rate increases on residents and make a 36 percent profit on its investment over five years. As rates skyrocketed, residents fell so far behind on water bills that the city had to place liens against 200 properties, edging their owners toward eventual foreclosure.

Bayonne, Christophers notes, is not an outlier. In 2011, Carlyle bought several water systems across the American West, in one case siphoning profits so mercilessly that the city sued to get out of the contract, claiming Carlyle “skimped on upkeep and repairs while enriching itself.” Beyond water, private equity is coiling its tendrils around everything from municipal parking meters to fire departments and 911 dispatch services. In all these cases, you find the same pattern: higher prices for gutted services and municipalities trapped in contracts that do little more than line PE firms’ pockets.

HOW DO WE FIGHT THESE ASSHOLES?

APPEALING TO CONGRESS IS ONE OPTION. ELIZABETH WARREN, who calls PE executives “vampires,” gained some traction in Congress with her anti-private-equity “Stop Wall Street Looting Act” in 2021. And several attempts have been made to close the carried interest tax loophole—which allows PE firms to book their performance bonuses at a preferential rate. But so far these efforts have foundered against intense opposition from corporate Democrats who take hundreds of millions in donations from the industry. (Fun fact: Chuck Schumer’s son-in-law is Managing Director of Government Relations for Blackstone.)

Administrative measures could be another possibility. The Biden administration’s antitrust wing—led by Lina Khan’s Federal Trade Commission and Jonathan Kanter’s Department of Justice Antitrust Division—has taken a notably hostile stance toward private equity firms’ anticompetitive practices. Brendan Ballou himself is a federal prosecutor who served as special counsel for private equity at the Department of Justice and is part of the antitrust push against the industry. His book offers a detailed reform agenda that also extends well beyond antitrust, including clever ideas for administrative actions that could bypass congressional foot-dragging. The IRS, for instance, could use existing statutory authority to unilaterally end the carried interest tax loophole. Or the Securities and Exchange Commission could impose fee disclosure requirements and fiduciary duties that would make it harder for PE firms to rip off the pension funds that invest in them.

Such concrete and modest changes, aimed at mitigating private equity's worst abuses, would certainly represent a marked improvement upon the status quo. Ballou's agenda is worth embracing in full. Still, piecemeal reforms that treat the noxious symptoms of private equity's increasing power in the U.S. financial sector don't quite get at the disease: a system that funds retirement for a relatively privileged subset of workers by gutting nursing homes, squeezing tenants, and pillaging municipal water systems.

WHY NOT ADDRESS OUR BROKEN RETIREMENT SYSTEM HEAD ON?

AFTER ALL, THIS SYSTEM IS FAILING MISERABLY. SOCIAL SECURITY benefits are not nearly enough for retirees to live on. Often, they don't even cover rent. If everyone had a pension, or at the very least a 401(k), to supplement Social Security, this might not be such a problem. But over the past 40 years or so, many employers have stopped providing any retirement option whatsoever. Today 69 million workers—56 percent of U.S. workforce—have no access to a retirement plan through their employer. Even those that do are probably not contributing enough to retire comfortably, either because they don't understand how to navigate their complex plan, or, more likely, because they simply don't make enough money to do so. This has left a huge swath of seniors behind—"too poor to retire and too young to die," as one reporter put it.

