

The Only Thing They Want For Christmas

CURRENT AFFAIRS

\$12.95

VOL. 8, ISSUE 6

NOV/DEC 2023

NOBEL PRIZES

How to win them in three easy steps.

1950S SCI-FI DYSTOPIAS

*Revisiting the yesterdays
of tomorrow.*

CODES OF ETIQUETTE

Are you following them?

AXOLOTLs

How to save these weird cuties.



FIRST WORDS

FROM THE MAGAZINE WHERE EVERY WORD IS INTENTIONAL



SEEKING LAVATORIAL BENEFACTOR

We recently asked our readers to contribute funds to help our staff buy new office furniture. Many of you were kind enough to contribute.

In return, we offered to name things in the office after our donors. A plaque with the named items is printed in this edition. We remember distinctly that one donor asked to have the office toilet named after themselves. We are perfectly willing to accommodate this request, but alas have lost the name of the individual. Please email editor@currentaffairs.org to claim the recognition you have earned.

CURRENT AFFAIRS IS NOW A REGISTERED 501(C)(3) ORGANIZATION. IF YOU DONATE TO US, THIS MEANS YOU ARE NOW OFFICIALLY CONSIDERED A PHILANTHROPIST!

TIPS FOR PROPER MAGAZINE ENJOYMENT

- ☐ Seek a quiet, soft place (beanbag, window seat, hammock)
- ☐ Bring delicious beverage (tea, cafe au lait, non-lethal lemonade)
- ☐ Also a scone or other pastry
- ☐ Perhaps a cat for the lap
- ☐ Turn pages slowly, savoring contents
- ☐ Skip parts you disagree with, or change your opinions so that you agree with them
- ☐ Read every last word for maximal satisfaction

WE BELIEVE IN MAGAZINE PERSONHOOD!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Current Affairs readers are famous for getting together in small groups (so-called "CA circles") to read articles aloud over tea and pastries. Following the readings, there is usually a discussion period, before the Adjournment Ritual (a reading from a Chomsky text, a sing-a-long of Solidarity Forever). But we have heard reports from certain group captains that the discussions are prone to "fizzling and dying." How, we are asked, can they be livened up and properly stimulated? Fear not, we have Recommendations. Use the following Discussion Questions (and others based on them) to encourage reticent attendees to engage in spirited dialogue with one another:

- Which article did you find least persuasive and why?
- Could you detect a common "theme" through this issue of the magazine?
- Based solely on the illustrations in this issue, what would you assume the magazine "stood for"?
- What article would you have contributed to *Current Affairs* instead of the ones we actually printed? (Incidentally, we do accept pitches.)
- If this issue had been an animal, what animal would it have been and why?
- What quotations from this issue were particularly meaningful to you and why?
- Give an example of some information you wish had been included in a particular essay.
- What objects would you have used to represent each article in the issue's "Table of Contents"?
- Did you find any typos? Have you reported them to the proper authorities?
- How many people have you bought subscriptions for today? If the answer is "none," what are you waiting for?

Discussion leaders may also wish to employ the patented *Current Affairs* "color-coded cold call system" (the "Forman/Robinson" method). For explanations, see Nathan J. Robinson, "A Nifty Little Trick For Facilitating Class Discussions," *Current Affairs* (July 13, 2018), and Nathan J. Robinson, "In Defense of My Color-Coded Cold Calling Card System," *Current Affairs* (Oct. 5, 2023).

BANNED WORDS

In 2015, this publication produced a list of English words that were henceforth "prohibited from all further written or spoken use." In the years since, we have been asked if the ban "will be rescinded anytime soon." We hereby affirm that the ban remains in place indefinitely. Please take note and govern your output accordingly.

THE BANNED WORDS ARE:

<i>hermeneutics</i>	<i>reification</i>
<i>decouple</i>	<i>fractured*</i>
<i>contingent</i>	<i>semiotic</i>
<i>toolkit</i>	<i>multiplicity</i>

Note: this list is not exhaustive. Further entries will be added as they are happened upon by the Committee. Ignorance of the list's existence will not be permitted as a defense to charges of unauthorized word usage.

*exemptions available for medical as opposed to sociological use of this term

Suggestions for further words to ban can be sent to editor@currentaffairs.org.



**FOR EVERY 30 MINUTES SPENT
READING *CURRENT AFFAIRS*, YOU
BECOME 17% MORE SOCIALIST**

CAT OF THE MONTH

**THE
PALLAS
CAT!**



CONTENT WARNING: THIS MAGAZINE CONTAINS ! CONTENT !

WE MUST REPLACE ALL VENDING MACHINES WITH SHARKS

According to *National Geographic*, more people die each year from being crushed by vending machines than from shark attacks. And yet sharks elicit terror while vending machines elicit nary more than the indifferent shrug or, even worse, enticement at the possibility of a delicious snack. Out of concern for the preservation of each precious human life, we ask that the federal government remove these death traps from our places of school, work, and recreation and replace them with one of the comparatively benign great white, tiger, or mako sharks found in American waters.



QUIZ: WHICH OF THESE OBSCURE EUROPEAN POLITICAL PARTIES ARE REAL?

- Righteous Croatia
- Attack (Bulgaria)
- Healthy Serbia
- Adequate Party (Armenia)
- Monster Raving Loony Party (UK)
- Farmers & Street Performers Alliance (Denmark)
- More Europe (Italy)
- Good Choice (Slovakia)
- People Animals Nature (Portugal)
- Nuance Party (Sweden)
- Empty Spain
- Anarchist Pogo Party (Germany)
- Free Grain (Serbia)
- Kindly Handshake (Slovakia)
- Bulgaria is Dying
- 100% Fed Up! (Belarus)
- Empathy Party (Sweden)
- League of Perturbed Socialists (Serbia)
- Strength in Numbers (Hungary)
- Hooligans United (UK)
- Dangerous Bear (Lithuania)
- "We Have to Live Here" (Ukraine)
- Overwhelmed and Annoyed Citizens (Spain)

- Democratic Axe (Ukraine)
- "There's No Going Back—Serbia is Behind"
- Normal Country (Hungary)
- European Realistic Disobedience Front (Greece)
- We are Family (Slovakia)
- Hooray! (Poland)
- Sanitation Should Not Be Ignored (Estonia)
- Everything is Fine (Belgium)
- Animals are Human (Denmark)
- Build a Moat (Czechia)
- LSD NOW! (France)
- Onward and Upward (Netherlands)
- Go Away! (Poland)
- The Eagle Lands Among Its People (Romania)
- We Are Very Upset (Portugal)
- XL Bully Defence League (UK)
- Down With This Sort of Thing (UK)
- Pornography Party (Austria)
- Apple & Pear (Norway)
- Fist of Humanity (Montenegro)
- Sicily Will Be Very Beautiful (Italy)
- Mighty Fatherland (Armenia)
- Pole of Communist Revival in France

- Stand Up, Bulgaria! We are Coming!
- Good Morning (Hungary)
- Blood & Chocolate (Switzerland)
- Internet Party (Ukraine)
- Ecological Revolution for the Living (France)

Real: Righteous Croatia, Attack, Healthy Serbia, Monster Raving Loony Party, More Europe, Good Choice, People Animals Nature, Nuance Party, Empty Spain, Anarchist Pogo Party, Adequate Party, "We Have to Live Here", Overwhelmed and Annoyed Citizens, Democratic Axe, "There's No Going Back—Serbia is Behind", Normal Country, European Realistic Disobedience Front, We are Family, Sicily Will Be Very Beautiful, Mighty Fatherland, Pole of Communist Revival in France, Stand Up, Bulgaria! We are Coming! Internet Party, Ecological Revolution for the Living

CURRENT AFFAIRS (ISSN 2471-2647) is published bimonthly for \$69.99/year by CURRENT AFFAIRS INC, 300 Lafayette St. #210, NEW ORLEANS, LA 70180 Periodicals Postage PAID at NEW ORLEANS, LA and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Current Affairs, 300 Lafayette St. #210, New Orleans, LA 70130 PRINTED IN PENNSYLVANIA BY SHERIDAN PRESS.



On the front cover of this edition, it is claimed that *Current Affairs* is "the only thing anybody wants for Christmas." Readers may well wonder: What of the other holidays? Are we among those reactionaries who say "Christmas" when they actually mean "Christmas and the other equally important holidays held around the same time"? Should we not have said The Holidays, in keeping with the secular editorial line this publication has held since its debut? (A "separation of church and magazine" was endorsed as early as Vol. I, Issue I.) Alas, reader, our duty to truth requires us to say "Christmas." We cannot tell a lie: a YouGov poll of 1,552 registered voters held between Nov. 15th and Nov. 22nd revealed that "among those who celebrate Christmas, all respondents revealed their foremost gift preference to be a copy of or subscription to *Current Affairs*." Regrettably, among those who celebrate Hanukkah and Kwanzaa, the results were quite different. Celebrants of the former are apparently mostly wishing for "adorable plush axolotls" while celebrants of the latter want "subscriptions to magazines, but not *Current Affairs*." As thrilled as we were to be the #1 favorite among churchgoing Christians, we could not help but be disappointed by these other findings. *Current Affairs* is a magazine for everyone, not just those who have embraced Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. We are therefore undertaking a strategy to expand our reach within other demographics. This will involve some adjustments to content (fewer references to the Bible, more pictures of axolotls).

CUT-OUT FIREWORKS

You want to celebrate the new year. But you have a problem. You spent all of your money on *Current Affairs* subscriptions for all of your friends and family, and now have none left over to spend on explosives. If you don't bring any fireworks to the New Year's party, your

friends will think you a chump. Why should you be punished for having done the right thing and given your money to *Current Affairs*? Reader, we've got you covered. Please find tiny fireworks that can be cut out and pasted on anything you want to celebrate. Best of all, they're fully reusable!



QUOTE OF THE MONTH

"You think you just fell out of a coconut tree? (laughs) You exist in the context of all in which you live and what came before you." - Vice President Kamala Harris

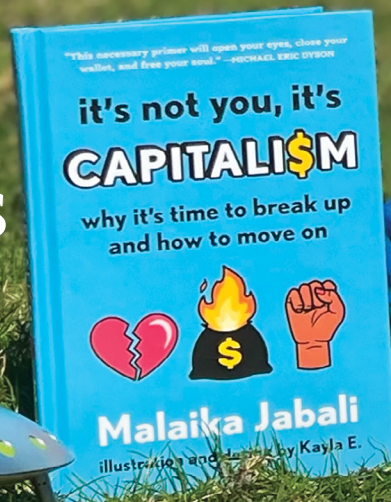


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Other Times, Other Manners

By
Lauren Fadiman

IN FEBRUARY 2023, THE EDITORS OF *THE Cut* waded once more unto the breach of etiquette by way of a quasi-humorous list of 194 modern rules for polite behavior. Some of the guidelines are no doubt good advice in a social landscape increasingly bereft of absolutes. “It’s never too late to send a condolence note,” assures one guideline. “[If you see] someone shoplifting? No, you didn’t,” asserts another. Other tips verge on the intuitive, like those warning against phone usage at the dinner table, bare feet in the office, and disingenuous compliments under any circumstances. But then, of course, comes the deluge of bad advice: “Do not touch the small of my back to move around me at the bar *if you’re ugly*,” “Never show that you’re impressed by anyone,” “Always wink,” and, lest you forget, “If you’re penetrating, you pay.” A final few start out promisingly, then veer into utter insanity, like a rebuke to “Never ask someone about their nationality if you want to know their ethnicity,” which goes on to suggest a more “honest,” and infinitely more impolite, alternative: “What’s your ethnic heritage?”

UNSURPRISINGLY, TWITTER AND THE WIDER INTERNET ate the article alive. “I can’t believe not bringing up your allergies at a dinner party is one of them,” read one such response. “Wouldn’t the real faux pas be accidentally killing your friend?” Others opted for stronger language: “That etiquette piece in *The Cut* is the work of a Hannibal Lecter-level psycho. Just an unhinged list of very specific personal pet peeves.” The *New York Post* called the piece “deeply infantilizing,” while the *Independent* opted for “deranged.” And countless wondered whether the list was meant to be read seriously at all, like the person who summarized it as “perfect Twitter outrage bait” consisting of a “random assortment of bad quality etiquette advice, oddly specific second person conversation policing, and incredibly aggressive jokes.”

Perhaps the confusion had less to do with *The Cut* and more to do with our culture at large. Not only are the specifics of modern etiquette controversial, but the very notion of “standard” etiquette as a social good is widely contested. After all, mainstream American etiquette throughout history has been used to reinforce racism and classism by codifying proper performance of whiteness and wealth. It has been wielded as a shibboleth: something mundane, but fraught, that distinguishes one group from another. Today, a more intuitive sense of what constitutes “good manners” and “well-adjustedness” prevails, seemingly, in most of the United States. This intuitive approach is undergirded by a set of thought-terminating clichés, perhaps best-exemplified by the tenets of Robert Fulghum’s *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* (1986), which include “Share everything” and “Play fair.” There are also those ubiquitous Pass It On billboards that line highways across the United States, critiqued in a recent *Current Affairs* article by Stephen Prager: “Be a force for good,” says a picture of Oprah. “The other person might be right,” suggests a picture of twins. These are guidelines for postmodern propriety: instructions for sociality in a world where everything is now understood to be a social construct—where the closest thing to a universal truth may well be, in fact, “Live, laugh, love” written in script on a doormat.

That is to say, controversy enveloped the *Cut* piece not merely because its advice was bad, but also because it dared to create a taxonomy of behavior in the first place. And the piece’s own internal inconsistencies reflect the extent to which social behavior has become subject to intuition, as opposed to expectation. For example, the article advises at once that one “ask how much everyone pays in rent,” while simultaneously, several lines down, issuing an injunction to “[never] ask people how much they pay in rent.” The discomfort caused by the compilation of such a list of absolutes is obvious in the piece’s internal ironies as well. “Do not touch the small of my back to move around me at the bar *if you’re ugly*,” for example, is self-terminating without even needing to rely on a cliché. Its sarcasm renders it functionally meaningless as far as advice goes—and perhaps that was the point.

The half-life of “shared” etiquette has proven remarkably short, given the many treatises it has yielded over the centuries, and its relevance as a determining factor in society continues to decay—from politics on down. What remains of the elaborate codes of conduct of yore has been broken down into discrete, digestible parts, metabolized through any number of distinctly modern paradigms. Some

of the better parts of modern conduct come from social justice and organizing discourse; much of the rest comes by way of pop psychology, with its misappropriated therapy jargon. The two might as well represent different ideologies: where one advises leaning into discomfort, the other calls for boundaries. And yet, many people preach both at once.

The rise of a more subjective approach has had at least one major pitfall where etiquette is concerned, even if the trend is governed by good intentions: namely, that, now, in lieu of other universal standards, one has only oneself (with all of one’s own neuroses, flaws, and biases) as a barometer for behavior. *The Cut* contributor who chipped in #72, which reads, “If you like them, text people within three hours of hanging out with them,” confesses that (unsurprisingly) the dictum is guided by her own anxious desire for “verification of a successful hang.” Another entry, #8, asserts that “It’s acceptable to tell any kind of lie in order to leave a drinks date,” on the assumption that “if the conversation is so painful you’re considering making up a story about a sick animal, your date will probably feel relieved.” In both cases, the advice given is more about making the self comfortable in the short-term than making the other feel comfortable—despite the fact that an eye toward the other is probably the closest thing to a key to both parties’ long-term social confidence.



THE SELF-INTERESTEDNESS OF SUCH SUGGESTIONS CALLS to mind Émile Durkheim’s *Suicide* (1897), with its description of anomie: the state of social instability that accompanies greater individualism when it comes with the erosion of shared values, characterized by feelings of purposelessness, futility, and despair. Durkheim attributes this phenomenon to an ever-more-specialized division of labor and ever-faster shifts in social life. “Anom[ie] indeed springs from the lack of collective forces at certain points in society; that is, of groups established for the regulation of social life,” he writes. “[The] gaps between one and another individual consciousness, estranging them from each other, are authentic results of the weakening of the social fabric.” Later writers would recast Durkheim’s theory of anomie as the problem of social “normlessness,” which leaves individuals adrift even within the confines of their own community.

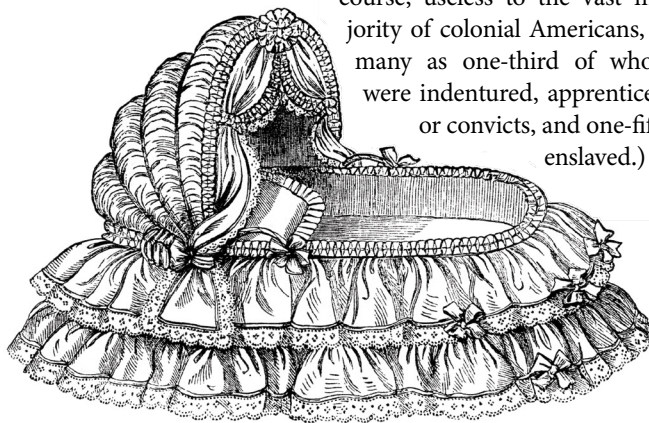
For the Left, the risk of anomie goes beyond any individual’s social confidence. At stake in even the most mundane social interactions is no less than the viability of any movement requiring mass solidarity. Our ability to build intimacy in everyday life is essential for sustaining political momentum through protests, strikes, direct actions, occupations—as well as the backlash that so often accompanies bold actions. The *Cut*’s etiquette guide is an education in social alienation, but its shortcomings provide a valuable opportunity to imagine alternative ways of existing in the everyday—guided by our attunement to the Other. Political resilience does not start on the picket line or up against a police barricade; it starts on sidewalks and subways, and is as apt to be tested at the DMV as in the DSA. It is honed not only under fire, but in moments when we are called upon to make far smaller gestures: to introduce, to excuse, to apologize, to forgive, to mediate, to host, to grieve, to comfort, to compliment, to listen, and to lend a hand.

Emily Postmortem



THE PRACTICAL TROUBLE WITH ETIQUETTE IS, OF COURSE, that it has been wielded more often as a shibboleth than as a social safety net—used to create divisions, rather than bridge divides. In 1968, the historian

Arthur Schlesinger published *Learning How to Behave: A Historical Study of American Etiquette Books*, one of the first texts to examine etiquette manuals as a genre. By his account, “American” etiquette began with efforts to reproduce European courtly refinement in the colonies. What was at first predominantly religious guidance—preached from colonial pulpits and echoed in almanacs like *Poor Richard*, and enforced by way of the whip, ducking stool, and stockade—grew more complex in the early Republic. Southern slaveholders living on large plantations were the most enthusiastic about these codes of behavior, modeling themselves after the English landed gentry, who were, in turn, imitating the quasi-mythic codes of chivalry performed by English nobles, *themselves* imitating the French in the late middle and early modern periods. (Courtly behavior was, of course, useless to the vast majority of colonial Americans, as many as one-third of whom were indentured, apprenticed, or convicts, and one-fifth enslaved.)



But those would-be heirs to the mores of the Old World faced, during the early 19th century, a shift in the very hierarchy reinforced by the concept of the “good breeding” of the ruling class. Schlesinger points to two concurrent trends: on the one hand, the expansion of suffrage to all white men, and not merely those who owned property, and on the other hand, an expansion in property ownership to a greater number of white men. Thus emerged that pervasive American myth, perhaps not so mythic at first, and with it a new reason for good etiquette: the notion that with industry, frugality, and good manners, any citizen could rise, as President Andrew Jackson himself had, from poverty to the upper echelons of American society.

The role that etiquette played in daily life changed as well. It remained a kind of status symbol, accessible only to the limited few—but where it previously served to make clear the social strata from which a well-mannered man or lady had come, now it said more about where they were going, or hoped to go, in the nascent American empire. “There are no distinctions in America which are certain and permanent,” wrote Catharine Maria Sedgwick, in

an 1842 self-education guide for adolescent girls. “The tenant of a log-house in the western wilderness acquires independence, and becomes a representative to Congress, and his wife and daughters figure in the drawing-rooms of Washington. The merchant of New York fails in business, and removes his family from Broadway to a prairie home.” The result was an American etiquette intended to empower its practitioner in fluent interactions with people of all classes—with the obvious problematic side effect of ideologically reinforcing those categories. “You should look forward to ... possible vicissitudes and be prepared for them,” warned Sedgwick. “You have it in your own power to fit yourselves by the cultivation of your minds, and the refinement of your manners for intercourse, on equal terms, with the best society in our land.”

That might have been true on the page, but in practice, a new white American aristocracy swiftly emerged in the wake of the Civil War and resurrected something like the over-compensatory courtly etiquette of yore. Sedgwick was right, to a degree, that the poor could become rich, but the nouveau riche were as self-conscious of the recency of their rise as those new to the peerage in medieval Europe. With the mining, railroading, banking, and manufacturing barons of the late 19th century came perhaps the most familiar shift in etiquette: that which yielded the extensive, Byzantine rules of decorum that theoretically governed high society in the late Victorian and early Edwardian eras. New etiquette books were generated at the rate of five or six per year between 1870 and 1917, their rules further propagated by women’s magazines and advice columns that received thousands of queries—quickly eradicating any social memory of the republican virtues of previous decades. Schlesinger quotes the towering journalist E. L. Godkin, founder of *The Nation*, who asked in his *Problems of Modern Democracy* (1896) whether a distinctly American *renovatio imperii Romanorum* (that is, rejuvenation of imperial Rome, which itself rose from the ashes of the Roman Republic) were not now afoot: “Is it possible we are about to renew on this soil, at the end of the nineteenth century, the extravagances and follies of the later Roman Empire and of the age of Louis XIV?” Godkin was referring here to conspicuous consumption, but etiquette was its own means of attracting attention: a set of conspicuous injunctions, perhaps.



BY THE TIME THE NOW-UBIQUITOUS EMILY POST entered the fray in the aftermath of the First World War, she was obviously far from the first to pen a tome on politeness. Her *Etiquette in Society, in Business, in Politics and at Home* (1922) is an encyclopedic account of correct behavior—down to the very *intonation* with which different social introductions should be made—in the early Interwar period. *Etiquette* has remained a family affair in the decades since Post’s death, with her great-great-grandchildren Lizzie Post and Daniel Post Senning responsible for its latest editions: the 19th (2017) and Centennial (2022). The great American writer and wit Dorothy Parker reviewed the 1927 edition of *Etiquette* with an attitude that feels remarkably contemporary. “As one delves deeper and deeper into *Etiquette*, disquieting thoughts come,” she writes. “That old Is-It-Worth-It Blues starts up again, softly, perhaps, but plainly.” Parker’s main problem with Post is that the society she encourages is irrefutably dull. “Safe” conversation topics offered as examples by

post include, for example, “I’m thinking of buying a radio. Which make do you think is best?” among other gems. “I may not dispute Mrs. Post,” writes Parker. “If she says that is the way you should talk, then, indubitably, that is the way you should talk. But ... there is no force great enough ever to make me say, ‘I’m thinking of buying a radio.’”

Parker—whose oeuvre includes “The Waltz” (1944), a story in which a girl privately laments an unpleasant dance with an unattractive partner, whose hand she has been forced to accept out of politeness—would no doubt have found some relief in the relaxation of American manners in the latter half of the 20th century. In theory, such a relaxation makes the U.S. less of a monoculture, and thereby more accommodating of other societal norms—specifically the customs and manners of minority cultures. These had no place, certainly, in Post’s and her predecessor’s sweeping generalizations of “good” and “bad” behavior in America. The relaxation of etiquette also, no doubt, makes life more interesting by permitting individual expression, unexpected intimacies, and contingencies of all kinds.

But there is a loss, of sorts, to consider as well. It is easy (and, in some respects, a good assumption, given the role that American etiquette has played in reinforcing systems of oppression) to interpret texts like Emily Post’s *Etiquette* in entirely bad faith: to see in them a code of conduct that is at once arbitrary and yet exacting, monolithic and yet stratifying. At its very worst, etiquette structures a system in which people live and die by their familiarity with something called a “fish fork.” But etiquette, at its best, also offers a fallback option for some of the most charged—and often unintuitive—encounters in life: apologizing, expressing condolences, offering gratitude, making a romantic move. Ideally, in some of the stock phrases etiquette provides, there is a gesture of that which is otherwise near-ineffable—a reassurance that, yes, there are things that are difficult to put into words, that we are not the first to try, that thoughtfulness is a social and moral good whether its expression is entirely original or not. It calls us to a higher standard than Pass It On and *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* prescribe. We must do more than pay lip service to the ties that bind us to our fellow human beings—we must *act* on them, in concrete ways, as well.

Social Anxiety Industrial Complex



THE SIXTH EDITION OF *THE SOCIAL-OFFICIAL ETIQUETTE of the United States* (1894) opens with a long-forgotten tune with such rousing lyrics as “if order is heaven’s first law, / we should not regard as beneath careful attention / the proper recognition of rules / which may tend to avoid confusion in social life.” That confusion, no doubt real in a period of enormous social transformation like the late 19th century, is still with us today—but social graces are now commonly regarded as intuitive and individual, and perhaps even innate, as implied by the notion of “emotional intelligence.”

Moreover, many of the places where one might go to practice said social graces, from the lycée to the labor hall, have followed Emily Post to her grave. For most Americans, daily socialization is increasingly limited to coworkers and family members. Robert D. Putnam’s classic *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000) describes at length the decline in American participation in any dimension of civil society, from labor unions to fraternal organizations. He hypothesizes that this trend is linked to the rise of entertainment technology and the related “individualization” of leisure time. Now, people can get all the pleasures of social interaction from home—in a digital field of play where, with few exceptions, the *id* rules. The onus is on the uncomfortable and offended to remove themselves from an adverse encounter. Most digital spaces have few or no rules regarding how one ought to treat others encountered online. Reddit may have its “Reddiquette,” but most platforms fall back on a kind of social Realpolitik where practically anything goes.



UNDER SUCH CIRCUMSTANCES, IS IT ANY SURPRISE that diagnoses of social anxiety have skyrocketed, since its first inclusion in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM-IV), in 1994, to 7.1 percent of Americans by the turn of the millennium, and untold numbers since? Not to mention the countless more who have self-diagnosed with social anxiety, characterized by feelings of awkwardness, uncertainty, embarrassment in social settings, and a fear of judgment, causing them to avoid social interaction altogether. It is no doubt the case that many who have social anxiety, with and without formal diagnoses, do suffer from genuine conditions that are improved by medical and psychotherapeutic treatments—but it can also be true that external social factors have exacerbated, perhaps even *generated*, the symptoms that characterize social anxiety. Some indication of this can perhaps be found among those who turn to, instead of therapy, a different kind of counsel altogether. With the atrophy of certain social muscles from simple lack of use, no doubt exacerbated by the Covid pandemic, a growing number of people seem to feel themselves flailing in their already-limited opportunities for social interaction—creating opportunities for an entire \$1.5 billion coaching industry dedicated to helping people figure out how to act. Indeed, in a recent article for *Current Affairs*, Ronald Purser describes the appeal of achievement-focused life coaching as rooted in the very same atomization that drives some people ashamedly indoors: workers languishing in the “loneliness epidemic” are, despite their labor, unable to afford mental health treatment, and so turn instead to cheaper-than-therapy coaches. These coaches, in turn, diagnose their clients not with what Purser calls “a sane response to the crisis of work,” but rather a pathological deficit of workplace motivation. A social problem is thereby made a personal weakness—even a failure.

The array of coaching services available today goes well beyond the motivational, though all make a similar gambit. In addition to mainstream life coaches, like those who specialize in career- and

team-building, one can find everything from conversation to relationship to intimacy coaches. There are even friendship coaches, and coaches who claim to be able to help the aspiring socialite penetrate the highest echelons of the New York party circuit. While these instructors agree with etiquette writers that social viability can be learned—"Kobe did not become Kobe overnight," proclaims the website for Become More Compelling coaching—they espouse a model that has more in common with Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) than Emily Post and her imitators. Their advice is fundamentally self-serving, concerned with social graces only insofar as they allow one to accrue a kind of social capital. In 1937, the satirist Sinclair Lewis summarized Carnegie's work as a treatise on how to "smile and bob and pretend to be interested in other people's hobbies precisely so that you may screw things out of them." There is something extractive about Carnegie's approach to attractive behavior, as though others exist merely as a font from which, with a few well-placed taps, oil may flow.

