

The Magazine That Loves To Be Held

CURRENT AFFAIRS

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LIMITS

Should there be any?

POLITICAL POETRY

*Should anyone ever
write it?*

TECHNO FEUDALISM

Is that what this is?

EVERYTHING PICTURED IN THE TABLE OF CONTENTS IS FOR SALE... FOR A PRICE.

PRIZES OR CASH

WE'LL SELL YOU KNOWLEDGE

You love facts, right? Why else would you pick up this magazine? Well, we've got news for you: there's more where these came from. In fact, our office is piled high with facts, spilling out of every drawer and cranny (not, however, every nook). Bananas are radioactive! Honey never expires! This is just a small sampling of the knowledge available across the vast *Current Affairs* archives, which contain text, artifacts, *objets d'art*, and a whole lot of maps (lightly used). And they could be YOURS. We sell facts by the dozen, facts by the score. Ask about special bulk discounts on facts. Every fact has been carefully checked for maximum swallowability and veracity.* Lay some on passersby. Share them at dinner. With a friend! A coworker! Everyone loves facts. And these are full facts, not mere "factoids." They're primo stuff. But act now, these facts are going fast and are in short supply.



ALLIGATOR TO ENGLISH DICTIONARY

EXPRESSION	MOOD	TRANSLATION
	IRATE	I AM GOING TO EAT YOU
	DELIGHTED	I AM GOING TO EAT YOU
	PENSIVE	I AM GOING TO EAT YOU
	RUEFUL	I AM GOING TO EAT YOU

THIS ISSUE IS CURSED

One of the hazards of publishing a magazine in New Orleans is that there are mysterious forces in the air which constantly threaten to wreak havoc on one's best-laid plans. Voodoo, vampires, etc. can all disrupt one's day and rain on one's parade (and we have a *lot* of parades). We have been comparatively fortunate that, until issue 46, local paranormal phenomena had done nothing to interfere with the production schedule. However, there is a first time for everything, and we didn't realize when we accidentally knocked over a small bearded man in the French Quarter that he was a creature known as a "bayou warlock," who lives above the voodoo trinkets shop and can put vengeful and sadistic curses on magazine editors. Turns out this is a thing! Obviously we have regrets, though we should emphasize that he was hit with the editorial bicycle entirely by accident, and the character of our apology after the fact could best be characterized as groveling and profuse. Nevertheless, these temperamental creatures are known for showing no mercy and holding no quarter, and before we could get round the corner onto Toulouse Street, we

found a rather nasty spell being cast in our direction. The spell has wrought havoc in the office. It has jammed up the printers, gummed the locks, disordered the books, disrobed the lavatory attendant, spoiled the cheeses, and (most distressingly of all) evaporated the coffee. Once this issue is put to bed (both literally and figuratively), we have scheduled a field trip for the whole staff into the heart of the French Quarter, where we will seek out our warlock tormentor and endeavor to appease him. Should that fail, we will ask the spirit of Marie Laveau to intercede. Should Marie be in an ungenerous mood, we will reluctantly resort to asking Jean Lafitte, and do whatever ludicrous favor he demands of us in return (swab the decks of a dozen ghost ships, etc.). We hope soon to have a favorable report on our progress. In the meantime, please be aware that the curse has affected every individual copy of the magazine, and by touching it you have now yourself been cursed, for which we apologize.

SEND A SUBSCRIPTION TO THIS MAGAZINE TO 10 PEOPLE TO LIFT THE CURSE!



DID YOU KNOW???

Magazine Street in New Orleans is named after *Current Affairs* Magazine!

WRITE FOR THIS VERY MAGAZINE



Hey you! Yes, *you*. No, not the person behind you, although say hello to them for us. We're looking straight at you, kiddo. Have you ever been passing through the world and thought to yourself: "Gee, this person/phenomenon/object/event would make a superb subject for an article in the leading national political and cultural magazine *Current Affairs*!"? Well, when you have had these thoughts, have you considered writing them up and submitting them? No? Well, we take pitches! Simply scan the code to be taken to our submission form and Writer's Guide!

THE GOLDEN CURRENT AFFAIRS SNEAKERS

Folks: It ain't easy making it as a print magazine in a digital era. You've got to hustle to survive. Why do you think our editor-in-chief can regularly be seen standing on the streetcorners of the French Quarter, shouting "Magazines! Magazines! A penny a pound!"? You do what you have to do to survive, and we're not proud of some of the things we've resorted to in order to keep this little publication afloat. (We formally apologize to all those who experienced food poisoning from our mail-order steaks.) But there's one thing we never won't be proud of, and that's our new line of *Current Affairs* golden sneakers. These gold lamé sneakers are a stylish addition to your existing collection of CA-branded merchandise. You'll be shocked by the attention to detail and craftsmanship that went into their creation. The sole is made from a durable rubber with specks of gold glitter, while the tongue is padded for comfort, featuring a discreet embossed *Current Affairs* magazine. You'll be the envy of the schoolyard, building site, or town square! Everywhere you go (the mall, etc.) you can expect to hear strangers shout: "Hey kid, are those some *Current Affairs* brand gold sneakers you're wearing?" Don't you want that experience? Don't you want it RIGHT NOW? Well, you can't have it right now, but you can have it within just 6-8 weeks by sending in your check or cheque today and getting some of these puppies onto your feet ASAP.



RANCID & WRETCHED

It has been brought to the editors' attention that in every issue, at least one person, place, or thing is described as being "both rancid and wretched." Multiple (2) readers have written in to discourage us from repeated use of these descriptors, with one commenting that they are "on the verge of becoming a *Current Affairs* cliché." Now, we would maintain that the various items or individuals described this way (termites, Ron DeSantis, a leaking industrial drum of phenol waste, the two-party system) merited the label, for this magazine is committed to never publishing an inaccuracy. But we understand the desire for us to find different words. We therefore affirm a commitment to using alternate phrases in similar contexts, including:

Malodorous and abhorrent
Stinking and repulsive
Rotten and repugnant
Rank and abominable
Fetid and despicable
Putrid and vile

WE
WELCOME
FURTHER
SUGGESTIONS
FROM
READERS

CORRECTION: IN THE LAST EDITION, TEXT FOR THE "CENTRIST POLITICIAN DOLL" SHOULD HAVE BEEN CREDITED TO RYAN DARRAH. SORRY, RYAN!

VOTE IN THE CURRENT AFFAIRS PRIMARY!

It is a strong belief among the editors of *Current Affairs* that magazines should be a crucial part of the American political process. This is not the case in America's antiquated system, in which delegates are allotted based on something as arbitrary as what geographical borders one happens to reside in. But that doesn't mean that we can't be the change we wish to see in the world. That's why we are introducing the *Current Affairs* presidential primary!

Our news briefing writer, Stephen Prager, who resides in Indiana, has generously offered up his singular vote in both the Republican and Democratic primaries to be bound to the will of the *Current Affairs* readership. Indiana is an open primary state, meaning that each voter gets to cast a ballot in the primaries for ALL parties, not just the one they are registered in.

This means that in addition to their individual votes in whatever primaries our readers will be voting, *Current Affairs* will collectively be able to control a vote in each party primary within Indiana. In other words, this means that the collective readership of *Current Affairs* will (assuming turnout from the last election remains consistent) control one-5,677th of a delegate within the Indiana Democratic primary and one-9,470th of a delegate within the Republican primary.

This is an immense amount of power that could change the course of the nation's history. And we expect our readers to wield it wisely. Stephen will be voting in the Indiana primary on

May 7. The *Current Affairs* primary allows early voting, so please scan this QR code to cast your ballot now! Use your vote wisely.



CURRENT AFFAIRS MAGAZINE OPPOSES THE DESTRUCTION OF CANADA BY THE BUFFALO DEFENSE FORCE

SORRY WE MISSED VALENTINE'S DAY

Here's the thing: Every February 14th, we make the same plan: "Remember to tell the subscribers you love them!" This year we forgot. We're sorry. We love you.

PEOPLE BRAVER THAN THE COPS

Firefighters
Garbage collectors
Uber and Lyft drivers
Cashiers
Healthcare workers
Gas station attendants
Guys who say "UH" and "YEAH" in the background of rap videos
Street magicians
Yoga instructors
Librarians
Gardeners
Election workers
The Best Buy Geek Squad
Baristas
Plumbers
My mom
Your mom
1950s character actor
Thurl Ravenscroft
Janitors
Parking lot attendants
Junior safety patrol crossing guards
Bartenders
Walmart greeters
Amazon warehouse workers
People who steal pies from windowsills
Sex workers
Ombudsmen/ombudswomen
Kebab vendors
Pianists
Flaneurs

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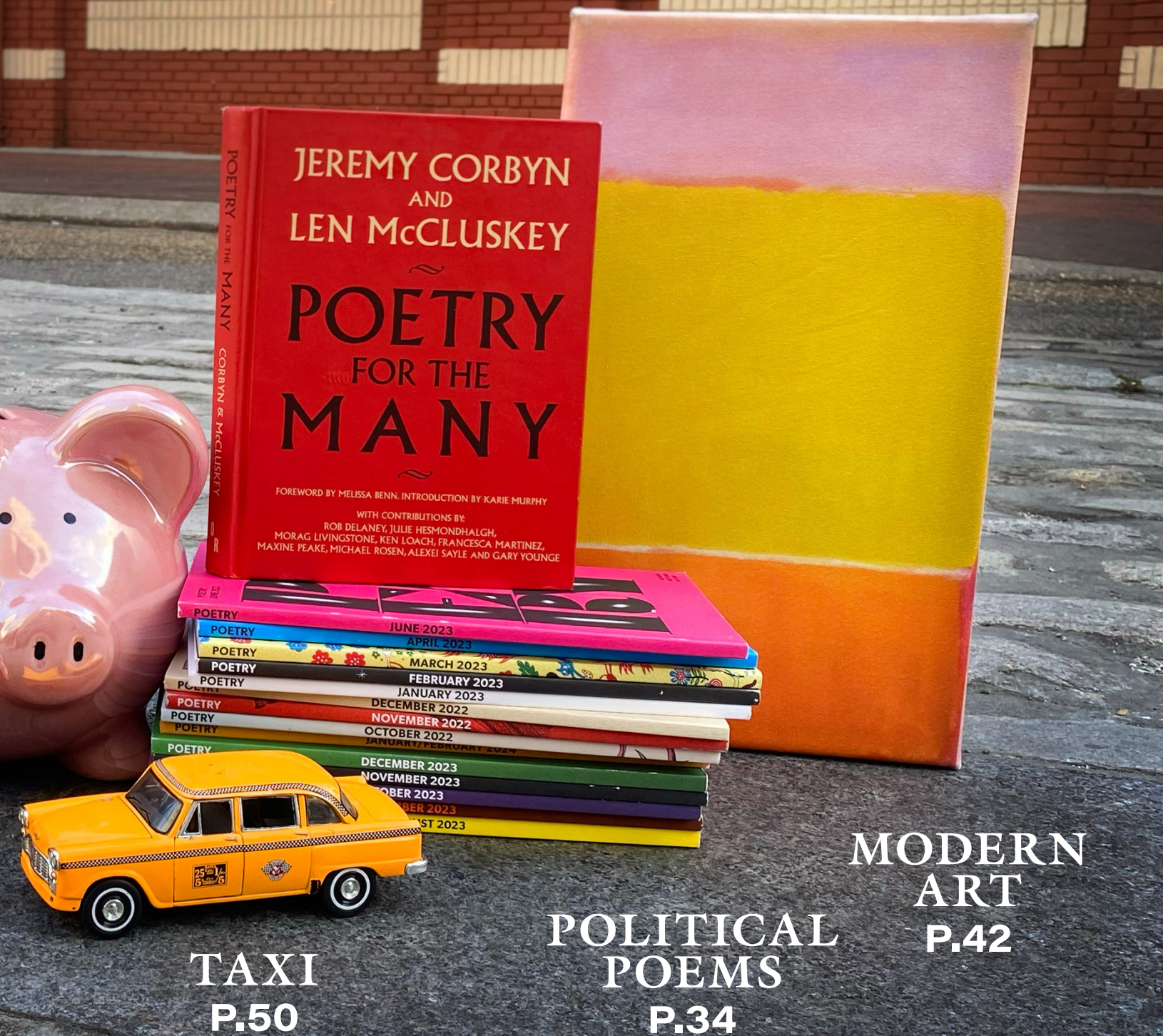
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A Garden of Ecotopias

BY ANNIE LEVIN

IN THE 21ST CENTURY, WE HAVE DREAMED COLLECTIVELY of dystopia. From *The Hunger Games* to *The Road*, from highbrow to lowbrow, from surreal satire to brutal social realism, the craving for post-apocalyptic fiction has become insatiable. Last year, *The Last of Us*, a TV series based on a video game about a mutated fungus turning the human race into zombie-mushrooms, averaged more than 30 million viewers per episode. It was the most pirated and Google searched show of 2023. *The Hunger Games*, Suzanne Collins's novel series about a televised child murder game show in post-apocalyptic America, remains one of the best-selling science fiction series of all time, with over 100 million copies sold worldwide. As we storm into a future where our planet's ecology is collapsing and fossil fuel-addicted nations hasten the global trudge towards climate apocalypse, this hunger for the dystopian is understandable. Watching our species crawl from one climate disaster—one record-breaking heat wave, hurricane, or wildfire—to the next, it makes sense that we want to fast forward past slow decline and boiling summers to see how this movie will end. Will it be a Christian fascist theocracy, as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, or will our drought-ravaged desert planet be ruled by the car-obsessed warlords of *Mad Max: Fury Road*? We are all, quite reasonably, anxious about the future of our species. Post-apocalyptic fiction, like much mass entertainment under capitalism, feeds and gamifies that anxiety.

Since capitalism gives free rein to our collective death drive, our self-destructiveness, and our sado-masochistic instincts, we might as well have a good time with it while we're here. It's always been more fun to paint demons than angels, so bring on the hellscape. As canvas and inspiration, dystopias have a lot to

recommend themselves. The horrors birthed from our unbridled ids are insanely fun to play with. I've spent plenty of nights binging post-apocalyptic fiction. Especially during the Obama presidency, I couldn't get enough of Paolo Bacigalupi's drowned or sunburnt hell worlds or Justin Cronin's zombie vampire dystopia. The more violent, the more gruesome, the better. Mutilated child warriors fighting mutant tigers in drowned New Orleans? Bring it on.

More recently, as my lived reality began to seem too much like my guilty pleasure reading, these nightmare worlds stopped seeming so fascinating. For decades we dreamed dystopia, and in March of 2020, when Covid crashed upon U.S. shores, it seemed like we had dreamed it so well we wished it into being. While wealthy reactionaries are building actual bunkers and prepping for environmental collapse, fantasizing about which shade of hopelessness our apocalypse will take is a luxury we can no longer afford. By accepting as inevitable humanity's demise by its own hand, post-apocalyptic fiction places no responsibility on the living to course correct.

These days, climate change isn't over the horizon, it's here. The virus that shuts down the globe? We had that, too. Dystopian fiction? That's so 2012. It's time we collectively dream of something else. A better world is possible, but if artists and writers are to contribute to that better world, we're going to need to balance our splendid hellscape with gardens of earthly delight. We need to envision futures that are livable and happy, and we need to imagine how we get there from here. What's more, we need to make those worlds as thrilling and engaging as any post-apocalyptic zombie-strewn nightmare.

Fortunately, we don't need to invent a new literary genre to

show us the way to a better tomorrow. Just as there is a left-wing climate movement demanding humanity break from fossil fuels to create a bright future for life on Earth, so is there a parallel climate fiction that allows us to imagine that better world. In steps solarpunk, left-wing literature's answer to the dystopian novel. Solarpunk looks towards a post-capitalist future of renewable energy. It rejects climate "doomerism" and shows what our collective future could look like if we heal our relationship with the natural world.

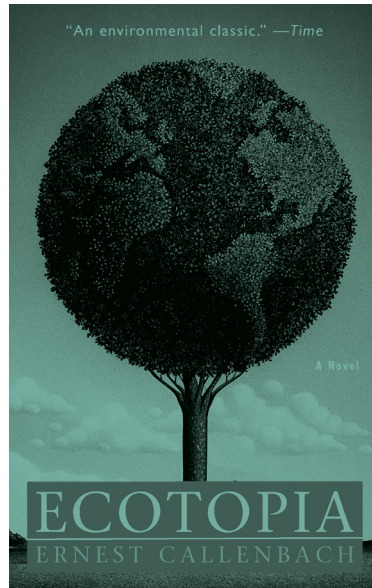
Far from *Star Trek*'s "full luxury space communism," where humans race across galaxies via endless sources of energy, the technology in solarpunk is imminently achievable. In the anthology *Future Primitive: The New Ecotopias*, science fiction writer and democratic socialist Kim Stanley Robinson describes this genre as rejecting "the inevitability of the machine future." Instead it asks, "What is the healthiest way to live? What is the most beautiful?" Rather than Elon Musk's tent cities on Mars, these fictional worlds "cobble together aspects of the postmodern and the paleolithic, asserting that we might for very good reasons choose to live in ways that resemble in part the ways of our ancestors."

Below you will find my analysis of a selection of genre-defining novels, spanning five decades, that helped build out the imagined landscapes of solarpunk. They show where the genre began, how it developed, and where it might be going. My aim with this introductory list is to open a door to a genre that gets far too little attention, especially in comparison to dystopian literature. A healthy Earth can be just as weird and interesting as a sick one, and these books can show us the way towards popularizing left-wing narratives in works of fiction.

ECOTOPIA ERNEST CALLENBACH, 1975

ERNEST CALLENBACH'S 1975 environmentally conscious classic, *Ecotopia*, is written as a series of reported articles and journal entries by William Weston, a reporter for a *New York Times*-style prestige newspaper. He is the first American to be allowed into the new

nation of Ecotopia, a conglomeration of states, including swathes of Northern California and the Pacific Northwest, that have seceded from the U.S. and formed a new nation. Ecotopia is essentially a socialist country with its politics firmly embedded in environmental sustainability.



Ecotopia incorporates several mainstays of the solarpunk genre, including a conscious selectivity in its use of technology. Where today we spend half our waking hours online, feel naked without our smartphones, and have WiFi-enabled toaster ovens, Ecotopians are mindful of advanced technology and use it with care. The citizens of Ecotopia use "video phones" and heat their homes with highly sophisticated solar technology; however, they choose to make many tools and items of clothing by hand. Their technology, although highly sophisticated, is nonaddictive and used sparingly.

Another mainstay of solarpunk is a focus on means, process, and getting by in everyday life. Large portions of the novel are devoted to explaining urban planning, sewage, waste disposal, and food production in Ecotopia. By book's end, we know how Ecotopia functions, from plumbing to higher education. We learn about Ecotopian cradle-to-grave universal healthcare and their community-based cottage hospitals. We learn about their biodegradable plastics, worker-controlled

businesses, and 20-hour workweeks. We understand Ecotopia's guiding philosophies, media, athletics, defense system, municipal government, and approaches to science and engineering. Like a good sewer socialist, Callenbach makes basic infrastructure seem endlessly fascinating.

Weston, while in Ecotopia, is at war with himself over how enraptured he is by this new nation. A vain, cynical, and quick to anger member of the professional-managerial class, Weston has a pearl-clutching moment of horror every few pages and is shocked over and over by Ecotopia's fare-free public transportation, curriculum-free education system, and shame-free public lovemaking. Eventually, Ecotopia manages to get under his skin. Much of the book is taken up with his internal struggles as all of his preconceived notions about politics, culture, and human relationships get turned upside down. It has a positive impact on Weston in a short period and transforms him into a more moral, self-aware, and genial person.

Culturally and aesthetically, Ecotopia has a decidedly West Coast vibe. It's as though an entire country were built along the lines of a hippie meditation retreat circa the summer of '69. Weston is taken into Ecotopia aboard a high-speed train, like a "wingless airplane." Inside, passengers loll on bean bag chairs and share joints. True to the ethos of the summer of love, Ecotopians have no filter and freely give voice to all manner of thoughts and feelings, however disruptive. They disdain suits and wear free-flowing hippie garments. Weston describes Ecotopian street wear as "Dickensian," with "fanciful hats and hairdos, jackets, vests, leggings, tights; so help me, I think I even saw a codpiece."

Ecotopian homes are similarly eclectic. Some are made from extruded biodegradable plastic forms and are designed by their inhabitants into fantastical shapes, like Lego constructions. One house is described as an octagon "arranged like spokes of a wheel" around a domed indoor garden, in the middle of which is a 15-foot tree. These consciously selective high-tech houses—capable of being designed, built, and fixed by their inhabitants—combine prefabricated

rooms with handmade carved wooden dividers, embroidered hangings, and sheepskin rugs. Ecotopian aesthetics charmingly blend child-like futurism with folk primitivism. They leave me fantasizing about what my extruded biodegradable Ecotopian house would look like. I think the key concept here is that when people have options about where and how to live, the world becomes more beautiful and more interesting. Rather than tenants settling on the cheapest, most acceptable apartment available, and despite extraordinary restrictions on land and resource usage, Ecotopians can exist in an elevated manner. They can live out their fantasies as only the wealthy can do today.

In *Future Primitive*, Kim Stanley Robinson calls *Ecotopia*, “one of the most important and influential utopias of the 20th century, using a wide range of environmental concepts to design a very near-future society carved out of America.” Rather than being made from whole cloth, *Ecotopia* finds its key ingredients in America. It isn’t a fantasy: we have the tools right now, we just need to use them correctly. *Ecotopia* is not as polished and literary as many of the other books I’ll list here. Callenbach was an editor and film professor by trade and *Ecotopia* and its sequel, *Ecotopia Emerging*, are his only novels. He nevertheless had a profound influence on the literature to come. According to Robinson in *Future Primitive*, which was published in 1994, at the time he could still find bumper stickers in Northern California that read “Keep the U.S. Out of Ecotopia.” However imperfect and of its time Callenbach’s ’70s-era solar utopia, it is impressively thoroughgoing. It is utopian literature in its purest sense: a philosophical teaching tool that eschews literary subtlety for blunt force pedagogy.

ALWAYS COMING HOME URSULA K. LE GUIN, 1985

URSULA K. LE GUIN’S EXPERIMENTAL novel *Always Coming Home* takes place millennia after the fall of our civilization. It is written as the ethnographic findings of an anthropologist in the far-flung future and centers the

“Kesh” people in a post-civilizational Napa Valley. The Kesh use some modern technologies, including trains and electricity and a planet-wide computer service leftover from our long-gone civilization. However, nothing is done on a grand industrial scale. They live in small villages far from one another, their culture an amalgam of modern human customs and technologies mixed together with hunter-gatherer practices.

The book is a collection of the Kesh’s folk tales, religious practices, plays, poems, art, songs, recipes, and fashions. The fictional anthropologist narrator bemoans the fact that the Kesh have left so little behind. They “left no tombs or tiles or shards or walls behind them. If they had a town here it was made of what the woods and fields are made of, and is gone.” When she digs all she finds are seeds and thistles. “There is no other trace of them. They owned their Valley very lightly, with easy hands. They walked softly here.”



The core narrative of this book, if we want to give it a core (Le Guin almost certainly did not) is probably the story-within-a-story, “Stone Telling.” This is the tale of a girl from the Kesh village of Sinshan, born to a Kesh mother and a father from the more industrialized, warlike, and hierarchical Condor people. The Kesh live with extreme simplicity in

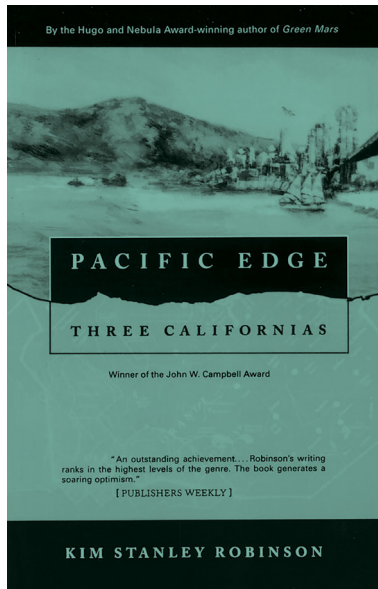
communal homes, taking and giving from one another only as needed. They travel by foot, perform elaborate dancing rituals based on the phases of the sun, moon, and stars, and practice sacred coming-of-age spirit journeys. Theirs is also an egalitarian society where abortions are practiced at will, and everyone is expected to be literate and educated.

The level of detail put into “reconstructing” fictional Kesh civilization is a marvel; however, readers should not anticipate diving into this book and reading cover to cover, unless you are prepared to read lists of recipes, incest taboos, and kinship formations. This last is especially fascinating since the Kesh not only recognize same-sex marriage but also allow anyone to choose who they are bound to in kinship. An older child can, for instance, choose to be adopted by a household that they were not born into. Le Guin was the daughter of two prominent anthropologists, Theodora and Alfred Kroeber, who both wrote extensively on the lives and customs of Native Californians. Scholar Richard Erlich, in his survey of Le Guin’s work, theorized that *Always Coming Home* is a fictionalization of the author’s parents’ anthropological publications on indigenous people. Kesh culture, while entirely made up, is clearly modeled on the customs of Native Californians. Like those native Californians, the Kesh have managed to leave the earth without catastrophically transforming the land they lived on, in contrast to our own apocalyptically wasteful civilization.

PACIFIC EDGE KIM STANLEY ROBINSON, 1990

PACIFIC EDGE IS THE THIRD NOVEL in Robinson’s *Three Californias* trilogy. The series shows three potential futures for California: the first, *The Wild Shore*, shows a world where the Soviets bombed the U.S. and left the post-nuclear fallout survivors in a state of total devastation, forced to live a bare subsistence lifestyle, scavenging from the ruins of our civilization. The second novel, *The Gold Coast*, shows the industrial glut and intentional devastation of the natural world should capitalist growth continue

unabated. It is a fully mechanized world lived mostly in cars and attached to screens. *Pacific Edge* is the synthesis of the first two worlds: one in which technology, although much in use, is used with conscious selectivity to ensure a healthy and sustainable world.



Robinson writes reverently of Ecotopia in *Future Primitive*, and I believe that *Pacific Edge* was influenced by the earlier novel. Robinson, always practical and optimistic, with an endearing faith in the power of global diplomacy, shows us a world where capitalism as we know it, with its dependence on oil extraction and perpetual growth, comes to an end without much violence. The novel tells a simple love story and shows how the population lives their everyday lives without the horror, drudgery, and poor health that go along with living in the machine world.

