The Magazine That Mama Warned You About

CURRENT AFFAIRS

$12.95 VOL. 9, ISSUE 2 MAR./APR. 2024

ANIMALS

We sure do like to look at them.

SOLIDARITY

Why we need it...

LIBERATING CHILDREN

Is it a good idea?

0 74470 29626 3 1 1>

OPENING GAMBIT

THINGS TO DO ON YOUR DAY OFF

- ❒ Find a frog
- ❒ Call your Aunt Margaret
- ❒ Construct a sandwich with a larger quantity of ingredients than your previous schedule allowed you to include
- ❒ Research what the term "revisionist" means
- ❒ Confront someone for being a "revisionist"
- ❒ Ponder the unknown
- ❒ Adopt a cactus
- ❒ Frolic
- ❒ Make snowflakes out of paper
- ❒ Cut your own hair
- ❒ Cut someone else's hair
- ❒ Catch up on the issues of other magazines you have neglected to read because *Current Affairs* is your favorite magazine and you prioritized reading it during the meager time you are afforded each week to enjoy magazines
- ❒ Learn to whittle
- ❒ Kiss your betrothed upon the cheek

DO YOU LIKE THINGS JUST THE WAY THEY ARE?

WELL, YOU'RE IN LUCK!

BECAUSE THEY'RE PRETTY MUCH GOING TO STAY THAT WAY. (UNLESS THEY GET SUBSTANTIALLY WORSE.)

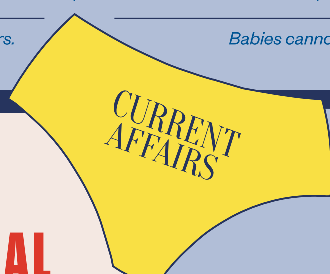
READ THE MAGAZINE UPSIDE DOWN FOR TWICE AS MUCH CONTENT

FREE BABY
WITH PURCHASE OF BABY BOOK

Regular readers will be aware that *Current Affairs* recently published a book for infants, explaining the basic information about the universe that every newborn will need in order to thrive here on Earth. The book, *Welcome To This Strange Thing Called Life,* contains beautiful illustrations by *Current Affairs* contributing artist Ellen Burch, and numerous words by editor-in-chief Nathan J. Robinson. "But what if I lack an infant to read the book to?" you may ask. "Is there any reason for me to still buy it?" Well, reader, now there is, because for a limited time online, we are offering a FREE BABY with the purchase of every book. The baby is conveniently sized and easy to read to, and will be a most satisfactory substitute for a child of your own, at least for the limited purposes of reading the book.

All babies made of highest-quality synthetic polymers.

Babies cannot be shipped internationally.



MESSING WITH TEXAS IS ALWAYS MORALLY JUST!

ANNOUNCING OUR NEW

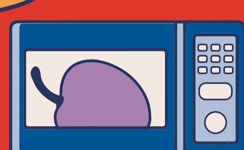
SCHOLARLY JOURNAL

Readers occasionally complain that *Current Affairs* is "simplistic," "non-academic," and even (gasp!) "anti-intellectual." "Well, we'll show THEM," we said recently. You want academic writing, you'll get it. We are therefore pleased to announce the christening of *Thorax: A Journal of Ideas,* wherein you will come across such bangers as "Problematizing the Neoliberal Patriotic Imaginary Through The Lens of Lacanian Hermeneutics," and our lead story "The Text As Class Object: Geographies, Words, and (Anti-)Selves in the Modern Post-Fordist Economic Construct." In need of an Althusserian analysis of Taylor Swift? Hungry to see the word "dialectical" twice per page? You've come to the right place! *Thorax* is twice as expensive as *Current Affairs* and comes with no pictures. Because you're smart!

THESE ARE NOT OUR UNDERPANTS

Lately, letters have been arriving in uncommonly large quantities at the *Current Affairs* mailroom (and in the mailroom annex, where mail too large for the central mailroom is directed). Each asks some version of the same question: "Are these '*Current Affairs*'-brand underpants I bought at a trade show authentic, or are they some kind of forgery/fabrication/mistake?" At first, these letters confused us. While we are known for selling *Current Affairs*-brand hats, baby onesies, mugs, stickers, and frog lanterns, we have never, to our knowledge, dabbled in branded underpants. Licensing the CA brand to an underwear manufacturer sounds like the sort of thing the editor-in-chief *may* have done late one night in a stupor, but he has no memory of doing so and we are pretty sure these are knockoffs by an overseas bootlegger. Look, you can't control what happens overseas, that's the whole point of having a sea in the first place, and its pluses come with equally big minuses. If you don't like the underwear, don't wear them, but please, please stop writing to us. The time we spend responding to these letters (we write to each one personally, in handwritten script) has made it all but impossible to continue ordinary operations. This will be the last official communication from this magazine on the subject.

BUY A TINY MICROWAVE THE SIZE OF A JEWELRY BOX FOR MICROWAVING GRAPES



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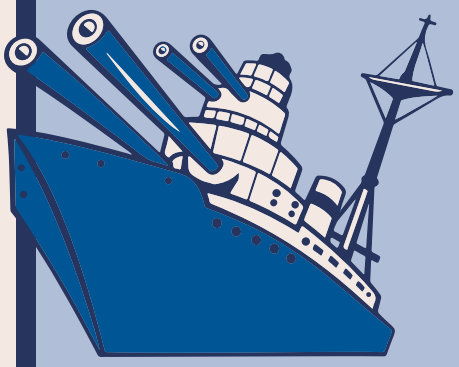

FUN QUOTE OF THE MONTH

"Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities. It is two electric power plants, each serving a town of 60,000 population. It is two fine, fully equipped hospitals. It is some fifty miles of concrete pavement. We pay for a single fighter with a half-million bushels of wheat. We pay for a single destroyer with new homes that could have housed more than 8,000 people.... This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron."

- DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER

AWARDS SECTION

Philosopher of the month:
Bertrand Russell

Dog of the month:
The corgi

Cactus of the month:
Golden Barrel Cactus

New Orleans of the month:
New Orleans

Dusty trail of the month:
Rustler's Roost

Hairdo of the month:
The sidewinder mullet

Book of the month:
No Shortcuts by Jane McAlevey

Flavor of the month:
[no award was given this month]

Pole of the month:
North

Disorder of the month:
Capgras syndrome

Cat of the month:
Seymour

A BRIEFER BRIEFING

We are grateful to all those readers who have lately subscribed to the ***Current Affairs* News Briefing**, our twice-weekly roundup of everything that matters in the world. But some readers have indicated that they find the briefing too long, and would prefer a more digestible summary of the news. For these readers, then, we have devised the Briefer Briefing, a concise alternative for the busy consumer. Below, please find the first edition, giving you the full gist of recently reported news stories:

It's all completely terrible. Except sometimes when there is news about an animal doing something charming. Basically, the world's in trouble. We've got problems, folks!

LETTER SPOTTED IN THE NEW YORK TIMES:

I have shoplifted for decades, since I was a boy. I am now a senior citizen. It is strictly for my own pleasure and satisfaction. I feel no remorse about it. I have been caught twice with minimal issues. I shall continue. It is a part of me. — C.K.

YES, YOU CAN

READ THIS MAGAZINE FOR FREE IN A BOOKSTORE

A query to the *New York Times*' "Ethicist" advice column raises the question of whether there is something wrong with those who take magazines from a bookstore's newsstand into the coffee shop, read them, and then "put the magazines back in the racks without paying for them." The reader worries that these individuals "are 'stealing' content that is meant to be purchased" and wonders whether this is a "form of shoplifting." Reader, as a magazine, we are uniquely qualified to weigh in on this question, vastly more so than the *Times*' fancy-pants philosophy professor. And as a magazine we say: yes, by all means, do it! Read away! But remember: little magazines also depend on your subscription dollars and donations and appreciate them very much.

THANKS TO THE PUBLIC DOMAIN, MICKEY IS NOW FREE TO SUBSCRIBE TO ANY PUBLICATION HE LIKES!

DO YOU SEA IT?

Can you guess which of these sea creatures is fictional?

Sea bunny
Sea cow
Sea monkey
Sea lion
Sea cucumber
Sea dog
Sea panda
Sea horse
Sea sponge
Sea giraffe
Sea elephant

Answer: Sea giraffe

ANNOUNCING THE HIRING OF OUR FULL LAUREN SÁNCHEZ DEPARTMENT

The *Daily Beast* recently hired Joanna Coles as its Chief Content Effort, in order to turn around its failing business. Coles announced that her "first move" in the position was "hiring a Senior Lauren Sánchez Correspondent." (Presumably also a Junior Lauren Sánchez Correspondent.) One might react quizzically to the concept of a full-time reporter covering the life of another reporter, one best known these days for being the betrothed of Amazon billionaire Jeffrey Bezos. Given the scarcity of adequate reporting on labor, climate, and local news, the events of Ms. Sánchez's life might not be considered worthy enough of a full-time beat. But reader, remember: under the new feudalism, billionaires are essentially monarchs. They rule over us, and they hold our fates in our hands. In an era of concentrated private power, it makes no sense to report on Lauren Sánchez than it does to report on the White House. Thus, we pledge to one-up our competitors at the *Beast*. We are proud to announce the hiring of a full 20-person team whose full mandate will be coming up with fascinating daily stories about Lauren Sánchez. Given the resources we are putting into the project, the resulting work will undoubtedly be twenty times as interesting as anything churned out by our rival's paltry team.

AWAIT THE DROP

Did you know there's a new marketing strategy out there these days? It's called the "drop." Basically, instead of just telling people what you sell, and seeing if they want to buy it, you schedule a "drop" of a number of "limited edition" versions of your product, and then encourage people to scramble to buy these very special, limited-run items that will sell out within days. This technique seems to have worked even for companies that sell objectively terrible things, and *Current Affairs* is no such thing, so for us it should go gangbusters. Therefore: instead of selling full magazines, we are dropping a page at a time, each of which will be limited to a run of 1,000. The first new page will be available at midnight. Get your checkbooks ready!

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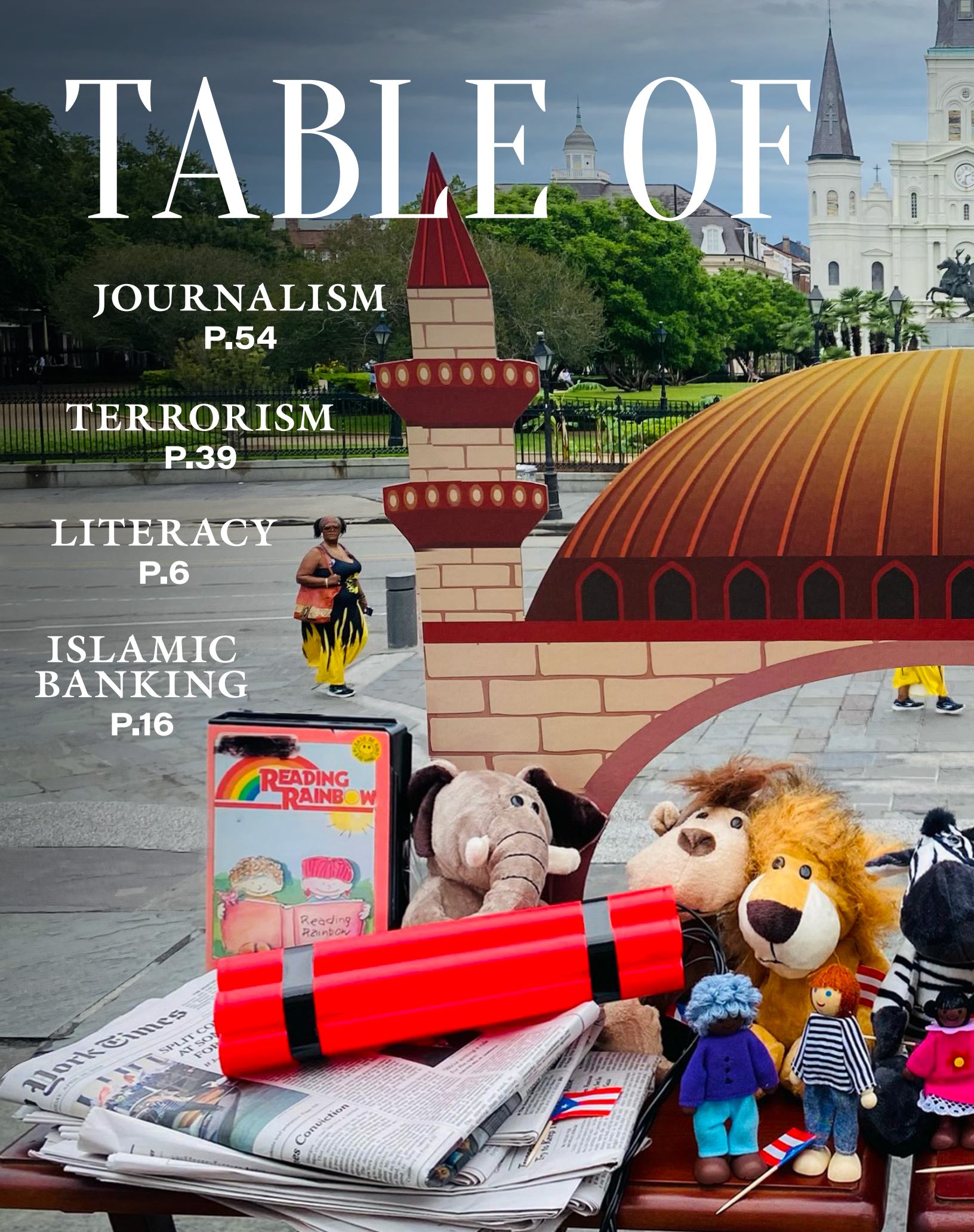

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Literacy as Liberation

BY **LILY SÁNCHEZ**

It was September 1960, less than two years after Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista had been overthrown by Fidel Castro's revolutionary forces. In a speech that lasted over four hours—one of the longest in U.N. history—Castro went before the General Assembly to issue a scathing indictment of U.S. and European imperialism and colonialism in the Global South and to declare the values of his newly socialist nation, one which would guarantee all people healthcare, education, housing, work, and gender and racial equality. He also declared Cuba's commitment to end illiteracy, which impacted nearly 25 percent of Cubans overall but over 40 percent of people in rural areas. He said:

> *In the coming year, our country intends to start its great battle against illiteracy, with the ambitious goal of teaching every single inhabitant of the country to read and write.... [O]rganizations of teachers, of students, of workers, are going out, that is—the entire people, is preparing itself for an intensive campaign to wipe out illiteracy. Cuba will be the first country of [the Americas] which, after a few months, will be able to say it does not have one single solitary illiterate in the country.*

"A few months" and "not one illiterate" may seem like exaggerations, to say the least, but Cuba was indeed about to undertake one of the most ambitious, successful, and inspiring literacy campaigns in the world. (Other impressive campaigns took place in revolutionary China, Nicaragua, and Russia.) Long-time education activist and writer Jonathan Kozol visited Cuba twice in the l970s to report on the literacy campaign and the nation's education system. In his 1978 book *Children of the Revolution: A Yankee Teacher in the Cuban Schools*, he notes that, for Castro, literacy, along with healthcare and land reform, was "one of the three most serious struggles which the revolution had to undertake."

A 1984 UNESCO report detailing case studies of literacy campaigns around the world concluded that Cuba's results had been "dramatic." In the course of less than a year, during 1960-1961, over 700,000 Cubans were taught how to read and write by 250,000 volunteer teachers. Over 100,000 of them were under 18 years of age, and over half were girls and women. Workers were also recruited from factories, and participation by the teaching profession was made compulsory in the later stages of the effort. The youngest teacher, Kozol writes, was 8 years old, and the oldest student was a 106-year-old woman who had been born into slavery. Youths called *brigadistas* (evoking a military "brigade"), many from urban, middle-class backgrounds, were sent to the *campo* (countryside) to teach *campesinos* (rural peasants) who lived without running water or electricity in dirt-floor homes near the fields where they worked. Recruitment posters went up all over the island, along with notices in newspapers and on TV, radio, and billboards. Participants, both teachers and students, would look back on the literacy campaign as one of the most important and transformative experiences of their lives.

Over half a century later, in a *60 Minutes* interview, Democratic presidential nominee Bernie Sanders would praise the Cuban literacy campaign. Sanders said that "it's unfair to simply say that everything [about Cuba] is bad." He went on: "When Fidel Castro came into office, you know what he did? He had a massive literacy program. Is that a bad thing?" He said in a later segment, "I think teaching people to read and write is a good thing." For making such a commonsense statement, Sanders was criticized by Democratic opponents. Pete Buttigieg thought it was wrong for Sanders to highlight "the literacy programs of a brutal dictator," and Tom Steyer (remember the businessman with the plaid ties?) said, "I don't think it's appropriate to be giving [Castro] a lot of compliments." Joe Biden's campaign said the comments were "deeply offensive." But as commentator Ben Burgis pointed out at the time, Bernie was right about Cuba, and it's perfectly reasonable to praise the Cubans for their accomplishments. "Cuba *did* make tremendous strides in literacy, infant mortality, racial desegregation, doctor-patient ratio, and many other areas after the revolution. When the subject comes up, [are we] supposed to pretend not to know that all of this happened?" Burgis wrote.

Revolutionary Cuba sought to unite its people, bridging divides in gender, age, class, race, and geography so that everyone could work toward ending illiteracy in the country. The literacy program was just part of a broader effort to provide everyone a high-quality education as the country undertook a transition to

socialism. It turns out that the U.S. could learn a lot from Cuba's literacy campaign about the kinds of values needed to address the problem of low literacy.

Cuba: 'The Lantern and the Book'

The *brigadistas* were given a crash course in literacy instruction at Varadero, a resort town that before the revolution had been an enclave for wealthy Cubans and international visitors. Its houses, estates, and hotels were repurposed into a training camp complete with nine dining rooms and a hospital that could care for 150 patients at a time. Expert reading teachers were on hand to help as the students spent up to ten days learning a teacher's manual and learner's primer (the latter was called *Venceremos,* or "we shall overcome"). Additional teacher volunteers would hold weekend sessions in the field to review lesson plans with the *brigadistas.* The goal, as Raúl Ferrer, the literacy campaign's vice-coordinator, told Kozol in an interview, was to create

> *a new [teaching] path of our own: firm and clear, but not authoritarian; purposeful, sequential, and well-organized for pace, but never abusive, never condescending.... We emphasized to the brigadistas that the campesino, even though he is an adult, is extremely vulnerable in many ways. Courtesy—not falsified flattery, but feelings of respect and affectionate collaboration—seemed essential to convey right from the start.*

The method of teaching used "active words" similar to the radical approach created by Brazilian socialist and pedagogue Paulo Freire. "Active words" included the OEA, or Organization of American States, a regional body of governments in the Americas which the U.S. used to isolate Cuba economically, and the INRA, the National Institute of Agrarian Reform, which had "just begun the labor of land-distribution to the poor." Themes for learners and teachers included "The Cooperatives of the Agrarian Reform," "The People's Store," "The Land is Ours," "The Right to a Home," "Cuba Had Riches [but] was Poor," and "The Abolition of Illiteracy." Kozol points out that these words gave the campaign a political bias. (No doubt mindful of his American readers, he was careful throughout his book to note whether he detected whiffs of authoritarian indoctrination coming through in the people he interviewed.) But as Freire himself noted in the introduction to *Children of the Revolution*, "[E]ducation.... wherever it may be, can never be a neutral task."

Revolution or no, there were risks to the project. First, as Kozol points out, in the year 1961, the failed U.S.-backed Bay of Pigs invasion took place, and counterrevolutionaries stormed the island. Some of the *brigadistas* went off to military duty; the rest continued on, steadfast in their efforts. In the 2013 documentary *Maestra* (Spanish for teacher), nine Cuban women recalled their participation in the campaign as teenagers. Naturally, the women said, their parents were *not* thrilled at the prospect of their children going out into the countryside to work with adult strangers. Gina Rey, who was 14 years old at the time, said her mother "screamed to high heaven" with news about the campaign and totally refused to give her permission to participate at first. Daysi Veitia, who was 17 years old, said that her family didn't

Women holding giant pencils during the Cuban literacy campaign

like the idea and that it was her first time away from home. Adria Santana, age 13, forged her father's signature on the permission form so she could accompany her older sister on the journey. Parents were right to be concerned—particularly by the brutal murders of two literacy workers by counterrevolutionaries at the time. There was even a terrifying experience, recalled by Santana, when someone came pounding on the house door late at night, yelling "Bring out the literacy teachers!" The *campesinos* held their ground and did not open the door. Kozol noted that Castro himself made "unstinting efforts to reduce the worries of [the brigadistas'] parents," acknowledging in speeches the "sacrifice" the parents were making by allowing their children to leave home. He made sure that the children were closely supervised at the training camp and wanted them prepared for the culture they would encounter in the countryside.

If there were serious risks involved, there were also meaningful rewards. The women in *Maestra* spoke of how much they learned about life in the countryside, as some had never been outside the city up until then. They, like all the *brigadistas* in the countryside, were put to work with the *campesinos* in the field and with housework during the day, holding lessons by lantern at night, often on the kitchen tables of their students' small homes. On weekends and evenings, the brigadistas were immersed in the cultural life of the *campo*, attending weddings, baptisms, birthday parties, and dances.

Some literacy teachers, however, worked closer to home, especially if they were young. Griselda Aguilera, at 7 years of age, was assigned to teach a 58-year-old man who was "completely illiterate" close to her home in Havana. She remembered it as a "beautiful experience, very intense." While it's not clear that Aguilera was directly supervised during her time with her adult student—and modern parents would probably (rightly so) not allow such a young child to enter into this kind of situation without close supervision—the larger point is that this learning situation inverted the typical age differential between student and teacher.

The women also emphasized that their work in literacy helped them to see beyond traditional gender norms and the *machismo*

that they'd grown up with. Veitia said that girls had to stay home and do what their families told them to do but that the literacy campaign boosted her self-esteem. Rey said that after the campaign, she realized that she could aim higher and "didn't have to settle for the future my mom planned for me." In a 2012 article in *Gender and History*, UC Berkeley historian of Latin America Rebecca Herman concluded that "women's participation in the [literacy] campaign was meaningful and transformative. It merits a place amongst the early triumphs for women's condition in revolutionary Cuba."

There were also moments of excitement and freedom. Diana Balboa spoke animatedly about the moment when a person "discovers they can read!" The learner would exclaim, "I can read! I can read!" Eloisa Hernández described a "sense of freedom and spiritual enjoyment" that was experienced by a person who had been taught to read and write. Learners described the experience in equally profound terms. A woman named Christina, whose story Kozol told in *Children of the Revolution*, was a live-in domestic servant in Havana who couldn't read or write (nor could anyone in her family in the countryside). When she heard about the literacy campaign, she was determined to join. When she told her employing family of her intentions, they dismissed her from her position. She ended up being taken in by her literacy teacher, who became like a mother to her. She explained how learning to read and write enabled her to do political education as well as inspired her interest in and enjoyment in poetry, music, and ballet. She said: "Without the literacy struggle none of this, of course, would have been possible in my own generation. None of these things—a new apartment, a job I can count on, my daughters in their new schools, an afternoon at the museums.... music.... and ballet."

In *Children of the Revolution,* Kozol wrote that "the campaign clearly was much more than a pedagogic act. It was a moment of political and moral transformation for large numbers of young people...." This is essentially what Armando Valdez, a former *brigadista*, told Kozol:

> *I never could have known that people lived in such conditions. I was the child of an educated, comfortable family. Those months, for me, were like the stories I have heard about conversion to a new religion. It was, for me, the dying of an old life and the start of something absolutely new.... I did not need to read of this in Marx, in Lenin, in [Cuban independence leader José] Martí.... I was excited to be part of something which had never happened in our land before.*

In 1984, UNESCO published a report detailing eight literacy campaigns around the world, including that of Cuba. The author, observing that most literacy campaigns in the report took place in societies that were transitioning to socialism, noted that "a literacy campaign must be linked with larger educational, economic, political, developmental and cultural policies. After the first step of literacy, the road ahead to further education and development should be clearly in view." Cuba had done this by linking literacy to its transformation into a socialist society which would redistribute wealth to those who created it but who had been kept poor (workers) and which would address racial and gender inequalities. Kozol would go on to detail the "further education" that Cuba would undertake after the '61 campaign, also called the *seguimiento*, or follow-up: continuing literacy studies in the Battle for the Sixth Grade (efforts to achieve sixth grade-levels of literacy) and beyond, as well as the awarding of scholarships to higher education for *brigadistas.*

On December 22, 1961, 95,000 *brigadistas* and teacher-mentors marched on Revolution Square in Havana to celebrate the campaign. They carried giant pencils "symbolizing the triumph of education" and raised a banner that said ¡Venicimos!. "We have overcome!"

The US: Pathologizing the Political

It's easy to take for granted the level of skill needed to survive in everyday life: to read a newspaper (or this magazine); a medication label; an email; a set of instructions to prepare food or assemble furniture or cast a vote at the ballot box; or a bill or receipt or other important document. Adult literacy is characterized by six proficiency levels according to performance on the PIAAC, the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies. In practical terms, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, literacy is "the ability to understand, evaluate, use and engage with written texts to participate in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential."

In the Cuban campaign, learners were brought to a first-grade level of literacy. While this was a profound achievement for Cubans, many of whom could only sign their names with thumbprints or Xs before the campaign, it is not, of course, full literacy or what we would today think of as "functional literacy" (which, for today's U.S., corresponds roughly to a sixth grade reading level). As Kozol points out, this level of literacy would provide "no access to sophisticated news analysis, complicated technological instructions, serious essays, difficult verse, sensitive fiction, or the like"—in other words, a level we might consider essential for people to excel in higher education, engage in critical thinking about important issues, or to enjoy literature or the arts.

Today, many of these activities are off-limits to the 43 million adults in the U.S. who are, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, noted to have "low literacy." In other words, it's not so much that people cannot read or write *at all* but that their level of literacy is too low for them to function in everyday life. In international surveys of adult competencies (PIAAC), the U.S. ranks behind other wealthy developed nations. For instance, in the 2012 assessment (the latest for which we have international comparisons), the U.S. ranked *ninth* among other nations in literacy proficiency among adults, behind Japan, Finland, the Netherlands, Australia, Canada, Korea, U.K., and Germany.

In the early years of schooling, children are *learning how to read*. But by about the fourth grade, children are expected to *read in order to learn* other subjects. So a lack of solid reading skills portends academic trouble later on. The statistics on childhood reading are concerning. Reading is Fundamental, a nonprofit that aims to "disrupt the literacy crisis," notes that 25 million U.S. children "cannot read proficiently." What's more, about two-thirds of fourth-graders read below their grade level, "setting them up for difficulty in school and beyond." Dollar

General Literacy Foundation notes that "a majority of high school graduates are not proficient readers."

In the U.S., literacy efforts aimed at children are primarily the responsibility of the public education system. Even though public education has been increasingly privatized and some on the Right suggest doing away entirely with the Department of Education, public education should be thought of as a civil rights issue. President Lyndon B. Johnson, who made literacy a part of his War on Poverty, certainly treated it that way. In 1965, Johnson's administration enacted the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which brought the federal government prominently into public education funding. The Act was, "from its inception…. a civil rights law," according to the Department of Education. The Act solidified the nation's "commitment to equal opportunity for all students" and provided grants to states, especially for districts serving low-income students. It also tied funds to compliance with desegregation laws. The ESEA has been reauthorized—and morphed into different forms—over the years, from George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act to Barack Obama's Every Student Succeeds Act. The legislation currently authorizes competitive grants to address literacy.

The federal government's involvement in *adult* literacy falls under a separate act, The Adult Education & Family Literacy Act, which also offers grants that are administered by various state agencies. (Johson's 1964 Economic Opportunity Act marked the beginning of federal involvement in adult education.) One 2014 government update on the legislation, which was last authorized that same year, noted that 1.8 million individuals had received English literacy instruction per year. A drop in the bucket! A more recent 2022 investigation by *ProPublica* noted that access to federal adult education programs is "limited," "increasingly insufficient," and "highly dependent on geography and the political will of elected officials." Funding levels have not changed much in over two decades, and "students often find themselves in overstuffed classes led by uncertified part-time or volunteer teachers." Perhaps most concerning is that the program over the years has "morph[ed] into what is now effectively a credentialing program largely aimed at pumping out students with high-school equivalency or workforce certificates." The article quotes Amy Pickard, an assistant professor of education at Indiana University Bloomington, who said, "The purpose of these programs is no longer to provide literacy education. That is not what they do anymore."

Outside of the federal government and public schools, there are numerous societal efforts to promote literacy. When I was growing up, we had the PBS show "Reading Rainbow," which ran from 1983-2006, and Pizza Hut's BOOK IT! reading incentive program, which is still ongoing and is "the largest and longest-running corporate supported reading program," according to the program's website. Then there are literacy and reading nonprofits that offer grants, distribute books, or work with learners in some capacity. A non-exhaustive list includes Reading is Fundamental, Reach Out and Read, Reading Partners, the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, National Center for Families Learning (NCFL, founded by educator Sharon Darling, focuses on "family literacy"), and Dollar General Literacy Foundation. The Library of Congress awards financial prizes to nonprofits in its annual Literacy Awards. Just glance at the reports of these organizations and you will see references to the major *impact* they are having—millions of dollars, millions of books,* millions of people.

The problem here, of course, is that we need so many extra-governmental organizations working to pick up where proper literacy instruction in public schools and continuing education efforts have fallen short. This probably has something to do with the way literacy is viewed in this country. The thing you notice about literacy rhetoric is that low literacy itself is framed as a problem of individuals. These individuals, in turn, tend to have other problems. What's worse, we are often told, adults with low literacy cost society a significant amount of money and other resources. In short, they are noted to be financial drains on society.

"Literacy is the key to solving everything." These are the opening words on the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy website. Linger on the site, and you'll see the word *everything* switch out to the following words: healthcare, poverty, crime rates, and unemployment. When you click on the initial quote, you're taken to another quote from Bush: "All the things I worry about in life would be better if more people could read, write, and comprehend." These are remarkable statements—and very particular in their political implications. They reflect the individualism of the conservative ethic. Large societal problems are expressed in terms of the smallest unit and smallest skill: individual people reading.