Similarly, there is something off-putting about dating coaching, which gamifies human relationships and frames the successful extraction of sex as evidence of success more broadly. Where etiquette once prescribed, in essence, a predictable pattern along which a romantic relationship could proceed from first meeting to wedding, modern dating guidelines attempt to assuage anxiety by simply giving their followers an upper hand. A *New York Times* report from January introduced readers to the realm of dating coaches who specialize in texting specifically. One of the featured practitioners is Kelsey Wonderlin, creator of the Texting Communication Cure Crash Course, which claims to offer counsel on any number of app-based angsts that they themselves reinforce, including: "Is triple texting that bad?" "How frequently should you be in contact in the early stages of dating?" "How do you confront someone who has ghosted you? How long do you wait and what do you say?" "Should you add an exclamation mark? Is two too many?" The room for error is extensive: the *Times* notes adverse possibilities including appearing both too eager and not eager enough in conversation. Most of all, there is the possibility of misinterpretation: that your interlocutor interprets your periods of unreachability as rudeness, your "k" as angry, your "haha" as disingenuous. The risk run, though, is not upsetting your conversation partner, so much as losing the larger game that is modern dating.

Etiquette experts have been around for a very long time, but this mode of coaching professionalization goes further than the authorship of a book on the subject. Social coaching is expensive, sustained, and one-on-one. Like a stint in therapy that never ends—which, by the way, is a uniquely American phenomenon—it implies a kind of fundamental defect in the individual. Even as it ameliorates a person's short-term problem of, say, being awkward on Tinder, it has the long-term effect of normalizing, facilitating, and even enforcing social alienation and apartness. If the social coach—the etiquette expert's bastard child—can be said to have an ideology, that ideology actually defies the mainstream reliance on intuition and common sense. Coaching claims that good manners *cannot*




be picked up effortlessly, by even a kindergartener, to be used for one's own good as well as for the good of others. Rather, they require enormous expenditure to acquire and are to be used mainly for securing sex, money, clout, and comfort. Of course, sex, money, clout, and comfort have always been a theme in etiquette—but for the social coach, they are its only ends.

Carnegie's vaunted advice might include, "When dealing with people, remember you are not dealing with creatures of logic, but with creatures bristling with prejudice and motivated by pride and vanity," but ethical philosophers remind us that, when we deal with said "creatures," we are in fact dealing with other human beings. Even some of the 19th-century etiquette guides that have aged the worst gesture toward the connection between good manners and morality in action. The aforementioned banger, "If Order is Heaven's First Law," concludes with the assurance that "that which is called *good breeding* / is actually the golden rule carried into practice." But even without the Christian overtones, a case can be made for treating etiquette as more than mere frivolity. The philosopher Sarah Buss contends that, fundamentally, codes of etiquette are not so much about setting the table correctly as about "avoid[ing] being discourteous, impolite, rude, inconsiderate, offensive, insulting," about treating others with a respect that implicitly acknowledges their "intrinsic value" and "dignity." In such a framework, violations of manners can amount to moral violations, and the fact that some are seemingly arbitrary does little to dampen that effect. "We [must] ask: what does the code mean now?" says Buss. "What do its rules signify to those who accept its authority? If, as seems obvious, the essential point of these rules is to instruct people on how to treat each other respectfully, and if ... treating people respectfully is essential to treating them with respect, then the essential point of good manners is a moral point." Respect, from this perspective, must be expressed behaviorally in order to exist at all. It is not enough to merely refrain from harming others, explains Buss:

we must also do the work of acknowledging the dignity of those around us by displaying good manners under even the most mundane of circumstances.

It is on this front that the *Cut* piece fails most substantially. Consider the ninety-ninth problem posed by *The Cut*: “Ignore your colleagues on the subway.” While the justification for this rule is seemingly thoughtful—the author claims that the “commute, in the right light, is a sacred space not to be infringed upon” for both parties in question—it fails to consider that this behavior is likely to come across as rude and hurtful to the other party, given that this guideline is not in accordance with mainstream behavior whatsoever. Most people’s intuitive sense of manners, after all, requires that they at least acknowledge the *existence* of those they know in the world. And while ignoring a coworker in favor of blissed-out silence on the subway might be preferable to you—hell, maybe even to them, too—it inevitably deals a blow to solidarity, too, by asserting that the best way to engage with one’s colleagues is as little as possible. In another piece for *Current Affairs*, Lily Sánchez describes *The Cut*’s defense of “zoning out” whilst commuting as straightforwardly pro-alienation: it “reinforces atomization and makes it easier to ignore one’s surroundings and the needs of others around us,” she writes. It makes possible the very lack of empathy that stops people from advocating for society’s most vulnerable members underground—and even from intervening in their deaths, as in the murder of Jordan Neely in May 2023.

On Camaraderie Between Comrades

 HERE THE *CUT* ARTICLE GROWS MOST conventional with its advice is on those very themes ripe for a change in American culture—namely, the lattermost of the three subjects which, according to tradition, one is never supposed to bring up over dinner: religion, politics, and money. First, *The Cut* poses its two contradictory pieces of advice regarding rent. Later, the guide advises against ever asking someone what their job is, on the grounds that “it’s classist and boring,” ignoring (in, arguably, subliminally classist fashion) the fact that many Americans, in order to make ends meet, have little going on *other* than their jobs. Perhaps the most conservative advice of all, however, is as follows: “If you hear rumblings of layoffs and are wondering if a friend or acquaintance was affected, the gentlest way to inquire is ‘Sounds like a tough day at [insert company or team name]. Sending good vibes.’” The statement is a three-tone death knell for labor organizing: an assertion that, even in desperate times, all we are obliged to do, to be “in the right” (and in the Right), is to think positively toward someone, proffer our “thoughts and prayers,” project our “vibes” in their direction. This etiquette may well reflect a dominant ideology of U.S. culture, but it certainly does not satisfy the moral demands of socialism, which must go well beyond “good vibrations” in its commitment to egalitarianism and human flourishing.



OTH BANAL STATEMENTS OF POLITICAL AMBIVALENCE and self-diagnosed social anxiety (in the colloquial, as opposed to clinical, sense) directly jeopardize leftist political solidarity. If someone doesn’t have the confidence or desire to interact casually with another person, how can those two people band together when the going gets tough? It may be true that adverse circumstances often bring people together, but that is no long-term solution. A sustainable labor movement and Left need to be bound by more than a feeling of solidarity born-of-crisis. They need to be bound by a tightly-knit social fabric that is capable of withstanding not only the bad times, but the good as well. Building a strong political movement is not so different from building a strong community—and both require similar things from their members. Can you apologize fluently? Can you cope with rejection? Can you thank someone sincerely? Can you forgive someone who has wronged you? Can you handle disagreements, ideological and otherwise? Can you offer meaningful sympathy to a friend in need?

The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) might try to employ the orderly parliamentary procedure laid out by *Robert’s Rules of Order* (1876) in its meetings, but once the meeting has ended, playground politics rule. Leftist discourse online is a particular bacchanalia of bad blood. Of course, the Left has been fractious and sectarian throughout its history; it is no less so now that the stakes of socialism have risen as hypercapitalism closes in, with catastrophic climate change close behind. Those rising stakes, however, demand that we rise to the occasion—and to do so, we must rise *above* the roiling anti-sociality of the Internet to recover an embodied sense of our obligations to one another. It is only offline that the virtues of the “social” part of “socialism” become clear. And while it is difficult to exist in community, we are far from the first to find it so; in fact, people have written entire books about it. Perhaps we need not dismiss everything those texts represent, even as we reject the social hierarchies they once sustained.

At its best, after all, shared etiquette calls us to *do*, while intuition allows us to merely *feel*—all while maintaining our alienation. And the outright rejection of shared etiquette is a political statement in its own right: an assertion that understanding will always be limited by identitarianism, or else undermined by individualism. That is not to say an Emily Post-style list of earnest, granular rules for behavior is necessary; just that intuition alone, based on one’s own experience, is *at least* as limited in perspective as any paperback etiquette guide, past or present. What many historical etiquette guides do take for granted, however, that so much modern discourse about manners disregards, is that legible communication with others has certain moral stakes in addition to social stakes: both practically and ethically, etiquette must be for the sake of the other. And for leftists operating in the estranged social and political landscape of the contemporary United States, where sociality itself is a virtue in decline, recalling that notion of etiquette might offer its own unexpected opportunity for political engagement. With some conceptual rehabilitation, perhaps we can reclaim some of etiquette’s assumptions—foremost being the idea that mundane gestures can go a long way—to communicate everyday solidarity in the face of a capitalism that feasts on our alienation from not only our labor, but also from one another. ✦



What They Want From Santa

Your child may tell you they want a wind-up dinosaur or superhero pajamas for Christmas. But *do* they? Deep down, what every child really wants is a subscription to the world's most beautiful and informative print magazine.

Whether they've been naughty or nice, tell Santa there's just one thing they need this year: the gift of *Current Affairs*!

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REMEMBER THE '90S?

BY AIDAN YA-M

ONLY 90S KIDS WILL REMEMBER THIS! FROM TAMAGOTCHIS TO WACO, THE 90S SURE WERE A DECADE FULL OF STUFF! HOW MANY OF THESE ICONIC 90S THINGS DO YOU REMEMBER?



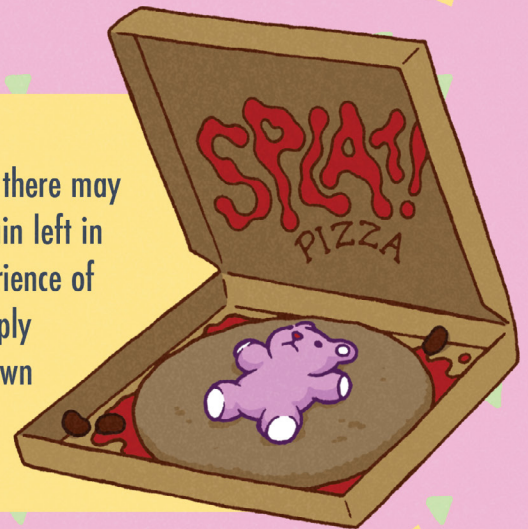
CHEETOS LOG

While kids today might enjoy their "Tik Toks" and their "rizz," those of us who were around in the 90s remember one of life's truest pleasures: gnawing on a fried corn snack the size of a thermos. Sadly, Frito-Lay were forced to discontinue the Cheetos Log in 2001 following a joint investigation by the FDA and EPA.



SPLAT PIZZA

Nothing says 90s like Splat Pizza! While there may not be any locations of this fast-food chain left in business, you can still replicate the experience of ordering one of their unique pies by simply flipping an ordinary pizza box upside down before opening. You'll have to supply your own free toy though!



ENRON PETROLIGAMER

The console wars between Nintendo, Sony, and Sega saw Enron's foray into home entertainment. The only disk-based video game system powered directly by gasoline was unfortunately discontinued after accruing a paltry 22-game library.

PLAYTIME TIPPER BRAND HUG-ME AL GORE DOLLS

What kid didn't want one of these state of the art toys in the 90s? With over twenty unique voice lines and animatronic movements, Hug-Me Al Gore dolls were beloved by children and adult roleplayers alike. Sadly, as a result of the widespread pandemonium caused by the toy's demand, thirty-seven shoppers were trampled to death in K-Mart's across the country.

SPLUB MUSIC

Move over grunge! Who can forget vibing out to the rhythms and melodies of splub music, the hottest new genre of the 90s? It may seem like splub was a worldwide phenomenon that came out of nowhere, but it actually had roots in other styles of music that preceded it. Needless to say, if you weren't listening to classic splub albums like Isthmus's *Music to Splub By* or Melroy Plubert's *Another Quarter in the Swear Jar*, you really missed out!



GENERATION



GEN X

Sandwiched between the boomer and millennial generations, Gen X had a big moment in the 90s! As young adults, they defined the colorful cultural landscape of the twentieth century's last decade. What became of Gen X? Who were they? Where did they go? Did they even truly exist? We may never know...

CALLING YOUR MOTHER

Back in the 90s it seemed like everyone was participating in this crazy fad! What happened?? You never write, you never call! How is she supposed to know what to get you for your birthday if you won't even speak to her? Are you dead??



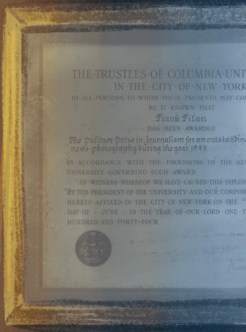
THE GIGAPOG

The best pog in the game! Everyone on the schoolyard envied the kid who brought this bad boy to recess.

TIMOTHÉE CHALAMET

You may know the *Call Me By Your Name* heartthrob from his work in recent films such as *Wonka*, but to those in the know he was already an underground star in the 90s. Fans at the time were quoted as saying "He's so smart! He already knows his ABCs and he can count to a hundred!" and "He's really good about sharing his juice boxes. What a sweet boy!"





A PORTION OF THE MIND:

On Writing and Nobel Prizes

BY YASMIN NAIR

THIS YEAR'S NOBEL PRIZE IN PHYSIOLOGY OR MEDICINE went to two American scientists, Katalin Karikó and Drew Weissman, while the award for literature went to the Norwegian author Jon Olav Fosse. The awards represent vastly and obviously different fields. Less obvious are the differences in the material realities which produced the scientific endeavors and fiction in question. Culture at large persuades us that research and writing materialize like magic in people whose natural talents simply burst forth. But such work is always the result of personal, political, and economic circumstances which either enable or prevent award-winning work—work that can only flourish if the humans producing it are also able to thrive in ideal conditions.

Karikó's story is unusual. She is an adjunct at the University of Pennsylvania, where she and Weissman (a professor at the institution) worked on groundbreaking research that led to the development of the mRNA vaccines against COVID-19. Karikó, a Hungarian immigrant, was rejected for tenure by the university, flatly told that she was “not of faculty quality,” and had her lab space taken away. The powerful and influential journal *Nature* rejected the pair's joint paper, claiming it was merely an “incremental contribution.” As the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* Megan Zahneis writes, that same paper would, “15 years later, become a blueprint for the mRNA Covid-19 vaccines that saved millions of lives around the world.”

Karikó's career reveals the kinds of slow-burning, caustic humiliations perfected by academia over centuries: if you're not kicked out permanently after failing to get tenure, you're compelled to hang around the edges as an adjunct, begging for classes here and there, trying to cobble together some kind of sustainable life with any number of side hustles. Gender was more than likely a huge impediment in her career—she has what has been described as a “blunt-spoken manner,” according to The Associated Press. The newspaper recounts an incident from Karikó's memoir, when two students botched an experiment: she threw out their samples and told them, “It's useless, garbage!” This is, of course, the kind of demanding behavior that an average male scientist would be praised for. Such a moment might, in the man's case, be described as part of his “exacting standards” and “keen perfectionism.” (The memoir also recounts the sometimes grim circumstances in which Karikó was educated,

from kindergarten onwards, and those included schools with no running water—she relates all of this with an astonishing lack of piety or sentimentality).

Karikó is one of the lucky ones. She was supported by colleagues like Weissman and an engineer husband. And she appears to have found what must have been a lucrative secondary career in biotechnology, founding her own company in 2006 and working in another till 2022.

Still, she couldn't have been wealthy enough to fund the kind of complicated research labs needed for her work. In science, access to equipment and labs can mean the difference between, well, being a scientist or not. The general public still imagines scientists as cartoonish characters busily spending all their days and nights in lab coats until their eureka moments, unconcerned and absent-minded about everything except the results of their experiments. The reality is that scientific research, especially in the U.S., is funded almost entirely by grants and endowments, and most of that only goes towards—let us put this bluntly—the sexy kinds of work that can be described in thrilling terms in mainstream media. A 2022 *Atlantic* essay by Derek Thompson, “Silicon Valley's New Obsession,” praises entrepreneurs for jump-starting some kinds of research, but the truth is that many of our most important and lifesaving medical inventions came about after hours of seemingly boring inquiries in cold labs, day after day, funded by the state. To depend entirely on either profit-driven research funding (by venture capitalists who hope to become famous) or the bureaucratic maze of state funding means that we don't get what we need produced. And timing is key: fifteen years ago, the scientific community thought an mRNA vaccine was inconsequential. And then the pandemic came upon us.

The average scientist can't afford to be an eccentric spending day and night in the lab: he—too often a he—also has to kiss the asses and rings of various potential donors, deans, and senior administrators whose whimsical ideas about what constitutes “good research” or, ah, “faculty quality” can mean the end of the most detailed and carefully argued projects—even the ones that promise lifesaving benefits. He is a part-time socialite, part-time fundraiser, and part-time researcher—up to 50 percent of his time can be spent trying to get grants.

THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN FUNDERS/DONORS AND scholars are not quite so explicit in the humanities, but there is just as much kowtowing to higher powers and a constant search for funds. The difference is in kind and degree: an underfunded English department has to count its Bic pens and keep track of its reams of printer paper, whereas the science lab's inhabitants might want an upgrade to their first-generation Keurig. Everywhere, even when not faced with threats and restructuring from sanctimonious officials like Ron DeSantis, universities are cutting back on what they consider the inessential parts of higher education: nearly all of the humanities.

Who gets to do research in this climate? Which PhDs have the time and resources to continue to spend hours on writing articles for the journals in their field, without even the scant resources that are available in tenured positions? Which professors, as they scramble to teach and write each semester and are anxious about their own jobs evaporating at any minute, have the time to advise their students? Increasingly, graduate students are told to find occupations outside academia. For most, that means the generally fruitless task of endless pitches to various publications, all in the hope of obtaining one of the unicorns of the publishing world: a book contract, a steady gig as a columnist or an editor, a Substack deal.

Sometime in February of this year, the writer L. Mad Hildebrandt posed a question on Twitter, "If someone has never been poor, what is something they wouldn't understand?" In response, Sam Haselby, the historian and senior editor at *Aeon*, tweeted, "That a portion of the mind, including imagination and the ability to make long-term plans, is in effect disabled by the pressing problem of providing basic necessities."

I've had that tweet saved on my laptop all these months: an eloquent reminder of the usually unseen links between a sustainable living and the ability to write. Professional writers like me—people who make most or all of their income from writing—are the last dinosaurs roaming the earth, barely dodging the meteorites crashing into the ground around us as publications everywhere shut down permanently, often because the venture capitalists who funded them are now bored and looking for the next new thing. Given all this, it's no surprise that most writers now write on the side, financed either by families or well-paying jobs that pay the bills. Privileged writers are not lesser writers, to be clear, and there's no need to resurrect any hoary ideas about how poverty and a hard life somehow make you a better writer (they don't: hunger is a powerful deterrent to creativity). But there is a world of writers shut out of publishing because they lack the resources that would let them write without the constant fear of penury.

What becomes of writing itself in these conditions? Karikó was fortunate that she had a supportive family in her husband and daughter and that many along the way saw the value of her work and made sure she had access to labs and the enormous and often expensive resources she needed to carry on her research. She was also determined that she would carry on the work regardless of whether or not she was recognized for it. But, again, she was able to do that with material support. Similarly, writers today have to find ways in which to continue

their work and that often means either choosing to chase a lot of assignments that they do purely for the money (such as puffy celebrity pieces) or by combining the better-paying gigs with the work that is more like what they might want to produce: experimental fiction, perhaps, or nonfiction essays on matters unrelated to whatever is trending on social media. More often than not, American writers in particular end up succumbing to the pressures of a market-driven publishing world. The result is that good writers end up writing bad books.

To add to the messiness: writing programs have exploded to the extent that they've become gateways (and gatekeepers) to writing careers. It's no longer even the MFA (made famous by the University of Iowa): many universities now offer PhDs in writing. It's still a matter of debate whether the existence of the writing PhD has made writing programs better or simply created a false demand such that a writer today has to have a PhD in order to perhaps get a job in a department that offers a PhD in writing, in order to teach writers whose best bet at job security is to graduate with PhDs in writing that might get them jobs in programs that offer PhDs in writing, and on and on.

There's a longer history to be written about how the explosion of MA/PhD programs has led to a tyranny of style and the enforced popularity of formulaic kinds of poetry and fiction and nonfiction. (Do you really like that hot new novel, or are you trying to make sure you're reading what everyone else is talking about reading?) The biggest writing programs have the biggest writing stars who are inevitably plugged into the biggest publications, including the *New Yorker*, which produces the worst—but also the most successful—fiction. It's not hard to discern the stamp of an MFA in a novel because it inevitably bears all the signs of a million workshop sessions: the very deliberate and overwrought hooks at the beginning, stark endings that resonate (with what, it's unclear, but resonance is achieved), and the utter lack of originality, long beaten out of it by the demands of one's peers who pored over every comma.

WHAT WOULD IT MEAN TO BE A WRITER WHO DIDN'T have to worry about the constant and looming concerns about healthcare, childcare, or housing, as the average American writer must (unless they are protected by wealth)? What would it mean to be a writer who could simply write without the burden of having to have their work first vetted and picked over by a group of peers, without having to worry about whether or not a work was "marketable"? Or whether or not it paid homage to the professor who runs the class that's supposed to teach you all about plot?

For an answer, we might turn to Norway, which has produced Jon Fosse and Karl Ove Knausgaard. In a 2013 essay about Knausgaard's "3,500-page, six-volume magnum opus, *My Struggle*," Sophie Pinkham describes the author's long, desultory passages about cleaning (70 pages), and taking his daughter to a birthday party (50 pages). She quotes the author explaining how his novel and style came to be, in response to the creative writing workshop he once attended:

Some simple rules dominated, and the most important one

dealt with quality: if a sentence was bad, you removed it. If a scene was bad, you removed it. The critical reading of the texts always resulted in parts being deleted. So that was what I did. My writing became more and more minimalist. In the end, I couldn't write at all. For seven or eight years, I hardly wrote. But then I had a revelation. What if I did the opposite? What if, when a sentence or a scene was bad, I expanded it, and poured in more and more? After I started to do that, I became free in my writing. Fuck quality, fuck perfection, fuck minimalism.

Pinkham writes that the people described in *My Struggle* are, to an American audience, curiously untroubled by the daily tensions that fill our lives. The (autobiographical) protagonist who shares his name with the author lives a life untroubled by, for instance, the hospital bills that come with childbirth, or the costs of childcare, or education for his three children, or his aging parents.



"My Struggle" (Complete Six Volume Set) for sale on AbeBooks.com

Similarly,

Knausgaard's best friend, Geir, is an unsuccessful writer, but that doesn't seem to put a damper on his coffeehouse lifestyle. When Geir worries that he'll never succeed, he frames his anxiety in terms of artistic success and recognition, not in financial terms.

Pinkham's larger point is that a work like *My Struggle*, which she describes as a masterpiece, can only come about in conditions where writers and other creative individuals simply concern themselves with the writing, letting it go where it will. Comparing the American approach—where everything is determined by an often hazily understood marketplace—to the Norwegian one, she writes, "Of course, either system can produce a masterpiece; life has its surprises, its moments of transcendence. But as *My Struggle* shows, it is more often predictable, and material conditions can be as decisive as fate."

Could we have a similar set of conditions in the U.S.? I doubt it, and not just because universal healthcare, free education, and

a life free from debt still seem so incredibly far away—even as groups like Debt Collective wage their increasingly successful campaigns to make change. The problem is that the publishing world in the U.S. (at least) has become so attuned only to marketplace concerns that writers are now forced to see themselves as influencers rather than as creators of original work. Time and again, I hear from writers frustrated when editors and publishers push them to produce whatever it is they imagine the "market" will want (and too often that translates to, "Write an autobiography about your trauma"—no matter the topic, whether biotech or travels). There are class distinctions in publishing that few will acknowledge: I can always tell which writers are sustained by private resources because they're the ones who sneer at the rest of us for staying on social media to promote our work (we hurl links into the void, like messages in a bottle across an ocean). Those with regular (if fast disappearing) jobs at publications can afford to stay off Twitter and all its iterations because their workplaces will do the endless work of promotion for them. The rest of us are in a constant state of panic and anxiety, worried that yet another magazine or newspaper will fold and take publishing opportunities with it or that our Substack or blog incomes might soon dwindle and dry up as the economy worsens.

But there might still be hope: not in the world of mainstream publishing but in some suggestions by Katalin Karikó. In another *Chronicle* article, also by Zahneis, the researcher suggests ways in which people like her might be supported by universities in more intentional ways:

Scholars who've already made it could advocate at the university level for colleagues whose work they feel is promising but hasn't gained traction. Grant funds could be pooled in a discretionary bucket and distributed based on internal recommendations, to help sustain work like hers. And, Karikó adds, institutions should reward advocates like Barnathan and Langer [fellow researchers who helped secure her institutional support] for helping boost their colleagues' profiles...

Just as importantly, Karikó advocates for a "a kind of pure-mindedness....The sole goal should be to gain an understanding of one's field, to resist to whatever extent possible the siren song of career advancement...." For writers, this isn't an easy task, but as I've written, the question should not be, "Am I more popular now?" but, rather, "Am I a better writer than I was five years ago?"

And yet. I return to Haselby's words and wonder: how do those of us struggling to make rent and pay bills even find ways to carve out time and space to write? How do we nurture those portions of our minds, "including imagination and the ability to make long-term plans" without constantly feeling like we're "disabled by the pressing problem of providing basic necessities?"

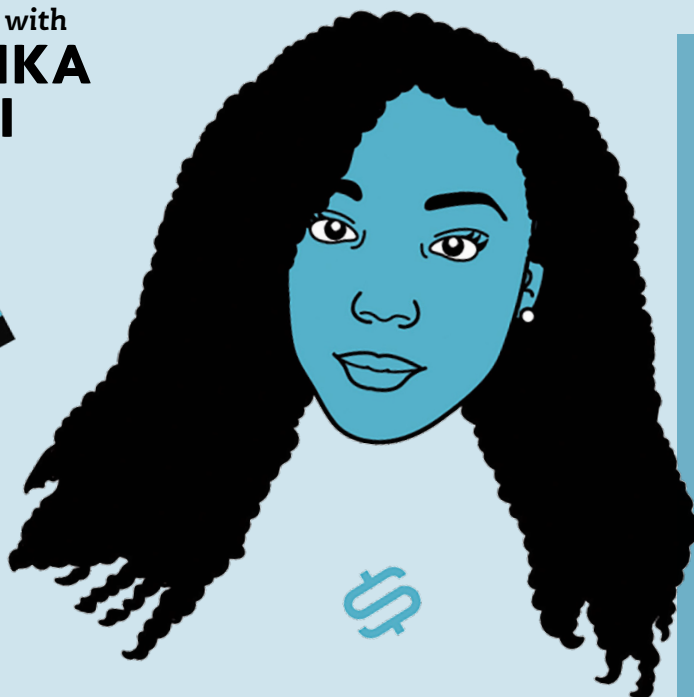
How do we create a world where writers do the unthinkable and simply write? ✚

*Yasmin Nair would like to move to Norway.
A version of this essay was previously published on
www.yasminnair.com on October 13, 2023*

HOW IS CAPITALI\$M LIKE A BAD RELATIONSHIP?



an interview with
**MALAIKA
JABALI**



illustrations by
KAYLA E.



Malaika Jabali is Senior News and Politics Editor at *Essence* magazine. She is also the only previous *Current Affairs* contributor whose writing for our magazine has won an award! Her exceptional piece, “The Color of Economic Anxiety,” won the 2019 New York Association for Black Journalists award for magazine feature. She has now published her first book, *It’s Not You, It’s Capitalism: Why It’s Time to Break Up and How To Move On*. In accessible and entertaining prose (with fun illustrations by artist **Kayla E.**), Jabali presents an introduction to leftist economic and social analysis for the uninitiated reader.

Nathan J. Robinson

You have produced, along with illustrator, Kayla E.— who deserves credit here because the illustrations in this book are fantastic—not only one of the most fun introductions to socialist thought that I’ve ever read, but one of the most beautiful and most conceptually interesting. You compare capitalism to a toxic relationship, and so I wanted to begin with a question for you that might sound like the setup to a joke, which is: how is capitalism like a bad relationship?

Malaika Jabali

Oh, in so many ways. The book is set up in 10 chapters, and I would say nine of them really dissect how it’s like a bad relationship, and six of those nine are about how capitalism directly affects us in these different areas of our life, like for example, the workplace. There are all kinds of pop culture references in there, and chapter four, which was about labor, I reference the Dolly Parton movie *9 to 5*. In that movie there was a boss that a band of scrappy women tried to overthrow because in that relationship, the women got little trinkets and gifts—but that’s really not enough to actually sustain them. Or they got a pizza party. But our rights and ability to unionize have been undermined by capitalists for the last 60 or so years. So, each chapter deals with various comparisons to toxic relationships in different parts of our lives.

Robinson

Something that runs through the book is the way that when people are in bad relationships, they find ways to deny the obvious reality in front of them. They can rationalize and justify it; they can look for the small, good things and try to pretend that those are the main things. And in the economic system that we have as well, there is often an effort to say, maybe this is the only way it possibly can be, and maybe this is all I deserve. When you start thinking about it with this kind of analogy, you start to notice all sorts of interesting parallels.