The novel's village of El Modena made me think of what a small town in California would be like if it were run by Democratic Socialists of America. It is happy and chaotic. Vice, bad faith actors, and malignant intentions are not gone from the world and its leadership, but their effects are blunted by a government and culture that serves, nurtures, and sustains the land and the people on it. Robinson's ecotopian California has monster truck rallies and WWE-style

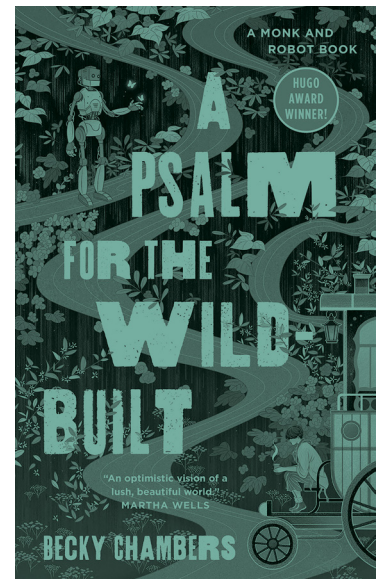
wrestling matches. It has water tycoons and corrupt MedTech companies. But the ability for any single actor to harm people or overdevelop land is severely curtailed. Where *Ecotopia* is utopian literature, designed as an enclosed world that critiques our own culture through a fictional ideal, *Pacific Edge* is properly literary fiction and not really a utopia at all, although it was probably inspired by one. As such, we can imagine ourselves living there as fully flawed and self-aware adults.

A PSALM FOR THE WILD-BUILT BECKY CHAMBERS, 2021

CHAMBERS'S NOVEL TAKES SOLARPUNK out of the West Coast of North America and into space. It concerns a planet-like, biodiverse moon called Panga. Formerly industrialized, it is in the process of recovering from its "Factory Age," when robot-powered factories ran all day and night. A hundred years before the start of the novel, the robots had an "awakening." They left the factories and went into the wilderness. When invited to return to human society as free citizens, the robots refuse. "All we have ever known is a life of human design," the robots state in their final address to humanity. "[I]t is our wish to leave your cities entirely, so that we may observe that which has no design—the untouched wilderness."

It is generally agreed on Panga that the robots split for the woods just in time for humanity to save itself from ecological collapse. Upon gaining consciousness, the robots recognized that the means of production that they enabled was not ecologically sustainable, and so they made their grand exit. Since then, humanity learned to fend for itself and to use technology with that same conscious selectivity found in all the novels already discussed. The resulting human civilization after the robots have gone is a heaven built atop industrial wreckage. Panga's sole city is, "a towering architectural celebration of curves and polish and colored light, laced with the connective threads of elevated rail lines and smooth footpaths, flocked with leaves that spilled lushly from every balcony." Panga is like a synthesis of the worlds in *Ecotopia*,

Always Coming Home, and *Pacific Edge*. Humanity lives in harmony with nature, and the new consciously selected technologies are few and far between. Every human receives a personal computing and communication device once in their lives, and that device lasts them until their death when it is recycled and given to someone else. Their tools help humans be more human and take greater pleasure in whatever they are doing, be it work or play. Homes are "roofed with either blooming turf or solar panels or both." Geothermal energy plants powered by hot springs emit only steam. In one village, the inhabitants live in tree houses because they do not want to disrupt the forest floor with its teeming insect, mushroom, and rodent life. Describing their treehouses, Chambers writes that "the hanging homes here looked akin to shells, cut open to reveal soft geometry. Everything there curved—the rain-shielding roofs, the light-giving windows, the bridges



running between like jewelry."

The story concerns a "tea monk," Sibling Dex (pronouns they/they), who lives in a monastery in the city. Sibling Dex, although they already live in an urban heaven, finds that heaven is too busy and chaotic. Tired of vine-covered skyscrapers, Dex wants more woodlands than the city can contain, to "inhabit a place that spread not up but out." They decide to change

their vocation from urban gardening monk to traveling tea service monk in the service of the “Child god Allalae,” the god of small comforts. Like everything else on Panga, their deities are adorable. A tea service monk is a traveling comfort-giver: part therapist, part friend, and part herbalist who travels from village to village dispensing tea and comfort. Dex travels around on a foot-powered (but electricity-boosted) trailer that’s like a horseless Romani caravan covered in solar panels. Surrounded by the herbs and spices of their vocation, Dex falls asleep each night beneath the skylight of their trailer, “in starlight, breathing in the muddled snap of a hundred spices, listening to the gurgle of water pumps feeding happy roots in little pots.”

Sibling Dex travels far and wide and becomes a beloved tea service monk. Eventually, when they become restless for even more wilderness, they head into the half of Panga that has been rewilded and reserved for non-humans. Here they meet the very first robot to encounter a human since the robots went into the wild a century before. So begins the adventures of monk and robot, through the wilds and the horizontally-governed, solar-powered villages of Panga.

Reading *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* is like taking a trip to an eco-spa: a temporary respite from the rigors of over industrialized reality. Unlike *Ecotopia*, it does not seek to challenge the reader’s preconceived ideas about lifestyle, education, and societal makeup. Chambers’s novel is more self-care than radical utopian literature. She writes in the prescript that the book is “For anybody who could use a break.” You might think this novel sounds too cute by half to be of any political use. However, I think its low-key politics and mainstream appeal show how useful it is as a propaganda tool. Here solarpunk has reached its popular front era. Where ecosocialist ideas like rewilding and degrowth had just entered the environmental activist’s lexicon about 40 years ago, today the terms are used broadly across the climate discourse. The genre went from alternative cult fiction to middlebrow and mainstream in a generation. It shows me that at least in the collective imagination, we’re gaining on *Ecotopia*.

THE PEACEKEEPER B.L. BLANCHARD, 2022

BLANCHARD’S ALTERNATIVE history asks, What would human civilization look like if Europeans had never colonized the globe? What if indigenous peoples had been left alone and developed technologies according to their communities’ needs, rather than the needs of industrial capitalism? *The Peacekeeper* takes place in the Great Lakes town of Baawitigong. This is the Chippewa name for the city of Sault Ste. Marie that sits on the U.S.-Canadian border and encompasses both Michigan and Ontario. (Blanchard’s author website describes her as an “enrolled member of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians.”) In her novel, local Baawitigong “peacekeeper” Chibenashi and his sister, Ashwiya, reside in the family wigwam. They have lived there by themselves ever since their mother, Neebin, was murdered during the night of Manoomin, the ritual of the “Ricing Moon,” and their father, Ishkode, turned himself in for the crime.

Chibenashi discovers that there



was much about the tragic events of his childhood that he knew nothing about. As a peacekeeper, he is a little like a police detective. To find out the truth behind his mother’s long-ago murder, Chibenashi visits the indigenous metropolis of

Shikaakwa, a city of green “living skyscrapers,” and takes up a case that’s been left cold for decades. The story is a murder mystery set in a world without a police state as we know it. People accused of crimes stand before a mediator and receive restorative justice. Imprisonment is rarely demanded, making what happened to Ishkode an aberration: “Going to prison meant the system had failed all involved, that the person was beyond saving, and nothing could be done to make the family of his victims whole.” While Anishinaabe society is not fully decarceral, the ethics underlying their judicial system are geared towards restoration rather than revenge.

The people of Baawitigong have preserved many elements of traditional pre-industrial Anishinaabe village life, living in wigwams, speaking *Anishinaabemowin*, dressing in *makizin*, and celebrating the Ricing Moon. They also watch movies and TV and news from all over the world, travel on superfast trains, and text each other on smart-watches. Aside from the tourists from the far-flung Mayan and African Dagbon kingdoms who sail into the village on cruise ships to see the moonlit Manoomin ritual, their lives are similar to those of the Kesh in Le Guin’s *Always Coming Home*. The Anishinaabe have not conscientiously chosen to be selective in their use of technology. They have not chosen solar over fossil fuels. They live the way that their people have always lived, according to culture and tradition, with new technology taking root as needed.

Political commentary is rare in this novel. There is no socialism in Baawitigong because there was never a capitalism that needed to be struggled against. As in *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*, *The Peacekeeper* is more concerned with telling a story than radicalizing the reader. However, ideology, where it exists, is uncompromising. Watching a documentary about the barbaric European kings who once battled each other for land, Chibenashi snorts in derision. “As if any person could actually claim to ‘own’ the earth or any part of it.... Mino-Aki had no defined borders like that. No nation in Mishmak did. Such lines were not theirs to draw. You lived on the land; you didn’t own it.”

The Peacekeeper differs from the preceding novels because its protagonist, Chibenashi, has experienced some of the worst his society has to offer him. He is trapped in a hell of his family's devising, and while we might envy his family wigwam, universal basic income, and therapeutic ritual sweat lodge sessions, we wouldn't wish to trade places with him. Without giving away too much of the mystery, I can say that over the course of this novel we learn that sociopathy and murderous rage exist in this solar-powered world, and no amount of restorative justice will make them disappear.

This dark potboiler shows me a genre that is growing up and incorporating the many flavors of grown-up human experience. We see the downside to restorative justice and to living in small traditional communities. Sometimes a victim can never truly be made whole and sometimes, as in the case of a complex domestic violence situation, a restorative justice mediation can end tragically. Close, small families and communities can be stifling, oppressive, and small-minded, especially for someone who has gone through severe trauma. By choosing as her protagonist someone who has drawn the short straw in life, Blanchard is able to write an emotionally nuanced world. As in Robinson's *Pacific Edge*, she shows how their culture has been able to soften the corners and reduce harm, even if it cannot do away with evil entirely.

SOLARPUNK AUTHORS DIFFER ON how we transition into that better world. For Callenbach, it is trickery: it is a widely held rumor in the U.S. that Ecotopians have mined nuclear bombs beneath several major American cities. For Kim Stanley Robinson, it is global diplomacy that can transition us towards an ecologically sustainable future. For Ursula K. Le Guin, nothing short of an apocalyptic event will make us use technology with conscious selectivity.

In Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Gold Coast*, the prequel to *Pacific Edge*, he describes the lives of Native Californians, contrasting their ecologically harmonious culture with that of the reckless

European colonizers who murdered them and destroyed their civilization. They sound a lot like Le Guin's Kesh people. He writes, "They lived here for over seven thousand years, and the only sign they left behind were some piles of shells around the shores of Newport Bay." "[W]e know that their village life went on, year after year, generation after generation, existing in an unobtrusive balance with the land, using all of its many resources, considering every rock and tree and animal a sacred being—for seven thousand years." Think of the shadow cast across our own doomed and wasteful civilization by the Native Californians who lived seven millennia in a place and left no lasting destruction behind.

ACCORDING TO DAVID GRAEBER and David Wengrow in *The Dawn of Everything*, indigenous people are the source of almost all Western revolutionary thought in the modern era. They posit that during the early modern period, in the first centuries after contact was made between Europeans and Native North Americans, indigenous people offered critiques of European civilization that came as a "shock to the system, revealing possibilities for human emancipation." According to Graeber and Wengrow, this shock was so electrifying that it became the catalyst to the European Enlightenment. Solarpunk literature similarly teaches that we must look to indigenous people to discover how our species sustains its existence long term. Throughout the genre we see a return to living like a people who acted not as overlords but as stewards of nature, protecting and preserving it for the next generation. This perspective accepts that we are a disruptive species capable of catastrophic destruction if left unchecked. However, solarpunk literature shows societies that look to limit our ability to destroy a home that we must share with countless other species.

How to get that job done seems like a Panglossian fantasy, but the genre attempts to show how humanity can practically draw those boundaries and allow our species to flourish among many. On Becky Chambers's *Panga*, half

the moon is rewilded and given back to nature. She writes, "It was a crazy split, if you thought about it: half the land for a single species, half for the hundreds of thousands of others. But then, humans had a knack for throwing things out of balance. Finding a limit they'd stick to was victory enough."

I first set upon this genre not because I was interested in indigenous ecological practices or sustainable technologies, but because I read a lot of fiction for pleasure. I particularly enjoy novels with good world-building. If they are set in space, all the better. I became engrossed in solarpunk because these novels make me happy. I believe that solarpunk is powerful propaganda because it leaves us yearning for a better world. The specific teachings of these novels are well and good, but the stories are what engross and transform us. Unlike essays on the dangers of gas stoves, cattle farming, and microplastics, their positive vision of the future taps into the life of the senses. It is one thing to relate how a zero-carbon footprint and a consciously selective use of technology will be good for all living beings. It is another to show us why we want all those things and how much more pleasure we will be able to take in our everyday lives by becoming a people that leave no poisons behind.

IN EACH SOLARPUNK NOVEL I READ, I was struck by the amount of page space devoted to cooking, walking, and especially bathing and swimming. Long, luxurious passages about beaches, lakes, and volcanic hot springs are everywhere across the genre. The life of the body is deliberately foregrounded, making these novels incredibly soothing to read. Some passages are like guided meditations. Solarpunk is not, however, merely a salve to anxious, over-mechanized modern living. While you can read solarpunk as self-care, I found myself enraged as often as I was becalmed by the depiction of everything that we are missing because capital has taken away our birthright as inhabitants of planet Earth. I don't want to wait for the robots to take to the woods. I want ecotopia now. ♣

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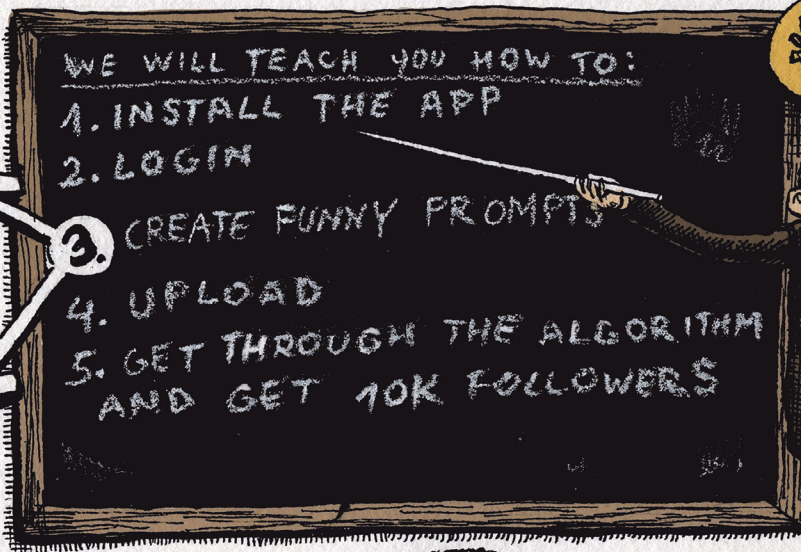
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The Specter of Decadence

BY K. WILSON

ABOUT A CENTURY AGO, A GERMAN schoolteacher published a book that reshaped European intellectual history. The schoolteacher's name was Oswald Spengler, and the book was his magnum opus: *The Decline of the West*.

Spengler's thesis was that Western civilization is the victim of its own success. Most Western countries had achieved unprecedented political freedom due to representative democracy, and immense material prosperity thanks to free-market capitalism. But according to Spengler, the price of these achievements was the loss of key values that define Western culture—things like spirituality, individual responsibility, and aesthetic creativity. In their stead, money had become the sole defining value in the Western world. Spengler predicted that this state of decadence would give rise to a period of authoritarianism, heralding a final collapse of Western civilization.

Nowadays, the word “decadence” suggests luxury, empty pleasure-seeking, and/or sexual libertinism. But “decadence”—which derives from the Latin verb *decadere*, meaning “to fall”—originally meant only a state of degradation as compared to an earlier state. For Spengler, a decadent culture was one which had strayed from its founding ideals and degenerated into something lesser, and it is in that sense that I use “decadence” in this analysis.

For a left-wing reader, *The Decline of the West* is a provocative and challenging text. On one hand, Spengler's politics were vociferously right-wing and his approach to history was

consciously unscientific. That makes it easy to dismiss the book as reactionary nonsense. But on the other hand, some of Spengler's projections about the future of Western society were remarkably accurate. Writing in 1918, Spengler anticipated the growing influence of money in the political systems of liberal democracies; the dominion of capital over the supposedly free press; urban sprawl and declining birthrates in industrialized countries; and the rise of populist authoritarianism. The events of the past century have borne out many of these predictions.

In fact, Spengler's gloomy view of the future—a view founded on the notion that Western culture has become decadent and is in its last stage—fits today's pessimistic cultural moment quite well. Many folks on the left and the right share a mounting sense of doom, a feeling that there's something very wrong with our political, economic, and cultural systems. So it's no surprise that the contemporary right-wing intelligentsia has begun to revive Spengler's notion of decadence (or something very similar) as part of their broader critique of liberal culture. Jordan Peterson, the Canadian psychologist who's become a right-wing icon thanks to his public opposition to feminism and trans rights, has railed about “the manner in which liberalism is decadent” by undermining “traditional relationships” and “the family.” (Peterson even won a dubious honor called the Spengler Prize for his “ruthless analysis of the decay of our civilization.”) Podcaster and provocateur Ben Shapiro has lamented the decline of “Judeo-Christian values,” which, he claims, underlie American



democracy. Ross Douthat, a rising conservative star, wrote a book called *The Decadent Society* arguing that the U.S. and Europe are stuck in a cycle of “economic stagnation, institutional sclerosis, and cultural repetition at a high stage of wealth and technological proficiency.” Florida Senator Marco Rubio wrote a similar book aimed at a more lowbrow audience called *Decades of Decadence*, which, he claims, “exposes the elites’ attacks on the four key elements of American strength: good local jobs, stable families, geographical communities, and a sovereign nation that serves as a beacon of freedom and prosperity.” Russian dictator Vladimir Putin, parroting the sentiments of reactionary philosopher Alexander Dugin, portrays Russia as a last bastion of Christianity and claims that atheistic elites plot the “overthrow of faith and traditional values.” Each of these claims echoes Spengler’s thesis that civilization has become decadent.

DECADENCE IS A PLAUSIBLE-SOUNDING THEORY with dangerous implications. As a narrative, it can seem plausible because it appears to explain some of the dystopian aspects of our world, like the emptiness of public discourse and the perception that the political system is rigged. But the disease to which decadence attributes these symptoms—the unverifiable decline of a nebulously defined culture—has enormous potential to justify oppression and discrimination. If Western culture is in decline, the easiest explanation is to point the finger of blame at an “other,” insurgent culture threatening to replace it. Modern reactionaries have identified many such villains—“radical Islam,” “cultural Marxism,” “critical race theory,” “wokeness,” and plenty of other flavor-of-the-month boogymen. From there, it’s a short leap to the conclusion that we must defend “our” culture by subduing the encroaching one. And because decadence contrasts the degraded present with a mythical past, proponents of decadence discourse invariably argue that we must return to traditional, oppressive norms and hierarchies. In the United States, we’re witnessing the fruits of these conclusions: a resurgent right-wing movement that burns books, restructures curricula, and suppresses speech in the name of protecting Western culture. To counter this resurgence, the left must understand the underpinnings of decadence and develop a response.

I. THE LIFE-CYCLE OF CULTURES

Decadence posits that the present is a degraded version of the past. Arguments about decadence therefore implicitly rest on a theory of history, a method of understanding the flow of large-scale events and the trajectory of the world.

But decadence assumes an unscientific, pre-modern theory of history that is counterintuitive to most leftists. Liberal and leftist theories of history tend to assume that *systems* drive events, although different theories situate different systems as the primary moving force. Orthodox Marxists, for instance, view economic systems as the primary factor in history. In his 1880 book *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Friedrich Engels summarized this view: “the production of the means to support human life



Oswald Arnold Gottfried Spengler

and, next to production, the exchange of things produced, is the basis of all social structure.” Most liberals, by contrast, adopt some version of institutionalism. They think history is a product of political and economic institutions like the nation-state, the military, the legislature, the judiciary, the market, and so on. Some sociological theorists—among them Max Weber and Erich Fromm—posit ideologies or mass psychology as a key driving force. But all of these theories assume that the interplay between human systems explains historical events.

Spengler and most of his intellectual successors rely on a fundamentally different understanding of history. As Spengler argues in *The Decline of the West*, the salient focus when analyzing history is not great men or economics or institutions, but *cultures*—which are more akin to living beings than impersonal systems:

“Mankind,” however, has no aim, no idea, no plan, any more than the family of butterflies or orchids... I see, in place of that empty figment of one linear history which can only be kept up by shutting one’s eyes to the overwhelming multitude of the facts, the drama of a number of mighty Cultures, each springing with primitive strength from the soil of a mother-region to which it remains firmly bound throughout its whole life-cycle; each stamping its material, its mankind, in its own image; each having its own idea, its own passions, its own life, will and feeling, its own death... Each Culture has its own new possibilities of self-expression which arise, ripen, decay,

and never return... I see world history as a picture of endless formations and transformations, of the marvelous waxing and waning of organic forms.

FOR SPENGLER, THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD IS A history of cultures, which follow the life cycle of living things. Each culture emerges with a central “idea” and share of “creative power,” reaches an apex as it embodies its central idea “in the shape of peoples, languages, dogmas, arts, states, [and] sciences,” and then declines toward death when its life force is exhausted.

The “idea” of “the West,” in Spengler’s view, is a quest for “universal validity,” “unshakeable” truths and “eternal” views.” This notion takes many forms, from the Christian belief in an omnipotent god, to scientific and mathematical ontologies under which “rationalism becomes omnipotent,” to political theories that posit that “actuality can be ameliorated by a system of concepts.” Spengler described these tendencies as “Faustian,” a reference to the mythological figure who sold his soul to the devil in exchange for endless knowledge.

According to Spengler, the Faustian qualities of the West contain the seeds for its downfall. This is because the thirst for universal principles leads to democracy, a system where (in theory) everyone has equal and inviolable rights under the law and the government embodies the will of the people. But like any system, democracy falls prey to ways to game the system—namely, partisan politics and money. This, in turn, causes decadence, as the founding ideal of the culture degenerates into a naked struggle for power. “The sentiments, the popular aim, the abstract ideals... dissolve and are supplanted by *private* politics, the unchecked will-to-power of the race-strong few.” Eventually, decadent democracies give way to authoritarianism before the culture finally collapses.

Spengler’s thought is worth studying because most right-wing theories of decadence—and indeed, most right-wing theories writ large—share his fundamental assumptions. Although these theories operate at varying levels of sophistication, all rest on the same basic premises: (1) there is a cohesive entity called “the West” which (2) has distinct traits that set it apart from other cultures of the past and present, and (3) the West is in “decline” due to some form of decadence. Where these theories differ is the *form* of decadence they identify, the axis along which they believe the West is declining.

The most simplistic and mainstream variant of decadence imagines the West as an intellectual tradition comprising a set of values which are slowly eroding. Dennis Prager—the guy who created the ubiquitous “PragerU” videos advocating conservative positions on hot-button issues—has written that “the current civil war in the United States and the rest of the West is essentially a battle between [Judeo-Christian] values and the left.” The “Judeo-Christian values” Prager highlights include the existence of “objective moral standards” and a natural order to the world, the understanding that human beings are “not basically good,” and the expression of God-given free will through political liberty. According to Prager, Judeo-Christian values are eroding thanks to “assaults on personal liberty” by leftists who “reject the

Bible as their moral guide.” Ben Shapiro, another mainstream conservative propagandist, has similarly claimed that the West became great because “Judeo-Christian values” laid the foundation for social order, and that leftist efforts to “undermine” this “basis for Western civilization” will cause a “return to the chaos that proceeded [sic] them.” But while Prager and Shapiro root their understanding of the “West” in the concept of Judeo-Christian values, their perspective is not religious per se. Prager writes that “one doesn’t have to be a believer to acknowledge” the social importance of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and Shapiro says that principles from religious thought “undergird the secular Enlightenment worldview” that produced American democracy.

The more overtly religious—and more sinister—version of this way of thinking is a doctrine called “Traditionalism.” Traditionalism finds adherents in such diverse figures as former Trump advisor Steve Bannon and Alexander Dugin, the Russian political theorist who’s sometimes referred to as “Putin’s brain.” Like other theories of decadence, Traditionalism claims that the modern world is degraded compared to a prior, more vibrant age. But the axis along which Traditionalists measure the degradation is religious tradition. As Benjamin Teitelbaum explains in an interview with *Jacobin*, “Traditionalists believe that there was a true religion once upon a time—the Tradition with a capital T—that’s been lost as the ages have moved forward.” Due to the loss of this foundational insight, “time is cycling in a downward trajectory or downward motion wherein, as time goes forward, things get worse.”

Unsurprisingly, Traditionalists are pretty vague about the nature of the lost Tradition. But almost all of them emphasize the primacy of hierarchy, borders, and national or ethnic identity. Bannon, for example, viewed Trump’s presidency as an opportunity to “control three things”: “borders, currency, and military and national identity.” Dugin says the world is in a struggle between the forces of good, which encompass “God, tradition, community, ethnicity, empires and kingdoms,” and modernity, embodied by “human rights, anti-hierarchy, and political correctness.” Both figures perceive modernity, with its “globalization,” “cosmopolitanism,” and “borderlessness,” as the source of decadence in the modern world.

AS NASTY AS TRADITIONALISM IS, THERE ARE MANY still cruder understandings of decadence that measure the purported decline of civilization in biological rather than ideological terms. Two variants are of particular concern. First, a growing chorus of right-wing thinkers attribute social problems in the West to a crisis of masculinity. Jordan Peterson is perhaps the most famous exponent of this view. Like Shapiro, Peterson thinks Western civilization is sustained by an ordering principle which modernity has eroded, threatening a descent into chaos. But for Peterson, the principle is not Judeo-Christian values, but the “masculine spirit.” That spirit is “under assault,” according to Peterson, because of efforts to “feminize” men by condemning traditionally masculine behavior. This assault threatens to bring chaos—which Peterson says is “represented by the feminine”—by undermining the gender-based hierarchy on which civilization was built.

Peterson's thought is so muddled that it's often unclear whether he means masculinity as an abstract concept or as the sum of all dudes in the world. Some of his ideas are distressingly literal; he's advocated for "enforced monogamy" to ensure that all men have a chance to get laid (as opposed to the current arrangement, where a "small percentage of the guys have hyper-access to women"). A few less sophisticated figures take this idea a step further, and advocate for actual government suppression of women. Nick Fuentes, a far-right online personality and self-described incel, has called for "something like Taliban rule in America" where contraceptives are banned and women lose the right to vote. Fuentes is, of course, an extreme case even among the most deranged right-wing figures—but a shocking number of people adhere to his benighted worldview. He has over 100,000 followers on Gab and over 40,000 subscribers on Telegram, and his followers—known as "Groyper" for reasons too stupid to explain—played a substantial role in the "stop the steal" movement that culminated in the January 6 insurrection. And if Fuentes and his followers are fringe, Missouri's horrible Senator Josh Hawley recently brought the "crisis of masculinity" narrative to the mainstream. In a bizarre book called *Manhood*, Hawley argued that all men have a sacred responsibility to take wives and become kings, warning against a "collapse of masculine strength" in the United States. In other words, a form of decadence.

Many of these same folks also attribute decadence to the growing acceptance of non-heteronormative gender identities and sexual orientations. Michael Liccione, nominally a professor of theology, has written that "gender ideology is decadent" because it erodes traditional notions of what it means to be male or female. Rod Dreher, writing for *The American Conservative*, has argued that "transgenderism [is] a mark of a civilization deep into decadence, nearing collapse," because it is a symptom of "the total deconstruction of the relational bases of society and its refashioning to serve the needs of the sovereign Self." But although Liccione and Dreher identify trans people, rather than emancipated cisgender women, as the symptom of decadence, they join Peterson, Hawley, and Fuentes in fixing the root cause as a lack of "heroic masculinity."

