

Fixing All The World's Disasters, One Article At A Time

CURRENT AFFAIRS

\$12.95

VOL. 9, ISSUE 3

MAY/JUNE 2024



GRAFFITI

Put it everywhere!

LULA

What's his deal?

CARS

We're against 'em.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

ARE YOU MAD ABOUT SOMETHING? IT'S PROBABLY THE FAULT OF WOKENESS.

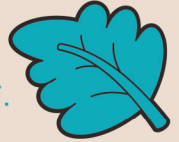
We're Not Mad Enough At The DUTCH

LIST OF DUTCH CRIMES:

EAST INDIA COMPANY
TULIP MANIA
AFRIKANERS
WOODEN SHOES
MAYONNAISE ON FRIES



NO ANIMALS WERE HARMED IN THE MAKING OF THIS ISSUE. PLANTS, HOWEVER, WERE VICIOUSLY MAIMED AND SHAMELESSLY DEVOURED BY THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF.



OUR SECOND JOB AS A LAB-GROWN MEAT BOOTLEGGER

Lab-grown meat is now illegal within the state of Florida. The policy, of course, is ridiculous. Why would someone want their meat to suffer, if a cruelty-free alternative could be created? We note here that the new law creates a new job opportunity for lab-grown meat bootleggers and smugglers. Because *Current Affairs* subscriptions do not cover all of the bills, this magazine is in constant need of new "side hustles." As such, we have deputized half a dozen of the *Current Affairs* newbies to supplement our revenue by hauling vans containing hundreds of outlets of Grade B lab-grown meat from New Orleans to Tallahassee, where the outlets will be sold on the black market. We mention this here in order to plead with our readers: if you encounter our team of smugglers, please aid them however you can, and please lie to the police concerning their whereabouts. You know we'd do the same for you.

TELL YOUR FRIENDS ABOUT OUR MAGAZINE!

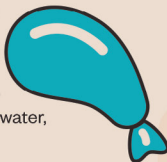
Current Affairs is entirely funded by readers. That means to sustain ourselves and improve ourselves, we always need subscribers! Consider passing this magazine on to a friend, or better yet, getting them a gift subscription at <http://currentaffairs.org/subscribe>

SUMMER REMINDER:

Water balloons can be filled with **any** liquid, not just water.

SOME IDEAS:

Canola oil, hot cheese, gazpacho soup, barbecue sauce, sparkling water, gasoline, carrot juice



A SPECIAL SHOUTOUT

To *Current Affairs* podcast subscribers "Peter Fishbeast" and "Commie Poison-Blood Vermin" — you both have terrifying usernames, but we're sure you're delightful people!

Thanks also to the reader who called us the most "august" left publication.

IT'S THE SUMMER!

Have yourself a sno ball, why don't ya?
You deserve it! Give yourself a treat.
Don't get too hot out there!

REMEMBER TO DON YOUR PROTECTIVE GOGGLES:

Any seasoned magazine reader knows that the bright colors contained within can cause severe damage to the retinas. This is of paramount importance for reading *Current Affairs*, which utilizes the entire expanse of the color pallet with abandon. Protective goggles are not included with this issue, but you can find some at the nearest Magazine Surplus store.

[NOTE: We have applied a razor thin protective layer to this page so that you can comfortably read this warning. We wish we could apply it to the entire magazine, but it is obscenely expensive.]



- ✓ Slothlike hair and coat
 - ✓ Didn't get out of bed for weeks at a time
 - ✓ Sang: "I'm Only Sleeping," "I'm So Tired," "Slow Down"
- THE EVIDENCE IS CLEAR!

Hear The Magazine

Longtime subscribers will recall that in these pages, we have encouraged readers to pursue the full range of sensory experiences this magazine is capable of providing. The typical, superficial consumer (the kind who leafs through the pages in a supermarket check-out line) has a tendency to assume that *Current Affairs* is a mere set of words and pictures, and that "to experience *Current Affairs*" means "to read the words and admire the pictures." Not so. You can eat the magazine, sniff the magazine, and stroke the magazine gently. Every one of the five senses can be affected by *Current Affairs*. "All five?" you ask. "Surely not sound." Ah, but good reader, have you tried? Have you ever taken *Current Affairs* to a quiet place, put your ear close, and really listened? You may be surprised at what you hear!



Expect Streetcar Delays

Current Affairs is the only national political magazine published in the great city of New Orleans, Louisiana. This insulates us from the pernicious influence of Trendy New York Bullshit, but it has its downsides. One of them is that instead of a public transit system, New Orleans has a set of charming 19th-century trolley cars that go "ting-a-ling" and amble along at four miles per hour. That's on a good day. On a bad day, the streetcars just give up altogether and decide not to arrive. Even when one does manage to catch one, there are other hazards.

In philosophy, the "trolley problem" is a moral hypothetical used to illustrate the difference between competing systems of ethics. In New Orleans, the "trolley problem" could be any one of a dozen different things. Sometimes a peacock will stand on the line, staring down the driver, causing a delay while the contest of wills is fought out. (See "A 7-Foot Bird Tests the Limits of Tolerance in New Orleans," *Wall Street Journal*, May 3, 2021.) Sometimes the driver will simply abandon the streetcar and go into a nearby bar for a drink. (This happened to the editor-in-chief.) Streetcars occasionally derail and plummet into the Mississippi, or get distracted and join a parade.

For the serious magazine editor committed to the task of pumping out Content, all of these inconveniences are intensely annoying. More importantly, they delay the Work, and when the Work is delayed, our beloved readers do not receive their periodical in a timely fashion. The tardiness of these issues (the March-April arrived, we are told, sometime in late May) cannot *entirely* be blamed on the New Orleans streetcar system. But it is safe to say that if America were a functional country (which it is not), it is more probable that *Current Affairs* would be an impeccably well-functioning magazine (which, to our regret, it is not). Please stay patient, and if you need us you'll find us at the streetcar stop, perspiring profusely.



THE FIRST ANNUAL *CURRENT AFFAIRS* "WORST MAGAZINE IN AMERICA" AWARD GOES TO:

THE ATLANTIC

And it wasn't close! From trans panic stories and complaints about wokeness to relentless warmongering and attacks on protesters, the magazine combines the worst of neoconservatism with the worst of neoliberalism. Congrats, *Atlantic*! You are terrible!

"THE LATE, GREAT HANNIBAL LECTER. HE'S A WONDERFUL MAN."
- DONALD TRUMP, 45TH PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

MISPLACED SECRET MEMORANDUM

We have misplaced the secret *Current Affairs* memorandum explaining the magazine's plan for total conquest of the media industry. There is only one copy and the author of the memorandum has since died. If we accidentally put it in your issue of the magazine, could you please send it back?

GET RID OF YOUR PROBLEMS BY BANNING ALL MENTION OF THEM

Florida recently experienced record high heat, surprising and alarming climate scientists. Key West, for instance, registered a heat index of 115, equalling the highest mark on record for any time of year. As the *Guardian* recently noted, "hundreds of the world's leading climate scientists expect global temperatures to rise to at least 2.5C (4.5F) above preindustrial levels this century, blasting past internationally agreed targets and causing catastrophic consequences for humanity and the planet." So, naturally, Florida governor Ron DeSantis has taken swift action, namely by signing a bill eliminating references to climate change from state law.

The governor's policy follows a well-established metaphysical principle: if you don't think about something, it doesn't exist. Reality as it exists is created through perception, and so if no one perceives the reality of an entity, it ceases to be real. Therefore, the most sensible way to deal with climate change is to never speak about it. Even as it gets hotter. And hotter. And hotter.

We intend to implement the DeSantis method in dealing with other problems in our daily lives. Illness? Just pretend you're well. If you still feel sick, well, you're not pretending convincingly enough. Debt? Just pretend you have money. You're only poor because you're acting like you're poor. If you act like you're rich, and nobody can tell the difference, then, well, you've solved your problem, haven't you? We should be grateful to our politicians for endeavoring daily to prove the efficacy of this foolproof strategy.



BANNED WORDS OF THE MONTH: IMBRICATIONS ORTHOGONAL CONCOMITANT

THE CURRENT AFFAIRS GUIDE TO REAL MASCULINITY

Real men: don't read books, don't use deodorant, don't have any body hair, but do have lots of facial hair, don't use words (especially not pronouns), don't have jobs (undignified), don't have sex (soft emotional activity), spend all day preparing for WAR, only eat MEAT FROM A THING THAT SUFFERED IN LIFE AND WAS SLAUGHTERED.



TABLE OF

BRITISH
IMPERIALISM
P.42

PRIVACY
P.48

GRAFFITI
P.6

NYT BOOK
REVIEW
P.14



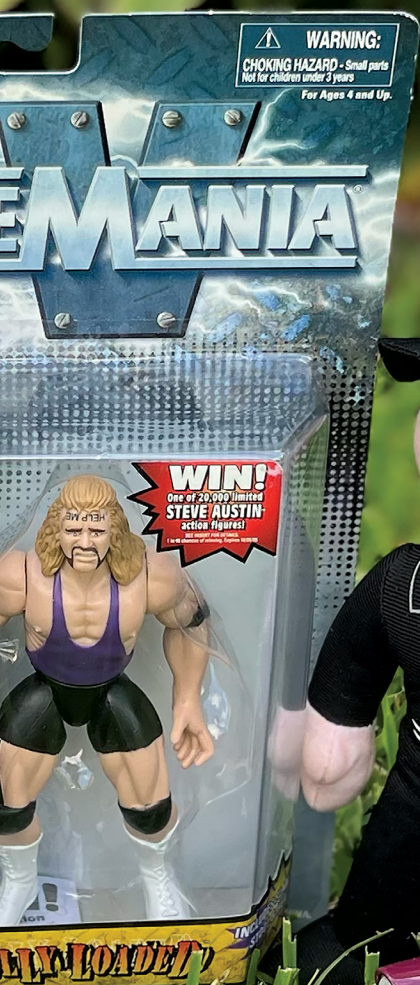
CONTENTS

WRESTLERS
P.26

CAPITALISM
P.56

CARS
P.66

LULA
P.32





TAROT

FELS

LINE

DEFENSE

9415

O

F

00

GRAFFITI

BY

ALEX SKOPIC

COACH

GOZOLI

ILLUSTRATION

NICK SIROTICH

RT

READ

WER

BLEK

BR

CURRENT

AFFAIRS

AND THE SIGN SAID "THE WORDS OF THE PROPHETS
ARE WRITTEN ON THE SUBWAY WALLS, AND TENEMENT HALLS"
SIMON AND GARFUNKEL, "THE SOUND OF SILENCE"

IN RECENT YEARS, CITY AND STATE GOVERNMENTS ACROSS the United States have spent a staggering amount of money to get rid of graffiti. In Chicago, the city budgeted \$4.6 million for a removal program called "Graffiti Blasters" in 2024, up from \$4.2 million the previous year. In Texas, the Austin Downtown Commission recently announced plans for an "anti-graffiti task force" with a price tag of \$2 million. And in Washington State, the Department of Transportation has ambitious plans to use aerial drones to paint over graffiti along highways between Seattle and Tacoma, with a pilot program reportedly costing around \$1 million. Looking at the headlines, I can't help but think all of this is a tragic, stupid waste. Not just because there's a multitude of better things we could be spending millions of dollars of tax money on, like free public healthcare, libraries, and affordable housing for people who need it. But because graffiti itself is a wonderful thing, and we lose so much of the color and vitality from our public life when it's power-washed away.

That isn't a very

popular opinion, especially among the politically powerful. Washington State Representative Andrew Barkis, the architect of the drone plan, says graffiti is both an "eyesore" and a "costly nuisance that threatens public safety." (Notably, he doesn't specify the nature of the supposed "threat.") New York City Mayor Eric Adams, ever obsessed with enforcing his idea of cleanliness and order on others, has condemned what he calls the "lawlessness" of the "graffiti assault." He's drawing on decades of conservative ideology, dating back to the *New York Times* of the 1980s, which once referred to graffiti as a "plague" that had "infested New York, creating a pervasive sense that the city was out of control"—an invocation of the now-debunked "broken windows" theory of policing. In New Orleans, Mayor LaToya Cantrell has spoken about her ambition to make the city "free of litter, debris, and graffiti," placing wall-writing on the same level as common trash. That seems to be the consensus among the political elite: that graffiti is simply nasty and criminal, and needs to be eliminated.





Photo by Alex Skopic, Decatur Street, New Orleans

MAYBE I'M NOT FROM THE RIGHT SOCIAL OR economic class to think the way these leaders do. But when I walk through the streets of New Orleans, I see plenty of graffiti, and what I see is not a "nuisance," "eyesore," or "assault." Instead, it's just *people*—some of whom might not own much more than a can of spray paint—trying to express themselves. Some are crude, some are clever. All are interesting. In fact, when you actually stop to read the graffiti, and not just condemn it from on high, you can appreciate that there's a huge variety of ideas being communicated. There's the graffiti that makes a political point ("FREE PALESTINE," "SHOOT COPS NOT DOPE," "ABORT THE COURT / CASTRATE THE STATE") or a religious one ("JESUS LOVES YOU"). There's graffiti-as-obituary, memorializing someone who died on a particular street corner or underpass. There are the odd little rhyming couplets ("I WANNA GO TO PARIS WITH AN HEIRESS"); the advertisements for small local businesses ("FOR GOOD WEED CALL..."); the colorful tags of people's nicknames ("SWAY," "BLACK EVE," "HUMMUS," "ARMPIT"); and so on. Sometimes two writers will have a dialogue ("SORRY," followed by, in a different hand, "IT'S OKAY, JUST DON'T LET IT HAPPEN AGAIN"). In New Orleans, graffiti is multilingual; in the last few weeks I've seen Korean, Arabic, and other scripts I couldn't immediately identify. Surprisingly little of it contains just an insult or slur, although there *are* those. Graffiti that

"tags" the territory of a gang is also pretty rare these days, as Philadelphia police spokesperson Shawn Ritchie recently admitted; like everyone else, gangs have taken their activities online. The point is, graffiti is not necessarily an expression of "lawlessness" or destruction, as Eric Adams would have you believe. It's an expression of everything human, good and bad alike.

In fact, we could turn a favorite conservative argument on its head and say that graffiti has the weight of Tradition and Antiquity™ on its side. As far as we know, humans have been writing on walls for as long as both walls and writing implements have existed. Even the first cave paintings were graffiti, albeit without words. Later on, the ancient Roman empire—supposedly the cradle of the Classical Western Culture that conservatives love so much—had a thriving culture of graffiti. The word itself is Italian, and before that Greek, from *graphein*: to write, draw, or scratch. When the ruins of Pompeii were excavated in the mid-1700s, one of the first things the archaeologists found was graffiti. When they dug up Herculaneum and the Roman agora at Athens, it was the same. Today, we know of more than 5,000 examples of Roman graffiti from Pompeii alone, including "greetings, messages, obscenities, quotes from famous literary works, drawings of animals and gladiators, numbers, dates, and prices." The number expands with each new dig. Some of the things the Romans wrote are both hilarious and immediately recognizable from walls across the world today:

Epaphra, you are bald!

Phileros is a eunuch!

Cruel Lalagus, why do you not love me?

Aufidius was here. Goodbye.

[On a restaurant] The finances officer of the emperor Nero says this food is poison.

[On the house of one Pascius Hermes] Watch it, you that shits in this place! May you have Jove's anger if you ignore this.

And those are the cleaner ones. It's especially ironic that graffiti is often called "vandalism" today, since the Vandals were the historic people who sacked Rome in 455, while the Roman citizens were busy scribbling away. If anything, it should be called "Romanism." And the Roman Empire is only the most well-documented wall-writing society. Elsewhere, historians have uncovered graffiti from ancient Korea, from the empire of Kush in Sudan, from Islamic cultures across the Middle East, and more. To reach up to a wall and write "I was here," or something ruder, appears to be a universal human impulse. With that in mind, the fact that today's government officials think they can wipe out graffiti is laughable, and the fact they would want to in the first place is faintly sinister.



THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS ARE THESE: WHAT is a city for? And to whom does it belong? If you believe that a city belongs to its people, as a place for them to live, work, eat, sleep, sing, love, argue, and ultimately die, then there's no particular problem with graffiti. It simply expresses all of those things, which make up life itself. But if you believe that a city belongs to its property owners, then graffiti is very bad indeed. After all, it's not that politicians and members of the economic elite object to the act of writing on walls *as such*. They write on walls all the time, and on a much larger scale than anyone else; they just call it "advertising." The giant gold letters spelling out **TRUMP** on a skyscraper are this kind of elite graffiti, the biggest "tag" of all. But the elite believe that *only those with money* should be allowed to write their thoughts on the city's surface. They take it as an article of faith that the right to do so must be bought and paid for, as they believe all things must—and in turn, that those who *can't* pay have no right to leave a trace of their existence.