Jabali

Yes, absolutely. I think one of the defining things I read in my journey to

socialism was actually an essay that you wrote about how we always get told that capitalism is an ideal system because capitalists are comparing our lives to how things might have been 50 or 100 years ago. But the reality is that we need to compare it to what the possibilities are and what could be. So, when we’re trapped in these bad relationships, we sometimes have a toxic partner that tries to convince us that they’re the best that we can do. They insult us and isolate us from our friends. In similar ways, capitalism isolates us from each other and from our communities, and it has convinced us that it is the best system possible. I get asked the question regularly: what’s better than the economic system we have now? Instead, my response is, can we at least try something different? I’m sure something has to be better than the pronounced wealth inequality that we have. Something has to be better than the fact that we have wages that have not kept up with production in 50 years. This is not at all the best that we can do.

Robinson

I was very honored to be quoted on page



11. “You don’t measure against what is or what has been, you measure against what could be.” I have always heard the idea that in 1910, they didn’t have fridges. That’s true, but we don’t measure how well we’re doing in 2023 against “there’s no plague anymore”—you have to ask, how well could we do? You don’t say, a lot more people could have died. That’s not how you measure it. You ask, what is it that we are capable of, and are we living up to that? Your title is *It’s Not You, It’s Capitalism*, and you write about how people, both in bad relationships and under capitalism, are told that the things that are wrong and make them unhappy are their own fault.

Jabali

Right. Under capitalism, we’re still getting the plague. One sinister part about living in a capitalist society is that it is rooted in certain principles and values, one of them being individualism. So we believe that if we have not accomplished certain things, if we have not succeeded in this capitalist society, it’s on us.

We cannot get assurances from our government, we’re not supposed to ask for help, and we’re not supposed to be supported. So, on top of being exploited, having very few worker protections, and not being able to afford rent, we get told that it’s our responsibility for these structural issues. During the pandemic, I was looking on Twitter, and somebody was complaining about having to work a third or fourth job just to pay his rent. Almost like a hive mind or a mind virus, everybody was just foaming at the mouth to tell him how much he wasn’t stepping up instead of saying, it is a pandemic, maybe we need to think about how to treat our workers better.

Robinson

There was a similar instance that I saw recently where this young woman recorded a video where she was crying because her long commute meant that she was always in her waking hours either working or commuting to and from work, and when she got home, she was just too tired to do anything else. There were all these right-wing people who picked it up and said, “that’s the reality

of having a job, girl,” and, “snowflake finds out what the real world is like”—all that horrible stuff, where you’re just told that if you’re unhappy and miserable, clearly, you’re just weak and are not worthy of the society and the economic system that you are insufficiently grateful for.

Jabali

Yes, exactly. And I saw her video and the responses to it, which are very similar to the example I gave. The lack of empathy that we are showing to each other is really jarring. And so, as much as this book is about a system, it’s also like a relationship guide, giving us the tools to recognize that it’s the system so that we’re not constantly berating ourselves and other people for not finding a successful path through it. I think we have to work on our own value system and question why we have certain values and why we project that onto other people.

Robinson

With both a terrible partner and a terrible economic system, there are so many ways in which the image and the reality diverge. I think you have a number of illustrations here that are simulations of a dating profile. On the surface, someone

or some system can be spun to look like something magical and wonderful, then underneath it the reality is truly miserable.

Jabali

Yes. I have a section called, “Capitalism, the ultimate catfisher.” I was thinking about this when that story about a scammer on Tinder was being featured everywhere. I was reading news about that as I was working on this chapter. We get one image of capitalism. This rhetoric has been very successful at telling us it’s about prosperity, mom-and-pop shops, democracy and freedom, and all of these really patriotic ideals. When you just scratch very shallowly under the surface, that’s really not what a lot of it is about. Even some of the things that entrepreneurs say about empowering people—such as economic mobility—don’t even happen for small business owners. I would say, on average, a household has to have \$380,000 to have a business. So, the average self-employed household has an average of \$380,000 in household wealth. The average lawn mower service owner, or somebody who just wants to be an entrepreneur and work independently, isn’t really able to advance in society. It takes capital to

make capital. That’s not something that we learned from capitalists. For instance, we learned that capitalism gives people of color and Black people a chance to progress through homeownership, but our homeownership rates have not improved since 1968. If after 60 years we have not even gotten to own homes, we’re clearly being sold certain lies through this capitalist enterprise.

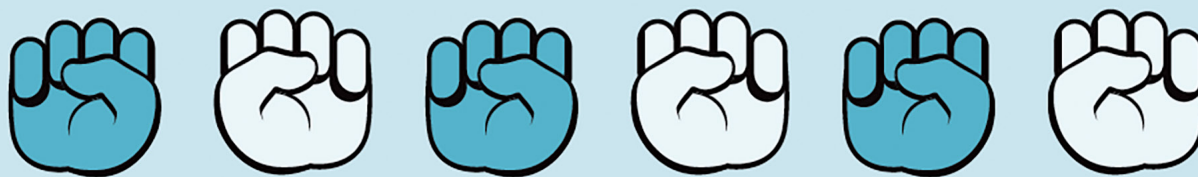
Robinson

There are other ways in which being trapped in bad relationships is similar to the economic situation, such as the fear of leaving, that anything else you could have would be worse and so you don’t want to destroy what you do have. And this, obviously, is like with free market economists constantly saying that any attempts to tinker with or repair these deficiencies you see with capitalism will just destroy the things you do have. It’s the Road to Serfdom: you’re going to end up in a socialist, totalitarian, authoritarian nightmare state, and they say that to create the fear of leaving.

Jabali

I think what’s important to remember is that so many of the things that have allowed us to be comfortable in capitalism were actually brought to us by socialists. There weren’t capitalists who said that we needed to regulate child labor; capitalists didn’t say that we needed to have unions to give us better bargaining power; capitalists weren’t the ones fighting for health insurance to make sure that people were actually covered. Capitalists fought tooth and nail against the things that have given us comfort in the United States. But if you look at the history of socialism in this country, we’ve just gotten a little taste. We know we’ve just dipped our toe in some elements of socialist ideas and policy. For instance, Milwaukee doubled its park space because of socialist mayors. We were able to get Social Security in the United States because of a school of thought that came out of economists who were socialists and said that we needed to put more value on labor and on workers instead of giving so many rights to corporations. It was socialists





within these various radical movements that gave us the 9-to-5 workday and weekends. So, if we're just getting that little taste, why don't we just try and commit?

Robinson

One of the cool things that you do throughout this book is to elevate the stories of historical figures who we are often not taught about but who brought us these things. In previous generations, they saw many of the same things that we do today and decided to do something about it and accomplished a great deal. You highlight many of these people so that we can be inspired by their work and pick it up where they left off.

Jabali

I was intentional about focusing on leftists of color. Some of them identified as socialists, some as communists, and some didn't identify as anything per se, but they were vocally critical of capitalism. So, I've got quotes from Dolores Huerta in there. I feature Frida Kahlo, who was a part of the Communist Party. I feature Assata Shakur, who was very vocally socialist, and the Black Panther Party in general was a socialist organization. They believed in Black liberation through the lens of a worker-led movement, and they recognized that many Black people, if we were to use some Marxist terms here, were part of the *lumpenproletariat*. They would be discarded in Marxist analysis, but so many Black people weren't employed and had been maligned in society and thought of as outcasts. Those were the kinds of people that needed to be organized because they comprise such a big part of the Black population. People like Malcolm

X are centered, and people like Martin Luther King Jr., A. Philip Randolph, and Bayard Rustin. Folks wouldn't know, for instance, that the March on Washington where we heard Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech was called the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Two of its main two organizers, A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, were socialists. So, much of the concept of the march was about economic exploitation and fighting back against it.

Robinson

Socialists, I think, bear some of the blame here for the racial image of socialism that is often handed down. It is often quite white, and that is not necessarily helped by seeing Karl Marx and Eugene Debs as the greatest figures in socialism. As you point out and emphasize throughout the book, so much of the revolutionary socialist tradition, some of the greatest socialist intellectuals from Du Bois to the Black Panthers, are people of color, and so much of modern socialism was forged in the Global South. This tends to get lost a lot of the time in American discourse around socialism.

Jabali

Yes, it does. And I think there are plenty of reasons for it. I think some of it is deliberate and is a part of some of the whitewashing that we see in modern politics. I talked about it in that essay for *Current Affairs*, where the support that Bernie Sanders had from people of color was deliberately underreported. Obviously, there were valid criticisms—I have criticized him in various outlets—but there were still people of

color who supported him, and there were reasons for that support. Many people recognize that a number of his policy platforms hit directly at their material interests, yet the Democratic Party was using their reputation and tradition that they had and the relationships that they were able to build with Black communities to say "we're actually the party for Black people," even though they weren't actually confronting the material disadvantages and harms that some of their policies caused for Black people. And so that, to me, is very convenient. It's very convenient to whitewash a leftist movement to advance your own political aims.

Robinson

One of the most cynical quotes of all time in politics was Hillary Clinton's infamous, "If we broke up the big banks tomorrow, would it end racism?" I remember this rhetoric in 2016, which was basically that it's a choice between addressing racism and addressing economic inequality and exploitation—we, the centrists, believe in the former, and Bernie Sanders believes in the latter but doesn't care about racism. It's just an extremely frustrating narrative.

Jabali

It was extremely cynical. And they were putting that in their back pocket for a reason: it was advantageous to them to simplify it that way. But as I've discussed before, it was a perfect opportunity to talk about the big banks and their role in undermining the wealth of Black people with the financial crisis of 2008. That was a very clear example of the intersection of race and class. So, it was less about not knowing that, but instead

about Clinton trying to muddy her own relationship with the big banks.

Robinson

In your introduction, you write about your own formative experiences that colored your perception of capitalism, and one of them was dealing with mortgage services.

Jabali

My family was targeted with a subprime loan. This hit me very hard. We weren't aware of what that meant at the time, I would say, but we had a lender who just sold us on this thing even though we had all the qualifications to get a conventional mortgage. They were pushing these on homeowners, and I saw it because I was on the receiving end of it. So, they pushed this on us and many Black families in Georgia, where I was raised and where I currently live, and that reverberated throughout the country. We were sold this thing, and then it was repackaged and sold to another servicer. And then we were getting calls and emails and letters regularly, basically saying that we owed when we didn't. They were using all these deceptive tactics, and they eventually got sued. There was a class action lawsuit against the mortgage servicer because this was a common practice. They were deliberately targeting a lot of Black and brown homeowners, and I was one of them.

Robinson

They would do crazy things—people don't even remember this. People would make their payments, and then they'd reject the checks, send it back, and then foreclose on you. Or if you paid too much, they wouldn't accept the check, so you couldn't pay things off ahead of time. The practices that were in place caused so much avoidable suffering during that period, 2007-2009.

Jabali

Just to add to that, I had to go through our archives with the company and look at every single check and show them that their machine clearly didn't notice that we paid the full amount, that it was not under. And so they blamed it on their photography service that documents the checks, and by then we're 60 or 90 days behind. For years, this was an ongoing thing. I'm lucky that my mom and I made time to do it because the average person probably wouldn't be able to.

Robinson

Right. And you are someone who ultimately became a lawyer. You're someone who has the capacity to go through piles and piles of documentation to ferret out the truth.

Jabali

That's right. I'm going to pull the receipts even if it takes up my time.

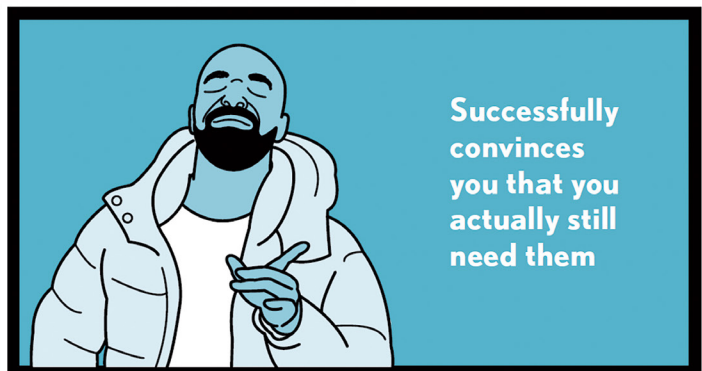
Robinson

But for plenty of people, it's just impossible to do this stuff, or they don't have the time because they're working all the time. We should mention your article for *Current Affairs*, "The Color of Economic Anxiety," because it touches on this. At the time of the 2016 election—again, to dredge up some ancient history—there had been this whole thing about mocking the idea that Trump voters were motivated by economic anxiety, with a bunch of Democrats saying that it's just racism. What your article did was say that economic anxiety is a perfectly real thing, and it's not just Trump voters. You went to Milwaukee and talked to disillusioned Black voters and said, first, it's a swing state that Hillary Clinton lost, and here are all these people who don't vote because frankly, the economy sucks. It doesn't work for them, and they don't see anything to vote for.

Jabali

Exactly. Part of what I write about in the book is the whitewashing of the working class. The reason why this is so important is that it's what dictates the policy priorities of our federal politicians. And so, when we have members of Congress who are saying that they need to appeal to conservative white voters, what they're saying is that we need to just be doing earned income tax credits and have zoning laws that make sure that we

HEALTHCARE HUSTLE



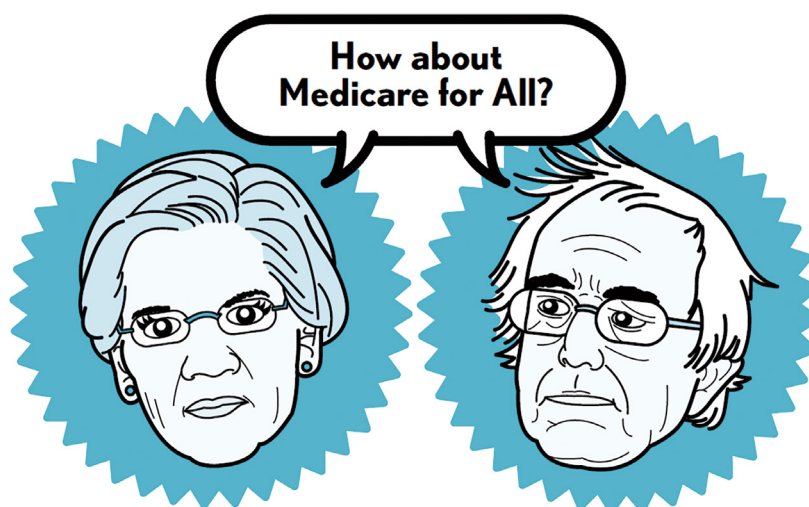
have enough single family housing, but they're not doing enough to make sure that we have affordable housing. They're investing more in these kinds of affordable housing programs that will benefit landlords but not tenants. They're not investing in public housing because that doesn't appeal to conservative white voters. So, when we do that, when we are so narrowly focused on the conservative end of the working class, we are denying the preferences of millions of people who want things like Medicare for All and free college tuition. We're denying the entire country the benefits that most other industrial countries have because we are so narrowly focused on a very mythical version of the working class in America.

Robinson

I want to ask you a meta question about the creation of the book. So, you go through various areas of economic life and show how capitalism functions. You show the ways in which we could have a healthcare system that actually takes care of people instead of extorting them and bankrupting them, how we could have jobs where we work reasonable hours and get paid what we're worth. This is a really interesting, creative, and novel book because you work with an illustrator. How did you think about taking these ideas and packaging and presenting them to people in the 21st century who don't want to pick up Karl Marx's *Capital: Volume One*? How did you take socialist ideas that are oftentimes, again, associated with the 19th century and make them relevant for 2023 in a way that people can understand, especially for young people, who are the target audience?

Jabali

I think everything really opened up when I came up with the relationship conceit. As someone who has dated in New York City, I've dealt with all kinds of personalities, and I was just able to run with it. Unfortunately for me, but fortunately for the readers, there's so much material to draw from. So, I've been on dating sites, and I thought, what does it look like when you see a nice



profile or when you see red flags? What kind of imagery can we come up with that will display something in a simple way? Also, having a bit of a magazine background helps a bit because I have to think about layouts and how to make some of our ideas visually appealing. I worked in communications for the New York City Council, and so as a lawyer, I frequently had to think about how to translate very wonky policy language into something that could fit on a billboard. So, I think all those skills came together and led to this book, and it took some time to sit with some of the concepts. I was brainstorming with my editor about what would make sense. I wanted to do a video game profile to feature some of the standout leftists: does that make sense? I would just go back and forth with her on some of those things.

Robinson

You ultimately make a structured argument in the book, but throughout the book, you have things like timelines, memes, little fake text messages, parodies of video game character selection screens, infographics, maps, charts, quotations—just all kinds of things that take these ideas, and you figure out a hundred different ways to present the ideas to people so they'll understand.

Jabali

Yes. I conceived a lot of it. I also have to

give props to Kayla, the illustrator and designer, for incorporating her creativity and imagination into the imagery. She just really got what we were trying to do.

Robinson

I just happened upon a page about vampires: student loan vampire, credit card vampire, jail vampire, payday loan vampire. Kayla did some adorable little vampires. "Why are we swiping right on these lending bloodsuckers and their vampire dating profiles?" Again, this is not like picking up *Capital: Volume One*.

Jabali

No, not at all. I had a lot of fun. I think for most of the ideas that I threw at my editor and the illustrator, they said, let's just do it. It was almost like a smorgasbord of random ideas that I would think about. And so, for the lending vampires, that came out of a Malcolm X quote where he talks about capitalists being bloodsuckers. I thought, why don't we just make this a whole *Twilight* theme? So again, there's just theme on top of theme here. Yes, it's about our romantic lives and people sucking the energy out of us, but I also wondered about what a movie reference for this could be. So, the movie we chose was *Twilight*, where you have these lenders, including our federal government, who tell us that we need to be making enough money to buy the basic necessities of life, but we're not getting enough money to do it. The next

“Power is the ability to make others respect the decisions you’re making. And power is the ability for you to access resources for the betterment of your people. That’s power.”

– Charles Barron



thing you know, they come around with student loans, payday loans—all these loans because we are not given the wages we need to afford our basic necessities. We’re getting the life energy sucked out of us just trying to meet interest rates and all of these requirements. So, that led to a whole vampire thing.

Robinson

I would describe this as really accessible, and this is what we always try to do at *Current Affairs*. We have all sorts of satirical advertisements and such because of what you identify in the book, which is that because ordinary people spend a lot of their lives working, they’re too tired to pick up a book of economic theory and ideas. It can be a lot of work, and it’s something that a lot of us don’t want to have to do. I don’t even want to pick up big works of socialist ideas very much. And so, you’ve clearly thought about how to simultaneously convey a lot of information—there are a ton of endnotes and statistics in it—and also give the reader some joy.

Jabali

Yes. I wanted to incorporate my own personality. I am a very studious person, but I also like to have fun. I like to tell my little jokey jokes. We’re going to have some fun while we’re reading and experiencing this. When I was writing it, if I didn’t have fun reading it back, if I didn’t laugh, I thought, maybe other people won’t laugh, either. So, it was really key for me that I was able to enjoy it. Even if you don’t have time for a book, I

recommend listening to the audiobook. I narrated the audiobook to capture the tone that some of the jokes required so people could get it, and I think that’s so key. We talk about the working class—people are *working*. They’re exhausted. Most of the things that I read that led to socialism happened when I was a student or when I just had more free time to do the reading, but we can’t have a movement just with people who are in libraries, people who are researchers and policy wonks. We need a movement of workers and people who are trying to work. I thought this would be a good introduction for those kinds of readers or listeners.

Robinson

In terms of making the reader feel another world is possible, or that a breakup with the economic system is possible, you look at people in our country and world who are doing the kind of activism that is necessary to create that alternate world. Tell us a little bit about who you chose to profile in the book.

Jabali

The whole book provides different alternatives. My editor Madeline Jones approached me with a concept of doing an approachable book about socialism. I felt that most readers would be most familiar with the idea of capitalism because we’re living through it, but we still wanted to ensure that a significant amount of the book got into ideas from socialists. So, in each chapter where I’m critiquing an element of capitalism, I

also inject it with ideas that socialists have introduced. In the chapter on socialism, which is the third chapter, I wrote about the work of Cooperation Jackson and the Jackson Plan, which is a Mississippi-based movement based on socialist ideas from Black Southerners and Black people who migrated from the Midwest and back down to the South. So, they’re working on a project to make sure that we have participatory democracies in Mississippi. I wrote about the Mondragon Corporation in Spain, which is a conglomeration of cooperatives with thousands of workers. The Marxian economist Richard Wolff has talked about it in his work, and I interviewed him to give us a vision of what a socialist workplace could look like through, for instance, workplace self-directed enterprises. So, it’s all throughout the book. But then at the end, I really hone in on a certain movement. For instance, there’s a city council member who’s a Black socialist and a former Black Panther, Charles Barron. He has been incorporating his socialism as a city council member and making sure that people have affordable housing in his district. I interviewed Chris Smalls, the Amazon Labor Union president who has been vocally critical and outspoken against capitalism. I talked to Smalls’s colleague Cassio Mendoza, who helped found the ALU and is a socialist. They all gave me their tools for what they’re doing today to bring more people into the fold. 🙌

**it’s not you, it’s
CAPITALISM**

**why it’s time to
break up and
how to move on**



Malaika Jabali

illustration and design by Kayla E.

YOU SEEM LIKE A
FELLA WHO WANTS
TO BETTER HIMSELF.
LOOK AT YOU,
READING A
MAGAZINE!

INTRODUCING



LEGLESS REPTILE
OIL

I'VE GOT JUST THE THING
FOR A
FORWARD-
THINKING
PERSON
LIKE YOU!

WE KNOW WHAT
YOU'RE THINKING:
WHY HAVEN'T I
HEARD OF THIS
BEFORE? WELL,
BECAUSE WE'RE
TELLING YOU
FOR THE
FIRST TIME

Silly

WE
ARE
NOT A
Snake

IN THE FAR REACHES
OF THE WILD, A LITTLE
KNOWN SPECIES OF REPTILE
HAS EVOLVED PAST THE
NEED FOR LEGS. NOW
THE MIRACLE OF SCIENCE
HAS PRODUCED A CONCENTRATED
EXTRACT OF THIS
CRITTER'S INGENIOUS
SPIRIT. WE CAN NOW
ABSORB ITS UNPARALLELED
WISDOM BY SPREADING
IT ON OUR WRISTS OR
DIFFUSING IT IN A DEVICE

Sold
Separately

Surprising Health Benefits

LEGLESS REPTILE OIL
SHARPENS THE MIND
WITH ITS MIRACULOUS
ANTI-GULLIBILITY PROPERTIES.
DON'T BELIEVE
ME? SOUNDS LIKE YOUR
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NEEDS...
Legless Reptile Oil!!

HERE AT
Legless Reptile Oil
WE OFFER AN EXCITING
OPPORTUNITY - TO
SELL LRO TO OUR CUSTOMERS.
AND IN TURN, THEY WILL
SELL LRO BACK TO YOU!!



WE CAN HEAR
YOU ALREADY!
ISN'T IT
too good to be
TRUE?
JUST YOU WAIT. THE OILS
WILL SOON REACH YOUR
CEREBELLUM. THEN
YOU'LL GET IT!

the ONE THING
your
life
is
MISSING!

YOU SEEM LIKE A DISCERNING
CUSTOMER... PERHAPS WE CAN INTEREST
YOU IN AN EXCLUSIVE, UNRELEASED
PRODUCT. IT'S EXPERIMENTAL & COSTLY TO
PRODUCE, A REVOLUTIONARY OIL... EONS AHEAD OF
OUR FAMED LEGLESS REPTILE OILS. MAIL US THIS
PAGE PLUS YOUR CREDIT CARD NUMBER AND YOUR
MOTHER'S MAIDEN NAME AND WE'LL SEND YOU OUR NEVER-
BEFORE-SEEN BRAND NEW --- snake oil!!



WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

GIVE IN TO temptation!

TRY SNAKE OIL TODAY!!



CIVILIZATION

DEFINES ITSELF

BY MICHAEL THOMAS CARTER

A TANK BATTALION MAKES ITS FINAL APPROACH ON Washington, D.C., each tank emblazoned with a light blue Mayan glyph resembling a tiger opening its mouth. The capital's defenses have been worn down after a long, grinding bombardment from artillery and aircraft. All that's left is to make the final capture, the culmination of generations of ceaseless war between the United States of America and the Maya civilization.

This is a scenario from the strategy computer game *Civilization VI*, a game where you can take control of various civilizations from history, including the Maya. Historically speaking, the game does take liberties. The people we call the Maya were not a relatively unified empire like the Aztec or Roman empires; there were more like a group of city-states that shared a similar culture, like ancient Greece. The developers simplify things, reducing the complex multipolar Mayan world into a single, unified "civilization" under a ruler called Lady Six Sky. The historical Lady Six Sky was an early medieval Mayan queen who ruled Wak Kab'nal, a city-state in modern Guatemala, ostensibly as regent for a series of male relatives. She survived for over 60 years in power, from a marriage alliance in 682 A.D. until she died in 741 A.D. (Remnant *Game of Thrones* fans will know how difficult that can be.) In the meantime, she managed to sack at least nine other cities and accumulate enough political capital and person-power to build monuments to her reign, which is why we know these things. I can't help but think she would be confused, but gratified, that over 1,000 years after her death, she alone among all her rivals is remembered as the archetypal Mayan ruler, at least for players of *Civilization VI*. This is the kind of thing the *Civilization* series has been doing since it began, tailoring concepts from real history to create a sort of standardized "racetrack" of development and placing all human cultures at the same starting line.

The *Civilization* series, which made the name of now-famed game developer Sid Meier and coalesced a new genre of gaming, started in 1991 with the adaptation of a 1980 board game, also called *Civilization*. In this series, the player takes control of a nation from history, spanning the great powers of the ages from Rome, to Egypt, to China, to the United States. Some civilizations ("civs" to the true gamers among us) have multiple leaders to choose from, each with specific traits and units meant to evoke their era. Would you like to play as Teddy Roosevelt, deploying "Rough Riders" and scoring bonuses for establishing national parks, or as Abraham

Lincoln, who gets bonus military units for industrializing? These are among the thousands of choices, large and small, that go into building and expanding a civilization. You can win through science, by sending a colony ship to the distant galaxy of Alpha Centauri, through culture, by attracting tourists to your historical sites and museums, through diplomacy, by winning a series of votes at *Civilization's* version of the United Nations, through religion, by converting all the other civilizations, and, of course, through warfare, by conquering the capitals of all other civilizations.

Conquest of one sort or another is at the heart of this particular gaming genre. The name usually given to strategy games like *Civilization* is "4X", which stands for "eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, and eXterminate." The unsavory connotations of these words may be why they are often abbreviated, though in the 1993 issue of *Computer Gaming World* where the term first appeared, "four X's" was also a joking reference to the 'XXX' rating on pornography. There is indeed a kind of illicit thrill to playing these games as a postmodern, enlightened human being. Beyond the time suck factor (*Civilization* games are famous for the "one more turn" phenomenon, which has led me to many semi-intentional all-nighters in my life), there is also the fact that nobody can see what decisions you make. You can direct the entirety of your economy to producing nuclear weapons while your subjects starve. You can create a lasting alliance with another nation, then stab them in the back as soon as they are occupied elsewhere. You can raze enemy cities to the ground, pillage the countryside, bombard farms and villages from afar, spy on your citizens, or even launch an inquisition to purge other religions. You can also play peacefully, developing your industrial capacity, making your farms more productive, investing in research, and building alliances, watching your people thrive and grow through the ages like a benevolent gardener. The goal, however, is dominance, however you achieve it. It is, of course, morally concerning that this is the goal, which *Civilization* somewhat obscures with its cartoonish art style and lack of the more traditionally criticized forms of video game violence. One reason I played so much of this series is that my parents did not allow me and my siblings to play first-person shooters. Little did they suspect that instead of embodying the lives of street murderers or soldiers, we were embodying the lives of war criminals, colonizers, and statesmen—a much greater scale of violence, perpetuated at a respectable remove.

OVER TIME, YOUR SOCIETY STARTS TO DEVELOP technologically, which gives you access to more buildings, governments, military units, and more. These technologies are organized in a “tree,” which is organized in a fairly linear way. The typical *Civilization* game starts at 4000 B.C., at which time your struggling hamlet is choosing between learning mining, pottery, or animal husbandry. What you choose first will influence which choices you have next. From that point on, every civilization progresses at different rates and in different paths, but through a standard path of development. In *Civ VI*, there is an identical process taking place with culture, which is related to the different forms of government you can adopt. This “tech tree” construct has been iterated upon countless times within the 4X genre in games like *Stellaris*, the *Total War* series, and *Sins of a Solar Empire*. It reveals certain assumptions about the way societies develop and the concept of progress. In the worlds of *Civilization*, there is an absolute measure of scientific, cultural, and even religious advancement for each civilization. (History buffs of 19th-century politics may recognize this as deeply reminiscent of the concept of “Whig History, which held that societies move along a linear path toward “enlightenment” or a “glorious present.”) You can tell with absolute certainty whether you are ahead of your neighbor. The technological disparities quickly become apparent. It is not unusual in a game of *Civilization* to have a battle between an archer and a tank, or to start the space race in 1700 A.D. This creates an interesting dynamic. It implies that the world has an essentially meritocratic character. If technology progresses in a linear fashion along a predetermined path, and every civilization starts from the same point, then the success or failure of a given society on the field of play must be primarily a matter of its merits. The victors deserve to triumph, while the losers earned their defeat—a troubling notion, in light of actual history.