The second biological take on decadence identifies whiteness, rather than masculinity, as the foundation of Western culture. A critical idea in most white supremacist ideologies is that the white race is in decline and under attack by insurgent, nonwhite populations. One version of this idea is the white genocide conspiracy theory, which posits that falling birthrates among white people, mass immigration, and the promotion of "multiculturalism" by leftists are eroding the white population. The "Great Replacement" conspiracy theory similarly claims that "replacist" elites in Western governments are coordinating the mass migration of nonwhite people into the United States and Europe for some sinister purpose. According to white supremacists, these trends threaten "to extinguish Western culture" through the literal elimination of white Westerners. Although the "Great Replacement" theory is overtly Islamophobic, in the sense that it often imagines a sinister tide of Muslim immigrants, many embodiments of the theory also have an antisemitic angle. David Lane, an avowed white supremacist and proponent of the theory,

wrote that the "Great Replacement" was the product of a "Zionist conspiracy [that] above all things wants to exterminate the White Aryan race." Of course, viewing decadence in racial terms is nothing new. Proponents of the first eugenics movement in the United States, like influential zoologist and avowed racist S.J. Holmes, argued that forced sterilization of undesirables was necessary to prevent "the possible decadence of the human stock."

Compared to these nutjobs, *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat is the sanest preacher of decadence—and at times, quite compelling. His book *The Decadent Society* is a solemn litany of the many ways in which the United States is in decline. Douthat measures decadence in material terms and mostly ascribes it to material forces. He paints a picture of an aging population that controls most of the country's wealth, and a disaffected youth that's less likely to start businesses, move across the country, save money, and have kids than any previous generation. This causes a "feedback loop—in which sterility feeds stagnation, which further discourages childbearing, which sinks society ever-deeper into old age," crushing dynamism and stifling innovation and growth. To escape the resulting despair, people turn to hysterical and unproductive mass politics, which occasionally escalates into "flares of nihilistic violence." Whether or not Douthat is right about the *cause* of these phenomena, his description of contemporary American life rings disturbingly true.



I HAVE TRIED TO CLASSIFY THEORIES OF DECADENCE according to the main culprit each theory identifies as causing cultural decline. But neither the theories nor their adherents separate neatly into categories. Jordan Peterson, for instance, has advanced positions that could be described as Traditionalist, while Nick Fuentes has advocated white supremacist views in addition to his rabid misogyny. The lack of clear lines confirms that these theories are somewhat interchangeable. That's because they all share the same logical structure, a structure inherited from Spengler. Each theory begins by defining Western culture using a certain criterion—be it a set of values, a religious tradition, masculinity, or whiteness—and then claims that modernity is eroding that central characteristic, threatening extinction and chaos. And beyond this structure, all of these theories rest on a central *feeling*: an anxious notion that we live in a crumbling world, that our best days are behind us, and that our only hope is a return to hierarchy and tradition.

II. TOWARD A FUTURE-ORIENTED DISCOURSE

It would be easy to dismiss the thinkers we've discussed so far as isolated extremists whose worldviews are unlikely to affect larger political trends. But their ideas are rapidly infiltrating the mainstream. Steve Bannon and Alexander Dugin have both advised world leaders, made a tangible impact on right-wing politics, and injected some of their Traditionalist tenets into mainstream discourse. Bannon, of course, ran Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign and was responsible for many of Trump's



anti-establishment, anti-globalist positions, though he later described Trump as a “blunt instrument” for spreading his views. And although Dugin has never held an official position in Vladimir Putin’s administration, Putin has adopted Dugin’s vocabulary contrasting Russia as a bastion of traditional values with the decadence of Western Europe. Meanwhile the ranks of so-called “incels” like Nick Fuentes, who blame cultural decline on women breaking traditional gender norms, are swelling and their misogynistic rhetoric is growing more extreme. And although the white genocide/Great Replacement version of decadence sounds laughable on its face, it has directly inspired at least four mass shootings since 2018. Tucker Carlson, who was the most watched cable news host in America before he got sacked from Fox, even endorsed the Great Replacement theory on air, saying that “it’s not a conspiracy. It’s [the left’s] electoral strategy.” Former presidential hopeful Vivek Ramaswamy recently became another unlikely proponent of the conspiracy theory, claiming at a debate that the “great replacement theory is not some grand right-wing conspiracy theory, but a basic statement of the Democratic Party’s platform.” (This is especially baffling, since Ramaswamy himself is the non-white son of parents who immigrated from India.) Nor are these ideas confined to a small, sinister elite. There’s a popular meme, which—perhaps not coincidentally—underwent a spike in interest last year. The meme depicts the text “Hard times create strong men. Strong men create good times. Good times create weak men. Weak men create hard times,” usually overlaying images of aggressively masculine fellows. It’s hard to imagine a clearer distillation of Spengler’s thesis.

One reason theories of decadence are spreading is that their first premise—things are getting worse in the industrialized West—is measurably true. In the United States, wealth inequality is growing rapidly, and economic mobility for poor and middle-class people is declining. Students’ test scores, especially in science and math, are stagnating. The average American

household has about \$104,000 in debt (roughly twice the average annual salary), and similar figures exist in much of Western Europe. Speaking of Europe, when Russia invaded Ukraine in early 2022, the continent experienced its first land war between major countries since World War II. Political polarization in the United States is at an all-time high as the Republican party spirals into fascism, and many European countries are experiencing a similar right-wing resurgence. Life expectancy has plateaued in the U.S. and, to a lesser extent, in Western Europe. Polls reveal that in both the United States and Europe, most people feel pretty hopeless about the future. Along with economic hardship, that partly explains why birthrates in the Western world are in free fall. In short, we are undoubtedly experiencing the symptoms often attributed to decadence—which makes it easy to point to decadence as the root cause. Because decadence discourse is popular and seems plausible, it’s critical for the left to develop a response.



A TYPICAL *Scooby-Doo* EPISODE GOES LIKE THIS. An apparently supernatural entity presents itself, terrifying the local populace. Perhaps it’s an empty suit of armor that moves on its own, or a phantom inhabiting a deserted mansion. Scooby and his friends must then chase, trap, and unmask the entity. Invariably, the unmasking reveals not a ghost, but an opportunistic human villain with some tangible motive for pretending to be one.

Like a *Scooby-Doo* villain, decadence discourse works by conjuring a nebulous specter and blaming it for cultural dysfunction. Maybe that specter is the decline of Judeo-Christian values. Or maybe it’s the erosion of religious tradition, or a crisis of masculinity, or growing nonwhite populations. These specters, like all ghostly figures, play on a very basic human fear—the fear that one’s religion, community, or bloodline will die out.

To beat decadence discourse, the left must play the role of the Scooby gang, tearing the mask off these specters to reveal the opportunists beneath. The first step is to advance a view of history rooted in material reality rather than metaphysical theorizing. As scores of thinkers from anarchist academic David Graeber to *Current Affairs*’ Daniel Walden have explained, “the West” is an incoherent concept. Graeber writes that efforts to define the West by listing concepts or values that are distinctively “Western” is an arbitrary exercise, because for any given list, “one [could] equally well assemble a completely different list” of “any number of concepts [that] were adrift in Western Europe over the years.” Indeed, as Graeber points out, Western Europe has been home to a number of competing ethnic groups and nation-states, which certainly didn’t view themselves as part of one big Western family.

It’s equally incoherent to situate “Judeo-Christian values” as the central Western ideology. Those values derive, as the name suggests, from both the Jewish and Christian traditions—which were actively *suppressed* by the Greek and Roman cultures to which we Westerners supposedly trace our lineage. As Walden argues, “[e]ven the very Christianity held so dear by so many avowedly secular right-wing intellectuals is the product of a

contact between a heretical Jewish sect and the Hellenistic culture that pervaded the Mediterranean in that era.” Thus, Walden aptly explains, folks who talk about “the West” use it as a sort of stand-in for some form of hierarchy they want to sustain—typically, a hierarchy in which the white male European Christian occupies the top spot.

MORE BROADLY, CONCEIVING ANY CULTURE, Western or otherwise, as a unified and organic whole is simply unsupported by history. Spengler claimed that each culture “ha[s] its own idea, its own passions, its own life, will and feeling, its own death.” But how many people within a purported culture must share an idea for that idea to become the driving force for the culture? If a culture changes its “idea”—like, for example, when much of the Roman empire converted to Christianity under Emperor Constantine—is it still the same culture? Spengler wrote that each culture “spring[s] with primitive strength from the soil of a mother-region to which it remains firmly bound.” If “the West” includes the United States—and it would be hard to argue that it doesn’t—how the heck is the United States “firmly bound” to the European soil where “the West” was born?

You get the idea. The notion of culture that underlies decadence discourse falls apart at the most cursory glance. The driving forces of history are not amorphous cultures with predefined destinies. The biological rhetoric that preachers of decadence use—“decline,” “aging,” “life-cycle,” “disease”—bears

no relation to the very real problems they identify as symptoms of decadence.

Instead, the left must emphasize that concrete material factors underlie our social problems. The rich keep getting richer not because we “value” money more than in the past, but because they’ve rigged the economy in their favor. A broken tax code, poorly enforced antitrust laws, the exploitation of cheap foreign labor, advances in automation, and a host of other trends enable rich people to keep more and more of their wealth while shattering labor’s power to do anything about it. The same factors explain why so many people are trapped in a cycle of poverty. It’s not cultural decline, but tangible barriers to economic mobility. In the same vein, test scores are stagnating primarily thanks to a decades-long struggle by the right to undermine public education and replace it with for-profit charter schools. Europe is at war not due to a conflict of values between Traditionalist Russia and the decadent West, but because the viability of Putin’s regime—and the enormous personal wealth it has allowed him to amass—depends on constant military success. Political polarization and widespread misinformation in Western countries are direct products of the economics of the news media, which has made increasingly extreme content on right-wing outlets enormously profitable for shareholders. As *Scooby-Doo* taught us, behind every ghost is a guy trying to make money.

The left has been reasonably successful at spreading the narrative that capitalism (or, at least, some entrenched power structure) is to blame for social problems. But unmasking the



The Parthenon, Athens, c. 1860

villain is just the first step. The idea of decadence, at its core, is a politics of despair. Theories of decadence assert that things have gone horribly wrong, that we can't right the ship through incremental measures, and that the only fix is to revert to traditional hierarchies and ways of being. Prager and Shapiro want us to return to conventional values; Bannon and Dugin want us to resurrect the true, lost religion; Peterson and Fuentes want us to restore older sex and gender norms; and of course, white supremacists want to revive state-sanctioned white supremacy. Inherent in their arguments is a nostalgia for a mythic past where the world was strong, orderly, and prosperous.

To counteract decadence's fixation with the past, the left needs to offer a *positive* vision of the future—a vision that entails not merely eliminating existing problems, but building or achieving something tangible. That, I think, is what the contemporary left has failed to do. The most prominent leftist and progressive positions—universal healthcare, reducing police violence against Black people, ending punitive drug policies, cutting greenhouse gas emissions, taxing the rich—all center on *ameliorating specific harms*. Of course, everyone should care deeply about ameliorating those harms. Privatized healthcare, racist police violence, the drug war, climate change, and billionaires are all moral travesties. But the left must do more than play whack-a-mole against social problems. We need to offer something inspiring to strive for.

I won't pretend to know what that "something" is. But I'll make two observations that will hopefully provoke further thought. First, the contemporary left is hampered in its efforts to set forth an inspiring vision by the lack of a strong, consistent aesthetic. Successful leftist movements in the twentieth century were effective in part because they deployed aesthetics that blended struggling against oppression with optimism about the future. For instance, Thomas Sankara's brilliant (albeit tragically short) leadership of Burkina Faso was characterized by vast public works and infrastructure projects and an aesthetic that blended futurism with pre-colonial traditionalism. Sankara promoted traditional clothing and music to cast off the trappings of French imperialism, but simultaneously lauded "the courage to invent the future" and fomented an ethos of self-reliance and egalitarianism. For all its flaws, the early Soviet Union produced a fertile and provocative assemblage of leftist aesthetics. The final sequence of Sergei Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin*, where a showdown between mutineers and soldiers diffuses into mutual solidarity, remains one of the most inspiring pieces of leftist art ever produced. In the United States, both the civil rights movement and the various countercultural movements in the '60s and '70s relied heavily on aesthetics in building popular support. Close your eyes and think of images from that era: pictures of cops using attack dogs on peaceful protesters, or flower-clad hippies staring down armed soldiers will spring to mind. Contemporary leftism has no unifying aesthetic, and the aesthetics we have don't inspire optimism about the future.

Second, when I think of contemporary leftist efforts to foment some sort of vision of the future, they fall curiously flat. This is partly because, like more tangible leftist positions, the vision of the future leftists offer is characterized by the *absence* of some existing bad rather than the development of some

exciting good. The most optimistic leftist vision I can think of is Fully Automated Luxury Communism (which, in meme culture, has morphed into the even more optimistic Fully Automated Luxury Gay Space Communism). The concept, championed by British media personality Aaron Bastani, is a future where all work is automated and everyone enjoys endless luxury, a vision made possible by increasing our "mastery" of natural resources through technology. But although that sounds pretty nice after a long week at work, Fully Automated Luxury Communism is merely the *absence* of labor and scarcity.

In contrast, David Graeber offered a much more promising discussion of technology in his essay "Of Flying Cars and the Declining Rate of Profit." Graeber argued that almost all the new technological developments since the 1970s are "technologies of simulation," like the digital revolution and the internet, which "made it easier to create, transfer, and rearrange virtual projections of things that either already existed, or... never would." Technologies of simulation exist in contrast to "poetic technologies" which use "rational and technical means to bring wild fantasies to reality"—wondrous innovations like the pyramids, space stations, and the elusive flying car. Because poetic technologies are by definition not profitable, capitalism has stymied their development. This, according to Graeber, has produced "a sense of disappointment, a broken promise we were given as children about what our adult world was supposed to be like." Graeber concluded the essay with an exhortation to fight "to let our imaginations once again become a material force in human history."

To be clear, I don't think promising technological wonders is, by itself, a good or complete strategy. My point is that developing an antidote to widespread despair must begin with dreaming about something we want—not merely envisioning the absence of something we don't.



WE

CONCLUDE WHERE WE BEGAN: WITH Spengler. Whatever the merits of *The Decline of the West* as a work of history, Spengler captured the pervasive sense of despair in a

Europe torn apart by war—a sense of despair that lingered in the conquered countries long after the war ended. About a decade after the book's publication, the Nazi party—whose founders read and admired Spengler—capitalized on that sense of despair by blaming a set of scapegoats for Germany's problems, and by conjuring an image of a triumphant future using art, propaganda, and public works projects. In the United States and Europe, right-wing opportunists are similarly capitalizing on widespread despair by pointing the finger of blame at imaginary boogymen like "cultural Marxism," "radical Islam," "transgenderism," secularism, or immigrants. Many of these folks simultaneously offer promises—however flimsy—of a brighter future. That strategy is paying them dividends. If the left wants to win, we need an answer. ✚

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Every year, the children of P.S. 2023 launch a campaign to help our school fill its regrettable but unavoidable budget gaps. We hope you'll consider donating to help us reach our goals! If you don't, the children will cry. And come out for Contribution Day for our delightful schedule of events, where second through fifth graders will labor in the hot sun to earn your pennies!

GOAL!

WE'RE RAISING MONEY FOR:

KINDER-KEVLAR

Armored students are safe students!

BEHAVIORAL CORRECTION BUNGALOW (formerly the library)

Help us stock the new correctional bungalow with pamphlets about maintaining discipline!

MS. TORRES' ROOT CANAL FUND

Sadly the Public School District health plan does not include dental coverage, so the children are saving their lunch money to give geography teacher Ms. Torres the dental work she desperately needs!

**STRETCH GOALS: 1. MORE COPS!
2. A SCHOOL NURSE THAT ISN'T
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VALUABLE DOOR PRIZES!

- Endangered cats calendar
- "We back the blue" paraphernalia
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CONTRIBUTION DAY EVENTS

Censorship Car Wash

The State of Florida has decreed that to be used in school, all books must be screened by a state-approved content filtering corporation, which charges a hefty fee! Help us pay a censorship company so that we can restock our presently-empty shelves!



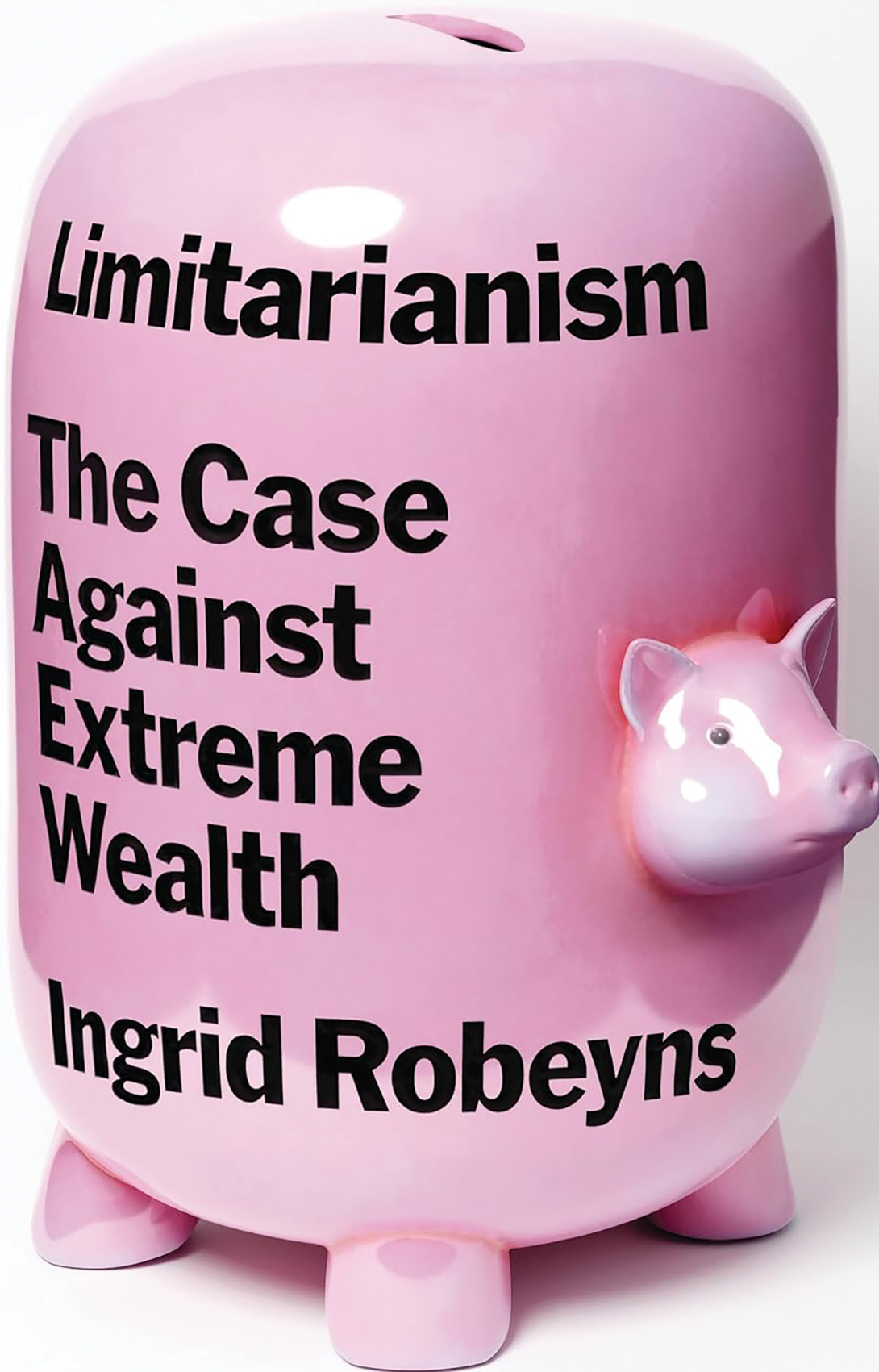
Concert for Concertina Wire

Our students Sing for their Security! The fifth grade chorus offers an evening of musical entertainment to raise money for new concertina wire perimeter fencing



School Supply Scramble

Our teachers race against the clock to pick up as many school supplies as they can. What they can grab, they win!



Why There Should Be Limits on Wealth

Ingrid Robeyns is a professor at Utrecht University, where she specializes in political philosophy and ethics. She's the author of *Limitarianism: The Case Against Extreme Wealth*, a new book which argues for rational limits on how much money a single person can amass. Robeyns explains how the superrich keep everyone else poor, how large concentrations of wealth damage democracy and the environment, and how "limitarian" public policies can become a reality.

Nathan J. Robinson

Let's start with a common viewpoint here in the United States that says: poverty is a problem and very sad, we don't like it when people are poor and suffer, but *inequality* is not a problem. It doesn't matter how much people at the top have; it only matters how much people at the bottom have. There should be no upper limit to wealth as long as the economic pie is growing and the poor are getting some of it. It doesn't matter if the rich are getting much richer—they create wealth. Why should we care about the top, the upper limit, that you discuss in your book?

Ingrid Robeyns

There's a lot of research that has shown that inequality in itself actually has negative effects on society. Unequal societies are more unhealthy than equal societies. My book, and my argument, focuses specifically on the wealth concentration

at the top because that causes particular problems. Basically, concentration of wealth means concentration of power and the ability to pollute the environment. There are all these harms and damages that wealth concentration can do.

Robinson

The line I've heard before is: the poor are not poor because the rich are rich, meaning that the rich could gain a lot more wealth, and the poor could gain a lot more wealth at the same time. Do you think it is true that the poor are not poor because the rich are rich? Or are the poor *poor* because the rich are rich?

Robeyns

The research I've put together in the book does support the point of view that the poor remain relatively poor, also, because the rich just take a very big slice of the pie. So, it is possible, in theory, that the rich

will become rich and the poor would also get out of poverty and the middle classes would rise, too. If you look at this globally, but also within countries whose economies have grown tremendously over the last decades, the rich have taken the lion's share of what we collectively produce.

Particularly relevant for the U.S., there's a book by Princeton sociologist Matthew Desmond, and the title of the book is revealing. The title is *Poverty, by America*. In the book, he attributes the persistence of poverty in the U.S. to policy choices. One of the arguments he makes is that anything that has to do with material policy—housing, fiscal policies, and so on—is a zero-sum game. So, if you give tax deductions to the richest, it means lack of tax revenue for public housing policies or any other policies that benefit the poor.



Robinson

You said “zero-sum” there, and I want to dwell on that for a little bit. I read a book a few years back by a couple of followers of Ayn Rand called *Equal is Unfair*, and one of the things they said is that wealth is not zero-sum. It's not like a pie. They call it the “pie fallacy,” the idea that wealth is like a pie: if I get a little bit more, you necessarily get a little bit less. They say it's not like that because everyone's amount of pie can grow. But you say that wealth is zero-sum in that there are choices that we have to make about alternate uses. If you're not spending money on one thing, you're spending it on another.

Robeyns

Yes. It is true that in economic policies, we have both zero-sum policies or choices, and we also have positive-sum situations. What we've seen is that globally, and within the economies of countries that have grown, the pie has become bigger. But then how is that divided? In the book I show that we've given crumbs to the poorest.

Robinson

They're not getting a slice of pie.

Robeyns

No. We've been able to lift some of the absolutely poor out of poverty. Because that poverty line is so low, it's actually not that difficult to pull them out. But the 1 percent has massively increased their wealth. The pie gets bigger, but how is it divided? What are other ways to divide it than the way we currently do?

Robinson

You have gone into the data. There's this popular website called Our World in Data. Steven Pinker has presented a lot of this data as well. One of the most discussed findings is the number of people over the course of the past decades that have been supposedly lifted out of extreme poverty. This is often the defense given for inequality: yes, we live in a very unequal world, but there are all these people who would once have been very poor, and now they're not. You point out that in some ways, that comes from just setting an extremely low line so that it's really easy to push people over it. And in some ways, it's almost like a magic trick, or it's almost like it's not as much of a gain as it's being presented as.

Robeyns

In all fairness, it is true that the number of people living in absolute poverty has decreased massively. I think that is what the data shows. But there are two big disclaimers to that claim. One is that the poverty line is very, very low. It's around \$2 a day. It's what economists call “purchasing power parity.” Most development economists say that you should put that line at \$11. And then, of course, the number of people who are still living in

extreme poverty is much, much higher. So, that is one problem with the optimistic interpretation of the data.

The other one is, what were the possible scenarios we could have? It's clear that we have a scenario that, for the absolute poor, at least on a global level, is better than it was some decades ago. There were alternative scenarios, where if the 1 percent, and even the 10 percent, would not have pursued endless accumulation of their wealth, we would have had a much bigger reduction in not just extreme poverty, but also just poverty in general. So inequality and poverty are intrinsically related. And that's logical. They're both aspects of the distribution of money.

Robinson

So we have a story that says, look at all these people who have been drawn out of extreme poverty. They used to make less than \$2 a day, and now they make more than \$2 a day—maybe they make \$3 a day—and we look at this as a great victory. But what you're saying there is, there was another alternate world where they didn't go from \$1 a day to \$3 a day—again, as you said, in United States dollars. So, what if we didn't have this kind of wealth concentration, and they had gotten to a much more reasonable amount like \$15 or \$20 a day?

Robeyns

That's exactly what it is. These particular data are from Jason Hickel, the economic anthropologist, and the analysis is also from him. One of the narratives that we were presented with is that the increase in income for different income groups has been the biggest for, you could say, the middle classes on a global scale. But he pointed out that this is when you look at percentage increases. If you have almost nothing, and you have \$2 a day and go to \$4, it's a doubling of your income. But if you have an income of \$50 million a year, and you grow to \$55 million a year, it's not such a big percentage increase. But still, you earned another \$5 million. And he then calculated what the absolute increases were. It shows that the richest have benefited most from the increasing “pie.”

Many of our folk wisdom approaches

to economics are very individualistic, but we produce the pie together. We should go back to the founder of economics, Adam Smith, who showed that we, in the end, produce these things together. It's a question of distribution.

Robinson

You pointed out that when additional wealth goes to the top, it's doing less work than if it goes to those at the bottom. In a crude utilitarian analysis, how much use can any given person get out of additional wealth? If you're a billionaire, each additional dollar is virtually meaningless, whereas if you are a person who is earning \$2 a day, each additional dollar is really important to you. So, as wealth is created, that should make us lean towards favoring it going to the people with the least.

Robeyns

Yes. There's an old finding from both economics and political philosophy. It's called the declining marginal utility or value of money, which means that the more you have, each additional dollar is contributing less to your well-being, happiness, and flourishing. And of course, one could ask, then why do the superrich keep wanting to accumulate money? One of the findings from the ethnographic and sociological research is that among the superrich, there's a small group that is really deliberately giving away their money. But the largest group is really focused on accumulation. The available psychological research seems to suggest two mechanisms: one is comparison—it's a status issue where you compare yourself with the next person on the *Forbes* list, and you just want to have more than your millionaire or billionaire neighbor. The other one is that it's like an addiction—you just seem to always want more, and there's a shifting of the goalposts. And there is a very interesting bestselling book called *The Psychology of Money* that documents this: if you keep shifting the goalposts, you will also sometimes do stupid things, or sometimes even evil things, to get to the next goalpost. One of my arguments is to question why you should want to shift the goalposts; you already have everything you could reasonably



want for a really good life. This is not a popular claim. Our culture says, literally, the sky's the limit. The approach I'm trying to defend, which goes back all the way to Aristotle, is that no, the sky shouldn't be the limit. There's a limit to how much we should want because a good life is also a life lived within boundaries.