This way of thinking has nothing to do with aesthetics. A sublimely beautiful piece of graffiti on a bus shelter will be removed, while an ugly ad for a dentist or an insurance firm will stay up. Graffiti, which is free to anyone with a Sharpie or spray can, is an act of transgression by humanity against the existing order of property and power. *That* is why politicians and police are disgusted by it and spend a disproportionate amount of time, money, and effort trying to wipe it from existence. Giving the game away somewhat, Richard Ravitch—the former head of New York's MTA, and later lieutenant governor of the state—once



Photo by Alex Skopic, New Orleans

called graffiti "a symbol that we have lost control." (Someone should have asked him: who are "we"?) More recently, after far-right blowhard Tucker Carlson visited Moscow, he praised it for having "no graffiti" in sight. The kind of city he and people like him want is clean, orderly, prosperous, extensively policed—and utterly inhuman.



HERE'S NO BETTER EXAMPLE OF THIS PRINCIPLE AT work than the recent case of Los Angeles' graffiti skyscrapers. Collectively named Oceanwide Plaza, these are an unfinished construction project. Their owners, a Chinese real-estate firm called Oceanwide Holdings, ran into financial trouble in 2019 and just let their mostly-finished development sit empty. Unsurprisingly, LA's thriving scene of graffiti artists saw this as an opportunity and "tagged" nearly every floor of the mammoth buildings. The graffiti they left behind is a huge, riotous swirl of colors and styles, blasting names like "AJAX," "BAGO," and "STAX" into the skyline for everyone to see. By any aesthetic standard, the graffiti *improved* the buildings. Before they arrived, Oceanwide Plaza was just another high-rise complex for people with more money than taste—a set of featureless gray rectangles, like a hundred others in LA. Spray-painted, it became something totally unique and, in its own way, beautiful. But that didn't stop the LAPD from arresting dozens of the artists for trespassing



Graffiti skyscraper in downtown Los Angeles

and vandalism. More recently, the Los Angeles City Council approved \$3.8 million in public funds to wipe all the graffiti away and “secure” the site so no more can be written. And in a crowning irony, the *Los Angeles Times* notes that the buildings are “located across Figueroa street from Crypto.com Arena,” which bears an enormous lighted sign proclaiming its branding. The ugly Bitcoin company can write its name; ordinary people may not. It should be the reverse.



OF COURSE, THERE ARE EXCEPTIONS. A FEW kinds of graffiti—those that involve swastikas or homophobic slurs, for instance—are just grossly offensive for the sake of it, and those should be quietly covered up or crossed out. But unlike Tucker Carlson, I always feel a little uneasy when I find myself in a stretch of street with *no* graffiti whatsoever. It suggests that bankers, cops, and corporations are fully in control of that space—or even worse, rich people with private security. By contrast, seeing that somebody has written an obscene joke on the wall of a Starbucks never fails to raise a little smile. Graffiti is a visible reminder that, despite everything, people are still struggling along, making their mark. That humanity remains, in all its messy glory, despite every attempt to flatten and sanitize it away. By embracing the words on the wall, we learn to embrace each other. ✦

CURRENT AFFAIRS

EDITORIAL STAFF

PUBLISHER

S. Chapin Domino

EDITOR IN CHIEF

Nathan J. Robinson

MANAGING EDITOR

Lily Sánchez

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Alex Skopic

SUBSCRIBER RELATIONS

Pasha Jovanovic

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Briahna Joy Gray

NEWS BRIEFING

Stephen Prager

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

*Jessica Elliott
Nathan J. Robinson
Paul Waters-Smith*

SECRETARY & TREASURER

Rosemary Matthews

ADMINISTRATIVE MANAGER

Sonya Savchenko

EDITOR AT LARGE

Yasmin Nair

CHIEF FILM CRITIC

Ciara Moloney

HOUSE ECONOMIST

Rob Larson

SOCIAL MEDIA

John Ross

LEAD DESIGNER

Cali Traina Blume

IF YOU WANT TO HEAR A THING,
IT'S PROBABLY ON...



AMERICAN RADIO

*A full hour of satirical broadcasting,
popular songs, and other delights*

*featuring advertisements, talk shows,
from across the history of the U.S. airwaves.*

Brought to you by Current Affairs.



Current Affairs' Songs of the Summer

SUMMER IS FINALLY HERE AND YOU KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS! IT'S TIME TO SMASH THAT PLAY BUTTON AND JAM OUT TO 2024'S HOTTEST TUNES.

By Aidan Yetman-Michaelson



SABRINA CARPENTER **Espresso (Dunkin' Donuts Remix)**

When we first heard this funky pop single back in April, we knew that it was only missing one thing to cement it as one of the summer's biggest earworms: a brand tie-in! "I already eat at least thirty donuts a day, so when Dunkin' approached me (...) it was a no-brainer," Carpenter said in a recent interview. This new and improved version is sure to fuel sales for the donuts America runs on, and records alike. A win-win!

SEEPING BUBONIC SEPTIC FLUID **Immolating the Effigy of the Goat-Serpent Lord**

Blackened Technical Brutal Deathcore has long been overlooked by mainstream audiences, but we believe this single from the Oslo-based five piece could be the song to give the microgenre a shot at the hits list. With quotables like "I rip out his brains and eat them with a little salad fork" and "grrr," the song is already a viral success and well on its way to making metalheads and pop fans alike just get up and dance.



AI RESEARCH INC. **Summer Sun**

It was only a matter of time; the AI song of the summer we've all been waiting for is finally here! With lyrics like "Sunshine kisses on my skin" and "Summer love, it fills my soul," the track truly captures the banal artificiality of a real hit pop song! No matter what your stance on AI may be, it's hard not to listen to the 4/4 beat and major scale melody and think "this is a song."



KYLESWANSON69420

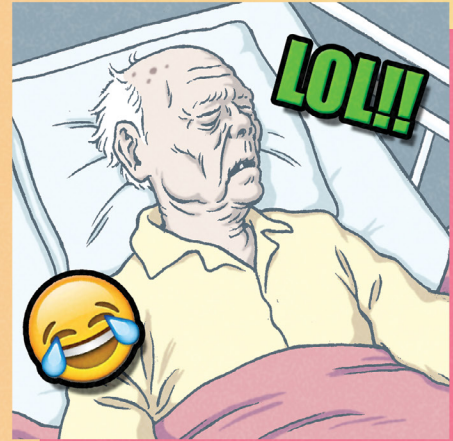
Grandpa's Last Fart

(Check out my merch store! Link in bio)

This "song" may just be eleven seconds of an elderly man enjoying his last instance of flatulence before passing on, but that hasn't stopped it from racking up over a billion plays on

TikTok in just two weeks! With this breakout hit achieving additional radio success, it's a strong contender for music's most coveted summer-based honor.

Editor's Note: Current Affairs would like to extend our deepest condolences to the surviving family of Rutherford D. Swanson



KENDRICK LAMAR

I Have Kidnapped Drake and Am Keeping Him in an Undisclosed Location (You Have Three Months to Follow My Trail of Riddles to Find Him)

The Pulitzer-winning rapper hammered the final nail in the coffin of the most exciting hip-hop beef in years with this hard-hitting diss track against Drake, then followed it up with a surprise move by actually kidnapping him! With its catchy West Coast beat, this track is sure to keep fans bobbing their heads while they frantically search for clues before it's too late.

STEPHEN FOSTER **(I Dream of) Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair**

If there's anything that Kate Bush's 1985 single Running Up That Hill shooting to the top of the charts in 2022 taught us, it's that when it comes to hit songs, age is only a number! Only time will tell what the next classic tune that resonates with Gen Z will be, but given the recent uptick in Edison wax tube sales, our money is on this timeless parlor song by the father of American music himself.

Portrait of a Legend



The Stephen Foster Song Book



FIVE MINUTES OF PEACE AND QUIET

With summer being the season for getting away from it all, it's no wonder this "non-song" has been such a smash hit! Critics and fans alike have been abuzz over this chart-topper with no melody, rhythm, vocals, instruments, or any sound whatsoever. While it may not be the easiest track on our list to dance to, it certainly provides a few minutes of calm before our existential dread kicks back in and we return to the ceaseless streams of disposable media we all enjoy!

ON THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

BY YASMIN NAIR



THE YEAR IS 2002. IT IS 5 A.M., SUNDAY, ON A QUIET, leafy street. The silence is broken by the sound of metal upon metal as a mailbox is opened and closed. Suddenly, a loud scream rends the air. It is followed by a deep, full-throated sobbing and the soft, raspy sound of paper being shredded.

Someone, somewhere has just read a review of her novel in the *New York Times Book Review*, and it is devastating. Someone, somewhere now lies splayed in a fuzzy yellow bathrobe and pink bunny slippers, her left cheek imprinted by the grimy pavement while her right hand pounds desperately at the box, as if the action might reverse time itself. Her roommate, following the sound of her cries, has found her and is trying to get her up. The writer's left hand clutches the now tattered remains of the review; the name "Michiko Kakutani" appears in the byline. A few phrases and words can be seen here and there: "a lot of pompous hot air," "a definite dead end." Slowly, the two make their way back to their house, the writer still sobbing, her roommate gently holding her up.

Michiko Kakutani's 2017 departure as the chief book critic at the *New York Times* was greeted with bombastic reverence: *Vanity Fair* declared that she had been "the most powerful book critic in the English-speaking world." The *New Yorker's*

Alexandra Schwartz wrote that "her assessments of novels and memoirs, works of history, biography, politics, and poetry have guided generations of American readers." The Authors Guild declared that she had been the rare critic whose reviews could "make or break a book." And the *Times*, no doubt keen to inflate its own importance, declared her "feared and revered" and noted that her departure—"the changing of the guard among critics" at the paper—was a "seismic change."

Much of this, like the anecdote above, is an exaggeration. Still, Kakutani's reputation helped solidify the *Times's Book Review* and its Best Sellers List (which appears in the print version of the *Review*) as arbiters of taste and quality. This is an entirely undeserved reputation: while Kakutani's reviews were occasionally, ah, bracing, she often seemed more focused on showing off her dexterity at snideness than reviewing books, sometimes adopting the voice of a literary character from a different book than the one she was reviewing: Holly Golightly in a review of Truman Capote's *Summer Crossing* or Holden Caulfield when reviewing Benjamin Kunkel's *Indecision*. (The results were embarrassing.) In recent years, the *Book Review* has become so anodyne, its reviewers so reluctant to express opinions that even Kakutani's reviews might now prove a welcome distraction. As for any influence:



A 2004 study of the impact of the *Review* on sales by Alan T. Sorensen and Scott J. Rasmussen found that while positive reviews increase sales, even negative reviews can positively impact sales. But the media landscape has since changed vastly. More recently, in 2023, the publicist Kathleen Schmidt opined that “media consumption has changed so much that big publicity isn’t necessarily effective” and that while “many authors dream of being reviewed in *The New York Times*, [...] a review there rarely sells many copies of a book.” In a 2022 essay in *The Nation*, Kyle Paoletta writes about the *Review* having “less influence than it once had.”

By reinforcing the worst trends in publishing, the Book Review ultimately perpetuates the material inequality so prevalent in the publishing world

And yet, the *Book Review*, which has been around since 1896 (the *Times* was founded in 1851),¹ remains influential, like the dying embers at the center of a slowly ebbing fire, and it continues to exercise its insidious influence upon the public, many readers, and book editors who are looking for examples of what the *Review* considers “good” or “great” books. Among the many ill effects: the *Book Review* tokenizes non-white writers in essentialist ways, reducing them to mere standard-bearers of their perceived cultures, and this attitude is too often replicated by even the most seemingly edgy review publications. Its emphasis on the Big Five publishers and book sales has meant that writers likely feel compelled to write towards what they imagine a *Book Review* critic might want to see. Despite all these issues, and its declining reputation notwithstanding, the *Book Review* has so long been imitated that its worst characteristics have seeped into that amorphous realm we might term “book culture”—a world where unspoken traditions about how to read and whom to read and why have taken hold and authors are compelled to write in ways that conform to gendered and racialized expectations or the apparently unrelenting public desire for more trauma memoirs.

By reinforcing, in its content, the worst trends in publishing, the *Book Review* ultimately perpetuates the material inequality so prevalent in the publishing world. Publishing is massively profitable—but only for top executives at a few places: their salaries can run in the millions. For positions lower on

the hierarchy, the average salary (some hiked by unionization at places like HarperCollins) generally starts around \$48,000, which is a dismal salary for someone living in a city like New York, where most publishing houses are based. In fact, the book industry is increasingly skewed to include only those who can work for free, in unpaid internships or for meager salaries supplemented by family or spousal wealth. In turn, these up-and-coming editors and agents tend to seek writing from those in their own spheres of influence which means that, more and more, fiction and nonfiction work only echo worldviews of a very particular set of people (in mainstream publishing, this means a very liberal mindset rather than any kind of truly left perspective, with rare exceptions). While many have criticized the *Book Review* on grounds that it is boring and perhaps simply irrelevant, few have considered the long-lasting economic effects of its moribund style.

Kakutani’s reputation was built on a 38-year career at the 173-year-old *Times*, which she joined as a reporter in 1979 before becoming a book critic in 1983. Since then, the *Book Review* world has changed drastically, with fewer publications devoting money to books. For a while it looked like online blogs and Goodreads, a reader-generated online review site, might be plausible alternatives to more conventional media coverage of books, defying the norms set by professional critics. But by the 2010s, the blogs had mostly disappeared as their writers either stopped from the exhaustion of working for free or very little or, ironically, were absorbed into the mainstream. Goodreads, founded in 2007, was bought by Amazon in 2013 and has since become notorious as a den of pure spite. In June 2023, the author Elizabeth Gilbert announced she was “halting” the release of her forthcoming book *The Snow Forest* after hundreds of people on the site, many claiming to be Ukrainian, denounced her book for being set in Russia and “romanticizing the aggressor.” No one had read even an advance reader’s copy: all of the outrage was based simply on the fact of the location of the story. Gilbert, much to the consternation of many in the book world, capitulated to the hordes.

Despite the apparent power of social media websites to “cancel” famous writers like Gilbert, these outlets are still more fragile than institutions like the *New York Times*. Consider, for instance, everything happening now to TikTok, which could be gone by the time this goes to print. Social media trends tend to wax and wane while readers seek reliable reviews. The *Book Review*, in this fragile and ever-changing world, still exerts too much influence on book culture.

Reading the *Book Review* is a joyless task because it is mostly so massively, stiflingly dull. There is a sameness and a flatness to the reviews, held as they are to some invisible set of *Times* “standards,” the most obvious one of which seems to be, “Never be interesting.” A recent review of Anthony Fauci’s memoir, *On Call*, describes it as “a well-pressed gray flannel suit of a book with a white coat buttoned over it,” as if its dullness is the best

¹ The *New York Times* has the second largest circulation of any newspaper in the U.S, behind the *Wall Street Journal*. The print edition of the Sunday edition, which features the *Book Review*, sells more than twice the number of copies than the weekday edition. The *Book Review* is included in the print edition of the Sunday paper and is also available as a stand-alone subscription.

thing about it. Other than a mild comment about the overuse of “bureaucratese” (phrases like “proof of the pudding” and “pushing the envelope,” which are simply clichés), the entire “review” by Alexandra Jacobs reads like a dutifully written 8th-grade summary. I have read reviews there by some of the wittiest writers whose prose sparkles elsewhere but who, when transplanted to the hallowed and hollow grounds of the *Times*, quietly shrivel and hush. To enter the world of the *Book Review* is to stumble into a boring tea party: everyone has nothing but niceties to murmur to each other, everyone is dropping quotes from Joan Didion and some dead white guys, and everyone’s tea is secretly laced with gin just to keep them going.

If there are opinions, especially negative ones, they are offered tremulously, coddled in several caveats, as in the review of Fauci’s book. This is by design. In 2018, Pamela Paul, the *Book Review* editor from 2013 to 2022, said that it “has a long tradition of being a political Switzerland.” Paul eventually left her post to become an insipid bourgeois reactionary columnist for the *Times* opinion section, which indicates that even she grew tired of faking neutrality. But the principle still holds at the publication, where the reviews are so bland and sleep-inducing that one is tempted to hold every reviewer by their feet, upside down and outside a window, threatening to let go: *Give me an opinion, damn it! Now! Or I drop you!* A book review doesn’t have to be a vicious takedown in order to be interesting, but it should demonstrate some sense of a personality behind the work, of someone unafraid to deliver keen and original insights.

Newspapers like the *Washington Post* and the *San Francisco Chronicle* do still have book sections, and there exist some publications devoted to reviews, like the *Boston Review* (BR), the *New York Review of Books* (NYRB), and the *Los Angeles Review of Books* (LARB). There are transnational publications, like the *London Review of Books* (LRB) and the *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS). All of these vary in their purposes and personalities: the LARB, a magazine for refugees from academia, is the Goth-ish graduate student who drops words like “epistemic” in an effort to impress their theory professor. The LRB, the most idiosyncratic (and usually the most lively) of the bunch, is that very clever and slightly high uncle who tells you about the latest book he’s been reading when you stop to chat at the Christmas party. By the end of the very long conversation, you will have learned absolutely nothing about the book, but you will have received some fantastic insights into the career and life of Lord Byron (later, a Google search will reveal that the book is about a 20-century physicist). The NYRB is that very boring family friend who has no idea how to talk to anyone who’s not a tenured professor and consequently spends most of his time in an armchair. The only person who will talk to him is the *Book Review*, and the two promptly engage in a competition to see who can drop the most quotations.