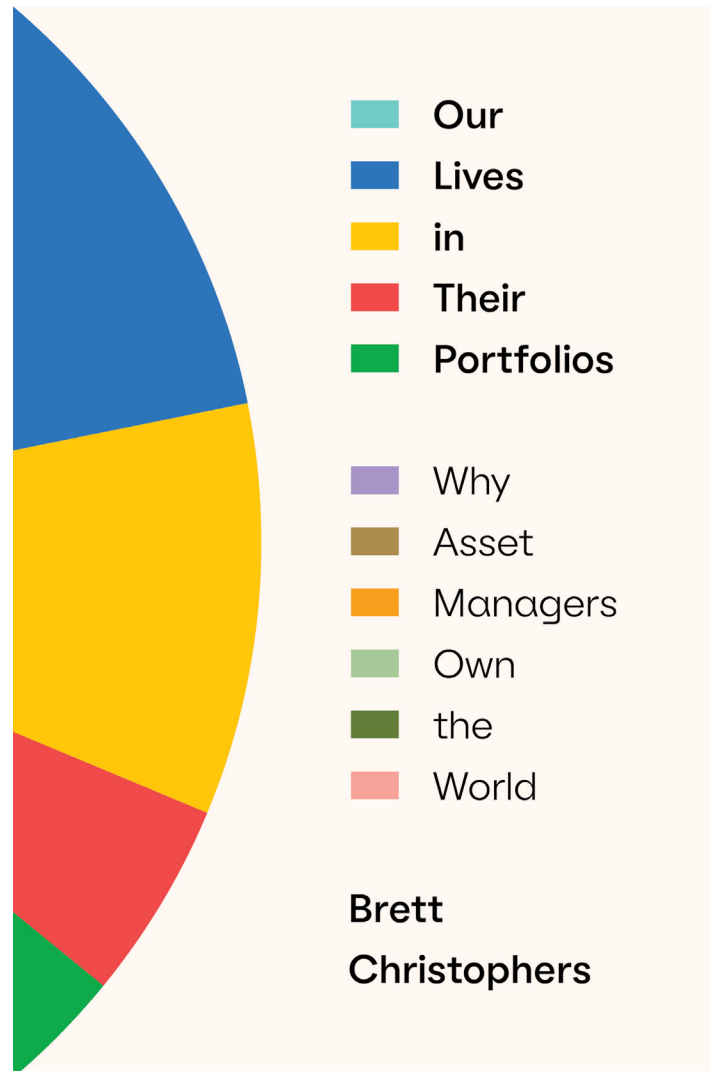
If we want to get the private equity industry out of our retirement system, our first impulse might be to shore up public funding for state and local government pensions so they wouldn't have to make risky PE investments in the first place. But this might be difficult to achieve. Republicans have spent years successfully demonizing public-sector employees—attacking their unions and their pensions as unproductive drains on taxpayers. This is complete bullshit, of course. But it has a certain intuitive political appeal that is hard to dispel. If you're not a teacher, and you're not a city worker, it's easy to think, "Why should *my* tax dollars pay for *their* pensions?"—especially if your own job provides no retirement plan at all.

A better bet would be massively expanding Social Security. Unlike public sector pensions, Social Security is overwhelmingly popular among both Democrats and Republicans of all ages. One survey found that more than 70 percent of Americans thought Social Security benefits should be raised—and that they'd be willing to pay more taxes to make it happen.

A push to modestly expand Social Security benefits is already underway in Congress. But to dislodge predatory financiers from the retirement system, we'll need something much, much bigger. We need to expand Social Security so much that workers simply don't need to supplement it with private alternatives. We need this because dignified retirement ought to be a right—not a reward for making sufficiently predatory investments. But we also

need this because Social Security is simply more efficient than private (or quasi-private) alternatives. Whereas pension funds waste hundreds of billions of dollars paying private equity's exorbitant fees, the Social Security trust funds invest exclusively in government debt, which comes with zero management fees. The program's simplicity and universality also make its administrative overhead very low. Social Security taxes pay for Social Security benefits—not for pension fund administrators to manage complex financial portfolios, and not for Blackstone CEO Stephen Schwarzman's \$20 million birthday parties.

Other than institutional inertia, the disjointed patchwork of IRAs, 401(k)s, pension plans, and Social Security that comprises our current retirement system doesn't have much going for it. It's not just that pensions make abhorrent investments in private equity. 401(k)s and IRAs also mainly benefit the rich. Social Security is the one retirement program we have that reliably reduces poverty and inequality. Building on that success—and sidelining private equity in the process—is a moral imperative. ✚



Our Lives in Their Portfolios by Brett Christophers

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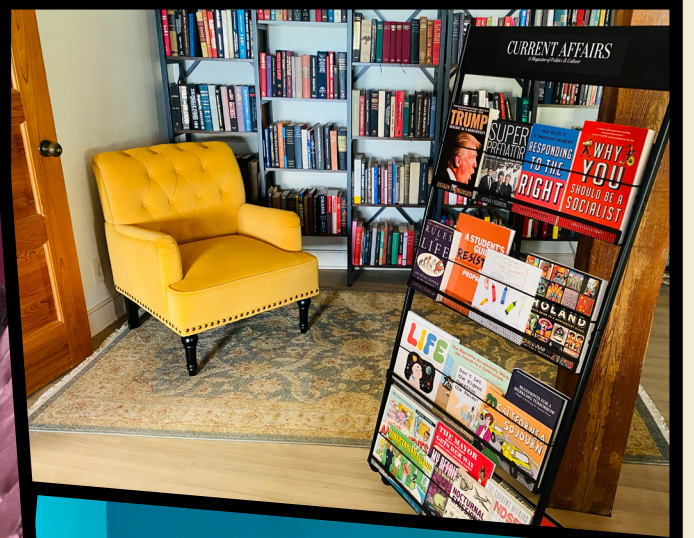
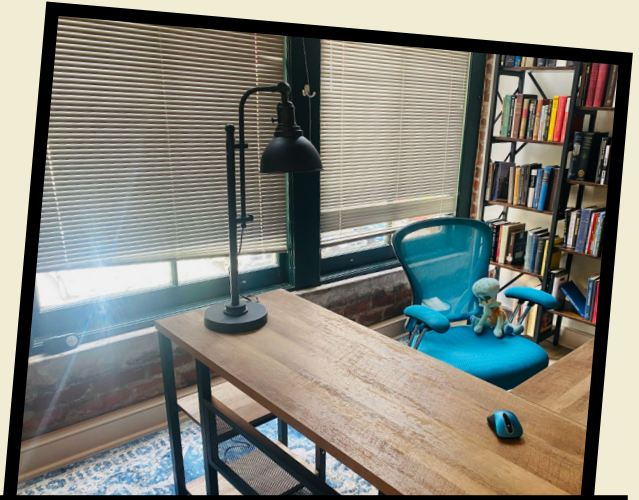
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PASS IT ON