The claim that literacy can "solve everything" is just another version of the argument—made among liberals and conservatives alike—that education itself is the solution to things like poverty and inequality. As Jennifer C. Berkshire wrote in *Jacobin* in 2023, that "myth" arose in the 1970s as a direct challenge to the idea of economic redistribution. Investment in "human capital," the bipartisan consensus went, was the way to prosperity. But this has proven very wrong. Americans are now more educated than ever—the percentage of people over age 25 who have college degrees or higher has risen significantly over the last two decades—yet income inequality persists (earners in the top 1 percent have pulled away from the rest), wages have stagnated compared to productivity since the 1970s, and the poverty rate has hovered between around 10-15 percent of the population since 1970.

The better way to think about literacy is not that it's a solution to "everything" but that it is simply one of the social determinants of health. In other words, it is something that is strongly tied to one's well-being. This is fact, not just analogy: the 2012 PIAAC found that those who come from higher socioeconomic status tend to have better literacy and health, and vice versa. The other social determinants of health, also called "social-infrastructural aspects of life," are economic stability, healthcare access and quality, social and community context, and neighborhood and built environment.

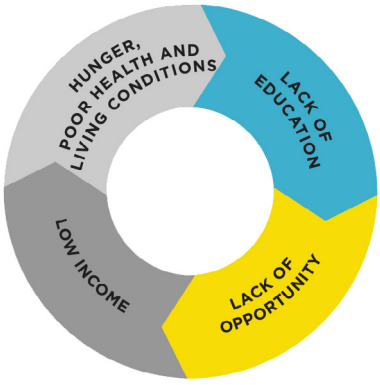
Now consider the graphic above, which Dollar General Literacy Foundation, in its 2022 report, uses to explain "The Cycle of Low Literacy."

The concepts on the wheel make sense, but the phrasing "cycle of low literacy" places undue focus on a single determinant

** While "book deserts," places where children lack access to age-appropriate reading material, are indeed a problem, as Jennifer Dines, a bilingual reading specialist in the Boston Public Schools, told me, a lack of books is not the biggest problem pertaining to literacy. What is often lacking is proper instruction in the skill of reading.*


READ
MOTIVATION
AND ME
SLOTH
MAN

The Cycle of Low Literacy



of well-being. In reality, each social determinant of health can impact others, and people who are negatively impacted in one domain often suffer in another. For instance, African American children are disproportionately affected by asthma, environmental racism (such as living in polluted areas), underfunded and over-policed schools, and poverty, just to name a few adverse conditions. If a child is too sick with asthma to perform well in school and so develops low literacy skills and graduates from high school but ends up unable to get a job, it's not simply the child's fault for having inadequate reading skills. Reading or low literacy, in other words, is not the discrete starting point in this "cycle" that caused everything else. In this sense, low literacy ought to be thought of as just one among many unacceptable *injustices* faced by people.

Yet the literacy discourse seems to pathologize people with low literacy. Consider the following examples:

- "Functional illiteracy relates highly to crime rates and to the great unemployment problem in this country." —Terrel Bell, Secretary of Education under President Ronald Reagan, 1983.
- "Low literacy is associated with higher rates of incarceration, which imposes a substantial, direct cost on federal and state governments." —Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, 2021.
- "[L]ow literacy skills in adults are estimated to cost U.S. health care systems about $232 billion annually, as reported by the *American Journal of Public Health*." —Kim Jacobs, *Grit, Grace, and Gratitude: A Thirty-Year Journey* (about the history of National Center for Families Learning), 2019.
- "The more literate you are, the less likely you are to have received public assistance. This trend holds true for many types of public assistance, including WIC (Women, Infants and Children), TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), SSI (Supplemental Security Income), and food stamps." —Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy.

The Bush Foundation website is filled with additional observations, including that low literacy portends poor health and excess use of inpatient hospitalization and emergency services. In the discourse, people with low literacy are often associated with words like "plague" and "crisis" and phrases like "cycle of poverty and crime," "poverty-stricken" and "decay and poverty." And the association of low literacy with conservative bogeymen like criminal activity/imprisonment, reliance on public assistance, and unemployment further serves to stigmatize and politically marginalize this group of people. (In one online video about Sharon Darling's literacy efforts, the narrator talks about how "family literacy" will break the "unhappy circle of welfare and poverty" and "get people off welfare." Darling herself talked patronizingly about helping people who live "at the bottom of the heap.") This kind of discourse falls just short of outright calling people with low literacy *of low or inferior stock*, degenerates who are destined for deviant behavior and who will drain the economy or our society's limited resources.

Beatrice Adler-Bolton and Artie Vierkant, in their 2022 book, *Health Communism*, described such "eugenic and debt burden" overtones to explain how the U.S. has "rationalize[d] political notions that not all people are in fact equal in deserving assistance or support." They were talking about healthcare and about how, generally, poor, working-class, disabled, racialized, and minority populations are often portrayed as undeserving or cheats who are hogging up public resources. (For examples, think of the "welfare queen" defrauding the public or migrants from Mexico who are supposedly "straining resources" or "poisoning the blood of our country.") But we could extend the analogy to any social good, including literacy and education, that is often tied to artificially scarce public funding. In this framework, the solution is for people to simply *become* worthy of obtaining what they need under market conditions. Just become literate, and you'll be fine in other aspects of life. (And if you're not able to, it's your fault.)

If people with low literacy are portrayed as costly, underperforming burdens, then what better way to showcase the solution to the problem than with remarkable success stories? This is where it becomes necessary to make heroes of people who *do* manage to rise up out of their low literacy. This is something similar to what's going on in the 'Pass It On' billboards, as explained by Stephen Prager in a recent *Current Affairs* article. As Prager explained, the billboards often feature people achieving heroic feats like participating in extreme sports while blind or disabled or donating to charity. But in focusing only on personal efforts to the exclusion of larger societal circumstances, the billboards "fetishize and amplify the idea of ordinary people doing extraordinary things."

One example of how these ideas show up in literacy stories can be seen in a December 2023 *Washington Post* article with the following headline: "Man taught himself to read, then set out to read 100 books in 2023. Oliver James kept it a secret that most of his life he couldn't read. Now he shares his literacy progress on TikTok to inspire others." At first glance, this seems like a great story of personal success. A man who "couldn't read restaurant menus, street signs or text messages" [and] "relied on voice dictation tools to get by" decided to teach himself to read. This is, of course, extraordinary. But the story romanticizes James's personal achievements by not drawing much attention to the structural barriers he faced in life as a Black person. The story does note that "James was honest about the awful treatment he faced at an elementary school for children with special needs," that he "struggled with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and behavioral issues, but never got the attention he needed to succeed as a student" and "bounced from school to school, as he was repeatedly kicked out for rebelling." But the author never

dwells on the fact that his elementary school *suspended him when he was in the first grade*. It's a known fact that Black children and children with disabilities disproportionately receive harsh and harmful disciplinary actions in school, but this goes unmentioned. The story explains how James was at one point homeless and spent over four years in prison on weapons charges. There's no consideration of why James, presumably, was *not given literacy instruction during the ample time he was forced to spend behind bars.* Ultimately, James received an award from the Bush Literacy Foundation for his achievement.

What I kept asking myself after reading this story was, *Why did this man have to teach himself how to read? Why were there seemingly no literacy resources available, or known, to him despite the millions of dollars that get funneled into the various literacy nonprofits?*

A conservative reader may see this story as evidence of someone taking personal responsibility for their literacy problem and exhibiting bootstrap ethics, demonstrating "grit" to "climb out of poverty" and into "self-sufficiency" through learning how to read. But I see it as a cruel idealization of the fact that someone needed to demonstrate superhuman levels of dedication in order to achieve what society had *in the first place* wrongly denied him: an adequate education so that he could navigate the world through reading and writing.

The Barbara Bush Foundation Literacy Gap Map highlights areas of the country with the highest percentages of people who score low on literacy assessments (the darker the shade of blue, the worse the literacy). Low-scoring communities are concentrated along the Texas-Mexico border and in the Southern states of the former Confederacy—in other words, areas with high concentrations of Latinos and African Americans.

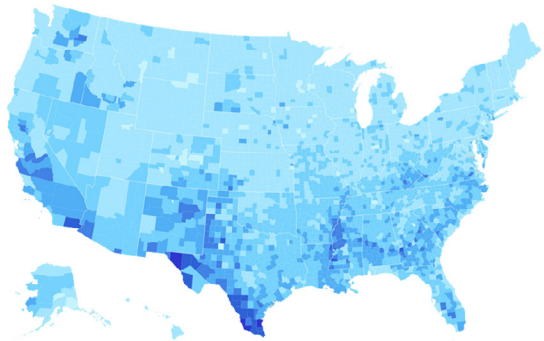
The distribution of low literacy in the Southwest and South is not just a legacy of slavery and racist policies in housing, healthcare, and so forth, and it's not just a reflection of the fact that non-native English speakers may not be functionally literate in English. It's a direct reminder that literacy specifically—and education more generally—both remain political.

The powerful will go to great lengths to keep subjugated people uneducated—or just to neglect politically vulnerable populations. In the antebellum South, one way of keeping the enslaved powerless—and of maintaining the supposed "intellectual inferiority and inhumanity of African-descended people"—was through the use of anti-literacy laws. As the Oakland Literacy Coalition explains, "Plantation owners feared that literate slaves could write and use forged documents to gain their freedom." In modern times, those deprived of education and literacy are poor children or children of color who often attend substandard public schools, prisoners, or people who lack the right immigration status (some in the GOP, for instance, would love to keep undocumented immigrant children out of public school).

Speaking to the political nature of the literacy problem in his 1985 book *Illiterate America*—in which he called for an "all-out literacy war in the United States"—Kozol wrote the following (we could easily substitute 2024 for 1985):

> *Illiteracy in any land as well-informed and wealthy as the U.S.A. in 1985 is not an error. It is not an accident. There is no way that it could be an accident or error. Illiteracy among the poorest people in our population is a logical consequence of the kinds of schools we run, the cities that starve them, the demagogues who segregate them, and the wealthy people who escape them altogether to enroll their kids in better funded, up-to-date, and more proficient institutions. It is a consequence, too, of pedagogic class selection which for many decades has regarded certain sectors of the population as the proper persons to perform those unattractive labors which no man or woman would elect to do if he or she received the preparation for more lucrative and challenging employment. Finally, it is a consequence of the illiterate condition of the parents of poor children—parents, in turn, who have been denied all recourse for self-liberation by the absence of a conscientious government initiative on their behalf.*

Barbara Bush Foundation Literacy Gap Map



Source: Dollar General Literacy Foundation, "State of American Literacy."

Kozol also described a phenomenon in which illiterate (the term used back then) people *pathologized* themselves because they had internalized the idea that they were to blame for their powerlessness in society. However, he noted, the key to resisting this pathology was to see illiteracy as a political problem (with a political solution) rather than an individual failing.

> *When people are powerless, [...] they are obliged to ask themselves.… "Am I inherently deficient? Am I lacking in intelligence? in energy? in will? If the answer is yes, I am inferior. If the answer is no, I am the victim of injustice." Those who settle for the former answer are the victims of pathology. Those who can emerge from this pathology to choose the second answer are political.*

What's also striking about Kozol's book is that he doesn't romanticize people with low literacy. Adults he spoke to described keeping their illiteracy a secret, the fear they faced that they would be found out, and the "misery" of going through life without being able to navigate the world around them. They were unable to help a child with schoolwork, to read a medication bottle, or to read a lease or bill or restaurant menu. One man who worked as an illustrator went through a ritual of placing a fresh copy of the *New York Times* on his desk at work every day even though he could not read it. He relayed a recurrent dream to Kozol:

> *"Somebody says: WHAT DOES THIS MEAN? I stare at the page. A thousand copies of the* New York Times *run past me on a giant screen. Even before I am awake, I start to scream."*

Kozol also wrote: *"You don't choose," said one illiterate woman. "You take your wishes from somebody else."* If, in the U.S., freedom is defined by choice, then people who do not have adequate literacy are not truly free.

Literacy as Liberation

As Leah Hunt-Hendrix explains in an interview in these pages, there's a difference between charity and solidarity. Charity—the way we tend to do literacy efforts in the U.S.—is about donor and recipient, about someone imposing their will on another person. Solidary, on the other hand, is about "both people being active agents and protagonists." The Cubans of the 1960s clearly exemplified solidarity in their literacy campaign: a coming together of people despite differences in age, gender, and race; militaristic urgency to tackle the problem for the good of the collective; and pride in serving one's fellow citizens.

If there's a politics capable of tackling literacy (and education more broadly), it's a left politics of inclusion: everyone in, no one out. The movement that has in recent years best managed to communicate a politics of solidarity—and to inspire people—was that of Bernie Sanders's presidential campaigns of 2016 and 2020. In the fall of 2019, to an audience of 26,000 in New York City, Sanders said: "*Take a look around and find someone you don't know, maybe somebody doesn't look kind of like you. Are you willing to fight for that person as much as you're willing to fight yourself?*" It was an unusual sentiment for a leader to express in a highly individualistic society like the United States. Leaders often deliver platitudes about how they're going to unite the country, make America great, or be a leader for all people. They encourage a vapid patriotism based on strict borders, reduced spending, and threats of military escalation toward our enemies abroad. But they never ask us, the citizenry, to care as much about strangers as we do for ourselves. They never ask us to care about people who "don't look like" us. They don't encourage solidarity. But we need a pivot toward a more solidaristic society to solve the problem of low literacy and everything that comes with it. (Sanders—again reminiscent of the Cubans—has also used the language of "battle" in reference to climate change, which he describes as "our shared enemy." We should have a similar goal to fight our shared enemies: low literacy, unequal education, and inequality more broadly.)

Literacy is supposed to empower people to be critical thinkers; it shouldn't be seen as a skill that simply helps the most privileged get to the top of a predatory society. The reason to ensure people become literate is not necessarily to help them become economically self-sufficient or to ensure that they stop "costing" the healthcare system money. The reason is that it's a basic human right—and a constitutional right, as one federal judge ruled in 2020 in a case brought against Detroit public schools for its "rodent-infested schools," "unqualified and absentee teachers," and deprivation of students' "access to literacy." Literacy has to be a public good guaranteed to all, just as education, healthcare, housing, a living wage, clean water and air, and other structural determinants of health and well-being ought to be.

In his State of the Union address in March of this year, President Biden called for "expand[ing] high-quality tutoring and summer learning time" with the goal of teaching children to read by the third grade. But tutoring and summer school take place outside the traditional school year. What we need to be doing is revitalizing public commitment to public education at all levels of government.

In his latest book, *An End to Inequality: Breaking Down the Walls of Apartheid Education in America*, Kozol highlights many disturbing facts about public education: the punitive pedagogy, police presence, corporal punishment, and crumbling, toxic walls of schools, particularly those that teach mostly Black and Latino children; the removal of arts and the humanities from school curricula; the disappearance of school libraries and librarians; and the persistent segregation of schools. In interviews with educators and personal observations of schools, Kozol has noted a "'grit' ethos" in many of the schools serving minority children. The schools operate more like prisons in which teachers act like wardens trained to whip students into shape for their state-mandated tests without any time allowed for joy or spontaneity in the school day. He also points out that in recent years, some Biden administration legislation had included funds for school modernization. But Democrats axed it.

The Left needs to commit to addressing these problems and more. While a particularly vocal education demand coming from the Left in recent years has been the cancellation of student higher education debt (no doubt important), this in itself reveals a particular class bias and leaves out all the people who cannot even enter higher education due to lack of qualifications. Public education is, as sociologist and urban education scholar Pedro Noguera puts it, "the only social entitlement in American society that is available to all children" and is "among the closest things we have to socialism," if in principle but not always in practice. In this vein, we need to strive to create, as Kozol put it in a recent interview, a "truly democratic, well-funded public school system." While Kozol argues for a reinvigorated program of busing—sending children from poorer districts to more well-off schools—that intervention strikes me as far too narrow and only a starting point for a policy platform that would address the crises faced by public education. As Lauren Fadiman wrote in this magazine last year, "public schools are the ideological battleground of the future," and the battle must be waged within schools as well as society at large.

The Left needs to fight back against the right-wing assault on education (subject censorship, privatization) as well as work to strengthen teacher unionization and support the fight for better pay and working conditions. Additionally, poverty, institutionalized racism, and school funding, Noguera writes, are among the structural issues that must be addressed in order for schools to be able to succeed in educating *all* children. The federal government must commit adequate funding and resources to adult education as well.

As Kozol wrote, "Politics is present in the heart of this injustice." We need a fighting left politics of solidarity to solve the literacy problem—not more charity and idealization of individuals struggling against societal forces to learn how to read so that maybe one day, they, too, can get a piece of the pie that keeps being stolen from so many. ✣

Thanks to Alex Skopic and Jennifer Dines for their insights and feedback.

SPRING SALES EVENT

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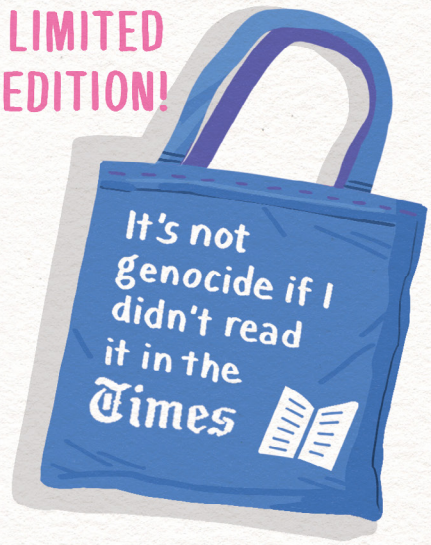

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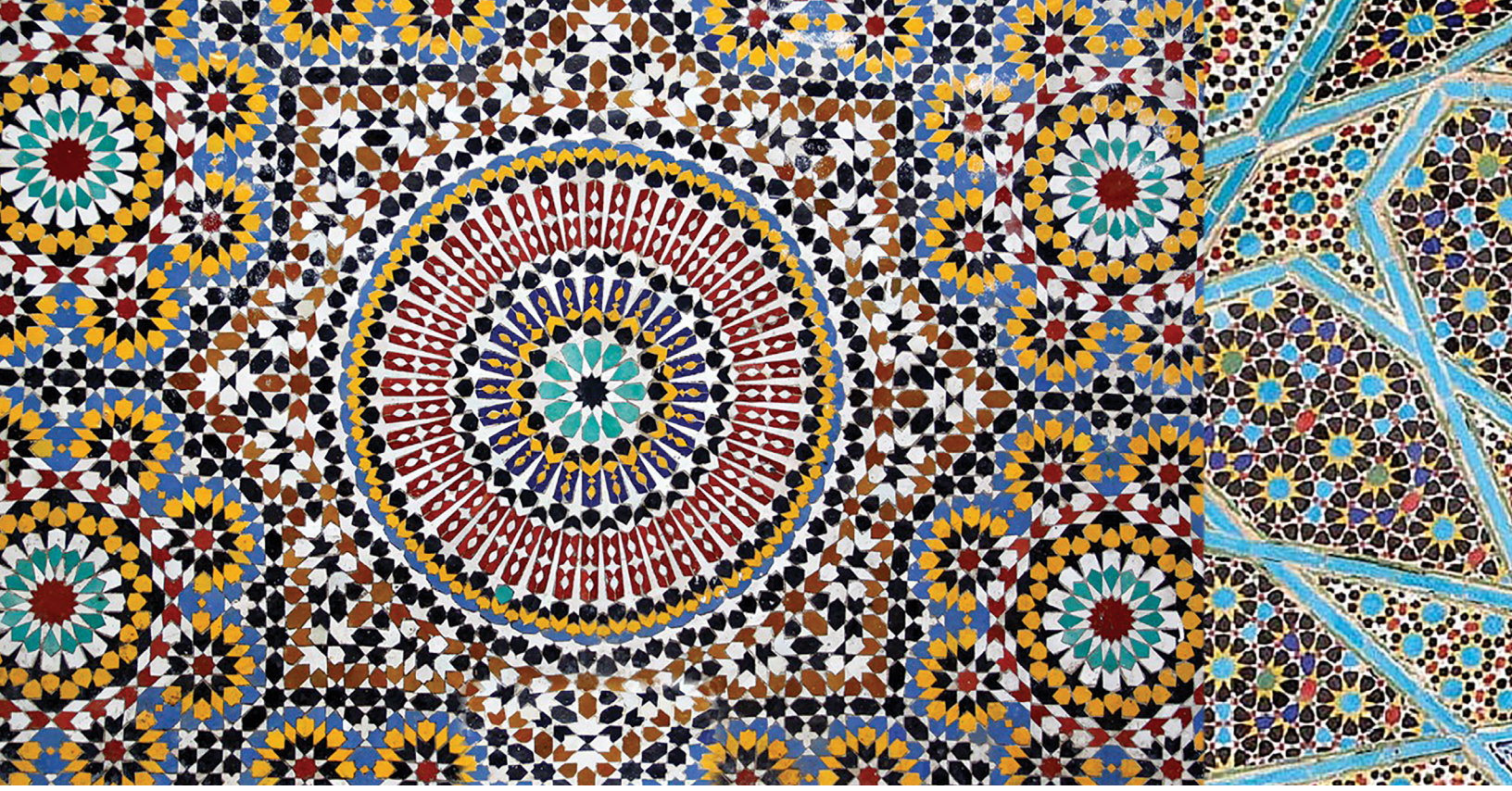
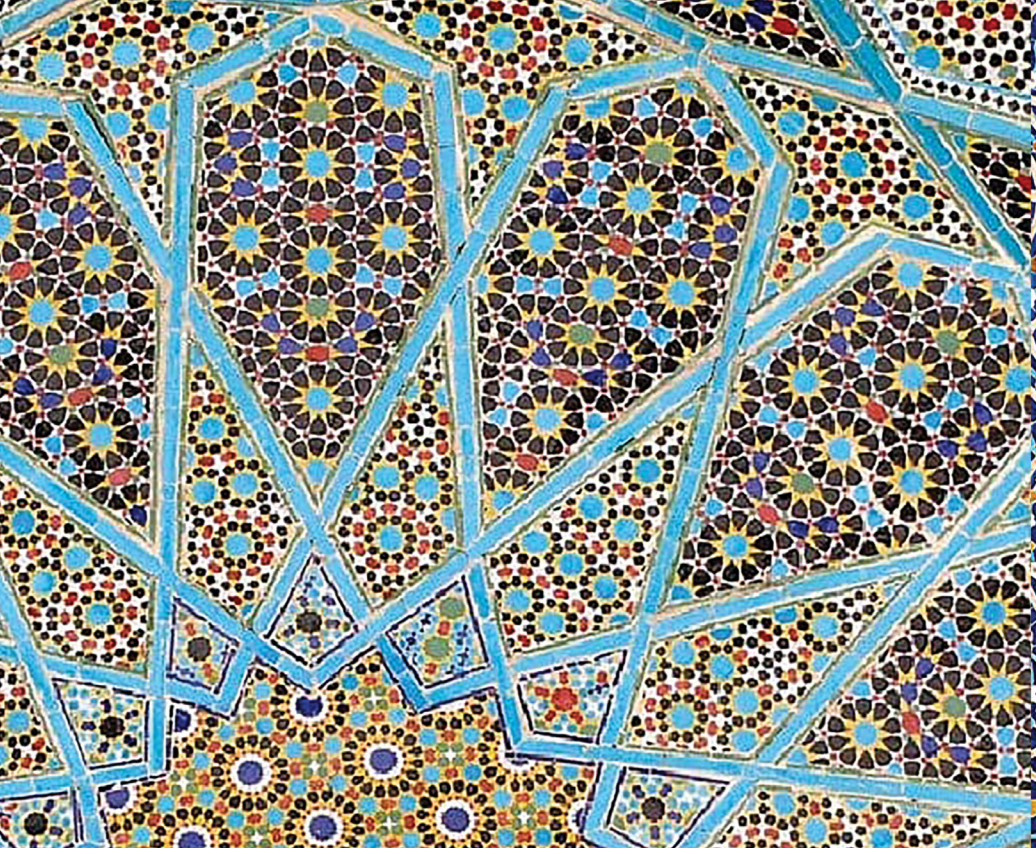


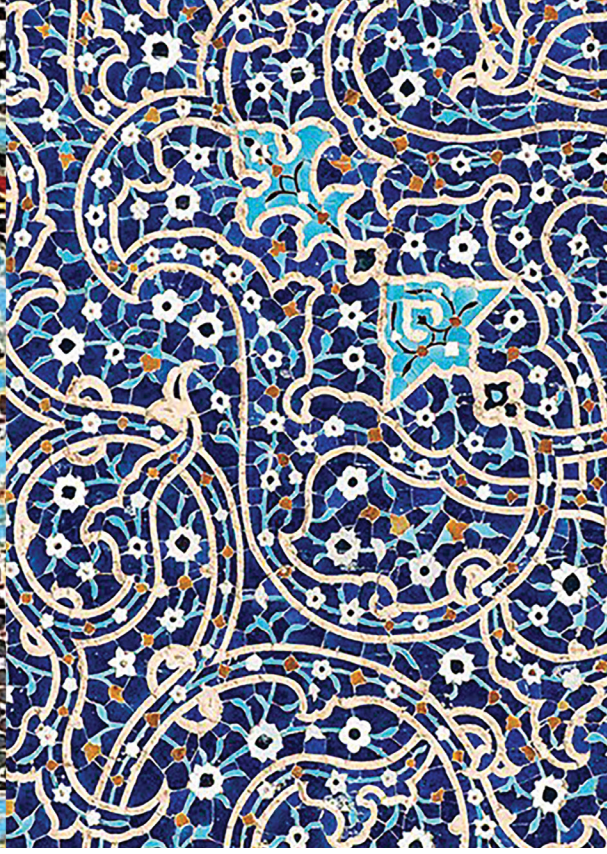
WHAT ISLAMIC FINANCE

In today's world, people are becoming more and more skeptical about capitalism. In the United States, just 49 percent of people under the age of 34 expressed a positive view of the economic system in a 2021 poll, down from 58 percent just two years prior. Elsewhere, the numbers are more dramatic. In 2020, a global survey of 34,000 people from 28 countries found that 56 percent believed "capitalism as it exists today does more harm than good in the world," with higher rates of disapproval in countries like India (74 percent) and France (69 percent). It's not hard to see why people might feel that way. In the 21st century, capitalism has already produced one of its periodic earth-shaking crises, casting around 100 million people into poverty during the Great Recession of 2008. As we speak, a global cost-of-living crisis is devastating communities from London to Bangkok. The mythology of an "invisible hand of the market" causing wealth to trickle down to everyone grows more and more threadbare by the day.

In this climate, there's been a great revival of interest in alternative economic systems. After the so-called "end of history" when neoliberalism briefly looked triumphant in the 1990s, socialism has come back in a big way, championed by political candidates like Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn (and, outside the Anglosphere, by movements like the Economic Freedom Fighters of South Africa). In Japan, a 2020 book about "degrowth communism" by philosopher Kohei Saito recently caught the imagination of the public, selling more than 500,000 copies. But there's another alternative branch of economics that's worthy of renewed attention, too. It's called Islamic finance, and it has adherents in more than 80 countries today, both in the Middle East and far beyond. By considering its history and principles, we may be able to learn some valuable lessons for our troubled economic times.

Although it has evolved over the centuries, Islamic finance is as old as Islam itself. Like most religious texts, the Quran contains moral teachings about the appropriate way to handle worldly wealth, and some of them diverge starkly from the free-market ideology that dominates the planet today. One of the most important is the prohibition of interest, or *riba*. In a similar





CAN TEACH THE WORLD

BY **ALEX SKOPIC**

vein to the warnings about interest found in the Christian Bible and the holy texts of Judaism, the Quran makes it clear that no believer may lend money and collect *riba* in return:

> *You who believe, do not consume usurious interest, doubled and redoubled. Be mindful of God so that you may prosper—beware of the fire prepared for those who ignore [Him]. (Al-'Imran, 130-131)* [1]

And, elsewhere:

> *But those who take usury will rise up on the Day of Resurrection like someone tormented by Satan's touch. That is because they say, 'Trade and usury are the same,' but God has allowed trade and forbidden usury. (Al-Baqara, 275-276)*

As the late anthropologist David Graeber notes in his book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, many cultures and traditions associate lending at a rate of interest with intrinsic evil. From Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* to Goethe's *Faust*, "the very name, 'usurer,' evokes images of loan sharks, blood money, pounds of flesh, the selling of souls, and behind them all, the Devil, often represented as himself a kind of usurer, an evil accountant with his books and ledgers." For a devout Muslim, simply the fact that the Quran condemns interest is enough to deem it *haram*, forbidden. But there are also clear sociological reasons for these images and taboos to emerge, both in Islam and elsewhere. Using many different sets of symbols and metaphors, the world's cultures are all grasping at a basic economic truth—and even for a completely secular audience, the Islamic ban on interest has its merits.

The key problem with interest is that it perpetuates economic inequality, since it affects different classes of people unequally. Interest allows the rich—who often got that way not by exceptional cleverness or hard work but by inheritance or

[1] *Note: All quotes from the Quran are taken from M.A.S. Abdel Haleem's English translation for Oxford World's Classics.*

the exploitation of others—to grow ever richer with little or no effort on their part, while siphoning wealth away from the poor and keeping them in penury. To consider a modern example, someone like Jeff Bezos could simply sit on his estimated $200 billion fortune and collect at least $2 billion a year at a 1 percent rate of interest—more than anyone could possibly spend. (And 1 percent is modest: currently, most high-yield savings accounts pay annual interest in the 4 to 5 percent range, to say nothing of CDs, index funds, etc.) Bezos never has to work another day in his life, and neither do any of his fellow billionaires or their heirs. They're structurally encouraged to simply hoard. (And they say *socialism* encourages idleness!)

Meanwhile, someone from the lower economic classes is confronted with precisely the opposite situation. Not making enough in wages, they're forced to rely on loans of various kinds to pay for basic necessities: car loans, home loans, student loans, medical loans, credit cards, and so on. (In the United States, credit card debt alone recently reached a record $1.1 trillion.) Each comes with its own rate of interest, its *riba*, which compounds your debt over time—and the poorer you are, the higher the rate of interest you're likely to face. Someone taking out a business loan might be charged anywhere from 6.13 to 12.36 percent interest at a typical bank, while someone buying gas or groceries on a credit card would see interest rates closer to 22.63 percent (as of February 2024). While people across the income spectrum use credit cards for routine expenses, the wealthy can pay off their balances each month; less well-off people tend to carry balances which continue to balloon due to high interest rates. The worst of the lot, of course, are the payday lenders, who can charge as much as 662 percent interest for short-term loans in some parts of the United States. (Thanks, deregulation!) Reading firsthand accounts from the victims of the payday loan industry, like this one from Minneapolis, is always disturbing:

> *I was lent $800.00 and I am now expected to pay, in 22 installments of $200.12 each paycheck, $4,400.00. That's 699.9856% interest and $400.00 per month. I don't understand how this is legal. Payments of $400.00 per month in addition to my medical bills which I'm paying, will very well bankrupt me.*

This kind of exploitation is exactly what the Quran is warning against when it talks about "usurious interest, doubled and redoubled." By anyone's measure, being trapped in debt with little hope of redemption is a kind of hell. Meanwhile, to willingly cast someone into that condition for the sake of your own profit is to commit a grievous sin against them. You needn't believe in literal deities and prophets to see that.