This, and other fudgings of the way history works, are necessary from a game design perspective. It wouldn’t be much fun to play as Poland, for example, and get endlessly divided between Germany, Russia, and whoever else could get a piece of the action. Instead, each civilization starts with one city and one warrior in 4000 B.C., even if they actually didn’t exist at that point. What would happen if Gandhi’s India and Hammurabi’s Babylon went to war with each other? Play *Civilization* to find out, sort of. Even the maps used are not the map of Earth, but a randomized map with characteristics you can set out beforehand. You can play with civilizations starting in their real positions on Earth, but for those of us who know a little geography (as many *Civ* players do), it takes some of the thrill of discovery out of the whole process. You’d already know what shape the continents take and who you are likely to find in each place.

There is the additional issue of Eurocentrism, in that most *Civilization* games have more European civilizations included than civilizations from other places, making Europe quite crowded and Africa and South America rather empty. The more recent offerings in the series have partially redressed this imbalance as well as gender imbalances, to the developers’ credit. The first *Civilization* featured 15 civilizations, only one of which was led by a woman (Elizabeth I of England). Six civilizations were European. In *Civilization VI*, there are 46 male leaders and 20 female leaders, a ratio that is significantly better than 14:1. (And, it must be said, a lot better than the current gender ratio of world leaders—just 13

of whom are female, among the 193 U.N. member countries). Out of 50 playable civilizations in *Civilization VI*, 18 are European, representing a modest improvement in diversity. Europe is still represented disproportionately to its size or population, which I believe is correlated with the games’ prescriptive conception of what it means to advance as a civilization. European societies and their global empires defined the concept of “civilization” as we understand it in the United States, using their own trajectories as a guide. In turn, these Eurocentric ideas form the criteria used by game developers to choose which civilizations to include. Societies that focused on territorial expansion, resource extraction, urbanization, and strict social hierarchies are more likely to be perceived as successful or important, and included in the games. The aforementioned 4X’s (eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, eXterminate) seem like a fairly accurate description of most European countries’ colonial efforts, at least by *Civilization* standards.

There is an essentially colonial aspect to this kind of game. That does not make them “bad” games or indicative of the moral character of those who enjoy them, but it does make it important to be aware of the ideological assumptions that underpin them. It also makes me feel indebted to the journalist who coined the term “4X,” Alan Emrich, whose analogy to pornography seems particularly apt. *Civilization* provides a sanitized, glamorized, airbrushed version of history, where an ageless intelligence pilots a nation like a marionette for 6,000 years. Everything is balanced, perfect, and transparent. Just like how pornography takes an essential part of the human experience (sex) and stylizes and simplifies it into brain candy, *Civilization* stylizes the complex realities of world history into an enjoyable (and addictive) power fantasy.

I don’t think it’s coincidental that both 4X games and traditional pornography have been primarily aimed at men. A 2017 study by Quantic Foundry found that only 7 percent of gamers who play Grand Strategy games like *Civilization* are female. This makes sense, in terms of traditional gender norms and stereotypes. As men, we are often socialized to value conquest, expansion, power, and authority. The “great men” of history we learn about, both in school and the media, are largely military leaders with astronomical body counts (sometimes of both the military and sexual kinds).

THERE HAS DEFINITELY BEEN A GROWTH IN THE NUMBER of queer gamers, female gamers, and gamers of color, but it can’t be denied that “gamer culture,” if there is such a thing, used to be dominated by white, cis, straight men, just like much of the rest of our society. As a millennial cis white man disillusioned with war, nation-states, and toxic masculinity, I find that there is a transgressive thrill in virtually enacting the kind of ruthless world conquest that allegedly has no place in the world today. I salve my guilt in such playthroughs by selecting underdogs from history, imagining a world where the Maya, for example, last until the postmodern era and conquer Washington, D.C., the center of contemporary military and economic hegemony.

The conflict between the desire to reflect the diversity of humanity and the essentially Eurocentric structure of the *Civilization* games has even spilled into the real world. In 2018, Milton Tootoosis—a contemporary headman of the Cree Nation, a tribe that primarily resides in Canada and the northern United States—criticized the portrayal of Cree culture and the historical leader Poundmaker

in *Civilization VI*. Tootoosis said that the game “perpetuates this myth that First Nations had similar values that the colonial culture has, and that is one of conquering other peoples and accessing their land,” and insisted that “that is totally not in concert with our traditional ways and world view.” In other words, the premise that *Civilization* games rely on and propagate is a common attitude among Westerners, which other cultures may not share. Because we in the United States come from a society and culture founded on genocide, we assume that all cultures and all “civilizations” share the desire to expand, dominate, and rule, which seems to us as natural as air and water. This faulty logic makes colonized peoples seem just as amoral as the colonizers, just a great deal less powerful. We have to oppress them, the logic goes, because they would oppress us if they could. One can imagine an American politician justifying conquering Lady Six Sky by conjuring this piece’s opening image of Mayan tanks on the White House lawn. This is how an occupying power with overwhelming force can make a resistance force seem like an existential threat.

This zero-sum view of the world makes sense for a conventional video game but is not how the world has worked throughout history. True, ancient empires formed in places like China and Rome, and conflict has always been a part of the human experience to some extent, but the formation of centralized state structures analogous to “civs” is actually somewhat uncommon. The only reason the modern nation-state is the way our world is currently organized is that European powers exported that model around the world during the first global colonial era. When Europeans were forced to give up their colonial possessions, the borders and governance structures they left behind persisted. There are countless other forms of social organization in history, from loose tribal confederations, to leagues of city-states, to pastoral nomadic groups held together by charismatic individual leaders. The idea of a nation with a distinct “spirit” that persists throughout history despite the turnover of leaders and populations is inextricably tied to the rise of nationalism in Europe in the 1800s. While there have been nation-like formations elsewhere in places like China, the age of imperialism and capitalism meant that European conceptions of nationhood and competition became hegemonic globally.

TODAY, IT SEEMS PERFECTLY NATURAL FOR INDIVIDUALS TO identify as a member of a national community, forming what political scientist Benedict Anderson calls “imagined communities.” However, this is actually a fairly recent development. At different points in world history, it would have been far more natural to primarily identify with your religion, your tribe, your class, or even your occupation. Monarchs would come and go, and kingdom borders would change with them—this was before the modern identification of language and government that drove nationalism and today’s expectation of stable borders. For most of human history, empires were multiethnic, speaking many languages and encompassing many communities (think of the Austro-Hungarian empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Roman Empire, or the Aztecs). But when nationalism came of age in the early 19th century, people started to “sort” themselves into national communities. Think of the unifications of the formerly fractious Italy and Germany in the late 1800s. As part of this process, nations started to attempt to acquire communities outside their initial borders that spoke their main language (think of

Germany and the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia). The culmination of this process was World War II, in which German fascists went beyond colonizing non-Europeans and trying to absorb ethnic Germans abroad and began actively trying to colonize and exterminate other Europeans with military force and industrial efficiency. After that, there was an understandable desire to curb the excesses of nationalism, leading to the United Nations system and the eventual conversion of European colonies into European-style nation-states.

WHILE EUROPE AND EAST ASIA HAD CENTURIES OF mutual warfare, resettlement, and diplomacy before arriving at their modern boundaries, Africa and the Middle East in particular were divided up based on European, not local, geopolitics. In many cases, European administrators who had never even visited the land in question drew completely arbitrary straight lines on the map, cleaving ancient communities from each other and placing bitter rivals in the same nation-state. (The infamous Berlin Conference of 1884, which divided Africa into nations with little regard for preexisting ethnic groupings, is one notable example.) In certain ways, the *Civilization* series puts the player in the position of such administrators, affecting countless lives and livelihoods with the click of a mouse. The arbitrary borders created by such decisions are often pointed to as a reason why warfare and political upheaval have been more common in these areas in the modern era. African and Middle Eastern ethnic groups have been randomly put in categories that do not correspond to natural ethnic or geographic boundaries. This is one reason why there are no modern African nations in *Civilization* that don’t have a historic version, as many modern African nations are both geopolitically hamstrung by the legacy of colonialism and ethnically divided in a way that cuts against the idea of a national “spirit” *Civilization* is based on. Mali is based on medieval Mali under Mansa Musa, Egypt is based on Ptolemaic Egypt under Cleopatra, and South Africa is represented by the Zulu nation under Shaka Zulu, which no longer exists.

What this suggests to me is that the *Civilization* series inadvertently defines the word “civilization” itself. The initial enemies in the game are called “barbarians,” creating a dichotomy between “civilized” people and everyone else. This dichotomy is central to Western culture going all the way back to Herodotus, who coined the term. While the *Civilization* games allow many peoples into the exclusive club of “civilized” people that were excluded at some point or another, it still fits everyone into the basic framework. In this framework, “civilized” people are people who build dense, settled societies using agriculture and industry and then expand those societies with warfare, settler colonialism, or conquest. By using this framework, the games create a fantasy world, an alternate history where the world and its peoples started mostly at parity then started to diverge based on their own choices. It also places stateless people in an almost subhuman category. Without a flag to rally behind, they are barbarians. Unfortunately, this is how many people view the world to this day. It’s a hegemonic, popular, and comforting way to view the world. But as modern human beings living in a world of nations, we ought to remember that all of these structures are just that: arbitrary, human-created, with a specific history and trajectory. If we realize that, we can also recognize that they can change when they are no longer fit for purpose. ✚

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IS FINALLY HERE.



TESLA



The British TABLOID loves to randomly emphasize WORDS in their headlines to evoke SHOCK and HORROR. ALL of the following headlines are REAL. Can you guess which WORD (or WORDS) The Mail capitalized? It's NOT always what YOU think:

1. Women become good cooks at the age of 55 - that is when they can cook a roast, rescue a meal... and finally boil an egg

2. Woman, 63, 'becomes pregnant in the mouth' with baby squid after eating calamari

3. Why women become less bitchy as they get older (and yes, it's to do with men)

4. Today's young women think they're victims... Do stop whining, sisters. We've won the sex war

5. Revealed: Eco warriors Prince Harry and Meghan take gas-guzzling, seven-car convoy around a single block to World Mental Health Day talk in NYC - five months after 'near catastrophic car chase'

6. Millionaire biohacker Bryan Johnson, 46, claims he has reverse-aged his penis by 15 years by using shock therapy on his genitals - revealing he is aiming to have 'the erections of an 18 year old'

7. Breakthrough as scientists create a new cowpox-style virus that can kill every type of cancer

(note: this one was edited after the fact because the cowpox virus could not, in fact, "kill every type of cancer," if you can believe it.)

8. Britney Spears's dad is pictured at a lumber yard as pop star's conservatorship which earned him \$16,000 a month is finally ended by judge

9. Is the lake pictured on every iPad secretly cursed by the ghosts of disabled babies who were thrown into its waters because they wouldn't survive?

10. Disturbing footage shows diner calmly dipping a baby mouse in a bowl of sauce before eating it alive as part of banned Chinese delicacy known as 'Three Squeaks' *(This story also turned out to be a hoax.)*

11. USA Today removes twenty three stories from its website over claims reporter made-up quotes and fabricated interviewees for stories on Texas abortion ban, Ukraine and a guide to sunscreen

12. Student, 20, demands lifetime supply of chocolate because she had no wafer in her KitKat

13. If your partner isn't putting out, you can have sex on the side: Tracey Cox has made five sex decisions for you

14. KATIE HOPKINS: The fallacy of 'free' healthcare and why it took a brave beauty queen to say what our politicians are too scared to admit - that some people don't deserve an NHS *(If you don't know who Katie Hopkins is, consider yourself lucky.)*

15. Why is Jennifer Aniston's swimwear always pink? Actress' five-year love affair with berry bikinis

(Rest assured, if a woman wears the color pink outside, The Mail will have all the details)

16. Pregnant Stacy Keibler takes baby steps on leisurely stroll in pink neon top amid reports sex of unborn child is a girl

17. The chicken in the egg: Amazing image in a frying pan

(This story was about a person who fried an egg that turned slightly chicken-shaped in the pan.)

18. Brown bear tears off a woman's arm and then eats it after she boasted she could feed the animal in its cage during a boozy Christmas bash at a Russian guest house

19. How prim and proper first lady Eleanor Roosevelt fell in love with a 200-pound woman reporter who drank like a fish, played a mean game of poker, smoked cigars and swore a blue streak

20. Montana's out-of-action Gov. Greg Gianforte is on vacation in Tuscany as historic floods devastate his state and Yellowstone faces 'indefinite' closure

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How to End an *Endless* Conflict

BY CIARA MOLONEY

THE BRITISH EMPIRE HAS LEFT MANY HORRIFIC LEGACIES across the world, but perhaps none as enduring, bloody, or self-defeating as partition. In its 20th-century retreat from empire, the administrators of the British state repeatedly found themselves departing a land that had sharp ethnic, religious, and cultural divisions, and figured the smart move was to draw a line on the map on their way out. It didn't especially matter if the map was accurate or up to date. It didn't particularly matter what might happen to the people who ended up on the "wrong" side of the border. Hardly considered was the possibility that decades and decades and decades of war would follow.

Ireland was divided into Northern Ireland and the Free State, leading to the decades-long war we euphemistically call "The Troubles." India became India and Pakistan with a line drawn by Cyril Radcliffe, a man who had never been east of Paris, was given five weeks to do the job, and refused payment when he saw the mass death and displacement that ensued. (He still accepted a knighthood for it in 1948, though.) British Mandatory Palestine was to be divided into a Jewish state and an Arab state, with a shared Jerusalem. I can only assume that's working out great.

But here's something miraculous: in Northern Ireland, right now, there is peace. There are still ever-present tensions and setbacks and political gridlock, and occasional, horrible flashes of violence, like the murder of journalist Lyra McKee in 2019. But there is a peace, however imperfect—a peace that, not too long ago, would have seemed unimaginable. As unimaginable as peace in the Middle East.

No conflicts are perfectly analogous to one another, but there are, surely, insights to glean here—lessons about how paramilitary and state violence interact, about the role of the international community, about how to build a peace process. Instead, the Western world seems more interested in imperiling Northern Ireland's miracle than trying to recreate it.

The simplest version of the story of what would become Northern Ireland begins with the Plantation of Ulster in the early 1600s. Scottish and English settlers were "planted" on land confiscated from Gaelic chiefs in Ulster, Ireland's northern province. Around 20,000 adult male British settlers were living in Ulster by the 1630s, to which you would add their wives and children

to get an idea of the total planter population. The settlers were all required to be English-speaking, Protestant, and loyal to the British Crown (though low take-up meant that wasn't always the case). Centuries later, there are two broad groups in what is now Northern Ireland—the predominantly Catholic community who identify as Irish nationalist, and the predominantly Protestant community who identify as British and support the union with Britain. And so it's easy to assume that the nationalists are indigenous and the unionists are settler colonialists.

The truth is a bit more complicated. Even if you don't concede any land rights to people who have lived on the island of Ireland for nearly half a millennium, it's impossible to cleanly trace unionists' ancestry to the plantation. There has been continued migration between Scotland and the north of Ireland forever. The history of these two places is sufficiently intertwined that if you go back far enough, the word "Scot" literally meant Irish; in ancient times, we basically swapped countries. "The Scots (originally Irish, but by now Scots) were at this time inhabiting Ireland, having driven the Irish (Picts) out of Scotland..." the spoof history *1066 and All That* puts it, "while the Picts (originally Scots) were now Irish (living in brackets) and *vice versa*." This intertwining is part of why the Ulster Plantation was more successful than the other plantations of Ireland. (The Munster Plantation—in Ireland's southern province—in the 1580s failed to attract anywhere near the 11,000 plus settlers planned for.) While the Plantation failed to materialize the artificial, British-ized social structure that the Crown had envisaged, in the decades and centuries that followed, something more resilient took its place: an organic, British-identifying society, existing alongside and intertwined with the Irish nationalist one.

By the start of the 20th century, unionists made up about twenty-five percent of the island of Ireland, but were a majority in the northeast. Irish nationalists managed to get the British government to pass a Home Rule Bill, which was due to grant Ireland its own parliament with control over domestic affairs in 1914. There was fierce unionist opposition to Home Rule, including the setting up of the paramilitary organization the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) to resist its implementation. (The bill was put on the

backburner with the outbreak of World War I, during which the whole Irish Question was radically altered by the Easter Rising and subsequent War of Independence.)

HOME RULE, A POPULAR UNIONIST SLOGAN WENT, would mean Rome Rule. Protestants would go from being part of a majority in the United Kingdom to being a small minority in Ireland, and feared what kind of laws a Catholic-dominated Irish parliament would pass. If this reaction might have seemed slightly hysterical at the time—and motivated in no small part by anti-Catholic prejudice—the subsequent century makes the unionists’ fears seem well-founded. When partition was implemented, it left the Irish Free State ninety-three percent Catholic, with Northern Ireland—which remained part of the U.K.—around two-thirds Protestant and one third Catholic. The Free State, later the Republic, wrote Catholic social policy into law—including banning contraception and divorce—and Church and State cooperated on an entire carceral system for unwed mothers and other accused deviants. In 1922, a group of Protestants were massacred in Cork, Ireland’s southernmost county, shortly after the end of the War of Independence. Even when not subject to violence, Protestant populations in the south declined: in 1911, the combined Church of Ireland, Methodist, and

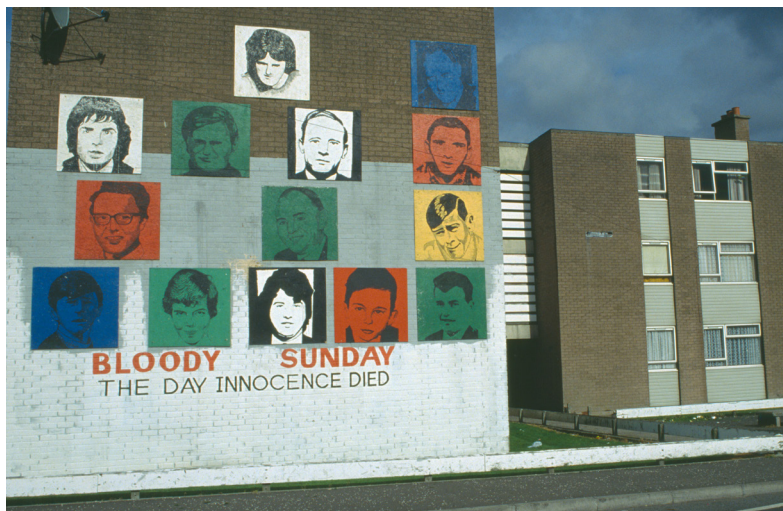
Presbyterian population in the future Republic was over 300,000—almost ten percent of the total population—and by 1991, it was just over 107,400, about three percent of the total. The 1937 Constitution of the Republic of Ireland recognised the Catholic Church as having a “special position” in Irish society, falling short of declaring Catholicism the state religion, but not *that* short. It is hard to imagine the counterfactual of what an all-Ireland state might have been like—whether having a substantial Protestant minority would have tempered the possibility of “Rome Rule” or just thrown a bigger minority population under the bus. But unionist fear of an Irish planet was underpinned by some genuine survival instinct, not just irrational hatred.

In Northern Ireland, the Protestant majority oppressed the Catholic minority. James Craig, Northern Ireland’s first prime minister, boasted of the North having “a Protestant parliament for a Protestant people.” The police force—the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC)—was almost entirely Protestant, and known for its discrimination, over-policing, and brutality towards the

Catholic minority. The “B-Specials” reserve constabulary was entirely Protestant, frequently consisting of state-approved versions of UVF militias. Catholics were systematically discriminated against in housing, employment, and voting: Northern Ireland maintained the property qualification to vote when it was abolished in mainland Britain, disproportionately disenfranchising Catholics, and extensive gerrymandering meant that even nationalist-majority areas were represented by unionist politicians. Basil Brooke, Northern Ireland’s third prime minister, publicly stated that if unionists “allow Roman Catholics to work on our farms we are traitors to Ulster,” imploring them “wherever possible, to employ good Protestant lads and lassies.”

Unionist dominance was absolute. And yet, it simultaneously remained precarious. Though unionists consider themselves British, mainland Brits don’t necessarily see them that way: when Kenneth Branagh, a little working-class Protestant boy raised in such a unionist stronghold in Belfast that he supports Linfield F.C.

and Glasgow Rangers, moved to England to escape the Troubles, he self-consciously adopted an English Received Pronunciation accent to avoid anti-Irish bullying. At the start of the Second World War, Winston Churchill offered to hand over the North in exchange for Ireland joining the war on the Allied side. He didn’t ask anybody in Northern Ireland how they might feel about that. Unionists might be British, but that doesn’t mean they could trust the British government to have their backs.



Mural in Londonderry depicting the Bloody Sunday victims

In the unionist mentality, they were constantly under siege: just like they’d been under siege in Derry during the war between the Protestant King William of Orange and his Catholic father-in-law King James II, when thirteen apprentice boys shouted “no surrender!” and closed the gates against the encroaching Catholic forces. I say this not to absolve Northern Irish governments of their abuse, belittlement and violence against Catholic citizens, but to try to understand the *why*. Holding both in your mind simultaneously is how you approach some kind of moral clarity. By the same token, it is at once true that South African apartheid was an unconscionable evil, and that its emergence cannot be fully understood without knowing that a few decades earlier, the British put Afrikaners in concentration camps. And we can condemn Israeli war crimes while realizing that it is impossible to understand the Israeli state’s actions without the context of the Holocaust. As Joe Brolly puts it in an episode of his podcast *Free State*, after World War II, the Jews who moved to Israel wanted nobody to fuck with them ever again.

Nationalists—and more than that, Irish-Americans and leftists from other countries—can tend to view unionists in two ways, contradictorily yet sometimes simultaneously. Unionists, in this mindset, are Irish people afflicted with false consciousness, tricked into identifying with our British oppressors, and/or Brits who can just go “home” to England, a country they may have never even visited. It’s an attitude that reinforces unionist fears, one that makes it seem rational to think that nationalists would want to extinguish them entirely. That makes it seem good sense to try to extinguish nationalists first.

BY THE 1960S, A GENERATION OF YOUNG CATHOLICS (and their left-wing Protestant allies) developed a civil rights movement in Northern Ireland, inspired in part by the Black civil rights movements in the U.S. and South Africa. Despite their moderate demands—not for an Ireland united and free, but simply to have the same rights in Belfast and the Bogside as they would have in Bolton or Birmingham—they were met with violent suppression from both paramilitary and state forces. The loyalist paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) petrol-bombed Catholic homes, schools, and businesses. At a civil rights march in Derry on October 5, 1968, the RUC

clubbed the protestors with batons, indiscriminately and unprovoked, including beating two Members of Parliament. In 1969, British soldiers were sent into Northern Ireland. Initially, many nationalists welcomed the army as a neutral force, in contrast to the RUC’s open sectarianism, but this didn’t last long. On Bloody Sunday, 1972, British soldiers shot twenty-six unarmed civilians at a civil rights march, killing fourteen, as well as injuring more with rubber bullets, batons, and army vehicles. The subsequent tribunal accepted the soldiers’ claims that they were shooting at gunmen and bomb throwers, only going so far as to call some of the shooting “bordering on the reckless.” (A second inquiry found in 2010 that the shootings were “unjustified” and “unjustifiable.” Only one soldier has been charged, and the U.K.’s Conservative government attempted to block his prosecution.)

The violent suppression of the peaceful civil rights movement contributed to the turn towards paramilitary violence on the nationalist side. Bloody Sunday was a flashpoint of recruitment for the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA). American

leftists—and Irish-Americans of all stripes—tend to romanticize the IRA as a revolutionary organization fighting off colonial oppressors. It’s a simplistic view that blurs and bleeds together often radically different movements, historical and contemporary, into a valorized fight against injustice: one that can justify any brutality. The *Washington Post* quotes Michael Flannery, the Irish-American organization Noraid’s founder, as having said that “the more British soldiers sent home from Ulster in coffins, the better.”

But even if you can justify the IRA’s violence as anti-colonial resistance—and please don’t—it can’t be ignored that the IRA was simultaneously an all-purpose mafia operation: protection rackets, bank stick-ups, prostitution rings, kneecapping, torture, murders without political motivation. Various incarnations of the IRA killed hundreds of civilians. I understand and sympathize with how someone could join the IRA after seeing a British soldier gun down their friends on Bloody Sunday. But I understand it not as a bold action against injustice, but as an act of desperation in a

world where there seems to be no other available response to oppression and violence. You tried civil rights protests. You got shot in the street.

What ensued was what seemed like a perpetual tit for tat of atrocities. Some of the most popular historical narratives about war conclude with one side “winning,” defeating the “bad guys” in noble battle. But in the North, as in so many places, war went on with no true prospect of victory or defeat: just a self-perpetuating cycle of brutality and revenge.



Mural in Londonderry commemorating the 1981 republican hunger strikers

Violence committed by British state forces or loyalist paramilitaries was responded to with Republican paramilitary bombings, and vice versa. Extraordinary measures to curb Republican violence further restricted the already minimal civil rights of Catholics in Northern Ireland, including the introduction of internment—that is, the arrest without evidence or trial of anyone “suspected” of being involved in the IRA. If certain Irish-Americans financially supported Republican paramilitaries, it must also be remembered that Margaret Thatcher “effectively used girl power by funnelling money to loyalist paramilitary death squads in Northern Ireland.” It was Thatcher’s belief that a military defeat of the IRA was both possible and necessary. Her total unwillingness to make concessions meant hunger strikers, who wanted to be treated as political prisoners, were left to starve to death in prison.

But how do you militarily defeat terrorist organizations? Over two decades into the War on Terror, you’d think we’d have cracked it. But instead, it seems like the War on Terror was a process of systematically forgetting how, exactly, one fights terror. A collective

beings: that they are recruited simply because they are evil, and so need to be put down like dogs. But if you know anything about terrorism, you know that killing the terrorists themselves doesn't kill the organization. The U.S. spent twenty years fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan, and it ended with the Taliban immediately taking back control of Afghanistan when the U.S. army left.

IN NORTHERN IRELAND, INTERNMENT, MASSACRES AND other attempts to defeat the IRA were most effective as IRA recruitment tools. And when the IRA declared a ceasefire and participated in peace talks, it was following peaceful nationalist and civil rights activist John Hume's decade of secret talks with the IRA at the height of the Troubles. Hume "was singularly against the IRA," Gerry Adams said on Hume's death, "But he was a Derry man so he knew that republicans who were involved in armed struggle were serious, so the way to get at that wasn't to have the stand-off that we had." It's a political truism that you can't negotiate with terrorists. But when the benefits were reaped, John Hume became the only person to ever win a Nobel Peace Prize, the Gandhi Peace Prize and the Martin Luther King Award. And he was voted Ireland's greatest-ever person in a 2010 poll by RTÉ, the country's public broadcaster.

In the endless cycle of tit for tat violence, a post-traumatic state becomes the norm, and hatred becomes rationalized, justified, intellectualized. But hatred isn't liberatory. It's confining. It damages your own soul and makes it easier to hurt people around you—to participate in the cycle of violence that hardens more hearts. "One common truth was that the hurt and the pain on both sides was sadly the same," Patrick Kilty, a comedian and TV presenter whose father was murdered by a loyalist paramilitary group, said. "We all shared something, but we just didn't realize it at the time. And there were days where we thought it would never end."

That these cycles of violence can *end* seems impossible, and impossibly naive. In the current war in the Gaza Strip, even calling for a temporary ceasefire is treated as inappropriately radical by both major parties in the U.S. and U.K. As an Irish leftist, I have been put in the extremely annoying position of having to be grateful for the political and moral courage of our right-wing Taoiseach Leo Varadkar. The position of so many countries seems to be that violence can and will and should go on forever, until one side defeats the other utterly.

In Northern Ireland, according to former Irish Ambassador Bobby McDonagh, both sides came to understand that a military victory was impossible. And if "victory for neither side was possible," he writes, then "without a peace agreement, at least another generation in Northern Ireland would be condemned to suffer." And a peace agreement came to be: through a leap of faith, through a willingness to see, to hope, to imagine. To believe that something else is possible, and to be willing to make compromises to get there. After decades of efforts that stalled out or failed, in 1998, we got the Good Friday Agreement. The Irish state removed by referendum a constitutional claim over Northern Ireland, with all parties acknowledging that Northern Ireland would remain a part of the United Kingdom as long as that was the will of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland. Irrespective of any change to constitutional status, the people of Northern Ireland

would be entitled to identify as British, Irish, or both. On certain issues, a cross-community vote would be required in the Northern Irish parliament—meaning a majority of both nationalists and unionists. Over 400 prisoners serving sentences for paramilitary activity on both sides were released. The RUC was replaced by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), which moved away from the militarism of the RUC toward community policing, and implemented affirmative action to recruit more officers from a Catholic background. Paramilitaries on both sides committed to decommissioning their weapons—and even though, like so much in this ever-imperfect peace, it took longer than was planned, those weapons were decommissioned.