The sinister politics behind a prolific purveyor of platitudes

BY STEPHEN PRAGER

IF YOU'VE EVER WALKED THROUGH A MAJOR AMERICAN city, traversed one of its sprawling airports, or chugged down one of its highways, you have probably seen a PassItOn.com billboard. While they vary widely in terms of which celebrity or other noteworthy figure appears, they are nearly uniform in appearance and startlingly simple. Each one bears a celebrity spokesperson, historical figure, or otherwise extraordinary person; a pithy quote or statement related in some way to their contribution to society; and a value they represent.

They are almost jarring in their simplicity. Unlike most forms of advertisement, they ask nothing transactional of you. There is no phone number to dial or product to purchase. And unlike other public service announcements, which usually at least tell you not to drive drunk or start wildfires, there is no discernible call to action—no wounded veteran to help, doe-eyed animal to adopt, political candidate to support, or fetus not to abort.

And yet, somebody is paying to put them up—lots of them. They have been erected in prime real estate like Times Square and outside Dodger Stadium. Walking around Chicago earlier this year, my dear colleague Nathan Robinson and I saw dozens of ads depicting *Star Trek* actor William Shatner urging us to “Boldly go.” At one point, there were noted to be around 10,000 Pass It On billboards throughout the country.

The Pass It On campaign has run numerous TV and radio advertisements over the years, which its website claims have been “seen in over 200 countries around the world.” Pass It On ads received more than 10 million impressions each day in 2016 and eight out of the top ten PSAs on TV that year were from Pass It On. According to the Pass It On website, its ads have been called “the most successful public service campaign in the history of outdoor advertising” by the Out of Home Advertising Association of America (a trade organization that has existed—who knew?—since 1891).

In addition to celebrities and historical figures, their posters bring attention to regular Americans who engage in charitable acts. Their billboard about “Charity” features the late Albert Lexie, who ran a shoe-shining booth and donated his tips to the Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh for 30 years.

Many other ads honor Americans who have overcome severe illness and disability, like mountaineer Erik Weihenmayer, who “Climbed Everest. Blind.” or Paralympic gold medalist Marlon Shirley, who “Lost leg, not heart.”

The Pass It On campaign is the progeny of a Denver-based 501(c)(3) organization called The Foundation for a Better Life

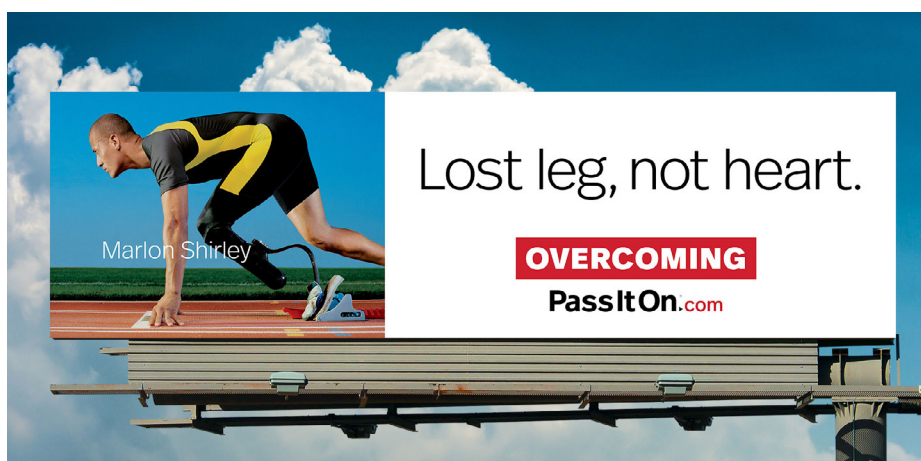
(which sounds like a fake charity George Costanza would make up if “The Human Fund” didn’t work out). The Foundation, which began in 1999, self-describes as a “nonpartisan, nonsectarian organization” with the characteristically vague mission to “promote positive values and encourage viewers to Pass Them On.” In a video on the site explaining the Pass It On campaign, Gary Dixon, the president of the Foundation for a Better Life, says, “The entire concept....was to encourage people to pass their values along to someone else.” It then cuts to a country song with the lyrics: “Hold the door, say ‘please,’ say ‘thank you’ / Don’t steal, don’t cheat, and don’t lie” laid over images of a man helping an older lady lift her grocery basket from the bus, a smiling woman purchasing something at a nonspecific item shop, and a young girl hugging her father.