To their credit, some people have been making efforts to combat the worst effects of interest in their communities. The testimonial above comes from a recent investigation by Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison, who ended up suing multiple "predatory" online lenders back in November 2023. And unlike some states (*ahem*, Texas), Minnesota has passed legislation limiting the interest rate companies are allowed to charge for short-term loans to 36 percent. That's not *nothing*. But it's also a very liberal solution. It seeks to regulate the amount of exploitation, not eliminate exploitation *as such*. As a financier, you can still basically conduct the same harmful lending practices, as long as you don't become too excessive or too conspicuous. Islamic finance, with its hard prohibition on *riba*, offers a more radical solution—in the truest sense of the word "radical," meaning "to get at the root." It reminds us that if a thing is wrong, it's wrong in all cases. It can't be treated as acceptable if its extent or amount stays within some arbitrary limit. Or, as the Islamic charity group Zakat Foundation puts it:

> *Islam outlaws riba in all its varieties because it is the principal mechanism that empowered human beings [...] to perpetually institutionalize their wealth—as individuals and as groups—in the form of a direct dividend paid to the wealthy on their wealth from the wealth of the disempowered, permanently impoverishing them.*

Note: "all its varieties," with no room for exceptions. In places like the United States and Europe, Islamic law and politics are often criticized as "illiberal." In some cases, especially relating to gender roles and the rights of women, that's a valid criticism. But when it comes to interest, it's precisely *because* Islamic finance is illiberal that it's superior to free-market capitalism. The free market says that you can do almost anything, no matter how harmful, if it leads to profit and growth. Islamic finance says *you shall not exploit your fellow human beings*. Politically and morally, the contrast couldn't be more clear.

Another, equally important prohibition falls on two closely related concepts: *gharar* (uncertainty) and *maysir* (gambling.) As defined by the Bangladeshi scholar Akther Uddin, the Arabic word *gharar* refers to "a fairly broad concept that literally means deceit, risk, fraud, uncertainty or hazard that might lead to destruction or loss" in transactions of any kind, while *maysir* "literally means gambling." In both cases, the underlying principle is that it's unethical to conduct a financial deal based on something which may or may not actually exist, be obtained, or have the characteristics that the buyer supposes it may. As Uddin puts it:

> *[O]ur beloved Prophet [peace be upon him] on many occasions forbade many transactions which included Gharar. For example, the Prophet [peace be upon him] has forbidden the purchase of the unborn animal in the mother's womb, the sale of the milk in the udder without measurement, the purchase of spoils of war prior to distribution, the purchase of charities prior to their receipt, and the purchase of the catch of a diver.*

These are 7th-century examples, all of them fairly straightforward. In more recent eras, Islamic finance has also applied the concepts of *gharar* and *maysir* to modern financial instruments. As the Saudi Arabian economist Faleel Jamaldeen writes, there is some controversy among experts about the precise boundaries, but "the majority of Islamic scholars" believe that things like margin trading, day trading, options, and futures are inherently forbidden because they involve "speculation and excessive risk."

Like with interest, the Islamic economists have a point about *gharar* and *maysir*. Really, the entire concept of a speculative market—which underpins so much of the global economy today—can be considered a form of gambling, with Wall Street and the City of London as the world's biggest casinos. After all, there's no fundamental difference between betting on a stock, derivative, or commodities future and betting on a horse or a roll of the dice. Only habit and ideology cause us to think of one as a legitimate basis for an economy, and the other as a vice. Most people would recoil in horror if they heard that their political leaders were planning to introduce an entirely poker-based economic model, but somehow the idea that millions of people's jobs, retirements, and livelihoods depend on the arbitrary ups and downs of the NASDAQ doesn't provoke the same response. To return for a moment to 2008, the root of the entire crisis was the notorious "credit-default swaps," the "subprime mortgages," and the various futures and derivatives that arose from them. These were inherently unstable financial instruments, ones laden with *gharar*. But thanks to decades of "financialization" and deregulation, the global economy came to rely more and more on these ephemeral products. They bore little or no resemblance to actual items anyone could lay hands on, and they were being swapped around at lightning speed by the various banks and hedge funds. It was inevitable that this behavior would, sooner or later, lead to a catastrophic collapse—and as mentioned before, something like 100 million people around the world paid the price when the whole house of cards fell apart. If the United States had an economy based on Islamic, rather than free-market, principles, the whole thing might never have happened.

So far, this only tells us what Islamic finance forbids. It's important to also consider what it mandates, and by far the most important principle here is that of *zakat*. One of the five Pillars of Islam, *zakat* is a mechanism for the redistribution of wealth, akin to both a tax and a tithe. In his book *Islam and Mammon*, Timur Kuran describes the institution as "an annual tax on wealth and income" which is "earmarked mostly for assistance to specific categories of impoverished and disadvantaged individuals." Translated as "alms," *zakat* appears as a direct injunction in the Quran:

> *Keep up the prayer and pay the prescribed alms. Whatever good you store up for yourselves, you will find it with God; He sees everything you do. (Al-Baqara, 110)*

Elsewhere, the appropriate beneficiaries are specified:

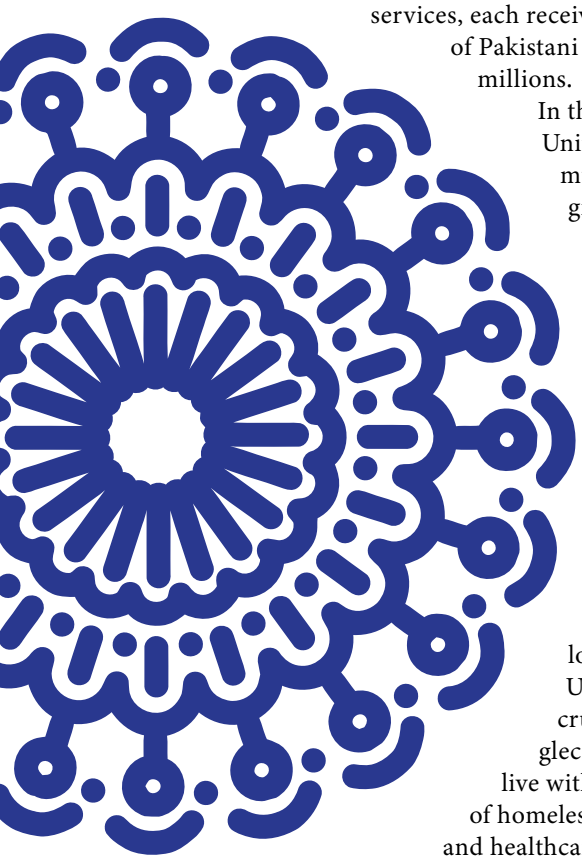
> *Alms are meant only for the poor, the needy, those who administer them, those whose hearts need winning over, to free slaves and help those in debt, for God's cause, and for travelers in need. This is ordained by God; God has the knowledge to decide. (Al-Tawba, 60)*

The references to "God's cause" and "those whose hearts need winning over" are generally understood to mean that *zakat* funds can be used for things like Islamic education and ritual trips to Mecca. Otherwise, the focus is all on the economically disadvantaged (with, notably, another mention of *debt* as something people ought to be freed from).

In different eras and locations, *zakat* has been treated both as a voluntary matter (albeit one strongly encouraged), and as a compulsory one administered by the state. There is some room for disagreement on the precise amount to be paid; as Kuran points out, the Quran "provides only the broadest guidelines on zakat's coverage, and it leaves open the issue of rates." Historically, rates of anywhere from 2.5 to 20 percent have been established, depending on the type of wealth being taxed. There is also some debate about the precise way to calculate the *niṣâb*, the threshold amount of wealth one must possess in order to owe *zakat*. More recently, reformers have advocated for adjusting the categories of beneficiary, deemphasizing the importance of payments "to free slaves" since chattel slavery is less common than it was when the Quran was written (although other types of slavery are still a global scourge). They've also expanded the scope of *zakat* collection, with both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia ruling that corporations are "juristic persons" who must pay. Across the board, though, the fundamental logic remains: in order to be a Muslim in good standing, you must have a portion of your wealth redistributed to the poor through *zakat*.

In this way, *zakat* is both like and unlike the tax system familiar to modern capitalist economies. It's similar to paying tax in the most obvious ways: percentages are calculated, funds are collected, and they're shifted around by whoever happens to be in power at the time. But it's also distinct in more basic ways, because the aim of all this is not to fund the operations of the state. When people in the United States pay tax, great chunks of their money go to wage wars overseas or fill the streets of their cities with more

and more police. When someone in an Islamic country pays *zakat*, the understanding is that it will be used for peaceful purposes and primarily to benefit those who truly need it. Historically, this had led to both direct redistribution and some truly remarkable public works projects. For instance, Kuran notes in *Islam and Mammon* that the Zakat Administration of Pakistan was actively building 75,000 houses for poor Pakistanis at his time of writing in 2004. Today, the Administration's website lists "provincial level hospitals," "education stipends," and other public services, each receiving amounts of Pakistani rupees in the millions.



In the past, the United States had a much higher marginal tax rate for the wealthy than it does today—as high as 92 percent in the early 1950s!—and pursued an ambitious public works agenda of its own. Over time, that's been lost, as physical U.S. infrastructure crumbles from neglect and Americans live with record levels of homelessness, hunger, and healthcare costs, due in no small part to government refusal to levy taxes to pay for these things. Even so-called "entitlement" programs like Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which aim to help the poor, are funded begrudgingly by both political parties. And when some financial or political crisis happens, these programs end up on the chopping block in the name of austerity. But *zakat* provides a thought-provoking alternative model for how we might totally reconceive our duty to those in need. If non-Islamic countries today completely reworked their tax codes to deemphasize things like the military and policing, boost spending on public goods, and eliminate the nonsense of "tax breaks" for wealthy individuals and corporations, the progressive tax system that emerged might look a lot more like the Islamic one.

As we've seen, there is an enormous gulf between the ethos of Islamic finance and that of capitalism. It's not simply a technical difference in the mechanisms for rearranging wealth. Rather, it's a difference between two philosophies of life. Capitalism holds that life is all about competition, that individual selfishness and greed are perfectly acceptable, even good. It's an ugly, barbaric philosophy, always putting people at each other's throats. As expressed by Margaret Thatcher, it tells us that "there is no such thing as society," only "individual men and women" in endless conflict. By contrast, one of the core principles of Islamic thought is the *ummah*, the global community of believers. There is always a society, and a bedrock assumption that the members of that society will care for each other. The idea that you might take advantage of someone through *riba*, *gharar*, or *maysir*, or refuse to pay *zakat* to support someone, is heavily stigmatized; the ethic is one of solidarity. It's a set of values that people everywhere ought to embrace. Why shouldn't people of every faith, and none at all, build a universal *ummah*—a community that includes and cares for the needs of all?

There are, of course, criticisms to be made. Some are valid, others less so. In *Islam and Mammon*, Timur Kuran is actually quite critical of the whole concept of Islamic finance, endlessly pointing out cases where its institutions fall short of their stated goals. "Nowhere," he reminds us, "has interest been purged from economic transactions" altogether. Nor has the institution of compulsory *zakat* succeeded in eliminating poverty in the countries that practice it. In some cases, it hasn't even made a noticeable dent, and corruption and mismanagement are just as common in Islamic finance as any other kind. These are familiar objections. Similar ones are used about socialism, pointing out the obvious shortcomings of countries like Venezuela or the former Soviet Union in an attempt to discredit the entire concept of a non-capitalistic economy. But of course, failure to live up to an ideal does not discredit the ideal itself. (Strangely, people making this type of argument never seem to say that the U.S. Declaration of Independence is illegitimate because the Founding Fathers didn't actually deliver "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" to anyone besides property-owning white men.) The more salient objection would be that Islamic finance doesn't go far enough: it sets moral strictures only on the distribution of already-existing wealth, not the original production of the wealth. It does not, in the last analysis, ensure that workers will control their workplaces and receive the full value of their labor. We have to turn toward other traditions, like Marxism and anarchism, for that.

Still, there's a lot the wider world can learn from Islamic finance. One needn't be a devout Muslim, or a religious believer of any kind, to find something of value in its lessons. In a time of growing economic crisis, it teaches us that there is a higher good than profit, and there is a higher authority than the will of bankers and shareholders. It tells us to care for the well-being of our fellow humans as a sacred duty. In many religious traditions, there is a version of the idea that one cannot serve both God and Mammon. In the secular world, we might interpret this through another lens and say that you must choose between capital and humanity. In the great struggle between the two, which side will you be on? ⚜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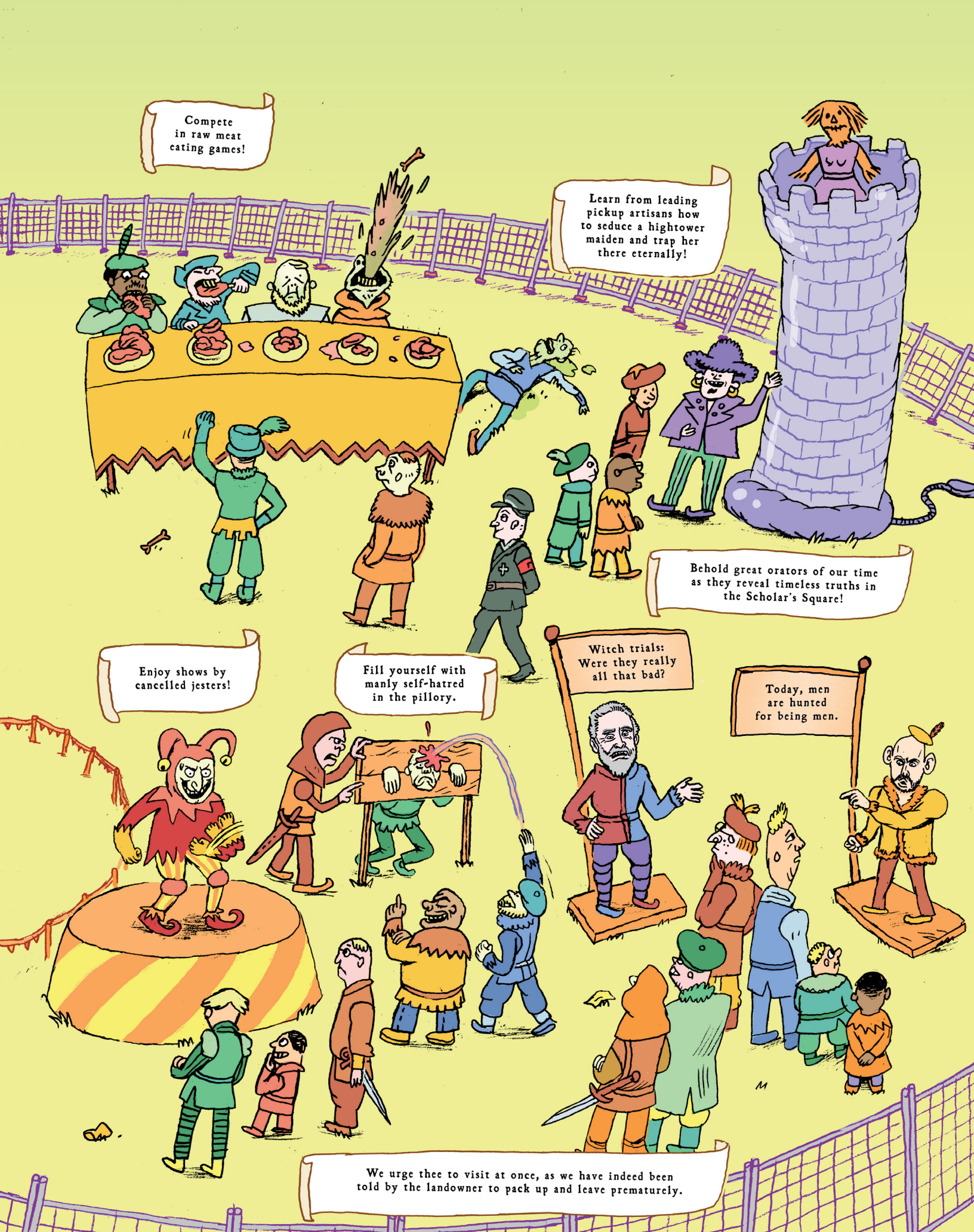
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We urge thee to visit at once, as we have indeed been told by the landowner to pack up and leave prematurely.


SORRY!

Think of the Children

BY LAUREN FADIMAN

In 1972, a 13-year-old named Peter Cane launched a youth liberation group at his junior high school in Huntington, New York—and was quickly reminded of his reason for doing so when his efforts to rent a P.O. box for the group were mercilessly thwarted by the Greenlawn Post Office. There, Cane was told he would either "have to show proof he was 18 or come back with his parents." So it goes, he explained to *Newsday*, in the "no-man's-land" into which all youths come of age. It is a landscape characterized by extreme vulnerability, little legal recourse, and a thousand petty humiliations children must contend with between the post office, the primary school, and their parents' house. "Our lives are considered the property of various adults," explained an activist with Youth Liberation of Ann Arbor in an edition of the *Ann Arbor Sun* from the same year. "[But] we do not recognize their right to control us. We call this control Adult Chauvinism and we will fight it."

Cane may well have been inspired by the unexpected success of Youth Liberation. Founded in early 1971, about six months before 18-year-olds were even granted the right to vote in the United States, the Ann Arbor group (and the wider movement it represented) followed on the heels of Civil Rights and second-wave feminism. It came, too, just a few years after the youth-helmed protests of 1968 shook the world. Youth Liberation was the brainchild of founders who were, legally speaking, children themselves: 15-year-old Keith Hefner and several friends, whose "modest goals" included "taking over the Ann Arbor, Michigan, public schools[...] and building a nation wide movement for youth civil rights" from Hefner's parents' basement. "If we happened to spark a nationwide uprising, as the youth of France had done just three years earlier," Hefner quipped when he reflected on the movement in a 1988 essay, "so much the better."

The group quickly made a splash in local politics, persuading the Ann Arbor City Council to retire outmoded curfew laws on the grounds that "any law which proposes to regulate a segment of the population on the basis of an unavoidable physical characteristic is inherently discriminatory and must be abolished." They also attempted to run a ninth-grader in the 1972 election for the local School Board. Sonia Yaco's campaign was thwarted by a state election law setting a minimum age requirement of 18 for would-be candidates, so she proceeded to file a lawsuit against the State of Michigan in the U.S. District Court in Detroit. This failed when the judge ruled that the age requirement was, in fact, necessary to "assure [sic] some measure of maturity" in elected officials—though Yaco still managed to snag 1,300 write-in votes. With youth liberation on the tip of everyone's tongue, the School Board announced plans for Community High School: Ann Arbor's very own experimental "school without walls," which maintains a radical social and political activist bent to this day.

Despite these direct and indirect victories, however, youth activists were dogged by disbelief. A 1976 article in the *Asheville Citizen* mocked Youth Liberation's stance that "since Americans under the age of 18 can't vote, they are subjected to 'taxation without representation' just as their forefathers were under King George III." A 1974 piece in the *Vancouver Sun*, meanwhile, admonishes, "Let's not insist… that day-old babies have credit cards. Let's face it—some are simply not ready." And a 1975 letter to the editor in the *Los Angeles Times* dismissed the movement's other demands as follows: "We must allow our children complete 'freedom' to be run over by cars, be morally and physically destroyed by criminals, and seduced in cutting school and heisting banks by people who talk about 'rights.'"

Attrition posed its own problems as the 1970s arced inexorably toward the 1980s. Gradually, many Youth Liberation members left town for college or graduated into other radical movements. A 1977 edition of the *Detroit Free Press* found 22-year-old Hefner—by then the last member of Youth Liberation of Ann Arbor standing—alone in the Youth Liberation HQ in his parents'

basement, contemplating early retirement from the cause. But the urgency of liberation for children, whom one ACLU lawyer referred to in 1974 as a population of "unseen people," remains as immediate now as it was then. It is something every child knows—and adults would do well to remember.

No More Kidding Around

In 1980, the year after Keith Hefner aged out of activism and into the nonprofit world, the anarchist folk singer Utah Phillips set the trials and travails of children to music. "I ain't a broom that you hide in the closet," he sings, in character as a child. "And I ain't a dog that you bribe with a treat / I'm tired of your threats and your punches and promises / And I'd run away, but I can't cross the street." The near-homonyms *threat* and *treat* capture the vast majority of childrearing tactics, and Phillips's tongue-in-cheek point about the perils of crossing the street is an apt reminder about the hostility of the modern world's very infrastructure to children's lives. In some ways, the problems facing children are simple: "How would you like to be shorter than everybody and not have any money?" asks a 1974 article in *The Atlanta Constitution*.

But if the problems are simple, the stakes could not be higher. "Since the Age of Reason created 'benevolence' for children," opines another 1974 piece, this one in Wilmington's *Evening Journal*, "millions of kids have been battered about in the name of humanity." The American Humane Association had reported just a few years earlier, in 1969, that as many as 10,000 children were "beaten, burned, boiled and deliberately starved in the United States" annually by family members and guardians. In 1975, meanwhile, the U.S. Office of Child Development reported that between 50,000 and 500,000 children were abused each year. And these figures came nowhere near capturing the *psychological* impact of childhood, the exact nature of which eludes theorists to this day. The Marxist-feminist theorist Shulamith Firestone offers one possible account in her seminal work of family abolition and children's liberation, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970). "Children … are not freer than adults," she writes in an attempt to puncture the American fantasy of Huckleberry Finn—who was, after all, only ever a fictional character:

They are burdened by[...] an unpleasant sense of their own physical inadequacy and ridiculousness; with constant shame about their dependence, economic and otherwise ('Mother, may I?'); and humiliation concerning their natural ignorance of practical affairs. Children are repressed at every waking minute. Childhood is hell.

It is because of this enormous repression that children lash out, Firestone explains; and it is because children lash out that they are, in turn, subject to ever greater oppression—too often the very physical discipline that teaches children to hit, bite, and scratch in the first place. If any symbol represents childhood as Firestone sees it, it is the ouroboros.

Accordingly, that age-old scourge of corporal punishment (and its close cousin, outright physical abuse) was one of the primary issues that mainstream children's activists, including the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), took to task. Another legal target was the practice of arrest for "status offenses," i.e. non-criminal acts including truancy and running away from home, for which thousands of children languished indefinitely in juvenile detention centers. The demand for due process for children arose following *In re Gault (1967)*, a Supreme Court case that overturned the conviction of a 15-year-old. Gerald "Jerry" Gault, the youth in question, had been sentenced to six years in juvenile detention for allegedly making an obscene phone call to a woman—a crime for which an adult would have only faced two months. He'd been arrested without a warrant, questioned without a lawyer, tried for a charge that was never formally made, and heard by a judge who neglected to inform him of his right to counsel.

"The condition of being a boy does not justify a kangaroo court," ruled the Supreme Court. But such had been the legal landscape since at least the Progressive Era, during which unofficial and indefinite sentencing had been implemented for the "good" of youth, though in purpose and in practice it served mainly to get Black and immigrant children off the streets and into institutions. The abusiveness of those institutions has been well-known for decades: "It is not unusual to find that tranquilizing drugs are given to young inmates rather than constructive therapy," an ACLU lawyer told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in 1974, "that solitary confinement is used and that corporal punishment is common practice."

But the demands of groups like Youth Liberation of Ann Arbor went even further than mere legal reforms. It was only by liberating youths, they explained, that new human futures might become possible. It was only by liberating all people from oppression that children could ever *truly* be free. "There is a basic decision to make: either we stay quiet and become part of a system of oppression, or we seize control of our lives, take risks, and struggle to build something new," declares their 1977 manifesto. "If our program strays from the specific needs of youth, it is because we know that we are not free until all people are free and the earth is a healthy place to live." The document included demands for not only "full civil and human rights," but also the "freedom to form into communal families," the right to "form [their] own education according to [their] needs," the "right to be economically independent of adults," and the right to "sexual self-determination."

Youth Liberation was inspired by the work of radical theorists like John C. Holt, who—in his *Escape from Childhood: The Needs and Rights of Children* (1974)—demanded that children have the right to vote and partake in politics, to own and exchange property, to borrow money and establish credit, to travel and even live independently of their parents, to enter into quasi-familial relationships outside of their own families, and (should the government ever implement a universal basic income for adults) to receive money from the State: "The right to do, in general, what any adult may legally do," he summarized. Another prominent theorist of children's liberation, Richard Evans Farson, made similar demands in his own treatise, *Birthrights: A Bill of Rights for Children* (1974). Farson's book opens, matter-of-factly, as follows:

Our world is not a good place for children. Every institution in our society severely discriminates against them. We all come

to feel that it is either natural or necessary to cooperate in that discrimination. Unconsciously, we carry out the will of a society which holds a limited and demeaned view of children and which refuses to recognize their right to full humanity.

Farson and Holt were behind much of the coverage that the children's liberation movement would receive in the media. Their books were reviewed across the U.S. and inspired many youths to think of themselves as a class and begin organizing in their own interest. Perhaps it is because of the sobriety of the arguments outlined in Farson and Holt's respective works that so many adult readers—like the Kirkus reviewer who blasted *Birthrights* as "ignorant of psychology and anthropology alike"—would react with such wildly inflamed tempers. Could it be the irascibility of the guilty conscience?

After all, both books were released in 1974, still a year before the Vietnam War would come to an end. And the Vietnam War would not end until more than 33,000 18-year-olds—people in their very first moments of adulthood—had been drafted into the U.S. military and dispatched abroad, where 101 would die in combat. Back on the home front, American youths had already spent more than a decade protesting not only American imperialism, but also sexism, segregation, and rampant capitalism. For some there, as abroad, the cost was death. Three Freedom Summer activists in their early 20s were abducted and murdered by the KKK in 1964; a 21-year-old Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC) member was murdered while trying to desegregate a gas station bathroom in 1966; a group of 31 protesters between the ages of 15 and 23 were wounded and killed by police officers in the infamous Orangeburg Massacre of 1968; four 19- and 20-year-old anti-war protesters were shot down by the Ohio National Guard at Kent State in 1970. These were not just martyred activists, presumably, in the eyes of their fellow young people. They were youths and students sacrificed by the adult world in defense of an oppressive status quo.

"Old enough to fight, old enough to vote" was a common slogan prior to the passage of the 26th Amendment in 1971, which reduced the voting age from 21 to 18. But that left many people *under* 18, who had become politically activated by the times in which they lived, still disenfranchised. Just to name a few examples, the Amendment did nothing for the 360,000 elementary- and secondary-schoolers who had participated in the New York City school boycott in 1964; the 1,000+ kids as young as seven who had marched in 1963 with the Birmingham Children's Crusade—and been confronted like adults in the streets with fire hoses, batons, and dogs; and the countless student participants in the 1968 East Los Angeles Walkouts, which alarmed even J. Edgar Hoover's FBI with its strength. (In the aftermath, the movement's 17-year-old leader was named "one of the hundred most dangerous and violent subversives in the United States" by the Senate Judiciary Committee.)

"Most people who believe in the institution of childhood as we know it see it as a kind of walled garden in which children[...] are protected from the harshness of the world outside until they become strong and clever enough to cope with it," writes Holt. "But Childhood, as in Happy, Safe, Protected, Innocent Childhood, does not exist for many children." For if it did, such a thing would not need to be enforced at gunpoint. Nor would it be maintained at the expense of children who dare try to actualize the fantasy of happiness, safety, protection, and innocence by asserting that—for such abstractions to ever become reality—racism and war must be eliminated first.

Life on the Wrong Side of the Law

The narrative of the happy childhood is nonetheless so pervasive as to obscure the reality experienced by most American adolescents. It excludes the 13 million who are currently going hungry, the 2.5 million living unhoused, the 600,000 passing through foster care, the 60,000 languishing in juvenile jails and prisons, and the 203 who have died in preventable school shootings in the quarter-century since Columbine. "A major bulwark for this myth of happiness is the continued rigid segregation of children from the rest of society," writes Firestone. "Such an absence of contact with the reality of childhood makes every young adult ripe for the same sentimentalization of children that he himself probably despised as a child." But to renounce the fantasy of youthful fulfillment would mean acknowledging the reality of cradle-to-grave suffering under capitalism. Easier said than done. "In a culture of alienated people," deadpans Firestone, "the belief that everyone has at least one good period in life free of care and drudgery dies hard." In the meantime, millions of children slip through the cracks of the daydream and experience the playground for what it really is: a kind of candy-colored prison.

No one knows the agonies of adolescence better than the posters of the Reddit group r/Teenagers, who commiserate across hundreds of posts about seemingly intractable situations involving abusive parents—who, from a legal perspective, are not abusive in the least. "My parents put parental controls on my lights," writes one beleaguered kid. "I cannot TURN ON MY LIGHTS at night. Like, the lights will not turn on and they spent hundreds of dollars to make it that way." More common (and disconcerting) than that is the loss of the bedroom door, posts about which are often accompanied by a picture of an empty door frame like a mocking, gap-toothed grin. "My parents say, 'What privacy? You don't have any privacy under this roof,'" reads a common complaint. "[They] constantly read my texts, look at my search history, force me to keep my door open, and read my diary." These are actions with unclear antecedents and ambiguous intent—things that, if done to a roommate, lover, or friend, would invite immediate intervention and even (in the case of the many adolescents who describe their parents physically abusing them with impunity) assault charges. But when an adolescent is the victim, the law looks the other way.

In other cases, the law is even explicitly permissive of parental excess and abuse. One particularly depressing post on the Reddit board r/Advice comes from a 15-year-old Oklahoma boy, whose homophobic parents want to send him to conversion therapy. "Everything they've done/want to do to me is still legal where I

live, and I'm afraid to do anything that could backfire and worsen the situation," he writes. "Is there anything at all I can do?"

As it turns out—no. "Try to get out of the therapy," suggests one commenter, "but if you must go, then go, pretend to be straight and cured, and then come home, pretend you are straight until you are a young adult, get a job, move out and go meet a nice guy and be happy." In the meantime, he can only endure until he reaches the age of majority. Until that time, his life is only nominally his own.