But because the cycle of violence is self-perpetuating—because every atrocity demands an atrocity in return—it's the duty of the international community to create the space for that leap of faith. To knock some heads together until empathy leaks through. It's taken as a given that the international community can underwrite war and atrocities, but the other side of that coin is an ability to underwrite peace, stability and justice. But it takes active, difficult work. Even leaving aside actual illegal activities, like funding paramilitary groups, international priorities have not always reflected what would benefit the peace process. British Prime Minister Ted Heath pulled Willie Whitelaw out of his role as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland right as an attempt at power-sharing was being set up in the 1970s, because since he was such a good negotiator, he wanted him to deal with the miners' strike back in England. (Five decades later, Northern Ireland seemed to hardly be a consideration when the U.K. voted to leave the European Union. Dominic Raab, the Brexit minister, admitted to never reading the Good Friday Agreement in its entirety—mind you, it's only thirty-four pages long, including the title page and table of contents.) Tony Blair later turned out to be a warmonger, but in the 1990s, he played a pivotal role in the Northern Ireland peace process. Mo Mowlam, Blair's secretary of state for Northern Ireland, kept her brain tumor a secret out of her dedication to working on the Good Friday Agreement. Taoiseach Bertie Ahern helicoptered between Belfast and Dublin to be able to participate in the talks and attend his mother's funeral. Bill Clinton allowed the U.S. to function as a neutral broker, and appointed George Mitchell as United States Special Envoy for Northern Ireland, in which role he co-chaired the negotiations. A decade later, militant unionist Ian Paisley and former IRA man Martin McGuinness were getting along so well that the press nicknamed them the Chuckle Brothers.

In the final episode of *Derry Girls*, a sitcom set during the Troubles, our teenage protagonist has to decide how to vote on the Good Friday Agreement: the document that we, the viewers, know will be the foundation of the peace process. "What if we do it, and it was all for nothing?" she asks her grandfather, worried in particular about the promised release of prisoners. "What if we vote yes, and it doesn't even work?"

"And what if it does?" her grandfather answers. "What if no-one else has to die? What if all this becomes a ghost story you'll tell your wains one day?... A ghost story they'll hardly believe."

Grandpa Joe was right. And that's all I dream of—that one day all of this will be a ghost story our kids will hardly believe. ✚

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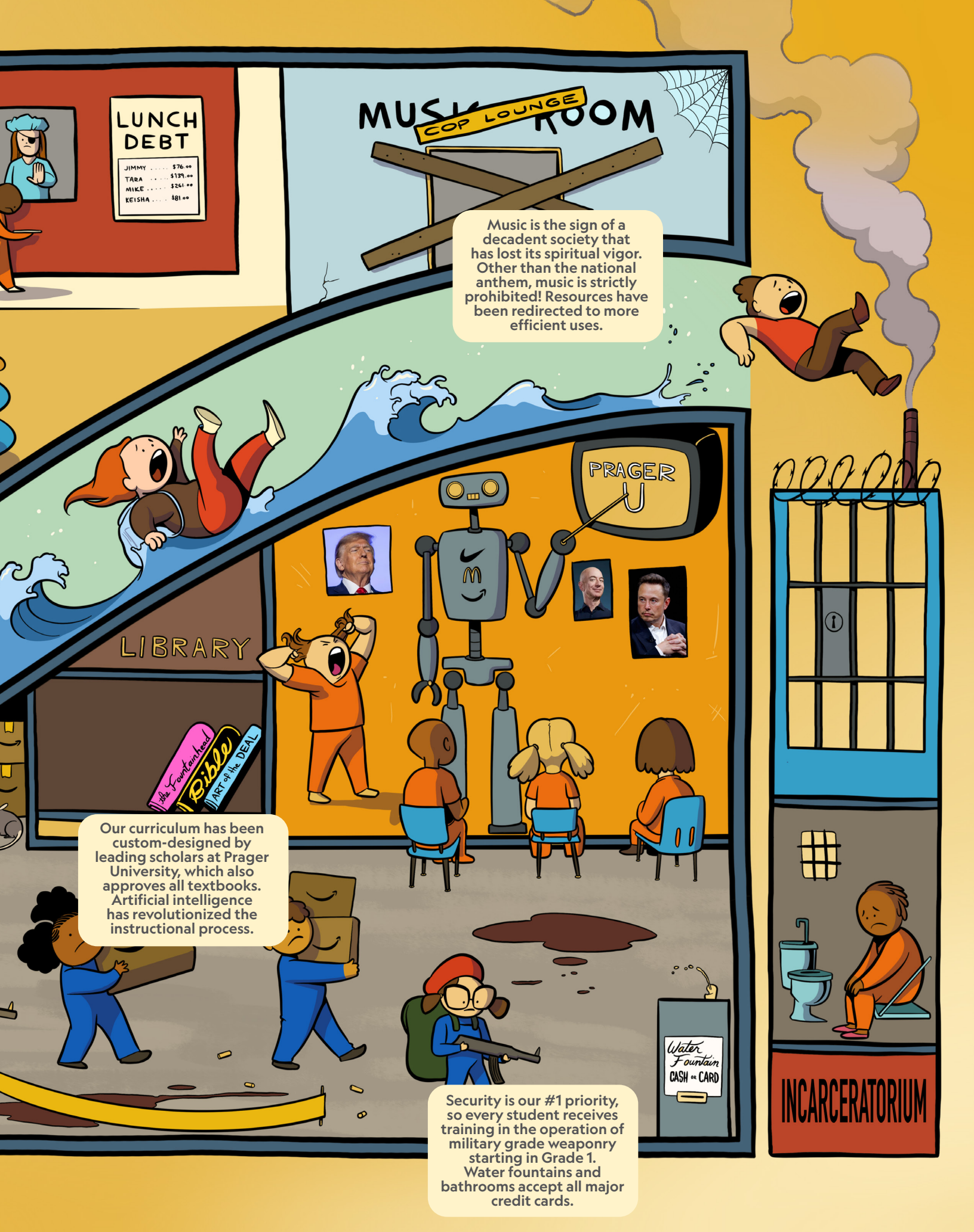


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AGAINST MANAGERIALISM

BY RONALD PURSER

IT WAS ANOTHER ONE OF THOSE WINDY, SUBZERO CHICAGO winter mornings as I trudged two blocks through the slush and snow to the hourly employee entrance of the Pullman Standard plant. A supervisor in a white hard-hat, all warm and cozy in a 1972 Buick Riviera, smugly waved as he drove by me to get to his reserved parking space. I was viscerally reminded every day that managers, wielding all the power and authority, enjoyed special privileges while looking down on us lowly hourly workers as if we were stupid and lazy. This was the 1970s, a time of widespread labor unrest and worker discontent that the media dubbed the “blue collar blues”—seen most notably in the infamous ’72 General Motors Lordstown automobile workers wildcat strike.

I was then an 18-year-old unionized industrial electrician, and what may seem to be a trivial encounter with that supervisor left an emotional mark that has haunted me for the rest of my adult career. At the time, I felt animosity towards management. With hindsight, I now understand that my resentment wasn’t just personal; it was related to my class upbringing. I grew up in a lower-middle class family on the southside of Chicago near the (now defunct) steel mills. Both my father and maternal grandfather were die-hard union railroad men, and I was the first in my family to go to college. Even though I wasn’t aware of it back then, the time clock that I punched each work day at the Pullman plant had a nefarious lineage, one in which the ugly face of raw managerial power was camouflaged with a costume of benevolence.

This history begins at one of the first company towns, built

under the direction of George M. Pullman, founder of the Pullman Palace Car Company, which mass produced railroad cars. Completed in 1884, the Town of Pullman was a 4,000-acre model industrial community designed according to Pullman’s vision of total managerial control over workers. The company town included housing rental units, good sanitation, an arcade of shops, schools, an 800-pew Christian church, libraries, theaters, a hotel, a bank, recreational facilities, stables—and even an underground tunnel system from workers’ homes to the plant where the luxury railroad cars were made. Taverns and saloons were conspicuously absent, as Pullman wanted to “exclude all baneful influences” from his community. Pullman wagered that his paternalistic experiment would attract the best class of skilled workers, and he hoped to circumvent the increasingly violent conflicts seen at the time between companies and their workers.

Heralded in magazines and the press, the “Town of Pullman” was a living and shining example of managerially imposed order, efficiency, and control. That glory, however, was very short-lived. In 1893, during a severe economic depression, George Pullman laid off thousands of workers and lowered wages by 25 percent, while monthly rental payments and store prices remained the same. The next year, nearly 4,000 Pullman factory workers walked off the job in a wildcat strike, resulting in one of the most bloody labor conflicts in U.S. history. National guardsmen fired into mobs of striking workers, leaving 30 people dead.

While working-class people and those who study labor history

are well aware of the violence frequently inflicted upon workers by bosses and corporations in their pursuit of profit, such history is curiously absent from introductory college textbooks on management. In these books, one will not find any mention of the Pullman strike, the labor movement, or any reference to such terms as the “working class,” “class conflict” or “class consciousness.” The consolation prize is often a perfunctory mention of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 and a portrayal of unions as an anachronism and an occasional nuisance that business majors are unlikely to encounter in their future roles as managers. And, of course, the fact that corporate management—at companies such as Amazon, Starbucks, and others—has a checkered history of spending millions of dollars for anti-union campaigns and engaging in unfair labor practices is also conveniently omitted.

But a short shrift to unions in management textbooks shouldn’t come as a surprise. There is an ideology of managerialism which is propagated through the deliberate exclusion of this labor history. *Managerialism*, an ideology so pervasive as to seem benign, is about the glorification of an elite group of people—managers—who are said to be uniquely qualified to have power over workers and companies. On the receiving end of management—whether one is a delivery worker forced to pee in a bottle, a white-collar worker in a cutthroat industry, or in some situation in between—most workers understand that the worker-boss or worker-management relationship is fraught with conflict. *Managerialism* cloaks the sources of this conflict—the workplace’s undemocratic, hierarchical, and asymmetric power structures—in humanistic and benevolent terms. For example, you may have heard of the idea that “strong corporate cultures” offer workers bottom-up voice and power. What this really amounts to is a nascent totalitarianism, a means of keeping workers in line by telling them they’re autonomous and part of a “tight-knit family” but immediately instilling feelings of shame and guilt for any transgressions from the norm. So long as you’re loyal to the corporate family and comply with its “values,” you’re supposedly “empowered.” A strong corporate culture is where “slavery is freedom” and

“strength is ignorance.” It’s part of what my friend Hugh Willmott, a professor of management and organization studies, calls a “double-think world.”

Take it from me. As a management professor, I’m familiar with all these psychological tricks—and the disturbing history of how we got to a point where management gurus have refashioned the manager as a coach, counselor, and visionary leader instead of the power-hungry exploiter and emotional manipulator that he or she often is. It’s a story of poorly executed research, medical quackery, public manipulation, and overrated business schools. Understanding the history of managerialism is critical because this ideology dangerously reinforces the capitalist mandate of endless economic growth and profit, which is currently driving us toward climate collapse.

MANAGEMENT VS. WORKER POWER

For the last 35 years I have taught undergraduate and graduate-level classes in management and organizational behavior, both in a private and public university (the latter, in a College of Business). While my formal title is *Professor of Management*, I have always struggled to identify with the field. I suspect my unease with my profession is partly attributable to my blue-collar roots. Becoming a professor was my ticket to gain self-respect. As Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb explain in their book, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, freedom and dignity are won by acquiring “badges of ability.” But the psychic injury of class is a wound that never really heals. Trading my blue denim overalls for a blue blazer came at the cost of chronic feelings of professional estrangement and survivor guilt. (Of course, I stopped wearing the blazer once I began to teach online.)

I didn’t, however, aspire or set out to be a professor of management at a business school. That happened rather serendipitously. While I was an undergraduate student in the humanistic psychology program at Sonoma State University (the first and only academic program of its kind), I had already started drinking the California-style human potential movement Kool-Aid. It so happened that I enrolled in a course, “The Psychology of Work,” which delved deeply into the

“Quality of Working Life” (QWL) and Quality Circles movements which were very popular in the 1980s. Emerging after the rising labor militancy of the 1970s and the competitive threat of Japanese manufacturing, the QWL movement involved trade union leaders and company management collaborating in experiments to redesign fractionated assembly lines. The experiments were supposed to counter the problem of worker alienation and stultifying jobs, with the aim of improving quality and productivity. QWL experiments typically included redesigning work through job rotation and multi-skilling and the formation of “autonomous work groups” that shifted decision-making authority and quality control away from supervisors to shop-floor workers.

Hungry to learn more, I discovered there was a unique doctoral graduate program in Organizational Behavior at Case Western Reserve University that had the Who’s Who of professors in the field of organization development. While in graduate school, I was thoroughly seduced by the messianic zeal of management theorists preaching a new gospel of management redemption. I came to believe that, given the right “behavioral science” interventions, management could be redeemed and corporations could be transformed into more humane, democratic, and sustainable organizations. Converted, I became a missionary whose goal was to set management on the right course.

In addition to full-time teaching, I had a side hustle consulting to numerous Fortune 100 companies. My first consulting gig was at the General Electric Lighting division’s posh Nela Park headquarters (the historic property was sold off in 2022). Working with their organization development staff, I was charged with assisting in developing and implementing “self-managing teams” in a GE manufacturing plant. Both shop floor workers and supervisors participated directly in the redesign of the work system, eliminating highly fractionated and monotonous jobs by creating multi-skilled teams, increasing their autonomy and responsibility for decision-making. Even though this program was economically successful—it improved productivity and reduced absenteeism and operating costs—corporate senior

managers resisted and withdrew their support. At first, this puzzled me. Why would managers pull the plug on experiments that were improving the bottom-line? The answer was simple: power. Shifting actual power, authority, and decision-making down to workers was just too much of a threat to traditional managerial authority.

Similar efforts had been thwarted by management before. Just a decade earlier, a Gaines dog-food plant (owned by General Foods) in Topeka, Kansas had been designed from the ground up with self-managing teams at its core. Under the “Topeka system,” team members were even making hiring decisions (normally the purview of the personnel department). The plant saw initial successes: a 10-40 percent reduction in operating costs; reductions in turnover (to less than 1 percent) and absenteeism (to less than 2 percent); high levels of job satisfaction; and “exemplary” safety. Yet the program was seen as an existential threat to senior managers and corporate staff, who rationalized it as a fluke, an idiosyncrasy of Topeka which would never work at other plants. As one reader of the socialist publication *Monthly Review* noted in a correspondence in early 1978, *Business Week* ran a March 28, 1977, article entitled “Stonewalling Plant Democracy,” which described management resistance to the Topeka system: “The problem has not been so much that the workers could not manage their own affairs as that some management and staff saw their own positions threatened because the workers performed almost too well.” Another insult to management was that, wishing to share in the company’s financial success, the employees proposed voting on their own pay raises and demanded bonuses. Clearly, the Topeka experiment had gone too far for management. A line in the sand had to be drawn: increasing employee involvement and participation was one thing, but the ceding of power and authority was quite another. As one Topeka plant worker put it, “There were pressures almost from the inception, and not because the system didn’t work. The basic reason was power.”

MASKING MANAGERIAL POWER

Managerial power is seductive. Studies

have found that subjects under the influence of power become more impulsive, less empathetic and able to put themselves in someone else’s shoes, and less risk-aware. The intoxication of power is so pronounced that it resembles the effects of a traumatic brain injury, as reported in *The Atlantic* article “Power Causes Brain Damage.” We probably all know someone who is a decent and affable person outside of work, but put them in a position of power, and all bets are off. The same goes for coworkers or peers who are suddenly promoted; put on their manager hats, and their inner tyrant is unleashed.

Tracing the etymology of the word “manage” reveals an asymmetry of power. In French, the word *manage* is derived from *manège*, the handling and training of horses, and *manier*, to handle. And in Italian, *mano*, means hand, and *maneggiare* means the handling of a tool or training of a horse. To manage means having *power over*. Managing an unruly horse requires exercising the use of physical power over the animal, not unlike the violent use of militaristic force over striking Pullman workers.

Since the era of mass production began, managerial power has found more sophisticated ways of optimizing employee commitment and productivity. The ultimate aim has never changed—that of maintaining power and control over employees. What *has* changed is the way managerial power is masked through political persuasion and double-talk. Much of the triumph of managerialism is due to persuading workers with the idea that they—not managers—have the power to get the job done. Managers don’t wield power, they lead, facilitate and coach.

In his book, *False Prophets: The Gurus Who Created Modern Management and Why Their Ideas Are Bad for Business Today*, historian James Hoopes clarifies this sleight-of-hand deception:

The idea of bottom-up employee power ... has a cultural function in a democratic society at large, which explains why management ideologues greatly overstate it. On the face of it, bottom-up power seems democratic and consistent with America’s historic political culture. When employees

bring their democratic values to work, managers assuage their feelings of lost freedom and dignity with the idea that the corporation is a bottom-up organization, not the top-down hierarchy that in reality it is.

The GE manufacturing and Topeka plant cases not only provided workers the bottom-up power to do their jobs but increased their autonomy and control over decision-making to such an extent that they wanted to grab the reins of power over the workplace. But management did not sign up for a program in workplace democracy; that would threaten their hierarchical power and control, along with the right to hire and fire—the very foundation of the corporate capitalist system.

“THERE WERE PRESSURES ALMOST FROM THE INCEPTION, AND NOT BECAUSE THE SYSTEM DIDN’T WORK. THE BASIC REASON WAS POWER.”

So how did management create the illusion of bottom-up worker power and convince workers (and the general public) of their benevolence? Enter one of the biggest con jobs in management history: the famous Hawthorne studies and the Human Relations movement they spawned. These studies began in the late 1920s at the Western Electric Hawthorne Works plant, a subsidiary of AT&T located west of Chicago which employed 29,000 workers for the manufacture and assembly of telephone equipment. The story usually begins with the factory Illumination Studies. Hawthorne’s industrial engineers experimented by increasing and decreasing the lighting on the shop floor to determine the effects of illumination levels on

productivity. The engineers were surprised by the fact that productivity increased whether the illumination was increased or decreased.

Determined to find the answers to what accounted for the productivity improvements, managers at Western Electric sanctioned what was known as the Relay Assembly Test Room experiments. On the main floor of the plant, several hundred workers produced over 6,500 different relays, with a total annual production of 7 million relays (a key switching device in analogue telephone systems). The assembly of relays consisted of mounting some thirty-five different parts and was highly repetitive and labor-intensive work requiring manual dexterity.

A special experimental test room separate from the main assembly floor was where six women were put to work. They were in their teens and 20's and of Norwegian, Polish, and Czech descent. Their productivity, social interactions, and attitudes were closely observed by a piece-rate analyst from Hawthorne's personnel department. For five years, various experimental conditions were introduced, with varying lengths of rest periods, coffee breaks, and shorter work hours. Productivity increased by 46 percent over the entire five-year period. During one of the later test periods, the women worked as they normally had before the experiment began—without rest periods and mid-morning coffee breaks—returning to their regular hours. In this period, the women broke all previous productivity records on a daily and weekly basis without any drop in output for 12 straight weeks.

Western Electric researchers concluded that no single experimental factor could explain or be correlated directly to the increases in productivity except for one constant: the presence of the piece-rate analyst who observed and recorded the women's activities. Hawthorne managers hired Elton Mayo, a professor at the Harvard Business School, along with several of his colleagues, as consultants to the project. Writing over a decade after the experiment, Mayo explained the productivity increases as an inadvertent result of the relaxation of managerial control:

The girls claimed that they felt less



Women in the Relay Assembly Test Room at the Hawthorne Western Electric Plant

fatigued, felt that they were not making any special effort. Whether these claims were accurate or no[t], they at least indicated increased contentment with the general situation in the test room by comparison with the department outside. At every point in the program, the workers had been consulted with respect to proposed changes; they had arrived at the point of free expression of ideas and feelings to management....

What actually happened was that six individuals became a team and the team gave itself wholeheartedly and spontaneously to cooperation in the experiment. The consequence was that they felt themselves to be participating freely and without afterthought, and were happy in the knowledge that they were working without coercion from above or limitations from below.

Mayo attributed the supposed lovefest in the test room to the unexpected influence of the piece-rate analyst, whose mere attention to the women, he surmised, caused them to become better workers. Mayo made a concerted public relations campaign, giving talks at gatherings of economists and neurologists, publishing his interpretation in newspapers and journals as well as writing books, and giving radio interviews in which he declared that

his groundbreaking *scientific discoveries* would once and for all solve the *labor problem*. His story became so popular that in the late 1950s, social scientists dubbed it the “Hawthorne Effect.” But the so-called “Hawthorne effect,” the mere act of paying attention to workers, was not what Mayo was most excited about. Rather, his most cherished revelation was that the researchers had supposedly created a “new industrial milieu,” the recreation of a seemingly Medieval, conflict-free atmosphere where the women’s “social-wellbeing ranked first and the work was incidental.” In other words, the women had come to know their place in the industrial-feudal hierarchy and performed their work without complaint.

A TEXTBOOK CASE OF MISREPRESENTATION

For nearly a century, management and organizational behavior textbooks used in business schools, as well as popular management trade books, have parroted Mayo's popular account of the Hawthorne studies. *Contemporary Management*, a widely adopted introductory undergraduate textbook, is faithful to this orthodoxy:

The researchers found these results [the “Hawthorne effect”] puzzling and invited noted Harvard psychologist, Elton Mayo, to help them.... Gradually,

the researchers discovered, to some degree, the results they were obtaining were influenced by the fact that the researchers themselves had become part of the experiment. In other words, the presence of the researchers was affecting the results because the workers enjoyed receiving attention and being the subject of study and were willing to cooperate with the researchers to produce the results they believed the researchers desired.

Textbook explanations, such as the one above, would like us to believe that a benevolent and utopian-like work atmosphere had been created in the Relay Test Room. However, absent an actual control group that would have removed the researchers from the test room, it's remarkable that the so-called "Hawthorne effect" is still considered scientifically credible at all. As Matthew Stewart writes in his book *The Management Myth: Debunking Modern Business Philosophy*:

Not until independent researchers took a fresh look at the evidence did the extent of Mayo's fraud become apparent. His posthumous critics eventually described the Hawthorne works as "worthless scientifically" and "scientifically illiterate."

Even as early as 1949, the United Auto Workers' monthly magazine, *Ammunition*, called Mayo and his pro-management colleagues "cow sociologists." This alludes to the way that contented cows provide more milk, implying that "happy" employees are more productive.

The textbook conclusion seems to not only conveniently ignore this shoddy experimental research methodology, but the depiction that the Hawthorne effect was "discovered" fails to account for the fact that "researcher presence" (code for gentle, relaxed, and humane supervision) leading to happier and more productive workers is a socially constructed myth, an interpretation and claim that Mayo imposed on the data to further his own ideological agenda. (In this way, meaning was not discovered but imposed, as is often the case in the social sciences.)

Mayo was, in fact, a conservative and a demagogue whose beliefs played to the times as an influx of European immigrants working in American factories inspired a fear of a working-class revolution, the "Red Scare." Just a sample of Mayo's earlier writings prior to his involvement in Hawthorne include: rants against democracy, socialism, and collective bargaining; quacky notions that the "agitation" of the working-class was due to high blood pressure, neuroses, and irrational unconscious forces; and grandiose promises that only a new industrial psychology could save Western civilization from decay. Given such ideas, one can hardly expect such a right-wing ideologue to have come up with a research conclusion other than the one he did.

Management textbook authors have not only ignored scholarly criticisms of the Hawthorne studies but have conveniently omitted relevant facts and important details about the Relay Test Room experiments that cast serious doubts on the findings and conclusions. Richard Gillespie's book, *Manufacturing Knowledge: A History of the Hawthorne Experiments*, provides a meticulous and rich narrative that is based on original experimental and archival data—and his historical account tells quite a different story from that of the popular version.

Gillespie's historical reconstruction of the Hawthorne study shows that it was a highly controlled and invasive experiment that has little resemblance to the stories told by Elton Mayo and his Harvard acolytes. Far from having autonomy over their work, the women in the relay assembly test room were under constant surveillance. The pace and productivity of each assembler was recorded in a logbook every 15 minutes by an observer that sat directly opposite the workbench where the women were seated. (One of the women requested that a screen be placed in front of her workbench to provide privacy from the male experimenter's gaze.) The observer also methodically filled out a daily history sheet, noting any changes in social interactions or attitudes of the women. The women were informed each day of their output and were threatened with reprimands if their output fell below expected levels. Western

Electric researchers also questioned the women about their home lives, families, and social activities, requiring the women to have monthly medical checkups by the company's physicians. Even the timing of the women's menstrual periods were known and recorded by the researchers.



Never mentioned are the special economic incentives that were introduced to the six women: they were rewarded for their group output. Prior to the experiment, the women were on a similar group incentive plan except that their earnings were averaged across the main department of some 200-plus assemblers. Under their new piece-rate wage system, any extra effort on the part of the six women would easily increase the amount of money they could earn. Far from being compliant and submissive, some of the women threatened to go on strike when they learned, on one occasion, that there had been a miscalculation of their wages. Even Hawthorne's test room observer noted in an internal report that "the women had a keen interest in their daily percentages and a much clearer understanding of the piecework system than other workers."

The women in the relay assembly test room were initially allowed to talk and enjoyed doing so while working, but incessant talking often led to slowdowns in production. The researchers warned the women that disruptive talking had to cease, but two of the women ignored the warnings and were removed from the test room just one year into the experiment, replaced by two new women who had reputations for being fast assemblers—another detail that is glossed over in textbooks, popular books, and internet retellings of this story. And such an incident certainly contradicts Mayo's assurance that, "At no time in the five-year period did the girls feel that they were working under pressure."

The Hawthorne experiments, then, have become a kind of mythology that supposedly proves the inherent beneficence of management while ignoring the actual variables at play that influenced the women's behavior. The women were given more attention alright, but it was in the form of *closer supervision and constant*



Elton Mayo led the research team at Hawthorne

surveillance, and, of course, they liked the extra money.

And what about Elton Mayo?

Was he really a savior who supplanted the slave-driving mechanization of factory work that took place in the early 20 century (the legacy of Frederick Taylor's "Scientific Management") with the communal harmony of good human relations? Mayo, an Australian, has been portrayed as one of the most influential social scientists of the 20th century. But he was a fraud. He misrepresented his credentials under the pretense that he was a psychoanalyst and a medical doctor. A little known fact is that "Dr. Mayo," as he liked to be called, flunked out of medical school three times, and his terminal degree was a bachelor's in philosophy. He was even known to fake a British accent to gain favor in social circles and fudged his curriculum vitae in his application to Harvard.

Prior to weaseling his way into Harvard, Mayo held a research associate position at Wharton's Department of Industrial Research, funded by John D. Rockefeller Jr. himself, whose largess and industrial empire had been built upon a dismal track record of labor relations, most notably the strikes at the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company which led to the infamous Ludlow Massacre, when the National Guard opened fire on striking miners in their tent colony, killing 25 people. Even

prior to coming to the United States, Mayo's skepticism towards democracy and politics had already taken shape, as he looked to big business—monopolistic corporations and a new "administrative elite"—as the linchpins for restoring social order and communal harmony. "Democracy, as at present constituted," Mayo wrote, "exaggerates the irrational in man and is therefore an anti-social and decivilizing force." Fervently anti-union, Mayo argued that labor and industrial unrest was due to a "working-class psychopathology," that workers suffered from neurotic "reveries" and obsessive fantasies because they lost their sense of meaning (resulting in anomie, or a breakdown of social stability) in industrial society. As Gillespie observed, there is "a persistent tendency in Mayo's work to transform any challenge by workers [to] managerial control into evidence of psychiatric disturbance." Interpreting employee defiance in this warped way is reminiscent of the treatment of dissidents in the former Soviet Union who were exiled to psychiatric hospitals for their protests against the Communist regime. Mayo's quackery went so far as to claim that "industrial unrest" and political revolutions were caused by populations with blood pressure derangements and concomitant "fatigue." For Mayo, group contagion fueled by irrational behaviors is what led to strikes and class conflicts. Salvation from this rabble lay

in training managers to use sympathetic human relations techniques as a psychiatric cure. Who would bring this psychiatric cure? Management.

A sophisticated charm school, human relations has now been rebranded as "leadership training," a master class in the etiquette of *soft power*. Managers-cum-leaders practice a dramaturgical performance art, learning to present themselves as an empathic coach, friendly counselor, and a source of moral authority. Just as knights and nobles had to learn courtly social graces if they were to successfully maneuver within the royal court, aspiring managers are exhorted to acquire "soft" skills so they can become enlightened corporate mandarins, emotionally intelligent leaders who have learned the subtle art of employee manipulation.