The Foundation for a Better Life website notes that it “choose[s] values we hope most individuals would find encouraging and relevant.” If you don’t apply much scrutiny to the ads, it’s easy to find them encouraging. The ads are not just nonpartisan, but violently uncontroversial in every conceivable way, the sort of vacuous but dimly inspirational fare that would feel at home in a school lunchroom next to “Got Milk?” and food pyramid posters. (In fact, one of the brains behind Pass It On is the late Jay Schulberg, the advertising executive who also came up with the milk industry’s famous “Got Milk?” milk mustache campaign of the 1990s.)

This effort appears, on its face, a very noble endeavor. Values are, of course, good things to have. And there is nothing at all wrong with reminding us to be kind to one another—to give up our seat to an older person on the bus, to help the loner pick up his books when a group of bullies push him over in the hallway, and to treat the kid with Down Syndrome who plays basketball with us as an important member of the team.

But despite the campaign’s plea to be seen as just a benign purveyor of platitudes separate from any ideology, there is indeed a political worldview informing the campaign. This becomes clear when you discover who is paying to put all those billboards up—and what other causes he pours money into which aren’t so inspiring.

THE SOLE BENEFACTOR OF THE FOUNDATION FOR A BETTER Life is the billionaire philanthropist Philip Anschutz—a right-wing oil magnate whose influence is similar to that of the infamous Koch Family but who has evaded similar scrutiny. For years, the organization has attempted to hide Anschutz’s



Pass It On billboard featuring Marlon Shirley

association with the Foundation. Between 2001 and 2020, the Foundation for a Better Life charity raked in \$55 million entirely from the Anschutz Foundation, according to tax information from ProPublica's Nonprofit Explorer. (Because the Foundation is a registered 501(c)(3) corporation, we can guess that some of that money can be deducted from Anschutz's taxes as well.) At the time of writing, he is the 45th wealthiest person in America and the 112th richest in the world, with a fortune of nearly \$15 billion according to *Forbes*. Anschutz took over his father's oil company in 1965 and grew it into an empire. Though he'd tapped fields in four states across the American West throughout the following decades, his career was propelled first by the \$500 million sale of part of his family's ranch, which contained more than a billion barrels of oil in total, to Mobil in 1982. From there, he became a sort of Vanderbilt for the new millennium, purchasing, flipping, and selling railroads, while using the rights of way to install fiber-optic cable as the founder of Qwest (now CenturyLink). As of 2023, he is the biggest private landowner in Kansas and one of the biggest in the country.

He is also one of the biggest players in the entertainment industry as head of the Anschutz Entertainment Group, which is the second-largest presenter of live music and entertainment events in the world behind Live Nation and is the single largest owner of professional sports franchises in the world. Between 2002 and 2017, Anschutz owned several of America's largest movie theater chains, including Regal Cinemas, United Artists,

and Edwards. He was one of the founding investors in America's Major League Soccer (whose champions hoist the Philip F. Anschutz trophy), and he spent nearly two decades as a partial owner of both the Los Angeles Lakers and Kings (the latter he owns now as the single owner), as well as the bustling Crypto.com Arena (formerly the Staples Center), where they play their games.

ANSCHUTZ IS THE RICHEST MAN IN Colorado. He hardly lives a life of austerity, but unlike others of his class who run for office, threaten to fight one another in cage matches, and jet into space on private rockets, he does carry himself publicly with what can be mistaken for a sort of quiet, rustic simplicity. He is often described as a sort of billionaire everyman—back in 1999, Brian O'Reilly and Ann Harrington wrote in CNN Money:

"As billionaires go, Anschutz, 59, is abnormally normal. He lives in a relatively modest house in Denver, wears a cheap watch, goes to church regularly, calls his wife 'sweetie,' runs unnoticed in local marathons, and has lots of friends."