Youth liberation goes beyond the mainstream interest in strengthening child protection laws and peddling cheap pseudo-empowerment, like the many student governments and extracurricular programs that allow students to play-act as political agents (without, of course, wielding any real power). It strives instead for true autonomy, demanding the right to make choices about the shape of one's life before the arrival of one's 18th birthday—a totally arbitrary occasion to which inordinate import has been attached. Above all, youth liberation is a rebuke of the Faustian bargain (made by proxy, since youths, after all, cannot enter into contracts) that curtails youth rights the world over: the widespread belief that limited responsibilities must necessarily come with limited rights. Within the existing system, what is generally framed as freedom from the many tedious obligations of adulthood—like serving on a jury, assuming and paying debts, filing taxes, and voting for the best of bad options each election season—is, in essence, "freedom" from legal citizenship. Which is to say, no freedom at all.

Mainstream children's advocates believe that the lives of children can be best improved by bolstering the very same protective legislation that differentiates their legal status from that of adults. They "take for granted the permanent disability of children and their lack of power to act for themselves," writes Farson in *Birthrights*. "Their efforts to 'help little children' have led to paternalistic attitudes which may[...] have [had] just the opposite effect." The same kind of paternalism served as an ideological justification for some of the most oppressive systems in modern history, from Black slavery to the violent imperialism of the "White Man's Burden." By asserting that a particular kind of person is helpless or incapable of making their own decisions, and promising to act on their behalf, paternalism forms an insidious kind of oppression. It demands relationships of economic dependence, employs violent coercion in the name of benevolent protection, and masks exploitation in the guise of edification. In the 20th century many major European colonies threw off the yoke of imperialism, revealing through revolution the emperor-wears-no-clothes emptiness of paternalist promises. And so paternalism was relegated back to the one place its existence remains largely unquestioned: the home.

That is not, of course, to compare the paternalist oppression of the home to that of the Belgian Congo. A better and far more commonplace comparison is to the plight of American women. Prior to the passage of the 19th Amendment, withholding rights from women was justified by a long list of so-called protections—from the dangers of the draft, from the burden of political engagement, from the "mental strain" of full public participation, and so on. "In trying to be protective of women," writes Farson, "legislators were perpetuating a system of discrimination whose effects were far worse than the imagined problems of equal rights. So we might… be particularly careful about our inclination to do something *special* for children." After all, historically, there has been real danger to membership in any supposedly "protected" class.

In *Escape from Childhood*, Holt describes the experience of childhood as one of total "subservien[ce] and dependen[ce], of being seen by older people as a mixture of expensive nuisance, slave and super-pet." Children are also treated very much like the *property* of their parents. Indeed, with few exceptions, their earnings can be confiscated by their parents, much like interest earned off an invested asset. When they run away from home, they are generally returned by the police into the hands of their legal guardians, whether the kids like it or not. "Many courts have claimed that the [custodial] right is based on principles of morality and natural affection," writes the renowned lawyer Sanford Katz in a 1977 compendium on children's rights. "However, the common-law history of the doctrine reveals that it may have been created for considerations of wealth rather than the dictates of a moral code." Hence the fact that custodial rights could be transferred and sold like financial assets during the feudal period.

Even though the implications and expectations of "custody" have changed greatly over time, our language reflects a capitalist riff on the ancient feudal notion of children as property of the father. In the capitalist present, the biological child is understood to be the "product" of their father and mother engaged in the "labor of love." With the invocation of words like "product" and "labor" comes a cascade of capitalist signifiers and assumptions that continue to circumscribe the scope of pre-adult personhood.

The Children's Crusade Continues

In some ways, youth activists were far more successful contributing to other movements than liberating themselves. "Everyone's trying to get liberated," Utah Phillips concludes in his aforementioned 1980 song "Kid's Liberation." "You've all got the notion you want to be free / Red folks and black folks and poor folks and women / Now all you damn grownups, stop picking on me!" In the recording of the song most readily available online, this sentiment is met with laughter. So have most demands for the liberation of children been in the decades since. And in the meantime, many of the movement's staunchest advocates have grown up. A more recent wave of activism, led by groups like the Pacific Northwest Youth Liberation Front—which has the honor of appearing on the Counter Extremism Project's list of far-left extremist groups—has fizzled. The PNW Youth Liberation Front has not updated its website since 2020, and its most recent activity on Twitter/X came by way of a Florida chapter in mid-2023. The radio silence is no doubt the same as that which descended over the Youth Liberation HQ in 1977: the high school activists of 2020 are college students today, no doubt focused on the many other issues that draw the attention of adults. They have made like 1 Corinthians 13:11 and "put away childish things."

That said, the youth liberation movement presided over certain undeniable victories in its heyday. In 1970, for example, corporal punishment was unquestionably legal in every school in America. Seven years later, the Supreme Court was forced to hear a case alleging that such punishments violated the Eighth and 14th Amendments—and although the judges upheld the legality of corporal punishment in *Ingraham v. Wright (1977)*, the majority of states would go on to ban the practice anyway. Another case, *In re Winship (1970)* asserted that youth incarceration required a standard of proof "beyond a reasonable doubt," as in adult proceedings. The 26th Amendment—passed in 1971 following ratification by three-fourths of the states—lowered the voting age from 21 to 18. *Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia (1972)* guaranteed free public education to children with disabilities, and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 required that the education of children with disabilities should take place in the "least restrictive environment commensurate with their needs."

Along the way, young people have become the primary culture-brokers of the country—in the sense that they are at the financial center of American culture, buying it and selling it on every television set and TikTok feed. One projection estimates that companies will spend as much as $5.26 billion advertising their products to children in 2024 alone. In between commercials, children's shows like *Cocomelon* and *Bluey* regularly garner some of the highest viewership rates in the United States. Offscreen, the Young Adult (YA) genre in literature, which only emerged in 1967 with the publication of S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, has grown into a market worth $11.34 billion—and its readers include not only teenagers, but also a huge number of over-18s who admit to preferring YA to adult-centric literature.

As ever more culture revolves around kids, it is hard to imagine them as a subjugated population—but consumer power is no substitute for citizenship, and representation no substitute for rights. The dire reality facing American children has become bracingly clear in recent years as the self-proclaimed "parental rights" movement scores victory after victory across the United States. Opposition to sexual education in public school has been a favorite cause of conservative parents for decades, but fresh targets—like gender-neutral bathrooms and critical race theory—have revived the movement for a new political era. In the past few years, right-wing parents have scored significant political gains, from the Florida Parental Rights in Education Act (better known as the "Don't Say Gay" law) to the 24 active state bans on transgender students' participation in school sports. All of these are predicated on an ideology that masquerades as natural intuition. "The parental-right doctrine is often treated as if it were an expression of 'the best interests of the child,'" writes Katz, though it is, in fact, an "archaic notion" that over-valorizes the importance of "blood ties." The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child concurs, pointing out that "traditional perceptions of children as objects and as the 'property' of parents and elders rather than as subjects of rights hinder their right to express their views and to participate in the family, schools and local communities." No surprise, then, that the U.S. remains the only country in the U.N. that has not ratified the Conventions on the Rights of the Child. Parental rights activists have raised issues (and strawman arguments) against the Conventions, claiming they include provisions that "undermine… the role of U.S. parents" by condemning corporal punishment, privacy violations, and parental censorship of their children's access to media, among other things. So far, they've been successful.

But for all the liberation movement's criticisms of parents, theorists like Farson don't blame them personally for the challenges facing children. "Parents are already overly victimized and need liberation in their own right," he writes. "[They] need to be freed from the burden of guilt that comes from believing that they are solely responsible for what their children become." Only in a liberated society, where children are entitled to the rights and responsibilities prescribed by Youth Liberation, can their parents also find freedom. In a society where children are afforded a far greater degree of self-determination, and their healthy development was made the responsibility of more than the two adults who happened to accidentally create their life, "[parents] would not need to feel guilty about their failure to make a success of the nuclear family, or about not being all-wise in matters of child rearing, or in sometimes not setting a good example, or any of a million ordinary frailties or inevitable social conditions that now produce an abundance of unnecessary guilt." In fact, Farson notes, plenty of adults—not just parents—would benefit from a revolution in the realm of children's rights:

If we were to design more of our physical world to children's scale, for instance, most handicapped people would also be accommodated. Parents, especially women, would be benefited if various forms of alternative child care were available. Old people would find that a consciousness of ageism at the lower end of the age spectrum would lead to consciousness of ageism at the upper end. If the criminal justice system were made to fit both adults and children without a double standard, it would probably become more humane and efficient for adults.

Perhaps children and adults each have a monopoly on something the other wants—and adults would no doubt benefit as much from the legal permissiveness and protections afforded (in theory) to children as children would from the self-determination that (in theory) characterizes life on the other side of 18. Firestone seems to think so: "We need to start talking not about sparing children for a few years from the horrors of adult life, but about eliminating those horrors," she demands. "In a society free of exploitation, children could be like adults (with no exploitation implied) and adults could be like children (with no exploitation implied)."

At present, the U.S. would seem to be heading in the opposite direction, extending an exploitative adolescence ever further into adulthood. Although age 18 supposedly marks the end of childhood and the beginning of the rest of one's life, the vote and the draft come with little else by way of political power. In fact, the demands of American youths are dismissed well into their twenties. When American politicians court the support of young people, they do so not with policy, but vapid posturing: think

Hillary Clinton dabbing on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* and telling young people to "Pokémon Go to the polls" in 2016. When youths *do* show up en masse for something, a pernicious war on two fronts begins. Political leaders deploy militarized law enforcement at full-force while simultaneously, in the media, dismissing youth activists as childish know-nothings. "Do the Gen Z pro-Palestine protesters even know what they're screaming, yelling, and encamping about?" asked a recent piece in *The New York Post*. That same week, House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) chided members of Columbia University's pro-Palestine student encampment to "go back to class and stop the nonsense." What exactly, one might ask, is so nonsensical about youths calling for a ceasefire in a war that the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has called "a war on children… on their childhood and their future," a war that has destroyed nearly 90 percent of schools in Gaza, orphaned an estimated 17,000 children, and killed more than 13,000 under-18s since October?

There is a political expediency to extending the tropes associated with childhood into people's twenties, because children are expected to be seen and not heard. When millions of youths take to the streets demanding ceasefire, police abolition, and climate change mitigation, politicians can simply turn their eyes skyward in a *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do* fashion and move on without substantive engagement. "It is much easier to justify control over persons called 'young,' 'immature,' and 'irresponsible,'" explains an essay in *The Children's Rights Movement: Overcoming the Oppression of Young People* (1977). "This 'strangling of the free mind at its source'... helps prepare a citizenry that is largely passive and apathetic, willing to accept authority unquestioningly, willing to think of themselves as incompetent and incapable of making changes." Indeed, despite the fact that most of the Founding Fathers were far from fatherhood—Alexander Hamilton was 21, and James Monroe a mere 18—when they signed the Declaration of Independence, present-day youth advocates can expect only tragedy or farce from the U.S. government in response to their demands. For the latter, recall former president Donald Trump dismissing then-16-year-old Greta Thunberg as "a very happy young girl looking forward to a bright and wonderful future" following her impassioned speech before the U.N. General Assembly in 2019. For the former, there are the Georgia state troopers whose multi-agency raid on a protest encampment against Atlanta's "Cop City" left the unarmed 26-year-old activist Manuel "Tortuguita" Terán dead from 57 bullet wounds, including through the palms of the hands he had raised in a gesture of nonviolence.

As long as children remain unseen and unheard, all youths—in fact, all *people*—are imperiled. The status of the child can easily become the status of the "childlike," allowing for state-sanctioned mistreatment and marginalization. This is true of everyone from the politically-inconvenient college student to the controversial celebrity—even the megastar Britney Spears, after all, ended up in a conservatorship arrangement that rendered her unable to make many of her own personal decisions until recently. This point has been taken up by activists for disability justice in particular, who note that childhood is seen as "disabling," allowing children to be "presumed incompetent and incapable of managing their own lives, not as individuals but as a class." This mirrors the way disabled people have often been denied full citizenship and autonomy in the name of care, compassion, and protection. "When capitalism is not… able to use you for the production of surplus value," explains the Marxist-feminist theorist Sophie Lewis, "[you wind up] positioned in our society, culturally and socially, very much at a disadvantage because of [your] relation to the workplace." In that sense, both childhood and the legal netherworld inhabited by disabled people serve as holding zones for those who cannot contribute to capitalist production. It's a position that need not necessarily, but so often *has*, come with the erosion or outright eradication of political rights and representation. So long as children remain entrapped by this set of assumptions, there will always exist a population for whom it is widely accepted that it is "in their best interest" that they not be full citizens—and whose grievances with that plight are met with growing rates of psychiatric intervention by a technocratic class of "child professionals," rather than anything even *approaching* meaningful political engagement. It all adds up to a dangerous precedent that even self-professed child-haters should be keen to upend. And as for those who are sympathetic to children? "Good radicals must think more like parents," writes Mark Gerzon, a youth-activist-all-grown-up by the time he penned the words in 1977, "and good parents must think more like radicals."

As unlikely as large-scale children's liberation may seem from our current godforsaken vantage, it might prove inevitable—should the capital-R revolution ever come to pass, that is. If there is one contemporary thinker who has taken up the gauntlet thrown down by Youth Liberation and its intellectual godparents in the 1970s, it is Sophie Lewis. Her most recent book, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (2022), is almost Cassandra-like in its quiet insistence that children's liberation is on the horizon. Lewis frames it as a necessary byproduct of any and all other forms of liberation: "There is no question in my mind," she writes, "that [prison] abolition entails changing everything about the family, too." Of course, children's rights will only be a priority if we (as our culture so often admonishes us, though the words are little more than lip-service) remember, now and in the future, to "think of the children." Even more importantly, we must *listen to* the children. "Adults who seek to describe the human condition of children hold reality in a sieve," wrote Helen Baker in *The Children's Rights Movement*. "What we desperately need are the voices of the children. Not just their voices in the classroom, or the student council, or even in the pseudo-unstructured weekend retreat," but their voices everywhere that adults can expect to be heard: at home, before the school board, in court, on the streets—and everywhere in between.

Only then might we be back on track to someday reach that land whose existence was first heralded by that most famous song of the children's liberation movement, which arrived even before some of its seminal texts were penned. "Free to Be… You and Me," debuted by the New Seekers in 1972, is sung in cars and kindergartens to this day: "There's a land that I see / Where the children are free," it goes. "And I say, it ain't far / To this land from where we are." We would be remiss to dismiss this distant land—glimpsed by countless people, young and old, over the years—as no more than a mirage.

NEW MEANINGS FOR COMMON HAND GESTURES

For some reason, white nationalists have succeeded in convincing the world that the "okay" hand gesture belongs to them, so that now every time someone does an "okay" we have to wonder whether they're secretly racist. The Anti-Defamation League has even gone so far as to list the "okay" gesture as a hate symbol. This situation is absurd, but sadly it doesn't seem like we'll be able to reclaim the "okay" any time soon. But two can play at this game. If the bigots are allowed to just claim that some ordinary hand gesture is actually theirs, we can do the same thing. So, below, please find the revised meanings of a series of existing common hand gestures. Henceforth, anyone who uses any of these hand gestures can be assumed to intend the revised meaning rather than the original one.

THUMBS UP

I support passage of the PRO Act to facilitate the rapid growth of the labor movement.

MIDDLE FINGER

I love what you are wearing today but lack the confidence to tell you directly.

FINGER GUN

I disagree with what you say but in a way I'm glad you said it.

JAZZ HANDS

Ceasefire now.

METAL HORNS

I support trans rights.

HEART

Death to capitalism.

PRAYER HANDS

Hail Satan.

BETTER THINGS ARE NOT POSSIBLE

BIDEN 2024

BIDEN

IT'S NOT LEGALLY A GENOCIDE YET

2024

BIDEN 2024

THINGS WILL STILL GET
VORSE, BUT MORE SLOWLY

BIDEN 2024 ★★★★★★★★★

HE'S NOT DEAD

HE'S JUST RESTING


UH, Y'KNOW
THE THING
BIDEN 2024
BIDEN 2024
ARTICULATE AND CLEAN
BIDEN 2024
SLIGHTLY BETTER THAN
THE LITERAL WORST
POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE
BIDEN
2024
SHUT UP
&
VOTE
BIDEN 2024
IF YOU THINK YOU'RE NOT DOING GREAT, YOU'RE WRONG
I WILL STILL VETO
MEDICARE
FOR ★ ALL
BIDEN 2024
STRAIGHT
OUTTA
SCRANTON
BIDEN 2024

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman

BY **CIARA MOLONEY**

A woman stands atop the parapet at the edge of a bridge. Her dark hair is pinned in curls at the back of her head, loose strands near her face caught in the wind. Her deep blue dress has a Victorian high collar; its flared skirt would trail on the ground behind her if her feet were on the ground. The camera pans up to the endless blue of the sky, and then back down as the woman jumps into the endless blue below her. In Yorgos Lanthimos's *Poor Things*, her death becomes a birth. Neither her own rebirth nor the birth of the unborn child in her womb, or maybe both those things. A new person is scavenged from the existing materials. Her name is Bella Baxter.

The basic premise of *Poor Things* is this: Dr. Godwin Baxter (Willem Dafoe) found the corpse of a woman who had taken her own life, before rigor mortis had set in—dead but fresh, with a still living fetus inside her. "It was obvious," he tells his student Max McCandles (Ramy Youssef). "Take the infant's brain out and put it in the full-grown woman, reanimate her, and watch." The film is a riff on *Frankenstein* that shucks off two centuries of cultural baggage to recapture how messed up *Frankenstein* must have seemed when Mary Shelley first wrote it, long before Dr. Frankenstein's creature was meeting Abbott and Costello (or Alvin and the Chipmunks). Part of what it discards in the process is any stability around who, if anyone, is the "monster" in a Frankenstein story.

Godwin—who Bella affectionately calls "God"—is himself both Frankenstein and the creature: as a child, his father subjected him to experiments that have left his face carved with deep, thick scars, his genitals non-functional, and a digestive system that requires being hooked up to machinery to produce gastric juices. "Dafoe plays every movement and gesture as labored," Angelica Jade Bastién writes for *Vulture*. "He shuffles and sighs and sulks." A student in his surgery class derisively calls him "the monster" because of his visible deformity. Yet God seems to regard his father not as an abusive sadist, but a man of science unwilling to put moral or emotional considerations above the pursuit of knowledge. He seems to admire this cool detachment, and emulates it in his own work: "Our

feelings must be put aside," he tells Max. "Do you think my father could have branded me with hot irons on the genitals the way he did if he could not put science and progress first?" In Shelley's original, Dr. Frankenstein shrunk with horror from his creation, next to which God's problem is almost a photonegative: his paternal feelings towards Bella are an affliction he tries to overcome, though he never quite manages it.

But the film's point of view is wholly Bella's: she, too, is both the creator and the creature, but entirely her own. She is her own mother and her own daughter, "born" into a crisply black-and-white, steampunk version of Victorian London and trapped in the confines of God's mansion. When she meets Duncan Wedderburn (Mark Ruffalo)—a lothario who warns her not to become a jealous lover demanding constancy before himself becoming exactly that—she embarks on a journey of discovery, adventuring across a funhouse-mirror Europe in which trams traverse Lisbon's skies and city streets come in the colors of lemon drops, cherry blossoms and sherbet.

Emma Stone gives a glittering catherine wheel of a performance as Bella, for which she unexpectedly took home her second Oscar in March. Her larger-than-life impact is composed of a thousand subtle details—in the way she holds her body, her face, how she speaks. She walks ever so slightly on the sides of her feet, giving her a heavy, uneven gait, and all her emotions are writ large on her face, practically one at a time, without the instinct to school her features into neutrality. She shoves pastries into her mouth with a delightful gusto matched only by her enthusiasm for—well, most stuff she does, really, from sex to surgery to socialism. "Bella is more like a fire than a monster," Zoe Williams writes in *The Guardian*, "destructive, heedless, purifying, warming, incredibly fun to watch." She eventually returns home when she finds out that God is dying—for a confrontation, a reconciliation, or something new sewn together from each one.

Much ink has been spilled on whether *Poor Things* is feminist or not. Is the film a story of a woman defiantly rejecting patriarchal expectations, or one that fundamentally misunderstands the nature of patriarchy, leaving Bella, as Eileen Jones argues in *Jacobin*, "triumphant in a void"? Is Bella's voracious sexuality boldly liberating or a straight man's sexual fantasy disguised as empowerment? Imogen Tilden writes that Bella's "mature body and child mind is the very template of male fantasy." The director, Yorgos Lanthimos, and screenwriter, Tony McNamara, being men is routinely cited as evidence. Some of this debate comes from a basic category error: the assumption that films not only have coherent ideologies but are political manifestos that exist to espouse those ideologies. It's an approach that, as Wesley Morris wrote in *The New York Times* in 2018, "robs us of what is messy and tense and chaotic and extrajudicial about art."

Equally, much of the criticism comes from a sincere effort to engage with a film that is clearly trying to say things about the experience of being a woman, and, for some viewers, comes up short. "Watching it for any sort of feminist revelation is akin to craving the salty chill of the ocean and the spray of a wave upon your face," Angelica Jade Bastién writes, "and having to settle for resting your ear against a curling seashell, listening to only the echo of what you truly desire." The result, for Bastién, is a film that feels like "a pretentious 14-year-old boy's idea of female becoming, if that boy had a Criterion Channel subscription."

Both sides of this argument rest on the assumption that *Poor Things* should be watched for "feminist revelation": that it is thematically concerned with the nature of being a woman, making broad representational claims about womanhood in general. But this is missing the trees for the forest.

In his book *Neurotribes*, Steven Silberman calls neurodiversity "the notion that conditions like autism, dyslexia, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) should be regarded as naturally occurring cognitive variations with distinctive strengths that have contributed to the evolution of technology and culture rather than mere checklists of deficits and dysfunctions." The term itself was coined by sociologist Judy Singer in 1998 to describe a new way of thinking about autistic people in neurotypical society: she wrote that the "'neurologically different' represent a new addition to the familiar political categories of class/gender/race," challenging "even our most taken-for-granted assumptions" about how different people "see, feel, touch, hear, smell, and sort information." Under the traditional medical model, the neurotypical way of processing the world is considered "normal," and pretty often as the ideal. Divergent kinds of neurological wiring are considered disordered and defective, and the presumption is that a just and compassionate society should try to correct or eliminate difference.

The neurodiversity model turns this on its head. "Neurodiversity," Harvey Blume wrote for *The Atlantic* in the same year Singer coined the term, "may be every bit as crucial for the human race as biodiversity is for life in general."

The concept of neurodiversity has become more popular in recent years, though in a more surface-level way than I'd like. Instead of upending the way we think about neurodivergence—conditions like autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyscalculia, Tourette syndrome, and all else that falls outside the bounds of the neurotypical—it has been too often treated as a new politically-correct paint to slap onto the same old assumptions, adopting new language without shifting the underlying belief that neurodivergences are dysfunctions. I might scream if I hear someone say "person with neurodiversity" one more time. We seem to be living through an inflection point, one that could tip either way. We've had both a spike in adults seeking diagnoses of autism or ADHD after a lifetime of passing for "normal"—seeing those diagnoses as ways of better understanding themselves, rather than tragedies befallen on them—but without a corresponding expansion of services to support them. Famous and successful people have publicly discussed their neurodivergence—Anthony Hopkins is autistic! Greta Gerwig has ADHD!—in ways that have nothing to do with old narratives about inspirational overcoming. Yet simultaneously, a fear and hatred of autistic people remains a key animating impulse of the growing anti-vax movement.

A still from the movie "Poor Things"

It's all a bit fraught, the way things get when a rising movement for rights and recognition clashes with both existing hostility and a coalescing backlash. And so *Poor Things* has been received, for good or for ill, by critics reluctant or unable to examine it through the lens it demands: neurodiversity. Seen through that lens, *Poor Things*'s central premise functions as a metaphor for neurodivergence in general and autism in particular, with Bella's adventures resonating with the all too rarely depicted experience of being an autistic woman.

Autistic people often identify with aliens, androids and outsiders. These are characters who observe human behavior at some remove—a distance that can be analytical or bruising. Spock from *Star Trek*. Data from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Characters from non-*Star Trek* media, one presumes. While it's possible to take this metaphor to dehumanizing ends—an ad by Cure Autism Now (since merged into Autism Speaks) once intoned "imagine that aliens were stealing one in every two hundred children" to frame autism as a frightening epidemic—it also captures something common in autistic experience. The title essay of Oliver Sacks's book *An Anthropologist on Mars* comes from Temple Grandin's description of how she feels interacting with neurotypical people. As portrayed by Emma Stone, Bella Baxter seems a deliberate entry in this tradition. Her unique condition may be science fiction, but because of it, her position in the world resonates with something deeply real. She navigates a social world with rules that everyone else seems to know instinctively, and when she learns those rules manually, they are negated by a thousand unarticulated exceptions.

I'm not saying, obviously, that autistic women have baby brains. God created Bella by transplanting a fetal brain into a dead woman's body, and many reviews reflexively refer to her as a child, describing the film's narrative as one that follows Bella from babyhood to maturity. But when Maya Phillips in the *New York Times* tries to map her coming of age along typical developmental milestones—childish innocence, adolescent sexuality, adult contemplation—the analogy seems strained. Bella has a unique neurodevelopmental path that doesn't correspond with those expectations. This is confirmed when God attempts to recreate it: a second woman with a transplanted brain, Felicity (Margaret Qualley, who was so wonderful in Ethan Coen's solo directorial debut *Drive-Away Dolls*) develops differently.

Bella's peculiar combination of strengths and weaknesses—of expertise and blind spots—don't reflect those of an infant. They reflect those of an autistic person, whip-smart and absent of so-called common sense. "You don't know what bananas are, you've never heard of chess, and yet you know what 'empirically' means," Duncan Wedderburn says, baffled. Bella spits food out if she dislikes the taste, unable to stand it for politeness's sake. When she *does* try to do things for the sake of politeness, she gets the wires crossed, winking at a man across the room simply because he winked at her and whipping Wedderburn into a rage. She takes things too literally—when Wedderburn says she

"disappeared," she corrects him: "I did not. Nobody can just disappear." Though her personal interactions seem superficially cold to others' feelings, she is deeply empathetic: when her cruise stops off at Alexandria, a friend shows her babies dying in the heat, ostensibly to prove how horrible the world is. For a distraught Bella, it instead proves that she must make the world a better place.

Bella's development and growth over the course of the film isn't a straightforward neurotypical coming of age. We see her speech develop from a limited vocabulary to a hyperliterate one, but she never loses her clipped, matter-of-fact, and oddly formal speaking style. Her motor skills improve, but her physical coordination remains gawky and angular. She learns so much, but even at her most worldly, is naïve to people's motivations, to hidden intentions: she wants to give her money away to the poor of the Alexandria slums, and when the cruise ship workers tell her they will pass the money along on her behalf, it never occurs to her not to believe them.

As Louisa Smith, Gemma Digby and Shane Clifton put it for *The Conversation*, we "see a woman using her behavior to express herself because she has complex communication barriers. We see a woman who is highly sensitive and responsive to the sensory world around her. A woman moving through and seeing the world differently." For Smith, Digby and Clifton, this is concerning: they see *Poor Things* as "play[ing] into deep and historical stereotypes about disabled people," conjuring the spectre of nineteenth-century freak shows and human zoos. But for me, Bella isn't an object in a freak show. She's the sun around which the film revolves. She is subject, not object, and bends the world to account for her experience of it, like a magician bending a spoon.

Lanthimos's films often have a neurodiverse flavor to them. In *The Lobster* or *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, his characters speak with a stilted, flat affect, common in autistic people. This contrasts with the absurdist events that happen to them in a way that you either find bone-chilling or, like me, hysterically funny. These films exist in worlds that look realistic—shot on location with mostly natural lighting—but are populated by characters for whom neurotypicality seems to be the exception, not the norm.

Poor Things doesn't take place in the surface-realist neurodivergent worlds of Lanthimos's previous films. Instead, we see the world from a neurodivergent perspective: it is huge, bright, strange and confusing in ways that reflect Bella's sensory perception. Huge amounts of the film are shot with a fisheye lens, distorting the edges of the frame in a way that makes the world feel too big, too much, overstuffed, impossible to process all at once. The score is discordant—becoming cacophonous in moments of distress, like when Bella discovers poverty—in a way that reflects autistic sensitivity to sound. And then there are the outfits. Bella's dresses and jackets have gigantic, puffed out sleeves. Her blouses have ruffles on ruffles. Everything is bigger, bolder, than reality would dictate, but in a way that feels like an authentic literalisation of autistic relationships to clothing. It's a visual approximation of what it feels like to react so strongly to texture, material, weight, closeness. The tag digging in at the neckline of your t-shirt. Costume designer Holly Waddington describes Bella's outfits when she leaves home as "discombobulated, like a child dressing from a parent's wardrobe"—she "wears things like sheer petticoats as outerwear or a bodice and knickers with a jacket." Like a child raiding their parent's wardrobe, sure. But maybe, too, like someone trying to balance the complex sensory experience of dressing with the potentiality of self-expression. "Clothes as a way of socializing that stands in for other forms of engagement," Joanna Walsh writes about her relationship to fashion as an autistic person. "Clothes worn to substitute for speech."

Autism in women has historically been underestimated. Hans Asperger's original study characterised autism as "an extreme variant of male intelligence," and decades later, psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen theorized autism in terms of an "extreme male brain." Bella's adventures give some of the reasons why: the men around her are generally not interested enough in her brain to notice if it's wired differently. It takes Wedderburn a shockingly long time to notice there's anything different about Bella at all, and when he does, he quickly attributes it to her being a heartless bitch from hell.

For autism, as for many neurodivergences, the official diagnostic criteria have a lot more to do with the question "how would a little kid with this condition annoy adults around them?" instead of "how does someone with this condition experience the world differently?" The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, better known as DSM-5, doesn't talk about stimming, sensory overload, or special interests, putting these radically different experiences all in a bucket labeled "restricted, repetitive behaviors." When women and girls are, as Silberman writes in *Neurotribes*, socialised to "be compliant and self-effacing—to fade demurely into the background," they often suppress behaviors that might bring their male peers to the attention of parents and teachers (and police). That suppression—masking, in autistic parlance—alienates autistic people in general and autistic women and girls in particular from their authentic selves, making it more difficult to understand their own emotional responses or build self-esteem.