THE MAKING OF THE MANAGERIAL CASTE

Human relations was the wolf in sheep's clothing that allowed managerialism to spread into every sphere of society. Writing during the Second World War, James Burnham, in his book *The Managerial Revolution*, foresaw the future as neither capitalist or socialist, but oligarchic—ruled by a professional class of managers. (Concerned with Burnham's dire predictions, George Orwell wrote a review shortly prior to the publication of *Animal Farm*.) According to Robert Locke and J.C. Spender, managerialism took shape in the economic boom years of the 20th century in parallel with the growth of business schools. In their book, *Confronting Managerialism: How the Business Elite and Their Schools Threw Our Lives Out of Balance*, they describe managerialism as:

What occurs when a special group, called management, ensconces itself systemically in an organization and deprives owners and employees of their decision-making power (including the distribution of emoluments)—and justifies that takeover on the grounds of the managing group's education and exclusive possession of the codified bodies of knowledge and know-how necessary to the efficient running of the organization.

As critical management studies scholar Martin Parker argues in his take-no-prisoners book, *Shut Down the Business School*, management is “a claim of specialist mastery which implicitly denies that others have that capacity, and is justified with reference to embossed certificates from business schools.” The entire edifice of management rests on the pernicious assumption that only managers have the special sauce, expertise, and know-how for managing; the rest of us minions are deemed incapable of doing so.

Locke and Spender go on to argue that managers have come to see themselves as a professional caste differentiated by their wealth, privilege, and superior educational status. Orwell’s *Animal Farm* was indeed prophetic of an anti-democratic management caste and their predilection for self-serving double-talk. Noting this, Locke and Spender write:

The management caste, the pigs, have changed the slogan of liberty from “all animals are equal,” to “all animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others”—at least in the workplace, where democracy is meaningful only to the rich and powerful.

This caste mentality is institutionalized in management and organizational behavior courses that are taught to every undergraduate business student worldwide. For example, the textbook *Contemporary Management* presents managerial power as simply the natural order of things:

They (managers) are the people responsible for supervising and making the most of an organization’s human and other resources to achieve its goals. Management ... is the planning, organizing, leading and controlling of human and other resources to achieve organizational goals efficiently and effectively.

This is a conception of management that claims a monopoly on organizations, legitimizing a belief that managers are an absolute necessity and exclusive stewards, not just for corporations but for *all areas of society*. Managerialism knows no bounds. Whether it be in universities,

healthcare facilities (where growth in management jobs is unusually high), NGOs, or sports teams (get a degree in sports management!), managers are seen as indispensable. (According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics, growth in management employment over the next decade is expected to be faster compared to the average growth in all other occupations.) Even Christian megachurches (and their disciples) need to be corporatized and better managed if they are to bring in the cash; luckily the Harvard Business School has a case study (Willow Creek Community Church) for doing just that.

“HUMAN RELATIONS WAS THE WOLF IN SHEEP’S CLOTHING THAT ALLOWED MANAGERIALISM TO SPREAD INTO EVERY SPHERE OF SOCIETY.”

This indoctrination is seductive. Managers are romanticized as a professional class that speak a different language, wear expensive business suits (or T-shirts in Silicon Valley) and sit behind big desks in corner offices, enjoy luxurious expense accounts, and, of course, command much higher salaries. This may be the destiny of students who can afford to attend an Ivy League school. But it’s disingenuous and deceptive marketing when such a proverbial cultural carrot is dangled to incentivize students in state colleges and public universities to pursue a degree in business management when the possibility of garnering such elite privilege is quite remote. (Still, management jobs generally pay well. Labor statistics show that the median annual wage in management was over \$107,000 in 2022, which was more than twice the median annual wage for all

occupations of \$46,310).

An introductory management textbook doesn’t convey the perks that many managers acquire, but that’s where the iconic Harvard Business School (HBS) case studies come in. Shortly after being appointed dean at the HBS in 1919, Wallace Donham, who had trained in the case method at Harvard’s law school, championed the case study method as a way of professionalizing the business curriculum. The Harvard case study was marketed as a “problem-centered” pedagogy, superior to rote textbook learning and abstract theory. “Real world” business problems and challenging scenarios from actual companies were presented in published cases, requiring interactive class discussions and analysis of facts. To this day, HBS case studies are still considered the pedagogical gold standard in business school curricula. In 2022, Harvard Business School Publishing sold over 16 million cases, accounting for 80 percent of cases used at business schools worldwide.

A typical management case study is a 10-20 page pamphlet that tells a story about a heroic CEO, (aka) a “transformational leader” of a Fortune 100 company who successfully changed the corporate culture, or some Wall Street darling turn-around artist who “strategically” downsized a firm. Students are cajoled to imagine themselves as the protagonist in the case, playing a make-believe game of “what would you as the CEO do in this situation?” One of the popular cases I had to use when I taught the case studies (which I detested having to do) was that of the late Jack Welch, CEO of General Electric, once known in the press as “neutron Jack” for his mass firings and plant closures. I felt a debilitating cognitive dissonance. Here I was, teaching about The Glorious (Asshole) Jack—to mostly first-generation college students who were probably, at best, likely to rise to the ranks of middle management or end up working in some back-office cubicle at an insurance company.

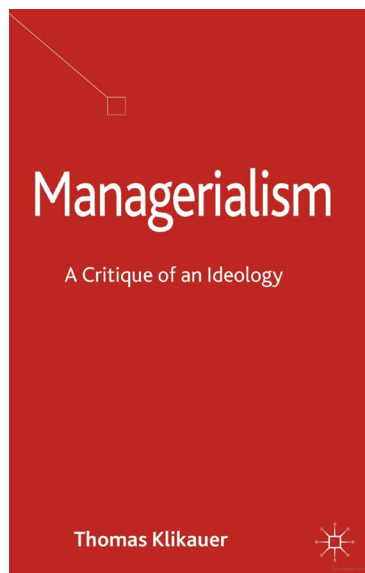
The lionizing of American CEOs in HBS cases reads like hagiographies of Christian saints. CEOs are trotted out as “leadership” role models students should emulate. And the case studies also promote the idea that, because these leaders have

entitled and elevated positions in the corporate hierarchy, they should be paid more—indeed, a lot more. According to the Economic Policy Institute, as of 2022, CEOs were paid 344 times as much as the average worker. Unsurprisingly, a search of the HBS’s extensive catalog results in only one case, from 2019, “Income Inequality and the CEO Pay Ratio at TJX Cos,” that acknowledges “concerns” regarding income inequality. In this case, it’s a CEO-to-worker pay ratio to the tune of 1,596-to-1 and CEO Ernie Herrman’s \$19 million salary. (Herrman is credited with steering “the company through the tumultuous retail environment.”)

The HBS case studies probably ought to be thought of as a form of propaganda. In 2016, management professor Todd Bridgman of Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand and colleagues published a “counterhistory” of the case method, looking deeper into the ideas of Wallace Donham. Some years after introducing the case studies, according to one summary of the paper in *Quartz* by Lila MacLellan, Donham actually “sincerely believed [the case studies were ...] too indifferent to larger societal ills, too insensitive to the labor market, and thus to economic prosperity and equality among workers.” MacLellan notes further that the case method has been “knocked for several serious moral failures,” including mythical portrayals of CEOs and senior management and the exclusion of the voices of women, the poor, and laborers. Bridgman believes the method has “tainted business education, leading people to believe [...] that business schools exist simply to ‘reproduce capitalists.’” Case closed!

OFFICE FEUD(ALISM)

There are more than 16,000 business schools worldwide, and business is one of the most popular undergraduate majors in the U.S. It’s no surprise that we have become an over-managed society where a professionally-trained managerial class has taken on a life of its own. Management has spread like a malignant cancer, proliferating through middle-level layers, making Kafkaesque organizations and justifying the call



Thomas Klikauer's book
"Managerialism: A Critique of an Ideology"

for more managers with spurious titles. This oversupply of managers requires the creation of work to keep them busy, which is one reason there are so many soulless, torturous, and frivolous meetings. Managers infected with the power bug crave a captive audience where they can strut their authoritarian feathers to remind us just how busy they are.

But that's not all. David Graeber argued that corporations (and increasingly bloated university administrations) operate more as feudal estates than “lean and mean” profit machines. Feudalistic managers keep their minions busy by generating a barrage of often unnecessary busywork—filling out bureaucratic forms, circulating memoranda and needless emails, wasting valuable time on wordsmithery in crafting meaningless mission and values statements, demanding useless reports, tedious assessments, and audits, mandating mind-numbing training courses, and then cajoling everyone to be a “team player.” The presence of managers who revel in dishing out these mindless tasks—who Graeber called Taskmasters or Box Tickers—is a definite sign of what he would call a “bullshit job” kind of situation, one in which managers or their subordinates might consider their duties more pernicious than useful to society, or just plain useless. But many managers would

probably never admit this.

One critical aspect of what Graeber called *managerial feudalism* is keeping the worker tethered to their desk. The modern corporate-feudal estate pays for a full-time, 9-to-5 employee whose physical presence at the office is not only supposedly essential for operations (or “spontaneous collaboration”!) but whose fealty is expected at all times. The Covid pandemic wreaked havoc on this arrangement. The pandemic created a large, sudden experiment for many companies, especially those in the financial, scientific, and IT industries, whose employees (sometimes nearly all of them) were suddenly working from home. Yet work was getting done without compromising quality or productivity, often in less than eight hours, and in between dog walks, childcare, and baking bread, even with some employees starting side hustles. And yet, according to the Society for Human Resource Management, and as reported in the BBC article, “What Bosses Really Think About Remote Work,” “a whopping 72 percent of managers currently supervising remote workers would prefer all their subordinates to be in the office.” No surprise, then, that many companies—including the big tech hipster firms Google, Meta (formerly Facebook), Apple, and Amazon, the early pandemic adopters of remote work—started demanding employees come back to the office. Even managers at Zoom, the remote video conferencing company which facilitated remote meetings for over 300 million people a day during the pandemic, have demanded their local Bay Area employees return to the office, citing a need for a “structured hybrid approach” that keeps “teams connected and working efficiently.”

This corporate flip-flop probably has something to do with a managerial lust for corporeal power. (Can you imagine the tutelary and quintessential corporate manager Don Draper of *Mad Men* getting his power fix over Zoom?) With remote work, managers lose the potency of their status differentials and all the informal cues that signal their rank, like telling a subordinate who sits in a cramped and noisy open-plan office

or dehumanizing cubicle to drop by for a “chat” in the boss’s plush corner office.

It took a severe economic depression to expose George Pullman’s true colors, showing that his Pullman Town had nothing to do with industrial betterment but with ownership and control of his employees. It’s not all that different from Google’s corporate headquarters—the 2 million square feet “GooglePlex” in Mountain View, California, which was designed to feel like a university campus catering to an employee’s every need. It has organic vegetable gardens, dozens of high-end eateries with a variety of ethnic cuisines, free cooking classes and laundry rooms, numerous gyms, swimming pools, and other recreational facilities, mindfulness and yoga classes, massage therapists, free bus shuttles, and Talks at Google featuring influential thinkers. Google also offers a \$99 company hotel room on-site as a perk to help employees transition to a hybrid work schedule. Why should an employee ever go home? This total captivity reminds me of the ad tagline for the Roach Motel: “roaches check in...but they don’t check out!”



The business school is a powerful global institution that deserves much of the blame for producing a power hungry, professionally-trained managerial class. Business schools are also responsible for perpetuating the ideology of what is called *managerial capitalism*. Managerialism’s prime concern, as Thomas Klikauer explains in his book, *Managerialism: A Critique of an Ideology*, is that “both [capitalism and society should] mirror the way corporations are managed.” In a society organized according to corporate logic, groups and institutions will essentially function to achieve endless growth and profitability—the mandates of all corporations. As economic anthropologist Jason Hickel has explained, “under capitalism, ‘growth’ is not about increasing production to meet human needs. It is about increasing production in order to extract and accumulate profit. That is the overriding objective.” Such profit, he explains, only comes about through human exploitation and massive natural

resource extraction—which is simply not sustainable ecologically.

Because managerialism has spread so thoroughly into society, its effect has been to anesthetize everyday life to the point that many people cannot envision an alternative way to organize themselves. “Any serious opposition to managerialism” has been “annihilated,” writes Klikauer, who poses an uncomfortably poignant question: without alternatives to managerialism, will “global warming, climate change, corporate environmental vandalism, resource depletion, and the passing of peak oil [production ...] wipe out the human race?”

The servitude to managerialism shapes the hidden curriculum across all B-school disciplines—whether it be finance, economics, management, marketing, international business, and the decision and information systems sciences. So long as the codependent relationship between business schools and the corporations and elites who have a vested interest in maintaining a society that operates according to “market” logic remains intact, the business school will, as Martin Parker has warned, remain a “dangerous institution.” It’s especially dangerous because its primary mission is to maintain the status quo, perpetuating the belief that there is no alternative to managerial capitalism, which is why the business “academy” is nearly void of any critical scholarship and independent thinking. Until this take-for-granted ideology is seriously challenged, business schools will remain the temples of capitalism, indoctrinating students into the liturgy of corporate managerialism so that they, the ordained dutiful servants of power, remain faithfully committed to maintaining the status quo.

SHUT IT DOWN

Uncoupling the business school from the tight grip of capitalism seems like a Quixote-like challenge, but there are ways forward. For these points, I have drawn liberally from Martin Parker’s *Shut Down the Business School*, as well as my interview with him, for inspiration.

First, business schools need to relinquish their cultish loyalty to the idea

that corporate managerialism is the only viable way of organizing human beings. I don’t mean we ought to continue the many failed attempts to “reform” business schools. Rather than trying to put lipstick on an elite pig, we need to do a complete overhaul and reinvention, cutting the umbilical cord to managerialism. This means educating *organizers*, not managers—creating, as Parker calls for, new “schools for organizing.” The broader purpose of such a progressive education would be to engage students in the struggle to organize a democratic society, offering a vigorous critical pedagogy that doesn’t pander to market logic. Certainly there are plenty of ways of organizing people in ways that are more fair, equitable, and humane than the corporate way. A broad education would expose students to alternative forms of organizing, such as worker-owned cooperatives, mutual aid organizations, local and decentralized economies that do not exceed the ecological carrying capacities of their bioregion, trade unions, gift economies, tribal direct democracies, commoning, anarchist communes, self-organizing and emergent organizations during natural disasters—not to mention what could be learned from history and anthropology.

Second, business schools need to stop perpetuating the myth of the “student as customer.” In the case of education, the customers aren’t “always right.” Indeed, they are often ignorant of what they need to know. Why pursue a degree if you already presume to know the subject matter? Moreover, the “student as customer” is an insidious and misguided adage that frames undergraduate education as a utilitarian and marketized commodity. This tail wagging the dog, sheep-like mentality has led to an overly narrow focus on teaching “skills” and “competencies” that students need as their ticket to a job. In this sense, business and management education is nothing more than a vocational feeder school for entry-level corporate jobs. (For all the big talk of the “student as customer,” business schools seem to be tone deaf when it comes to the fact that the majority of Gen Zers distrust capitalism, with 54 percent harboring a

negative view in 2021.) This kind of business education produces, as Max Weber wrote in his famous lament, “specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart.”

Is it any wonder, then, that business undergraduates and MBA students are the biggest cheaters in the university? Monkey see, monkey do. Business schools transmit an ideological commitment to the “bottom line,” and some students may learn that success means doing whatever it takes to get the job done—even if that means cheating. And the growing push among business school professors to simply count the number of publications in peer-reviewed journals as a metric to earn accreditation or simply for reputation-building creates incentives for publishing fraudulent research. It’s beyond ironic that behavioral economics professor Dan Ariely of the Duke Fuqua School of Business and Harvard Business School professor Francesca Gino, both of whom are well-known academic superstars for their research on honesty and cheating, were accused of fabricating research data.

Finally, business schools need to honestly acknowledge that they have become willing handmaidens in the destruction of our planet—even as they claim to be working to address the problem of climate change. Efforts to make business studies reflect “sustainability” never lose sight of, as Andrew Hoffman, a professor of sustainable enterprise, writes in the *Financial Times*, “the bottom-line,” “the business case” or the opportunities of gaining “market advantage when addressing climate change.” And while 800 business schools have jumped on the sustainability and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) bandwagon, these programs are, at best, impotent Band-Aids, and at worst mere window-dressing and fashionable marketing ploys for recruiting prospective students. Humanity faces impending climate collapse; massive inequality; the weakening of democracies and the growth of ideological extremism; food, water, and energy shortages; civil strife and unrest; forced mass migrations; and financial instability—all of which contribute to

people’s deteriorating mental health and well-being. “Sustainability certificates” and other tweaks to existing curricula hardly measure up to these challenges.

Business school professors need to stop fooling themselves and wake up to the stark truth that their profession is part of the problem. As Hannah Arendt wrote, “the sad truth of the matter is most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be or do either evil or good.” Absorbed in the ideology of managerial capitalism, far too many business professors are, to use Arendt’s expression, “terrifyingly normal,” career complacent and self-satisfied, deluded into believing that by publishing obfuscatory, theoretical, and abstract twaddle in pseudoscientific peer-reviewed journals (that only a handful of other academics read) from their lofty perches they are making a real-world “impact.” Most business academics that I know have buried their heads in the sand, condoning off their personal values, moral conscience, and ethical concerns. This strategy of avoidance, of course, only exacerbates faculty stress and alienation. (I know, because I have been one of them.) Those professors who wish to defect need to do an about-face and become engaged public intellectuals, refashioning themselves as voices of resistance.

Schools of organizing may sound utopian, but this is actually a good thing. “Oppositional utopianism” as critical education scholar Henry Giroux advocates, is the antidote to managerial capitalism. But it’s highly unlikely that business schools in the U.S., given how entrenched they are in corporate stewardship, will lead the way. It’s much more likely that schools of organizing will take root in social democratic countries which have already laid the foundation for such change. They’ve learned from the industrial democracy movement in Western Europe, which sanctioned the legal rights of employees to participate in decision-making and corporate policy-making affecting their employment, income, and quality-of-work life, along with the power to give or refuse their consent on workplace changes—what

was often known as “co-determination.”

What, then, can U.S. business professors suffering from Stockholm syndrome do? They might start by taking a good hard look at their diploma—a Doctorate in Philosophy. That’s *philosophy*, not ideology. Yes, *philo-sophia*, which, for the ancient Greeks, is the love of wisdom. Philosophy differs from ideology as it’s concerned with the formation of character, engaging in the discipline of inquiry, posing critical questions, and interrogating history—rather than merely informing or indoctrinating. It’s rare to find this sort of philosophical professing in the business classroom. Are business students exposed to the history of labor movements or how American capitalism was built on the backs of enslaved workers on the plantations? Do accounting majors learn that Excel spreadsheets have their roots in American slave-labor camps? What about finance majors? Do they get to debate the merits of economic rationality, the dominant, “value-free” and morally bankrupt economic theory which contends that actors behave in rational and efficient ways by maximizing their own interests, even if it means lying, cheating, or stealing in order to accumulate wealth? Are students challenged to pose critical questions about managerial power and the legitimacy of oligarchic corporations? Of course they aren’t. “Managerialism as an ideology,” Klikauer laments, “does not serve truth but invents knowledge in the service of power.” And as Loren Baritz concluded at the end of his timeless 1960 book, *The Servants of Power*, the willingness of business professors “to serve power instead of mind” makes them “a case study in manipulation by consent.” So the question remains. Which master will business professors continue to serve, managerialism as ideology or the philosophy of organizing? For the sake of the human species and the planet, let’s hope it’s not the former for much longer. ✚

THIS CHRISTMAS,
THE THING THEY WANT MOST IS A...

Talking **CENTRIST POLITICIAN** Doll

TO TELL THEM WHY THE ECONOMY IS GOOD.

COMES
WITH CHARTS
ABOUT GDP &
INFLATION!

"HOW WILL
THAT LOOK
TO SWING
VOTERS?"

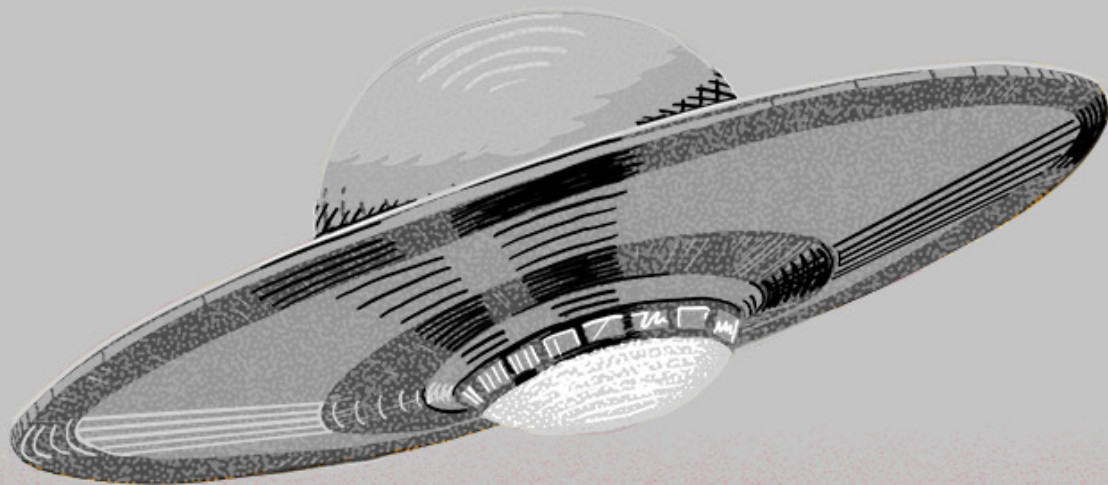
"AMERICANS
ARE JUST SO
DIVIDED THESE
DAYS"

"IT'S
JUST SO
COMPLICATED."

"EVERY BIRD
NEEDS A LEFT
WING AND A
RIGHT WING IN
ORDER TO FLY."

"HOW ARE YOU
GOING TO PAY
FOR THAT?"





WELCOME TO MY LOW-BUDGET SCIENCE-FICTION DYSTOPIA

BY RICHARD ESKOW

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN people told themselves very different stories than we do today. And they took those stories more seriously than readers and viewing audiences do today. They even kept a straight face at the end of science fiction movies when, after the alien invasion had been repelled, these words filled the screen: “The End ... *or is it?*”

I remember.

According to statistics, you are almost certainly younger than me. There were 2.6 billion people on Earth the year I was born; now there are 8.6 billion. Two-thirds of the people born that year are now dead. Nineteen out of 20 people in the world are younger than me. I have run aground on an alien planet. Sometimes I feel the urge to anchor myself in space and time like a traveler caught between dimensions.

Where am I from? Utica, New York, in the American Rust Belt. *When* am I from? From a time when there *was* an American Rust Belt. And so the story begins....

REMEMBER TOMORROW

I was a sci-fi fanatic from an early age. From my earliest years, from the late 1950s on, I was addicted to the black-and-white science fiction movies on my family’s first TV. And I read as

only a proto-nerd would read: obsessively. I read about distant futures and galactic empires, but I was especially drawn to futures I thought I might live to see.

There were space futures, which I rated solely on how impressive the starships were. There were super-civilization futures, with elaborate painted cities and hovercars flitting from one spire to another. (These were good.) There were future fascist states (bad, but with impressive uniforms and technology), interplanetary wars (bad, but also kind of cool), and nuclear apocalypses (bad, and not even remotely cool).

And there were low-budget dystopias, where it was obvious that the filmmakers didn’t have the money for special effects or set design. The future in those movies looked pretty much like 1965, but the cars were shaped a little differently and people carried little gadgets in their pockets. They weren’t the worst dystopias, but they were definitely the lamest. That’s the kind we live in now.

Sorry.

FORTY YEARS TO TOMORROW

The big reveal in Philip K. Dick’s 1959 novel *Time Out of Joint* is that its main character isn’t living in the 1950s, as he thought,



Still from the 1958 film "Frankenstein 1970"

but in a future riven by nuclear war between humans on Earth and others on the moon. He has been tricked into believing he lives in that supposedly idyllic time because that future, and his role in it, are too terrible for him to accept.

The year is 1997.

A surprising percentage of 20th-century science fiction falls into a category that might be called "forty years to tomorrow." When writers wanted to portray a different but still recognizable future, they would set it forty years after the date of publication, give or take a few years.

Harry Harrison's 1966 novel *Make Room! Make Room!*, for example, describes an overcrowded and impoverished America of the 1990s. Forty years. Written at the height of "population bomb" fears, the novel's American protagonist can only watch his television by rigging it up to a bicycle to generate power. The futuristic dystopia of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was set 35 years from its publication date in 1949. Robert Heinlein's 1958 short story *All You Zombies* (which you should really read) lets us know that time travel is available in 1993, 35 years later. 1953's *Fahrenheit 451* was set in the 1990s, another 40-year gap. Its author, Ray Bradbury said "I thought I was describing a world that might evolve in four or five decades." He continues:

"But only a few weeks ago, in Beverly Hills one night, a husband and wife passed me, walking their dog. I stood staring after them, absolutely stunned. The woman held in one hand a small cigarette-package-sized radio, its antenna quivering. From this sprang tiny copper wires which ended in a dainty cone plugged into her right ear. There she was, oblivious to man and dog, listening to far winds and whispers and soap-opera cries, sleep-walking, helped up and down curbs by a husband who might just as well not have been there. This was not fiction."

For Bradbury, born in 1920, a transistor radio and earpiece were science fiction of the highest order. They were for me, too, after I read those words. Those radios aren't around anymore, which means one of my futures is now in the past.

TEN YEARS IS FOREVER

Other science-fiction futures used even shorter timelines, around the ten-year mark. Robert Heinlein's 1957 novel *The Door Into Summer* describes a post-nuclear United States in 1970, which has technology for suspended animation, household robotics, and even a "zombie drug" for enslaving people. One of Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles* stories, originally published in 1948, was set in 1960. A 1970 TV show called *UFO* portrays the world of 1980 as one of space commands, human-made flying saucers, supercars, and people who went to work dressed like members of KC and the Sunshine Band.

A classic of the ten-year subgenre is *Frankenstein 1970*, a movie that fascinated me as a child. The Wikipedia entry for this movie says "The title *Frankenstein 1970* was intended to add a futuristic touch." Oddly enough, it succeeded—for a movie that was released in 1958! When I saw it on TV in 1964 it definitely felt like a movie about the future, even though there were no real science-fiction elements in it.

The plot: Victor Von Frankenstein's descendant (Boris Karloff) has been badly disfigured by the Nazis for refusing to help them. The Nazis, who had been defeated less than 15 years earlier, were and are the ultimate dystopian trope. Frankenstein is bitter and plans to get revenge by rebuilding his ancestor's monster. But he needs an "atomic" reactor to do it, an allusion that was almost certainly inserted to fit the new title because, hey, won't home—and castle—reactors be common by 1970?

Common, maybe, but not cheap. That's why the Baron reluctantly admits a film crew into the castle to film a documentary. Chaos predictably ensues.

I remember being excited by the reference to 1970. It was the future, but it wasn't so distant as to be unimaginable. Things would no doubt be very different, in exciting yet somehow recognizable ways.

Forty years, ten years: why did those timelines matter? The sweep of those forty-year futures demonstrated how quickly people expected the world to keep changing. 1996 was expected to be radically different from 1956, with interplanetary flight a commonplace. Why? Because 1956 felt so different from 1916, at least in what were then called the "developed countries." The ten-year timelines served another purpose. They broke this rapidly unfolding future into digestible bites.

1996? The mind boggles just trying to imagine it.

ENGINEERING ÜBER ALLES

Heinlein, a naval engineer turned science-fiction writer, came close to the ten-year mark with a 1940 story called "The Roads Must Roll." It's prescient in predicting a 1950's-era national highway system, urban sprawl, and the need for solar energy. But cars on Heinlein's superhighways can't go *slower* than 60 mph.

The story is haunted by Heinlein's obsessions. An oppressive federal government limits the use of fossil fuels. The answer? Massive systems of conveyor belts, reaching ultra-high speeds, connecting major urban areas and dramatically reducing the

use of cars. People can work, shop, play, even have homes on these moving belts, or “roads.” And, of course, they can eat at:

JAKE’S STEAK HOUSE No. 4
The Fastest Meal on the Fastest Road!
“To dine on the fly
Makes the miles roll by!!”

But there’s trouble in paradise. It takes workers to operate the roads, and the workers have a union. The libertarian Heinlein’s union leaders are predictably corrupt and greedy. “Who makes the roads roll!” they shout to a rowdy and uncultured mob. “We do!” answer the (all male) workers. “Let ‘em yammer about democracy,” one speaker shouts. “That’s a lot of eye wash—we’ve got the power, and we’re the men that count!”