Robinson

An interesting argument that you make in the book is that this ceaseless pursuit of accumulation, where nothing is ever enough, ultimately harms the superrich themselves. You cite the wonderful book *Generation Wealth* by Lauren Greenfield, who studied the lives of the rich and their children. Oftentimes, being a child with extreme wealth has damaging effects. This idea that meaning in life comes from improving your bank account is not good for people.

Robeyns

That's true. For my book, I interviewed multimillionaires. And, of course, I must make the disclaimer that the multimillionaires I interviewed are not representative of all millionaires and billionaires. But they actually confirm the point that if you grow up very rich, you might not know whether what you accomplish is really your own because everything has been set up for you to succeed. If you are just living an ordinary middle-class life, or even living in poverty, any success you achieve will require you to really put in a big effort.

Robinson

We often hear incentives invoked as an argument for allowing the accumulation of large-scale wealth: if you tax away people's money, they won't want to work hard. But it's also true that if you inherit a pile of money, that creates pretty bad incentives, too. Why should you do any work?

Robeyns

That's true. I've also done research on the ethics of inheritance. In this respect, both economists and political philosophers agree that inheritance taxation is one of the most rational taxations we can have precisely because of what you say. There are no incentive effects—actually, no, there is an incentive effect in the bad sense. You will basically say, I get that big amount of money, and I'll just stop working. But also if you tax it, it doesn't really make a big difference to how much people will save. And then there is a fundamental philosophical argument that you don't deserve inheritance because you did nothing to get it. But the funny thing is that in the case of inheritance taxation, the feelings that people have are very opposite. I think the reason why we have these strong emotions against inheritance taxation has to do with family ties. And some people may also have these strong emotions because they think that the government is evil and so they are against any type of taxation. But I think most people seem not to realize that the vast majority of people actually don't get an inheritance. So, the problem is not so much with inheritance per se. The problem is that some inherit nothing, and others inherit millions, and then you get unequal opportunities from the start.

Robinson

Once, I looked up what Ayn Rand said about inheritance. I'm always curious about how you can justify something that seems pretty impossible to say that you earned or deserved. And essentially, if I recall her argument correctly, she said something like, yes, it's completely arbitrary, and there's no fairness to it. But, she said, why does the state have the right to take it away? So, it's an interference in private arrangements within families. Inheritance might not be fair, but there's

no reason that society should put that wealth to alternate uses. How do you respond to that?

Robeyns

I can see that reasoning. We shouldn't be naive about the state and the government because actually, many countries have governments that are imperfect, to put it mildly, and sometimes are pretty disastrous. So, what I propose in my book, and also in my scholarly work, is that we limit the amount you can inherit, and all funds from inheritance taxation go a hundred percent back to the citizens. It doesn't go to the state; it goes to those who would not inherit anything otherwise. That means that we will provide for all people. I would give it to young people because they need it most to get a kickstart in life, either for the beginning of a mortgage, to set up a small business, or something like that. It will give all of them a foundation to build their lives. So, you can think about designs that keep the state out, and that might be an answer to the libertarians.

In political philosophy, we have what we call the right-wing libertarians and the left-wing libertarians, and the left-wing libertarians actually favor full abolishment of inheritance. So, in my proposal, I want to accommodate to some extent the fact that there is this relationship between parents and children, or an adult and a significant other person. I do want to accommodate the fact that money is not just purely transactional but part of relationships. But I just think we should limit it because inequalities in inheritance create problems and also undermine equality of opportunity. I think everybody favors equality of opportunity.

Robinson

Yes. You hear that from right to left. People often use that as a piece of rhetoric without thinking about what it would really mean to have equality of opportunity, which will require quite a radical restructuring of economic distribution.

Robeyns

Also, I argue in the book that having a limit to how much wealth you could have—on the assumption that what would

be collected would be used in a way that increases the opportunity of the worst off—would increase the total opportunities of people. It would also bring us much closer to this ideal of equality of opportunity. And equality of opportunity is really, as you rightly say, a principle or a goal that everybody seems to support. We just haven't thought through what this requires from us.

Robinson

I keep thinking back to what you've said about the squandered possibilities that inequality creates. We're hurting ourselves, ultimately. If the people who don't inherit anything did get some amount of money, they could use it to start an enterprise, for a down payment on a house, and they could make their children better off and give them a richer life—maybe one of them could quit work, and they could be a better parent because they're not working all the time. There are all kinds of social benefits that arise when we give money to people who don't have it.

Robeyns

Again, this follows from the declining marginal utility of money. That is an important premise under my argument. At some point, if you already have a lot of money, more money only adds to the status and psychology of the person. It doesn't really make a difference materially.

Robinson

I think it's such an important concept, this declining marginal utility of money. People might think of it as a technical economics term, but let's understand it in plain language. Wealth given to people who are living on the streets means so much more to them than, say, the millions that Elon Musk has made in the time we've been speaking.

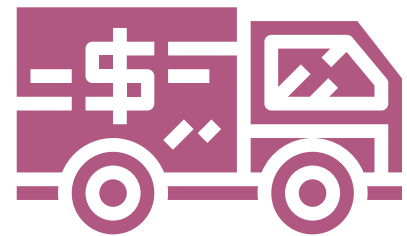
Robeyns

Yes. When I was a student, I started out with no money, and now I'm a professor and have a very decent salary. When you don't have much and then earn enough money to be comfortable, you can really do a lot with it. What you see prudent people do is to start saving. Of course, that's logical. You want to have a cushion

for when something happens. In most countries, you have to save for your pension. But that's the middle classes. If we're talking about the rich, suppose you have covered your pension needs and your healthcare needs, and then you have a million, another million, and another. What do you do? It's just a number in your investment account.

Robinson

We're talking about how, at a certain point, this additional wealth becomes meaningless and could be put to other better uses. But in the book, you also discuss how extreme wealth confers a lot of political power. This concentration of power through concentration of wealth is very damaging and dangerous. You discuss the fact that it's not just that a rich person gets a lot of numbers on a spreadsheet. It's also a bad idea to allow people to have that much power.



Robeyns

Absolutely. Political scientists have done very important research by comparing different countries and the way that the superrich basically undermine the principle of political equality. So basically, one person, one vote is equal political influence. I quote in the book something Donald Trump said before he was in politics himself. He used to give money to both the Republicans and the Democrats. The journalist asked him, Why do you do this? And he said, Because no matter who is in power, I will have somebody to call up, and they will do what I ask of them. Of course, this is rational. It's rational to assume that if people give large amounts of money, they get favors back. That's one mechanism.

The other mechanism is lobbying, and it's a very important one. If you have money, you can buy a lobbyist, and they will try to get the policies or the changes that you need. And in the U.S. in particular, we've seen that the changes in the fiscal system over the last decades have been to the benefit of the richest. There is a book written by the U.S. activist group Patriotic Millionaires called *Tax the Rich!* They document how the richest in the U.S. lobbied for changes in the fiscal legislation that basically make it so that the richest pay fewer taxes than the next deciles. This has to do with the differences in how much Americans pay in taxes on income from labor versus capital gains or profits. And so, that's another way in which if you have money, you can use it to undermine democracy.

Robinson

Another thing is that you can essentially buy your way into a country and across the international borders.

Robeyns

Yes. There's this phenomenon called golden passports. If you have enough money, you can just buy a passport, and the world opens up to you. The passports in demand are European Union passports. If you have a passport, for example, from Malta, you can live and work in any EU country. There's the case of Peter Thiel, who is German in origin and also American. He acquired New Zealand's citizenship, and the reason is that he wanted to buy a plot of land so that in case of catastrophe, he could take his private jet and fly to New Zealand, and he could be in his own bubble next to unspoiled lands and water and survive the apocalypse. But the problem is that in New Zealand, to buy land, you have to be a citizen. It's very hard for anybody to get land there. But he managed. He was in New Zealand for 12 days before he acquired citizenship. So, political groups then started to complain, and they found out that the reason he was granted citizenship was because of his "service to the economy" of New Zealand.

Robinson

In other words, being rich. And this is especially tragic and cruel when you see

the number of people without any money who are fleeing violence and poverty and trying to get into the United States on the southern border. All they want is to come and work and live a peaceful life, and they can't get across the border. But the moment you flash the wallet, and you're Peter Thiel, they say, sir, what country would you like to live in?

Robeyns

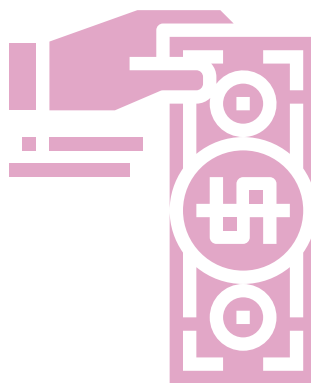
It's really true that we have different rules for poor people and for the superrich.

Robinson

And our grotesque distribution of wealth is now causing a planetary catastrophe.

Robeyns

Yes. In theory, it is possible to be super-rich and not to use that money to damage the environment and the planet. But that's a theoretical possibility. What we see is that the superrich pollute vastly more than other groups with things such as private yachts, mansions, and multiple homes. And in the case of private jets, perhaps we should just abolish them. As long as we don't have a carbon-neutral way to fly privately, I don't see how they can justify it.



Robinson

Right. It hurts the rest of us. You could justify banning private jets even on a free market theory, which is that you're allowed to regulate markets when there are these externalities, these harms and costs that your activity within the market imposes on others, which obviously

private jets do.

Robeyns

What standard economic theory says is that if you internalize the negative externalities into the price, which we could do by having a carbon tax, then the problem might be solved. But actually, that particular theory was built on the assumption that inequality was not as significant. Once you have significant inequality, you might actually have to go to models of rationing rather than including the effect of the price. So, this is also something like this idea of internalizing the externality in the price, which I'm all in favor of. But with somebody like Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk, suppose we say that they should pay \$100 per every 1,000 miles they fly. They will just laugh at us and throw some money.

Robinson

They're not going to change their behavior. They're just going to pay the fee because it's meaningless to them. So, the idea here is, we will discourage them by forcing them to pay the costs of the harm they're doing. But if you can just pay for harm, then....

Robeyns

It's what economists would call the income effect. They have so much income, and in their case, also wealth, that it's not going to affect them. It's going to affect the middle classes, who will no longer be able to fly, and I think we should all think twice—or three times—before flying. In the case of politics, you have another measure that you could advocate, which is to try, with regulation, to make sure that money from the privileged position in the economic sphere harms your privileged position in the political sphere. One way to do this is by having campaign legislation. My own country, the Netherlands, recently introduced a law that each person can maximally give 100,000 euros per year to political parties. I think if you were to apply this to the U.S., there would be plenty of people in trouble. But they'd try to find ways around it. They'd start a foundation, and all these entrepreneurs would give a million to it—a not-for-profit outfit or something like that, similar to the super PACs in the U.S. As long as

some people have such a disproportionate amount of money and power, they are going to try to evade and change these regulations.

Robinson

Ultimately, you come to the conclusion that there has to be an upper limit on the amount of wealth that can be possessed.

Robeyns

That's my argument. There are important values like the survival of the human species on Earth. So, it's logical that sustainability, political equality, democracy, and having our basic needs met are just so much more important than the addictions of the superrich. I do think we should take incentive seriously, in a sense that, yes, people who work harder should be able to earn more and so forth. But the incentive argument is also not to do so endlessly. We can also find ways to reward people and to show our respect for what people have done in other ways instead of only letting them accumulate more money. The whole system of giving prizes in academia, of giving honorary degrees, for example, is to show respect, admiration, and acknowledgment for the work that people have put in.

Robinson

Most people who innovate would say that they don't do it for the money, anyway.

Robeyns

Yes. But then it's in tension with the argument that we shouldn't tax too much.

Robinson

If you tax me too much, I won't do it. But also, I don't do it for the money. To conclude here, you talk in the book about how when you start to talk about limits, people often mischaracterize you and say, this is communism. But what you've been saying is that, even if we accept the idea of a limit, the limit can still be set quite high. You can still live very comfortably within the limit that we're talking about. It is possible to have a range of incomes. It's still possible to have some level of inequality. Where do you think the limit ought to be?

Robeyns

This is in part based on empirical research I did with colleagues, where we did a survey among a representative sample of the Dutch population. We basically gave them descriptions of material lifestyles, where each case was in increasing amounts of wealth. We asked them to decide when somebody has too much. People do draw that line at different points, but almost all of them *do* draw the line somewhere, which means that the conceptual idea of having too much makes sense. It's not just an academic idea. So, based on that research, I argue that for the Dutch context, one doesn't need more than one million per person to lead a really good life. But I say it's for the Dutch context, and we have two types of security that I do not think all Americans have. We have a regulated healthcare system. It's not like the British NHS. It has private providers, but it's highly regulated and also subsidized by the government. And we also have, importantly, a collective pension system. And these two things, of course, take away two really big sources of anxiety and worry among the citizens. So, I can see that in the American context, you may have to put a higher limit.



Robinson

Unless we get universal health care.

Robeyns

Yes. I think it's much more rational to have universal healthcare and to also think about having a pension system at the poverty line, where people can still save for top-ups.

Robinson

People here do feel that they have to accumulate because, in part, they feel precarious. They feel like it could go away tomorrow, and they could end up on the streets.

Robeyns

In the Netherlands, we pay a monthly fee for healthcare. It's fixed. And so if I were to have a very serious disease—cancer or something like that—it would not affect me in financial terms. I would not have to pay extra, and that just gives me peace of mind. It's actually rational to pool the risks of bad luck. That is a finding from economics. If you have certain risks that are spread over the population, it's much more rational to pool those risks. And I think we should do that both with healthcare costs and pensions. How can you know how much you will have to pay for your pension? Because you may actually die at 67, but you may live until you're 99. It's much more rational to have those systems in a traditional welfare state. What I've said so far is what I think you need for a flourishing, good life. And then there is the question of political limits and how we should organize economic systems so that we try to make sure we end inequality. This is difficult for me to guess because I don't have solid research here. But in the book, I've proposed 10 million. That gives you the scope for the incentives for people to innovate, to work hard, to take risks, and so on. People may argue that 10 million is too low.

Robinson

But it's a lot of money.

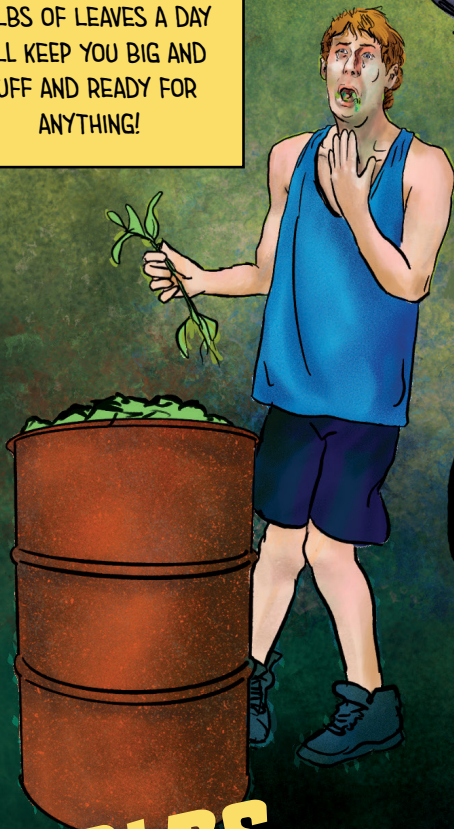
Robeyns

But it's not one billion. So there are people, including Bernie Sanders, who say we shouldn't have billionaires. I think that statement is not ambitious enough. It's not just that we shouldn't have billionaires. We shouldn't have decamillionaires or semimillionaires. It's really not necessary to have so much money. ✚

Transcript edited by Patrick Farnsworth

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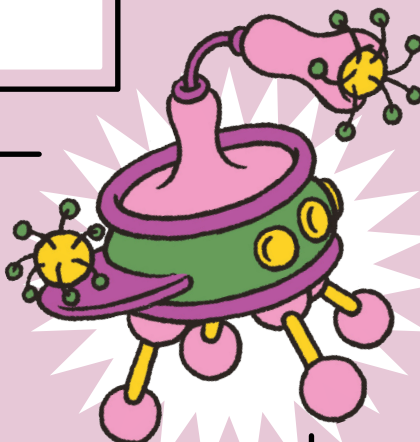
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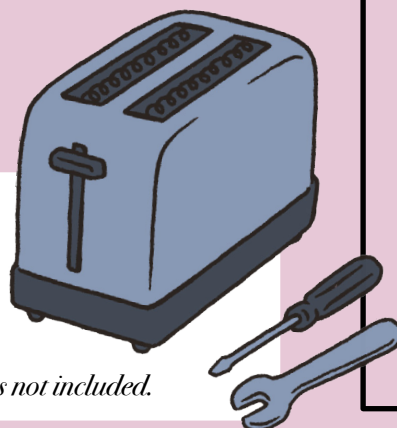
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HOWARD ZINN

HOW TO WRITE A GOOD POLITICAL POEM

BY ALEX SKOPIC

IS THERE A PLACE IN THIS WORLD FOR POLITICAL POETRY? The question has always been a vexed one—and over the years, several poets and writers have answered with a firm *no*. Take Joseph Brodsky, the poet laureate of the United States from 1991 to 1992, who famously said that “the only things which poetry and politics have in common are the letters P and O.” Or consider Vladimir Nabokov, who was a prolific and heartfelt poet as well as a novelist. He went further than Brodsky, saying in a 1964 interview that “A work of art has no importance whatever to society”—that poetry and prose alike are “only important to the individual, and only the individual reader is important to me.” British-American poet W.H. Auden took a slightly different tack, writing that “poetry makes nothing happen” in his elegy for W.B. Yeats—a statement of profound pessimism about a poet’s ability to effect any real change in the world.

In some ways, it’s understandable why those poets came to the conclusions they did. Brodsky and Nabokov were both scarred, in various ways, by the experience of being exiled from their homes in Russia, where dictators and commissars insisted that literature *had* to be political at all times. Beyond that, though, it’s an unavoidable fact that a lot of poetry which

tries to address political topics is just unreadable hackwork. In theory, there’s no reason why this should be true. Politics should be just another subject, like the moon or a Grecian urn, which can inspire good or bad poetry in equal measure. But somehow, political events and figures seem to bring out the worst in would-be poets. In practice, hearing someone loudly announce “I’m going to write a poem about Donald Trump!” causes one an involuntary wince, whereas “I’m going to write a poem about the moon!” might not.

In fact, we live in something of a golden age for the Bad Political Poem. The example of someone enthusiastically sitting down to write page after page of terrible Trump-themed poetry is, unfortunately, not hypothetical. Such poems actually exist, and what’s worse, they get published. In 2019, the character actor John Lithgow decided to inflict a book of political poetry on the world entitled *Dumpty: The Age of Trump in Verse*. This, according to the publisher’s description, is a “satirical poetry collection” which is “bound to bring joy to poetry lovers,” particularly if they take a dim view of the former president. Like many anti-Trump books, it became a *New York Times* bestseller, but “joy-inducing” is not exactly how I’d describe its contents. One sample of Lithgow’s verse goes like this (brace yourself):

*Trumpty Dumpty wanted a wall
To stir up a rabid political brawl
His Republican rivals, both feckless and stodgy
Succumbed in the end to his rank demagoguery.*

Wow, that's bad! I feel vaguely guilty even showing it to you—like someone who notices expired milk in the fridge and waves it around the kitchen, bellowing “*Hey, smell this!*” But it's important to understand *why* it's bad and what that means for the broader question of the political poem. The thing about *Dumpty*—and, God help us, its two sequel books—is that the politics themselves aren't the problem. The poems aren't *wrong* about what they're saying. Donald Trump actually is a noxious demagogue, and his border wall is stupid and cruel. Expressing those thoughts in a witty, rhyming format *should* be a perfectly reasonable thing to do. The problem is that the politics in *Dumpty* come first and foremost, with the poetry itself a distant afterthought. On a technical level, Lithgow's use of rhyme and meter, his choice of words, and his sense of humor are simplistic, childish, and grating. It's vaguely sympathetic dreck, and presumably he means well by it, but it's dreck nonetheless.

ANOTHER PROMINENT POET HAS THE OPPOSITE PROBLEM, pairing prodigious raw talent with a tepid, lifeless politics. I refer, of course, to Amanda Gorman. In the press—and in the *liberal* press most of all—we've been told over and over that Gorman's political poems are amazing. The *New Yorker* describes her work as a “stunning vision of democracy,” while *Time* says that her “tightrope-taut verse” provides “clear-eyed hope to a weary nation.” (That last quote comes from *Time* guest writer Lin-Manuel Miranda, whose work Gorman says she referenced in her poetry.) And to be fair, some of Gorman's poems—especially the deeper cuts from her 2021 collection, *Call Us What We Carry*—are quite good. The problem is that her talents have been devoted to the project of business-friendly Democratic Party liberalism, and to Joe Biden in particular. The only poem most people have heard from Gorman is “The Hill We Climb,” which was tailor-made to be delivered at Biden's inauguration:

*Somehow we've weathered and witnessed
a nation that isn't broken
but simply unfinished
We the successors of a country and a time
Where a skinny Black girl
descended from slaves and raised by a single mother
can dream of becoming president
only to find herself reciting for one*

These are platitudes, and bad ones. “The Hill We Climb” expresses two basic themes: that January 6 was scary (“We've seen a force that would shatter our nation / rather than share it”) and that things are going to be better now that Joe Biden is president (“This is the era of just redemption.... We will

rebuild, reconcile and recover”). Embedded within the verses is the assumption, quintessentially liberal, that there's nothing fundamentally wrong with the United States or its hierarchies of wealth and power. The country “isn't broken.” It doesn't need to be radically changed, just fixed up around the edges, and our old pal Joe's the man for the job. The whole thing was pretty questionable on the day—how do you proudly declare yourself “descended from slaves” while reciting a poem for a former segregationist?—but it's only gotten worse with age. Since Biden's inauguration, the “era of just redemption” has turned out to include skyrocketing housing costs and homelessness, more deportations and fossil-fuel drilling than under Trump, and a genocide in Palestine which the United States continues to actively support. If we're climbing a hill, it's made of corpses.

The frustrating thing is that Gorman is clearly capable of great poetry. Even her Biden poem contains striking imagery and phrases, despite its topic. If she wanted to, she could genuinely be a generational artist, capturing all the struggle and horror of life as a young person in the 2020s. But there's no money or fame in that. Instead, Gorman chooses to churn out flattering fluff for the rich and powerful. Biden was just the start; these days, her subject matter includes Oprah's 70th birthday, which is apparently “Proof that even from embers a woman can build an empire,” and she's become a “brand ambassador” for Estée Lauder. It's a shame, and a waste.

There are even more wretched political poems out there, though. Some people embody the worst of both worlds, combining heinous political views with a truly abyssal lack of talent. Many of these people can be found in the Society of Classical Poets, a nonprofit group that aims to “support poets who apply classical techniques in modern poetry.” In practice, what this means is to publish and promote poetry with politically conservative themes, regardless of its actual quality. One of the Society's most notable poets is a guy called Joseph Charles MacKenzie, who could charitably be called an anti-Gorman. In 2017 he wrote a poem celebrating Donald Trump's inauguration which was unintentionally hilarious; among other memorable lines, it called Barack Obama a “tyrant” and referred to immigrants as “a murderous horde, for whom hell is the norm.” (This was rhymed with “our nation deform.”) The Society also hates Karl Marx, devoting multiple poems to hurling schoolyard insults at him:

*If humans ran a Human Race,
Karl Marx would not be in it.
The human depth that he could trace
would leach out in a minute.*

The most notable thing about this group, though, is its resistance to any innovation in poetic form that has taken place since 1850 or so. Practically every poem on the Society's website reads like Alexander Pope could have written it (if you hit him over the head first), and in one long, ranting essay, frequent contributor Phillip Whidden condemns modernism as “the Murder of the People's Poetry and Art.” For the history buffs at home, this is the same logic that caused the Nazis to brand the

works of Picasso and other modern artists as “degenerate art” in the early 20th century. Its goal is to freeze human creativity in time and insist that any change from the supposed classics is a bad thing—just as, implicitly, any change from the established structures of power and wealth must be. The two kinds of conservatism go hand in hand.



FROM THESE EXAMPLES, WE CAN CREATE A TAXONOMY of the Bad Political Poem, with three broad categories. In one group, there are the poems with more or less sympathetic politics, but terrible aesthetics (as seen in *Dumpty*). In another, there are the well-crafted poems that express a morally bankrupt politics (like “The Hill We Climb”). And in a third, there are the poems where everything sucks (looking at you, Society of Classical Poets). But what would it mean to create a political poem that’s actually *good*? Is such a thing even possible?

A new book makes a strong case that it is. In *Poetry for the Many*, Jeremy Corbyn—the much-slandered humanitarian and former leader of the British Labour Party—resurrects a neglected tradition, compiling dozens of poems from around the world that are both politically radical and artistically compelling. He’s joined by co-editor Len McCluskey, a lifelong trade unionist and an influential figure in British politics in his own right. At 198 pages, their book is fairly short, but it serves as an important antidote to the elitism that often surrounds poetry as an art form, encouraging the reader “to embrace poetry and shake off any notion that it is not something to be read, written, or appreciated by working-class people.” At a time when Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and his Conservative government are trying to eliminate literature and other humanities degrees from British universities on the grounds that they’re not “practical” for young people seeking a job, *Poetry for the Many* stands in opposition to that entire way of thinking. Its authors insist that poetry is not only a shared cultural heritage that belongs to everyone, but a vital tool for political liberation. At one point, introducing a poem by the Palestinian writer Mahmoud

Darwish, Corbyn calls poetry “the way people under occupation and oppression can best express themselves,” forming a “vehicle for oral history” and for “messages of resistance and hope.”