Debates about the alleged feminism of *Poor Things* discuss it as a film about a woman without shame: Bella's fresh brain means she has not learned to feel ashamed of her body, her desires, her pleasure. Her skin has not been cut into by the gender roles coiling tighter and tighter around her. But Bella is not merely a vision of a woman who has not learned to be ashamed—she is a vision of an autistic woman who has not been taught to be ashamed of her autistic traits. And she's wonderful: uncompromised, uncompromising. Joyful, watchful, kind: a whirling spitfire with her nose stuck in a book. In *Poor Things*, the audience sees through her eyes, and gets to see the neurotypical world as the absurd one. ✣

THE MEANING OF TERROR

BY **KODY CAVA**

The United States has a nasty habit of labeling disparate groups of people across the political spectrum as terrorists. Domestically, that includes everyone from 1960s radicals such as the Weather Underground to animal rights activists and environmentalists, Atlanta's "Stop Cop City" protesters, and Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh. January 6 rioters have been called terrorists by U.S. officials, and some have been given draconian prison sentences, with even nonviolent offenders being charged with felonies that can carry up to 20 years in prison. In 2020, President Trump said he wanted to label Antifa as a terrorist organization. The U.S. Navy has categorized *socialists* as terrorists in its training materials. The FBI has labeled anarchists and antiracists as domestic terrorists; the agency's Counterterrorism Division has labeled Black activists as "Black Identity Extremists" who are considered "threats to national security." Someone called *me* a terrorist when I was marching during the 2020 uprisings. Internationally, familiar designants include Al-Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, and the African National Congress—the party of now-revered anti-apartheid leader Nelson Mandela. Nations such as Syria, North Korea, Iraq, Iran, Sudan, and Cuba have found themselves listed on America's list of naughty "state sponsors of terror." These are just a small selection of those lumped together in America's rabid culture of anti-terrorism.

Members of these groups harbor distinct ideologies and motivations for engaging in a range of actions including bombings, hijackings, property destruction, peaceful protest, direct action, and civil disobedience. Labeling all of them simply as terrorists flattens important distinctions. It prevents us from uncovering the true motivations of those who engage in particularly egregious and calculated mass casualty events such as the Oklahoma City bombing or the 9/11 attacks. "One often hears that we must not consider these matters," writes Noam Chomsky, "because that would be justification for terrorism, a position so foolish and destructive as scarcely to merit comment, but unfortunately common."

Over the years, the U.S. State Department has maintained multiple terrorist lists, adding or removing designees often for political expediency. The state's definition of terror is largely provisional, certainly hypocritical, and divorced from any consistent, universal principle of justice. The U.S. tends to

AN ANIMAL WELFARE ACTIVIST WITH DIRECT ACTION EVERYWHERE

respond to "terror" with "anti-terror" violence of its own, which—with rare exception—tends to exacerbate the underlying problems which motivated the act of "terror" in the first place. For the U.S., anti-terrorism is a tool that perpetuates the root causes of injustice and conveniently stifles dissent at home and abroad.

'Why' in Their Own Words

The mainstream media generally does a poor job of covering terrorism, failing to explain the motivations of various actors, the contexts for their actions, and the relevant history of U.S. foreign policy. As Michael Parenti writes in *The Terrorism Trap*:

> *[S]eptember 11 had a terrible shock effect on the millions of Americans who get all their news from the corporate media.… [A]lmost all of America know[s] next to nothing about how U.S. supported terrorists have taken millions of lives in scores of other countries. The media have little to say about* those *acts of terrorism, and so the general public knows relatively little about them.*

And As Antony Loewenstein writes in *The Palestine Laboratory*:

> *How terrorism was defined, and by whom, was rarely asked in the mainstream media in the decades after 9/11.… There is an interchangeability between terrorism experts who appear in the media to talk about the never-ending risk from insurgents big and small, deliberately conflating Hamas with Hizbollah, al-Qaeda with ISIS, and the Taliban with the Islamic Republic of Iran as if they are all the same irrational, Jew-hating force to be defeated by military means alone.*

In a pre-9/11 review of the coverage in the mainstream press about Middle Eastern affairs, Daya Kishan Thussu comments on a passage from the U.K.'s *Sunday Times* which reads: "Should Iran, Iraq or any other country where Islamic fundamentalism hold[s] sway ever become nuclear powers, the world would move into a new age of terror." Thussu explains that putting "both Iran and Iraq in the same fundamentalist camp despite the fact that they are sworn enemies and represent two entirely different political ideologies (Iraq is one of the most secular Arab countries) demonstrates that facts can be sacrificed for propaganda reasons."

Instead of offering nuanced analysis about such complex issues, the media often defaults to the bellicose propaganda and braindead patriotism of U.S. officials—similar to what the late journalist Robert Fisk called the "language of power"—to fill in the gaps. The country was at war against an "axis of evil," President George W. Bush said after 9/11. The Oct. 7 attacks by Hamas were "an act of sheer evil," President Biden said. "We are fighting against human animals," said Israel's Defense Minister, referring to Gazans in the aftermath of the Oct. 7 attacks.

With the mainstream media unquestioningly joining the state in deeming something as an act of terror and its perpetrators as evil, sub-human terrorists, this automatically negates any discussion of what the motivations for the act were. "'[W]hy' is a question the media are trained to shy away from," Gore Vidal wrote in an analysis of the case of Timothy McVeigh, considered the nation's most deadly domestic terrorist. It's "too dangerous" to ask why, Vidal wrote. "One might actually learn why something had happened and become thoughtful." Similarly, Chomsky wrote shortly after 9/11: "To refuse to face this question is to choose to increase significantly the probability of further crimes of this kind."

So to actually face this question, there are three examples of "terrorists" whose words we could learn from. One is Cathy Wilkerson, a former member of the infamous militant group known as the Weather Underground. Wilkerson was one of two survivors of the Greenwich Village explosion, where a bomb-in-the-making unexpectedly went off and killed three of her fellow Weathermen. In her memoir *Flying Close to the Sun: My Life and Times as a Weatherman*, she wrote:

> *Those of us in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and, later, Weatherman, saw ourselves as part of a worldwide uprising of young people working for freedom and equality. By the late '60s, a great many young people were reeling from the rapid bombardment of many ideas—about feminism, national liberation, black nationalism, environmental destruction, and the apparent impotence of our electoral system.*

In choosing the route of violence, she explains, the Weathermen mirrored the violence of the monsters in power.

> *[I] made a series of decisions, from a standpoint of rage, hopelessness, and fear, in which I accepted the same desanctification of human life practiced by Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and William Westmoreland. I accepted their supposition that, in the end, violence is the only effective strategy for social change; that might makes right, despite the fact that treasuring humanity—and each life within it—was one of the values that I had fought for. I abandoned myself to the sanctimoniousness of hating my enemies.*

Much less contrite are the words of Timothy McVeigh, whose motivation for the Oklahoma City bombing was retaliation for federal agent militarization and disproportionate use of force at the Waco siege (a 1993 standoff between federal agents and the Branch Davidian cult which McVeigh himself witnessed) and other similarly violent federal actions such as Ruby Ridge (a 1992 standoff between federal agents and Randy Weaver, a member of the separatist movement, which resulted in law enforcement killing Weaver's wife, son, and dog). The police drove a *tank* through a building with innocent children inside it at Waco. Ultimately, 25 children and 51 others, including two pregnant women, were killed. In McVeigh's own words:

> [*F]or all intents and purposes, federal agents had become "soldiers" (using military training, tactics, techniques, equipment, language, dress, organization and mindset) and they were escalating their behavior.… Additionally, borrowing a page from U.S. foreign policy, I decided to send a message to a government that was becoming increasingly hostile, by bombing a government building and the government employees within that building who represent that government. Bombing the Murrah Federal Building was morally and strategically equivalent to the U.S. hitting a government building in Serbia, Iraq, or other nations. Based on observations of the policies of my own government, I viewed this action as an acceptable option. From this perspective what occurred in Oklahoma City* was no different than what Americans rain on the heads of others all the time*, and, subsequently, my mindset was and is one of clinical detachment* [emphasis mine].

While McVeigh murdered many innocents in his attack on a physical symbol of U.S. power and oppression in Oklahoma City—168 people to be exact, including 19 children—he was nevertheless reacting to the very real problem of U.S. law enforcement, increasingly militarized, acting all too often as judge, jury, and executioner. McVeigh's reasoning—which is a disturbing and simple reminder that violence begets violence—is, to this day, little known or remembered. And it is notably similar to the reasoning given by Osama bin Laden for the 9/11 terror attacks. In a 2001 statement, bin Laden said:

> *What America is tasting now is something insignificant compared to what we have tasted for scores of years.… Millions of innocent children are being killed as I speak. They are being killed in Iraq without committing any sins.… To America, I say only a few words to it and its people. I swear to god.… neither America nor the people who live in it will dream of security before we live it in Palestine and not before all the infidel armies leave the land of Muhammad…*

At the time, the Bush administration asked networks to "exercise judgment" about airing bin Laden's words, lest he relay coded language to spur more attacks. The American people were thus shielded from bin Laden's express motivations.

In November of 2023, bin Laden's "Letter to America," which was published by *The Guardian* in 2002, was given new life by young people who found much discovery and resonance in his words, given they'd been raised on the many lies that America tells to its children. Newsweek reported that the letter went viral on TikTok, with one user saying, "It's actually so mind-fucking to me that terrorism has been sold as this idea to the American people…. that this group of people, this random group of people, just suddenly wakes up one day and just fucking hates you…. it doesn't make sense." Another person said, "He was right." After the newfound virality, *The Guardian* deleted the letter from its website on November 15, 2023. TikTok has since suppressed videos discussing the letter.

While the U.S. government feels the need to hide bin Laden's words from its citizens, some of his arguments bear striking resemblance to those made by stalwart critics of U.S. policy such as James Baldwin and Noam Chomsky. In one passage, bin Laden emphasized the historical crimes for which the U.S. has yet to pay:

> *As for the war criminals which you censure and form criminal courts for—you shamelessly ask that your own are granted immunity!! However, history will not forget the war crimes that you committed against the Muslims and the rest of the world; those you have killed in Japan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Lebanon and Iraq will remain a shame that you will never be able to escape.*

This notion of inescapable memory is similar to one of the great themes elucidated in James Baldwin's work. Baldwin wrote:

> *And the West quite fails to see the unforgivable enormity of Hiroshima—repeat: unforgivable—nor, since it believes in a history that is entirely its invention, does it have any sense of the dreadful tenacity of human memory, what that memory records, and how every bill must be paid.… I can tell you not only that my soul is a witness, but that what goes around, comes around.*

Elsewhere, bin Laden argued that the American people were not innocent of their government's crimes. After all, Americans pay taxes that "fund the planes that bomb us in Afghanistan, the tanks that strike and destroy our homes in Palestine, the armies which occupy our lands in the Arabian Gulf, and the fleets which ensure the blockade of Iraq." While the average American has little say in the foreign policy enacted at the highest levels of government, it's not too much of a stretch to see Americans as morally responsible, to some degree, for what the government does in their name. Chomsky argued as such in regards to America's dastardly 1998 bombing of a pharmaceutical plant in Sudan. He wrote, "Our crimes, for which we are responsible: as taxpayers, for failing to provide massive reparations, for granting refuge and immunity to the perpetrators, and for allowing the terrible facts to be sunk deep in the memory hole."

What America suffered on 9/11 was "something insignificant" compared to what the U.S. rained on the heads of others "for scores of years," bin Laden said. His assessment is similar to that of Chomsky's: "There's no moral equivalence between [9/11] and the [U.S.] destruction of Nicaragua, or of El Salvador, of Guatemala. The latter were far worse by any criterion."

The U.S. has a vested interest in hiding the words of terrorists from view because those words often present a vision of reality that stands in stark contrast to the official narrative. What would the American people do if they really knew what their country was responsible for? Ultimately, Osama bin Laden's "Letter to America" is an Islamist screed which calls for the imposition of Sharia Law, contains antisemitic tropes, and was indeed written by a man who is responsible for monstrous, unjustifiable crimes. But the grievances it contains are well founded and should be listened to and understood. The same goes for the others. And as we will see, if the term were given universal application, Barack Obama, George W. Bush, Benjamin Netanyahu, Tony Blair, and many of their ilk would be standing right alongside Osama bin Laden as some of the worst "global terrorists."

Terrorizing Dissent

Domestically, anti-terror laws have been used to infringe upon constitutional rights and to break radical movements—often on behalf of corporate interests—in what journalist Will Potter has called the "Green Scare." As environmental and animal rights activism increased in the 1980s and '90s, corporations lobbied lawmakers to label these activists as terrorists and suppress direct actions that targeted their companies. As post-9/11 anti-terror hysteria worsened the already widespread criminalization of these movements, industry pressure kept federal priorities on environmentalists instead of, say, right-wing extremists that they might have otherwise pursued. Corporations have since worked hand in glove with law enforcement to stifle dissent against their business practices. The fur industry provided lists of names of known activists to the Justice Department. Enbridge, a fossil fuel company, gave funding and tactical advice to Minnesota police departments to protect the company's oil pipeline construction. Fossil fuel corporations have gathered dossiers on activists and suggested specific criminal statutes for prosecuting them.

Convicted activists have been sent to Communications Management Units, secretive and highly restrictive prison units that were created by post-9/11 counterterrorism policies. Environmentalists have been violently removed from tree sittings and other occupations. They have had pepper spray-soaked cotton swabs rubbed in their eyes, a practice that Amnesty International deemed "tantamount to torture."

In recent years, the penalties have become more severe for resistance to environmentally destructive projects, such as the Dakota Access Pipeline near Standing Rock Reservation in the Dakotas. In 2016 and 2017, two Catholic Worker activists, Ruby Montoya and Jessica Reznicek, set fire to pipeline construction equipment and burned holes in the pipeline using welding torches. In 2017, 84 members of Congress wrote a letter to the attorney general pressuring federal prosecutors to charge pipeline protesters with domestic terrorism. (Those Congress members had received a combined total of $36 million from the fossil fuel industry, which has a long history of lobbying to criminalize environmentalists.) Ultimately, Reznicek and Montoya were both given terrorism enhancements. Reznicek was sentenced to eight years in prison and Montoya to six years. The enhancement, which was written into law a year after the Oklahoma City bombing,

increases the length of prison sentencing.

Severe penalties have also been levied against protesters of Atlanta's "Cop City," a sprawling, $109 million police training facility which has destroyed parts of the Weelaunee Forest, one of the city's largest green spaces. In March of 2023, dozens of people attending a Weelaunee Forest music festival organized by protesters were swept up in a mass arrest and many charged with domestic terrorism. This sweep occurred shortly after property destruction had been carried out against nearby construction equipment for Cop City. An *Intercept* headline explained the absurdity of the situation, in which authorities sought to link festival attendees to the acts of vandalism: "Atlanta Cop City Protesters Charged With Domestic Terror for Having Mud on Their Shoes." In separate incidents, other protesters have been charged with terrorism for things like "trespassing on posted land," "sleeping in the forest," and possessing "a climbing harness and rope." At an Atlanta City Council meeting in 2023, Micah Herskind, then a public policy associate with the Southern Center for Human Rights, summed up the situation:

> *We've seen sweeping repressions, mass arrests, overzealous criminal prosecutions and over 40 people have been charged with domestic terrorism, many for things that amount to no more than criminal trespass.… Charging protesters who are part of a social movement with domestic terrorism is a dangerous sign of where things are going when it comes to police repression of our movements.*

On the animal rights front, authorities have used the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act (AETA) to target activists. The law criminalizes as terrorism any action that is carried out "for the purpose of damaging or interfering with the operations of an animal enterprise." One need not even be directly involved in actions to be targeted for arrest. Consider the case of Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC). SHAC was a 15-year campaign against Huntingdon Life Sciences, a research company that conducted experiments on animals in ways that can be reasonably be described as torture. SHAC organizers tried to pressure companies and individuals who did business with Huntingdon to end their ties with the company. These pressure campaigns involved letter writing, phone calls, protests, vandalism, and intimidation of company employees. The group also ran a website that disseminated news of such actions. SHAC activists were charged and sentenced to prison for "encouraging and publicizing radical tactics"—not for actually carrying out any of the actions.

In another case, two activists were sentenced under AETA for having freed 2,000 minks from a fur farm in 2013. One of those activists, Kevin Johnson, wrote: "The Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act achieved its intended outcome. When the distinguishing feature of a 'terrorist' is simply an ethical concern for animals, such concerns become marginalized, and voicing them becomes dangerous. What remains is silence."

The nation's political hysteria in response to 9/11 resulted in passage of the PATRIOT Act, which ushered in a new age of mass surveillance against a backdrop of ongoing policies including indefinite detainment, torture, and presidential kill lists. The Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq, as part of George W. Bush's War on Terror, marked the beginning of two decades of costly wars in the Middle East. Far from an "emergency measure," these laws have been perennially renewed by Congress and now seem like an unalterable normal.

Before 9/11, though, an earlier act of domestic terror first led our nation down the path of constantly looking for terrorists inside our toilet bowls: the Oklahoma City bombing. Following the bombing in 1995 (which several media outlets initially blamed on Islamic terrorism), Congress passed the 1995 Rescissions Act, which gave emergency funding to "anti-terrorism initiatives."

Later, in 1996, Congress passed the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, adding new tools for the criminalization of domestic terror. The law established the Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) list, a designation made by the State Department, and allows for the criminalization of anyone who gives "material support or resources" to those on the list. As we will see, the determinations made for who gets put on the FTO list are far from impartial. The law also created the terror enhancement charge later used against Ruby Montoya and Jessica Reznicek, as well as many other environmental activists caught in an FBI dragnet in the early 2000s.

The Official Definition

The U.S. defines terrorism, both in international and domestic forms, as "violent acts or acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States" and "appear to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping." This official definition seems a somewhat reasonable formulation. If applied universally, as laws should be, there would be little here to object to. But problems with this legal definition arise immediately if we turn our focus to the violent actions of the U.S. and its allies. From Central America to Africa, from the Middle East to East Asia, the U.S. and its proxy forces have carried out immense campaigns of violence directed against civilian populations in order to secure their own interests. America's official definition of terrorism can remain coherent only if it is understood to apply to our enemies and not to us.

This willful hypocrisy serves U.S. interests quite well and it is amply validated and disseminated in mainstream media, scholarship, and think tank reports. The national security think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies, based in Washington, D.C., analyzed ideologically motivated acts of violence and defined domestic terrorism as "the deliberate use—or threat—of violence by *non-state* actors in order to achieve political goals and create a broad psychological impact" (*emphasis mine*). The point is clear: states, specifically our state and our allies, are exempt from the definition of terrorism and therefore have a legitimate monopoly on the use of violence.

The Western nations, those "self-declared enlightened states," Chomsky writes, "which have the power to determine norms and to apply them selectively at will," have demonstrated over decades their capriciousness in who they define as terrorists or terrorist states. Let us turn to some revealing examples.

Shifting the Definition for Our Own Interests

In 1979, Congress passed a law regulating commerce with foreign nations and included stipulations regarding states that are deemed to be sponsors of terrorism. With this and other subsequent laws, the State Department has the authority to list nations as state sponsors of terror if they "have repeatedly provided support for acts of international terrorism." Once a nation is put on the list, the U.S. can levy unilateral sanctions against it and other nations or individuals who do business with it, including banning weapons sales, restricting foreign aid, and prohibiting any financial transaction between a U.S. citizen and the designated governments. Two states which have appeared on the list provide useful insight into how the list is politically weaponized: Iraq and Iran.

The original 1979 list included Iraq for its support for the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK), the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and others. At a key moment, the

PROTESTS BY THE ATLANTA FOREST DEFENDERS

U.S. would remove Iraq from the list.

In 1984, a few years after the Iranian revolution overthrew the CIA and MI6-installed Shah, the embarrassed U.S. State Department added Iran to the state sponsors of terrorism list. With the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), the U.S. decided that stoking the conflict would be to its benefit. Thus, Iraq was delisted as a state sponsor of terrorism in 1983, allowing the U.S. to provide weapons and logistical support, including help in chemical weapons manufacturing (illegal under international law) and key U.S.-supplied intelligence which facilitated the gassing of Kurdish people by Iraqi forces. Additionally, as exposed in the Iran-Contra Affair, the U.S. secretly supplied Iran with arms during the conflict. Thus, by playing both sides in the Iran-Iraq War, the U.S. violated its own law against doing business with a "state sponsor of terrorism."

Only after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 (after Saddam Hussein thought he received the go-ahead from his American ally) would the U.S. again add Iraq to the state sponsors of terrorism list, thus giving the U.S. carte blanche to wage war and levy harsh, murderous sanctions against Iraq. When it comes to matters of geopolitical hegemony, the U.S. has no qualms about redefining nations as sponsors of terrorism simply to suit its own interests, though not without blowback. The many premature deaths of Iraqi children that resulted from U.S. sanctions were explicitly cited by bin Laden as motivation for the 9/11 attacks.

A similar cynical dynamic is apparent with how the U.S. has treated the aforementioned MEK, an Iranian militant group which opposes Iran's revolutionary government. The MEK was deemed a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in 1997, so anyone who gave material support to them was criminalized. As noted by many, the MEK is a bizarre, cult-like organization that is deeply unpopular within Iran. It has carried out suicide bombings and assassinations in Iran, targeting Iranian scientists and government officials, and has killed a dozen or so Americans. In 2012, after a successful lobbying blitz (terrorist groups can lobby Congress apparently), the MEK was removed from the FTO list. Since then, high profile right-wing Americans such as John Bolton and Rudy Giuliani have given paid speeches at MEK events where they have voiced support for regime change in Iran. Again, never having gotten over the successful Iranian Revolution, the U.S. has played with its own anti-terrorism laws in order to demonize and destabilize Iran without regard to fairness or any objective notions of what constitutes terrorism.

The law which instituted the FTO list contains within it a loophole for just this kind of capriciousness. The law states that a terror group may be removed from the list "at any time…. if the Secretary finds that…. the national security of the United States warrants a revocation." Under the law, "national security" is defined as "the national defense, foreign relations or *economic interests* of the United States" (*emphasis mine*). Never mind whether innocents are killed—U.S. economic interests can always take precedence over consistency, justice, and human lives.

The PKK

In contrast to the state's cynical vacillations with the MEK stands the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey. The PKK has consistently remained on the FTO list since the list's inception for two main reasons: its ideology and its stated enemies. The PKK was founded as a revolutionary socialist organization, two dreaded words for the capitalist United States. The group's general aim is to establish Kurdish autonomy, with their chief opposition being the state of Turkey, a key NATO member with a long history of oppression against its Kurdish population.

Since its founding, the PKK has harmed few if any Americans. The Center for Strategic and International Studies has assessed that the group poses a "minimal threat to American citizens or government personnel," citing its good working relations with the U.S. military, while the NSA described the group as a "third-tier terrorist organization," unworthy of the resources the agency devotes to higher tier groups. Despite the FTO designation, the U.S. once considered the PKK and other militant Kurdish groups as key bulwarks against the threat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, with the Pentagon funding PKK-affiliated groups to the tune of tens of millions of dollars year over year, in direct opposition to Turkey's misgivings.

While the U.S. again violates its own anti-terror laws by giving material support to an FTO group, the U.S. nevertheless keeps the PKK on its FTO list mostly to appease Turkey, a key NATO ally. U.S. officials pay lip service to Turkey while still supporting the PKK materially. Joe Biden even equated the PKK with ISIS, saying "there is no substantive difference" between the two (never mind little quibbles of ideology, such as the PKK being founded as a Marxist-Leninist group, shifting to something more like anarchism in recent years, and having many women in its ranks who engaged in armed combat against the repressive, atavistic ISIS members fighting for Sharia Law). The U.S. and its client states have little curiosity or patience for such nuance in regards to their declared enemies. This is the kind of brain rot that happens when every militant group is sweepingly labeled as terrorist. If the Turkish regime ever starts defending PKK notions of national self-determination and sovereign rights to their natural resources, you can bet your ass that the U.S. State Department will be looking for ways to moderate PKK leadership, delist them as an FTO, and get some Stinger missiles into those guerillas' hands.

Palestine and Israel

Perhaps nowhere is the terrorism double standard demonstrated as nakedly and consistently than with the intractable Israeli occupation of Palestine. As Daya Kishan Thussu writes, "Despite its violations of U.N. resolutions and international law in its routine attacks on Arab lands, Israel has never been characterized as a 'rogue'

nation or a 'terrorist' state[,] the phrases routinely used to refer to the enemies of Washington." Stacks of books have been devoted to this subject, so a few demonstrable examples shall suffice here.

In a recently released report by the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) and Palestine Legal, the authors find that anti-terrorism laws in the U.S. have, from their inception, been targeted against supporters of Palestinians. They find that "the earliest mention of 'terrorism' in a federal statute, in 1969, dealt specifically with restricting humanitarian aid to Palestinians and inaugurated a pattern of rendering Palestinians synonymous with terrorism." Since October 7, pro-Palestinian protesters have been accused of giving "material support to Hamas," a criminal act, and pro-Palestinian student groups have been banned from college campuses.

In 2006, when Hamas, considered an FTO by the U.S., was democratically elected to majority seats in the Palestinian Authority, the Western world, that sole purveyor of global democracy, collectively lost its mind and shouted "No! We didn't mean democracy *like that*!" Congress quickly passed a law barring any aid to the Palestinian Authority unless it demonstrated "progress toward purging from its security services individuals with ties to terrorism, dismantling all terrorist infrastructure and cooperating with Israel's security services, halting anti-American and anti-Israel incitement, and ensuring democracy and financial transparency." Likewise, the "Middle East Quartet" composed of the United Nations, the United States, the European Union, and the Russian Federation, issued a statement, saying, "A two-state solution to the conflict requires all participants in the democratic process to renounce violence and terror, accept Israel's right to exist, and disarm." Wait, what? So that means Israel also needs to renounce terror, accept Palestine's right to exist, and disarm? Netanyahu's own party platform specifically denies support for a Palestinian state.

Looking at the question of civilian casualties between Palestine and Israel, a clear double standard arises. Three years after the Palestinian elections, Israel launched Operation Cast Lead against the people of Gaza, resulting in the deaths of around 1,400 Palestinians, of whom 1,172 were deemed civilians, including 342 children. Hamas responded with rocket attacks that killed *three* Israeli civilians. Later, in 2014 fighting, Israel killed 2,202 Palestinians, of whom 1,371 were deemed "non-hostile." In the same fighting, 68 Israelis were killed, *five* of whom were civilian. Based on these numbers alone, Hamas is better at avoiding civilian casualties than the Israeli Defense Forces are. The U.N.'s 500 page Goldstone Report concludes that Operation Cast Lead was "a deliberately disproportionate attack designed to punish, humiliate and terrorize a civilian population" and that "the repeated failure to distinguish between combatants and civilians appears to…. have been the result of deliberate guidance issued to soldiers." We had to destroy the village to save it. Kill anything that moves. We'll show those human animals what happens when they vote for Hamas. Collective punishment rules the day.

Israel is a regularly belligerent nation that has bombed Egypt; bombed Jordan; bombed Tunisia; is currently bombing Syria; and invaded, occupied, and subjected Lebanon to state terror and aided mass torture there throughout the 1980s and '90s. Israel regularly assassinates Iranian civilians. It is carrying out the longstanding occupation and ethnic cleansing of Palestine, which began in 1947. Yet "Israel has the right to defend itself," goes the common refrain of Western elites. Meanwhile, every rock thrown by a Palestinian child at an Israeli armored vehicle is considered an act of international terrorism. In this narrative, a vote for Hamas is a vote for terror, while a vote for the genocidal right-wing Israeli party currently in power is a vote for democracy.

Such hypocrisy is to be expected when the laws that define terrorism are written by and for powerful interests. Because of its unwillingness to truly understand the forces of terrorism, the U.S. government knows all too well that its power to denote who is and is not a terrorist is, in fact, the ability to fashion convenient and unarguable enemies in comportment with its "national interests," which are, emphatically, not the same interests of the nation's people, but instead that of the ruling class.

Criminals At Large

Of course, there have always been conspicuous absences from America's terrorist lists. As Michael Parenti points out:

> *[N]either the Clinton nor Bush administration ever placed Afghanistan on the official State Department list of states charged with sponsoring terrorism, despite the acknowledged presence of Osama bin Laden as a guest of the Taliban government. Such a "rogue state" designation would have made it impossible for a U.S. oil or construction company to enter an agreement with Kabul for a pipeline to the Central Asian oil and gas fields.*

Similarly, America has always treated the oil-rich Saudi Arabia with kid gloves, "despite the Saudis' devastation of Yemen, the murder of *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and even suspicions that parts of the royal family funded Osama bin Laden," write Marc Lamont Hill and Mitchell Plitnick in *Except for Palestine*, making it clear that "human rights are not the primary predicate for U.S. policy in the [Middle East]."

In Latin America, we find the case of Pinochet's Chile, responsible for (with CIA support) the overthrow of democratically elected President Salvador Allende as well as Operation Condor, a project of international terrorism carried out against dissenters to the fascist Chilean regime. Condor operatives went so far as to bomb a former official of President Allende's leftist government, Orlando Letelier, while he was driving with his young American assistant, Ronni Moffitt, in Washington, D.C. Both were killed. This killing of an American on U.S. soil was insufficient to ever warrant putting fascist Chile on the state sponsors of terrorism list.

Likewise, though Nelson Mandela and other members of his African National Congress party were on a U.S. terrorist watch list until 2008, apartheid South Africa never joined any such list. Irish Republican Armies have been, and are, considered FTOs, but the U.K., with its roving paramilitary death squads in Ireland, never joined America's list of terrorist states. "Loyalist gangs, often operating with the tacit approval or outright logistical assistance of the British state, killed hundreds of civilians in an endless string of terror attacks," writes Patrick Radden Keefe in *Say Nothing*, a book about The Troubles conflict in Northern Ireland. He continues:

> *These victims were British subjects. Yet they had been dehumanized by the conflict to the point that organs of the British state often ended up complicit in such murders, without any sort of public inquiry or internal revolt in the security services.… "We were not there to act like an army unit," one former British officer who served in the [Military Reaction Force] later acknowledged. "We were there to act like a terror group."*

There are many other examples. Any casual look at the history of U.S. foreign involvement, from Central America to the Middle East, Europe to East Asia, yields a clear pattern of cynical support for "our" terrorists—"freedom fighters" being the preferred term—and unremitting cruelty for any terrorists that don't serve our interests. Thus, in all the official State Department lists, you will never find some of the worst terrorist offenders. This fanatical anti-terrorist attitude in the U.S. maintains a vicious cycle of violence and oppression. So long as we manufacture everlasting enemies, so long as we permanently menace entire peoples, the whole of our society will be under threat from both within *and* without by that same menace we think to be our salvation. Is it any wonder that as we cover up our nation's crimes by demonizing those who lash out against us, and as we continue to ravage the Holy Lands, watering the sand with blood, that these people, these future terrorists—representing at once our shameful history and our future legacy—are running up behind us with a knife aimed squarely at our back? ✣

You've worked your body, now

WORK YOUR MIND

Yeah, okay, you can bench 480 and do a thousand squats. That's cool. But remember: the head is the most important muscle in the body, and if you don't work it, you just might lose it. The best thing you can do to keep your brain fresh and limber is buy a full year's subscription to Current Affairs magazine.