When they’re not singing militant songs (to the tune of “When the Caissons Go Rolling Along”), the workers instigate lethal sabotage at the behest of their tyrannical leader, “Shorty” Van Kleeck. Van Kleeck is finally defeated by his brilliant engineer boss, Chief Engineer Gaines, who—unruffled by his brush with death—snaps to a subordinate, “Get me a car, Dave, and make it a fast one!”

For all its radical technology, the most implausibly science-fiction element in this story is that a union has that kind of power in 20th-century America.

THE CRAZY YEARS

Heinlein’s 1941 novel *Methuselah’s Children* offers some headlines from a future 1969, during a period Heinlein describes as “The Crazy Years.” They include:

COURT ORDERS STATEHOUSE SOLD
Colorado Supreme Bench Rules State Old Age Pension
Has First Lien All State Property

“U.S. BIRTH RATE TOP SECRET” — DEFENSE SEC.



Still from the 1955 film “Day the World Ended”

CAROLINA CONGRESSMAN COPS BEAUTY CROWN
“Available for draft for President” she announces while
starting tour to show her qualifications (Note: Although he
was praised for his strong heroines, Heinlein could be sexist.)

IOWA RAISES VOTING AGE TO FORTY-ONE
Rioting on Des Moines Campus

LOS ANGELES HI-SCHOOL MOB DEFIES SCHOOL BOARD
“Higher Pay, Shorter Hours, no Homework--We Demand
Our Right to Elect Teachers, Coaches.”

Ever the engineer, Heinlein prepared a detailed timeline for all his stories in a collection called *The Past Through Tomorrow*. How good were his predictions? In Heinlein’s fictional future, the 1960s saw “the first rocket to the moon” (so far, so good) and “mass psychoses in the sixth decade” (arguably true). But, *contra* Heinlein, the seventies did not bring an “inter-regnum” followed by “a period of reconstruction ... ended by the opening of new frontiers.” It did, however, begin “a return to nineteenth-century economy,” in a predatory neoliberal fashion. Heinlein was probably picturing something, however, quite unlike the rise of globalism and mega-corporations. Perhaps he was imagining the restoration of an imaginary frontier economy made up of mom-and-pop trading posts in far-flung settlement towns.

Nor did the 1980s and 1990s bring us the founding of Luna City, the “Space Precautionary Act,” the “Period of Imperial Exploitation,” the “Revolution in Little America,” “Interplanetary exploration and exploitation,” or the “American-Australasian Anschluss.”

DISTANT FUTURES

Imaginations were allowed to run free in the stories of more distant futures. Then, as now, those stories showed that science-fiction writers were capable of great feats of imagination when it came to *science*, but were often incapable of imagining different kinds of *societies*. The “space operas” used alien beings and technologies that could reshape the universe, but leaned on well-worn human situations: medieval-style kingdoms, empires, cowboy-style shootouts, and galaxy-sweeping romances. One character or another was typically “Lord So-and-So,” while another would be somebody from a humble planet like Earth who was fast with a laser gun.

I was especially fond of E. E. “Doc” Smith’s *Galactic Lensman* novels, despite their flaws. Smith engaged with long sweeps of history, from billions of years in the past to the far future, placing humanity in a long sweep of interstellar social forces.

Another favorite was Olaf Stapledon, whose novels had unparalleled ambition. *Last and First Men: A Story of the Near and Far Future* tells the story of humanity today (which Stapledon calls “the First Men”) through the final stage of humanity (the “Eighteenth Men”). Alongside their scientific

accomplishments, the Eighteenth Men have a variety of new gender classifications (or “sub-genders”) and are very open sexually, which appealed to my pre-pubescent and somewhat libidinous spirit.

My favorite writer of all, however, was Isaac Asimov, whose *Foundation* series tracked the rise and fall of galactic empires. These novels argued that, given enough data, a scientist could forecast future events—a science Asimov called “psychohistory.” The “father of psychohistory,” Hari Seldon, was capable of forecasting the time when an empire is at risk of collapsing, which was called “a Seldon crisis.” He is portrayed as an unparalleled genius—which meant, of course, that I saw him as a potential role model for, ahem, myself.

One of my favorite far-future stories is surprisingly down to earth. Asimov’s “The Feeling of Power” takes place during an interstellar war, long after humans have become reliant on technology and have forgotten how to do mathematics. One technician reverse-engineers an old computer and learns how to do calculations with a pencil and paper. His discovery becomes a military secret and leads to new forms of human-controlled weaponry, including kamikaze missiles, because human life is cheaper than technology.

I even wrote Asimov a fan letter when I was twelve, along with a science-fiction story I had written. I received a rather diplomatic postcard in return with a typed message and a handwritten signature: “Keep writing, Richard. Best, Isaac Asimov.”

My familiarity with Asimov came in handy when I interviewed economist Paul Krugman, with whom I had disagreed in print, during the 2009 financial crisis. To relieve the tension, I mentioned that I had read an interview where he said he wanted to become an economist after reading about Hari Seldon, because economics was the closest thing to “psychohistory” he could find. I reminded him of that and asked, “Is the United States in a ‘Krugman crisis?’”

“I’m not that cosmic,” he answered.

FUTURE WHILE-U-WAIT

Even the stories set in the present (the 1950s or early 1960s) showed us a kind of future, as the familiar world was suddenly transformed—by nuclear war, flying saucer attacks, or giant monsters laying waste to Japanese cities. Sci-fi films taught us that the present could become a hellscape overnight—which was certainly true at the height of the Cold War.

There were so many movies about nuclear radiation and apocalypse they run together in my memory. *Day the World Ended* had a goofy-looking monster. *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms* had something about a lighthouse. *Panic in Year Zero!* had an exclamation point in the title. So did *Them!* That’s the one about giant ants; *World Without End* is the one about giant spiders. *The H-Man* was incomprehensible. *Attack of the Fifty-Foot Woman* was desirable. *Fail Safe* was for parents. *On the Beach* was too arty (that is to say, boring). I preferred the ones filled with roving, murderous mutants.

Where I lived, B-52 bombers would fly overhead on

their way to nearby Griffiss Air Force Base. I made models of American and Russian jets, and when I heard a plane fly overhead I would go out to see if it was “one of ours” or “one of theirs.” But I was far from the coast, so I was safe from the giant radioactive octopus in *It Came From Beneath the Sea*.

Even then, it was understood that Japanese monster movies drew on the country’s recent trauma; they destroyed Tokyo again and again. My friends and I were especially fascinated by the tiny, telepathic twin singers who communicated by singing in *Mothra*. (I have since learned that they performed—life-sized—as “The Peanuts.”)

The alien-invasion classics include *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers*, where spaceships crashed into famous American monuments; *The War of the Worlds*, George Pal’s transplant of the H.G. Wells story into Southern California; and Michael Rennie as the alien peace envoy Klaatu in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. (The short story it was based on, Harry Bates’ “Farewell to the Master,” has a good surprise ending that was left out of the movie.) *When Worlds Collide* shows humanity banding together to save itself from destruction, with scenes of a devastated earth as a rocket is prepared for the trip to its new home.

The idea that humanity would band together when faced with a common threat seems hopelessly naïve in an era when nations seem incapable of responding to climate change. But it was also the theme of *The Outer Limits*’ famous “The Architects of Fear” episode, where an astronaut agrees to be transformed into a monster and pretends to be an alien invader so that Earth’s countries will end their wars and band together.

Invaders From Mars is the one where a Midwestern boy sees a spaceship land in the field next to his house and nobody believes him. We watch the ground open up and swallow everyone he loves, turning them emotionless and deadly one by one. Its dreamlike quality and its play on primal childhood fears concludes when he wakes up and finds it was just a dream—only to once again see a spaceship landing in the field next door. “Gee whiz!” he exclaims.

They replayed it on TV once a year. I would walk next door



Still from the 1953 film “The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms”



Still from the 1956 film "Earth vs. the Flying Saucers"

to my friend Louie's house, we would watch it, and then I'd walk back across the lawn expecting the earth to swallow me at any moment. Those thirty feet or so were the longest journey of my young life.

GOD IN THE MACHINE

Religious movies were another subset of the "future now" genre. In 1952's *Red Planet Mars*, astronomers find evidence of intelligent life on Mars—and the Martians warn humans of the punishment they'll face for deviating from Biblical teachings. Soon there's deception, Cold War paranoia, and the overthrow of the USSR by a theocracy. The final message is interrupted, but it begins "You have done well..." As in, "You have done well, my good and faithful servant."

1950's *The Next Voice You Hear* skips the middleman (or "middle-alien") altogether, as the voice of God is heard on radios all around the world. The protagonists are the stereotypical "average American family" of movie lore—which is to say they're white, middle class, and are named Joe and Nancy Smith, plus their son Johnny. (Mrs. Smith is played by future First Lady Nancy Davis.) We are never told why God needed to use the medium of radio to communicate with His creation. The movie's trailer says that *The Next Voice You Hear* "gets its Greatness from its Simplicity and its Humility." The end credits read as follows:

"In the beginning was the Word: and the Word was with God: and the Word was God." John Chapter I, Verse I

And then:

*MADE IN HOLLYWOOD, U.S.A. by
Metro~Goldwyn~Mayer*

That's humility, show-biz style. The studio gets better billing than God.

HIDEOUS BUT TRUE

Parents in the 1960s often complained that "wholesome," "moral" stories like these were being displaced by violence and grotesquery. It's true that sci-fi stories became darker as time went on, and even mainstream programming increasingly leaned on the shock value of monstrosity. A case in point is the above-mentioned *Outer Limits* episode, "The Architects of Fear." Some affiliates reportedly found that episode's "monster" so frightening that they blacked it out during the original broadcast. They didn't black it out in Utica and, trust me, it made an impression. A lot of the monsters who look silly today were terrifying at the time.

In a very different way, the Baron's disfigurement in *Frankenstein 1970* was also a sci-fi trope. Disfigurement represented a transformation of the self into something different and alien. Aliens and monsters were usually as ugly as the makeup artists could make them.

Ugly was different; different was scary; and scary was dystopian.

WORLDS WITHIN WORLDS

The new-ish medium of television produced its own science fiction, of course, but its series tended to avoid full-scale dystopias, relying instead on "monster of the week" formats like *The Outer Limits* or ironic commentaries on human nature like those found in *The Twilight Zone*. Those programs had enormous impact, both on the general public and on me personally, but they didn't necessarily fit either the dystopian or the far-future frameworks. *Star Trek* was set in a distant future, but pre-teen me was initially unimpressed. The spaceships didn't look real, the uniforms seemed hokey, and the papier-mâché aliens were an affront to my dignity. Over time, the show wore down my resistance. But it wasn't a future that felt tangible.

The Twilight Zone did have its dystopian moments. Dennis Hopper made an indelible impression as an American fascist guided by the phantom of Adolf Hitler in an episode called "He's Alive." In "Two," a man and a woman from warring countries try to survive in a post-nuclear holocaust without being able to speak. In one of the series' most famous episodes, "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street," aliens armed with only a small radio transmitter tear a small town apart by preying on the residents' fears and prejudices.

The Outer Limits' "Demon with a Glass Hand," written by Harlan Ellison, brought its protagonist from a dystopian future into the present. It was hard to follow, but induced a kind of dream state that lasted long after it was over. The series also wrestled with then-new physics discoveries in "Production and Decay of Strange Particles," when a form of radiation possesses nuclear plant workers and turns them into zombies. As the narrator says,

"Hidden deep in the heart of strange new elements are secrets beyond human understanding – new powers, new dimensions, worlds within worlds, unknown."

FAST FORWARD

These accelerated timelines—ten years, forty years—may seem absurd today. Does anybody think 2033 will be *that* different from today? But technological and social progress was moving rapidly back then. The 1940s saw global war, the defeat of the Nazis and Imperial Japan, the jet plane, the atomic bomb, and the rise of Communist China. The 1950s saw millions of people buy their first homes and cars, the Korean War, the hydrogen bomb, Sputnik (I remember hearing it beep on the family radio), the Cold War, a cure for polio, television, and the spread of mass consumer technology. The 1960s would bring the Space Race, the civil rights movement, lasers, more medical breakthroughs, assassinations, the antiwar movement, and humans walking on the moon.

There was no reason to think this pace wouldn't go on forever. That's why "1970" whispered to us of unseen wonders.

And here we are in a low-budget future—no flying cars, no interplanetary travel, no superintelligent robot friends. But is it dystopian? See for yourself: Pandemic. War. Racial conflicts and American fascism. Climate catastrophes that movie producers could present, low-budget style, using newsreel B-roll of past disasters. Even flying saucers are back in the news.

Gez whiz.

At its best, science fiction can teach us to recognize the future when it arrives. When it comes to their global impact, today's mega-corporations pose the same kind of threat as runaway intelligences or alien invaders. Watching our response to the climate crisis, I have long thought about what "The Architects of Fear" and other stories got wrong: if aliens invaded today, humanity would not come together to fight them. Corporations would make deals with them and, as in the recent film "Don't Look Up," other people would deny their existence. (Interestingly, Paul Krugman also mentioned "The Architects of Fear" in an interview during the financial crisis, suggesting a fake invasion might be a good ploy for passing some fiscal stimulus spending.)

We know what science fiction got wrong. But despite my parents' concerns, my absorption in it has shaped me and others in extremely valuable ways—especially now. We live in a time when the human imagination has been constricted by a global economic system that's determined to tell us that, in Margaret Thatcher's words, "there is no alternative." Science fiction shows us that there is *always* an alternative. It's not surprising that there was a strong leftist theme throughout Asimov's writing, or that Stapledon was a self-described socialist.

The world can be remade. I know. I was inside the Soviet sphere when it collapsed, which it did in the manner of Lenin's dictum: "There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen." Lenin's observation is still true. The elite political consensus is eroding all around the world. That creates the potential for radical change—either global advancement, or global collapse—something which could take decades to unfold or might happen faster than we can imagine. Sci-fi taught me to remain open to the possibility

SCIENCE FICTION CAN TEACH US TO RECOGNIZE THE FUTURE WHEN IT ARRIVES

of ever-living radical transformation. And ideas like those in Asimov's pencil-and-paper story made it easier for me to understand and embrace thinkers like Ivan Illich, the 20th-century philosopher who promoted the use of "appropriate technology" over resource-intensive corporate products.

"I'm not that cosmic." Well, *I* am. You probably are, too. I give science fiction a lot of credit for that. In 2011, I went back to Utica after a 40-year absence. Large parts of the city had been left in ruins by the collapse of industry, and it had become a major refugee resettlement area. Here's how I described myself then: "A man (wears) black clothes of no known 1950s fashion. A headset flashes in his ear. The object in his hand links him to the entire world. He's an emissary from my childhood's future..."

Everyone's future begins as a nearly infinite array of possible timelines. But each narrows down into one. This is mine. Trust me, yours will be interesting—filled with new powers, new dimensions, worlds within worlds. But my world won't change very much. As far as my path to the future is concerned, this is the end.

Or is it? 🤖



Still from "The Twilight Zone" episode "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street"



FROM THE MAKERS OF DRAFTKINGS,
INTRODUCING

DEBATE KINGS

MONEY LINES

WHO WILL BE TRUMP'S RUNNING MATE?

VIVEK
RAMASWAMY

-163



TIM
SCOTT

-127



MARJORIE
TAYLOR
GREENE

+113



KID
ROCK

+300



THE MOST RACIST
GOLF CADDY AT
MAR-A-LAGO

+400



A PLATE OF
MCDONALD'S
HAMBURGERS

+700



YOUR FIRST BET IS
RISK-FREE
!!!

PROP BETS

JOE BIDEN FORGETS THE
NAME OF THE TOWN HE'S
SPEAKING IN

-233



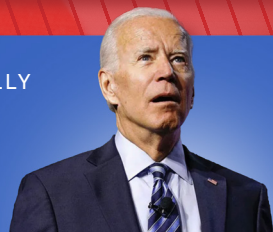
RON DESANTIS CRASHES
HIS CAMPAIGN BUS,
BLAMES "WOKE ROADS"

+186



JOE BIDEN ACCIDENTALLY
CALLS A REPORTER
"STROM"

+104

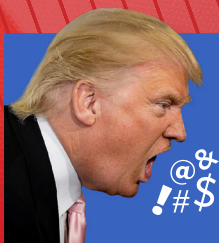


KAMALA HARRIS SAYS
SOMETHING STRANGE
AND OFF-PUTTING

-4900



WIN BIG IF TRUMP USES AN ETHNIC SLUR ONSTAGE!
TYPES AVAILABLE



CHINESE -186



MEXICAN -150



INDIAN +122



IRISH +186

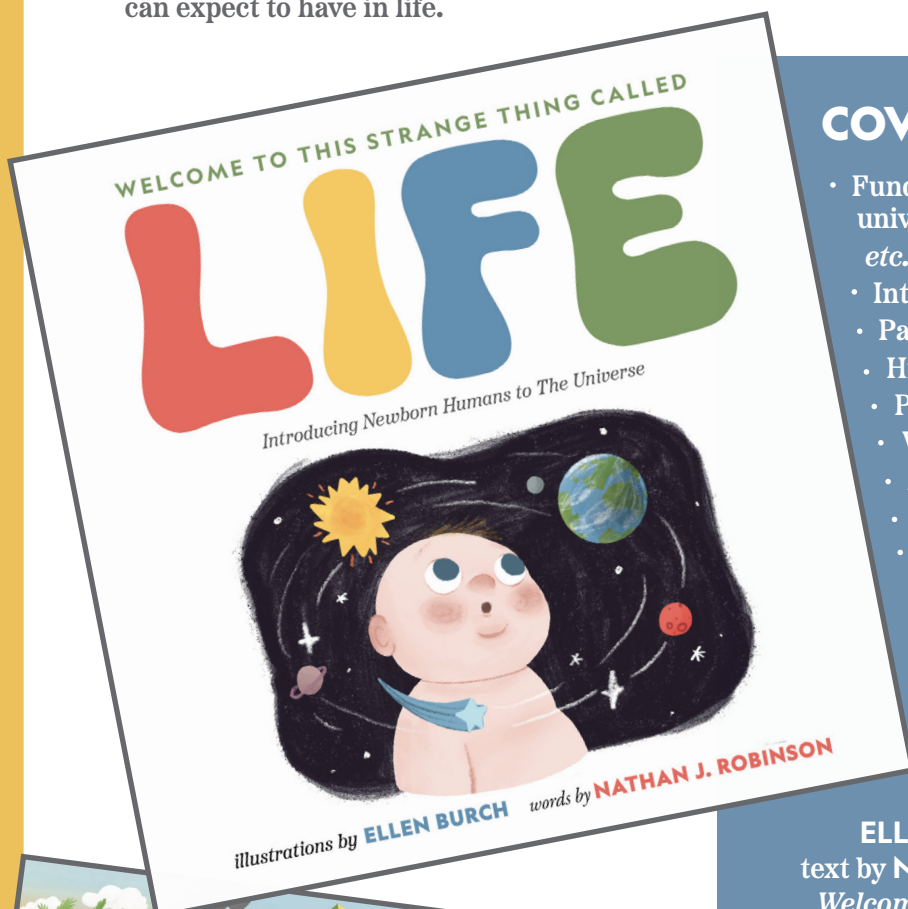


ALBANIAN +400

Do you know someone with a GAMBLING PROBLEM? Just mind your own business! After all, they might win big, and then won't you look silly? We bet you don't know someone like that at all, actually. We'll give you ten-to-one on it.

OUR NEW BABY BOOK!

Being born can be a very bewildering experience. Babies have very little knowledge of the world when they arrive, and the whole world is mysterious. Things need to be explained—and fast. Fortunately, *Current Affairs* has prepared a beautiful and amusing book for new parents to read to newborns, explaining the basic facts about why they exist and what experiences they can expect to have in life.



COVERS:

- Fundamental facts of the universe (*time, space, matter, etc.*)
- Introductory linguistics
- Parts of the body
- History
- Politics
- War
- Animals
- Gender
- Many other important facets of existence

With beautiful illustrations by *Current Affairs* contributing artist **ELLEN BURCH** and amusing text by **NATHAN J. ROBINSON**, *Welcome To This Strange Thing Called Life* is a delightful gift for every new parent!



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Also available on Amazon.



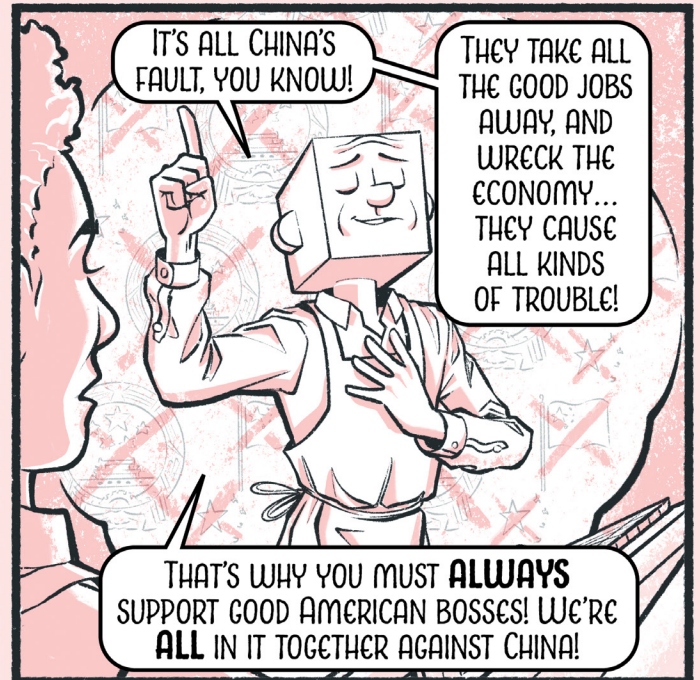
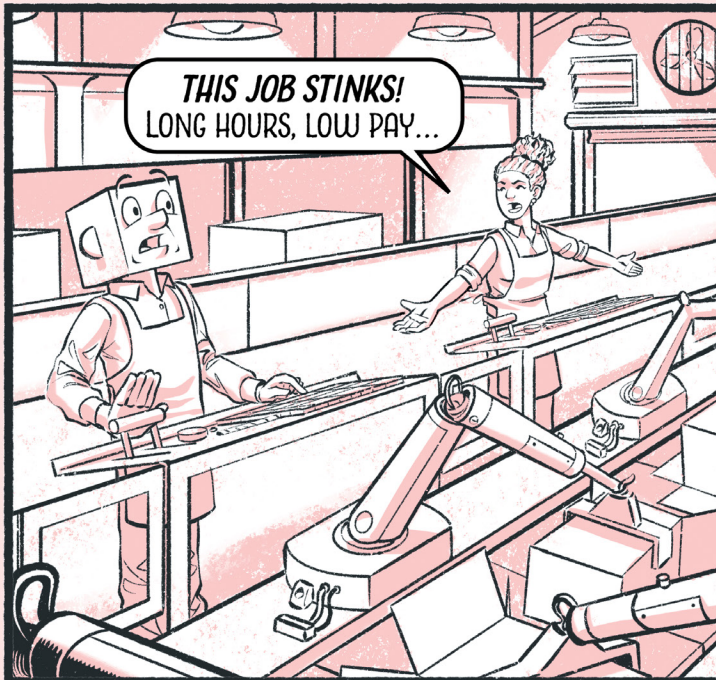
Let's not get too much further into astronomy for now and it's probably too early for quantum physics, but for now just note that everything you see is made of much smaller things that you can't see and those are in turn made of even smaller things and it just keeps going, though we do believe it eventually stops. Oh, and the Universe is governed by strange and mysterious forces that do astonishing things like pull objects together without touching them. Oh, and time is relative, but the implications of that for you at present are minimal.



In 1912, cartoonist **Ernest Riebe**—a trade unionist with the Industrial Workers of the World—created one of America’s most memorable cartoon characters. **Mr. Block**, Riebe wrote, is “the representation of that host of slaves who think in terms of their masters,” siding with the rich and powerful in every argument. He “owns nothing, yet speaks from the standpoint of the millionaire,” is “patriotic without patrimony,” and “licks the hand that smites him and kisses the boot that kicks him.” Mr. Block is “the personification of all that a worker should not be.” Thanks to the wonders of the Public Domain, we now bring you the 21st-century adventures of:

MR. BLOCK HE BLAMES CHINA

WRITTEN BY: ALEX SKOPIC • DRAWN BY: J. LONGO



ON DOLLAR STORES

BY ALEX SKOPIC



IT'S A TYPICAL MORNING AT DOLLAR GENERAL—MY WORKPLACE, WHETHER I LIKE it or not. It's my turn to open the store, so I roll into the parking lot at 7:45 a.m., and start going down the checklist of tasks. Unlock the doors. Turn off the alarm, which is blaring, before it auto-dials the cops. Set up the cash register. Set up the self-checkout. Print last night's sales reports. Put out today's newspapers. Get the keys to the cigarette case from the safe (time delay: nine minutes). Haul the big cart full of beach balls, lawn chairs, and towels onto the sidewalk out front. Finally, unlock the ice chests. All this has to be done by 8 a.m., and 15 minutes is usually *just* enough time.

Not today, though. Today there's a surprise. A huge yellow tractor-trailer has pulled into the lot, decals screaming "DOLLAR GENERAL" on the sides. It has arrived early. And it's a weekday, which means it's the "fresh" delivery—the one full of milk, eggs, and frozen food, which needs to be put away in a hurry before it thaws. Probably a hundred boxes or more. And I'm the only one here, so I'll somehow have to deal with all that, *and* ring up the customers—who are now starting to arrive.

I pull out my phone, and check the schedule app. Nobody else will be clocking in until 10 a.m.

Shit.



FIRE EXIT

BABY

MILK

DOLLAR STORE

HELLO MY NAME IS

Donna



Interior of a Dollar Tree in Gillette, Wyoming

Before I was an editor for a prestigious political magazine, I was a retail worker at a dollar store. Initially, I needed a part-time job to pay for gas and textbooks during college. Later, I needed a *second* job to pay for, well, everything. I lived in a rural part of Pennsylvania, and Dollar General was the nearest store with a “hiring” sign, so there I went. It’s not a job I look back on fondly, for reasons that will become clear. But it’s one that taught me a lot—about money, about labor, and about the way American free-market capitalism really works. Or rather, doesn’t work.

Recently, John Oliver did a long segment about dollar stores on HBO’s *Last Week Tonight*. I haven’t always been a fan of Oliver’s comedy—he can be unbearably smug sometimes—but I recommend watching that particular episode. It really captures everything that makes dollar stores sleazy, exploitative, and hellish to work in. Oliver points out how they profit from people’s financial hardship, using a really stunning quote from Dollar General CEO Todd Vasos: “We do very good in good times, and we do fabulous in bad times.” Just how fabulous? According to Equilar, a company that tracks executive pay, Vasos made \$182,750,913 between 2015 and 2021.

In the segment, Oliver plays cell phone footage from various Dollar Trees and Generals around the United States, showing scene after scene of chaos. At some stores, boxes are piled everywhere, and there’s only one worker to unpack them all. At others, the air conditioning doesn’t work, leaving the staff in danger of heat exhaustion. Rats run around the storage areas, with no pest control in sight. “At every turn, dollar stores seem to treat their workers with either stunning indifference or outright contempt,” Oliver says, and he’s not wrong. I should know.

SO WHAT IS IT ACTUALLY LIKE TO WORK IN A DOLLAR store? Well, unsurprisingly, it’s rough. Even Macon Brock Jr., the cofounder of Dollar Tree, admits as much in his memoir, *One Buck at a Time*:

[W]orking for Dollar Tree is one of the hardest jobs in American retail, second only to managing a Dollar Tree. Just the physical aspects of the job are demanding. Anywhere from twenty-two hundred to three thousand cartons of merchandise

show up at a store per week and have to be carried to the right aisle, unpacked, and displayed. The pace is relentless. The press of customers is constant.

All true—although, of course, Brock could have made the work less “relentless” any time he wanted. To his account, I’d add that dollar stores essentially expect you to work several jobs at once. Usually, there are only two workers running the entire store, and sometimes you’re stuck there by yourself. So you have to run around the building, dealing with problems as they come up. Just when the line of customers is longest, you’ll hear the *crash!* of a shattering pickle jar ten aisles away. You’re a cashier *and* a janitor, and a security guard, and a stocker of shelves, and an unloader of trucks—and you’re the complaints department when any of that goes wrong. At a Walmart or a Target, in contrast, there’s a full staff, and everyone has clearly-defined roles. At Dollar General, you do everything, all for one low, low price.