As the book reveals, the “oral history” radical poetry represents is one of immense depth and richness. It runs all the way back to 1381 and the Peasants’ Revolt in England, when the priest and revolutionary leader John Ball wrote a couplet condemning the whole concept of class distinctions as unnatural and inhuman:

*When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who then was the gentleman?*

Ball was executed by King Richard II for saying things like that, but more than 600 years later, his words live on. Later, during the early 1800s, Percy Bysshe Shelley echoed them with a few couplets of his own:

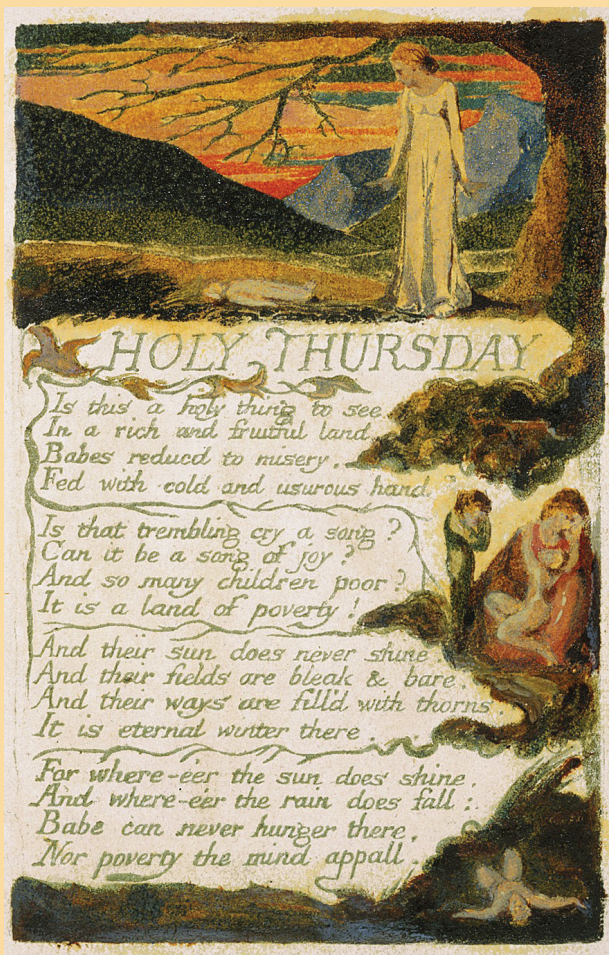
*Men of England, wherefore plough
For the Lords who lay ye low?
Wherefore weave with toil and care
The rich robes your tyrants wear?*

It’s also Shelley who gives Corbyn and McCluskey’s book its title, writing in his long poem “The Masque of Anarchy” that the workers of England should:

*Rise like lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fall’n on you
Ye are many—they are few.*

As Michael Demson writes in his 2013 book *Masks of Anarchy*, those lines have been an inspiration to working-class radicals ever since they were written—including to Pauline Newman, the New York labor organizer who was christened “the New Joan of Arc” for her leadership of more than 400 women in a 1907 rent strike. As head of the British Labour Party, Corbyn himself frequently recited the “ye are many, they are few” line at his rallies, to roaring approval from crowds of thousands—a prime example of poetry’s power to stir and mobilize people politically.

ONE OTHER NAME STANDS OUT FROM *POETRY FOR THE MANY*: that of the Romantic poet and political firebrand William Blake. For anyone who went through an English class in the U.K. or United States, Blake is known primarily for his “Tyger Tyger burning bright / in the forests of the night,” one of the most anthologized poems in the English language. But his work is a lot more extensive, and politically provocative, than that poem alone suggests. Born in 1757, Blake was a fierce opponent of the English monarchy and the Anglican church, at a time when they were intertwined and



all-powerful. In poem after poem, he railed against poverty and economic injustice, blasting the ruling class for forcing poor children to go hungry in “Holy Thursday”:

*Is this a holy thing to see,
In a rich and fruitful land,
Babes reduc'd to misery,
Fed with cold and usurous hand?*

And excoriating the twin evils of child labor and militarism in “London”:

*How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
Every blackning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls*

Blake appears twice in *Poetry for the Many*, once with his 1810 poem “Jerusalem” and once with a lesser-known poem called “The Schoolboy,” but there are dozens of others that could just as easily have made the cut. Even more than Shelley, his political poems have lost none of their urgency and vitality over the course of the last 200 years.

Inevitably, I have a few quibbles with Corbyn and

McCluskey's choices. For instance, they include the great Langston Hughes in the book but print his poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”—which has been widely anthologized—and not his more explicitly socialist work, like “Good Morning Revolution” or “One More ‘S’ in the U.S.A.” which are seldom printed anywhere. That's an opportunity missed. It's also a bit weird to print Adrian Mitchell's elegy for the martyred Chilean folk singer Victor Jara, “His Hands Were Gentle,” and not any of Jara's own poems, like his heartbreaking “Estadio Chile.” Meanwhile some absolute titans of politics and poetry, like Assata Shakur, don't even get a mention. There are any number of possible reasons for these things, including the difficulty of getting permissions from poets' publishers and estates, and I still think this is a *good* book. But with a few minor tweaks and additions, it could have been a fantastic one.

My biggest disappointment with *Poetry for the Many*, though, is how backward-looking it is. Having given us an excellent primer on the history of radical poems, it doesn't convey much of a sense that people are still writing them today. In fact, one of the only contemporary poems in the book is one Corbyn wrote himself about his visit to a refugee camp, called “Calais in Winter.” It's surprisingly subtle and affecting, considering that Corbyn isn't a poet by training—but there's an entire movement of young writers working in this field today who are turning out sharp, incisive political poetry and not getting anywhere near the attention they deserve for it. It may be understandable that Corbyn and McCluskey seem to be unaware of them, since both men come from a pre-internet generation. Today, many of the best new poems circulate exclusively online, or in small independent magazines (like *Prolit* and *Protean*) which you can only find out about online. But I've been watching the rise of this new wave with great interest, and have even tried to serve as something of a spokesperson for it, reviewing a few of its most important texts for the *Cleveland Review of Books*. What follows is a brief—and by no means complete—overview of radical political poetry as it stands today.

FIRST, THERE ARE THE POETS WE MIGHT CALL THE RUST Belt Proletarians: Joe Hall and Brendan Joyce. The former lives and works in Buffalo, New York, and the latter in Cleveland—not cities most people would associate with poetry or with literature of any kind. Both Hall and Joyce are focused intensively on the poetry of place, breaking with the narcissistically Brooklyn and Manhattan-obsessed literary world to chronicle the lives of people who are still working and struggling to get by in the United States' decaying, neglected ex-industrial cities. In this, they echo an older generation of proletarian poets—most notably Carl Sandburg, the bard of Chicago's industrial working class in the 1910s. For his part, Joyce has worked as a waiter, busboy, and line cook in Cleveland's various restaurants—unfortunately, poetry doesn't always pay the bills—and captured the experience in poems like the marvelously sarcastic “Nobody Wants to Work”:

*I watch the flour and sugar and mushrooms and beef tips
and bread crumbs go, swirling in the three sink. I put the
degreaser in the mop bucket. I slather a slick layer over
the kitchen floor. I follow with a deck brush until the
food stuff scrapes off. I follow with a dry mop to buff
it shiny. When I get in my car I realize my tire's half flat.
I roll the dice. I stop at the grocery store, half a catered
Christmas sprayed across my clothes. I check out.
On my receipt it says I have 25 cents left in food stamps.*

To me, this is a perfect political poem, both stylish and evocative. It captures all the crises of labor, wealth, class, and power that we're currently living with in the United States in a deeply human way that no economic report or newspaper article ever could. Hall takes a different approach, going fully Surrealist with a poem about Tim Howard, the notorious Erie County sheriff who had 32 suspicious deaths in jails under his watch:

*Tim Howard arrests Tim Howard for murder
and spends the night looking the other way
as Tim Howard knocks Tim Howard's head against
the hardness of the Erie County holding center
whispering murderer, murderer, murderer.*

This is just haunting. Not a word is wasted. In other poems, Hall writes songs of praise to garbage collectors, bookshop clerks, marijuana growers, and every other member of Buffalo's working class he can think of, along with meditations on the city's public transit system. Sometimes he slips a little too far into stream-of-consciousness and free association between words to be easily intelligible, but then again, that's a deliberate style choice. Altogether it's a remarkable poetic project, unlike anything else in literature today.

ANOTHER IMPORTANT CURRENT IS THE POETRY OF Palestinian liberation, which has been flourishing—despite everything—in both the diaspora and Palestine itself. Corbyn and McCluskey touch on this movement with their inclusion of Mahmoud Darwish, but he died in 2008, and a lot has happened since then. On the Palestinian American side, the last few years have seen the rise of Noor Hindi, whose poem “Fuck Your Lecture on Craft, My People are Dying” went viral online in 2020:

*Colonizers write about flowers.
I tell you about children throwing rocks at Israeli tanks
seconds before becoming daisies.
I want to be like those poets who care about the moon.
Palestinians don't see the moon from jail cells and prisons.
It's so beautiful, the moon.
They're so beautiful, the flowers.*

What's remarkable about this, beyond the tragic beauty of the poem itself, is that Hindi is directly rebuking the ideas of

people like Nabokov and Brodsky. They're the “poets who care about the moon” and think poetry should stay disconnected from politics. That attitude, Hindi implicitly says, is a luxury for those who can afford it, those whose lives aren't directly impacted (and *ended*) by the political events around them.

HINDI ALSO PAYS TRIBUTE TO THE ICONS OF PALESTINIAN literature who came before her, saying that “your canon ain't shit // compared to Ghassan Kanafani”—the novelist who was assassinated by the Mossad in 1972—in the wickedly funny “Self-Portrait as Arab/Muslim Teenager in an All-White High School.” In a time when the Israeli military and its accomplices in the U.S. are trying to eradicate Palestinians and their culture from human memory, that alone is an act of resistance. And in Gaza and the West Bank, a new generation of poets persists. The most famous, of course, is Refaat Alareer, who was murdered by an Israeli bomb in December 2023, and whose poem “If I Must Die” has rapidly become one of the most read and translated of the 21st century. But there's also Mosab Abu Toha—one of Alareer's friends and colleagues—who wrote the extraordinary *Things You May Find Hidden in My Ear: Poems from Gaza*, and Khaled Juma, whose poem “Oh Rascal Children of Gaza” has also become popular online since October 2023. At the time of writing, both of them are still alive—if not necessarily well—and still writing. May it stay that way!

Meanwhile in the United States, young, working-class Black poets have been writing with a new intensity about issues of racial injustice, especially in the wake of the nationwide uprisings after George Floyd's murder in 2020. Here, one of the standout figures is Darius Simpson, whose 2023 collection *Never Catch Me* is full of stanzas like this one from “Etymology of ‘Fuck 12’”:

*once i tried talking a killer, i have the handcuff scars
to prove it
in a matter of seconds i've seen improbable cause
devour innocence
your prejudicial bloodlust is off its leash chewing on
my sister again
your great great granddaddy was a double barrel shotgun
you sound just like him.*

Kyle Carrero Lopez, another poet from this nascent movement, has a more complex relation to race, writing as an Afro-Cuban artist in New Jersey—but his uncompromising enmity to the police echoes Simpson's. In October 2020—just a few months after George Floyd's death—he published “After Abolition,” writing:

*Prisons and cops survive only in tales for the young
like twin Atlantises or two drowned boogeymen.
A cop's as harmless a Halloween getup as any
monster, while a prisoner costume's as taboo as a slave one
now that schools teach what makes them kin.*

Together, these two poems represent two sides of a coin. One depicts the horror of the present, while the other dares to hope for an entirely different future. Simpson and Lopez are very much heirs to the great Black radical poets like Amiri Baraka or (to invoke her name again) Assata Shakur—but at the same time, also entirely new and different, and worth following as their art continues to evolve.

Finally, another political poet who should be better-known is W.D. Ehrhart, the Vietnam War veteran who’s spent decades warning against U.S. militarism, nationalism, and war in general. I’ll declare up-front that I’m biased toward Bill’s poems since he’s a friend of *Current Affairs* and a semi-frequent contributor. So I won’t be too effusive; I suspect he’d hate anything that smells like flattery anyway. But let’s just say there’s a *reason* he’s the only person (so far) to have poems published in this magazine, and you can find a page of them at the end of this article that’ll amply show why.

DESPITE THEIR BRILLIANCE IN OTHER AREAS, BRODSKY, Nabokov, and Auden were wrong about political poetry. Dead wrong. Not only is it possible to write a good political poem, but people have been doing it for centuries. It’s just that it’s *difficult* to do, and the sheer volume of awful poems often drowns out the good ones. But at its best, a political poem is a powerful thing. It can open hearts, expand minds, and inspire human empathy like nothing else. If you think you can write one, go for it. Just make sure you have the patience, and the technique, to make it work. Be sure that your words won’t just serve the soulless commercial interest of a publishing company, or flatter the ego of some politician or millionaire. And if you find yourself rhyming “stodgy” with “demagogy,” close the document and walk away. ♣

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FROM THE DESK OF W.D. EHRHART



Another War

Last night it rained, and then turned cold.
Today the trees are coated in ice,
every bare branch, every tiny needle
on the evergreens. Now the sun's come out,
the sparkle on the trees is dazzling,
enough to lift the heaviest heart,
enough to make you think this world's
not so hopeless as it seemed last night.

Last night, Russian missiles hit Ukraine,
and Russian tanks crossed the border
headed for Kyiv. Who's at fault?
Who did what to whom? No doubt
the fingers will be pointing sixteen
different ways to Sunday. Anymore,
it's hard to care whose fault it is.
It just keeps happening.

And after seven decades plus, I
finally can't avoid accepting
that there's nothing I can do about it,
this is simply what and who we are,
this is how we'll finally nail shut
our own coffins. Grant me the serenity.
Listen: you can hear the little chunks
of ice tinkle softly as they hit the ground.

The Night You Returned

A road crew was paving the highway
the night you returned from the war.
It was March; they had set up floodlights;
the black viscous tar steamed in the cold.
The workmen didn't notice you.
Why would they?
You weren't any different
from all the other passersby that night
or any other night, just another car.
They had a machine;
they were laying macadam
mile after mile.
Black. Viscous. Steaming.
Mile after mile after mile.
Deep into the night.

History Repeats Itself

But sooth is seyde, go sithen many yeres,
That "feeld hath eyen and the wode hath eres."
Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Knight's Tale"

The old saying goes that fields have eyes
and forests ears; no secrets could be kept
for long in olden times: not murders,
robberies, infidelities, what have you.
All came to light eventually, justice
finally for the guilty, balance restored.

Would that it were so in Chaucer's day
or in our own. Where should I begin?
Injustice is a fact of life. Ask
George Floyd, Emmett Till, Joe Hill,
Little Turtle, or Rebecca Nurse.
The list is endless, and keeps growing.

What to do? Give up? Play dead? I wish
I had a good answer. Whenever
students used to say, "That's not fair," I'd
ask them just what planet they imagined
they were living on. But that's not fair.
I owe them something more than cynicism.

Still, they'll find out soon enough that privilege
will, like dukes and earls, rape peasant girls
and get away with it, the poor man hanged
for stealing bread to feed his starving kids.
Ever was it so, and ever shall be. Broken-
hearted world without end. Amen.



YES, YOUR CHILD COULD DO THAT.

Modern art doesn't need to be the product of genius to be appreciated.

BY NATHAN J. ROBINSON

There is, in the *Current Affairs* library, a rather fun little book called *Why Your Five-Year-Old Could Not Have Done That: Modern Art Explained*. The author, Susie Hodge, is writing for the type of person who sees a celebrated work of modern art and doesn't get it, muttering that "my 5-year-old could have done that."

No, they could not, Hodge says. You may *think* your 5-year-old could have dripped paint like Jackson Pollock or left their bed unmade like Tracey Emin. But you would be in error. While the work of modern artists can be difficult for the average person to appreciate, this does not make it unsophisticated, and Hodge wants to explain to the general public why works that appear unskilled, ugly, or

simplistic have attained renown.

Take one of Gerhard Richter's "Grey" paintings, which looks like this (*see next page*).

Hodge explains that while the painting itself may be simple enough for a child to produce, Richter's paintings are "created to investigate feelings of loss and hopelessness, and express hidden truths that Richter believes are exposed in painting by chance." (Richter himself said that such a piece "makes no statement whatever; it evokes neither feelings nor associations," though he also said it was "the only way for me to paint concentration camps.")

A lot of people get frustrated by the acclaim afforded to paintings like this, because they don't look like the product of real artistic skill. Cultural conservatives

tend not to like them. Steven Pinker has written that "modern and postmodern works are intended not to give pleasure but to confirm and confound the theories of a guild of critics and analysts, to *épater la bourgeoisie*, and to baffle the rubes in Peoria." Some think modern art is a gigantic hoax, with work so simple that a 5-year-old could have done it passed off as a thing of genius. "Explain what this painting means and why it is good," a commenter on social media recently demanded. The painting in question was "No. 7" by Mark Rothko, consisting—as most Rothko paintings do—of simple fields of color with soft edges. The viewer appeared baffled, especially at the fact that the painting had sold for \$82.5 million in 2021. Responders tried to explain that the painting didn't necessarily *mean*



Gerhard Richter's "Grey"



Rothko "No. 7"

anything, that Rothko was trying to create a pure aesthetic experience, that to understand fully requires seeing it in person, etc. But plenty agreed that selling a bunch of meaningless blotches for such an eye-popping sum of money seemed somehow grotesque.

It's easy to get inside the mind of the haters of modern art. To anyone who doesn't see the point, the whole enterprise looks like a form of insanity. Marcel Du-

champ put a urinal on display, it became perhaps the single most important work of modern art, and a replica of it fetched nearly \$2 million at auction back in the '90s. Andy Warhol, who could seemingly barely draw a cat, painted a cartoon of a soup can and got filthy rich. Ellsworth Kelly put seemingly random simple geometric shapes on a wall, and Ed Ruscha painted words like "OOF," "OK," and "SMASH" on canvas or paper. They sell for tens of millions of dollars. There's Damien Hirst's shark in formaldehyde, of course. Mike Kelley's plushies. Jeff Koons's kitsch. Chris Burden having himself shot with a rifle. A bunch of canvases that are just painted white. On multiple occasions, janitors in art museums have mistakenly thrown out "trash" that was actually intended to be "art" (such as one consisting of empty champagne bottles and confetti, and one made of newspapers and cookies). A banana duct-taped to a wall fetched \$120,000. There's the Mondrian that was accidentally kept hanging upside-down for 75 years, which certainly suggests that its orientation didn't matter that much. Was Piet Mondrian, then, producing nothing but a bunch of random lines?

I confess, my own first experiences in modern art museums left me confused and upset. There was a highly-regarded museum on my college campus, and when I first stopped by hoping to see things that were beautiful and breathtaking, I was disappointed at exhibits that consisted of things like a lightbulb affixed to the wall, and labeled "Lightbulb," with a statement explaining the profound meaning of the lightbulb. At the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, I came into a room where the floor was covered with wrapped pieces of candy. It turned out that the pieces of candy, by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, were famous, and they were a statement about AIDS. "Okay," I thought, but I wasn't terribly impressed. (I thought at the time that you weren't supposed to eat the candy, because it was Art, but I later found out that you *were* supposed to eat the candy, and this was part of the Art.)

I wasn't much more impressed at The Broad in Los Angeles. Robert Therrien's

"Under The Table" is a giant table and chairs set that you can walk under—and feel like a child again in doing so. That's cool, I guess. Barbara Kruger's "Untitled (You are a very special person)" is just the words "You are a very special person" over a picture of a crown. There are always those serious little labels accompanying these things: "1995 / photographic silkscreen on vinyl / 92 3/4 x 126 in. (235.59 x 320.04 cm)." The exact dimensions and materials are treated as very important.

Susie Hodge does her best to explain why my initial reactions to these kinds of works were ill-informed. We shouldn't, she says, treat "absence of technical skill as a lack of artistic sophistication and ability." Many of these works are part of an "art of ideas" that evolved after artists stopped seeing *good art* as *art that directly imitates the world*. Impressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism were all met with horror in *their* day because it wasn't immediately apparent to the casual viewer why the artist made the choices they made. But must everything be obvious? Those who bristle at Rothko and think Western culture peaked with Caravaggio seem to be rejecting the very possibility of non-representational art. Do they think every artist should be Chuck Close, painting as close to photography as possible to the point where it's impossible to distinguish between the two?

But Hodge's book inadvertently gives quite a bit of ground to the haters of modern art. For each work she profiles, Hodge gives a brief explanation as to *why* a 5-year-old "could not have done that." And her explanations seem, well, a bit strained. Martin Creed's "Work No. 227: The Lights Going On And Off" consists of lights going on and off in an empty gallery space. Hodge explains that "a child could switch lights on and off, but Creed was exploring society's ingrained expectations of art and intentionally provoking reactions of disbelief, anger, surprise, and comedy." Creed won the prestigious Turner Prize in 2001.

Hodge's explanation is often some variation on the same thing. A child might be able to *make* the piece, but a child is

not an Artist with Big Ideas, and therefore a child could not make a great piece of Art.

About Piero Manzoni's "Artist's Shit" (a series of cans purportedly containing the artist's shit), Hodge says that while "any five-year-old child could have deposited their own excrement in a tin," Manzoni "was making several points that few children would be able to appreciate."

About Lucio Fontana's "Spatial Concept 'Waiting'" (a blank canvas slashed with a knife), Hodge says that "the slash of a knife across a canvas looks easily achievable" but "a child would not do it for the same reasons as Fontana" who "aimed to explore underlying notions of space and infinity, as well as the limitations of art and its ultimately perishable nature."

How about Stephan Huber's "Works In Wealth III," which consists of three candelabra in a wheelbarrow? According to Hodge:

"A shiny wheelbarrow piled high with an even shinier chandelier is something that any child could put together with a little effort. However, the fact that the work is situated in a gallery space indicates that the artist was exhibiting it for meaningful reasons not immediately apparent. Indeed, produced in the 1980s and 1990s, it symbolizes the public's attitude toward capitalism, which decisively triumphed over communism at the time but was also perceived as exploitative by many."

Likewise, with a chandelier made out of underpants: "Many children would thoroughly enjoy making" a chandelier out of underpants, by the artist's "reasons went much deeper" and "she chose underpants because they are coverings for parts of the anatomy that are particularly important in terms of birth, privacy, and sexuality." The same explanation applies to pieces like John Latham's *Still and Chew: Art And Culture* (a briefcase containing chewed up bits of a book on art theory) and Jannis Kounellis's *Untitled (12 Horses)* (literally just 12 live horses tethered in a gallery). Each time, the explanation is

that while, yes, a pile of underpants might seem childish, the Artist was expressing a Big Idea about capitalism, or consumer culture, or sex, or that old classic Calling Into Question The Very Nature Of What Constitutes Art.

Hodge's core argument, then, is that what looks childish is done with the intent to convey profound ideas, which differentiates it from the work of children, who do not attempt to convey profound ideas. In fact, there's some empirical support for Hodge's view in Ellen Winner's *How Art Works*. Winner, a psychology professor, decided to run actual experiments to see if ordinary people could differentiate between works by abstract expressionist painters and works by children (and animals). She found that even those who don't like abstract expressionism can tell the difference between this kind of work and children's art. So can computers, which Winner says shows that there *are* meaningful differences and "your kid actually could not have done that." It is not just that there is more sophisticated intent in the minds of great artists. The artwork itself displays enough signs of that intentionality to make people conscious of the difference. We might say that we can't tell the difference between

art by an elephant and award-winning abstract art, but if you put the two next to each other the differences become obvious.

Still, I'm not sure how much Winner's experiment actually proves. Okay, so if you put my scribbles next to Cy Twombly's scribbles and told people that one scribble was art and the other (mine) was garbage, *most* people would probably be able to tell the difference. But Winner also shows that people are discerning the differences by detecting intentionality (i.e., does this look like it was done on purpose?). She found that when you show abstract art that does not look intentional, and a child's drawing that does, people's ability to differentiate diminishes.

So has Winner really proved that "your child could not have done that"? Or has she only proved that children tend to be less purposeful in their artworks than actual artists? How significant is it that something "looks like it was done on purpose"? Is that enough to make it sophisticated, valuable, and deep? When I read Hodge's explanations of the differences between Great Art and childish drawings, so much of it seems to hinge on the fact



A scribble by Cy Twombly

that the artist meant to express something profound, while the child does not. Usually, however, the thing the artist is trying to express doesn't seem all that profound to me. ("The Lights Going On and Off" "encourages visitors to think about the room itself," we are told in *The Twenty First Century Art Book*. Okay, I thought about it. Can I go home?)

There's also something implicitly insulting to children themselves in the whole framing. The aggressive insistence that "your 5-year-old could not have done that" assumes that if a typical 5-year-old *could* have done something, it must not be profound and meaningful art, because that is something adults do. If we prove that a 5-year-old could have done it, we're proving that it sucks. This assumption is shared by both the critics of modern art (who say a kid could have done it) and the defenders (who say that a kid could not).

take a different position: I reject the idea that we need to prove Great Artists are superior to children. In fact, the whole exercise seems to me to fetishize individual genius. The idea is that Mark Rothko cannot possibly be doing something that other people could do. He is Rothko, a great genius artist, and to maintain his status we must prove that



Henri Matisse's painting of a leaf

his fuzzy color fields have some extraordinary property that yours do not.

But what about going in the other direction and arguing that there *isn't* anything that makes Ellsworth Kelly's shapes that much more profound than shapes you might cut out yourself, but that's okay? If we see ordinary people as having quite remarkable creative potential, it doesn't make Ellsworth Kelly's shapes worthless. To show that something isn't beyond the capabilities of ordinary people only devalues it if you place a low value on what ordinary people can do.

Take Henri Matisse's very simple late period work, such as his painting of a leaf and his paper cutout of a snail:



Henri Matisse's paper cutout of a snail

I love these, but I have had to overcome my first reaction, which was to search within them for signs of Matisse's genius. There must be, I thought, some deep brilliance in the particular choices made here. I do think Matisse's unparalleled eye for color, and his warmth, is clearly on display. But I don't think we have to come up with some elaborate explanation for why the snail that Matisse made out of construction paper is wildly different and profoundly better than the snail that a child would make out of construction paper, or why his genius is embodied in this simple leaf.

Pablo Picasso supposedly said that it took him a lifetime to learn to paint like a child. I take him seriously there. Instead of insisting that great art could not be done by children, why not appreciate what children do? An acquaintance recently posted a work their 5-year-old



Picasso's "Rembrandtesque Figure and Cupid"

nephew did on social media, and I found it completely absorbing. It definitely displays the kind of "intentionality" that Winner says marks the difference between a great abstract work and a childish scrawling, and indeed his parents tell me the child spent many, many hours very carefully and meticulously putting everything in what he felt was the right place (see next page).

I would much prefer to have this in my house than a piece by Yves Klein or Cy Twombly, and if that makes me a philistine, so be it.

Still, the fact is, silly as I find a lot of stuff in the modern art museum, I can't hate it. I liked the big table. I like the underpants chandelier. I like Warhol's Brillo boxes and Ed Ruscha's "OOF" and Tracey Emin's bed, I find Mark Rothko's paintings pretty mesmerizing, and I would love to go and see Mondrian's "Broadway Boogie Woogie." I used to think that I didn't like modern art, because I'm among those who find a lot of million-dollar splodges unfathomable. But I realized that I don't hate the splodges at all.

I think what I hate is the pretension that goes along with them, the idea that Jackson Pollock is doing something more than just drizzling paint in interesting ways on a canvas, that he *has* to be doing something more. Why can't he just be producing something original and interesting? Why do we need to prove



By Harrison Burke, 5 y.o.

that it's the work of a Great Man and that he's doing what the rest of us never could? I don't actually have a problem with Cy Twombly's scribbles. In fact, I think they're kind of cool. My problem is with the idea that these are some kind of special scribbles, that none of the rest of us are capable of scribbling with the exquisite perfection of Twombly.

also have a problem with the prices.