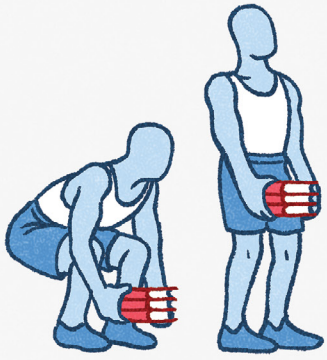
currentaffairs.org

THE CURRENT AFFAIRS

ULTIMATE 7-DAY FULL BODY WORKOUT

DAY 1

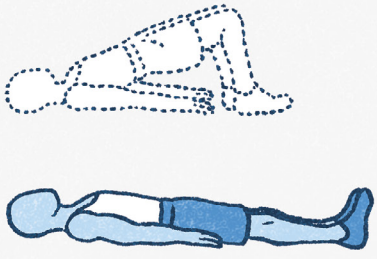
20 FINGER WAGS



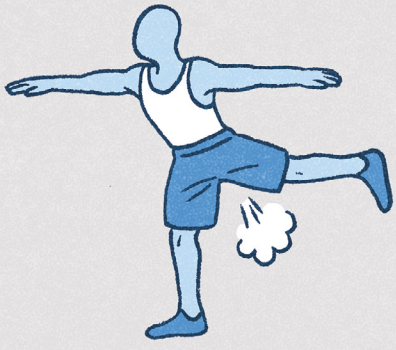
20 KNAUSGÅRD'S *MY STRUGGLE* DEADLIFTS

8 HOURS FARMING

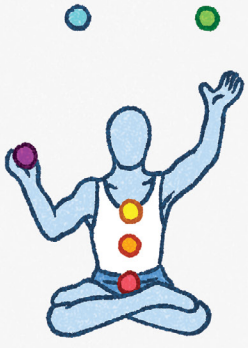
DAY 2



20 ASTRALLY PROJECTED GLUTE BRIDGES

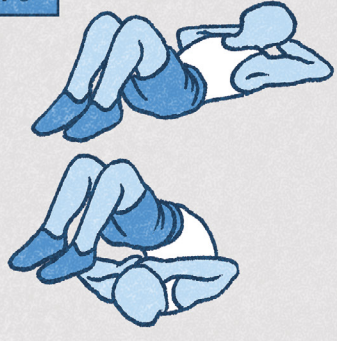


20 WIND BREAKS



45 MINUTES CHAKRA JUGGLING

DAY 3



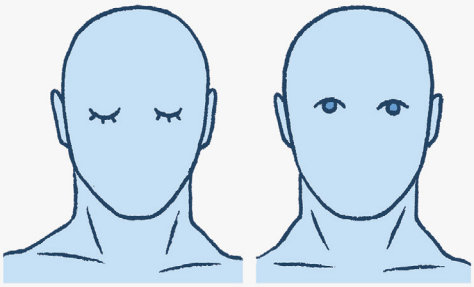
20 REVERSE CRUNCHES

20 ADVANCED ARM EXTENSIONS

2 HOURS REFLECTING ON YOUR MISTAKES

DAY 4

20 TONGUE PUSHUPS

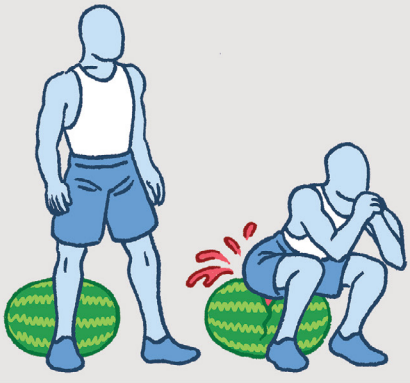


10,000 BLINKS

1 HOUR CONTRAPPOSTO

DAY 5

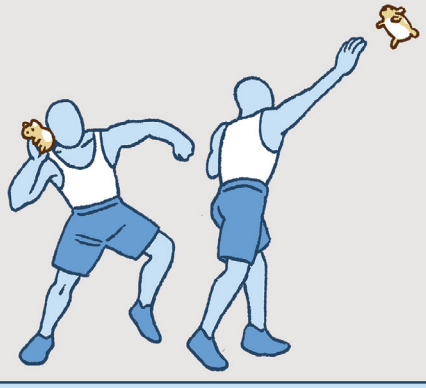
20 NECK SNAPS



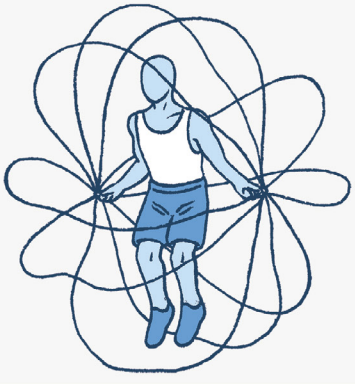
20 MELON SQUASHES

1 MEDICINE BALL EATING CONTEST

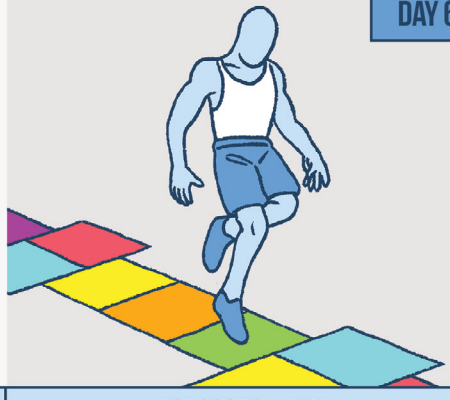
DAY 6



20 HAMSTER TOSSES



10 MINUTES DECTUPLE DUTCH



1 HOPSCOTCH 10K

DAY 7

20 ATTEMPTS TO OPEN A JAR OF PICKLES

20 SPIKE-ASSISTED HAND STANDS

1 HOUR EXTREME CUDDLING

A SHORT PLAY ON THE LONG HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES REJECTING PUERTO RICO STATEHOOD

A 125-YEAR-OLD DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND PUERTO RICO ON THE ISLAND'S POLITICAL FUTURE.

*EVERYTHING YOU'RE ABOUT TO READ, SAVE FOR THE EPILOGUE, IS AN INTERPRETATION OF DOCUMENTED HISTORICAL FACT.

BY **ALBERTO C. MEDINA**

1898

UNITED STATES: Hi! We're the United States. We're invading you now. You know, to free you from Spain's colonial rule.

PUERTO RICO: Um... OK. So are you going to make us a state then?

UNITED STATES: Statehood? Oh! Funny—hmm. Well... no. At least, not yet! But who knows what the future holds?

1901

UNITED STATES: Hey, Puerto Rico, we're starting to get some questions about you. Legally speaking. Which of our laws apply in our new colo—I mean, territory? Does the Constitution follow the flag? Do we have to give you Puerto Ricans, you know, rights and stuff?

PUERTO RICO: You could just make us a state. That would pretty much solve everything.

UNITED STATES: Right, right... we *could* do that. But here's a thought: we'll have the Supreme Court make some rulings. They'll say you're our territory—but an *unincorporated* territory. They'll say you *belong* to the United States, but you're not a part of the United States. We'll justify it by calling Puerto Ricans an alien race of savages, and we'll have ourselves an egregious legal framework that'll last for the next 125 years.

PUERTO RICO: Seriously? There's no way that's going to last. Surely at some point in the next century somebody's going to look at these rulings and overturn them. I mean, it literally says "*savages*" in there.

UNITED STATES: You'd think so, wouldn't you?

1917

UNITED STATES: Hi, Puerto Rico! Quick question: how would you like to become U.S. citizens?

PUERTO RICO: You mean, because we're gonna be a state? Are you finally gonna make us a state?

UNITED STATES: No, no. No statehood. We'll just... make you citizens.

PUERTO RICO: But why? Why would you give us citizenship but not statehood?

UNITED STATES: For reasons.

PUERTO RICO: I dunno, Uncle Sam. It sounds a little weird.

UNITED STATES: Look, I'll sweeten the deal. We'll make you citizens, we'll let you have your own House and Senate so you can pass your own laws.

PUERTO RICO: Oh! So it'll be like we can govern ourselves?

UNITED STATES: Wait, you didn't let me finish. We're also gonna make all federal laws apply to Puerto Rico—except for when we don't want them to apply.

PUERTO RICO: Can we pass laws that supersede federal law?

UNITED STATES: Not at all.

PUERTO RICO: Then can we at least choose our own governor now?

UNITED STATES: Of course not! Our president is going to keep appointing him.

PUERTO RICO: This all just seems so needlessly complicated. Are you sure you don't want to just make us a state?

UNITED STATES: We're quite sure.

PUERTO RICO: You know what? This is pretty sketchy. I don't think we want this.

UNITED STATES: We already did it. Congratulations! You are now United States citizens.

ONE MONTH LATER:

PUERTO RICO, *reading news that the U.S. has entered World War I:* Huh. War in Europe. How 'bout that?

ONE MONTH AFTER THAT:

PUERTO RICO, *reading news of the Selective Service Act:* Oh son of a bitch!

1918–1949

UNITED STATES: Hey Puerto Rico: we're noticing a lot of pro-independence activism going on down there. I'm going to need you to help us surveil and suppress all these subversives for a few decades.

PUERTO RICO: And then, once we've decimated their movement, you'll give us statehood?

UNITED STATES: We'll see.

1950–1952

UNITED STATES: Come here, Puerto Rico. You're causing us some trouble again. We thought letting you have your first election for governor in 1948 would be enough, but apparently not.

PUERTO RICO: Enough for what?

UNITED STATES: Oh, it's this whole *post-World War II international order.* That new thing, the U.N., they started a list of non self-governing territories and are making us submit an annual report about each one. Can you believe asking *us* for a report on how we champion democracy in our colo—I mean, territories?

PUERTO RICO: Then it definitely seems like it's finally time to make me a state and solve all our problems.

UNITED STATES: Hmm… no, still don't think that's the right answer. But how would you like to have a Constitution? You can write it up yourselves and everything!

PUERTO RICO: Really? We can just put whatever we want in there?

UNITED STATES: Well, within reason. We'll definitely be reviewing it; might put some things in, might take some things out.

PUERTO RICO: So you're not really giving up power over us.

UNITED STATES: Wait, I wasn't finished. How about a name change? Let's see, what's that thing they call Massachusetts? A Commonwealth! The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico has a nice ring to it.

PUERTO RICO: But what does it mean?

UNITED STATES: Nobody will know, and nobody will care. That's the beauty of it. We'll go to the United Nations and say, Puerto Rico's not a colony; it's a Commonwealth. They got their own constitution and everything!

PUERTO RICO: And you think that'll be enough?
United States: To get the United Nations to do whatever we want? Absolutely.

1967

PUERTO RICO: Hey, U.S. You believe in democracy, right? Voting, the will of the people, all that stuff?

UNITED STATES: Democracy is the bedrock on which this great nation was founded. But where are you going with this?

PUERTO RICO: We're gonna vote on our political status. Let the people decide between statehood, independence, and keeping the current status. A true exercise of democracy! So you'll abide by the results, right?

UNITED STATES: We always encourage democracy.

PUERTO RICO: Can we get that in writing?

UNITED STATES: Just keep us posted!

STATEHOOD GETS 39 PERCENT OF THE VOTE; COMMONWEALTH GETS 60 PERCENT

UNITED STATES: Look at those results! Glad to see you're happy with the way things are going. Don't get me wrong, I *totally* would have acted on the results if you had wanted the thing I've refused to give you for the past 69 years. But looks like you didn't. So, all's well that ends well!

PUERTO RICO: You really would've granted us statehood if a majority of our people wanted it?

UNITED STATES: Of course! I'm Mr. Democracy over here! Just take a few decades, come back with that majority, and then we'll talk.

1993–1998

PUERTO RICO: Hi, United States! Just wanted to let you know we've had two more votes on our political status, and statehood is really picking up momentum.

UNITED STATES: Oh yeah? Let's see.

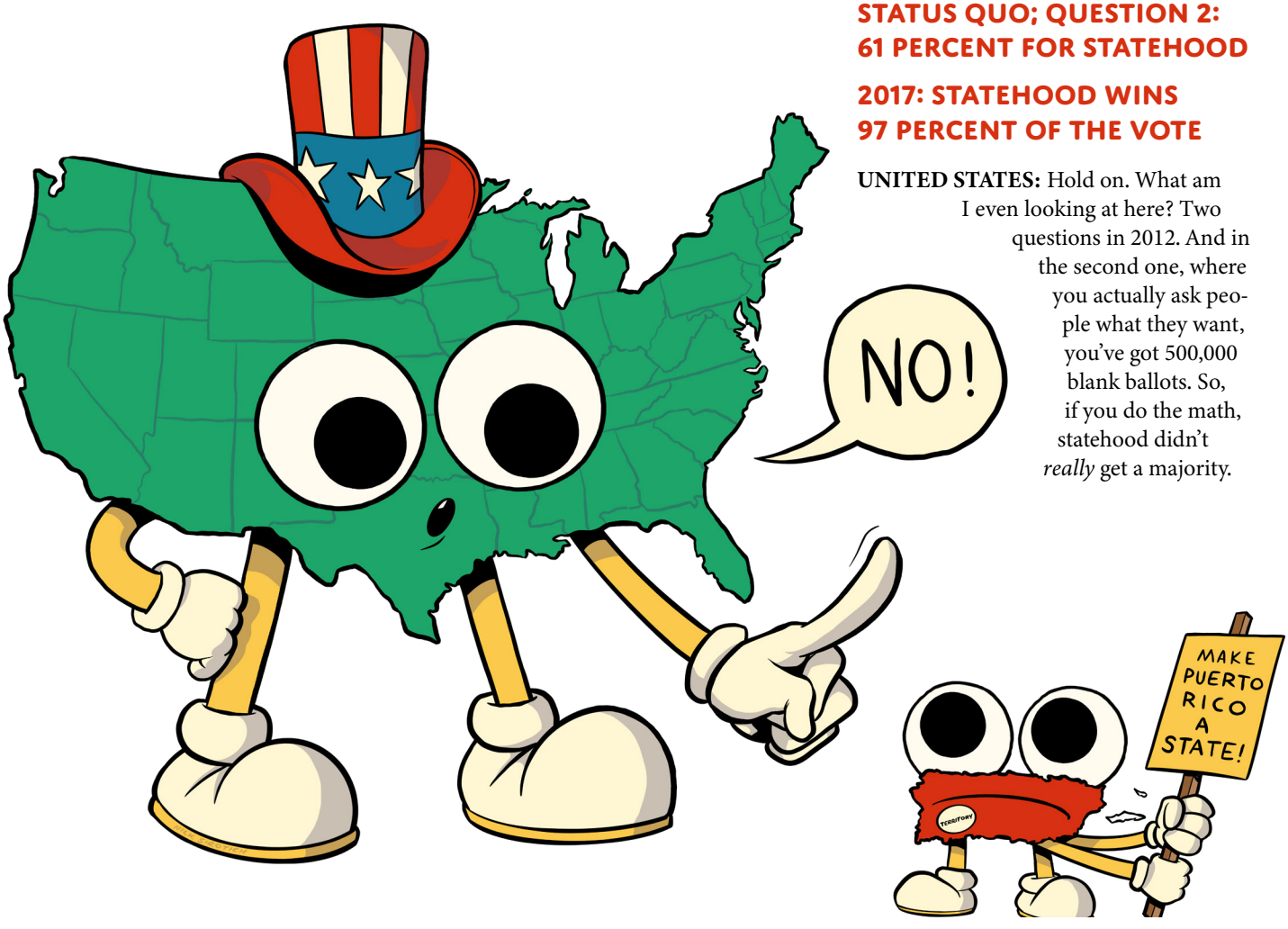
1993: STATEHOOD GETS 46 PERCENT OF THE VOTE; COMMONWEALTH GETS 49 PERCENT

1998: STATEHOOD GETS 47 PERCENT OF THE VOTE — "NONE OF THE ABOVE" GETS 50 PERCENT

UNITED STATES: You came so close, Puerto Rico! Forty-six percent! That is some excellent progress. You're almost at the point where we'd really have a hard time ignoring your request for statehood. You know, hypothetically.

PUERTO RICO: But 46 percent is almost a majority. And the status quo didn't get above 50 percent either, so at the very least people want a change. It's been 100 years since you took over. Don't you think it's time to start seriously talking about statehood?

UNITED STATES, *pointing at a big 50 percent sign on the wall and shaking his head:* Sorry, Puerto Rico, but 50 percent plus 1 is the magic number. Democracy! Will of the people, remember? You can't expect us to go against the will of the people!



So until you get that majority, we've no choice but to keep things just the way they are.

2012–2017

PUERTO RICO: Hello again, U.S.! We've got some more plebiscite results to share with you.

UNITED STATES: Two more? Again?

PUERTO RICO: Well, you told us we gotta achieve a majority. And you're not really doing anything at all on this issue. What other option do we have but to keep voting on it and see what happens? Besides, we really shook things up this time, and we think you'll be really excited about the results.

2012: QUESTION 1: 54 PERCENT AGAINST THE STATUS QUO; QUESTION 2: 61 PERCENT FOR STATEHOOD

2017: STATEHOOD WINS 97 PERCENT OF THE VOTE

UNITED STATES: Hold on. What am I even looking at here? Two questions in 2012. And in the second one, where you actually ask people what they want, you've got 500,000 blank ballots. So, if you do the math, statehood didn't *really* get a majority.

PUERTO RICO: But who counts blank ballots?

UNITED STATES: We do. If we feel like it. And now what's this in 2017? You don't really expect me to believe everybody on the island suddenly wants statehood, do you? Turnout was 23 percent. Everybody else literally boycotted the vote. Of course

statehood got 97 percent; those are the only people who showed up!

PUERTO RICO: Well, what do you expect? This is the fifth vote you've refused to approve or treat as binding. Statehood supporters are the only ones still taking them seriously; everybody else thinks they're a big joke.

UNITED STATES: That kind of sounds like a *you* problem.

PUERTO RICO: Why don't you get involved next time? You can dictate the process, approve the alternatives, and we'll do it however you want.

UNITED STATES: Sorry, Puerto Rico. You can't ask us to do that! We're the United States government—we don't just meddle in other nations' politics.

PUERTO RICO: You know, one of these days, maybe even a few months from now, there's gonna be some big disaster in Puerto Rico. And you're going to fail us because we're your colony—yeah, I said it, colony—and thousands of Puerto Ricans are gonna die, and people of conscience everywhere are going to rise up and take you to task for perpetuating this unfair, unjust, so-called Commonwealth status.

UNITED STATES: Nah. But we'll get some paper towels ready.

2020

PUERTO RICO: We're gonna try again. *Sixth* time's the charm, right?

UNITED STATES: Uh-huh.

PUERTO RICO: Look: we're keeping it super simple this time. One question. One option. Statehood: Yes or No?

UNITED STATES: Uh-huh.

STATEHOOD WINS 53 PERCENT OF THE VOTE

PUERTO RICO: I... I think we did it? Clear question. Clear majority. Strong turnout: 55 percent—not great—but better than a lot of U.S. elections! Did we do it? Can we be a state now?

UNITED STATES: You've certainly got something there. Don't get me wrong, it's not exactly an overwhelming mandate, but it's something. Remember when we said we'd find it hard to ignore majority support for statehood? That, uh, that's kind of where we are now.

PUERTO RICO: Woo! This is so exciting. I mean, we've been waiting for so long. And now it's finally going to happen. And such good timing! The Orange Man has been voted out, the good guys are going to be in charge again. It's statehood time!

UNITED STATES: Well, hold on now. There's a process to these things. But yes: we are definitely, probably going to get right to work on it. Why don't you start by getting your Congressional Rep., the one who can't vote, to introduce a statehood bill?

PUERTO RICO: Aye aye, captain! Can't wait to join our fellow Americans!

2021–2022

PUERTO RICO: As promised, here's your bill: The Puerto Rico Statehood Admission Act. Ready to sail through Congress and land on the president's desk!

UNITED STATES: Ha! Sail through Congress. That's a good one. Listen, we've been thinking. And we totally respect what you've done down there with your little plebiscite. But 53 percent isn't really blowing anybody away over here. I mean, what kind of a majority is that? At best, it's *majority-ish*...

PUERTO RICO: But, but... what about the will of the people?

UNITED STATES: How about this? We'll think about your statehood bill; keep that over here. But we're gonna introduce a different bill. The Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act. That sounds good, doesn't it? Who doesn't love self-determination! And aren't two bills better than one?

PUERTO RICO: But we've voted on this six times. All kinds of ballot designs, all kinds of majorities. Haven't we already self-determined up the wazoo?

UNITED STATES: That's one way of looking at it. But we never really approved any of that. It's not really *your* self-determination unless *we* sign off on it.

PUERTO RICO: That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. It just seems like you came up with this other bill to throw a wrench in the works, to divide support for Puerto Rico, and to keep kicking the can down the road. It's 1901, 1917, and 1950 all over again. There's a simple solution, and you're doing everything but. We voted for statehood. So why won't you just grant us statehood?

UNITED STATES: OK, OK. Forget the two bills. New plan: we're going to compromise. Combine the bills. Take the best parts of both—or maybe the worst parts, whichever we can get people to agree on—and create a single bill: The Puerto Rico Status Act. This is the way forward.

PUERTO RICO: But this compromise bill doesn't grant anything. It tells us to go have another vote, on options you choose, defined the way you want.

UNITED STATES: Right. We pre-decide for you, and then you get to decide. Except when we decide not to pre-decide, and instead decide to post-decide. It's really not that complicated.

PUERTO RICO: It just feels like we could've done this years ago. Decades ago! *Sigh*. But hey, if this is what's going to work, if this is how a bill becomes a law and we're finally—finally!—going to have a Congressionally approved process to change Puerto Rico's status, let's do it!

UNITED STATES: Yes, well... becoming law. Have I mentioned we're a pretty divided country? Maybe we pass this in the House. Maybe! But the Senate. We have Joe Manchin and the filibuster. How do you say that in Spanish?

PUERTO RICO: *Filibusterismo.*

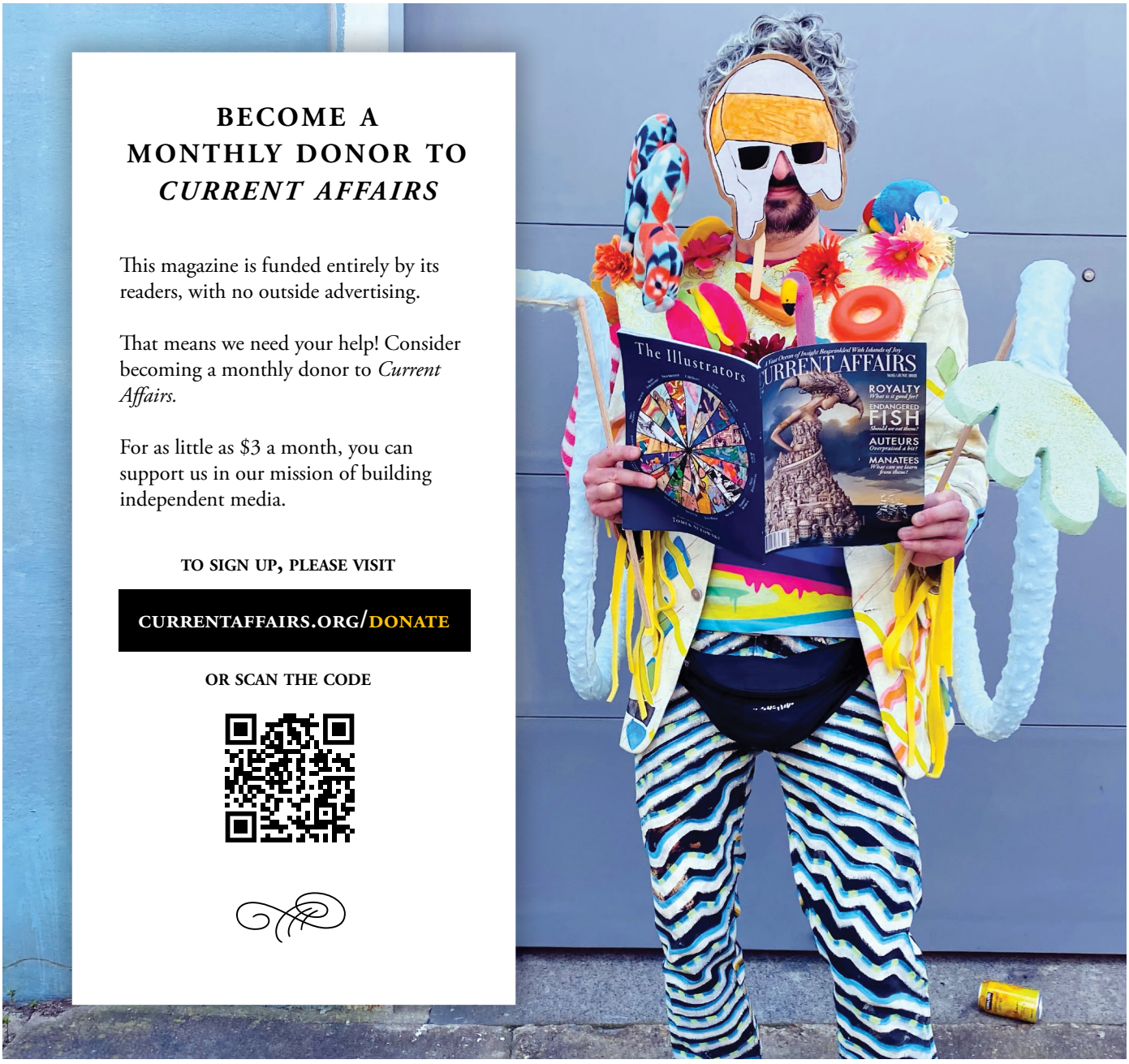
UNITED STATES: Huh! No kidding.

PUERTO RICO: So what you're saying is, we're not getting statehood? We're not getting a statehood bill. We're not getting the other bill. We're not even getting—not really—*this* bill that was supposedly, specifically crafted to be a politically feasible compromise. Pardon my French, America, but what the fuck are we even doing, and why the fuck are we even doing it?

UNITED STATES: Because, Puerto Rico: what we say goes. And don't you fucking forget it.

The Puerto Rico Status Act passes a lame-duck House of Representatives in December 2022, on the very last day the House is in session. It is reintroduced the following year: in the House, where Republicans ignore it, and in the Senate, where Democrats ignore it.

In Puerto Rico, pro-statehood leaders muse about having yet another non-binding plebiscite—No.7, if you're counting. The dwindling "Commonwealth" supporters desperately cling to the notion that Puerto Rico is not a colony. And the independence movement, now allied with other progressive forces on the island, fights for a potential electoral victory in 2024 and prepares for the future. ✣



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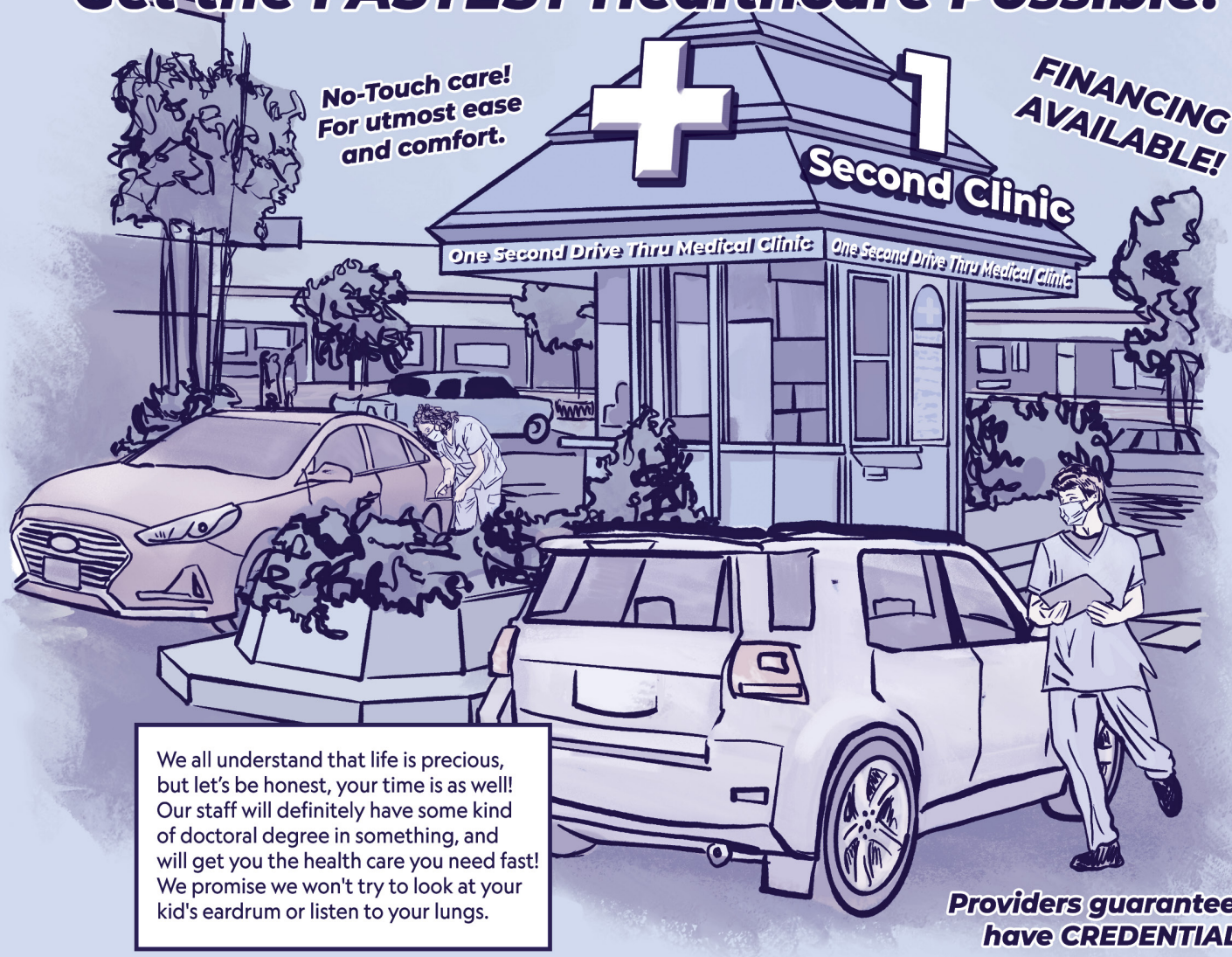

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121K
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NOT ENOUGH LIKES
GAZA GENOCIDE
UN POPULAR!