In 2000, he won the Horatio Alger Award, which is bestowed upon those who "personify the American Dream and [whose] life experiences are proof that, with perseverance and unwavering belief, anything is possible in our country through the free-enterprise system." In the video commemorating Anschutz, he describes learning from his father's struggles with his health and finances and his mother's "strong moral values and Christian values." The narrator goes on to

describe 8-year-old Philip as an entrepreneurial wunderkind that almost sounds like a parody of one of Alger's rags-to-riches tales:

"With these influences, young Philip's own entrepreneurial spirit developed early, as he took on a number of jobs: yard work, grocery stores, and his own chain of lemonade stands."

He goes on to describe inheriting his family's oil business and rescuing it from the brink of collapse. "It helps to have your back against the wall," he says, "Adversity is a huge advantage." In this sense, the ethos of Pass It On is to fetishize and amplify the idea of ordinary people doing extraordinary things while also "promoting universal values" and "good role models."

But while Pass It On purports to be an apolitical and secular purveyor of universal virtues, Anschutz assuredly is not. He is one of the most prolific donors to religious right-wing causes and politicians in America. According to OpenSecrets, he and his wife Nancy have personally given more than \$5 million to political candidates since 1989—virtually all of which has gone to Republicans. Meanwhile, Anschutz Corporation's PACs, members, and owners have given another \$10.3 million in campaign donations since 1990 and \$5.9 million in lobbying since 1998. Meanwhile, virtually every socially conservative or economically libertarian advocacy group of even modest stature has received funding from the Anschutz Foundation.

He has donated to numerous right-wing economic think tanks, including the American Enterprise and the Manhattan Institute. He has given to the Koch Brothers' massive slush fund known as Donors Trust—which shells out millions each year to organizations that attack environmentalists, public schools, labor unions, and any form of economic regulation that harms the wealthy—and to many other organizations that do the same thing. He has dumped money into right-wing propaganda films—most notably *Waiting for Superman*, which is full of distortions intended to demonize public schools while promoting charter and private schools. As the owner of Regal Cinemas, he funded the Parents Television Council, which has fought for decades to have what they consider to be non-family-friendly television programs removed from the air by government censors. From 2009

until it went belly up in 2018, Anschutz's Clarity Media Group owned *The Weekly Standard* magazine, a house organ for neoconservative foreign policy that arguably had more influence than any other publication in pushing the Iraq War in elite circles. He still owns *The Washington Examiner*, which has published articles casting doubt on the environmental harms of everything from coal to DDT and has said that people who are afraid of climate change should not have children because "IQ is hereditary."

For years, Anschutz donated to viciously anti-LGBTQ organizations, including The Alliance Defending Freedom, the National Christian Foundation, and the Family Research Council. The most infamous of these is the ADF, a conservative

more than a decade attempting to push laws in Africa that would jail and even execute gay people—one of their pet projects, known by opponents as the "Kill the Gays" law, passed in Uganda earlier this year.

Anschutz denied donating to anti-gay groups, calling the reports "fake news" and "garbage," but tax filings show he gave more than \$200,000 to these hate groups between 2010 and 2013 and continued donating to the ADF and National Christian Foundation until 2015. Even after Anschutz stated publicly, "I support the rights of all people and oppose discrimination and intolerance against the LGBTQ community," and gave a large donation to the Elton John AIDS Foundation (whose namesake later appeared on a

tion, moral suasion, and legal sanctions."

If you take the messages of the Pass It On campaign at face value, then this is a story about rank hypocrisy. They claim to be apolitical and non-religious but are funded by a bigwig donor for the Republican Party and the evangelical right. Their ads promote values like "tolerance" and "inclusion" while its benefactor funds organizations that want to make the world less inclusive and tolerant of sexual minorities. They make ads for "Our Beautiful World" filled with sweeping shots of mountains and rivers overlaid with John Denver music while their benefactor gives money to organizations that bash environmentalists. They preach one thing while doing another.

BUT THE PROBLEM IS NOT SIMPLY that the ads claim to be apolitical while the person funding them quietly pursues a vicious political agenda. The ads themselves also subtly reinforce Anschutz's worldview but do so through the *negation* of politics as something worthwhile for ordinary people to practice. For you and me, it's random acts of goodness and individual perseverance and resilience that will make the world better. For the extraordinarily rich, it's donations to lobbyists and groups that wish to legislate *their* values of family, hard work, Not Being Gay, Not Addressing Climate, and so forth.