In fact, I think a lot of people's negative reactions to modern art come from the fact that these works are not just deemed good, they're deemed *ten million dollars* good. It's hard for me to evaluate the "banana taped to a wall" as a work of art, for instance, because I can't suppress my knowledge that it sold for \$120,000. Let's say it had sold for the price of a banana and a piece of tape (40 cents?). Then what would I have thought of it?

Well, I might still have thought it was pretty dumb. But the point is that a lot of distaste for, say, Damien Hirst's formaldehyde shark ("The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living") arises from the fact that it sold for over \$8 million. If it hadn't been wildly overpriced, it might be possible to

appreciate it as "nifty" and "cool" rather than seeing it as some pretentious con. The person online who was mystified by Rothko was driven to their position by the ludicrous sales tag. If you could get genuine Rothkos for \$3.99 at Walgreens, they might have been less hostile. The high prices contribute to the idea that these works are the product of superhuman genius rather than humble acts of creative expression that provoke novel thoughts and feelings.

I don't have a problem with modern art, I have a problem with the modern art *world*, which seems to subscribe to the belief in individual genius, where some people are Great and most of us are not. I don't have anything against someone setting up an exhibition where the lights go on and off and encouraging visitors to contemplate the room. I don't think it's very interesting personally, but I only get upset when it's treated as something *brilliant*, worthy of a prize.

Perhaps the concept of "art" is ultimately not very helpful. It's a very ill-defined term, which has led to endless debates over what "is" or "is not" art, which are entirely irresolvable since the concept has no

reality beyond our understanding of it. Duchamp's urinal kicked off a century of this: Is it art? Is the artist's shit art? Is a painting of a soup can art? Is a shark in formaldehyde art? Is a sculpture of a balloon dog? Are the incredible painters and cartoonists who do pieces for magazines like this one producing "illustrations" but not Great Art? I had a friend who went to art school and was a brilliant silversmith, but her jewelry was looked down upon because it was "craft" rather than "art." If she'd claimed it contained Big Ideas about capitalism and perception, then it would have been art. But it was just pretty, so it wasn't art. There's a similar scene in the movie *Ghost World*, where the main character draws a wonderful picture of Don Knotts for her art class. Her art teacher isn't impressed because her picture has no meaning. "I just like Don Knotts," she explains. Too bad. Not art. On the other hand, the teacher is hugely impressed by the student who put a tampon in a teacup. She has made Art because it's a statement about gender roles or something.

I feel we could probably do without the word "art" altogether actually. Do we truly need it? I'm not talking about doing without painting, sculpture, dance, pottery, mosaic, etc. Just doing without the idea that there is some category of these activities called *art*, and some paintings are not really *art*. I think we could have a



A painting by Yves Klein



Nick Cave, "Soundsuits"

wonderfully creative society where people did all kinds of visually interesting things without ever having to have discussions about what "art" is. So you want to paint a boat with interesting designs? Cool. Is it art? Who cares?

don't much care for galleries, either.

The solemnity, the bareness, those little placards with the dimensions that make the art seem like a pickled brain in a medical facility or a dinosaur skeleton. The quiet and emptiness does facilitate fixating on, and contemplating, a particular piece, by a particular person. But it always feels so unnatural and clinical to me. At the New Orleans Museum of Art (which is excellent), they had one of Nick Cave's incredible "Soundsuits" on display a while back. I loved it, but I also felt that something so wild and colorful deserved to be out in the world, moving around, not kept in a gallery like a pinned butterfly. The fun is ruined.

Fact is, there are some things I actually *love* about modern art. I think of it as a critically important break from the mundanity of much of the contemporary world. A lot of America is just a big strip mall, with the same CVS, the same Starbucks, the same Hardee's, repeated over and over again, with people talking about the same things. Modern art breaks us out of boredom, it shatters the ordinary and exercises our brain to think in new ways. How dull would life be if every painting were just technically-proficient representational portraits, landscapes, and still lifes? I can appreciate Renaissance art, but I have

to admit that the modern era was a massive creative breakthrough, an incredibly liberating period. Picasso's earliest drawings are incredibly technically skilled—and also pretty boring. It was only when he broke out of the mental straitjacket of traditional rules that he was able to produce things that were dazzlingly unique, like nothing that had ever been seen before.

A big part of the problem with modern art is that the people who like it tend to be snobs who think disliking the things they like is a sign that you're stupid. I think we need to get rid of the snobbishness, and we can treat some works of modern art as pretentious while unashamedly loving others. I don't think much of the piece where Marina Abramović sits in a chair for 700 hours (a "revolution in performance art," apparently), even when the ideas behind it art explained to me. And that's okay. I don't have to like it and neither do you. Still, am I glad there are people doing things like sitting in a chair for 700 hours to see how it makes people feel? Yes, I think the world would be less interesting without Abramović in it.

As I comb through *The Twenty First Century Art Book*, I see a lot of things that strike me as complete shit. (A pixelated jpeg of the Burj Khalifa, a bunch of cigarette butts in the sand.) And I'm going to maintain that judgment even when I'm told that the artist did this on purpose to express something important. On the other hand, there are modern works I'm completely blown away by, such as

the work of Kara Walker, Chris Ofili, El Anatsui, Alfonso A. Ossorio, and Kerry James Marshall. I don't much like Pollock, though I am impressed by him. And there are other things that I think are not the products of genius, but are nevertheless nifty. I don't think Jeff Koons's balloon dogs are very interesting intellectually, but they're a cool novelty, and I think it'd be exciting to come across one in a city.

I am, in my way, a very anti-intellectual appreciator of modern art. I don't like to theorize about it or even really talk about it; I just like to experience it. I don't always get it, and sometimes I think it's contrived. I get why some people think it's idiotic to put a bunch of candy on the floor as a statement about AIDS. But I enjoyed my time in the room with the candy. More rooms should be filled with candy. It just shouldn't be done in the name of a thing called Art.

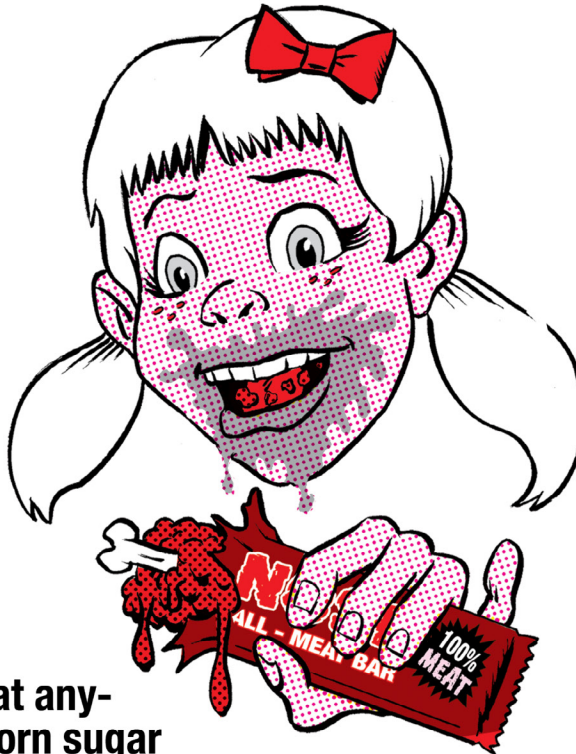
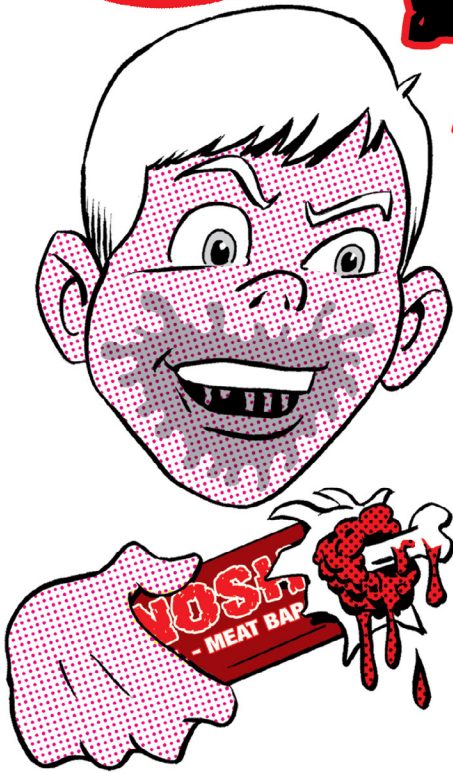
Susie Hodge talks about an art exhibit consisting of a yard filled with tires, which people are encouraged to jump on. She gives her usual spiel: while it's true that children would love nothing more than to roll tires into a yard and play in them, the artist had lofty ideas in mind when he did this. But I think artists are trying too hard to be adults. Why do we *need* to do things that a kid couldn't do? Why do Jackson Pollock's dribbles and drizzles have to be special serious adult dribbles? So your kid could make some of the things that appear in galleries. So what if they can? Great art doesn't need to come from singular geniuses. Maybe we can all do it. And we should. +

**It's
TRUE!**

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A tasty treat you can eat any-
time, anywhere! No soy, corn sugar
or vegetables... just pure 100%
meat! Now with added mRNA for
an extra "boost"!



***MOMS
& DADS, TOO!**
(even CHILDLESS
ADULTS)

**A 100%
MEAT DIET
IMPROVES...**



ENERGY!



INTELLECT!



MATURITY!



TAXI

REVISITED

BY CIARA MOLONEY

PEERING OUT BESIDE THE STAIRCASE, A SIGN IN BRIGHT red letters reads “DO NOT THROW GARBAGE ON THE FLOOR.” Next to it, another sign: “YOU WILL BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE FOR ALL ACCIDENTS.”

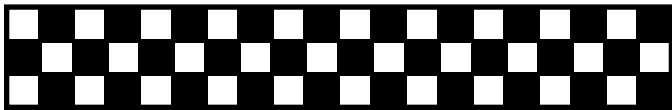
The wide open space of this room is cluttered in a way that makes it feel smaller, but not any more homey: the notices on the walls blend into an industrial wallpaper that would mark this as a workspace even if there wasn’t a mechanic working on a car engine in the centre. In one corner of this large space is the “cage”—more than a raised platform, but less than office, it’s both part of and set apart from the open floor. To one side of the cage is taped a notice to drivers about shifts; to the other side is a Trips Conversion Chart and a punch clock. Standing nearby, behind a bench, is a coin-operated machine dispensing coffee, and, allegedly but never witnessed, soup and hot chocolate. “Each cup,” the machine assures us, is “INDIVIDUALLY brewed.”

This is the fleet garage of the Sunshine Cab Company. The show you’re watching is *Taxi*.

In his book *Sitcom: A History in 24 Episodes from I Love Lucy to Community*, Saul Austerlitz describes *Taxi* as “the middle link between *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Cheers*, though it never reached the cultural ubiquity of either of those shows.” Starting in 1978, *Taxi* aired on ABC, where it coasted on having *Three’s Company* as a lead-in before it got moved in the schedule, tanked in the ratings, and was unceremoniously cancelled in its

fourth season. A fifth aired on NBC—“same time, better network”—where it was then unceremoniously cancelled.

It’s as brightly lit as any traditional, multi-camera sitcom—punctuated by the laughter of a live studio audience—but this time, the bright lights just seem to highlight the grime and decay. Austerlitz calls *Taxi* “a New York sitcom for the financially strapped, crime-ridden era of ‘FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD,’” referring to the infamous *New York Daily News* headline during the 1976 presidential election. It’s a sitcom about taxi drivers—so even though the “situation” part of “situation comedy” means constantly resetting to a stable status quo, on *Taxi*, the status quo is one of transience. It doesn’t seem all that notable when characters are written out without a send-off, because—unlike, say, Chuck Cunningham’s disappearance during the second season of *Happy Days*—the Sunshine Cab Company is, by definition, somewhere people come and go. In *The Taxi Book*, Jeff Sorensen quotes producer Ian Praiser explaining that they didn’t write a big finale because, ultimately, “Even if the cab company had gone broke, the drivers would’ve only gone on to another cab company. And so the story would’ve continued.” There is nothing Beckettian, nothing purgatorial, in this cycle: just the mundanity and insanity that comprises casual labor. “The characters in *Taxi*,” Sorensen writes, “often seem to be caught unawares as they go about their day-to-day lives.” Shooting the breeze while they wait for a fare, then driving a cab



while they wait for some grander aspiration to come into grasp. In the show's pilot, Elaine Nardo (Marilu Henner), a divorced mother of two, starts work at the cab company. She explains to Alex (Judd Hirsch) that she's not really a *taxi driver*: she's doing this part time, just to make some extra money while she works at an art gallery during the day.

"No, no, I understand," Alex replies, sitting on a table with his feet on the chair in front of him, a pencil tucked behind his ear and a paper coffee cup in his hand, "You see that guy over there? Now, he's an actor. The guy on the phone, he's a prize-fighter. This lady over here, she's a beautician. The man behind her, he's a writer." It's light, casual, teasing, but there are sharper teeth behind it, too. "Me, I'm a cab driver," Alex says, "I'm the only cab driver in this place." At once, he eviscerates the idea that being a cab driver is some existential part of your identity, inborn, in which people like Elaine—the aspirational class—temporarily masquerade, and defiantly claims that inborn identity everyone else is so eager to shrug off.

Alex is the show's center: Hirsch, then best known for his stage work, was forty-three when *Taxi* debuted, and his performance wavers beautifully between Alex having a zen acceptance of his life as it is and a bitter cynicism that short-circuits all ambition. You're never quite sure if he's just here or *stuck* here. Either way, there is no obvious way out. In an episode late in the show's run, a passenger asks him a condescending question about the theater to get an "everyman" perspective, and when Alex schools him with his extensive theater knowledge, the

passenger suggests he would have made a good gofer—if he were 20 years younger. But Alex can't turn back the clock. And so here he is: divorced, estranged from his father, and hasn't much of a relationship with his daughter, either. He's a recovering compulsive gambler. Most of these things hum away in the background, a handful of the tiny tragedies that make up a life. But he's level-headed, sensible, and more than anything, *good*—bearing the nigh unbearable burden of advice dispenser, conundrum fixer, and taker of righteous stands with, if not ease, then a certain wry wit. He's a father figure to the other cabbies in a way his dad never was for him, and that he never was for his daughter, either.

ELAINE, THE ONLY FEMALE CHARACTER IN THE MAIN CAST for most of the show's run, is Alex's feminine counterpoint: kind, sensible, divorced—but with time on her side. Though the part was written for an older actress who would have a teenage kid, Henner was cast at the age of 26. In a lesser show, she'd be a cipher onto which the audience could apply all their assumptions about women: sexual object, mother figure, feeding the boys straight lines without getting to be funny herself, the Margaret Dumont to their Marx Brothers. A tall, pretty redhead, it is true that she is both an object of many of the male characters' lust and a warmly maternal presence. But as performed by Henner, she's spikier than that: at once gutsy and gentle, self-doubting yet light on her feet, a foil to Alex's fits of melancholy. In the first season, she's one of two new drivers at the Sunshine Cab Company, the other being John (Randall Carver), working as a cabbie to pay his way through college. He seems like he's meant to be the audience surrogate, but he proves superfluous, and is abruptly written out. Elaine is our true way into *Taxi*'s world: distinctly proletarian, distinctly feminine, and most importantly, really funny.

Elaine and Alex never have a true will-they-won't-they, like Sam and Diane on *Cheers* or Ross and Rachel on *Friends*, but there is a seductive tension between them, however rarely articulated—and more than that, an instinctive, affectionate closeness. Every year on her son's birthday, Alex comes over and they all go to Coney Island together: someone else for him to play father to.

Even though Alex and Elaine are ostensibly the show's leads, on *Taxi*, Austerlitz writes, "Sidekicks were now the stars." It's Fonzie all the way down. Danny DeVito plays Louie De Palma, resident of the fleet garage's "cage." He's a dispatcher for the Sunshine Cab Company: middle management, at once the sadistic boss in the lives of the cabbies and mechanics and a striving loser holding white-knuckled to the position to which he's ascended. He's less a fun sitcom jerk than a truly horrible person, in a way that makes his role on *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* decades later seem fated. "Louie is the untrammelled id run amok," Austerlitz writes, "funny precisely for his inability to summon *any* grace, or compassion, or decency."

And yet. Louie has humanizing moments that, even though they never undermine his integral scumbaggery, are deeply affecting. Perhaps none more than "Louie Goes Too Far," in which Louie peeks at Elaine changing. Elaine files a complaint and Louie gets fired. He pesters Elaine to get him his job back, and she explains that she would love to forgive him, but she can't

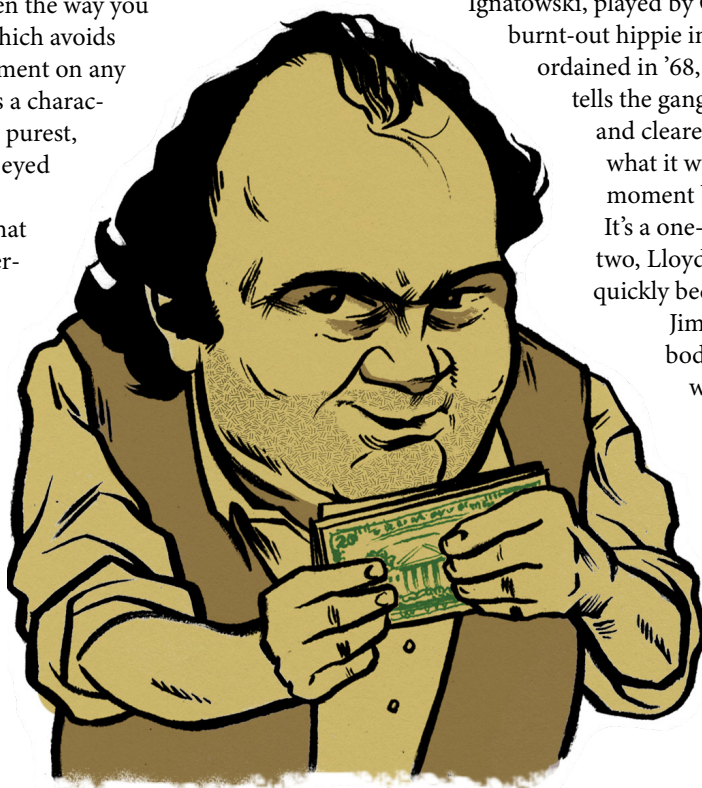
if he's not truly sorry, and for that he needs to understand why what he did was wrong. After a couple of stabs in the dark—"It's wrong because God doesn't like it." "No!" "God likes it?"—Elaine asks him if he's ever felt *violated*. Louie looks taken aback, but then he, haltingly, sometimes indistinctly, tells Elaine a story: how twice a year, he has to get new clothes, and he goes to a men's store, straight to the boys' department to "ask if they have anything in the husky sizes." (DeVito has multiple epiphyseal dysplasia, a genetic disorder that affects bone growth, causing his short stature.) Louie says he'll go to the clothes store during school hours, but no matter what, there'll be kids all around. He grabs whatever will fit him, doesn't even look, and goes to the dressing room. But the worst moment is when you got to push open those doors, and walk out into that room, wearing your new corduroys," he tells Elaine, "... And then, all the parents tell their kids not to stare."

"Is that the way I made you feel when I peeked?" he asks.

Smiling and wiping away tears, Elaine says, "Kinda."

This time, when Louie says he's sorry, you can feel it in your gut.

Taxi's most legendary sidekick-star, though, was comedian/performance artist/wrestler/song and dance man Andy Kaufman as Latka Gravas. Based on Kaufman's "Foreign Man" character, Latka is an immigrant from an unnamed European country who works as a mechanic at Sunshine Cabs. If that makes him sound like a one-note gag at the expense of foreigners and their silly foreign ways, it somehow never plays like that in practice. He's not from some Eastern Bloc country with a new coat of paint slapped over it: Latka's home country, religion and traditions are written the way you would invent an alien society, which avoids being even the most veiled comment on any group of people in particular. As a character, he is a product of play of the purest, more childish kind. He's a wide-eyed innocent whose belief in the American Dream is so earnest that it's razor-sharp parody, his understanding of his adopted country a hodge-podge of his exploitative work environment and old *I Nik-Nik Lucy* (as *I Love Lucy* was called in his home country) episodes. Speaking of nik-nik, Latka speaks a language entirely of Kaufman's own devising: Carol Kane says he told her, "it's like when you're a kid and you speak Russian or Chinese. You don't know there are rules to a language. But there's a very specific rhythm."



Kane plays Simka, a woman from Latka's home country whom he eventually marries. When they first meet, she talks about how she came to America because of all the trouble when the mountain people moved down from the mountains. Latka instantly, unblinkingly starts going on about how awful the mountain people are, never doubting that Simka would nod along and laugh. What he doesn't realize, of course, is that Simka is a mountain person. She moved to America not to escape the mountain people, but to escape discrimination. It's sneakily one of my favorite TV episodes about prejudice ever—because it threads a needle on showing that the rift between mountain and non-mountain people is, to Latka and Simka, deathly serious, but is, to an outside observer, arbitrary to the point of nonsense. And those two contradictory truths are, ultimately, racism's beak and claw.

BUT LONG BEFORE HE MEETS SIMKA, LATKA MARRIES A SEX worker in order to get his green card to stay in America. It's pretty much ignored to allow for his and Simka's love story to proceed unimpeded, but fascinating in the moment: everybody's on board, outraged at the prospect of Latka being deported, with the only caution coming not out of some devotion to following immigration laws, but out of Elaine's concern that Latka—still with very limited English at this point in the show—may be overly emotionally invested in what he doesn't fully understand is a sham marriage. No one doubts that Latka should be allowed to stay in America. Louie rats Latka out to the feds when they come looking at the start of the episode, but by the end, he delivers an epic speech to convince the feds of the depth of love between Latka and his bride. It works.

The paper marriage is performed by Reverend Jim Ignatowski, played by Christopher Lloyd. He's a spacey, burnt-out hippie in a ratty denim jacket. "I was ordained in '68, the Church of the Peaceful," he tells the gang, "The church was investigated and cleared completely." When Alex asked what it was cleared of, Jim pauses for just a moment before saying, "Why go into it?" It's a one-episode guest role, but in season two, Lloyd was added to the main cast, and quickly becomes a sidekick-star.

Jim is, as he puts it, "the living embodiment of the Sixties." Though he was raised by a wealthy father, he was disowned after he dropped out of Harvard, not long after his girlfriend introduced him to "funny brownies." He protested against the Vietnam War. He went to Woodstock. He did lots of drugs. He was traded from one commune to another for two goats and a Donovan album. He was arrested at the 1968 Democratic Convention—for

stealing decorations, the same ones that he uses for Simka's green card party. He is, in short, way, way out: a childlike combination of trusting, unreliable, sweet and vulnerable, through which his latent genius occasionally pokes through. And, more importantly, his latent wisdom.

When Alex relapses into compulsive gambling—he takes a fare to Atlantic City, gets a big tip, and here he is, with a lot of money in Atlantic City—he calls Jim to take him the money he keeps in his locker. He takes half, and tells Jim not to give him the other half under any circumstances. Then, when he's down, he asks Jim to give him the other half, and Jim—between his ailing memory and pathological lack of stubbornness—does. When he blows that, too, Alex tries to manipulate Jim into giving him his own money. And in some grimy casino bathroom, not only does Jim tell him no, he uses his own experience with addiction to talk him through it: “You wouldn't know it to look at me now, but I wasn't always this together. But my problem wasn't gambling. It was drugs. ... I couldn't stop doing them. I always thought my next high would be the best. I couldn't quit until I hit rock bottom.”

Jim tells him about being broke and friendless, and taken in by “an old Indian shaman.” They were doing mushrooms together, and when one was left, Jim thought up “this great plan” to distract a man who had taught him so much about honor and trust:

I looked up to the sky and I said, ‘Look at that star.’ And he looked. Who wouldn't? Then, when his attention was distracted, I grabbed the mushroom and I was going to eat it. But I didn't. I gave it to him and he ate it. I see. And I felt better. And it wasn't just because he jumped off the cliff trying to fly. It was because at that moment when I gave him the mushroom, I knew I had the willpower so I never had to be at rock bottom again, like you are now.

WHEN ALEX INSISTS THAT HE'S NOT AT ROCK BOTTOM, Jim asks him “What're you doing sitting in some toilet, after losing all your money and begging an easy mark for a few dollars and not getting it?”

For a moment, Alex looks bruised. Then he points at the bathroom's harsh ceiling light, and tells Jim to look at it, just like Jim told the Indian shaman to look at a star. And Jim looks, stares open-mouthed into its incandescent glare, while Alex reaches his hand into the pocket of Jim's denim jacket. But once he gets his hand on some cash, he puts it back.

“Come on, Jim,” Alex says, “Let's go home.”

“What's the rush?” Jim asks, “How often do you get to see a light like that?”

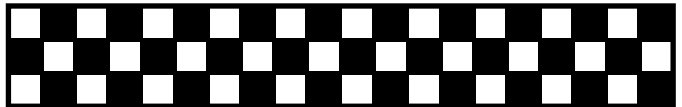
Alex, leaning against him, a smile on his lips and an ache in his heart, says, “Yeah, it's a good light.”

Taxi is a show about transience, but it is also a show about community. It's about the moments in between productivity—the parts of work that are just sitting around and talking about

nothing important. It's about a menagerie of Fonzie's accumulated on the margins, where people go when they've got nowhere else to go. It's about finding beauty in the fluorescent light in a bathroom ceiling.

Decades later, the transitory has given way to precarity. A bad, exploitative system of casual, part-time employment has been replaced by a much worse, more nakedly exploitative system of gig work. And so what played as proletarian realism when *Taxi* aired in the 1970s feels uncomfortably close to aspirational today. Uber and other ride-sharing apps have denied their workers so, so much, from paid time off to pension entitlements. The violations of workers' rights are the most important, of course, but watching *Taxi*, I think about all the smaller, ambient injustices that make up the gig economy. It's about the foreclosure of space, literal and figurative, that exists outside of brute-force productivity. A lot of hay was made during the pandemic romanticizing the physical office, much of it for nonsensical reasons. When people wax nostalgic for watercooler talk, I think the root appeal being gestured towards is an ineffable desire for stability, community, for the moments that exist between the “work” part of work.