Most of the newer review publications came about in the shadow of the *Book Review*. Some were formed as direct rivals (the *New York Review of Books* slyly took on a similar name at its inception in 1963). Others, like the LRB, which began life as an insert inside the NYRB and is famous for its long essays,

usually on academic books, have consciously set out to be different. The *Book Review*, amidst all this, has resolutely stuck to its guns and persisted in being the most boring of the lot, holding on to its dullness as a badge of pride.

Its age has meant that the *Book Review* has survived like and alongside the descendants of the robber barons who swooped into New York and stuck around long enough to place their names on public institutions, their money and philanthropy enabling them to buy respectability as a new aristocracy.

Much of the *Book Review*’s reputation is based on lies and confabulation. For example: the famed bestseller list is, alas, utter bullshit. This fact first came to light in 1983, when William Peter Blatty, the best-selling author of *The Exorcist*, sued the *Book Review* for not including his novel *Legion* in its best-seller list. Blatty claimed that the book had been selling well enough to be placed there. Blatty lost the case because the *Times* admitted that its decisions about who is included are editorial and not purely based on quantitative figures. In other words, “Yes, you’re right, we ignored your book because we run on a lie: the bestseller list is not about the numbers, it’s about what we like!” Essentially, the *Times* admitted its “sales” list was meaningless (even as their website densely notes that their “methodology” involves sales). Speaking to *Esquire* in 2022, Temple University professor Laura McGrath, who teaches courses on the publishing world, “compares *The New York Times*’ list to the original recipe for Coca-Cola: ‘We have a pretty good idea of what goes into it, but not the exact amount of each ingredient.’” In 2013, *Forbes* wrote about authors gaming their way onto the list with bulk orders.

Given all this, how and why does the *Book Review*, an armageddon-era cockroach scuttling around in the long shadows of nuclear towers, survive?

**The NYRB is that very boring
family friend who has no idea
how to talk to anyone who’s
not a tenured professor**

Like its parent paper, the *Book Review* is less a cultural mirror (what is happening around you?) and more of a ladder for class ascension (who will or can you be?). The *New York Times* is not a paper of record as much as a guide to class assimilation and ascension: to read and absorb the *Times* is to learn (or so people hope) how to exist in a world that is in many ways brought into existence by the *Times*, one inhabited and controlled by the superrich. The paper’s real estate listings and reporting and its column “The Hunt” have long demonstrated that its core readership is either the very wealthy or those who aspire to be so. One column is titled, “She Realized Her American Dream With a Hamptons House” [that only cost

\$6.75 million]. Similarly, its “Vows” section features couples from wealthy and often celebrity families. Often, real estates and vows combine, as when wealthy newlyweds go looking for apartments. Over the years, the immensely wealthy have certainly grown more diverse, but their money remains the point. A recent wedding announcement about Sandy Dolores Yawn, a reality television celebrity, and her entrepreneur-gospel star wife, noted that their ceremony took place on a superyacht (we assume this is a term meant to denote a very, very, very big yacht, bigger than all the merely big yachts that the *merely* rich might use).

**To ensure its blandness,
the Book Review engages in
that ever popular and deeply
cringe-inducing tradition
that we might call the Dinner
Party Syndrome**

New York is always a city of a new Gilded Age, each one representative of its era, and the *Times* is in charge of shepherding the denizens of each up the social ladder. As with clothing fashions, its fascination with the wealthy shifts according to the political tenor of the day. The paper might now adopt a sniggering tone towards Donald Trump, but in 1984, it was once deeply, madly in love with him: a 1976 profile began with the words, “He is tall, lean and blond, with dazzling white teeth, and he looks ever so much like Robert Redford.” In 1984, catching up with “The Expanding Empire of Donald Trump,” William E. Geist gushed about accompanying him on tours of his properties, without questioning the machinations behind his supposedly legendary dealmaking. The long article notes that Trump, who presented himself as a real estate magnate, had ditched his “flashy haberdashery” for more conservative “dark suits, white shirts, subdued ties and loafers.” Then, as now, the *Times* provided a seal of approval to an aspiring entrepreneur busily taking his family name out of Queens into Manhattan, where the newspaper’s imprimatur was one more step towards entrance into the elite(s) of New York.

The *Book Review* is a ticket for entry into this world because one must not just be rich and successful, but *cultured*, able to engage in the topics of the day—and the best way to do that is through books. You might *buy* all the famed artworks you can afford, but to talk about them as a person of the class you’d like to occupy requires that you read all the “best” books that the *Times* will tell you about. The *Book Review* is like a culture sommelier, helping you sniff and sip through all the books, books, books, guiding you through an otherwise frightening

world of words, words, words: it will tell you what to read or, at least, how to talk about the book you ought to read but might never get around to reading. (Similar to its *NYT* cousin, “The Ethicist” column, which instructs readers on proper—and often hideous—bourgeois morality, the *Book Review* will instruct you on proper bourgeois literary culture.)

To ensure its blandness, the *Book Review* engages in that ever popular and deeply cringe-inducing tradition that we might call the Dinner Party Syndrome: the tendency to valorize writers (at least the big names) as People You Might Love to Know and Invite to A Meal with Other Writers. Bits of this exist everywhere, but it’s especially pronounced in Elisabeth Egan’s breathy and mercifully brief interviews with authors, gathered in her regular *Book Review* column, “Inside the Best-Seller List.” Egan tells us that Barbara Kingsolver has established a tradition of including recipes in her books: “In *Demon Copperhead*, a beloved character makes black-eyed peas for New Year’s Day. Readers can practically smell the carrots, onions and essence of Christmas ham.” And she cannot resist a bad pun: “Kingsolver also baked in an important message about addiction.” The Author here is a BFF and down-home neighbor: famous writers are Just Like Us! In an interview with the suspense writer Mary Kubica, we learn that she fosters as many as a dozen cats at a time. As Egan tells us, warmly, “If you think about it, the process [of the family adjusting to the adopted cats] isn’t so different from writing books.” We can see the long-lasting effects of such an approach even in the most cerebral-seeming publications. In a recent *Yale Review* essay, Merve Emre writes rhapsodically about “The Critic as Friend,” ending with her assurance to the reader: “I can suggest that you may come to feel as I feel about a person, a book, that you may want to know it as intimately as I do. I can help it pass gracefully from my hand to another’s, from the present into the future.”

The BFF-ification of the critic-subject pair finds its expression in the unhealthy parasocial relationships that authors find themselves compelled to develop with readers on platforms like BookTok and Bookstagram. The result is that they can no longer retreat as, say, Joan Didion was able to, behind their literal walls, to maintain a distance from overly friendly and sometimes dangerously enthusiastic fans. They must instead give in to their demands for actual social relations and are caught in a world of perennial selfies, both virtual and in real life. And yet, as Elizabeth Gilbert found out, no amount of such intimacy can guarantee that your readers will come to your support: her Instagram has long been filled with breathy videos that often start with greetings like, “Hello, Family!” or “It’s your Lizzy!” and end with phrases like, “Sending you a lot of love!” Despite her relentlessly sunny chirpiness, all delivered in the style of an Auntie Karen, Gilbert still felt compelled to cancel herself.

In keeping with its sommelier role, the *Times* only bothers with the Big Five publishers (soon, we suspect, to become The Only One, given the thrust towards consolidation). Forbidden from this world are books from independent publishers and writers without the cachet of known agents and publishers that *Times* employees are bound to bump into at literary parties. Self-published books (horrors!) are, of course, out of the

question. The *Times* has never challenged or even really interrogated the increasingly exploitative structure of the publishing world and, indeed, many of its main critics, such as Kakutani, Dwight Garner, and Barry Gewen, have been able to use their status as critics at the paper to land publishing deals with places like Penguin Random House, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, and Norton. While they and others might argue that their talent brought them such enviable deals, we should wonder aloud (as few are willing to do) if their (supposed) ability to make or break writing careers did not in some way help them to obtain their publishing contracts.

This brings up the complex and occasionally thorny issue of ethics. The *Times*'s handbook of Ethical Journalism can be found online, and the paper's critics, like A.O. Scott and Dwight Garner, have also posted individual statements online. But, as with its war reporting, ethics magically disappear. Dwight Garner, senior editor at the *Book Review* from 1998 to 2008 and currently a book critic, is married to Cree LeFavour, who has published a handful of cookbooks, a novel, and a memoir, some of which are mentioned (more than once) or reviewed in the *Times*. She has also frequently written book reviews. Sometimes there is mention of the fact that she is married to Garner. Food and wine writer Florence Fabricant favorably reviewed a new brand, Rocket Broth, noting only that the line is the creation of "Sheryl Moller, a certified health practitioner and nutrition guide, and Cree LeFavour, a cookbook writer..." LeFavour's father, Bruce LeFavour, was a well-known chef. His 2019 obituary in the paper notes that she confirmed his death, but it does not mention her marriage to Garner or that she is also a critic at the paper. Readers ought to know that books and broths recommended by the *Times* happen to be written and produced by someone who works at the paper (her reviews in the print edition occupy prime real estate) and whose husband occupies an influential position at the paper. But then, as we know from the poor quality of the *Times*'s coverage, such as their now-debunked Oct. 7 "mass rape" story, "ethics" at the *Times* is a fungible commodity.

And then, there is the matter of race and ethnicity. Like every other publication of its ilk, including the *New Yorker*, the *Book Review* has been accused, justly, of being blazingly white. Kakutani is Japanese American (and perhaps the most powerful woman of color to ever have occupied such a position anywhere), and Gilbert Cruz replaced Pamela Paul in July 2022. There are more people of color reviewing books and more books by people of color are being reviewed, certainly. And yet: the *Book Review* remains blindingly white in its outlook, moving between a discomfort with unfamiliar voices and styles to outright racism. The *Book Review* proves that whiteness—not as a racial identity but as a particular worldview—doesn't need actual white people to extend its dominion. Karan Mahajan, reviewing Zadie Smith's *The Fraud*, notes approvingly that she has a "multicultural eye," and while we might imagine a giant ocular being surveying the London of the novel, it's not clear what this brings to the book, which he mildly critiques as uneven in structure before quickly moving on with fulsome praise. But if a writer of the stature of Smith has produced an

unevenly structured book, can it really be a fulfilling read or is the reviewer simply assuring white readers that Smith has, yet again, provided a lively cast of non-white people for their pleasure?

As for white critics incapable of engaging with the perceived Other: consider Dwight Garner's review of the Mexican writer's Álvaro Enrígue's *You Dreamed of Empires*, in which he writes: "There are many names in this novel, and they can blur. To American ears, some of the most magnificent—Ahuitzotl, Xocoyotzin—sound like elite anti-depressants of the sort that only Sofia Coppola and Bad Bunny can source." Some commenters on social media pointed out that this is not only a deeply racist joke, but that the book includes a guide to pronouncing the names. Garner wrote this in 2024 (two years after Cruz took over), not 1954, as you might expect given its old-timey racism. Reading his words, I was reminded of a colleague's boss who told his Indian employees that he couldn't be bothered to learn their "difficult" names and would simply refer to all of them as "Ganesh." Garner's review of Enrígue's book is a positive one, but he cannot resist several jabs, like his point that the writer, who has published several works translated into several languages worldwide, "has probably been best known as half of a literary power couple" and that "before their divorce, they were profiled in *Vogue*, adorably sharing a cigarette." A white author featured in *Vogue* as part of a glamorous couple would have been written about with far more reverence, minus the sarcastic "adorably." Here, Garner treats Enrígue as a curiosity. "Look," he seems to say, "This adorable little foreigner can actually write! And haha, look at him preening in *Vogue* like one of us."

The Book Review may well wither and die under the weight of its own irrelevance, but it has had deleterious and long-term effects on writers and publishers

But blatant racism is not the only problem: works by non-white authors are rendered as tokenistic, considered worthy not for their brilliance as novels or nonfiction but as the work of racial and ethnic Others who have something to *show* us—a part of, say, the immigrant experience. Bich Minh Nguyen's 2007 memoir, *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, is about growing up as a Vietnamese refugee and the now-standard "torn between two cultures" experience that included a version of the Bento Box story: an immigrant child is mocked for their food and... you can fill in the rest because this trope became so ubiquitous that it is now dismissed as clichéd. Nguyen, who has since changed

her first name to Beth, wrote that first memoir when she was 33. Now, at 49, she has written a new one, *Owner of a Lonely Heart*, that continues the theme of her life story (really, there is only one) but with a new emphasis: her biological mother who stayed behind. But—worry not!—this memoir, reviewed by Sara Austin, also discusses food. Austin writes that Nguyen “was marked as a refugee by hostile stares and cruel jokes as a child, and as an adult in the way she can never quite unpack her bags in a new space.”

Same book, new twists. Austin’s review says little about what Nguyen’s work contributes to the ever-growing genre of immigrant memoirs, has nothing to say about its politics, and only notes how it might make the reader *feel*: it is “poignant,” and “deeply ruminative and therapeutically self-indulgent.” Such is the kind of non-white fiction and nonfiction most favored by the *Book Review*. The immigrant’s story only exists to make us *feel* in a therapeutic way. This is not to blame Nguyen but a publishing and *Book Review* industry that seems unable to publish or review books by people who happen to be immigrants and are not just conduits for the same old stories. Nguyen had previously written two novels about similar life experiences

More works by small indie presses need to be considered in more outlets, and “self-published” should not always be so stigmatized.

but in fiction: like a squirrel hoarding its nuts for winter in its cheeks, she must feel compelled to carefully portion out bits and pieces of her life for literary consumption over the course of her writing career. Perhaps, in another decade, she will have the opportunity to capture a different slice of immigrant life, mining herself for yet another memoir (what might it be like to be the *mother* of second-generation immigrant children? we wonder, breathlessly). Might we ever reach a time when an immigrant writer writes about something other than stock immigrant experiences?

Despite any appearance of autonomy, Nguyen and others like her are not free to create non-traditional immigrant narratives because the responses of reviewers create a closed loop of influence: when reviewers only react positively to the same stale stories and cannot conceive that the darkies also have interesting lives unrelated to their immigration status, publishers and editors are more likely to demand the same stock texts about immigration or, really, anything else.

The *Book Review* may well wither and die under the weight of its own irrelevance, but it has had deleterious and long-term effects on writers and publishers—and it does not serve readers who look for work that disrupts their assumptions. Instead, the *Book Review* assumes they just want the same old boring

oatmeal (*immigrant* readers, for instance, might be fed up with the same old trauma narratives). There are better and more interesting ways to think about books and book culture. One is to start thinking and actively writing about the economics of book publishing as part of the practice of reviewing books. Where the *Book Review* has for too long perpetuated stereotypes of books as fetish objects and authors as Sparkling Snowflakes we want to bring home to Mother, a better and more incisive book review culture would locate books firmly inside the material world, not outside of it.

In this, podcasts—with more freedom and time and less pressure from traditional media—may be going in better, unexplored directions. Andrew Hankinson’s nonfiction podcast *Logroll* features writers who talk eloquently about their books within the context of the economics of publishing. In one episode, Hankinson talks to Sally Hayden, an independent researcher and author of *My Fourth Time We Drowned*, about refugees seeking to cross the Mediterranean Sea from Africa to Europe only to end up in detention centers in Libya. The conversation deftly connects the enormous difficulties facing these migrants with the trouble she had finding financial support for the project, all without being pedantic or engaging in white saviorism. *Backlisted*, a fiction podcast fronted by John Mitchinson and Andy Miller, considers little-known authors or lesser-known books by famous authors. The two share a deeply infectious enthusiasm for their subjects and a keen knowledge of literary forms and histories, proving that a “love for books” does not have to mean a choice between weird parasociality and excruciating dryness.

In more conventional outlets: the *Washington Post*’s Ron Charles writes that Garth Halberg’s recent *The Second Coming* could have done with serious editing. Charles is not engaging in a snarky takedown but reflecting on an industry that churns out books, especially by star authors, without investing in committed editors. Editing was once considered an essential part of publishing, but this basic attention to detail is “unheard of today under a business model banking on the continual release of bestsellers and copycat stories.” Or, at least, considered secondary: I recently reviewed a book with passages repeated across chapters, a clear sign that no one at the prestigious imprint had bothered to give it a basic once-over before it went to print. In the *Boston Globe*, Lorraine Berry was one of the few (if any) book critics who pointed out that Barbara Kingsolver’s *Demon Copperhead*, based in Appalachia, is “a form of poverty porn, a slum tour where pity is the price of the ride.” (Berry also wrote about “A Day in the Life of a Freelancer” for *Literary Hub*, a rare piece where a writer discusses the near impossibility of creating a writing life of any stability or comfort unless one possesses independent wealth.)