CAPITALISM *vs.* JOURNALISM

How the For-Profit Model Has Hollowed Out the Fourth Estate

BY **STEPHEN PRAGER**

The industry of journalism is in a state of terminal crisis. Since 2005, more than a quarter of all local newspapers in the United States have closed down. Many of the ones still around are shells of their former selves, producing vastly diminished content and leaving the local communities that rely on them as "news deserts." Digital media is dominated by shallow clickbait, sensationalized coverage, and hyperpartisanship. Simultaneously, trust in media among the American public has never been lower.

All of these worrying trends share the same progenitor: the profit motive. Like with every other thing of value in a capitalist society, the factor that determines whether a journalistic endeavor succeeds or fails is its performance in a competitive market. And like with fast food and Marvel movies, the profitability of a news outlet has little to do with whether it serves the public interest.

When news outlets shape their content to maximize clicks, allow themselves to be bought and gutted by private equity companies, or subject their employees to unreasonable working conditions, they are doing precisely what the logic of the market tells them to do. When *profit* or *perish* are the only two available options, most publishers will choose the former no matter what compromises and sacrifices—to the quality of journalism, or to their own employees—they must make to get there. But choices that confer short-term profit also tend to wreak havoc on the journalistic landscape. The imperative that journalism be profitable is in fundamental conflict with its other functions in a democratic society.

As media professor Gerald Baldasty at the University of Washington points out, "The media are a private business, but they are also cloaked with immense social responsibility." This is, of course, a commonality in American society: many things that serve immensely important social functions, like healthcare and transportation, have been outsourced to for-profit enterprises as well. And given the manifold inefficiencies and inequalities wrought by the profit motive in those systems, we should not be surprised when journalism succumbs to them as well.

Three recent cases show how the profit demands of the American media system force companies to make financial and management decisions that damage the quality of their editorial content, the conditions of labor for their employees, and the health of the news ecosystem. At Insider Media, executives' obsessive adherence to "metrics" pitted journalists against one another to churn out advertiser-friendly fluff in place of well-researched work. At Gannett, the costs of a merger that turned the company into America's largest news conglomerate were forced onto employees in the form of mass layoffs and salary cuts. And

at Tribune Publishing, private equity vultures cut the company to the bone to maximize shareholder returns with little left over to pay for quality journalism.

While all of these stories are different in their specifics, I implore you to keep in mind the similarities. In each case, the need to maximize profits led companies to treat their journalists less like human beings who perform a critical civic function, and more like interchangeable financial instruments that can be disposed of with little regard for the effects. Recognizing the destruction capitalism has wrought upon the journalism industry, we must begin to consider how these organizations would function differently in a society where they did not have to worry about profitability, and their success was instead determined by their value to the public.

INSIDER: WORSHIPING THE METRICS GOD

The vast majority of Americans now get some or most of their news using digital devices. Outlets have, in turn, begun to cater their content toward online advertisers. The need to reach as many readers as possible to maintain a commercial appeal to advertisers forces reporters and publications to abandon their responsibility to serve the public good. Instead, they become more like marketing professionals.

One of the best examples of this trend has been the rise of metrics—that is, data about how many people view and share particular articles—as a tool for story selection in newsrooms. Metrics have been colonizing newsrooms for the better part of a decade, perhaps best exemplified by Gawker Media's "big board," a giant, centrally located screen that publicly ranked writers' stories based on audience engagement. Even the *New York Times* succumbed to this urge in 2015, featuring a "trending" bar on the website's front page with the most viewed and most emailed stories. (The bar has since been removed.)

But Insider's use of metrics was among the most ruthless. In 2021, *Digiday* reported that each journalist at the company's various outlets, like *Business Insider*, was at the mercy of the metrics. They were required not just to submit a minimum quota of stories every month, but were also responsible for earning "a specific amount of page views, unique visitors or subscriptions," which were calculated using the analytics software Chartbeat.

"You pick up very early on that the way to get praise and recognition is to have a story that's really high up on Chartbeat," one former reporter told the *Daily Beast* in 2020. On the other hand, failing to meet metrics requirements—which employees said often changed every quarter—could result in disciplinary action and even firing. One *Insider* writer described feeling like they were "expected to sell the stories" in addition to merely reporting them. Others said their weekly targets led them to prioritize "quantity over quality." They even received memos urging them to "play the Chartbeat game" by avoiding topics that didn't guarantee traffic and simply "publish more." Reporters said they shied away from undertaking more in-depth, original stories in favor of ones that could be produced quickly and fit neatly under a salacious headline.

The almost religious fixation on metrics did not just hurt story quality but damaged workplace morale as well. A Gawker-esque "big board" led journalists to feel as if they were being pitted against one another. But reporters were also required to submit their own self-evaluations of "impact points" and "helpfulness points" that could be earned by being quoted on cable news or being retweeted by a prominent journalist. In other words, reporters had to be as rigidly focused on documenting their own media footprints as they were on the subjects they actually covered. Facing pressure to meet weekly targets, writers would often "cannibalize" one another's stories, regurgitating information from prior reports and even swiping stories and sources from reporters on other beats.

Several other reporters described the granular fixation on metrics as adding undue stress, forcing them to work extra hours and forgo time off in order to hit unrealistic goals. This illustrates a secondary function of metrics: along with helping news organizations maximize advertising revenues, they serve as a disciplinary mechanism to squeeze more hours out of their workforce and diminish camaraderie within the workplace. "I have spent too much time consoling tearful colleagues over the phone about the fear of losing their job due to metrics goals. I have watched my friends leave the newsroom because they didn't feel valued. I have agonized over whether I'm going to make my traffic goals or whether I can afford to take time off when I'm severely burnt out," said reporter Yelena Dzhanova.

After forming a union the previous fall, reporters for *Insider* went on strike in 2022, with their most important demand being an end to the practice of disciplining reporters for missing metrics goals. The company agreed to end the practice, but still relies heavily on Chartbeat to guide their editorial direction. "Our work is often praised and incentivized when it 'crushes the metrics,' not for its quality or other merits," said one reporter who spoke with *The Fine Print*.

Rutgers journalism professor Caitlin Petre analyzed this problem more thoroughly in her 2021 book, *All the News That's Fit to Click: How Metrics Are Transforming the Work of Journalists*. Petre writes that metrics have "fundamentally reshape[d] the journalistic labor process" to one where "journalists are reduced from expert arbiters of newsworthiness to mere executors tasked with unquestioningly following the dictates of quantified representations of audience popularity." She goes on to describe metrics as "an intrusion of commercial considerations into the newsroom," adding that "by installing analytics dashboards, management is arguably taking a sledgehammer to the 'wall' between editorial and business operations that has long been central to the notion of journalistic independence and professionalism." Petre says this endangers the civic value of journalism as well, calling metrics "a new patch of terrain on which the tension that exists in journalism between the profit motive and the democratic imperative is fighting itself out."

This observation was borne out in a 2020 meta-analysis conducted by Silke Fürst at the University of Zurich. In addition to the effects on working conditions for journalists themselves, Fürst argues that "journalists' use of audience metrics has a mainly negative impact on news quality. This effect is the result of both the growing economic pressures on newsrooms and a

The Gawker "Big Board" that kept track of how writers' stories were performing at any given time / Scott Beale / Laughing Squid

dominant rhetoric that equates measures of audience size with audience interests and good journalistic work."

The constant demand for websites to be updated with new content creates an incentive for what is often called "churnalism," a phenomenon in which time-strapped journalists write fewer deeply researched stories and more that merely regurgitate press releases or repackage news already released by other outlets. In a 2014 interview, one journalist working at the Slovenian news website *Delo* described their job as essentially one of "pure economy" where they "hunt for clicks by following what is out there online and what might get our readers' attention."

With an emphasis on speed and volume, less attention is paid to ensuring accuracy. Meanwhile, the topics chosen are narrowed to what is guaranteed to draw attention. Because certain subjects have been found to generate more clicks, many websites that once had harder news focuses have amped up their coverage of celebrity gossip, crime, and sex. Political stories, likewise, increasingly focus on leaders' personal foibles rather than the consequences of their actions. Rather than ponder whether monarchy is a just institution, for example, news outlets recently dedicated an entire news cycle to whether Kate Middleton had photoshopped her sleeves.

GANNETT: CUTTING CORNERS

Conflicts over metrics have just been one dimension in the battle between employees and publishers over the conditions of journalistic labor. The past two years have seen an unprecedented number of strikes by U.S. journalists over layoffs, budget cuts, and pay inequality. This past summer, as strikes by Hollywood actors and writers dominated the headlines, workers at more than two dozen newspapers owned by the Gannett corporation also went on a two-day strike that had been years in the making.

In 2019, when it merged with GateHouse Media, Gannett became the largest newspaper conglomerate in the United States. That merger loaded the company with debt, a problem it resolved by enacting a historic purge of its workforce under new CEO Mike Reed. In 2019, more than 25,000 journalists worked for Gannett papers. By 2023, just 11,000 employees remained.

At some papers, the number of employees dropped by as much as 90 percent. Some of Gannett's local newspapers were suddenly without a single full-time reporter, or left the few reporters who remained on staff desperately trying to pick up the slack for those who'd been fired. For employees who survived, the company handed down mandatory furloughs, suspended 401(k) contributions, and mandated a week of unpaid leave, all while cutting salaries by 10 percent.

These savage cuts were made even more insulting by the knowledge that the same executives who instituted them were taking fat bonuses for themselves and spending hundreds of millions on stock buybacks. In 2020, amid mass layoffs and benefit cuts, the company's chief financial officer was awarded a $1.2 million bonus for his "sacrifices during the pandemic." While the average Gannett employee made just over $51,000 annually in 2021, Reed—who initiated the cuts—brought in $7.74 million in 2021 and $3.38 million in 2022.

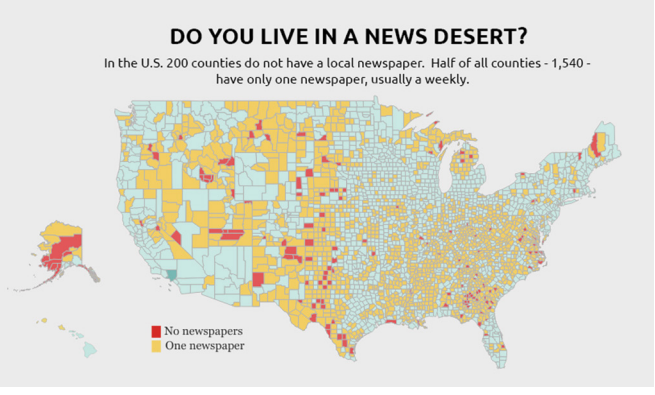
Work conditions at Gannett had been the subject of simmering resentment for years. The company had a well-known habit

of paying its journalists of color much less than its white ones. Other workers went public with stories of wage theft that were met with derision by management. When one reporter at *The Arizona Republic* tweeted about her experience with illegal wage theft from Gannett, writing "Don't work for nothing," an editor at the paper responded by freely admitting to and justifying the practice, saying "Every business exploits the young — it's called gaining experience, and I don't regret it one bit."

Working conditions were surely front and center when Gannett employees went on strike in 2023. But in their letter to shareholders demanding a vote of no confidence against Reed, they also drew attention to the way his cuts had demolished the nation's news ecosystem. "He has reduced local content by relying on wire service and regional stories [and] cut newsroom staff," the NewsGuild said. "As a result, our communities are not being served and our employees are demoralized."

Over the four years between the 2019 merger and the 2023 strike, the number of papers owned by Gannett dropped from 563 to 400, as more and more outlets simply shut down or merged with others. That number is expected to drop even further in coming years. Most of the papers shuttered by Gannett and companies like it have been those in smaller towns, which are the least cost-effective but have arguably the greatest impact, as they are often the only source of high-quality information on local events like elections, school board decisions, and so on. Without them, many of America's smaller towns are left as "news deserts," says Joshua Benton at Harvard's Nieman Journalism Lab.

Since 2004, more than 2,100 newspapers have shuttered, according to a study by the University of North Carolina. There are more than 200 counties around the country that lack a single newspaper, while more than half have only a single paper, usually a weekly.



UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media

In the *Atlantic*, Elaine Godfrey neatly sums up the effect this trend has had on towns across America:

> *By now, we know what happens when a community loses its newspaper. People tend to participate less often in municipal elections, and those elections are less competitive. Corruption goes unchecked, and costs sometimes go up for town governments. Disinformation becomes the norm, as people start to get their facts mainly from social media.*

In other words, the loss of local journalism to the profit imperative erodes democracy itself.

TRIBUNE: HOLLOWED OUT

Other ailing newsrooms around the country have been gobbled up by private equity. Just like they've done with healthcare, retirement, and housing, private equity firms have come to dominate the media market over the last two decades. Today, around half of America's newspapers are controlled by private equity firms, hedge funds, or other investment groups according to the *Financial Times*. And as with these other industries which serve a critical function in society, private equity firms have reduced the work of journalism to a toy for investors to play with. As Robert Kuttner of the *American Prospect* writes:

> *The private equity model is to acquire a newspaper property and strip it to the bone by cutting staff, selling real estate, getting rid of pension plans where possible, and extracting cash. Sometimes, the plan includes borrowing against the newspaper, pocketing the proceeds, and then sticking the debt on the newspaper's balance sheet. Private equity owners are also notorious union-busters.*

According to research by Michael Ewens, Arpit Gupta, and Sabrina Howell of New York University's Stern School of Business, the purchase of a paper by a private equity firm has obvious negative effects. It often coincides with a decreased focus on local news (which is considered less profitable than national news) and has led to a nearly 17 percent drop in the total number of articles written by a publication. Buyouts were often followed by cuts to the number of reporters and editors while salaries for those who remained were cut by 7 percent on average.

By far the largest and most notorious of these groups is Alden Global Capital, a New York-based hedge fund that owns hundreds of papers around the country. In 2021 Alden purchased Tribune Media, the second-largest newspaper publisher in the United States. The effect on the company was instantaneous. In the *Atlantic*, McKay Coppins writes that its flagship paper, the *Chicago Tribune*, was "reduced to a newsroom the size of a Chipotle." He continues:

> *In the ensuing exodus, the paper lost the Metro columnist who had championed the occupants of a troubled public-housing complex, and the editor who maintained a homicide database that the police couldn't manipulate, and the photographer who had produced beautiful portraits of the state's undocumented immigrants, and the investigative reporter who'd helped expose the governor's offshore shell companies. When it was over, a quarter of the newsroom was gone.*

Coppins goes on to describe how the paper struggled to fulfill even basic functions:

> *After a powerful Illinois state legislator resigned amid bribery allegations, the paper didn't have a reporter in Springfield to follow the resulting scandal. And when Chicago suffered a brutal summer crime wave, the paper had no one on the night shift to listen to the police scanner.*

Alden Capital's gutting of Tribune is one of the most high-profile cases in recent years. But it's emblematic of what has happened around the country as smaller local newspapers have increasingly come to be owned by private equity firms, who treat their stewardship less like a long-term public service project and more like a short-term money making opportunity.

As Penelope Muse Abernathy, a journalist and academic who specializes in the study of news deserts, wrote last year in a report for the University of North Carolina about private equity:

> *Newspapers represent only a fraction of their vast business portfolios—ranging from golf courses to subprime lenders—worth hundreds of millions, even billions, of dollars. Their mission is to make money for their investors, so they operate with a short-term, earnings-first focus and are prepared to get rid of any holdings—including newspapers—that fail to produce what they judge to be an adequate profit.*

The incentives of these "new media barons," as Abernathy calls them, are fundamentally misaligned with those that create papers of quality and longevity.

The capitalist ownership of media has always carried with it perverse incentives to prioritize profits and use papers as a bully pulpit for the interests of the owner. (For more on that, see Nathan J. Robinson's 2023 *Current Affairs* article on "How Rupert Murdoch Destroyed the News.") But at the very least, newspaper owners in the past had reasons to invest in the long-term success of their media ventures, which required them to pay attention to the wants and needs of the public. This meant establishing credibility, expanding coverage, and hiring talented reporters. Private equity treats journalism as a pure, undifferentiated investment opportunity that can be picked up and dumped like corn futures or shares of Apple stock. Everything is reduced to a dollar amount on a ledger. Everything becomes expendable.

* * *

While recounting all of these examples, it's worth considering how they may have played out differently if the need for consistent profitability was not a factor. Nonprofits, of course, still need to pay the costs of operation and bring in some revenues, but the survival of these publications is not contingent on the need to return maximum profits for owners and shareholders. If the goal was only to cover the costs of operation, the incentive to maximize clicks, cut salaries and benefits, and reduce newsrooms to the bare minimums they need to function might still exist, but would be far less potent.

We see every day what nonprofit journalism can do. America's oldest nonprofit news organization, the Associated Press, shapes news coverage across the thousands of newsrooms that use its wire service. (Although it took an undeniable blow this year when the Gannett and McClatchy newspaper chains announced they'd be dropping the service.) *ProPublica,* a nonprofit investigative newsroom, has produced half a dozen Pulitzer Prize winning pieces since its inception in 2007 and broken critical stories exposing the audacious corruption of multiple Supreme Court justices. On a fraction of the budget, the *Intercept* has produced war reporting and investigations into the U.S. security state that surpass those of America's most storied newsrooms. Nonprofit news makes up the bulk of left-wing publishing in America. The *Nation,* the *American Prospect,* and *Jacobin* remain indispensable homes for thoughtful progressive opinion. Meanwhile, *Democracy Now!* and *Common Dreams* cover daily news for a progressive audience while managing to largely eschew the Democratic Party sycophancy of their for-profit competitors like MSNBC.

The stories described above show that journalism still remains largely trapped in the for-profit model. But although the vast majority of reporters still work at for-profit entities, there are signs that a formidable nonprofit news economy could be sprouting up, especially in the local sphere. According to the Institute for Nonprofit News, the number of nonprofit newsrooms grew by 17 percent in 2022 and the revenues they have brought in have kept up with their creation. For more than 80 percent of them, their revenues either stayed the same or grew between 2021 and 2022. In 2014, just six percent of the nation's statehouse press corps worked for nonprofits, according to Pew Research. By 2022, that number was up to 20 percent.

Some for-profit entities are shifting their models entirely. After more than a century of for-profit ownership, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Salt Lake Tribune* have both converted to nonprofit status. The *Inquirer*'s staff is now far larger than those at major papers in comparable metro areas which are still owned by private companies. It has also opened a new investigative partnership with Spotlight PA, which has carried out numerous in-depth, issue-focused reports of the sort that the for-profit model discourages. The *Salt Lake Tribune*, meanwhile, has found financial sustainability for the first time in recent memory and has increased its staff by 23 percent. It has even created a new "solutions-oriented" team dedicated specifically to covering issues that affect Utah's most disadvantaged communities.

Smaller papers have experienced a resurgence under nonprofit auspices as well. A collection of new philanthropic outfits—including the National Trust for Local News, Report for America, and the American Journalism Project—have emerged in the last decade to fund and revitalize local newsrooms that might otherwise face closure or buyouts. Earlier this year, the National Trust for Local News, which is dedicated to rescuing local news organizations from bankruptcy, purchased 22 ailing newspapers in Maine that were being targeted by

a notorious private equity firm. Another coalition of philanthropic organizations—including the Knight and McArthur foundations—have announced the "Press Forward Initiative," which will provide more than $500 million to local newsrooms around the country in hopes of reversing the trend of "news deserts."

But as a 2017 study by Rodney Benson, professor and chair of the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University, described it, nonprofit news as it currently exists is "a remedy, with shortcomings, to the journalism crisis." Nonprofit news initiatives are still far from eclipsing the power of for-profit companies. And these newsrooms are still far from self-sufficient, relying on foundations and grants for the majority of their funding, which means their existence is still largely dependent on the will of wealthy philanthropists.

Benson's study found that while the control of financial elites is slightly less pronounced at news foundations and nonprofits,

> *Project-based funding from foundations may skew media attention toward issues favored by donors. Media organizations dependent on project-based funding risk being captured by foundation agendas and are less able to investigate the issues they deem most important.*

We've seen this happen at NPR, once a renowned home for audio journalism. In recent years, the broadcaster's income has come largely from corporate sponsorships and donations from groups like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. As a consequence its outlook has become, as Kody Cava put it in *Current Affairs*, that of "a partisan news service with a sterile, professional tone that belies an underlying allegiance to a very narrow range of political viewpoints that are largely inoffensive to those in power."

Nonprofits are not immune from the pressures of the market, either. The *Texas Tribune*, once heralded as a savior of local media that inspired nonprofit ventures around the country, laid off 11 percent of its staff last year amid financial strain. And due to their more restricted budgets, nonprofit newsrooms also have accessibility problems that for-profits are less likely to have. Just to name one, many nonprofit newsrooms—even for local legacy papers—have excised their print editions in favor of entirely digital publications, which means that older community members accustomed to receiving a physical copy of the newspaper might struggle to make the transition to a new format.

With all of this said, many of these problems exist to an even worse extent in for-profit news. Ultimately, the status quo cannot last. For-profit newsrooms are terminally hemorrhaging revenues and employees, while the newsrooms that remain become shells of their former selves. Something must fill the void they leave behind, and nonprofit newsrooms are far superior to any other option.

But the success of nonprofits in their current form has a ceiling as long as they are subject to market dynamics. Turning the media industry over to a network of nonprofits may be a good short-term solution to reorient publications away from the profit model, but a long-term solution will require our society to fundamentally reimagine journalism. We must come to understand it not as a commodity or a luxury, but as a necessity for our communities to function. Like with housing, healthcare, education, and the other necessities of life, it needs to be freed from the private domain and reconsidered as a shared investment in the health of our society.

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On Pictures of Animals

BY **NATHAN J. ROBINSON**

Everyone loves animals! At least if they are in two dimensions. Children's picture books are full of mice and frogs and rabbits and monkeys. Kids watch *Peppa Pig* and *Daniel Tiger* and *Bluey*. They wear Hello Kitty backpacks and have dinosaur stickers. When you grow up, you are somewhat less surrounded by images of animals, and most of us no longer cover our binders in animal stickers. (I still do.) But even as our backpacks become much more boring, we still love animals. We love a video of an adorable sloth, or a cat attacking a Christmas tree, or a beluga whale appearing to enjoy a mariachi band. We love our pets and often describe them as "family."

But we have not constructed a society that treats animals very well. In 2019, the U.N. released a 1,500-page report called the "Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services." As the *New York Times* noted, the report found that human "activities like farming, logging, poaching, fishing and mining are altering the natural world at a rate 'unprecedented in human history.'" Human-caused climate change and the development of roads and cities have also altered or destroyed the habitats of species. As a result, an astonishing one million species may be on the verge of extinction thanks largely to human activity. Since 1970, across North America, bird populations have declined by 3 billion. Animal populations worldwide have declined by an average of 70 percent, and in many places, most of the animals that once existed are simply gone, in a devastating phenomenon that has been called the "sixth mass extinction." The changes are shockingly rapid, since they have occurred not over millions of years but in the course of a single human lifetime.

Then, of course, there's factory farming. Hundreds of millions of animals are killed every day for food, and usually kept in appalling conditions. They suffer virtually nonstop from their births to their premature deaths. They live out their short lives in cages so small that they cannot move. Their dwellings are filthy. They are isolated from other individuals, tend to get sick, and rarely get fresh air before their deaths. This is a system where sentient beings experience torture on an unimaginable scale.

I am constantly struck by the disjunction between the images of happy little animals in children's picture books and cartoons and CGI films and the bleak reality of life for pigs and cows in the real world. It makes the children's books feel kind of dark and disturbing to me. Nobody wants to be a killjoy, and even the most moralistic leftist (and I'm just about that myself) may hesitate to spoil the fun of a toddler reading *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* by pointing out that, in fact, the majority of birds in a lot of places are gone thank to our wanton destruction of the natural world. But sometime we've got to confront the sheer weirdness of the contrast between our celebration of animals in images versus what we actually do to them.

Other than pets, many of us don't encounter animals much in our day to day lives. Developers purge new neighborhoods of all wildlife, making places where almost nothing non-human can live, other than the carefully maintained grass and a decorative tree here and there. Nature is shamelessly bulldozed and paved over, and conservatives have (ironically) long viewed many conservation efforts as a particularly annoying form of government meddling. One of their classic tales of bureaucracy gone mad is when a shopping mall or hotel is held up because some endangered species of owl has been found in a tree on the property. Rush Limbaugh was frank about how he thought such situations should be dealt with:

If a spotted owl can't adapt, does the earth really need that particular species so much that hardship to human beings is worth enduring in the process of saving it? Thousands of species that roamed the earth are now extinct... There's no reason to put the timber business out of commission just because of 2,200 pairs of one kind of owl [at the expense of] 30,000 jobs. That's the wrong set of priorities.

While it's rare to hear it put so explicitly, a kind of savage Darwinism runs through right-wing ideology generally, the idea that strength is virtue and the weak deserve their fates. Still, Limbaugh almost deserved a certain amount of credit for his absence of hypocrisy. He didn't pretend to think animals were worth trying to save. If job creation necessitated mass killing, well, so much the worse for other species. That's life.

Personally, however, I can never shake the conviction that there is something deeply and terribly wrong about the mass killing of other species. Carol J. Adams, in the feminist-vegetarian classic *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, describes a common experience that turns people against meat-eating: the realization that there is a logical disconnect between the attitude we have toward some animals and the attitude we have toward others:

At the end of my first year of Yale Divinity School, I returned home to Forestville, New York, the small town where I had grown up. As I was unpacking I heard a furious knocking at the door. An agitated neighbor greeted me as I opened the door."Someone has just shot your horse!" he exclaimed. Thus began my political and spiritual journey toward a feminist-vegetarian critical theory. It did not require that I travel outside this small village of my childhood—though I have; it involved running up to the back pasture behind our barn, and encountering the dead body of a pony I had loved. Those barefoot steps through the thorns and manure of an old

apple orchard took me face to face with death. That evening, still distraught about my pony's death, I bit into a hamburger and stopped in midbite. I was thinking about one dead animal yet eating another dead animal. What was the difference between this dead cow and the dead pony whom I would be burying the next day? I could summon no ethical defense for a favoritism that would exclude the cow from my concern because I had not known her. I now saw meat differently.

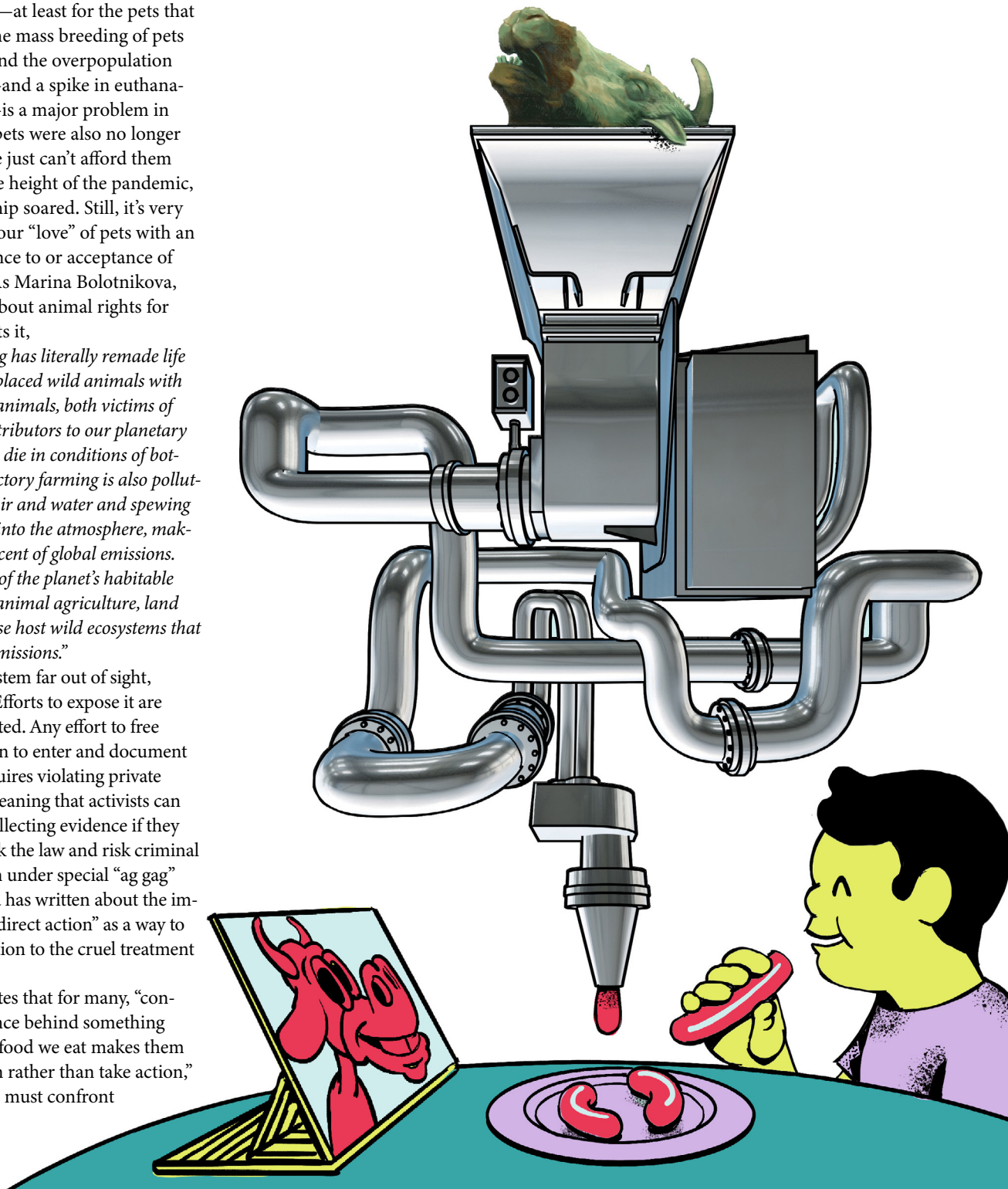
The love and care showed for pets seems almost boundless—at least for the pets that are wanted. But the mass breeding of pets is a cruelty, too. And the overpopulation of cats and dogs—and a spike in euthanasia rates in 2023—is a major problem in U.S. cities. Many pets were also no longer wanted (or people just can't afford them anymore) after the height of the pandemic, when pet ownership soared. Still, it's very hard to reconcile our "love" of pets with an outright indifference to or acceptance of factory farming. As Marina Bolotnikova, who has written about animal rights for this magazine, puts it,

"Factory farming has literally remade life on Earth. It has replaced wild animals with billions of farmed animals, both victims of and unwitting contributors to our planetary crisis, that live and die in conditions of bottomless cruelty. Factory farming is also polluting communities' air and water and spewing greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere, making up 15 to 20 percent of global emissions. More than a third of the planet's habitable land is devoted to animal agriculture, land that could otherwise host wild ecosystems that sequester carbon emissions."