The typical Pass It On ad does a lot of work to send a contradictory message to its viewers: *you, the viewer*, can make the world better by heeding its wisdom. But absent from the message is the idea that societal problems can actually be *solved* by groups of people getting together to change society, or that problems are the result of *decisions* made by other *actors*.

Let's return to the example of Albert Lexie: the shoe shiner who used his tips to pay for medical care for sick children. The Pass It On website reads, "[A]stonishingly, he donates approximately \$10,000 a year to the hospital." The ad is all about celebrating the heroism of Lexie (who was, indeed, extraordinarily heroic!). But also, isn't it a *little bit strange* that, were it not for this humble shoe-shiner's generosity, a bunch of children wouldn't have been able to receive medical care? (Actually, there's a scalable policy solution in which everyone gives some of their



Pass It On billboard featuring Sir Elton John

Christian legal advocacy group that made the case for the criminalization of homosexuality in the 2003 *Lawrence v. Texas* Supreme Court case. The group has since supported efforts to criminalize being gay in several other countries and supported gay conversion therapy in the U.S. Its longtime former president Alan Sears has written extensively on the idea that homosexuality and pedophilia "are intrinsically linked." More recently, the ADF defended old legislation that had been on the books in Europe which required sterilization of transgender people who sought administrative validation of their chosen gender identity (interestingly, the newly-minted Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson previously spent eight years as senior legal counsel for the ADF). The Family Research Council, meanwhile, has spent

Pass It On billboard), the donations didn't stop. In 2018, Anschutz gave \$1 million to Colorado Christian University, which has threatened to expel students for same-sex "sexual activity" and "dressing or acting differently than the biological gender that God created a student to be" and gave \$20,000 to Sky Ranch Christian Camps, which calls being gay and transgender a sin. Until at least 2016, Anschutz also donated regularly to the Heritage Foundation, which has advocated to defund the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR)—a program estimated to have saved 25 million lives since it was started by President George W. Bush in 2003. The Heritage Foundation says that HIV is "primarily a lifestyle disease (like those caused by tobacco) and as such should be suppressed though [*sic*] educa-



Pass It On billboard featuring Albert Lexie

money for the common good. It's called taxation!)

This is one of many Pass It On ads that ends up reading like one of those "heart-warming" local news stories that actually just lay bare the cruelty of American capitalism...you know the ones: "Teen gives up college savings to help her mom pay rent," Teachers chip in sick days so their colleague can take time off to get chemotherapy, Home Depot employees build walkers for toddlers whose insurance doesn't cover them, "3rd grader uses allowance to pay classmates' school lunch debt."

These kinds of stories are hard enough to stomach when they come from a guileless local news anchor. But when a story like this is relayed to you by a guy with a net worth of nearly \$15 billion and who has donated much of that bounty to political organizations and politicians dedicated to *keeping* healthcare an unaffordable, privately owned commodity, it almost reads like a form of taunting.

In the world of Pass It On, the effects of politics, like unaffordable healthcare, exist. But these problems (and their potential solutions) are not treated as political. And the acts that are praised are those that *ameliorate* the problem (giving some needy children healthcare) yet don't seek to solve it or address the root cause (a for-profit system in which one is only entitled to the care they can afford to purchase). In this sense, political injustices

like lack of healthcare are merely character-building obstacles for individuals to overcome (and for the weakest of the weak, who cannot overcome, there will be 'compassion' and 'charity' and 'tolerance').

THE ADS, THEN, ARE MEANT TO inspire us to become the same sort of self-possessed Horatio Alger character Anschutz imagines himself to be. Often, this comes in the form of portraying the limitless potential for achievement, even for those with the toughest circumstances. A blind person can still climb Everest. A quadriplegic can still graduate from Harvard. An illiterate 70-year-old can still learn to read (If they can do all that without help, surely *you* can pay off your student loan!)

Usually, the libertarian streak is only recognizable through subtext that doesn't come through unless you are aware the commercial you just watched is funded by a right-wing billionaire. But sometimes, it is right out in the open. Perhaps the single worst Pass It On advertisement—for the value of "Hard Work"—is an honest-to-goodness commercial about the virtues of child labor.

"Ask our father what dreams are made of and he'll tell you *hard work*," the voiceover says fondly. The scene shows two young kids building a brick wall, hands covered in cement, outside of what appears to be a warehouse where their father is shown consulting with another person and machinery moves boxes. "We were kids and he expected us to build The Great Wall of Philadelphia. And he wanted it to be perfect. No friends, no football, nothing." (The inspirational Gloria Estefan hit "Reach" plays in the background, adding a saccharine overtone to the video.) As the kids' friends approach, asking them to take a break to toss around the pigskin (lazy bums!), they are forced to decline, which appears to devastate the younger of the two wall-builders.