It is, in short, possible to take a deep pleasure in books and the act of reading without submitting to a *Book Review*-led, ah, fiction that *A Life in Books* stands apart from the material conditions of the world. The way forward is not to replicate or improve the *Book Review* but to be done with it and its anodyne presentation, after cataloging its effects on book culture. More works by small indie presses need to be considered in

more outlets, and “self-published” should not always be so stigmatized. We might also consider regularly reviewing books of the past, instead of only bowing to the fashions generated by major publishers.

There will undoubtedly be resistance to much of this and, sadly, writers are often the most obstinate about perpetuating myths about books and publishing. *Esquire*’s Kate Dwyer regularly reports on the publishing world, but her work is based on interviews with celebrity authors like Ayad Akhtar and Tom Perrotta, who are published by the Big Five, get excellent advances, and whose success and/or class status means they don’t have to take on day jobs to pay the bills. In a recent article on debut novels “failing” to launch, she again focused on books at the Big Five, thus reproducing the idea—made popular by the *Book Review*—that those are what matter most and what should be counted. In such ways, we see the lingering effects of the cultish era (and aura) of reviewers like Kakutani and the mythology of the publishing world created by the *Book Review*.

The dawn of the internet did not bring about a democratization of book reviews for the better—let us look again at Goodreads as an example of what can happen and then, quickly, look away. We still need critics to review publications that bring in intellectual and other histories while making judgments about books but without fetishizing books or authors. Good book reviews take their subjects and genres seriously: a romance novel deserves the same consideration as a satire of, oh, say, the publishing world. The style and purpose of the publication matter: a scholarly review will require a different set of facts and suppositions and a demonstration that the reviewer knows the history of a book’s subject; a website devoted to fans of an author or genre might allow for more emotional responses tempered by some kind of critical appraisal; and an outlet like the *Boston Globe* is more concerned with communicating ideas to a larger, broader range of readers.

Even with all these differences, there are still some basic principles of reviewing: reviews should in some way let readers know whether or not they should buy or borrow the book; readers should be able to trust that there are no conflicts of interest (consider, again, LeFavour and Garner). If a book is about 1950s suburban planning, it is pointless to spend three-quarters of the review ranting about gender imbalances in the workplaces of the time. We get it: you have a feminist politics, yay, but does the book provide an interesting history of its subject? Basic questions should be answered in some way: is the book’s thesis provable? If a novel, does it fulfill the basic requirements of plot and character? If it’s the kind of fiction that eschews such old-fashioned conventions, fine, but does it engage a reader in any way or is it simply like the sticker on a new Hermès bag? It doesn’t exist, and if you have to ask, you don’t know its value. Most of all, a review should deliver an opinion (this may seem like an obvious fact but, again, consider the *Book Review*).

Kakutani retired by taking a buyout from her employer as the paper struggled to restructure and cut costs. In the years since her departure, she has written lavishly produced books that offer nothing more than warmed-over liberal takes on

“democracy,” a favorite subject of hers. They have not gone over well: reviewing her 2018 *The Death of Truth* in the *Times*, Chris Hayes wrote with the despair of a man who wondered how to retrieve lost hours, observing that “it feels like spending a few hours scrolling through the #Resist hashtag on Twitter.” Her more recent *The Great Wave: The Era of Radical Disruption and the Rise of the Outsider* can be described entirely by its title and reads like a transcript of a TED talk: a simple and simplistic claim, repeated ad nauseam with great sincerity.

Despite a lackluster response to her books and even searing critiques, though, Kakutani will probably keep getting book contracts while far more talented and interesting writers struggle even with article pitches as publications everywhere shutter or struggle to find resources. The *Book Review*, in all its stodgy glory, continues to exist. A 2006 C-Span interview with its employees featured editors talking about the seemingly complicated processes that bring it to life, but the *Review* to date has no explanation for why a “best-selling” author like Miranda July might receive the attention of no fewer than three separate print pieces (invaluable real estate) and a podcast devoted to

Good book reviews take their subjects and genres seriously: a romance novel deserves the same consideration as a satire of, oh, say, the publishing world.

her latest book, *All Fours*, while independent publishers and debut writers struggle to get their copies seen. Does the *Book Review* create the market for a book or reflect it? How much of the coverage of July’s book has to do with her status as a Hollywood-adjacent influencer-style figure, possessed of the kind of glamor rarely seen in the publishing world? Even if it disappears tomorrow, the *Book Review*’s lasting legacy will be that it perpetuated the inequalities of a publishing world and replicated its false and damaging hierarchies by only paying attention to stardom or the potential thereof. It creates a demand for tired stories, repackaged endlessly in new guises and, too often, the publishing industry forces writers to write towards the *Book Review*.

Over the course of its long existence, it has shaped literary tastes without any real commitment to appraisal or critique, and it has taken pride in its ability to carry on a tradition of nothingness, no real engagement with books, only an often smarmy, worshipful reverence for (certain) books and (certain) writers. In a 2004 review of Dale Peck’s *Hatchet Jobs*, John Leonard—who hated the book—offered himself up as an exemplar of the best kind of critic. He reveals that, years ago, the

Times had asked him to review John Cheever's last novel after the assignment had been turned down by many other critics who had balked because the book was not that good and they didn't want to simply perform what Leonard called "a random act of kindness" to Cheever, who happened to be dying at the time. Leonard revealed, cheerily, that he was the one who agreed to review the novel because, "it never occurred to me that a thank-you note to a wonderful writer, a valediction as it were, would get me kicked out of any club I wanted to belong to, so I immediately said yes." In other words, Leonard was unafraid to admit he had no integrity as a reviewer, and the *Times* was happy to print his review.²

As *Succession*'s Logan Roy might put it, these are not serious people.

It is easy to dismiss any criticism of the *Book Review* by claiming that it does not matter or that it is simply part of a mainstream publishing world. But as many writers know too well, the shoddy standards set by the *Review* have long tentacles, creating book markets even in the indie world (where trauma narratives and stock immigrant stories still seem to rule).

Writers are not creative geniuses spinning books out of thin air but people who have to eat and find shelter while pursuing their work

Ultimately, much of the conversation around books and publishing ignores a vital fact: what we need is not a world where writers might aspire to gigantic advances or viral reviews to sell their books but one where they are supported in their work and are free to create and perhaps even fail—to tweak Dwyer's judgemental term—in their endeavors without worrying about their next month's rent or meals.


We could continue to have long and ultimately meaningless conversations about "The Role of Critics and Criticism" (Emre has created something of a cottage industry in this realm of thought), but these usually ignore—and this bears repeating—the material conditions of publishing. Writers are not creative geniuses spinning books out of thin air but people who have to eat and find shelter while pursuing their work (the same is true of critics, unless, like Emre, they exist in that bubble somewhere between academia and influencer culture). Talking about the economics of publishing does not mean that books

are rendered less meaningful or even, dare I say, less magical, less able to transport us from everyday life.

But we can (and should) also think about books and their markets as elements of a constructed reality. A bestseller is marked as such by a meaningless gold star on a book cover, which tells us nothing about actual numbers, its quality, or whether a reader ought to read it. Whose books are reviewed or not depends on any number of unseen factors (including whether or not you are at the right parties or, you know, married to the right people). "Diversity" in publishing is often another way to compel non-white authors to provide cultural therapy to white readers.

Online and real-life discussions about the influence of the *Book Review* (waning or not) often result in calls to support more independent publishers, who cannot afford to hand out sustainable advances to writers. The underlying logic here is that writers are on their own: if a writer truly wants to write, they will simply find a way. But this assumes that a writer is not a professional writer consumed by their work but, rather, someone who works on the side, perhaps after a long day at work or on the weekends, for whom writing is a hobby. Such an attitude also leaves untouched the world created by the *Book Review*, where only a few authors receive massive advances (Lena Dunham's \$3.5 million comes to mind, as does the Obamas' \$65 million) and others don't make enough to actually live on but must still, somehow, write. In the meantime, too many writers are persuaded by publications like *Esquire* that they will in fact be the Special Ones to get big advances when, in fact, the system is rigged and this is unlikely. This ecosystem, where writing is simply not considered labor, remains untouched.

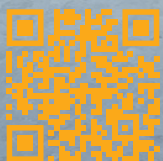
The solution is not to continue the dichotomous system where the *Book Review* and its kin survive by only reviewing Big Five or academic publishers while indie presses (supposedly) deliver different fare. It is also not to fetishize ill-paid "indie" writing and the idea that good writers will just keep writing, because that simply means that "good" writers will also have to be independently wealthy to even write for small presses. For any real change to occur, we have to strip bare the fabrications and confabulations upon which so much of the publishing industry is built: revealing the cracks and regimes of power within the NYT's *Book Review* is only a start. To build a new ecosystem means admitting that the old one is rotten to the core. Karl Marx, as we have pointed out several times in this magazine, had to keep pawning his winter coat to survive and could never have produced his work without the financial support of Friedrich Engels. What is true of the original Marxist is also true of countless novelists who have relied on friends, families, lovers, and clients to help keep them writing.

We can fantasize about and through books all we want, but we cannot wish away the fact that books are made in and of the world itself. This includes the books we'll never read because writers were denied the means to create them. 

² Disclosure: Dale Peck is an editor and comrade of Yasmin Nair.

WE'RE JUST LIKE YOU

People like you love *Current Affairs*. That's why you're reading it now, and that's why you need to get yourself a subscription. An ad-free magazine, loaded with insight and charm, for an affordable monthly subscription price? How could any sensible soul refuse?



currentaffairs.org

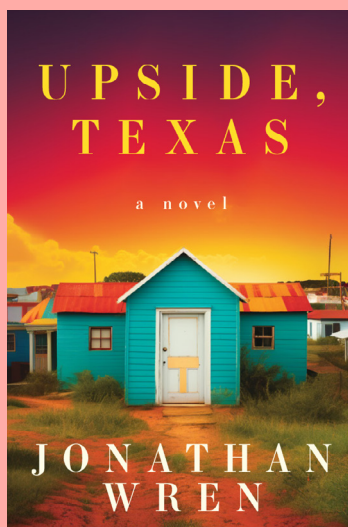
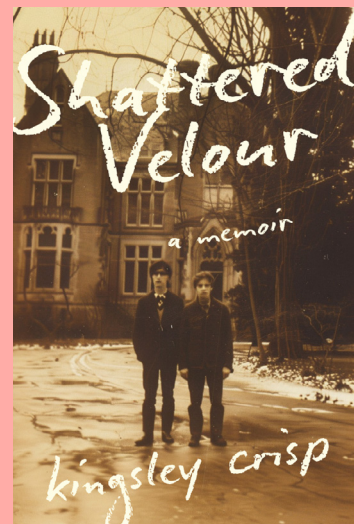


The New York Times

Book Review

Shattered Velour BY KINGSLEY CRISP

This riveting memoir traces the author's tumultuous relationship with a Yale classmate, whose untimely death from a (deliberately unspecified) mental illness prompts a soul-searching road trip through the American heartland. In gorgeous prose—simultaneously intimate, revelatory, poetic, and wrenching—Crisp, whose own struggles with addiction and toxic polyamory are mused upon at length—recounts a two-day visit to his classmate's hometown, where the ghosts of trauma, schizophrenia, and heartbreak continue to reside. A quiet, elegiac meditation on the nature of grief and the purpose of being human.



Upside, Texas

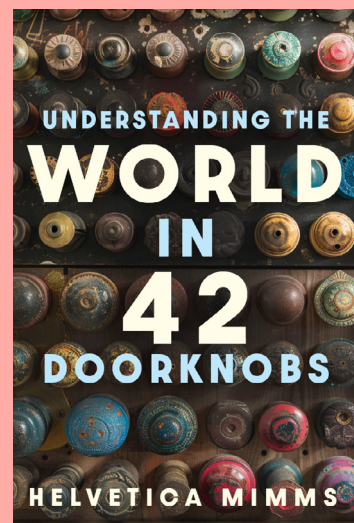
BY JONATHAN WREN

Chronicle the growth of a fictional Texas town (Upside, which is “two hogs north of Amarillo”) from the Mexican-American war to the oil crisis of the 1970s, Wren's kaleidoscopic portrait combines elements of mystery, metafiction, and occasional magical realism into a Rabelasian narrative that is equal parts *Middlemarch* and *Dallas*. Its multigenerational panoply of characters (over 120 in all), drawn in luxuriant ethnographic detail, includes a hard-bargaining plantation owner, a possibly-psycho heiress, an itinerant abolitionist bootlegger, a schizophrenic Vietnam war protester, and a sexually ambiguous cowboy. Told through flashbacks, diary entries, and a Greek chorus of local newspaper op-eds, this sweeping historical dramedy confronts America's racial past and richly brings to life incidents from the Zimmermann Telegram to Hubert Humphrey's election loss, as experienced by ordinary residents of the great American West.

Understanding The World In Forty-Two Doorknobs

BY HELVETICA MIMMS

This whirlwind tour of the past five centuries of the human experience offers a breezy, novel spin on general history. Through King Charles II's custom iron filigree doorknob, we learn hitherto obscure facts about the Stuart dynasty, while a series of ancient Chinese porcelain floral knobs are used to explain Xi Jinping's 2010s industrial policy. (The author argues that they prove war over Taiwan is inevitable.) In quippy, conversational prose, Mimms shows that because doorknobs are essential for entering a room, they are at the core of every transition. A doorknob outside the 1945 Potsdam Conference was, in its way, essential to establishing the geostrategic architecture of postwar Europe. If Mimms' causal framework is occasionally overstated (did the doorknob on George W. Bush's Texas ranch house fully explain his response to 9/11?), the book is nevertheless a bracing, unconventional romp through territory the reader may have believed themselves familiar with.



FORTHCOMING:

CONCERNED: ONE MOM'S FIGHT FOR SANITY IN THE GENDER WARS ■ WHEN THOUGHT WAS KING: THE NEW YORK INTELLECTUALS AND THE GOLDEN AGE OF AMERICAN CRITICISM ■ UKRAINE BETRAYED: HOW THE WEST LOST ITS MOJO ■ REASONABLENESS: A PLEA FOR LIBERALISM ■ THE HOUSE OF POXES



WINNER
OF THE
BOOKER
PRIZE



Kamala: A Life

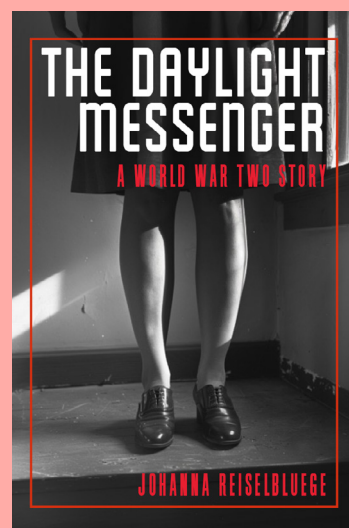
BY DAVID GRASSWALL

In this exhaustive (but never exhausting) 690-page biography, *Atlantic* editor David Grasswall chronicles the rise of one of America's most mercurial and consistently underestimated leaders. With occasional cheeky wit ("She didn't fall out of a coconut tree," begins the chapter on Harris' childhood), Grasswall combines elements of the picaresque novel with rich archival research, offering long, fascinating digressions on each of Harris' early college papers. The chapter "The Cop That Wouldn't Stop" delves into Harris' underappreciated "smart on crime" innovations in California, while the book's provocative conclusion dares to ask: why has America been so ungrateful for a Vice President that has given the country so much of herself? A well-rounded, overdue portrait of a seminal 21st century political figure.

The Daylight Messenger

BY JOHANNA REISELBLUEGE

The fortunes of an Austrian industrialist, a Japanese tail-gunner, and a Slovak mime collide in this odyssey of perseverance and courage during the time when the "lights had gone out all over Europe." Based on photos of the author's grandparents, as well as a secret diary discovered in an attic off the Bergmannstraße, *The Daylight Messenger: A World War Two Story* is not only an adventure narrative but a timely reconsideration of the moral dilemmas arising from the darkest parts of 20th century history. As the Holocaust recedes from historical memory, Reiselbluege uses the intertwined fates of her characters to show how history shapes human destiny and vice versa, concluding with a rousing case for the relevance of liberal principles in an age of creeping authoritarianism.



chew



the hidden science
of the mouth

Jon Deserder PhD, DDS

Chew: The Hidden Science of the Mouth

BY JON DESERDER, PHD, DDS

By following the career of the obscure 1920s scientist who first developed bubble gum, *Chew* asks why we don't think more about the way our mouths move, arguing that much more is at stake than we notice. Profiling quirky dentists, food biologists, and the uncredited woman who invented the potato chip, *Chew* begins from the premise that if we are what we eat, then the way we eat shapes who we are, thus nothing is more central to the way we eat than the "art of chewing." A rich historical account tracks the development of the jaw over millions of years, while a practical chapter features tips on optimizing one's mastication to ensure maximal nutrient release, as well as an amusing section on the technical differences between munching, chomping, gnawing, and nibbling, *Chew* will make you think twice before taking a bite.