We keep this system far out of sight, and out of mind. Efforts to expose it are ruthlessly prosecuted. Any effort to free the victims, or even to enter and document the treatment, requires violating private property rights, meaning that activists can only succeed in collecting evidence if they are willing to break the law and risk criminal punishment (often under special "ag gag" laws). Bolotnikova has written about the importance of such "direct action" as a way to bring public attention to the cruel treatment of animals.

Bolotnikova notes that for many, "confronting the violence behind something so intimate as the food we eat makes them want to shut down rather than take action," but argues that we must confront the truth and that it can be liberating when we do. Is it really possible to live indefinitely in denial, looking at cheery images of cartoon animals, while endeavoring constantly to suppress recognition of the horror on which our food system is built? Even if it were possible, would any person of conscience wish to live in this state of moral dissonance? Far too many injustices persist because it's too easy to mentally wall them off and act as if they are not happening.

The way we treat non-human creatures on this planet is often appalling. It's also destroying our own species' chance at a healthy future on Earth. Every creature on the planet should be seen as special and worthy of life. Instead of loving some creatures, we've got to love them all. This means radically rethinking our treatment of animals—and the food we eat every day.



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The road to becoming the world's greatest Nohopémon Master is not an easy one, because things get worse every day. Wipe the tears from your eyes and meet some of the lovable monsters featured in the upcoming games, Nohopémon BloodRed and Nohopémon OilBlack.

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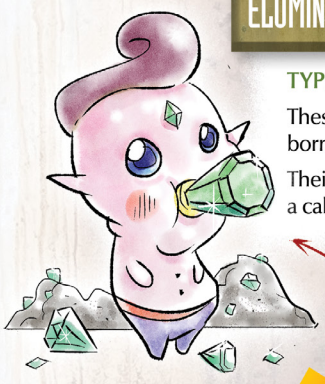
ELOMINE



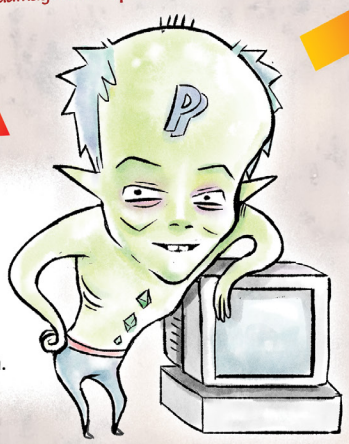
TYPE: GROUND

These cave-dwelling babies are born deep within an emerald mine.

Their bejeweled pacifiers release a calming chemical into their brains.

PRO TIP: Push it down the stairs to deal 4x damage. **It's super effective!**

ELOPAL

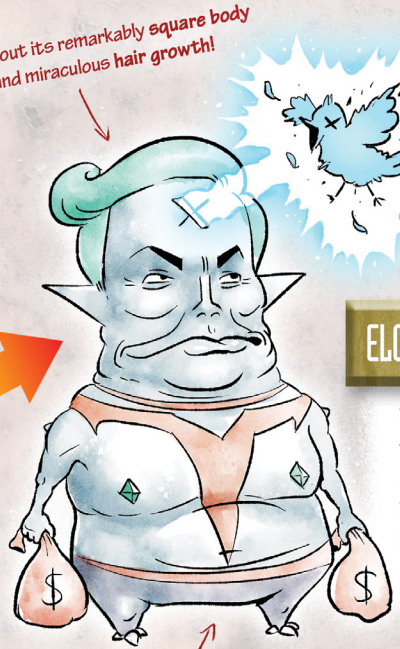


TYPE: GROUND/GRASS

Elopal's smooth, beautiful head is nothing to be ashamed of.

Its "Invention" ability allows it to steal the creations of other Nohopémon to claim as its own.

Check out its remarkably **square body** and miraculous **hair growth!**



Special moves:
- REBRAND
- LOOK INTO IT
- SUMMON NAZIS

ELOPLUG

TYPE: GROUND/FIGHTING

This hyper-reproductive Nohopémon spawns millions of Elomines every year without ever meeting them.

It sends a "Cry-laugh" emoji before rushing into battle.

If this Nohopémon sexually harasses you, it will buy you **a new horse!**

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Nohopémon researchers believe the process of entering and exiting Nohopéballs only causes **slight pain** to the creatures.

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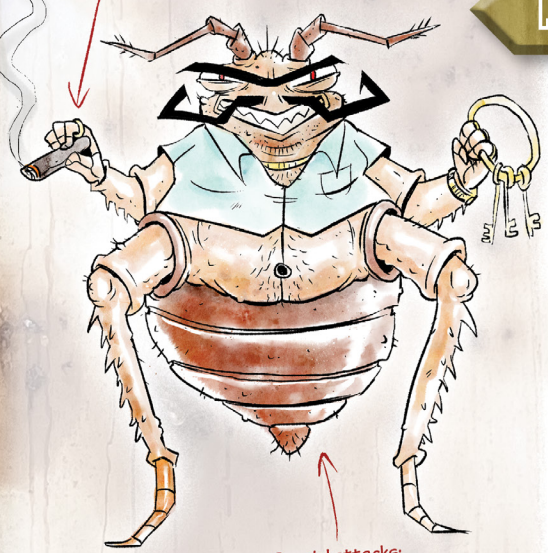
Ultra-powerful thumbs from **excessive twiddling** between feedings



Special attacks:
- ENTRY WITHOUT NOTICE
- RENT INCREASE

TYPE: BUG/DARK

Lantlort feeds once a month, using its sharp teeth to extract tasty blood from its victims.

It is said that Lantlort has a key to every rental unit, including ours in the real world.

GREENWASH

TYPE: ELECTRIC/POISON

The Nohopémon Company created Greenwash as part of its commitment to green energy.

With its help, we hope to supply the region with up to 0.2% renewable energy by 2080!

What **beautiful green infrastructure!** Not only is it inspiring, it'll bring **good returns to our shareholders** while affirming our progressive environmental values.

Just shut your little fuckin mouth about this part. You didn't see anything. Know your place and mind your own business, kid. Shut up.

PHETTABOY

TYPE: NORMAL

Peaceful Phettaboys roam the hills and forests calling for legal weed and good jobs.

Its signature hoodie-like exo-skeleton shields it from most attacks and criticisms.

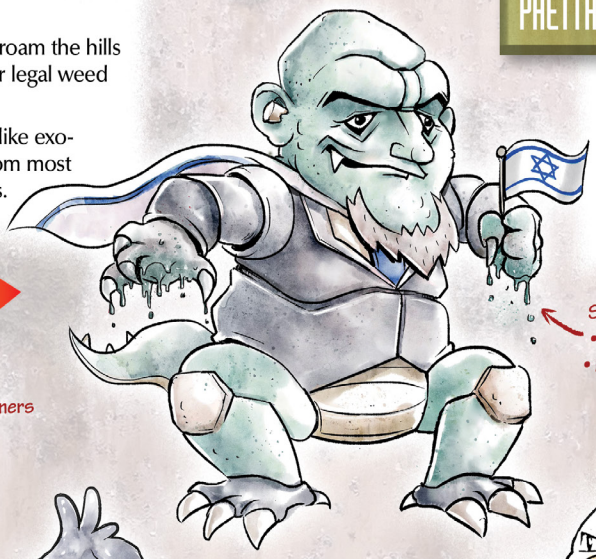
Watch out! Phettaboy may threaten jogging Trainers with its deadly **SHOTGUN** attack.

PHETTAMAN

TYPE: DARK

The fearsome, ogre-like Phettaman remains faithful to its allies, regardless of whatever atrocities they commit.

Its earplugs help muffle the blood-curdling screams of innocents.



Special moves:
- HEEL TURN
- FLAG TAUNT

FUN FACT #2
Nohopémon battles exist in a legal **gray area.**

SLICKDUCK

TYPE: WATER/POISON

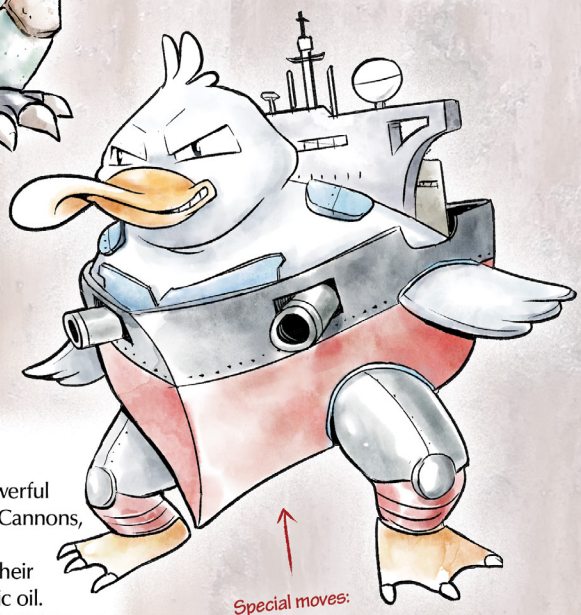
Slickduck was born in a lake full of crude oil. It's adapted to live in an environment plagued with constant pollution.

No amount of dish soap can cleanse its sludge-covered body.

DUCHTANK

TYPE: WATER/STEEL

With the help of its powerful chest-mounted Sludge Cannons, Ducktank defeats rival Nohopémon by filling their habitats with highly toxic oil.



Special moves:
- OIL SPILL
- CATASTROPHY
- SUBSIDY

Don't look directly into its eerie, glowing eyes!

MISTABEEST

TYPE: GHOST

Known for its haunting smile, Mistabeest lures children into the woods with promises of chocolate and free money.

Citizens are advised to chase it out of town and pummel it to death with rocks.

I'm giving a million dollars to the first 1,000 kids who sub to my channel and buy one of my patented "Mistabeest Burgers!"

NOHOPÉMON TRADING CARD GAME

POOR KIDS NEED NOT APPLY!
The new "pay-to-win" Nohopémon Trading Card Game ensures that the kids from the richest families will always win on the playground.

FUN FACT #3
When all 151 Nohopémon are captured or bought, that summons the **True God**. Then, canonically, the God fights & destroys the **demiurge** that cursed our fallen world.

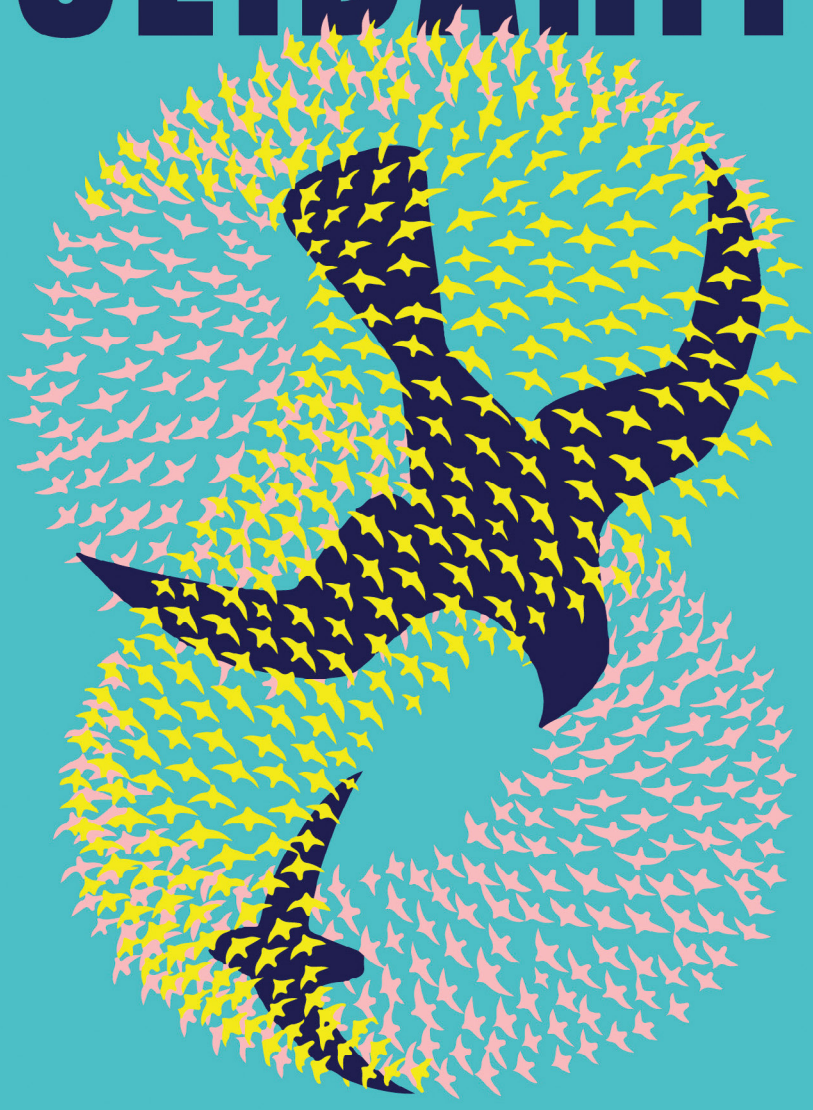
Do you have what it takes to buy 'em all? Take out a high interest personal loan and begin your Nohopémon purchasing journey!

Buy both games! Buy Nohopémon light-up shoes, Trapper Keepers and hygiene products! Invest in the trading cards! Kick and scream until your parents buy you every single product in triplicate! Don't be afraid to lie, cheat, steal, bargain, beg, rob, and kill for these beautiful creatures and our products.

Then, and only then, you may become a **NOHOPÉMON MASTER!**

Writing & art by Shawn Vulliez & Matt Beaudoin

SOLIDARITY



The Past, Present, and Future
of a World-Changing Idea

LEAH HUNT-HENDRIX
& ASTRA TAYLOR

Political philosophy is full of talk about liberty and justice. But in *Solidarity: The Past, Present, and Future of a World-Changing Idea*, Leah Hunt-Hendrix and Astra Taylor argue that another concept is just as crucial when we consider how society ought to be ordered and what we owe one another: solidarity. A solidaristic ethic means seeing other people's fates as intertwined with your own and being committed to fighting for the interests of those whose problems you do not necessarily share. It has underpinned the socialist project from Eugene Debs to Bernie Sanders, and as Hunt-Hendrix and Taylor show in the book, it has deep historical roots. They trace the origins of the idea of solidarity, showing how it evolved as a crucial part of left thought and practice, and argue that what we need today is a reinvigorated commitment to it. They explain what it would mean to practice it and the demands it makes of us. In this interview, Leah Hunt-Hendrix shows us the history of solidarity and what it means.

SOLIDARITY: THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

NATHAN J. ROBINSON

In this book, you point out something that I hadn't noticed before, which is that the concepts of justice, of democracy—or fairness, equality, or liberty—have a voluminous academic literature on them. But the concept of solidarity, while equally important, is not discussed as often.

LEAH HUNT-HENDRIX

Exactly. Solidarity is always thrown around—people sign their emails "in solidarity." I got such an email today. But in the stacks of the bookshelves in the libraries, there's very, very little about it. And so, I started to wonder, why has this concept been neglected? The French motto of the revolution was "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity." I found an article that traced it back to ancient Rome, where it was a concept of mutually held debts and solidarity debts. From there, it was translated when the French adopted some of Roman law- through the Napoleonic codes; it got transferred into French legal thought. From there, almost by analogy, it got transferred into the political discourse that we have debts to each other. And so, we should perhaps pay taxes and have some kind of social insurance and public goods because we owe this to each other—we owe it to the future generations, and we've inherited so much from past generations. This notion of collective debts, and solidarity being our repayment of those debts, became actually part of the founding of the welfare state and part of the justification for

that. This is such a rich history, yet it's so under-discussed. We felt it was worth spending some time to just recover that history.

ROBINSON

It's incredible. In the book, you write that in the 19th century, this concept really flourished. This was used by many people, to the point where—I love this quote—"The concept of solidarity became as ubiquitous as smokestacks and steamships in the 19th century." And you quote a French writer in 1914: "Now these days, not a book, a newspaper, a meeting, a dress, or a formal speech is given in which the word solidarity is not repeated." So, this idea, at one point, really flourished.

HUNT-HENDRIX

Yes, it did. There was even a group called the Solidarists—almost a political group—and they were part of organizing towards the welfare state. Émile Durkheim was part of that. He wrote a book on the division of labor in society in which he breaks down his concept of solidarity. The big question at the time of the Industrial Revolution, when the grip of the Church was being challenged, was, What can hold us together with the decline of God and King? Durkheim optimistically believed that maybe the division of labor, art, and the interdependence of each of us making up a different widget in the factory would somehow hold us together, or make it clear that we were interdependent and had duties to each other. And over the course of his life, he became less optimistic about that. But that was the question at the time. And solidarity was raised as a potential solution. Perhaps we needed to construct solidarity in new ways given the decline of these previous systems.

ROBINSON

Help us better understand what this idea is. You mentioned this idea of a collective debt and a kind of interdependence. As I understand from reading your book, it's also a concept that stands in contrast to ideas that divide human beings into groups: racism, hierarchy, nationalism, individualism. Solidarity is the counterpoint to these.

HUNT-HENDRIX

Well, I think solidarity in its most basic sense is a neutral term. It's just the way a group holds together. It can be positive or negative. There's reactionary solidarity—based on shared race, ruling class solidarity, white supremacist solidarity—versus what we call transformative solidarity, which is trying to extend the bounds of a collective identity to be broader and more inclusive. In a historical philosophical tradition, we lay out the idea of solidarity being about creating a collectivity that has some difference within it. It's not unity, necessarily. So yes, it's always doing the work of creating new collectivities, but those can be more exclusionary or more inclusive.

ROBINSON

You survey the history of solidarity in practice across various movements from abolitionism to anticolonial struggles to the U.S. labor movement. But as you've mentioned, there is a kind of solidarity in nationalism. It's the idea that I see my fate as bound up with those that I consider to be in my particular group. You distinguish that from the idea of transformative solidarity, which is embodied in activist movements. What are the characteristics of activist groups that give them the quality of transformative solidarity?

HUNT-HENDRIX

I probably got my real start in activism during Occupy Wall Street. That's actually where Astra and I met as well. Occupy was this wild eruption that had a focus on class inequality. It had a really interesting framework of the 99 percent versus the 1 percent. It was a really intentional construction of collective identity, saying that 99 percent of us have something in common, and the 1 percent are those we don't have a lot in common with. So, it invited people to come together across all sorts of different professional, racial, and national backgrounds and to see themselves as unified and part of a shared political project.

ROBINSON

This is striking when you think back to Occupy Wall Street. Obviously, they were so successful in getting that slogan, the 99 percent versus the 1 percent, into the discourse. We take it for granted. You hear something enough times, and it loses its sense of being remarkable. When you go back and draw attention to it, you think about what it means in a country where we are so politically and economically divided. To say, let's have the largest possible group of people who have a shared interest, work together—it really is quite powerful. Your book tries to tease out what this means as an idea. But I think many people very much experience this as just a feeling that you know when you feel it, and if you really feel it, it can send chills down your spine. I felt it with Occupy Wall Street. I felt it again with Bernie. You quote Sanders saying, Fight for someone you don't know, and fight for someone who doesn't have the same problems that you do. You feel this powerful sense of solidarity with them.

HUNT-HENDRIX

There is something incredibly powerful about collective action. Especially in a society that's so focused on the individual, on celebrity, or on the social media influencer or the individual entrepreneur, it's rare that we get to really feel that effervescence of taking action together. It's so powerful. Of course, nationalism also has that element to it. There can be that kind of nationalist, patriotic effervescence, and it can lead people to war and is often stoked by creating an "other." Benedict Anderson, someone that we drew on also in the book, has written about nationalism. How is it that we all feel American? We don't know each other. What do we

have in common? National identity is something that's created and sustained through different practices and rituals, things that are very mundane, like going to the DMV or getting your driver's license, but also through media. He talks a lot about the role of the media in creating a sense of national identity. That's one of our real challenges today. Our media landscape is so divisive as opposed to unifying. Nationalism is not the thing we're trying to lift up here, but people do need to feel like they're a part of some kind of collective project.

ROBINSON

This idea of seeing yourself as having a shared interest with other people, even if their struggle is not exactly your own, has been really important in some of the most powerful movements in history. You go back to abolitionism and look at people like John Brown, who was obviously not enslaved himself. You cite Friedrich Engels, who came from wealth and was the son of a factory owner. Why did he need to be involved in the struggle for socialism when it wasn't going to benefit him financially? In fact, Engels subsidized Karl Marx. These were people who felt a strong sense of identification with others, an interdependence to where they had to act, regardless of whether it was going to bring immediate personal benefit to them.

Let's talk about problems with philanthropy. You go through the history of Rockefeller and Carnegie and all these people who believe on some level that they want to improve the lives of others but who lack what you describe as solidarity. How is solidarity different from those other approaches that still profess to want to elevate and help people?

HUNT-HENDRIX

We call those the semblances of solidarity: things like altruism, charity, benevolence. Even the word benevolence, like goodwill, is one person's will towards another. One very prominent movement these days is called Effective Altruism. The concept of altruism is about your moral purity, in a way, whereas solidarity is really relational; it's about both people being active agents and protagonists, not one person being the donor and the other the recipient. So, there's a way in which philanthropy can be dominating and can really impose the will of the philanthropist on the recipient. In my early experience in this field, I would notice funders would offer a grant to an organization on the condition that they use it for a certain project. And the organization would quietly say, that's not really what we wanted to do, or that actually pulls us away from our core work, and it could have the power to change the mission of the organization. We are in a situation where most nonprofit organizations need funding.

ROBINSON

You're making a distinction: what kinds of support are you giving to people, and are you approaching people as equals? That seems to be a really important part of solidarity. Do we all feel bound together with everyone contributing?

HUNT-HENDRIX

And see our fates as intertwined. The effective altruists may send malaria nets to countries in Africa, but they aren't necessarily concerned with the dynamics that created the situation where malaria continues to exist in Africa but not here. What, potentially, was the United States' role in that? There's a real absence of politics, power, and history, and just a sense that I have these resources now, and I can give them away. But the recipient is not seen as an agent who has decision-making power or political agency.

ROBINSON

As I mentioned earlier, you define and theorize solidarity in the book, but it is one of those things where you know it when you see it, and it's best understood through seeing examples of it in action. We're recording this just a few days after the young Air Force member Aaron Bushnell self-immolated in front of the Israeli embassy to protest the Gaza genocide. Obviously, that's an extreme step to take. As I was reading your book, I was thinking about this guy. He's not Palestinian, and I don't know that he has Palestinian relatives, but he is a person who saw himself, his fate, as bound up with whatever happens to Gaza. He saw himself as complicit—he said he felt complicit—and said he had a debt. It's a rare person who feels that way, but that does seem to be the core of what solidarity is.

HUNT-HENDRIX

Yes, exactly. I think that we are all complicit in the actions of our government, and our government is currently funding Israel's war on Gaza. There are many, many people, Jewish Americans and Jewish Israelis, who have expressed real solidarity and are doing so much to try to bring about a ceasefire.

ROBINSON

In some ways, you are thinking of solidarity as the antithesis of self-interest and individualism. But on the other hand, there is a way in which solidarity is in our self-interest. With the Bernie Sanders campaign, with everyone coming together to work on a vision of what we could achieve together, it's true that people were fighting for people they didn't know—even if you don't have student debt, you believed that student debt was an injustice. It was also true that in a country with people so lonely and atomized as this one, even if you didn't have the particular problems that were being addressed by the public policy, being part of a solidaristic movement just totally transforms your life. You meet and get to know people, you have experiences you never would have had, and you don't sit alone scrolling through the news.

HUNT-HENDRIX

I think there is a real aspect of self-interest to solidarity. Political philosopher Danielle Allen talks about rivalist self-interest versus equitable self-interest. Rivalist self-interest is very focused on competition and zero-sum, but equitable self-interest is the way in which we all benefit from each other benefiting. So, I'd benefit from having a community that is healthy, safe, and thriving. The idea is that we lift all boats, but you see yourself in the boat as well.

ROBINSON

We've talked about how activist movements succeed through transformative solidarity. But I want to talk about a couple of the implications. You do challenge readers by saying that on the Left we need to be careful about the tendency to call out, denounce, and cast people out of our movements for their transgressions. Obviously, you have to have your lines of who you will and won't have in your movement. But an organizing and solidaristic approach requires a great deal of empathy. You challenge social justice movements and progressive activists to make sure that the idea of solidarity is real. It's not just a word, but it's also not necessarily easy to show solidarity.

HUNT-HENDRIX

We definitely need accountability and to have lines and to help people change when they cross those lines, but I think our movements can be quick to be exclusive. The Left can tend to self-marginalize and just feel unapproachable. Personally, I was raised Evangelical, and I recently went back to visit my parents in Dallas. We went to church, and right when we walked in the door, there were greeters just pulling you in and telling you about all the things that you could sign up for—this singles group, the men's group, the parents group—and it was very welcoming. I don't endorse their theology, philosophy, or politics, but I think there's something to learn from that. Also, I think a lot of people on the Left struggle with burnout after being in the movement for a while because the standards are high and the work is long. How do we become a movement that is nourishing and healing and rejuvenating and makes people want to come back for more? That's the challenge.

ROBINSON

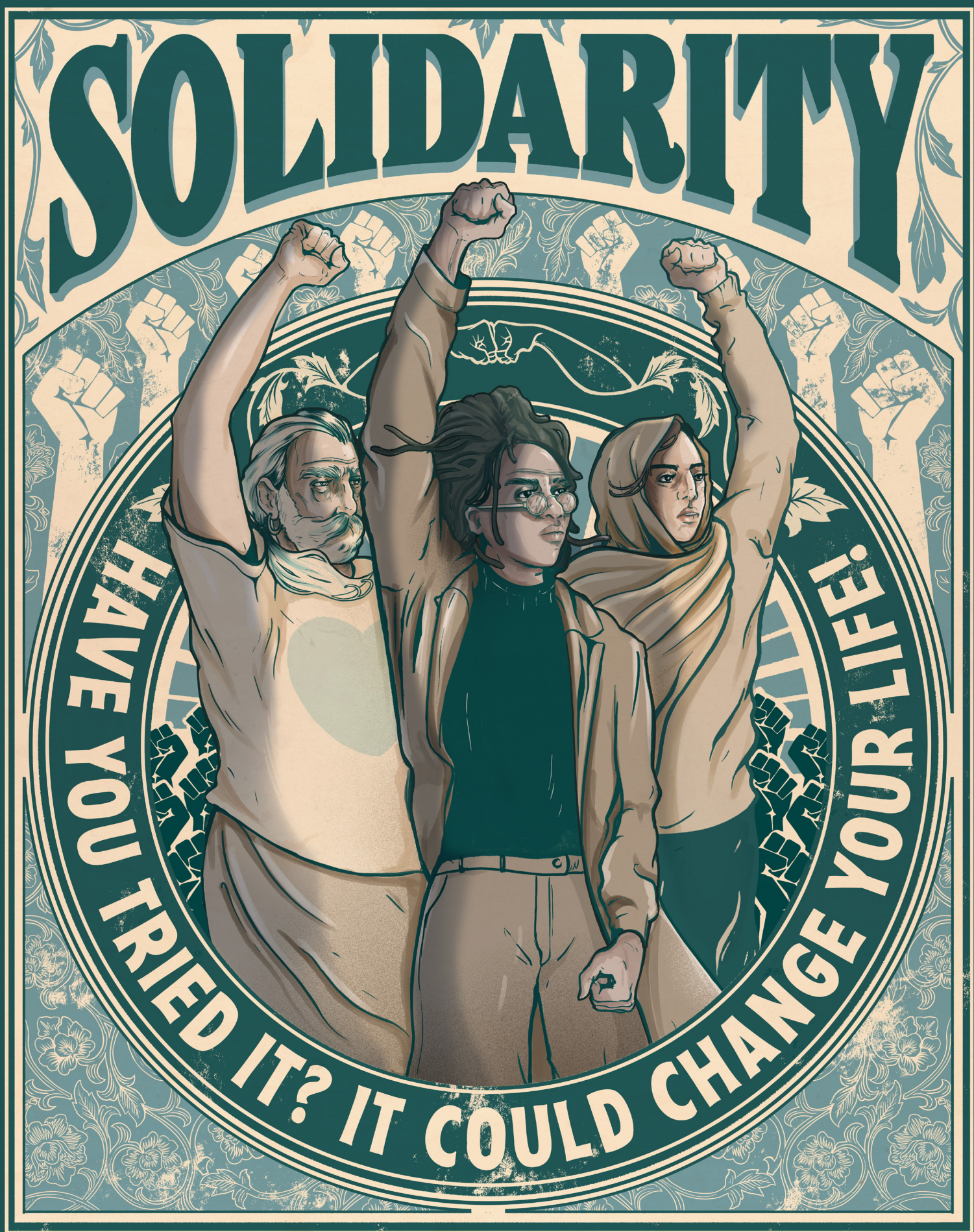
I recently wrote an article about the 1930s *New Masses* magazine. It was incredible. They used to have things like the socialist dance nights, book clubs, and all sorts of things to bring people in.

In the book's conclusion, you talk about the virtues that accompany solidarity. You say that solidarity should require us to look within ourselves and think about who we are and to try and embody these virtues that you list. Could you tell us a little bit more about that?

HUNT-HENDRIX

I'm sure many of your listeners and readers think about how they might become better writers, better athletes, better at whatever they want to pursue. So I think we all do understand that it takes work to cultivate different skills and sensibilities, and I think that's also true of our moral sensibilities, about how we treat each other, and the kind of people we are in the world.

Part of what society does is to cultivate certain kinds of people. Capitalism cultivates us as consumers. We need to be aware of that and realize that we have some control over what qualities we cultivate in ourselves. Things like humility, hospitality, and courage are things we want to try to intentionally foster. ✣


SOLIDARITY
HAVE YOU TRIED IT? IT COULD CHANGE YOUR LIFE!

the Illustrators

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