The ad very deliberately shows the boys constructing this wall for *months*, doing it in the heat of summer and the dead of winter, all the while appearing rather annoyed and confused about why they've been made to do this menial task. At one point, they are shown out in the snow standing next to a burning trash can late at night to keep warm while their father grins at them through the window, pre-

sumably enjoying the heat and a piping mug of cocoa.

WHEN THE WALL IS FINALLY DONE after what looks like nearly a year of "no friends, no football, nothing" their dad saunters up to them and knowingly says, "Don't ever tell me there's something you can't do." The narrator concludes: "There *is* something I can't do. I can't thank him enough!"

This is totally sociopathic! It's one thing to teach your children the value of working hard, by encouraging them to do things that are fulfilling or valuable in some way. But the message of this ad is that children need to build character by being forced to do mindless busy work for no reason (well, maybe it was for the father's company's bottom line?) while shunning any other form of enjoyment. The message is that one should work not because there is important work to be done, but because work *itself* gives you value (sets you free, one might say). It's a sentiment eerily similar to something former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy said earlier this year as he advocated for poor children to be required to work to receive welfare benefits:

"We might have a child that has no job, no dependents but sitting on the couch, we're going to encourage that person to get a job and have to go to work, which gives them worth and value."

Anschutz has been very candid about the fact that he views the values in his ads as being *more* conducive to human flourishing than actual policy changes. Anschutz told the Philanthropy Roundtable in 2009:

"Food banks, charter schools [LOL], and homeless shelters are a good way to help people. But in the long run, people grounded in solid values will be better situated to prosper on their own."

The PassItOn campaign is clearly positioned not just to gently remind people to be kind but to promote mere individual acts of kindness as a form of activism. In the Foundation's welcome ad, Bob Doyle, the longtime manager for country singer Garth Brooks, says that because of Pass It On's ads, "You might care about somebody or a situation in another way that you never even thought about before, but it provokes you to take action, or to do something or to change your point



Pass It On commercial promoting "Civility"

of view." (Interestingly, on the Pass It On website, a creepy-looking Brooks is shown accompanied by words that seem to evoke a post-racial fantasy: "When there's only one race and that's mankind... we shall all be free.") Evan Lamberg, the President of Universal Music Publishing North America says the ads "have massive impacts." Dixon, the organization's president, says, "It has made a difference: people have felt uplifted, they've felt encouraged. They've felt like, *wow, I'd thought we'd forgotten about values, but we haven't.*" The Foundation for a Better Life is even partnered with the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation, which urges people to become "RAKtivists" by doing things like "write a handwritten letter and mail it" or "write positive messages on sticky notes and leave for others to find."

On the rare occasion when the Pass It On campaign *does* discuss politics, the idea that anyone might have strong political convictions that they fight for is treated with contempt. Take their ad for "Civility," which takes place at a town meeting.

A man in a red tie slams his hand down on the table in the following exchange with a lady in a blue shirt (no prizes for guessing what the symbolism here means):

Red Tie Guy: *Well, you're wrong!*

Blue Shirt Lady: *I'm wrong!? You're the one that misrepresented the facts!*

Guy: *I misrepresented the facts? Are you kidding?! Your proposal is ridiculous!*

Lady: *You have no right to call—*

Guy: *You are the worst example of politics!*

Lady: *I stand for something!*

Guy: *You flip flop!*

Lady: *I stand for something!*

Guy: *Flip flopper, flip flopper!*

Lady: *Your proposal's ludicrous!*

Guy: *My proposal will go exactly the way I say it will.*

Lady: *Over my dead body!*

Then, an adorable little girl chimes in with a Michelle Tanner-style punch line: "I think somebody needs a time-out!" and everyone learns their lesson and agrees to be nice and civil and never yell about politics again.

BUT DID YOU NOTICE THAT DURING that entire exchange, you never learned *what* they were actually arguing about? Maybe Blue Shirt Lady wanted to pass an ordinance that would make it easier to pollute the town's water source. Perhaps Red Tie Guy wanted to require every teacher to carry a Glock or ban every book about gay people. The message the ad communicates is that having strong political opinions and fighting for them is stupid and mean, and that no political issue—no matter how dire the consequences—could possibly warrant getting angry or raising your voice. This just so happens to be a very useful message for someone who is giving millions to Red Tie Guy so he and his friends can keep cooking the planet with fossil fuels.