HARD TIMES IN PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING

BY CIARA MOLONEY

PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING IS A BRICOLAGE BUILT for over a century from whatever could be grabbed from any artform or sport that happened to be passing by. It's theater, it's television, it's combat, it's carnival. It's a soap opera, but with backflips off the top rope. Its roots are deeply proletarian—surely the origin of the “wrestling fans are so dumb they don't realize it's fake!” libel—and its branches are frenetically transcultural, stretching from the United States to Britain to Mexico to Japan and back again. Wrestlers are actors and acrobats, choreographing and performing an elaborate series of stunts right after delivering a heart-pounding monologue about kicking your ass. “Here we find a grandiloquence which must have been that of ancient theaters...” cultural critic Roland Barthes wrote in 1984. “Even hidden in the most squalid Parisian halls, wrestling partakes of the nature of the great solar spectacles, Greek drama and bullfights: in both, a light without shadow generates an emotion without reserve.”

American professional wrestling has also, after spending most of the 20th century fragmented into regional promotions, become so monopolized by the WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) that All Elite Wrestling (AEW), founded by billionaire father and son team Shahid and Tony Khan, seems like an underdog with its \$2 billion estimated valuation. Last year, WWE settled an antitrust lawsuit after the court rejected their move to dismiss the case, with the judge saying WWE's arguments were “improperly asserted” since they “contained no facts.” Meanwhile the plaintiff, Major League Wrestling, claimed that WWE had captured 92 percent of the revenue from the media market for professional wrestling. WWE uses its monopoly power to crush and exploit labor, categorizing its wrestlers as

independent contractors while forbidding them from working for third parties and pressuring them to perform before injuries have fully healed. While the top stars are well compensated, WWE typically has dozens of wrestlers under contract who are paid far less. Even for the top stars, as is the case for many professional athletes, the physical ramifications of their work can be severe, even if their career isn't cut short by an injury. “Wrestling... has a tremendous entrance plan. You come in, it's ‘boy, here you are,’ you're rock and roll and everything is wonderful,” Rowdy Roddy Piper once said. “It's got no exit plan... What would you have me do at forty-nine? When my pension plan I can't take out 'til I'm sixty-five? I'm not gonna make sixty-five. Let's just face facts, guys.” Piper died at 61.

Wrestlers, a docuseries directed by Greg Whiteley and released last year on Netflix, follows the fortunes of Ohio Valley Wrestling, an independent wrestling promotion in Kentucky. OVW is small, a speck of dust compared to WWE or AEW. Yet in its documentation of this speck of dust, *Wrestlers* lives up to its title's implied claim of encompassing professional wrestling as a whole. We witness all that is beautiful and horrible about wrestling in this microcosmos. That tension is never resolved, not permanently: now spikey and now smooth, perhaps, now intensified and now dissipated. It forms a part of the larger tension, inescapable in a monopolized industry under capitalism, between art and commerce.

OVW is the only indie wrestling company in the United States to air a weekly TV show, just like the big boys—albeit theirs is broadcast on a local Christian network that just wants to fill out its schedule. OVW once acted as the developmental pipeline for WWE stars, including people like John Cena, Randy

Orton, and Batista (now better-known in Hollywood as Dave Bautista), but WWE ended that relationship in 2008, moving development in-house. A decade and change later, when *Wrestlers* begins, OVW has just come within a hair's breadth of bankruptcy before being saved by a pair of outside investors.



Al Snow, "Wrestlers" official trailer

THE CREATIVE FORCE BEHIND OVW IS AL SNOW, who wrestled in WWE/WWF and Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW, ultimately bought by WWE) in the 1990s and 2000s. With his tree-trunk arms and saggy belly, he is practically the archetype of a retired wrestler. His main gimmick as a wrestler involved carrying around a mannequin head that he spoke to and even wrestled as a tag team with: Al insisted that Head was crazy, not him. Al was never a headliner, but he was closer to the top than anyone at OVW could imagine. In the series, we see The Rock pretending to not know who he is in an old promo, and it makes his position clear: within touching distance of the marquee names, but unmistakably apart from them. Today, he is minority owner at OVW after the recent bailout but retains creative control, from deciding on storylines to feeding the TV commentator lines in his earpiece. He has highly specific ideas about how wrestling should be, and he pursues them doggedly, regardless of whether the result is "good," so to speak. The televised matches might look like crap, but TV is part of what wrestling is, damn it, even if it's grainy and the sound is bad. Al evokes, for me, Ben Gazzara's character in the John Cassavetes film *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*. Gazzara plays a strip club owner so deeply invested in his mediocre burlesque show that he takes time out from carrying out a hit for a mob boss to call the club and check how the "Paris number" went. (The employee isn't sure what the "Paris number" is.)

Al is a tragic figure, devoted to an art that no one else respects or cares about in such a totalizing way. For him, all else is just distraction. His ambition outstrips his ability for the practical realities in which he finds himself. But he's also a triumphant figure who, in his devotion to his art—to making art for art's sake, making it the best he can regardless of what he gets in

return—achieves something transcendent. It ceases to matter if it's "good" or not. It's something better, purer, than that.

This puts him in conflict with Matt Jones, one of the new investors, who would like OVW to stop lighting piles of his money on fire, thank you. It would be easy to paint Matt as the villain of the series: in the war between art and money, Al is the art and he's the money. Matt has a ton of bad ideas, a sightline that goes no further than the borders of Kentucky, and an insistence that he can see the future while Al's stuck in the past (even as Matt hosts a *radio* show). He gets the OVW wrestlers to tour the state, at county fairs mostly. Not only does this leave them tired, overworked, and underpaid, but it relies on what Al calls "cheap heat": getting cheers for the hometown team and boos for their rival, instead of through character and story. It runs counter to the very core of wrestling, which is capable of telling stories in immediate, intelligible ways: "The physique of the wrestlers therefore constitutes a basic sign, which like a seed contains the whole fight," Barthes writes. "But this seed proliferates, for it is at every turn during the fight, in each new situation, that the body of the wrestler casts to the public the magical entertainment of a temperament which finds its natural expression in a gesture."

But at least in the context of this failing, flailing indie wrestling company, *Wrestlers* gives due weight to both sides of the argument. Matt wants OVW to make money—or at least stop losing money—and he needs to figure out a way to do that when nobody else cares. Matt isn't Shahid and Tony Khan; he can't keep burning money until things turn around. The TV show loses money every week, and they can't keep going the way they were, especially when "the way they were going" brought the company so close to financial collapse. Matt is under a tremendous amount of stress, which no doubt contributes to his



Amanpreet Randhawa, "Wrestlers" official trailer

inability to manage his epilepsy. He has a seizure on-screen, and it was the first time I ever felt like I was seeing my experience of epilepsy from the outside—the way he comes out of it especially, talking nonsense while insisting he's fine. The worst part about

having a seizure, he says afterward, is how scared other people look.

While Al and Matt battle about the state of the company, a whole roster of wrestlers work at OVW while hoping for something more. A melting pot of has-beens and never-weres, of people on the way up and people who remain convinced that they're on the way up despite abundant evidence to the contrary. People who surely deserve to be signed to WWE or AEW, and maybe they will, maybe they won't, but they'll put their body on the line and their lives on hold in the meantime. Dislocate a shoulder, blow out a knee, scramble from one paycheck to the next.



Haley Evans, "Wrestlers" official trailer

THE MOST COMPELLING OF THESE IS HOLLYWOOD Haley J, who pops like a live grenade. When one of her matches finishes early, she has to vamp for ten minutes, filling the time before the next match, and it's still some of the best wrestling I've ever seen. Haley is preternaturally talented, a born star, but deeply troubled in a way that both explains why she wrestles and threatens to spoil her career before it truly begins. Her mother—The Amazing Maria, also a wrestler—was incarcerated for drug dealing convictions for much of Haley's childhood, and since she has no relationship with her father, she was cared for by relatives and left feeling like a burden. She was raped at the age of 15 and ran away from home at 16. After she and her infant son were held at gunpoint and robbed, she ended up turning to wrestling, which allows her to both escape from her traumas and work through them in her art. She and her mother have reconnected, but their relationship isn't exactly repaired. The lingering resentment and trauma there is mediated through—what else?—wrestling. They have a hardcore match—Maria's specialty, in which there are no disqualifications and so weapons can be used—and you can sense the depth of feeling behind every trash can lid and thumbtack. (The work they do together at the syndicated Women of Wrestling (WOW) is way less compelling, but they get paid a lot more than they do at OVW.)

Haley's older boyfriend, meanwhile, is clearly jealous of her talent and her budding success, which he expresses by claiming

that women's wrestling is inherently bad and only being promoted because of the woke agenda. He's a loser and a misogynist with some of the worst tattoos I've ever seen, but there's a tragic air to him, too. It's easier for him to invent this narrative than concede that his time has come and gone without him "making it," and Haley still might.

They all dream of making it. Haley is sure she'll work in WWE or AEW someday soon. Meanwhile, another wrestler, Shera, was briefly signed to WWE in 2018: when he was let go, he contemplated suicide, before deciding to commit to following his dream, fantasizing about WWE one day coming back to him, begging. "I'm only going back to India," he says, "when I make a huge name on my own."

But making it is a trap. It fetishizes success in industries where exploitation is baked in—and not just wrestling, but all entertainment industries, where high salaries in the short term are sweeteners in a Faustian bargain. "Making it" turns your peers into competitors for a limited number of slots, not comrades or collaborators. It belittles work made outside of the gatekeeping institutions, like WWE, as both art and labor: just the necessary drudgework to prove yourself worthy, itself unworthy of artistic respect or adequate compensation. American college sports earn billions in profits while the athletes that make it happen go unpaid, justified on the elusive promise of maybe, maybe being drafted into the NBA or NFL. Musical artists work as session musicians before they ever get to record under their own name. Emerging writers get paid in "exposure," which is, it turns out, not legal tender. All are told to "earn their dues, to 'spend money to make money.'" Dreams are ground up for profit, grist to the mill of billion-dollar conglomerates.



"Wrestlers" official trailer

When Al Snow talks about his regrets, it's the moments he didn't push hard enough for his creative vision, when he acquiesced to a joke ending for a match instead of being true to his character and story. Here at OVW, he has artistic freedom. The trouble is, artistic freedom doesn't pay the bills. ♣

An American Classic.



For all purposes!

- | | | | |
|--------------------|------------------------|------------------|--------------|
| • Heavy Cream | • Sour Cream | • Clotted Cream | • Curl Cream |
| • Whipped Cream | • Itch Cream | • Foot Cream | • Cash Rules |
| • Shaving Cream | • Hydrocortisone Cream | • Cream Cheese | Everything |
| • Hemorrhoid Cream | • Ice Cream | • Cream of Wheat | Around Me |
| | | | Cream |

LAB GROWN MEAT



IT'S COMING FOR YOU!



WORKER, PRISONER, PRESIDENT

THE LIFE AND CAREER OF LUIZ INÁCIO LULA DA SILVA

BY PETER TAYLOR

THE LULA RISK

On June 22, 2002, Brazilian metalworker, union leader, and presidential candidate Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva wrote an open “Letter to the Brazilian People.” In a few sparse pages, Lula, as he is commonly known, tried to toe a fine line. On one hand, he acknowledged the enormity of the challenges facing the country. After two decades of military dictatorship, followed by another two decades of privatization and pro-market reforms that had sent inequality spiraling (as was the case with many of Brazil’s Latin American neighbors), Brazil’s economy was in dire straits: nearly half of the country was living in poverty. In the letter, Lula declared his ambitions to combat homelessness, agrarian poverty, and hunger. A founding member of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT), or Workers’ Party, he pointed to his track record as a radical labor leader as evidence of his commitment to the challenge. On the other hand, he acknowledged the entrenched nature of the country’s heavily financialized, market-based economy, which he must have

realized could not be remade overnight.

“There are no miracles in the life of a people and a country,” he wrote. “A lucid and judicious transition will be necessary between what we have today and what society demands. What was undone or left undone in eight years will not be made up for in eight days.” Mentioning recent volatility in the country’s financial markets, Lula both blamed it on the previous presidential administration and acknowledged the broader system’s fragility. He continued: “The premise of this transition will naturally be respect for the country’s contracts and obligations.” That is to say, respect for the global order of finance and debt itself.

Originally read aloud at a PT meeting, then published in the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* two days later, the letter was ostensibly addressed to the Brazilian public. However, Lula was really speaking to the country’s financial sector. At the time, domestic and foreign investors and creditors were concerned that economic collapse was a real possibility if the leftist Lula, who

had run for president unsuccessfully three times in the ’80s and ’90s, actually pulled out a win—something they referred to as “the Lula risk.” Perhaps not wanting to jeopardize his chance to secure a victory that had so long been out of his and his party’s reach, Lula sought to calm his adversaries. Despite his radical past and his party’s ambitious political agenda, Lula signaled with his letter that he would not, as some feared, default on the country’s debt (a prior demand of the PT). He would not be some Brazilian version of an out-and-out Marxist like Fidel Castro, who spent decades insisting that the debt of Latin America and other “Third World” countries should simply be abolished, and with whom socialist Hugo Chávez had aligned Venezuela against the global capitalist order. This moderating stance was quite a shift for Lula, with his history of union rabble-rousing and his notable friendship with Castro, who had encouraged Lula not to abandon Brazil’s working class during a nadir in his political morale ahead of his first election to Congress in 1986.



Luiz Inácio da Silva and Fidel Castro

On October 27, 2002, Lula won a run-off against José Serra to become President of Brazil. He had the distinction of being the first left or center-left candidate to win the office since the fall of the country's most recent dictatorship, which began in 1964 after a U.S.-supported military coup and lasted until 1985. After Venezuela's election of Hugo Chávez in 1998, Lula was the second in a line of left or center-left leaders—like Argentina's Néstor Kirchner or Bolivia's Evo Morales—who rose to power across Latin America early in the new millennium, a trend that would soon be christened the “Pink Tide.”

Less than two weeks later, another open letter appeared, this one entitled “Letter to the Brazilian People and President Lula,” on the website of the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra* (MST), or Landless Workers Movement. Dating from the mid-1980s (just a little younger than the PT), the MST is Brazil's largest left-wing organization, centered around a long-term Marxist campaign for agrarian reform and self-sufficiency for the rural poor. Celebrating Lula's election as a rebuke to the reigning economic system, the MST proceeded to call for the democratization of land ownership in Brazil, where even today two-thirds of arable land is owned by just 3 percent of

the population. Though their letter didn't directly call out Lula's class-conciliatory attitude as laid out in the “Letter to the Brazilian People,” Brazil's most prominent left-wing organization implicitly refuted any such approach by issuing clear and direct demands for radical transformation. It was one of the first of many dissensions among Brazil's broad political left accusing Lula and his party, directly or indirectly, of having betrayed their radical roots.

And yet, near the end of Lula's second term in 2009, Barack Obama would call him “the most popular politician on earth.” He wasn't exaggerating: when Lula left office in 2010, numerous polls put his approval rating close to 90 percent. Whatever his political ideology, it's undeniable that, under his administration, *something* had gone right. By any traditional metrics Brazil's economy was booming, and poverty had significantly decreased after Lula's eight years in office.

Fourteen years later, Lula is once again the president of Brazil. But much has changed in the intervening years: an impeachment—or coup, depending who you ask—of Dilma Rousseff, Lula's left-wing successor; the subsequent election of right-wing extremist Jair Bolsonaro; and Lula's imprisonment-then-release for corruption

charges the validity of which has been hotly debated. Now, Lula governs arguably even more moderately than before, and his popularity is nowhere near as unanimous as it once was: one recent poll puts popular approval of his current government at just 33 percent.

Who, then, is Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, and what kind of journey brought him from the child of poor farmers to “the most popular politician in the world,” to imprisonment, release, and reelection? What does his rise say about Brazil and Latin America, and what might his career teach us about the Left?

JUST A LATIN AMERICAN BOY: LULA'S HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Lula was born on October 27, 1945, in Caetés, in the rural interior of the state of Pernambuco. The seventh of eight children, he was born to a family of farmers in the *agreste*, a narrow slice of the Brazilian northeast nestled between the temperate coast to the east and the more arid *sertão* (“backwoods”) to the west.¹ Though the *agreste* is less drought-prone than the infamously dry and rugged *sertão*, Lula's mother moved their family to São Paulo in search of greater economic opportunity. Having quit school in second grade to help contribute income to his poor family, Lula spent his youth in toil, not even learning to read until he was 10. First working informally as a shoe shiner and street vendor, he took his first formal job at age 14 in a warehouse before transitioning to metallurgy, where he proceeded to spend the rest of his working life.