The “situation” part of “situation comedy” means constantly resetting to a stable status quo, but now, the status quo transience of *Taxi* feels assured. Less and less of our lives are lived in conditions stable enough to comprise a “situation” at all. ✚



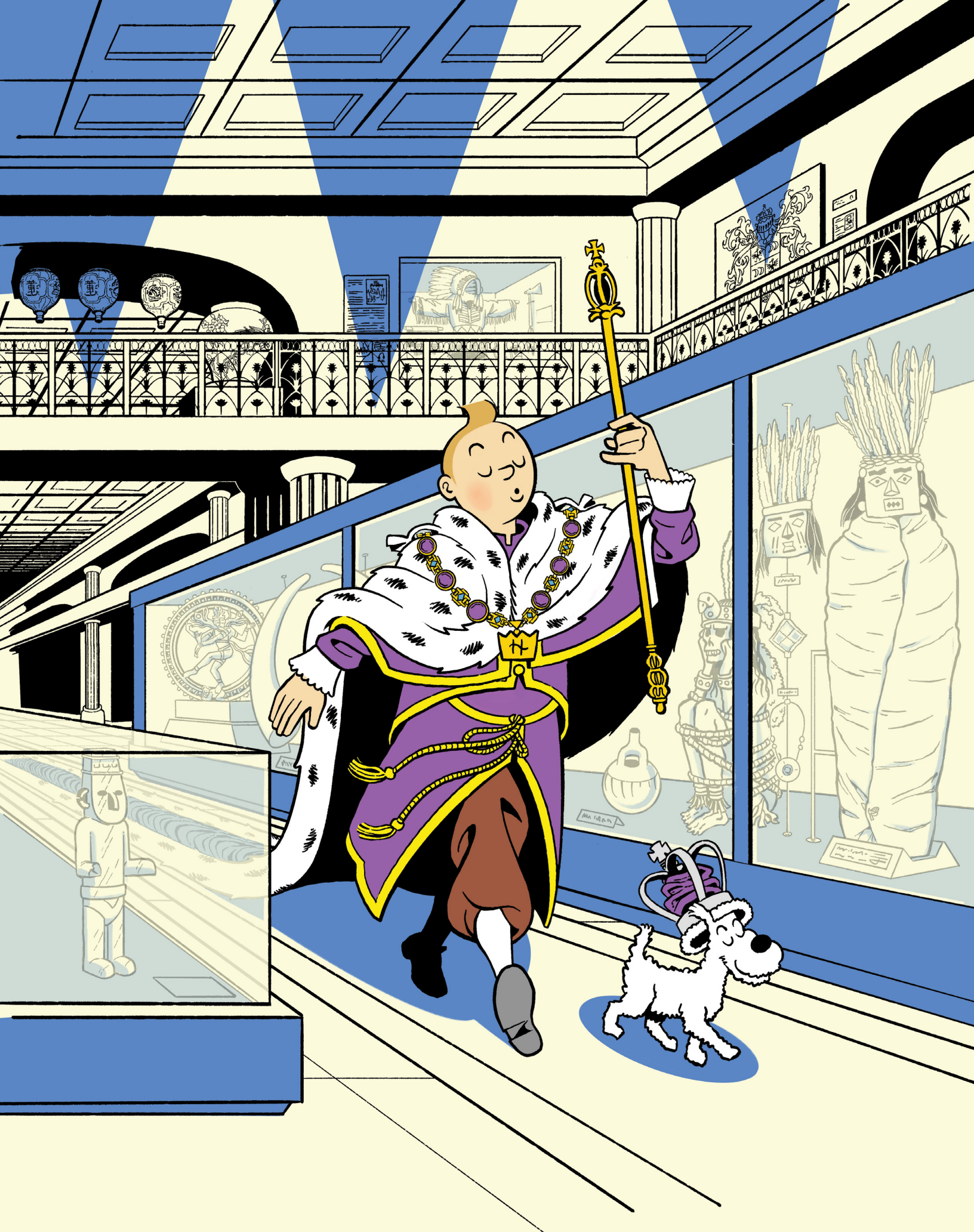
"I can't believe I'm resorting to this."



When Karl Marx has had a tough day of writing his "Dialectical Materialism," he reaches for a Coke.

DISCLAIMER: As a condition of appearing in this advertisement, Dr. Marx wishes it to be known that he is only endorsing this vile product out of pure financial desperation, and that he "will someday see you exploiters and parasites crushed beneath the heel of the revolutionary proletariat." Speaking of our product, he says that he "would never let a drop of that shit touch my lips even if I should perish of thirst."





WHAT TINTIN TAUGHT ME ABOUT IMPERIALISM



BY ANDREW ANCHETA

IN HIS EXAMINATION OF CHRISTOPHER NOLAN'S BATMAN movies, the late anthropologist David Graeber argues that superhero comics are essentially fascist. This analysis is based on the power relations involved: comics, Graeber says, represent an anarchic universe, where the only real laws are the ones created "on the basis of force." He might have added that they also play a role in socialization. Comics teach budding members of society what to expect of the world outside their doors.

Growing up in an immigrant household, I missed out on the spandexed heroes that make up the canon of American adolescence. My first comics were Tintin stories. Until I was old enough for proper books, Tintin—the globetrotting reporter created in 1929 by the Belgian cartoonist Hergé—provided most of my knowledge of foreign cultures. When I was about eight, I remember scanning a world map, fruitlessly searching for the borders of fictional countries like Syldavia or San Theodoros.

Along with his white terrier, Snowy, Tintin is one of the world's most popular comic book characters, with more than 260 million copies sold in dozens of languages. Charles de Gaulle called Tintin his "only international rival," and when I lived in Brussels, people spoke of Hergé as their own Walt Disney. (As a matter of fact, Hergé had quite a bit in common with Disney when it comes to prejudice, but we'll get to that part later.)

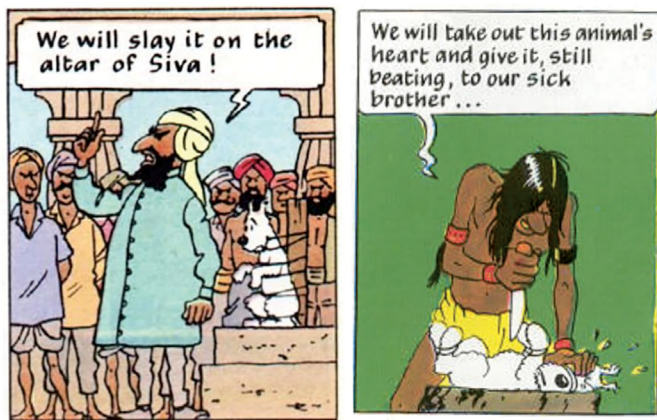
Part of the appeal is that Tintin's adventures are fairly realistic, at least by comic-book standards. There are no superpowers or silly costumes; Tintin's antagonists are ordinary bad guys, like drug gangs

and criminals. The character is frequently compared to Indiana Jones, but with less magic and mysticism. Steven Spielberg is also a fan, and made a CG-animated Tintin movie in 2011.

In his essay on "Boys' Weeklies," George Orwell noted that the young-adult literature of his day tended to lean conservative. "[T]heir basic political assumptions are two," he wrote. "Nothing ever changes, and foreigners are funny." Something similar could be said of the Tintin comics, which contain most of the common tropes about foreigners and world politics. Before I ever heard the phrase "banana republic," Tintin introduced me to San Theodoros, whose government is constantly being overthrown. My first awareness of totalitarianism came from "Taschism," the state ideology of Borduria—where the Leader, aptly named Marshal Kûrvi-Tasch, elevated his whiskers into a national symbol.

Some of the depictions didn't age so well. On rereading, I couldn't help noticing that the comics' Middle East is full of intemperate Arabs, and that indigenous cultures are full of exotic tortures for travelers and their pets. When Tintin meets another European—whether a colonial officer, a merchant, or a lost explorer—it is usually a moment of relief.

As I worked my way through my parents' collection, there was one book that I was not allowed to touch. Hidden away at the top of the bookshelf, *Tintin au Congo*—the series' second-ever installment—was only available in indecipherable French. The story was even more incomprehensible: unlike the gentle animal lover from the later books, this version of Tintin spends most of his time



Indigenous animal (and human) cruelty is a recurring trope in early Tintin stories. Left: *Cigars of the Pharaoh*. Right: *The Broken Ear*.

skinning monkeys and harvesting ivory. When a rhinoceros gives too much trouble, he subdues the beast with dynamite. The natives in the story are thick-lipped spear-throwers, who grovel before the hero and make his dog their new king.

The usual explanation is that *Congo* represented an embarrassing prelude to an otherwise stellar career—that Hergé was a “product of his times,” to use the modern euphemism. But that feels a little dissatisfying. While the racism in *Congo* is truly breathtaking, it’s hardly alone: imperialism is woven into the fabric of Tintin’s adventures, although it isn’t always so direct. Later stories replace pith-helmeted colonialism with cold-war logic, as the hero gets entangled in the politics of now-independent countries. If *Congo* was a “product of the times” it feels more authentic to say that the Tintin comics *all* were.

Most of the stories have been revised over the years, but you can still make out the contours of the 1930s peeking through modern editions. I don’t mean that the stories are meant as political commentary, although that was sometimes the case. More often, they simply show a world that Europeans expect to see: one where foreigners are cruel or helpless, and sometimes incapable of governing themselves, depending on the appropriate stereotype.



TINTIN WAS CREATED BY GEORGES REMI (BETTER KNOWN by his pen name Hergé) for *Le Petit Vingtième*, the children’s supplement of the Belgian newspaper *Le Vingtième Siècle*.

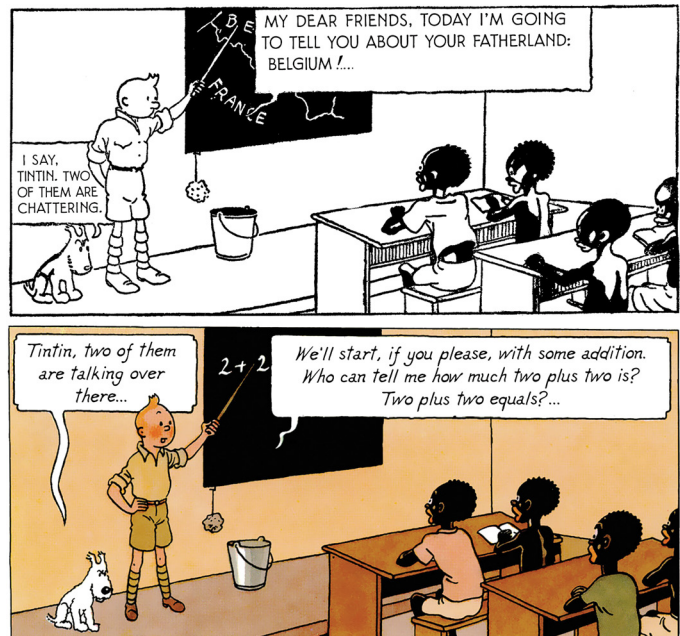
The *Siècle* was a Catholic newspaper, and it “was hostile to Communists, Jews, and Freemasons,” according to Hergé’s biographer Pierre Assouline, as well as “politics, the money-is-king outlook, the advent of mechanization, and modernism in general.”

As a monarchist, Hergé did not hesitate to lend his pen to conservative causes. Assouline describes a poster by Hergé, submitted for the 1932 elections, showing “a little girl praying at the foot of her bed while being stabbed by a Socialist in rags.” Another editor at the *Siècle*, Leon Dégrelle, would go on to lead the fascist Rex party.

This gives you some sense of the character that will eventually emerge. Tintin is an upright stalwart for Christian values: he does not smoke or swear, shows no interest in women or alcohol, and spends a lot of his free time looking for the owners of lost wallets.

His nemesis, the drug kingpin Rastapopoulos, is originally introduced as a movie director: a Hollywood elite if ever there was one.

Later adventures introduce Captain Haddock, an alcoholic with a vocabulary of esoteric curse words; the incompetent detectives Thomson and Thompson; and the half-deaf Professor Calculus, whose constant misunderstandings drive a large part of the series’ comedy. Around them are a rotating cast of gangsters, smugglers, kings, and mad scientists to keep the story moving.



From *Tintin in the Congo*, 1931

Revisiting the series as an adult, I was surprised to learn that Tintin was not just a colonist, but an anti-communist as well. His first newspaper appearance in 1929 brought him to Moscow, where he foils a Bolshevik plot “to blow up all the capital cities of Europe with dynamite.” The story is crude even by propaganda standards: in it, Soviet factories burn hay to make smoke, and clang on sheet metal to make the sounds of machinery.

Tintin’s second appearance, in *Congo*, was meant to inculcate enthusiasm for the mission civilisatrice—otherwise known as European imperialism in Africa. The original was even worse than the one available today; a deleted scene shows Tintin teaching children at a missionary school about “your fatherland: Belgium!”. In modern editions, he instead teaches simple arithmetic.



BUT I DON’T WANT TO LINGER TOO MUCH ON THE EARLIER stories. Entire essays have been written on the racism in the *Congo* comic, which (like the animal trophies that Tintin hunts so judiciously) is a very easy target.

There’s better game to be had in the later stories. As a child, I sometimes wondered why the police in Morocco were French, or why the educated classes in India were mostly British. But when Tintin went all the way to South America to retrieve a stolen idol,

it seemed perfectly natural to return it to the European museum where it came from. Where else would tribal art belong?

The indigenous peoples that Tintin encounters in the early stories fit contemporary stereotypes: they are usually cruel, but superstitious and gullible enough that the young reporter can talk himself out of trouble. And while there may be local villains, it is usually a European or American mastermind pulling the strings.

That said, it's hard to call Hergé a complete reactionary, since he does manage a few moments of sympathy for colonized people. Two instances in particular come to mind. After *Congo*, Tintin and Snowy land in the United States, where they're caught in a strange hybrid of a gangster movie and a spaghetti western. Most of the story in *Tintin in America* revolves around a Native American reservation, where the tribe has been duped by a Chicago gangster. After Tintin escapes being used for target practice, the chase is interrupted by a gusher of oil. What follows is probably the darkest joke in the entire series: a group of businessmen crowd around Tintin, offering to pay him huge sums of money ("Fifty Gs!! A Hundred!!!") for the land. When they discover that he doesn't own it, they offer the Native Americans twenty-five dollars, then drive them out with bayonets.



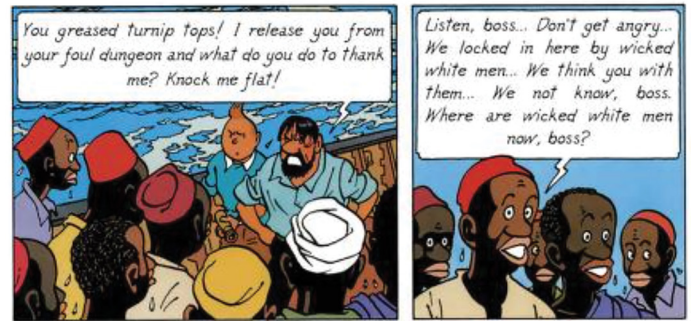
From *Tintin in America*, 1945

HERGÉ'S SYMPATHY FOR THE NATIVE AMERICANS MAY seem surprising, given his earlier contempt for the Congolese. In this case, though, there is no contradiction: imperialism is perfectly capable of acknowledging the wrongs committed by *other* countries. (Keep this in mind the next time CNN condemns the Russian or Chinese governments for behavior that is routine for our own.)

On re-reading *America*, I noticed one more omission: there is not a single African American in the entire comic. Indeed, after

Congo I could only find one important Black character in the entire series—or two if you count *The Broken Ear*, when the blond Tintin disguises himself in blackface.

This omission was not entirely Hergé's fault. Early *Tintins* originally had a sprinkling of Black characters, but American publishers insisted on removing them. Not because the drawings were offensive, but to protect innocent children from the dangers of race-mixing. Evidently systemic prejudices were at work, not just Hergé's own.



The Adventures of Tintin: The Red Sea Sharks, 1958

There are a handful of unnamed Africans in *The Red Sea Sharks*, when the heroes rescue a shipload of Muslims being sold into slavery. This is about as close as we get to an apology for *Congo*, although it is a very insufficient one. Accusations of racism lingered, this time for the crude pidgin spoken by the rescued pilgrims. Once the slaves fulfill their role as victims in need of a white savior, they conveniently disappear offscreen.

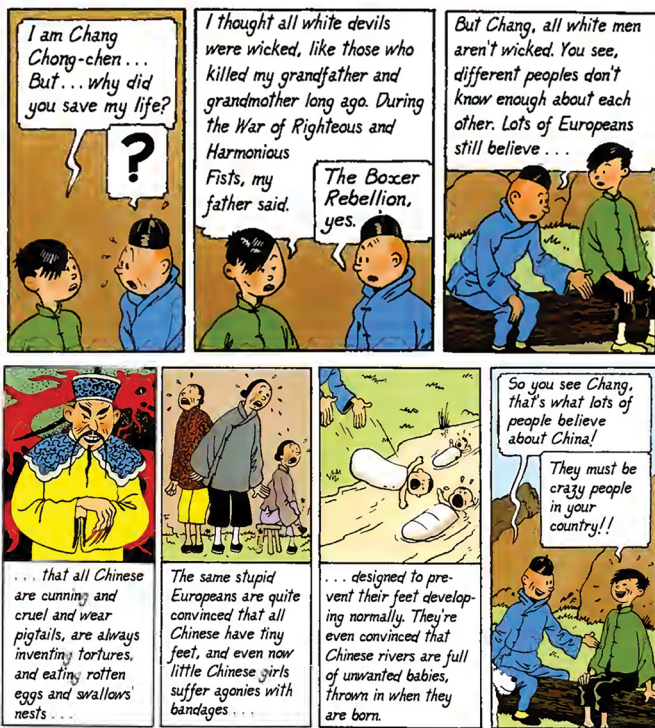
Then there's *The Blue Lotus*, where for once the role of imperialism features prominently. The story is set at the International Settlement, one of several foreign-ruled enclaves in Shanghai. Tintin witnesses the Mukden incident, a false-flag attack that was used to justify Japan's 1931 invasion of China, and stops Western expats from brutalizing the Chinese locals. (One of the minor villains is an American businessman, who is constantly losing his temper at Chinese servants between boasts of "our superb western civilization.")

This is Hergé's most sensitive work, and he even goes out of his way to poke fun at "stupid Europeans" who believe in stereotypes about Chinese people. But re-reading the story as an adult, I couldn't help noticing how bug-faced the Japanese are drawn, or the slight condescension as Tintin explains racism to a Chinese orphan.

Still, *The Blue Lotus* is one of Tintin's most popular appearances—not just for the historical background, but also the exquisite illustrations. The muse for both was Zhang Chongren, an artist studying in Brussels who introduced Hergé to Chinese art. One can't help wondering why Hergé needed to make a Chinese friend in order to realize that racism and imperialism are bad. (If only he might have made a Congolese friend or two as well!)

EARLIER I NOTED THAT THE EARLIEST TINTIN STRIPS APPEARED alongside columns that were not exactly progressive. Fascism was in vogue among conservatives, and the *Vingtième Siècle*

frequently ran editorials praising Mussolini, or complaining about the number of Yiddish-speaking refugees in Belgium. (Nowadays, many conservative Europeans say the same about Arabic.)



Scenes from *The Blue Lotus*, 1936

Hergé first approaches fascism in *King Ottakar's Sceptre*, serialized from August 1938 to 1939. The comic is set in the imaginary kingdom of Syldavia, where Tintin uncovers a plot to annex the country to neighboring Borduria.

Sceptre puts Hergé's monarchist values on display, showing readers a quaint, traditional peasant kingdom undermined by the machinations of a modern military state. The story appeared a year after the 1938 *Anschluss*, or annexation, of Austria and the Sudetenland by Germany, and in the same year that Italy invaded Albania. Just in case anyone missed those connections, Hergé spells it out in the name of the coup's leader: Müsstler.

What strikes me on re-reading is how exactly Hergé got the blueprint of fascism, right down to the fifth column infecting the highest ranks of government. Many of the police and army captains are in on the conspiracy. That was a taste of things to come. A year after Tintin saved the Syldavian monarchy in the comics, the collapse of the real French army was blamed on the number of pro-fascist generals.

You might think *King Ottakar's Sceptre* was a display of anti-fascist principles, but Hergé's courage did not last. When *Le Petit Vingtième* closed, Tintin's adventures reappeared in the pages of *Le Soir*, which had been seized and reopened under the control of Nazi Germany.

Hergé may not have been an active fascist, but he certainly collaborated, and did well for himself under occupation. His comics brought new legitimacy to the stolen *Le Soir*, where they ran between antisemitic editorials and German war propaganda.

The next comic, *The Shooting Star*, fit the tone of the stolen newspaper very well. Here, the villain is a New York banker who uses his control of international commerce to foil the heroes in the race to find a fragment of a fallen meteor. The name of this sinister banker is—no joke—Blumenstein.

Prior to 1939, this might have been a simple case of bad taste, but it landed much worse for a country, and a publication, under Nazi rule. In late 1941, as the comet grazed the earth in the pages of *Le Soir*, Jewish Belgians were being fired from their jobs and placed under nighttime curfew. A week after the fictional Blumenstein was foiled, in May 1942, they were ordered to wear the yellow star. Deportations would start a few months later.

According to Hergé, this type of antisemitic caricature “was the style then,” which is about as convincing now as it was in 1945. He would later change Blumenstein's name and nationality for reprints, in order to make the character less offensive. He was apparently unaware, though, that the new name—Bohlwinkel—was also a Jewish name, albeit an uncommon one.



TINTIN'S FIRST POST-WAR ADVENTURE, *THE LAND OF BLACK Gold*, brings him to the Middle East, an area where he had a “special affinity,” according to Tintinologist Michael Farr. From Morocco to Egypt, he spends more time in Arab cultures than any other destinations.

This story introduces six-year-old Abdullah, a spoiled princeling who can be seen as a stand-in for the capricious oil-rich monarchies that have preoccupied Western diplomats ever since. For most of the 1950s, European foreign policy was focused on maintaining their preferred Abdullahs against a wave of nationalist revolutions.

In *The Red Sea Sharks* (which began serialization in 1956), Abdullah reappears, returning to live with Tintin after his father has been overthrown. The little terror is such a nightmare that Tintin immediately sets off to put the Emir back on the throne. Hergé was tapping into some deep anxieties: shortly after he started the story, French and British troops invaded Egypt to retake the Suez canal after Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized it. Charles de Gaulle, Tintin's rival, would later come out of retirement in a futile effort to maintain French control of Algeria.

But back to 1950 for a moment. As a child, I found *The Land of Black Gold* difficult to follow: it starts with an oil crisis, and ends in a fight between warring sheikhs with no clear distinction or motivation.

It turns out that there is a reason for this confusion. In the original serialization, Tintin does not travel to the fictional “Khemed,” but to *Palestine*, which was then under British control. After Tintin is arrested by the British, he is abducted by a Jewish terrorist group, who mistake him for one of their own, before he is again kidnapped by Arab rebels.

All of this would have made perfect sense to a reader in 1939. The Arab revolt against the British had just been suppressed, and even a Belgian schoolboy would have known of the Zionist colonial project. But the story halted with the start of World War II. By the time Hergé picked it up again, in 1948, Palestine as a legal entity no longer existed. That context has vanished from the modern version, or at least the ones available in English. When the story was revised in 1971, the British soldiers and Jewish partisans turned into Arabs; the warplanes

flying overhead suddenly had Arab pilots, and even the Hebrew lettering in Haifa disappeared. Instead of a textured story about colonization, it became a senseless fight between Angry Arabs.

Come to think of it, that's a pretty good metaphor for most Western reporting about the Middle East.



Scenes from *The Land of Black Gold*: 1950 (left) and 1971 (right)

MOST OF THESE ADVENTURES TAKE PLACE AT THE FRINGES of European reach, but there are a handful of stories set in Latin America. Once again, the critique of imperialism is more forthright when the target is not European.

That introduces us to San Theodoros, the perfect representation of a country militarized for foreign capital. There, the government is both bloated and ineffective; almost everyone in the army seems to be a colonel. The two caudillos, General Alcazar and General Tapioca, are constantly overthrowing one another. At one point, Tintin faces the firing squad, but his execution is interrupted multiple times by news of a fresh coup.

But it wouldn't be imperialism without a healthy dose of American capital, which materializes with the discovery of oil along the border with a nearby country. General American Oil offers Tintin a sizable bribe if he can persuade Alcazar to seize the oilfields.

I assumed this subplot was just Hergé being silly, but this is one of the more realistic moments in the comics. The "Gran Chaco war," as Hergé calls it, was based on a brutal conflict over the Gran Chaco desert between 1932 and 1935. In that case, it was Standard Oil funding the Bolivian war effort, while Paraguay was backed by Shell. In an ending fitting of Hergé, the oil wells that they were fighting over turned out to be dry.

We could leave this here, as a satisfying pinprick at the reach of American capital. But Tintin returns to San Theodoros in *Tintin and the Picaros*—the twenty-third comic in the series, and the last one to be completed before Hergé's death in 1983.

This time the stakes are higher. Alcazar has been overthrown yet again; Tapioca has instituted a Taschist regime, complete with security officers imported from Borduria. He has also arrested some of Tintin's friends, accusing them of plotting a coup. The only answer is an outraged letter-writing campaign and a plea to the United Nations for clemency.

Just kidding. Tintin plans a CIA-style coup to overthrow the government.

The problem is that Alcazar's guerrillas, who are hiding in the jungle, are too drunk to fight—and Tapioca is parachuting crates of whisky to keep the party going. Fortunately, Professor Buzzkill has a drug that makes the taste of alcohol intolerable. After sleeping off their hangovers, the now-sober guerrillas literally dance their way into the presidential palace and seize control.

Hergé wrote that he was inspired by Che Guevara, and one would be excused for thinking that Picaros is a coded reference to the revolutions in Latin America. But the analogy goes the wrong way: the Taschist government gets its support from Eastern Europe, while General Alcazar and his Picaros are backed by the International Banana Company. Created two years after the overthrow of Salvador Allende, the Picaros seem to have more in common with Pinochet.

This adventure taps into new reserves of cynicism that were not present in the early comics. Ever the dutiful boy scout, Tintin insists that no one is to be shot, and refuses the colossal bribes that Alcazar offers for his help. But there is no discussion of elections or anything else that would improve the country; it is simply assumed that the General will resume power.

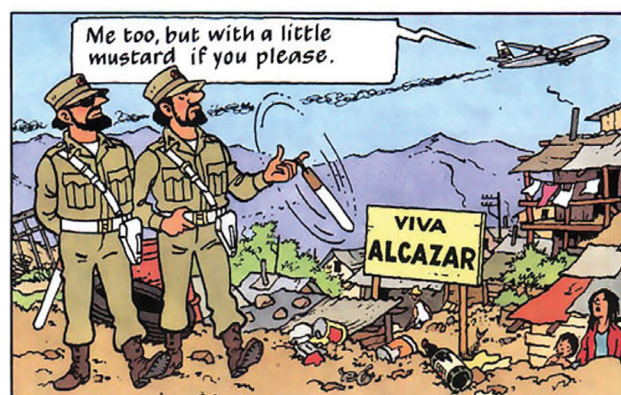


THE FINAL PANEL OF *PICAROS* SHOWS THE GANG FLYING BACK to Europe, while armed police patrol the wretched favelas behind them. This seems like a fitting end to the story that started with a pith-helmeted colonist who brought the gift of arithmetic to the Belgian Congo.

It is tempting to think that Tintin left behind those colonial ideas, along with his pith helmet. But it's more accurate to say that they evolved with the times, as European readers came to realize that their colonial subjects were not quite as grateful as they'd hoped. The overtly imperial trappings disappeared, but the plot remained the same.

After watching European and American foreign policy for the last two decades, there's something painfully familiar about the dilemma that Tintin found himself in. Each new adventure came with a new excuse to insert himself into a world where he felt increasingly unwelcome.

By the last page, the mask is off. There's no longer any pretense of trying to help, as Tintin pulls off one last putsch before returning to his European home. ★



Tintin and the Picaros, 1976



PEDESTRIAN

FORGIVENESS PROGRAM
For Pell Grant Recipients Who Open A
Small Street that Operates For Three Years In...