Another "Civility" ad, released in 2018

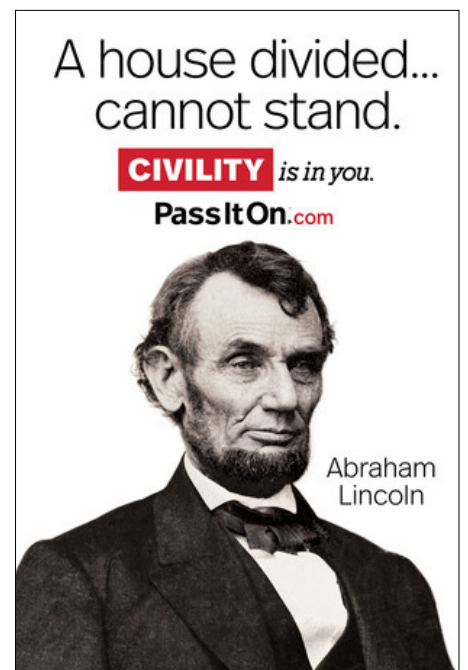
at the height of the Trump-era moral panic about political polarization, features Abraham Lincoln.

One needn't be a historical scholar to see the problem with this. Of all the virtues that should be associated with Lincoln, a propensity toward *compromise* is not one of them. In fact, in the 1858 speech from which this quote is lifted, Lincoln specifically argued:

"[T]his government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved – I do not expect the house to fall – but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other."

What makes Lincoln unique is that he *refused* to compromise with the slave-holding South, as many of his forebears had, and went to *war* to fight for his belief in abolition—a decidedly un-"civil" thing to do.

To treat Lincoln as someone defined by his ability to find common ground with his opponents is a vile act of historical legerdemain. But it's one that serves a purpose. It helps to reinforce the larger worldview that Anschutz and the Foundation are trying to push, which erases the concept of political conflict and boils every political debate down to one of manners and ideas. It is perfectly consistent for a far-right billionaire to promote such pablum. *Incivility*, through mass



Pass It On billboard featuring Abraham Lincoln

protest or organization, is antithetical to not only their view that Great Men alone move the wheels of history, but to their material interests as billionaires.

IN THE UTOPIAN FUTURE I LIKE TO imagine, in which humanity has transcended the need for profit and unleashed its full glorious potential, I'd *hope* the spots that once contained billboards for payday loan operators and Carl's Jr. would be transformed into pro-social monuments to human achievements. I'd hope we'd use them to remind people to share and help one another. I'd hope to see them honor the humanitarians and innovators who created that utopia—the ones who ensured that everyone in the world has clean drinking water, the doctors who finally found the cure for cancer, and the leader who makes sure that cure is free for everyone to receive. I want to see billboards that honor those who achieve the impossible as well: the quadruple amputee who circumnavigates the globe in a 17th-century schooner, or the person who creates a device allowing humans to communicate with seahorses.

But this is the sort of project for when all of society's collective problems have been *solved*. Not for one with more than half a million homeless people, millions of children hungry, and where more than one in four people have put off medical care because they can't afford it. The Pass It On

campaign's existence is one of the most profound examples of why *nobody* should have a billion dollars, let alone \$15 billion. If, as it does in our society, having billions of dollars confers political power on a person, and if the person who has that money happens to be dumb as rocks, then the way that vast sum of money is spent will *also* be dumb as rocks, and there's not a damn thing the public can do about it.

When thinking about the Pass It On campaign, I'm reminded of one of the most infamous tweets of all time. In 2014, as Israel pummeled the Gaza Strip with airstrikes following rocket attacks by Hamas as part of Operation Protective Edge, the YouTuber Keemstar tweeted, "Israel & Palestine need [to] study John Lennon Imagine." The Pass It On campaign is what it would look like if we turned that childish prescription into actual public policy. It's as if, instead of providing humanitarian aid or demanding our president push for a cease-fire, we used that money to blast Lennon's song from atop Mount Sinai in hopes that the combatants would put aside their petty squabble.

The Pass It On campaign offers platitudes as a replacement for politics. It acknowledges that the world is full of suffering, but treats that suffering not as the result of how our society is structured, but as a failure of each individual to be kind and charitable or the failure of the disadvantaged to rise up and beat

the odds through sheer determination. It's reminiscent of Margaret Thatcher's famous statement that "There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families." This is a useful attitude for one of America's wealthiest people to promote because it tells people that they are fundamentally alone. If people who struggle are busy looking within themselves, they're *not* busy looking at the guy with all the money and at the destructive right-wing political agenda he supports. ✚



Pass It On billboard featuring Garth Brooks

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