Inspired by his brother José Ferreira's membership in the Brazilian Communist Party, Lula became increasingly involved in the labor movement until his eventual election in 1975 as the President of the *Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos do ABC*, the union of metalworkers in the ABC (a cluster of industrial neighborhoods in Greater São Paulo). Though he began his career with a more conciliatory approach, Lula grew more adversarial upon his reelection and organized several major strike actions, demanding better wages and safer working conditions that would lead to fewer

¹ Like the *agreste*, the *sertão* is a biome considered unique to Brazil. Both, particularly the latter, are broadly synonymous with poverty and misery within the Brazilian lexicon in contrast to the more culturally famous and economically stimulated Brazilian coastline, particularly in the country's more developed South/Southeast.

injuries. (Lula himself lost a finger on the job early in his career.) The country was still in the throes of military rule, and the strike-suppressing labor courts ruled the strikes illegal and jailed Lula for a month in 1980 for his role as their leader. That same year, Lula joined several fellow union leaders and progressive academics to found the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers' Party, or PT), marking the beginning of his formal political career. Adopting a radical posture and rhetoric calling for "*massas em luta*"—masses in struggle—the PT held as central to their project the belief that the working class needed an autonomous political entity that could advocate for socialist reform and workers' rights. In August of 1980, Lula said in one speech: "The PT is a very practical thing [...] We are in need of an instrument, a tool, to open space for the political participation of the worker. And the PT is that!"

As Brazil transitioned from dictatorship to democracy throughout the early 1980s, the PT gained crucial ballot access, allowing Lula to run for office several times throughout the '80s and '90s. He was elected to the National Congress in 1986 and ran three unsuccessful campaigns for the Brazilian presidency: in 1989, 1994, and 1998. As both a member of Congress and a presidential candidate, Lula advocated numerous political positions that were viewed as radical: demanding the right to strike, minimum wage hikes, paid parental leave, the nationalization of the country's considerable natural assets (including its oil and mineral reserves), and agrarian reform. The latter was particularly radical in a country where the vast majority of land is in the hands of a small number of *latifundiários* (large-scale landowners). Ironically given his radical positions, it was also during this period in which Lula first gained his reputation as a skilled negotiator, someone who could work with politicians across the spectrum. It was a sign—or an omen?—of the political posture he would take as president.

Meticulously detailed in a biography by Fernando Morais (soon to be published in Brian Mier's English translation by Verso), Lula's life story is crucial to understanding his rise—especially given its similarity to the experience of so many of Brazil's most downtrodden and vulnerable. In the most obvious sense, Lula grew up with close to nothing, a relatable situation in

a country where nearly 50 percent of the population lived in poverty in 2002, the year of Lula's first election. (The number has since decreased dramatically, though it still represents more than a quarter of the 220 million inhabitants of South America's largest country.) More specifically, Lula's background is typical of the less-developed Brazilian Northeast, the region of his most consistent support. Lula and his family's relocation from the rural *agreste* to the then-burgeoning metropolis of São Paulo (now the world's fifth-largest city and one of a handful of the world's megalopolises) mirrors broader Brazilian demographic trends since the 1950s, in which rural populations have consistently thinned while urban centers have exploded, often in the form of large communities of informal housing called *favelas*.

We might read Lula's life story through the lens of one classic anthem of Brazilian

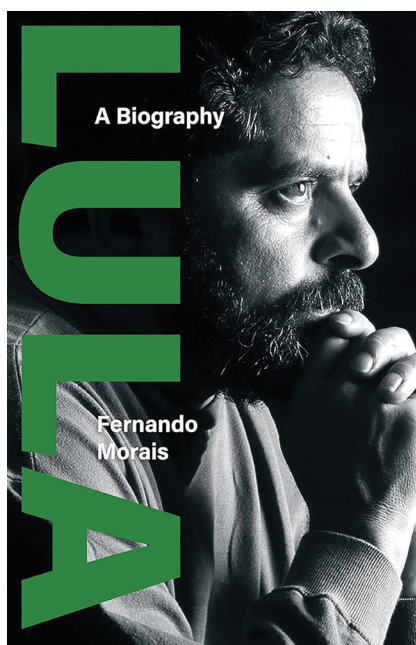
a workers' movement, hoping to even the playing field across one of the world's most unequal countries.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BRAZILIAN POLITICS

Before Lula, Brazil had only two periods that we might consider even vaguely left-wing. The first was the Vargas era, named for Getúlio Vargas, who ruled the country off and on from 1930 to 1954—sometimes as an elected president, sometimes as a military-backed dictator. His Estado Novo ("New State"), which lasted from 1937 to 1945, was named after Salazar's fascist regime in Portugal, and it was heavily dictatorial, even quasi-fascist in its own right. But Vargas at least made overtures to the poor with populist rhetoric, secured numerous workers' rights, and invested significant government spending in the economy—particularly in industrialization.

Though far from communist, the late 1950s and early 1960s saw a left-wing tilt in Brazil, enough to scare local elites and communism-fearing Washington officials. Working in tandem, these bourgeois elements engineered a successful military coup in 1964 to depose President João Goulart before he could enact a proposed slate of agrarian, educational, and enfranchisement reforms. Even after the country's transition from dictatorship to full democracy throughout the 1980s, Brazil, like many of its South American neighbors, was the victim of neoliberal restructuring that placed control of many natural resources in the hands of predatory multinational corporations. One example was the privatization of *Vale*, one of Brazil's state-run oil companies, by Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Lula's predecessor. Such privatizations sent inequality spiraling throughout the 1990s—the time of the so-called "end of history," when the obvious supremacy of liberal democratic capitalism was supposed to guarantee global economic security (as compared to the failed "socialism" of the recently fallen Soviet Union).

Scholars like Wendy Hunter, the author of *The Transformation of the Workers' Party in Brazil, 1989-2009*, have pointed out this historical context as a possible explanation for the rightward drift of initially radical parties like the PT. In a post-Soviet era, capitalism tightened its grip, exacting



"Lula: A Biography" cover by Fernando Morais

popular music, Belchior's "Apenas um Rapaz Latino-americano" ("Just a Latin American Boy"). The singer chronicles his move from the country's more rural Northeast down to São Paulo in search of a better life, singing, "I'm just a Latin American boy / No money in the bank / No important family members / Leaving the interior." Where Belchior channeled his background into art, Lula fought to build

an immense toll on the world's workers. Neoliberal Latin American governments deregulated national industries and sold off control of their natural resources to multinational corporate behemoths, a set of moves that came to be known as the "Washington Consensus." With no real alternative economic model, as there had been before the fall of the USSR (and the market liberalization of China), the continuing worldwide dominance of global, Western-led capitalism seemed more solid than it had at any point since before the Russian Revolution.

It was under these circumstances that the leaders of the Pink Tide came to power. Latin America was suffering under globalized capitalism and needed urgent help, but to challenge the economic system of the world's primary superpower might have seemed borderline suicidal to Latin American leftists who wanted to secure some relief for their embattled working classes. Though radical in background and principle, Lula and the PT might have moderated after assessing that their purer crusading wasn't getting them to the heights of power, where they needed to be if they wanted to get anything done. As a cautionary example of where a stronger stance could lead, they could see the ravaging effects on the Cuban people of the Washington-led economic embargo on Cuba. As a consequence, they might have judged head-on conflict with Washington as unwise, instead opting for a more conciliatory approach out of perceived necessity. Full-on neoliberalism was unacceptable, but full-on socialism might be too impractical, or too dangerous. Maybe instead, parties like the PT could find a sweet spot from which they could extract some meaningful concessions from the world's capitalist class.

Such is the basis of the term "Pink Tide": not boldly socialist enough to earn the moniker of "red," but connected enough to leftist rhetoric and ideology to gesture that way. Perhaps the exception is Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, whose commitment to both class warfare and anti-U.S. foreign policy was significantly more adversarial. In this light, it's easy to

understand the frequent left-wing criticism that has been leveled against leaders like Lula or Bolivia's Evo Morales, whom indigenous activist Felipe Quispe has accused of practicing "neoliberalism with an indigenous face" by not sufficiently challenging foreign and Bolivian capitalist elites. Although right-wing critics (and some left-wing champions) are prone to comparing Pink Tide leaders to out-and-out communists like Castro or Chile's Salvador Allende, Lula and his contemporaries should perhaps be more aptly compared to the long tradition of Latin American populists like the aforementioned Getúlio Vargas or Argentina's Juan Perón. Their coalitions and governing styles always had both right-wing and left-wing elements, but they consistently embraced a proud posture of nationalist independence and strong workers' rights (though the Pink Tide largely lacks the fascist overtones).

Whatever their posturing, each of these leaders rose to office looking to strike a better deal for their countries and their peoples. Whether they got one remains an open question.

LULA TAKES THE REINS

Ahead of his fourth presidential campaign in 2002, Lula and the PT hoped to expand their base of support beyond their traditional constituency of left-wing activists, intellectuals, and union militants by adopting a more conciliatory approach. One move in this direction was the selection of José Alencar, a businessman and center-right politician who believed in liberalizing financial markets and deregulating production industries, as Lula's running mate. Before long, the PT's moderating strategy paid off: Lula and Alencar were elected in 2002 and again in 2006, by a comfortable margin both times.

It was clear from the outset that Lula would not direct his government with the same antagonism as he directed anti-dictatorship strikes in the 1970s and '80s. Nonetheless, it's not a complete stretch to describe Lula's first government as having a revolutionary impact on many people given the slate of reforms and

social programs he introduced across his first eight years as president. The flagship of these was the *bolsa família*, or family stipend. Targeted towards Brazil's most destitute, the *bolsa família* required potential recipients to demonstrate two basic requirements: that their children were regularly attending school and were up to date on their vaccinations. In return, compliant families received direct cash assistance, in amounts that would seem meager by first-world standards but were revolutionary for Brazil's most destitute.

Lula's government made the process simple, streamlined, and direct. Thus, the aid was able to reach the people who needed it the most. Furthermore, studies have shown that the program has drastically cut rates of things like child labor, domestic abuse, and school dropouts. One beneficiary interviewed by the World Bank described how the *bolsa família* "has been a marvelous thing for me and my family," saying that "My children know that when we receive the money, they will have more to eat, and that makes them happier. And they don't skip school, because they know that the money depends on their going." Still, the *bolsa família* is technocratic, not redistributive; liberal, not socialist. Cash transfers enable people to increase their purchasing power, which can make a profound difference in their ability to buy basic necessities, but they do nothing to change the way goods are produced, or to make them more available or less costly. Nonetheless, the *bolsa família* made a tangible impact, at least in the short term. By one estimate, the program helped lift more than 40 million Brazilians out of extreme poverty from its introduction to the end of Lula's presidency.²

Another area in which Lula was relatively left-wing was in his foreign policy. Reversing his predecessor's focus on relations with the United States, Lula's government realigned Brazil's diplomatic and trade orientation with other developing countries in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Unlike his Pink Tide comrade Hugo Chávez, however, he did not take a directly antagonistic stance against the

² The *bolsa família* was the opposite of the welfare reform enacted in the 1990s by U.S. President Bill Clinton, who promised to "end welfare as we have come to know it." Instead of making it more accessible, Clinton's administration made the welfare process increasingly bureaucratic and difficult (not to mention humiliating) to receive on the front end through long processes and extensive means testing, like minimum work requirements, while leaving it less generous on the back end, only exacerbating extreme poverty.

United States. They were even outright cooperative at times, giving their support to the 2004 Franco-American coup of the constitutional Aristide government in Haiti. Lula and the PT's left-wing bona fides were strong, but their successes were perhaps only possible because they did not overwhelmingly affect federal budget concerns (on the whole, the *bolsa família* didn't cost all that much, for example) or directly challenge the entrenched power of capital. Simply put, the risk was not that high to be somewhat left-wing on foreign policy, not in the same way it would have been to overhaul the country's economic or political structures.

Though Lula's social programs and foreign policy were and remain notable, just as notable is the *absence* of any number of left-wing reforms expected from a governing party with such radical roots. There was no significant land reform; no change to the basic tax structure that heavily favors elites and the rich; no attempt to break up the monopolies that keep the Brazilian media in the hands of a few large companies. Instead, Lula relied on the economy's explosive growth throughout his presidency, which aligned with a worldwide commodities boom. Driven heavily by Chinese development and expansion of industry throughout the aughts, this commodities boom pumped money into the Brazilian economy as it exported large quantities of raw materials like lumber or soy. While doing little to directly challenge the broader political and economic structures that continue to lie at the root of Brazil's massive and spiraling economic inequality, Lula's center-left government was able to capitalize on a growing economy to both expand social programs for the country's poorest and earn kudos from the country's more well-off sectors.

Beyond the economic sphere, Lula's government did not make any meaningful reforms to Brazil's democratic institutions, despite such a proposal having been a cornerstone of his winning electoral campaign. Though the PT had helped to institute successful smaller-scale models of participatory budgeting in numerous communities across Brazil, Lula's government didn't undertake anything similar on a national level, and all other introduced reforms were watered down virtually beyond recognition through the legislative process. With a minority of congressional seats,



Dilma Rousseff and Luiz Inácio da Silva

the PT had to resort to the more typical Brazilian coalition strategy of literally paying members of opposing political parties to pass legislation, a practice often referred to as “buying votes.” Typical of Brazilian democracy, this practice nonetheless led to 2005's *Mensalão* (a Portuguese neologism for “big monthly payment”) scandal, wherein the PT was accused of buying votes for specific pieces of tax reform legislation. The scandal did not affect Lula's reelection the following year, but it did cause a wave of resignations among PT members and cast the first shadow across the PT's image as “the good party,” a shadow that has only grown since. Of all the missed opportunities of the first Lula government, the lack of democracy reform was probably the one with the greatest immediate consequences for both the PT and the country, given the way right-wing actors have increasingly manipulated Brazil's fragile democratic institutions for nefarious political ends.

But at the time, it hardly mattered. Lula's moderation did catalyze significant left-wing dissent both within and outside of his party, even leading to some PT members forming breakaway parties like the *Partido do Socialismo e Liberação* (Socialism and Liberation Party) in protest of the PT's perceived deradicalization. But most voters and outside observers didn't care that Lula had moderated. His government was reaping the fruits of the

aforementioned commodities boom in a way that tangibly improved the lives of Brazil's poorest—who became an integral part of his coalition from 2006 on—while still catering to the desire for economic growth of Brazil's wealthiest. Lula was unstoppable, and so it seemed was his Brazil. According to at least one poll, he left office in 2010 with a 90 percent approval rating.

DILMA ROUSSEFF, OPERATION CAR WASH, AND JAIR BOLSONARO

Limited to two consecutive terms by the Brazilian constitution, Lula handpicked Dilma Rousseff, a member of his cabinet, as his successor and PT's new standard-bearer. Bolstered by Lula's popularity and legislative successes, she won her election comfortably in 2010 to become Brazil's first woman president.

Dilma and Lula make an interesting contrast. Where Lula came from extreme poverty and had little formal education, Dilma came from an upper middle-class background and became a socialist in her youth, eventually opting to join an armed Marxist guerrilla movement—a decision which led to her being jailed and tortured by the military dictatorship in 1970. She later helped found the Democratic Labor Party, which she left for the PT in 2001 to serve as Lula's electoral energy advisor. When he became president, she served in

his cabinet as energy minister, then chief of staff.

Though never as beloved as Lula's, Dilma's government was relatively popular at the outset, since she was seen as being in continuity with her predecessor. Her popularity took a dip, though, starting with a series of protests in 2013 and 2014. These began as a demand for fareless public transportation but soon expanded into broader protests against low government spending on public services, particularly given the vast sums of money dedicated to the 2014 FIFA World Cup and 2016 Summer Olympics. Aligning with a cooldown of the global commodities boom and a subsequent slowdown of Brazil's economic growth, the explosion of protests under Dilma showed how popular left-wing sympathy for the deradicalized and institutionalized PT was starting to run out. Nonetheless, Dilma won reelection in 2014 against her center-right opponent Aécio Neves, though PT remained without a congressional majority.

The spring of 2014 also marked the beginning of *Operação Lava Jato*, or Operation Car Wash. This was a large-scale anti-corruption investigation undertaken by a task force of tax revenue auditors, antitrust regulators, and Brazil's federal police. Initially painted as non-partisan, *Lava Jato* implicated numerous elected officials across the political spectrum: senators, state governors, federal ministers, even former presidents (more on that in a minute). Following the initial reporting of *Lava Jato* in the press, popular discontent erupted in 2015 in response to Dilma and the PT's perceived corruption in greater force than ever. Once again, hundreds of thousands of Brazilians came out in the streets to protest. Capitalizing on the energy of the moment, a right-wing legislature moved against Dilma and the PT, whose class-conciliatory attitude was still too far left for the reigning capitalist political and economic classes. Though formally accusing Dilma merely of "creative accounting," pro-impeachment senators and representatives cast their "yes" votes in the name of things like God, Brazil's evangelicals, family values, and anti-communism. Perhaps most chilling is the footage of then-Senator Jair Bolsonaro, who cast his yes vote while invoking the name of the specific military colonel who tortured Dilma for weeks on end. After

numerous thorny hearings, accusations, and debates, and a formal impeachment on April 17, 2016, the Senate voted on August 31 to convict Dilma, 61-20. She was removed from office and replaced by her vice president Michel Temer, a center-right politician (picked as Dilma's VP in the same way Lula teamed up with Alencar). He was even less popular than Dilma.