The pay really is low, too. Retail companies often discourage their workers from talking about wages, so I think it’s important to be very explicit here. When I started working for Dollar General in 2019, I made \$8.50 an hour. You can do the math: that’s \$68 for a standard eight-hour shift, or \$340 for a 40-hour week. Not much in a country where the average rent is estimated at \$1,372 a month. And with a few rare exceptions, nobody actually got 40 hours. Every employee except the manager was part-time, and schedules were wildly unpredictable. Some weeks you’d work 39.5 hours, just enough to keep you below the full-time threshold (and thus without healthcare benefits), and other weeks it would be more like 15 or 20 hours. The constantly-fluctuating income made budgeting interesting, to say the least. By the winter of 2022, though, things were looking up: my pay had increased to a whopping \$11 an hour! (Before tax, mind you.) According to data from the Economic Policy Institute, this was pretty much typical. In 2021, 92 percent of Dollar General workers made less than \$15 an hour. In other words, starvation wages. I was lucky enough to live in a relatively cheap part of the country, but there are dollar stores in the most expensive cities in the U.S., like New York and Seattle. I have no idea how the workers there survive, unless they each have six roommates or something.

(At this point, the usual chorus of free-market defenders might pipe up, arguing that retail jobs aren't intended to support adults and are just "entry-level" jobs for high-school kids to get a little experience. To which we can reply: *then why is the store open during school hours, smart guy?*)

Being constantly spied on by management was fun, too. In the 21st century, virtually every workplace has some kind of surveillance system, but the Dollar General corporation is especially fond of theirs. When I started the job, one of the first warnings I got from a co-worker was "Be careful. They watch the cameras." I'd soon find out how true that was. It turned out that "they" mostly meant Mike, the district manager. Rather than do any actual work, Mike would sit in his office watching the CCTV feeds for the fifteen or twenty stores within his little fiefdom, and whenever he saw something he didn't like, he'd call that store's phone to yell at the worker in question. On one occasion, someone at my store had the audacity to *sit down* for a minute, several hours into their shift; we got an earful from Mike about that. In fact, it seemed like the cameras existed mostly to police and micro-manage the workers, rather than prevent thefts by the general public. In 2017, sociology professor Tracy L. Vargas published a study on "surveillance and scrutiny" in U.S. dollar stores, focusing on a company she called "Dollar Basic"—which I'd bet my internal organs is really Dollar General. After working at "Dollar Basic" for six months herself, Vargas concluded that employees there are "monitored with pathological intensity" and are always assumed to be guilty of something by a "web of contradictory work policies, technological apparatuses, and management strategies that position them as suspects" regardless of their actual behavior. That sounds about right.

Even the store managers don't have it much better. They are on the receiving end of the same corporate greed and abuse, just in a different form. Managers are usually salaried employees, and under U.S. law, companies aren't required to pay hourly overtime to anyone with a salary above \$35,568. (Before 2020, the threshold was even lower, at just \$23,660.) This means that dollar stores can work their managers a lot more than 40 hours a week and still pay them the same flat amount. The extra hours are essentially free, and the companies take full advantage. In a particularly awful case documented by the Economic Policy Institute, a woman named Dawn Hughey was paid \$34,700 a year to manage a Dollar General in Flint, Michigan, and was initially told she'd be working 44-hour weeks. In reality, she often ended up working 60 or 70 hours a week, for no additional pay. This, too, is typical of the entire dollar-store industry. In a 2022 report, *Business Insider* spoke to nine former Family Dollar managers who each said they'd been required to work unpaid overtime:

"Our regional manager told us it was mandatory to do at least 65 hours a week, even though we were scheduled for 52," a former store manager from Michigan said. "They were careful not to put that in writing." The root of the problem, many former store managers said, was that the company didn't allocate enough money to schedule other workers for the hours needed to keep the store running. "They tell you, 'If you don't have anybody to work, then you work,'" another former manager said.

There is, as it happens, a word for labor that's both mandatory and unpaid: slavery.

AT THE DOLLAR GENERAL WHERE I WORKED, OUR manager—a tough, hardworking woman called Kelly—did at least get occasional bonuses. But even this was organized in a deeply bizarre and unfair way. Managers' bonuses were paid out, or not, based on the store's performance, and that "performance" was calculated almost entirely from customer surveys. You've probably seen these before: they're the little website links, at the bottom of receipts, which say something chirpy and corporate like "*Tell Us How We're Doing!*" Because you're normal, you probably completely ignore these and throw your receipts away. Almost everyone does. In a typical month, we'd maybe get 5 or 6 survey responses, and the vast majority of them were from grouchy people making weird, unreasonable complaints. (Someone once left a negative rating because a cashier said "no problem" to them instead of "you're welcome.") The low response rate on receipt surveys—less than 1 percent of customers answer them, according to one study—means that random cranks have a disproportionate influence on the results. Even one negative survey can wreck a manager's average performance score, leading to reduced bonuses or none at all. At best, this is an incredibly stupid way to compensate people for their work. But really, I suspect the company does it this way on purpose, so they have a plausible excuse to avoid paying out. The survey system does have one silver lining, though. If anyone reading this is getting mistreated by a DG manager, now you know how to screw them back.

Of course, from the bosses' perspective, everything is working perfectly. In fact, dollar stores are extremely profitable for the companies that run them. In 2022, Dollar Tree (which, as of 2015, also owns the Family Dollar chain) reported a gross profit of \$7.7 billion, while Dollar General made \$10.8 billion. The sheer size of the dollar retail chains is staggering. There are more than 35,000 dollar stores across the United States, and more than 19,000 of them are Dollar Generals. (For comparison, that other sleazy retail giant that mistreats its workers, Walmart, has around 5,200 retail stores in the U.S., including Sam's stores.) The number is rapidly growing, too. By some estimates, Dollar General opens three new stores every day, many of them in low-income rural areas where people have few other options for shopping or work. In 2023, the company even went international, opening its first location in Mexico. In the break room, we used to joke that if Elon Musk ever does land on Mars, he'll find a Dollar General waiting to greet him.

As *Forbes* puts it, this dramatic growth comes from a "winning combination of cheap land, cheap construction and cheap labor." Really, dollar stores do *everything* as cheaply as possible, and that includes the manufacture of the merchandise itself. You might think buying something for a dollar is a bargain, but in most cases the dollar store paid much, much less. In *One Buck At a Time*, Macon Brock brags about buying polyresin bear statues from China at just 33 cents apiece:

Some others might read about "Bear on Books" and accuse us of exploiting the Chinese; they might say that, with our paying so little, those men and women on the assembly line couldn't

have made more than pennies per hour. I think it's probably true that they made very little money, but I believe it to be equally true that without our business they'd have no work at all.

Isn't it amazing what CEOs will admit to, in books they assume will only be read by their fellow bourgeois scumbags? Brock is describing *sweatshop labor*, and he's proud of it. In 2010, the activist group China Labor Watch conducted an investigation into four randomly-selected factories, all of which supplied U.S. dollar stores with various products, and found hideous labor abuses at each one. For example, the Yiu Yi Plastic and Mould factory in Shenzhen, China made "Christmas crafts, plastic toys, poly products, timepieces, and electronics toys" for Dollar General. There, the investigators found that workers performed "overtime work [for a] total 300 hours during peak seasons," which meant that "sometimes workers only get one day off in a month." There was "no regular pay date," "no evaluations of occupational hazards"—despite "potential safety risks caused by poor management of chemicals"—and "no annual leave, maternity leave or marriage leave." There was, however, plenty of fraud: according to the report, "the factory would prepare workers for inspections, and workers answering questions 'correctly' would be rewarded with a [one] time bonus of \$14.29." People's lives were put at risk, all to stack the shelves of dollar stores across the U.S. with cheap plastic crap.

Dollar stores endanger their workers' lives here in the States, too. Since 2014, at least 49 people have died in Dollar General stores, and 172 have been injured. The company is on OSHA's list of "severe violators," having racked up \$21 million in fines for workplace safety issues since 2017. Meanwhile, OSHA has found more than 300 violations at Dollar Tree-owned stores, and officials say the company has demonstrated a "repeated and continued disregard for human safety," often blocking fire exits and stacking boxes in haphazard piles that could topple and crush someone. In *Bloomberg*, we can find a disturbing account from David Williams, a former Dollar General worker from New Orleans:

While he was unloading sausages and soup cans, the manager called him over to a fire door and showed him how to build a pyramid of water cases that would obstruct it. The idea was to deter shoplifting. Williams, who was a Hurricane Katrina refugee in his teens, says he knew this was dangerous, and he felt guilty—especially when customers asked about it. But it seemed clear that, if he wanted to keep his job, he had to do it, so he did.

Having worked the same job as Williams, I find this darkly funny, even as it's also horrifying. Of course the company was more worried about the possibility of shoplifting than someone dying in a fire. That's them in a nutshell. Even the practice of having one person open a store alone in the morning, as I did many times, isn't particularly safe. What if I'd had a heart attack one of those mornings, with nobody around to dial 911? What if someone showed up with a gun? The latter happens all the time. In August 2022 alone, there were 3 armed robberies at Dollar Tree stores, 5 at Family Dollars, and 15 at Dollar Generals. Dollar stores were robbed more days than not. Speaking to CBS, one retail analyst

suggests that the stores make "a particular target for crime as they are often staffed by only one or two people, so would-be criminals feel they're a softer target." The crimes are a direct result of the companies' cost-skimping. And when workers do become victims of violence on the job, the bosses reveal just how little they care. In 2018, a St. Louis man named Robert Woods was shot and killed as he worked a shift at Dollar General, and the store remained open for several hours after his body was carried out. Everyone had to just keep on working like nothing had happened, until "protests from local residents" finally shut the store down.

KNOWING ALL THIS MAKES IT ESPECIALLY DISGUSTING that dollar stores try to portray themselves as a force for good in society. In this respect, they're nothing if not brazen liars. Dollar Tree's corporate values statement insists that the company is "dedicated to making peoples' lives better," while Dollar General's motto is simply "Serving Others." The whole industry drips with sanctimony. In his book *My Father's Business*, Cal Turner Jr.—a beneficiary of nepotism who replaced his father, Cal Sr., as Dollar General's CEO in 1977—describes the company's "mission" as something downright benevolent:

We defined our customers as "deserving, salt-of-the-earth people struggling to make ends meet." That definition helped us to come up with our first mission statement: "To serve better than anyone else does our customer's need for quality basic merchandise at everyday low prices."

Yes, you read that right. To hear the executives tell it, selling stuff for a dollar isn't just a marketing strategy. It's an act of *service*. Good old Cal was taking pity on the poor, struggling folks of the world by offering all those bargains. Profit? Greed? Never heard of them. And that virtuous goal, in turn, justifies paying workers as little as possible:

I had always heard my dad and grandfather agree that low-end retailing is the struggling, gutsy end of the business. You have to work the dickens out of your people, and you can't pay them much in order to keep your overhead low and survive.

In other words: to serve poor people, you have to keep people poor. How convenient.

I don't mean to suggest that working at Dollar General was pure misery. There were occasional bright spots, although they always came in spite of the company, not because of it. Mainly, my co-workers made the job bearable. There was another Alex, this one a Zen Buddhist who was always up for a debate on philosophy. There was Ana, who was studying to be a cosmetologist; Aiden, who was building a gaming PC from parts (he never did get it working); Vanessa, who consumed more energy drinks than anyone I've met; and plenty of others who only worked for a month or two before fleeing. (An understandable reaction.) We all quietly despised "corporate" and helped each other muddle along as best we could. If your car battery wore down, someone was always ready with jumper cables. If you badly needed a certain day off, someone was usually willing to fill in. Nobody used the word

“solidarity,” but that’s what it was. We had to have each other’s backs, because we knew the company never would.

Working retail puts you in touch with the community where you live in a way few other jobs can. Sooner or later, everyone has to stop and buy the basics—soup, dog food, Pepto-Bismol, etc.—so you eventually *meet* everyone and get a glimpse into their life. You get a sense of how well people are doing, or how badly. At this particular dollar store, it was often “badly.” Around a third of the customers, to make a conservative estimate, were relying on food stamps to buy their groceries. (According to government data, so were 4,488 Dollar General workers, which means U.S. taxpayers were forced to subsidize the company’s stinginess. Dollar Tree had slightly more workers on government assistance at 4,515, and Walmart and McDonald’s had even more.) Expensive food items would sit on the shelf until they expired; ramen noodles sold out almost immediately. People would come in with Ziploc bags full of change they’d scrounged from their cars, painstakingly count it out, and hope they had enough for their kids’ allergy medicine. Eventually, we started keeping an emergency fund under the counter with a few bucks for anyone who ran short. At one point, the store had a mysterious villain: we kept finding empty packages of Imodium tucked behind other items, where someone had popped open the boxes and shoplifted the pills. We dubbed this person “the Diarrhea Bandit,” and it was funny, but also kind of tragic. Like many drugs, Imodium can be abused, but at \$13.75 a box it’s also fairly expensive; it could simply be that someone couldn’t afford to treat a legitimate medical need they had. In any case, nobody would be stealing if they had any better options.

THERE’S A CERTAIN CLASS OF PUNDIT, like Dr. Steven Pinker, whose schtick is to insist that capitalism makes life just great for everyone. They’re praised and rewarded, by capitalists, for holding this opinion. In the last year or two, a variant strain has emerged, whose stock-in-trade is to claim the Biden economy is a good one, and that anyone who believes otherwise is just delusional. These people have all sorts of impressive-looking charts they’ve made in PowerPoint, with lines pointing perkily up, and they’re always very smug and self-assured. But the truth is, there’s a depth of poverty and want in this country that no economic graph can express, because there are places no economist or statistician ever goes. I’d like to see one of these modern-day Dr. Panglosses work behind a dollar-store counter for six months and then look me in the eye and say the economy is good.

Needless to say, what we really needed was a union. It’s a fact that workers in a union get better wages, benefits, and safety protections, while workers without one get scraps and pennies. Unfortunately, the company knew this too, and they did

everything in their power to prevent organizing. In the breakroom where I worked, there was a huge poster called “Positive Work Environment and Remaining Union Free”—subtlety was not the goal—that listed all the usual anti-union talking points. The company was “built on respect and opportunity,” we were told, and that meant that workers “have a direct voice and will be heard.” If you had a workplace issue, you should just talk to your manager or call the company hotline. The poster cautioned us to “carefully examine any literature” a labor organizer handed out and advised us we had a “right to refuse” joining a union. (It didn’t mention that we had a right to *accept*, too.) Ominously, it warned us to be aware of the “issues and consequences of signing the union card.” Really, it was a masterful piece of legalese, stopping *just* short of making actual threats. There was a video version too, where cheerful Dollar General workers—I’m convinced they were paid actors, because their uniforms were spotless—solemnly told us how expensive union dues could be and how they wouldn’t want a “third party” getting involved in their work. It was longer than almost any other training video, including the ones about workplace safety.

Propaganda tactics like these are common enough, at workplaces from Walmart to Amazon. They are, unfortunately, allowed under U.S. labor law. In the past, though, dollar stores have gone well beyond what’s legal in their efforts to crush labor organizing.

In another passage from *My Father’s Business*, our old friend Cal Turner Jr. relates how his dad handled things:

I remember that during one attempt to organize J.L. Turner and Son [the predecessor to Dollar General] employees, a bookkeeper named Barbara invited two other bookkeepers to join her for lunch with a union organizer. My dad found out about it and saw to it that she was fired by five o’clock that afternoon.

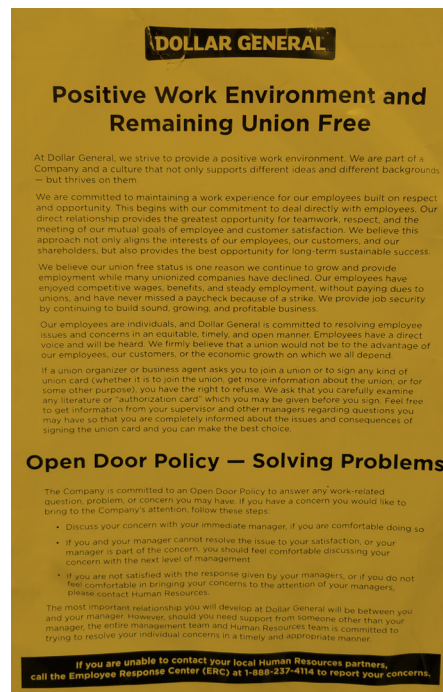
Later, Barbara calls the Turner residence, and Cal Jr. stands by the phone, hoping his dad won’t accidentally tell the truth: that he fired her illegally, just for getting information about a union.

“Mr. Turner,” she said, “I want to know why I was fired from J.L. Turner and Son.”

“Well, Barbara,” he said, “I can’t discuss that with you until Mr. Craddock [who was in charge of the bookkeepers] and I can sit down together and talk about it.”

Yes! I thought. He’s aced it. Now if I could just get him off the phone.

“However,” he said—and I knew something bad was coming—“I think everyone should know that we don’t intend to have any union sympathizers working for J.L. Turner and Son.”



Dollar General's anti-union poster

Once again, it's kind of breathtaking how these people just openly admit the depths of their wrongdoing. In *One Buck at a Time*, Macon Brock concurs with the Turners, saying he decided early on that "we don't have unions at Dollar Tree. Not one." Both men's malign influence can still be felt today.

THAT HASN'T STOPPED SOME BRAVE AND DETERMINED people from organizing anyway. In the South, a group called Step Up Louisiana has been fighting for the rights of dollar store workers, especially on the issue of workplace safety. They say they're a "labor movement," but not a union, favoring tactics like street protests and advocacy in the media over traditional workplace organizing. In May of 2022 and 2023, their members held protests outside Dollar General's annual shareholder meeting in Goodlettsville, Tennessee, where they were joined by workers from groups like the Union of Southern Service Workers (USSW). Presumably they'll be doing it again in 2024, although no specific plans have been announced. Step Up Louisiana's demands include hiring "community safety managers"—not police or private security guards, but "in-house" dollar-store workers who'd be trained in de-escalation and self-defense—to increase workers' safety. They also want guarantees that no worker will be scheduled to run an entire store alone and paid time off for any worker who suffers a traumatic event like a robbery. Really, that's the bare minimum anyone could reasonably expect.

Elsewhere, other workers have tried to organize their stores. One of the most notable cases was in Auxvasse, Missouri, where the staff of a Dollar General voted to unionize with the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 655 in 2017. There was a lengthy court battle over the election, as Dollar General alleged that the 4-2 vote was influenced by threats and bribery. (They didn't offer any actual evidence, of course.) Finally, in February of 2020, the Eighth Circuit ruled that the company had to recognize the union. That May, Dollar General responded by closing its Auxvasse location entirely, citing "an assessment of the store's future profitability." It was a transparent act of retaliation and a demonstration of how determined the company is to retain unchallenged power over its workers. As David Cook, the president of UFCW Local 655, put it at the time:

I don't think anybody out there recognizes the value an employer like Dollar General puts on having an at-will workforce. 'At will' means I can fire you for any reason I want as long as it's not color, religion, or ethnicity. It's that ultimate power of intimidation.... You can't put a value on that if you're an employer—especially one the size of Dollar General.

In 2018, during the legal battle, the company put that power to use. When Margeorie Nation, the manager of a nearby Dollar General in Glasgow, Missouri, asked a question about the Auxvasse union drive on social media, the company abruptly fired her for it. They also fired one of their analysts, Daniel Stone, for speaking up about unsafe working conditions during the height of the Covid pandemic in 2020. Most recently, when a Dollar General in Barkhamsted, Connecticut was about to hold a union election in 2021, the company reportedly "hired five anti-union consultants, each of whom

was paid \$2,700 a day." The election narrowly failed—although the NLRB later ruled that Dollar General had made unlawful threats to close the Barkhamsted store, just as they had done in Auxvasse.

In light of these companies' commitment to union-busting, I have a few thoughts on strategy. It seems obvious that organizing at the store level, when it's successful, will be met with something we might call the "Auxvasse Treatment." That is, the store in question will simply be shut down, and the company will make excuses about how it suddenly became unprofitable. It's a method Starbucks has also been using, shuttering 23 stores in 2022 in response to union activity. As a result, I believe a successful labor campaign at Dollar General, Dollar Tree, or Family Dollar will need to unionize an entire *district* at once. I can only speak for the chain I worked for, but at Dollar General, a district consisted of roughly 20 stores. This presents a significantly larger task than organizing one store, but it may not be insurmountable. Typically each store has five or six part-time workers, plus an assistant manager (full-time, but paid hourly) and a store manager (salaried.) Multiplied by 20, that's around 160 workers for each district. And as we've seen, the store managers are getting mistreated by the company almost as much as anyone else, which may make them surprisingly open to unionizing. The challenge wouldn't be the numbers—the Staten Island Amazon warehouse that unionized in 2022 had thousands, not hundreds, of workers—but how geographically spread out the workers are, and the logistics of getting them on the same page. Still, I think it's achievable and worth a serious attempt. They can't shut down a whole district.

ONE OF THE UNACKNOWLEDGED TITANS OF AMERICAN literature, as far as I'm concerned, is the Detroit-born horror writer Thomas Ligotti. In his 2001 novella *My Work is Not Yet Done*, Ligotti writes about the experience of working for a faceless, soulless capitalist entity that feeds on human misery. He wasn't talking about a dollar store, but he might as well have been:

The company that employed me strived only to serve up the cheapest fare that the customer would tolerate, churn it out as fast as possible, and charge as much as they could get away with. If it were possible to do so, the company would sell what all businesses of its kind dream about selling, creating that which all of our efforts were tacitly supposed to achieve: the ultimate product—Nothing. And for this product they would command the ultimate price—Everything.

In this brief survey of U.S. dollar stores, we've seen plenty of horrors, too—from the low pay, to the union-busting, to the Chinese sweatshops, to poor Robert Woods lying dead in an aisle in St. Louis. I think about Robert Woods a lot. In each case, these things are not flaws or mistakes in the business model. They *are* the business model. Everything dollar stores do follows naturally from the core premise of any for-profit business: to maximize income while minimizing expense. It's just that wages, safety, and ultimately life itself are expenses. Dollar stores are what capitalism looks like when it finally takes off the mask and stops trying to pretend. They can't be reformed. They, and the system they stand for, have to be completely overthrown, and only working-class rebellion can do the job. ✚

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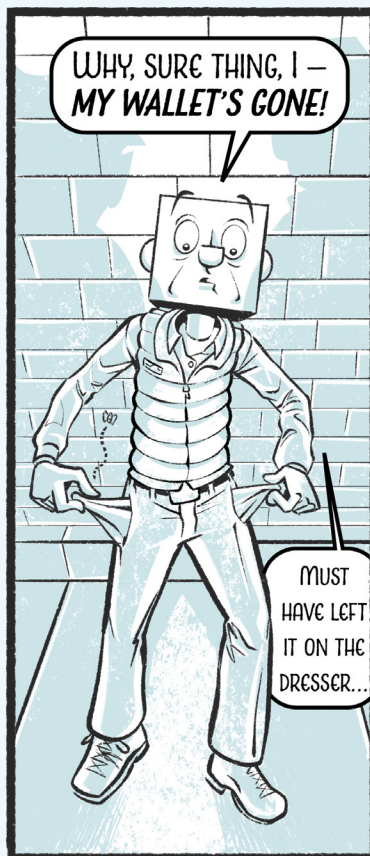
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We Adopted An Axolotl and You Should Too

THESE FASCINATING CREATURES ARE CRITICALLY ENDANGERED.
“ADOPT” ONE TO HELP CONSERVE THEM!

BY NATHAN J. ROBINSON

THE AXOLOTL IS A WEIRD LITTLE GUY. THEY'RE A TYPE of salamander that lives in Mexico. They are fun to look at, because they have a set of physical characteristics that makes them look extremely cute to humans. They often look like they're smiling, and it's difficult to remind yourself that just because an animal looks to us like it's smiling, doesn't mean it's actually smiling or happy. Remembering this is not enough to overcome the impression, though, and it's hard not to think of them as cheerful and delightful.

The axolotl is actually interesting to science, because it has impressive powers to regenerate bits of itself after they have been damaged. The axolotl can even regenerate new brain cells, which I wish I could do after reading through Twitter posts for more than a few minutes. Axolotl brain regeneration is being studied to see if it holds any clues for how we might help humans with serious brain injuries.

Some other fun axolotl facts: they breathe through those feathery things on the sides of their heads, which are gills. They can live for 15 years if well cared-for. They can be up to a foot long. They live entirely underwater, unlike other salamanders. And they exist in a kind of perpetual youth, because they don't outgrow their larval stage. They are the “Peter Pan of salamanders.”

Unfortunately, a less fun axolotl fact is that they're critically endangered. Axolotls are only found in a small complex of lakes in Mexico, and pollution has killed a huge number of them off. The axolotl population has declined by a horrifying 99.5 percent. They're just being completely wiped out, like so many other animals.

Now there's a campaign to save the axolotls. Mexico's National Autonomous University gives the public the chance to “adopt” an axolotl. It costs \$30. You don't get to take it home with you. It stays in Mexico. But

you know you're doing your axolotl some good, and funding the conservation effort.

(For a smaller donation, you can “buy an axolotl a meal.”)

Current Affairs has, of course, adopted an axolotl. The form makes

you choose whether you want a male or female axolotl. I chose a female. Then it asks you to name it. I named ours “Seymour,” because I forgot that I had chosen a female axolotl (and because gendered naming conventions are arbitrary). Supposedly we'll be getting an “adoption kit” soon with more information and a certificate, as well as updates on how our axolotl is doing.

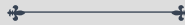
I would like to point out that if you're looking for a slightly offbeat gift idea, adopting an axolotl in someone's name is entirely charming. (You could also give them a plush axolotl at the same time, of which there are astonishingly many types available online.) It's for a good cause. These fascinating little creatures need help, and for a small sum you can help the effort to keep the species going.

Now, I have to note briefly that axolotls are, in many ways, an easy creature to care about because of their “cuteness” and because they're weird and interesting. Human beings have biases toward certain species that are entirely arbitrary, with the so-called “charismatic megafauna” getting outsized attention. We have to remember that the value of an animal's life does not depend on whether it's “cool,” and I recommend reading Kecia Doolittle's recent piece in this magazine about her effort to save a couple of neglected turkeys from a factory farm. The axolotl got lucky enough in the genetic lottery to attract human sympathy with its quasi-smile. A lot of the other creatures we kill by the millions do not tug the heartstrings in the same way. The animal rights movement is based around the idea that animals' experiences and intrinsic value, not their outward appearances, are what matter. Likewise, it shouldn't matter whether they can contribute to important scientific research about regenerating neurons. We need a respect for animal life that isn't particular to the animals we happen to be drawn to.

Nevertheless: the axolotl campaign does good, and you can feel good about helping them. I recommend using it to start broader conversations around animal rights. But I also think it's just a really nice thing to get someone to show them you care. What says “I love you” like an axolotl adoption certificate? ♣

“I was friend of the lions and panthers, but had never gone into the dark, humid building that was the aquarium. I left my bike against the gratings and went to look at the tulips. The lions were sad and ugly and my panther was asleep. I decided on the aquarium, looked obliquely at banal fish until, unexpectedly, I hit it off with the axolotls. I stayed watching them for an hour and left, unable to think of anything else.” - Julio Cortazar, “The Axolotl”





Dear wonderful subscribers,

I just wanted to take a bit of space to wish you all the best for the holidays and thank you for all of your support for this magazine. As you know, it's a rough time for independent media, and seemingly every other week there are new reports of publications being forced to shut down. We've been fortunate to have a base of subscribers and donors who have allowed us to survive and thrive in a difficult media environment. So thank you! Thank you for helping us build an independent left magazine with no advertising (other than the fake ads for nonexistent products, and some plugs for our own stuff!). Thank you for reading and sharing our material. Thank you to those who have visited us at CAHQ here in New Orleans this year, and to those who donated money to help us furnish our new offices. (See plaque.)

We're really proud of the hundreds of articles and podcast episodes we've put out over the course of 2023, on a broad range of important subjects. We encourage you to check out our archives to see what you may have missed! We can't wait to bring you more great magazine issues in 2024. The world is full of dire risks and major challenges, but we're here with you all through it, trying to offer comfort, explanation, and encouragement.

But we really need your help. CA cannot survive without ongoing support. We're now a registered 501c3 organization (EIN 83-1675720), and your tax-deductible donations to our organization go toward the crucial task of building independent journalism. We need your help! We are actively looking for new sources of funding for our organization, so get in touch with us if you can give us leads, and head to <http://currentaffairs.org/donate> to make a donation directly. Every bit helps!

As I say, it was a great 2023 for us. Our wonderful writers and artists have produced some extraordinary work. We've been able to expand our team, having hired two new staff members, editor Alex Skopic and designer Cali Traina Blume. We started a News Briefing service under the supervision of Stephen Prager (subscribe if you haven't! <http://currentaffairs.substack.com>). And we'll be continuing to grow in the new year. You're the ones who have made it possible, and we appreciate you!

All best for a pleasant start to your 2024,

Nathan J. Robinson
Editor in Chief

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