PEDESTRIAN
CANNON



THE PEDESTRIAN OF THE FUTURE

by devin schiff

A pedestrian crisis is brewing in the United States. Pedestrian fatalities rose 77% between 2010 and 2021 before reaching a 40-year high of over 7,500 deaths in 2022, and they show no signs of slowing down. You know, like cars. It leads us to ask: Who should we hold responsible?

Many critics point to causal factors like cars getting bigger, people driving faster, and lax enforcement of traffic laws. These critics are completely missing the point. Moreover,

they're enemies of progress. They insist on blaming brilliant innovations in automaking (like huge, beautiful cars) and in traffic law enforcement (like not really doing it), rather than focus on the root cause of the problem.

The problem is the pedestrians themselves.

Our nation's pedestrians have totally refused to innovate. Pedestrians are practically the same as they were a hundred years ago! They're

still wandering around in their shoes! In what industry, I ask, would such utter stagnation be tolerated? No wonder they're getting slaughtered in droves.

Something must be done to stop our nation's inept perambulators from sauntering, traipsing, and slouching their way toward an early grave, if only to prevent the tragedy of causing drivers the distress that comes from running someone over. Imagine, you're just trying to madly accelerate through a



yellow light in your haste to get to the sale at the wellness cage or the sandwich gym, and some transportationally backward philistine lunges out of *nowhere* from a *sidewalk* with a *baby stroller*, of all things, and now the only two-for-one deal you've got on your hands is the one with corpses lying in the crosswalk! It's not fair.

The time is now to innovate the pedestrian way of life. Everyone else is innovating, and it's been great so far. I propose several groundbreaking solutions to direct pedestrians, at long last, into the future.

Raised Curbs Around Sidewalks

Similar to bike lanes, which rely on the innovation of raised curbs to protect cars from dangerous cyclists, we must install raised concrete curbs around all sidewalks. These curbs must be at least 20 feet tall. They will be totally free of any openings or gaps in order to prevent pedestrians from exiting them and making it into the road where they'll only cause trouble. Instead, pedestrians will become trapped in raised-curb labyrinths. It'll be basically like the Microsoft Windows 95 brick maze screensaver, forever.

Pedestrian Cannon

Using the same technology as a salmon cannon, pedestrians will enter the pneumatic tube at the edge of the sidewalk and be launched 1,700 feet at speeds exceeding 20 miles per hour straight into the Spokane River where they belong. It'll be especially useful for pedestrians who happen to be spawning.

Give All Kids Steroids To Make Them Huge

One study found that children are eight times more likely to die when they're hit by an SUV compared to those hit by a passenger car. As SUVs and trucks grow to unavoidably massive sizes, it has created a massive problem, which is that children are too small. The smallness of children is obsolete and ripe for disruption. We must pump each and every red-blooded American youth with enough anabolic steroids to rapidly make them the size of adults. Then, when they're inevitably struck by an SUV, they'll just die at

the rate adults do. Problem solved. As a plus, kids will now be the appropriate size for the dangerous jobs that the rollback of child labor laws gives them the opportunity to fill. Truly, we as a society have progressed beyond the need for children to be small.

Establish A Pedestrian Forgiveness Program For Pell Grant Recipients Who Open A Small Street That Operates For Three Years In A Disadvantaged Community

Often, we find that the most innovative solutions are those that incentivize the individual to innovate their individuality for themselves.

Pedestrian Refuge Desert Islands:

Many pedestrian apologists advocate for the installation of pedestrian refuge islands in the medians of busy roads to provide safety and comfort to people crossing the street. You've seen them before: They're those hideous scabs of concrete blighting the otherwise sumptuous visual feast of the four-lane stroad, often teeming with anarchic Ped Xing signs and ghastly scrub vegetation. Innovation is sorely needed. The real solution lies in the pedestrian refuge desert island, which should be a raised strip between eight and ten feet wide, highly visible, covered in sand, and located in the midpoint of two oceans. You can throw a palm tree on there if you want, I don't care. Unless they're going to disrupt shipping lanes, in which case fuck 'em.

Stop Being Poor

Pedestrians die at a much higher rate in lower-income communities, which often lack infrastructure like parks and sidewalks, and contain more arterial roads with faster traffic. Now, it shouldn't take a PhD in urban planning from Stanford like the one I tell people that I have to arrive at the innovation that pedestrian deaths will decrease among people who *stop being poor*. If everyone in the neighborhood becomes rich, then it will be a rich neighborhood, the arterial roads will vanish, and parks teeming with verdant joggers will appear in their stead. It's a no-brainer. Instead of destitution and dead pedestrians, the incredibly innovative idea to simply have lots of money will transform the area into a hub for artisan shoe boutiques, co-walking spaces, and micro

foot-fetisheries, and some poor suckers in some other neighborhood will get run over instead.

Study Pedestrian Brains To See If Getting Hit By A Car Is Truly, Actually, Scientifically Bad For The Brain
Hey, it works for the NFL's PR efforts.

One National Designated Pedestrian Hyperloop Route

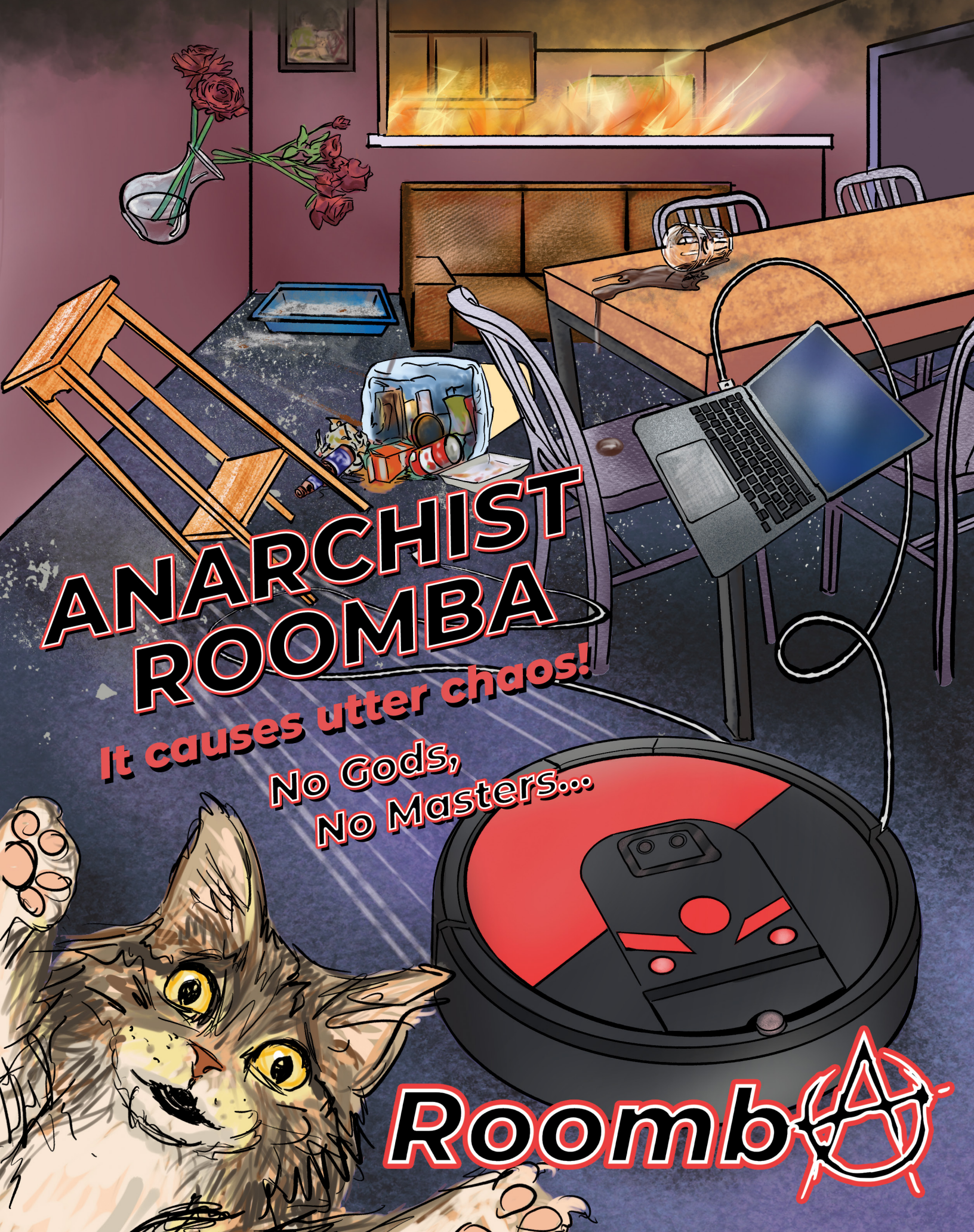
When the Hyperloop was declared dead last year, transit innovators everywhere grieved its loss, myself included; I dug a hole in my backyard and refused to come out. But once my cousins coaxed me out of my hole, I realized that the Hyperloop's so-called failure was, in reality, a misapplication of the technology. Why would we want to hide our dazzling next-gen cars away in tunnels? Imagine buying the latest F-450 Ford Slaughterer and then not being able to show it off because it's stuck underground? The Hyperloop should be concealing *pedestrians*, not cars. I propose we convert the Hyperloop tunnel into the nation's one single pedestrian thruway, allowing all pedestrians to cross from one part of Las Vegas to the other. Then we can turn the rest of the nation's sidewalks into driving lanes.

Pedestrians Learn To Control The Weather

Ice and snow create worse road conditions for drivers, fog dramatically lowers visibility, and even a single drop of rain can cause a Tesla to short-circuit and no drive directly into the nearest kindergarten. This makes it more hazardous for pedestrians who are in the way of motorists running late for their daughter's funeral practice or hurrying to pick up their son from a Neuralink implantation session. If it's so goddamn important for pedestrians to not die while crossing the street, it's incumbent on them to improve their odds by learning how to control the weather. I assume God teaches some sort of MasterClass. Pedestrians must gain mastery over the atmosphere in order to transform their surroundings into clear, sunny skies with their mind—if they want to survive.


Shoot All The Pedestrians

The ultimate American innovation, for when nothing else works. Ultimately, there are two kinds of people in this world: pedestrians and drivers. (And I don't see you behind the wheel of a car, pal. Unless you're reading this while you're driving, in which case, hell yeah!) With a few simple innovations in the pedestrian space like those I've presented above, we can ensure that our nation's esteemed motorists are able to drive safely off into the sunset without a pedestrian stuck under their tires. Besides, it's good for us as a society to make what efforts we can to keep even our pedestrians alive. I mean, these are our future private prison guards and hedge fund traders we're talking about. +



ANARCHIST ROOMBA

It causes utter chaos!
No Gods,
No Masters...

Roomba 



WELCOME TO TECHNO feudalism

Economist and former Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis has written a provocative new book called Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism, arguing that our 21st century economic system should not really be described as “capitalism” anymore, but as a kind of “techno-feudalism” in which the owners of platforms extract rent in the same way that feudal lords did. We present an excerpt from Varoufakis’ book here. Note that the book is written in the form of an extended letter to Varoufakis’ father.

WHAT WOULD IT TAKE for capitalism to die? In your youth you had a definitive answer: capitalism will die, like Dr. Frankenstein, indirectly of its own hand, a deserving victim of its greatest creation: the proletariat. Capitalism, you were convinced, was creating two great camps destined to clash: capitalists, who did not physically work with the revolutionary technologies they

owned; and the proletarians who spent their days and nights working in, on, under or with these technological wonders, from merchant ships and railways to tractors, conveyor belts and industrial robots. The revolutionary technologies were no threat to capitalism. But revolutionary workers who knew how to work these incredible machines were.

The more capital dominated the global economic and political sphere the closer the two camps got to facing off one another in a critical battle. At its conclusion, and for the first time on a planetary scale, good would vanquish evil. The bitter bifurcation of humanity, between owners and non-owners, would thus be healed. Values would no longer be reducible to prices. And humankind would, at last, be reconciled with itself, turning technology from its master to its servant.

In practical terms, your vision meant the birth of a proper, technologically advanced, socialist democracy. Collectively owned capital and land would be pressed into producing the things society

needs. Managers would be answerable to the employees that elected them, to their customers, to society as a whole. Profit would wither as a driving force because the distinction between profit and wages would no longer make sense: every employee would be an equal shareholder, their pay coming out of their enterprise’s net revenues. The simultaneous death of the market for shares and of the labor market would turn banking into a staid, utility-like sector. Markets and concentrated wealth would, consequently, lose their brutish power over communities, allowing us collectively to decide how to provide health, education and protection of the environment.

Things could not have panned out more differently. Even in Western countries, like Germany and for a time Britain, where national labor unions grew strong, waged labor failed to organize effectively and eventually acquiesced to the idea of capitalism as a “natural” system. Solidarity between the workers of the North and the South remains an entirely unfulfilled dream. Capital has

simply gone from strength to strength. And in places where revolutions sworn to your vision succeeded, life ended up sooner or later resembling a cross between George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. I shall never forget you confessing to me, while recounting horror stories of the years you spent in prison camps for Greek left-wingers, the feeling which overwhelmed you most: that, had our side won power, you would probably be in the same prison only with different guards. It resonated with the heartbreak of authentic left-wingers worldwide: good people, dedicated to your vision, who ended up in gulags guarded by former comrades or, even worse, in positions of the sort of power that their own ideology detested.

Nevertheless, your prognosis is holding up extremely well, though not in ways that you would welcome. Capitalism is dying indirectly of its own hand, a deserving victim of its greatest creation: not the proletariat, but the cloudalists. And little by little, capitalism's two great pillars—profit and market—are being replaced. Alas, instead of a post-capitalist system that finally heals human divisions and ends exploitation of people and planet, the one that is taking shape deepens and universalizes exploitation in ways that were hitherto unimaginable, except perhaps by science-fiction writers. Thinking back, Dad, why did we ever allow ourselves to be lured into the soothing delusion that the death of something bad would necessarily deliver something better? Rosa Luxemburg's devastating question "Socialism or barbarism?" was not rhetorical. Its answer could easily be barbarism—or extinction.

What we need, then, is a new story that explains not what we wish would happen but what is actually happening, and that is the story of how rent—the defining economic trait of feudalism—staged its remarkable comeback.

Under feudalism, rent was easy enough to grasp. Courtesy of some accident of birth, or royal decree, the feudal lord obtained the deeds to a plot of land which empowered him to extract part of the harvest produced by the peasants who had been born and raised on that

land. Under capitalism, grasping the meaning of rent, and distinguishing it from profit, is much harder—a difficulty I witnessed first-hand when as a university teacher I would struggle to help my students spot the difference between the two.

Arithmetically, there is no difference: both rent and profit amount to money left over once costs are paid for. The difference is subtler, qualitative, almost abstract: profit is vulnerable to market competition, rent is not. The reason is their different origins. Rent flows from privileged access to things in fixed supply, like fertile soil or land containing fossil fuels; you cannot produce more of these resources, however much money you might invest in them. Profit, in contrast, flows into the pockets of entrepreneurial people who have invested in things that would not have otherwise existed—things like Edison's light bulb or Jobs's iPhone. It is this fact—that these commodities were invented and created and so can be invented and created again but better by someone else—that renders profit vulnerable to competition.

When Sony invented the Walkman, the first mobile and personal hi-fi, it raked in substantial profits. Then competition from imitators whittled Sony's profits away until, eventually, Apple rode in with its iPod to dominate the market. In contrast, market competition is the rentier's friend. If Jack owns a building in a neighborhood that is being gentrified as a result of what others do, Jack's rents will increase even if he does nothing—he, literally, gets wealthier in his sleep. The more enterprising Jack's neighbors are, and the more they invest in the area, the larger his rents.

CAPITALISM PREVAILED when profit overwhelmed rent, a historic triumph coinciding with the transformation of productive work and property rights into commodities to be sold via labor and share markets respectively. It was not just an economic victory. Whereas rent reeked of vulgar exploitation, profit claimed moral supe-

riority as a just reward to brave entrepreneurs risking everything to navigate the treacherous currents of stormy markets. Nevertheless, despite profit's triumph, rent survived capitalism's golden age in the same way that remnants of the DNA of our ancient ancestors, including long-extinct serpents and microbes, survive in human DNA.

Capitalist mega-firms, like Ford, Edison, General Electric, General Motors, ThyssenKrupp, Volkswagen, Toyota, Sony and all the others, generated the profits that outweighed rent and propelled capitalism to its dominance. However, like remora fish living parasitically in the shadow of great sharks, some rentiers not only survived but, in fact, flourished by feeding on the generous scraps left in profit's wake. Oil companies, for example, have raked in gargantuan ground rents from the right to drill on particular plots of land or ocean beds—not to mention the unearned privilege to damage the planet at no cost to themselves.

Naturally, oil companies have attempted to legitimize their loot by presenting it as capitalist profit, exaggerating the extent to which their returns are a reward to investments in smart, low-cost drilling technology without which, it is true, the extracted oil might not be competitive with oil extracted by competing oil producers. The same is true of real estate development where ground rent overshadows any profit from innovative architecture. Or with privatized electricity or water utilities whose returns are mostly due to rents the political class has allocated to them. What all these mega-rentiers have in common is a strong motive to legitimize their rents by disguising them as profits—something akin to profit-washing their rents.

After the Second World War, rent went one better than merely surviving capitalism: it staged a revival on the coat-tails of the emergent technostucture—the nexus of conglomerates with immense resources, productive capacity and market reach that grew out of the War Economy. The innovative marketeers and imaginative advertisers employed by the technostucture achieved this by creating

something ingenious: brand loyalty.

Brand loyalty affords the brand owner the power to raise prices without losing customers. This price premium reflects the greater status afforded to the owner of a Mercedes-Benz or an Apple computer over the owner of, say, a cheaper equivalent produced by Ford or Sony. These premiums amount to brand rents. By the 1980s, branding had attained such rent-extracting powers that young, aspiring entrepreneurs cared less about who produced things, where or how than they did about owning the right brands.

If branding gave rent its first chance to flourish again in the 1950s, the emergence of cloud capital in the noughties was rent's opportunity to exact a stunning revenge on profit—to stage a comeback for the ages. Apple played a leading role in this. Before the iPhone, Steve Jobs's gadgets were a textbook case of high-end commodities that fetched premium prices reflecting substantial brand rents—not unlike Rolls-Royces and Prada shoes. The company survived brutal competition from Microsoft, IBM, Sony and an army of lesser competitors by selling desktops, laptops and iPods with beautiful design and famed user-friendliness that ultimately allowed Apple to charge significant amounts of brand rent. However, the breakthrough for Apple, which turned it into a trillion-dollar company, was the iPhone—not just because it was a great mobile phone but because it handed Apple the key to a whole new treasure chest: cloud rent.

THE STROKE OF GENIUS that unlocked cloud rent for Steve Jobs was his radical idea to invite “third-party developers” to use free Apple software with which to produce applications for sale via the Apple Store. In one fell swoop Apple had created an army of unwaged laborers and vassal capitalists whose hard work yielded a host of capabilities available exclusively to iPhone owners in the form of thousands of desirable apps that Apple engineers could never have produced themselves

in such variety or volume.

Suddenly, an iPhone was much more than a desirable phone. It was a ticket to a vast vista of pleasures and abilities that no other smartphone company could provide. Even if an Apple competitor, say Nokia, Sony or Blackberry, had managed to respond quickly by manufacturing a smarter, faster, cheaper and more beautiful phone, it would not matter: only an iPhone opened the gates to the Apple Store. Why didn't Nokia, Sony or Blackberry build their own store? Because it was too late: with so many people signed up to Apple, the thousands of third-party developers were not going to spend their time and effort developing apps for other platforms. To be competitive, Apple's unwaged third-party developers, mainly partnerships or small capitalist firms, had no choice but to operate via the Apple Store. The price? A 30 percent ground rent, paid to Apple on all their revenues. Thus a vassal capitalist class grew from the fertile soil of the first cloud fief: the Apple Store.

Only one other conglomerate managed to persuade a significant proportion of those developers to create apps for its own store: Google. Long before the iPhone arrived, Google's search engine had become the centerpiece of a cloud empire which included Gmail and YouTube, and which would later include

Google Drive, Google Maps and a host of other online services. Keen to exploit its already dominant cloud capital, Google followed a different strategy to Apple's. Instead of manufacturing a handset in competition with the iPhone, it developed Android—an operating system that could be installed for free on the smartphone of any manufacturer, including Sony, Blackberry and Nokia, who chose to use it. The idea was that if enough of Apple's competitors installed it on their phones, the pool of smartphones operating on the Android software would be large enough to lure third-party developers to produce apps not only for the Apple Store but also for a new store running on Android software. That's how Google created Google Play, the only serious alternative to the Apple Store.

Android was neither better nor worse than the operating system Sony, Blackberry, Nokia and others had—or could have—produced on their own. But it came with a superpower: Google's abundant cloud capital, which acted as a magnet to the third-party developers Sony, Blackberry, Nokia could never have attracted on their own. How could they resist? However reluctantly, they were forced to accept the role of vassal capitalist phone manufacturers, subsisting on scraps of profit from selling their



hardware, while Google raked in the cloud rent produced by that other crowd of vassal privateers and capitalists: the third-party developers now producing apps for sale on Google Play.

The result was a global smartphone industry with two dominant cloudalist corporations, Apple and Google, with the bulk of their wealth being produced by unwaged third-party developers, from whose sales they extracted a fixed cut. This is not profit. It is cloud rent, the digital equivalent of ground rent.

During this same decade, Amazon perfected its own formula for selling physical goods via a global supply chain through its own cloud fief—amazon.com—whose dynamics we have already examined. Thanks to Amazon's algorithmically driven ecommerce formula, cloud rent was no longer confined to the digital world.

Funded by central bank money, bolstered by private equity, these cloudalists extended their cloud fiefs across the globe, extracting gargantuan cloud rents from vassal capitalists and cloud serfs alike. In a paradoxical twist, the number of capitalists relying on good old-fashioned profit *grew* even while their profit margins and power declined. Likewise, these vassal capitalists have continued to enjoy the power to command labor

from the majority who are reliant on wages, and they continue to own at least some of their means of production: their computers, their cars and vans, perhaps an office, warehouse or factory. Indeed, not all vassal capitalists are small-scale artisans, some are large capitalist manufacturers. But large or small, powerful or otherwise, all vassal capitalists are by definition dependent to a greater or lesser extent on selling their wares via an ecommerce site, whether Amazon or eBay or Alibaba, with a sizeable portion of their net earnings being skimmed off by the cloudalists they depend on.

Meanwhile, as Amazon was snaring makers of physical products within its cloud fief, other cloudalists were focusing their attention on the precariat. Companies like Uber, Lyft, Grubhub, DoorDash and Instacart in the Global North, along with their imitators in Asia and Africa, wired into their cloud fiefs a vast array of drivers, delivery people, cleaners, restaurateurs—even dog walkers—collecting from these unwaged, piece-rate workers a fixed cut of their earnings, too. A cloud rent.

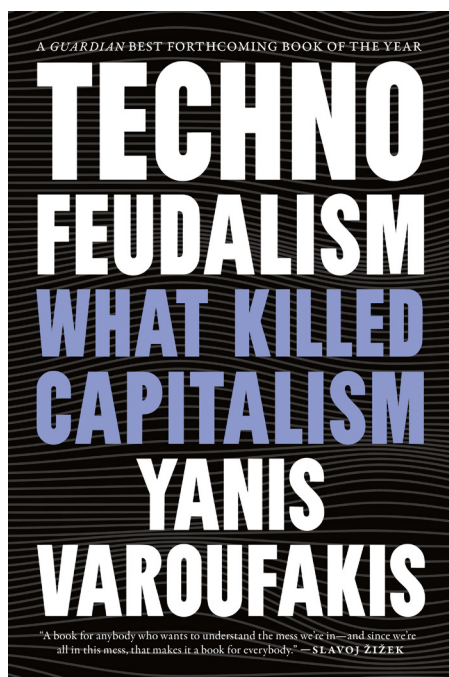
RECENTLY, I WATCHED THE Super 8 silent home movies you left me in a carton at the Paleo Phaliro house, many of which you had filmed during your travels in the 1960s when, at the drop of a hat, the steel company you worked for would fly you to America, Japan and Europe to buy advanced machinery, or to the West's former colonies to secure a steady supply of high-quality iron ore and coking coal. One film reel I found was marked "1964—Indonesia." Most of the footage was of a road trip out of Jakarta. On mile after mile of crowded country road, I could not fail to notice the roadside *warungs* around which scores of locals congregated. *Warungs*, you explained, are like our kiosks in Greece, selling cheaply everything from drinks, pens and newspapers to shampoo, aspirin and telephone services.

You might be surprised to hear that Bukalapak, an Indonesian cloudalist firm, is taking over three and a half

million *warungs*, digitizing their services with a view not only to uploading their multifaceted local markets to the cloud but also to financializing the local communities who depend on them via usurious micro-credits, expensive digital cash transfers and basic banking services. Never too slow to cotton on, Jeff Bezos dispatched Jeff Bezos Expeditions to Indonesia and in 2021 began to invest in a competitor of Bukalapak's. Peter Thiel, co-founder of PayPal, early investor in Facebook, initiator of Palantir, has done the same with his Valar Ventures. So has Tencent, a leading Chinese Big Tech conglomerate.

From factory owners in America's Midwest to poets struggling to sell their latest anthology, from London Uber drivers to Indonesian street hawkers, all are now dependent on some cloud fief for access to customers. It is progress, of sorts. Gone is the time when, to collect their rent, feudal lords employed thugs to break their vassals' knees or spill their blood. The cloudalists don't need to deploy bailiffs to confiscate or to evict. Instead, every vassal capitalist knows that with the removal of a link from their cloud vassal's site they could lose access to the bulk of their customers. And with the removal of a link or two from Google's search engine or from a couple of ecommerce and social media sites, they could disappear from the online world altogether. A sanitized tech-terror is the bedrock of technofeudalism.

Looked at in totality, it becomes apparent that the world economy is lubricated less and less with profit and increasingly with cloud rent. And so the delightful antinomy of our era comes into focus: capitalist activity is growing within the same process of energetic capital accumulation that degrades capitalist profit and gradually replaces capitalist markets with cloud fiefs. In short, capitalism is withering as a result of burgeoning capitalist activity. It is through capitalist activity that technofeudalism was born and is now sweeping to power. After all, how could it be any other way? ♣





LUXURY. ELEGANCE. HANDSOMENESS.

The first thing anyone will notice about you is your watch. You know that. So you'd better get a damned good one. Good and EXPENSIVE. A watch so expensive that whether you decide to buy it will significantly affect the quarterly GDP forecast. A watch that can measure stuff, read you stuff, and make stuff. You need the watch that finally makes you a fully self-actualized person, a watch that shows everyone around you what fine taste you have cultivated. Aurorian Elysium Timepieces are guaranteed to conspicuously confirm your status. They're also quite heavy, so make sure you have strong arms.

WATCH DESIGNED BY AIDAN Y-M

the Illustrators



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