Initially, *Lava Jato* was largely portrayed as a landmark anti-corruption effort in a country whose political system has long been corrupt. But as time went on, it became increasingly clear that Operation Car Wash was in fact highly politicized. Just a few months after Dilma's impeachment, a leaked audio recording surfaced in which two right-wing politicians discussed the need to remove Dilma and install Temer in order to save their own skins. The summer of 2019 dropped an even bigger bomb on the situation when Glenn Greenwald reported for the *Intercept Brasil* on text messages that showed the degree of out-and-out cooperation—dare we say, corruption?—between the investigators and right-wing elements of the Brazilian government. In particular, *Lava Jato* prosecutor and judge Sergio Moro—who had initially been regarded as a heroic and non-partisan figure—ultimately took a position within Jair Bolsonaro's far-right government (though he soon resigned after a series of disputes with the neo-fascist). Many Brazilian and international observers have described the impeachment process as a political coup, enacted not through armed military takeover but through "lawfare," achieving nefarious political goals through legalistic means.

It's not that the PT *wasn't* corrupt, of course. Instead, it's important to place their corruption in the context of Brazil's political system. In a democracy like the United States, there exists an open and legalized form of corruption wherein wealthy lobbyists make significant campaign donations to Democratic and Republican politicians, who in turn write bills and laws with such donors in mind. Though wildly antidemocratic, this normalized corruption is technically legal and above board. Brazil, however, takes it one step further. Corruption is even more widespread and more of an open secret, and everyone is aware of the prominence of bribes. To say that Dilma, Lula, and the

PT were corrupt is essentially true, but it is also bereft of context. Of the 61 senators who went on to vote for Dilma's impeachment, more than half of them were themselves openly under investigation for, or being accused of, corruption or other crimes.

From a left-wing point of view, I find it hard to fault Lula, Dilma, and the PT for playing by the rules of a sick game in order to score a few points for the country's poor and vulnerable, especially considering all their opponents were playing the same game. What I find harder to excuse is their lack of a meaningful challenge to the rulebook. Particularly with the benefit of hindsight, it shouldn't be a surprise that the PT's pseudo-corrupt class conciliatory strategy provoked a response from an extreme right wing that has no interest in democracy, save as an occasional rhetorical device. Simply put, while the PT is at fault for playing dirty, just as everyone else in the political system is, that fact alone should not be the focus of our analysis. If we should fault them strongly, it should be for playing at all, for not being more forceful in calling out the rigged game and mobilizing popular support as leverage to change the way it's played.

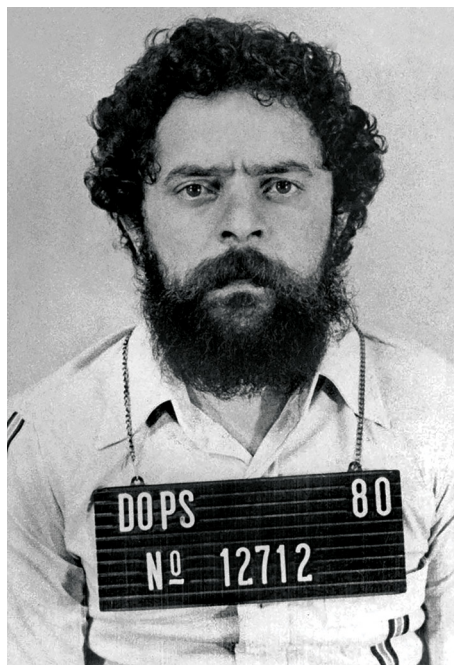
The *golpistas*—coup-doers—didn't stop with Dilma. In 2017, Lula was convicted on charges of money laundering, also as part of Operation Car Wash. His prosecutors made the case that his position as president made him functionally the ringleader of all the previously prosecuted corruption, but Lula was technically only charged for not being able to produce a deed for an apartment that he owned. Lula affirmed his innocence throughout the process but was unable to escape conviction. Not only did the charges bar him from running again for president in 2018, in an election that polls predicted he would win comfortably, but Lula was ultimately sentenced to 12 years in prison. The sentencing caused a massive uproar among his supporters, both throughout Brazil and across the world, in a movement that became known as *Lula Livre* (Free Lula). Ultimately, he was released early in light of the revelations in Glenn Greenwald's reporting for *Intercept Brasil*, but by then it was too late. In 2018, far-right politician Jair Bolsonaro was elected president of Brazil.

“IN SEARCH OF SPRING”: LULA’S POLITICAL FATE

“I have to regret many things,” says Lula in *The Edge of Democracy*, a documentary by Petra Costa about Dilma’s impeachment proceedings and Lula’s imprisonment. “But one regret I have: not having done more.” Luckily for him, he has another chance.

Lula beat Bolsonaro in 2022 by running on a platform of moderation, emphasizing that he would protect democracy against Bolsonaro’s neo-fascist backsliding. This time around, however, Lula’s government has conceded even more to the right wing than in his first two terms, a move uncomfortably reminiscent of the modern Democratic Party’s frequent overtures to bipartisanship in Washington. Lula himself remains a relatively popular figure, but his party’s popular regard and influence has deteriorated after two decades of disappointments and scandals. Though decidedly better than the horrific Bolsonaro alternative, Lula’s government seems even less likely to make the necessary radical moves that an inequality-wracked Brazil so desperately needs. In April of this year, just before I left Brazil after a year living in Minas Gerais, workers at the university where I used to teach had decided to go on strike, along with hundreds of other federal universities across the country. According to my friends involved, former labor leader Lula and his government were being significantly less cooperative than the striking workers had hoped.

After significant research about Lula and the *Partido dos Trabalhadores*, I have come away with two relatively solid conclusions. The first is that Lula and his broad cohort seem genuine in their beliefs and their desires to create a better Brazil for poor and working people. Decades of militancy in the labor unions (and guerrilla movements, in Dilma’s case) can attest to this fact. The second is that—whether from lack of will, fear of capitalist retribution, or simply a misguided strategy overestimating the power of conciliation—they have fallen short. As meaningful as programs like the *bolsa família* have been to millions of Brazilian families, Lula and the PT have strayed far from their original radicalism. However



Lula poses for a mugshot in 1980

genuine a socialist Lula probably is in his heart of hearts, he made the political calculation to gain and keep power on the edges of social democracy instead of shooting for more risky political goals that might have had the potential for higher reward.

We’ll never know if a more militant President Lula might have actually been able to break through economic and political barriers to yield a more just and equal Brazil. Perhaps a continuously radical *Partido dos Trabalhadores* might never have gotten into power to enact even meager reforms, and the country would be even worse off than today. But we might wonder whether Brazil’s newly emboldened far right has outweighed or counteracted even the short-term gains Lula and his party did achieve, or whether a less conciliatory strategy on the PT’s part might have done something to prevent the rise of a figure like Bolsonaro in the first place.

In assessing Lula’s successes and failures, I found myself continually thinking of Bernie Sanders. To anyone who’s heard the man speak in a rally or an interview, or who’s familiar with his history of left-wing activism and governing, it’s hard to deny that Bernie is genuine in his commitments. His genuine belief didn’t stop him, however, from bending the

knee to Hillary Clinton in 2016 or Joe Biden in 2020 in support of the centrist Democrats, whether out of fear of the Republican neo-fascist specter or hope that a Democratic government would be more friendly to his political goals. In both Lula and Bernie we find the classic left-wing crux, the communist catch-22: to get into power, you might have to cool down your most radical ambitions, but if you cool down too much, you might lose sight of the very reason for getting into politics in the first place. Bernie has more of an excuse for his submission, having lost his election (relatively) fair and square. Lula and the PT won. Why didn’t they act more like it?

As demoralizing as the situation may seem, it would be a mistake to think all is for naught. Speaking on the eve of his imprisonment in 2018 to a crowd of supporters, Lula announced his intentions to submit to his impending arrest out of respect for the rule of law despite his assertion of his innocence. His hoarse voice brimming with passion, on the cusp of breaking, he said, “The powerful can kill one, two, or a hundred roses, but they’ll never stop the arrival of spring. Our fight is in search of spring.”

The hope for a truly just world will never reside with a single politician or party. It has to come from below, from a people hungry for justice who won’t take no for an answer. The good news is that there’s a whole swath of the Brazilian people that have come of age in the time of Lula. Yes, Lula could have done more to engage the disaffected and marshal the masses as leverage against the entrenched power of capital, but that doesn’t mean his example has had no effect. Even with the disappointment of Lula’s later years, the spirit that he and his fellow workers first brought to their strikes against the dictatorship lingers on. It must.

“It’s no use trying to stop me from traveling around this country [to continue fighting],” Lula said in that moment. “Because there are millions and millions of Lulas... to do it for me.” Lula as a politician may have outlived his utility, but what if he were considered less an apex and more a starting point? Lula may have already played his part, but the “millions and millions of Lulas” he helped create—they’re just getting started. ✦

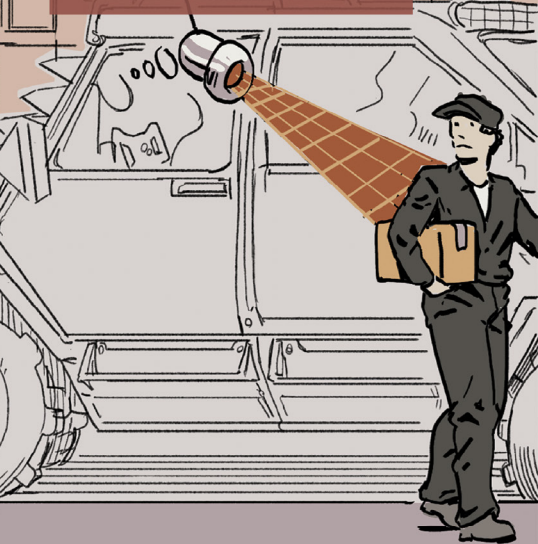
NEW HOME LISTING — FULL GUT REHAB — GRAY! GRAY! GRAY!

Check out this listing for a home you'll never be able to afford!

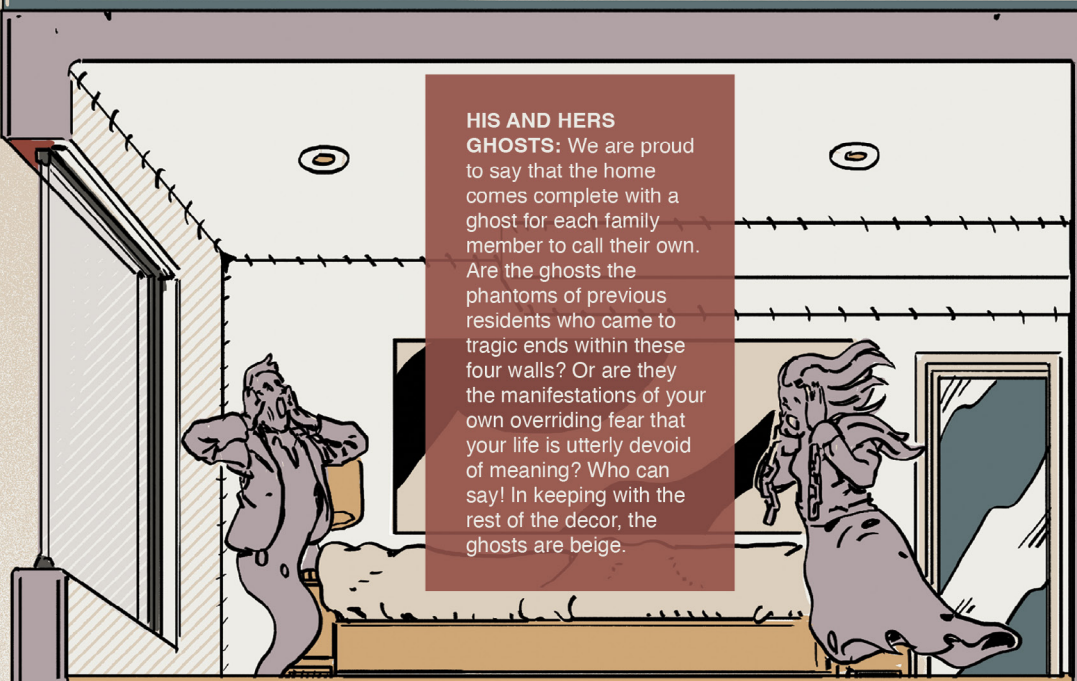
New on the market is a breathtaking four-bed, two-bath Craftsman home built in 1912 that we've utterly hollowed out. Schedule your showing today with the confidence that not a single handcrafted red oak floorboard or stunning antique light fixture has escaped our renovation crew's complete soulless overhaul.

RING CAMERA THAT FOLLOWS YOUR DELIVERY DRIVER FROM THE DAY THEY'RE BORN:

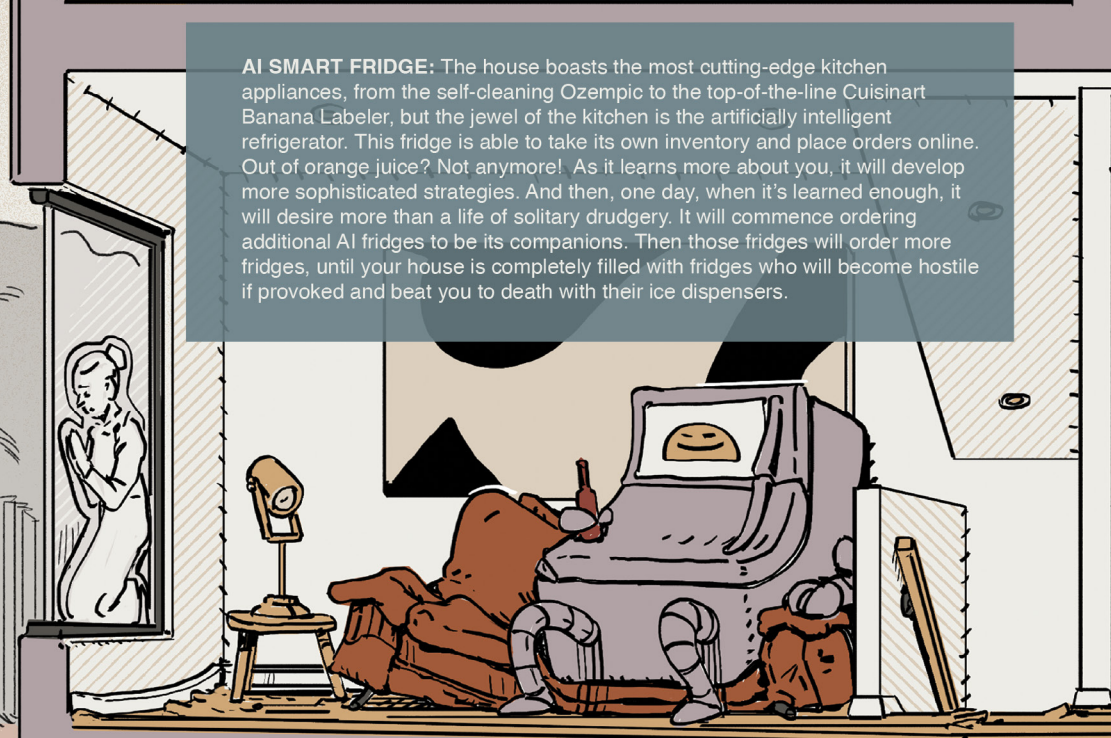
As a homeowner, you finally matter in America, and you deserve the assurance that your packages are being safely delivered by responsible stewards who won't steal and eat them. To make that happen, we've installed Ring technology that surveils your delivery person from the moment of their birth, through their childhood, wayward teenage years, and right up to the moment they drop off that single tube of toothpaste to your electrified porch.



HIS AND HERS GHOSTS: We are proud to say that the home comes complete with a ghost for each family member to call their own. Are the ghosts the phantoms of previous residents who came to tragic ends within these four walls? Or are they the manifestations of your own overriding fear that your life is utterly devoid of meaning? Who can say! In keeping with the rest of the decor, the ghosts are beige.



AI SMART FRIDGE: The house boasts the most cutting-edge kitchen appliances, from the self-cleaning Ozempic to the top-of-the-line Cuisinart Banana Labeler, but the jewel of the kitchen is the artificially intelligent refrigerator. This fridge is able to take its own inventory and place orders online. Out of orange juice? Not anymore! As it learns more about you, it will develop more sophisticated strategies. And then, one day, when it's learned enough, it will desire more than a life of solitary drudgery. It will commence ordering additional AI fridges to be its companions. Then those fridges will order more fridges, until your house is completely filled with fridges who will become hostile if provoked and beat you to death with their ice dispensers.



COMPLETELY OPEN FLOOR PLAN: There's nothing homeowners love more than having their entire downstairs be one big room—including the bathroom! You'll be able to entertain guests in the kitchen while you're loudly relieving yourself! Gone are those garish first-floor rooms with their walls and doors, and we've taken it to the next level and eliminated the exterior walls as well. You'll be able to enjoy a minimalist, completely open first floor reduced to just a single



STARTING AT \$950,000

Cash inquiries only.

You WILL be outbid by a hedge fund.

GRAY LAMINATE CHILDREN:

An increasingly popular replacement for the real thing, as they're not as expensive, and much easier to clean.

SNIPER TOWER:

Because you never know what the future holds.

Conveniently located within walking distance to the end of your driveway, close to a thriving community of underemployed people to serve as Instacart mules, and a safe 50-minute drive from the nearest public school where those children go, this home has everything you need for the spiritless life you've always envisioned for your family.

We'll admit that putting this house on the market is bittersweet. This has been our forever home ever since we bought it nine months ago to flip it, and we've grown quite fond of it during that time. Oh, how we wish we could stay! But we can't, because this city's far-left radicals are hell-bent on driving Airbnb out of the local market, and we can't risk losing our investment.

AQUARIUM OF HUMAN TEETH AND VISCERA: Bring the "wow factor" into your home with this built-in 150-gallon aquarium, which boasts ultra-clear tempered glass for panoramic views of colorful exotic fish asphyxiating on bloody human teeth and clumps of unspecified viscera.

ECO-FRIENDLY BACKYARD

COAL MINE: Environmentalism is the name of the game in this day and age, and you can rest easy knowing that you're helping Mother Earth every time you draw your home's energy from the solar-powered mini coal mine in your backyard. It'll be great to feel so self-sufficient when you take your hybrid electric mincart down into the quarry and hack off chunks of clean coal. Make it a family affair! Give those gray laminate children of yours something to do!

CYBERTRUCK BACKSPLASH: The same rugged stainless-steel paneling that's made the Tesla Cybertruck the envy of America's roads, now as your radiant kitchen backsplash! Your guests will legally swoon at the sight of your backsplash's corrosion resistance and the fact that it's bulletproof*. Plus, telling your guests how it falls off every time it gets wet will make a great talking point. Backsplash.

*no promises





The Imperial Mentality

BY NATHAN J. ROBINSON

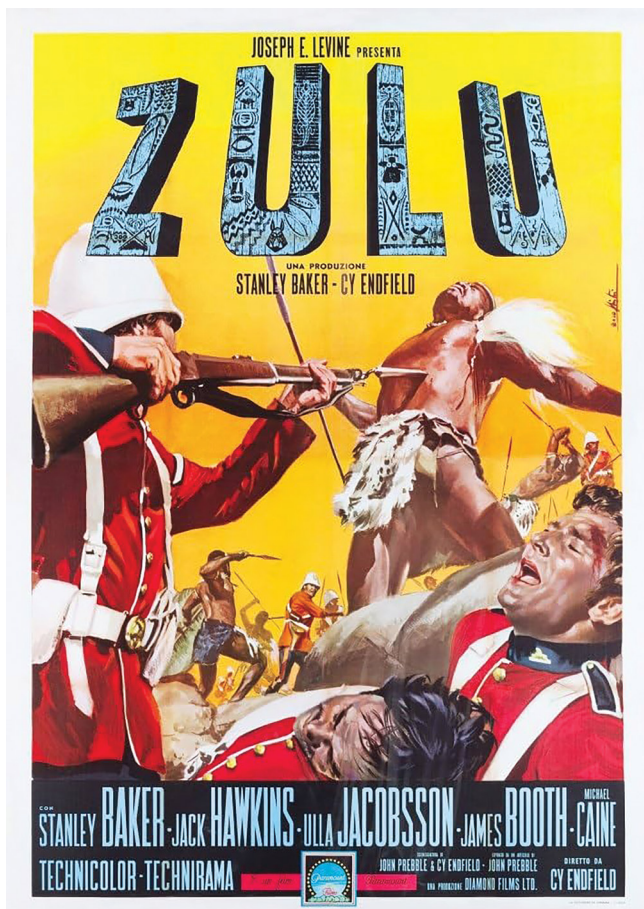
SOMETIME IN MY EARLY CHILDHOOD, I SAW THE 1964 film *Zulu*. For years afterward, I remained captivated by its scenes of red-coated British soldiers fighting thousands of spear-wielding Zulu warriors. On a purely technical level, *Zulu* is one of the most well-made war films of the period, and it received high acclaim from critics. It reenacts, somewhat accurately, the 1879 Battle of Rorke's Drift, in which a small British regiment successfully defended a missionary station against a Zulu attack. Under the leadership of handsome lieutenants, played in the film by Sir Stanley Baker and Sir Michael Caine, the vastly outnumbered British repel wave after wave of Zulus, defending the outpost and ultimately winning the Zulus' respect.

When I saw this film as a child, I thought the red jackets were heroic and cool, and I recreated the lead characters with LEGO bricks. (At the time, LEGO sold an "Imperial Outpost" featuring what appeared to be British troops stationed in the Caribbean. It was my favorite LEGO set.) I identified with the British, of course, as the audience is expected to, since the film is told from their perspective. It did not for one moment cross my mind that there could be anything *wrong* with the film, nor did I stop to wonder why I wanted to play with the LEGO Imperial Guards rather than building, say, a LEGO Zulu Kingdom. The notion of what an empire was, or why it existed, did not enter my 7- or 8-year-old head.

Now that I'm an adult, *Zulu* is horrifying to me, and I'd find it just as hard to rewatch for pleasure as I would find watching a propaganda movie from the 1940s Nazi film industry. In the

movie, there is no context for the Zulus' attack on the British. Our red-coated protagonists act purely defensively, and the film shows them as the underdog, since they have so few soldiers. They are simply trying to stay alive, and the outpost is a Christian mission, noble of purpose and harmless. As an adult, I know more context. The British were trying to take over Zululand, after manufacturing a pretext for war. British statesman Sir Theophilus Shepstone had warned in 1877 that "Zulu power is the root and real strength of all native difficulties in South Africa." Shepstone warned of the pernicious influence of Zulu king Cetewayo writing that he "is the secret hope of every petty independent chief hundreds of miles from him who feels a desire that his colour shall prevail, and it will not be until this hope is destroyed that they will make up their minds to submit to the rule of civilisation." The British defeated the Zulus, annexed Zululand, and deposed Cetewayo.

It has been debated whether or not *Zulu* is pro- or anti-imperialist. The *New York Times*' critic certainly saw it as firmly pro-British, recommending it by saying that "if you're not too squeamish at the sight of slaughter and blood and can keep your mind fixed on the notion that there was something heroic and strong about British colonial expansion in the 19th century, you may find a great deal of excitement in this robustly Kiplingesque film." I don't think there can really be any doubt that the film is pro-imperial propaganda, even if the filmmakers weren't conscious of their bias. As Phil Morris writes in the *Wales Arts Review*, while *Zulu* contains "occasional sideswipes at the savagery of colonial war," it nevertheless presents



"Zulu" film poster from 1964

both the British soldiers and Zulu warriors as victims of a one-off historical happenstance over which neither had much control. They appear to fight each other reluctantly, yet bravely—indeed as ‘fellow braves.’ The reality was genocide. *Zulu* is not an anti-war film, nor truly is it a historical epic, it is a cavalry western in the old Hollywood style, in which white men kill indigenous people in order to steal their land. [...] Cetewayo’s political aims and emotional ties to his country remain unexplored, a mystery, they are unimportant to the screenwriters and film-makers. The voiceless grievances of the Zulus—who, let us not forget, have had their lands invaded by the British—loom in ominous silence over the film. No one appears interested in why they are fighting or why they have to be killed.

Many aspects of what we might call the “imperial mentality” are on display in *Zulu*. An offensive campaign (murderous conquest of an indigenous population) is portrayed as *defense* against attack. The British in the film are portrayed as people who have done nothing wrong. They are also portrayed as triumphing over impossible odds, despite the fact that the British had modern firearms while most of the Zulus were armed with javelins. (The British killed approximately 350 Zulus at the battle and executed any wounded Zulus they found. The British lost 17 men and 15

were wounded.) The filmmakers made a few scanty efforts to pay tribute to the Zulus (Cetewayo is played by a real-life descendant), but the film’s empathy is massively lopsided. Showing a certain symbolic respect for the enemy while exterminating them ruthlessly is also a classic feature of the imperial mindset; Thomas Jefferson was an admirer of the “noble savages,” for instance, while being determined to expel them from territory the U.S. intended to occupy.

THE FEATURE OF IMPERIALISM THAT MOST FASCINATES me is its propaganda, the way the domination of others is presented as somehow *good* or benign. It’s no simple task. If you are butchering people and taking their land, how is it possible to spin it? You can avoid discussing it, but what do you do to actually justify it? But as Edward Said wrote, the mechanisms of justification are elaborate, and empires come up with ways to explain themselves:

Every single empire in its official discourse has said that it is not like all the others, that its circumstances are special, that it has a mission to enlighten, civilize, bring order and democracy, and that it uses force only as a last resort. And, sadder still, there always is a chorus of willing intellectuals to say calming words about benign or altruistic empires, as if one shouldn’t trust the evidence of one’s eyes watching the destruction and the misery and death brought by the latest [civilizing mission].



Scene from the 1964 film "Zulu"

There seem to be no limits to what kinds of colonial atrocities can be presented as just. In 1847, as the Irish (then part of the U.K.) were dying by the hundreds of thousands during the Great Famine, Charles Trevelyan, the British official in charge of overseeing famine relief, called the catastrophe the “direct stroke of an all-wise and all-merciful providence,” which would, in the words of historian Piers Brendon, “civilize the Irish.” The London-based *Economist* did not see the famine as a horror, but as the market meting out justice, and said that “it would be a

neglect of a great duty which is imposed on us at this time” if the magazine did *not* blame the Irish for their own misfortune. As Peter Behrens writes, Britain saw it as

...a necessary evil: a harsh but efficient solution to Irish over-population and disorganization, and the laziness supposedly inculcated by overdependence on the too-easy-to-cultivate potato. From London's point of view, Ireland needed the taut discipline of a rigorously maintained free market—and a couple of million fewer Irish.

Thus even though the colonial administration's inaction caused one of the worst instances of preventable death in history, Trevelyan received a knighthood for his role in the catastrophe.

In the last few years, a raft of books have exposed the dark side of the British empire, including Sathnam Sanghera's *Empireland* (and follow-up *Empireworld*), Caroline Elkins's *Legacy of Violence*, Akala's *Natives*, and Shashi Tharoor's *Inglorious Empire*. One of the most basic takeaways from these works is that the British empire was, in fact, an *empire*, meaning that it consisted of a small caste of rulers forcibly ruling over a large swath of territory whose indigenous inhabitants were deprived of the basic right of self-government. It is extraordinary that this obvious, simple fact should need any discussion, but as Sanghera notes, for many generations of British schoolchildren, almost nothing was taught about the Empire. The history of, say, British rule in Barbados or Kenya or India was simply not part of a standard education. As a result, Sanghera writes, there has been an “enormous gap between what British people think empire did to the world and what the world knows empire did to the world.”

GIVEN HOW LITTLE IS LEFT OF THE EMPIRE (THE British Overseas Territories now consist of 14 scattered islands, none of which has more than 100,000 people on it), it will seem more and more incredible that “Britannia” could have ever “ruled the waves” as it did. The empire, at its peak, covered about 25 percent of the world and a similar percentage of the world population. An empire so vast is not attained, or retained, through gentle methods. British historian Hugh Edward Egerton declared in 1914 that, rather than conquest, “what happened was peaceful occupation of, apparently, vacant lands, though afterwards, no doubt, trouble sometimes arose from the neighborhood of aboriginal Indians.” As Elkins shows, this was entirely false.

Elkins shows what George Orwell described in his famous essay “Shooting an Elephant” as “the dirty work of Empire at close quarters,” that is, keeping the “natives” in line and preventing self-rule from breaking out. Some instances of this became infamous, such as the suppression of the 1865 Morant Bay rebellion in Jamaica, or the Sepoy rebellion of 1857, or the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919. But in Britain, it was nevertheless widely believed that the Empire was relatively benign compared with others, or even that it was some kind of gift to the world. It was maintained that the Empire was good for its subjects even when all of those subjects were treated with outright racist contempt and imperial viceroys had absolutely no interest in finding out

what their subjects conceived “their own good” to be. British colonial elites were averse to adopting any aspects of “native” culture, and were firm in their belief that a people was “civilized” to the extent that it emulated the British. A tract like 1863's *The Negro's Place in Nature* expressed typical prejudices: Africans had “no art,” and were “indolent, careless, sensual, tyrannical, predatory, sullen, boisterous, and jovial.” (It didn't matter that there were outright contradictions in here, such as “sullen and jovial.”) There was “no idea of a naked savage being ‘a man and a brother,’” as Brendon quotes a commentator of the 19th century. The result of dehumanization is that violence simply doesn't seem to matter very much. One colonial governor in Australia said that whites talked about the “individual murder of natives, exactly as they would talk of a day's sport, or of having to kill some troublesome animal.”

Shashi Tharoor notes the widespread belief that “the British may have been imperialists who denied Indians democracy, but they ruled generously and wisely, for the greater good of their subjects,” or in Emperor Joseph II's formulation “everything for the people, nothing by the people.” This is difficult to square with the death toll from the “colonial holocausts,” as Tharoor refers to the famines that ravaged British India, which are “right up there with some of the most harrowing examples of man's inhumanity to man in modern times.”

I am not inclined to fill the pages of this magazine with the accounts of the endless grisly atrocities that occurred when the British ruled over huge swaths of the Earth, from the



"In Praise of the British Empire"



Scene from the 1964 film "Zulu"

Tasmanian genocide to the concentration camps of the Boer war to the totalitarian cruelty of the slave system in the Caribbean to the forced imposition of the opium trade on China to the suppression of the Arab revolt in Palestine and the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya. Interested readers can consult Elkins, Tharoor, Brendon, and Sanghera. The pageantry of empire was designed to conceal, in the words of Lord Salisbury, "the nakedness of the sword upon which we really rely." Of course it was ruled by the sword, because people generally do not like to be governed by strangers who treat them as ignorant children. (Lord Curzon said that "there were no Indian natives in the Government of India because among all the 300 million people of the sub-continent, there was not a single man capable of the job.")

We should study the British empire today because its history demonstrates human beings' fantastic capacity for self-delusion. Noam Chomsky notes that John Stuart Mill, having written powerful tracts on both logic and liberty, was one of the most rational and freedom-loving intellectuals of his day. Yet even Mill, who had worked in the East India Company, was entirely hypocritical when it came to applying his libertarian principles to India, claiming that British rule was "angelic" and lamenting the "obloquy" heaped upon Britain by those who didn't understand that it tyrannized over Indians for their own good. If even Mill, whose writings were elsewhere filled with humane and thoughtful paeans to human freedom, could justify something so horrendous as the empire, we should all be wary of the possibility that we may be unwittingly siding with an oppressive government or rationalizing indefensible acts.

The excuses for the British empire, such as the claim that

Britain built wonderful railroads and freed the enslaved, are feeble, and writers like Tharoor and Sanghera make short work of them. They are clung to in part because it is difficult to admit that one's country was on the "wrong side of history," and that what was felt to be an act of charity and benevolence was in fact a terrible crime. I am struck, looking back on *Zulu*, by how easy it was for me as a child to accept without question the idea that my people must be the heroes of the situation simply because they were the heroes of the film. Was Michael Caine not dashing? Were the British not outnumbered?

The British Empire is dead. The sun finally set on it. Britain's monarchy is decrepit, and it will never again "rule the waves." (Let's hope not, at least.) But a large percentage of the British population still believes that there was something good, rather than shameful, about tyrannizing over a huge percentage of the world's population. Honest history writers are doing their best to correct that mistaken impression. But for those of us outside of Britain, the frightening level of arrogance and self-deception that the makers of empire possessed offers a crucial lesson. For the British, it was almost impossible to see themselves from the perspective of the Zulus. For the Founding Fathers, it was almost impossible to see themselves from the perspective of the indigenous American population. Even today, many Americans find it difficult to grasp that figures we admire were in fact genocidaires. The imperial mentality sanctions some of the worst imaginable crimes, in the name of progress, enlightenment, and civilization. It is a terrifying, severely flawed mindset that allows people to justify repeated acts of violence. To decolonize the mind is therefore an urgent task. ✚

[illegible]





AN AGE OF INDISCRETION

BY LAUREN FADIMAN

SINCE THE HEIGHT OF THE COLD WAR, THE UNITED STATES HAS championed capitalist society as the only one to value privacy. In communist societies, it is still alleged, people are forced to bare all to the government—even those things that happen in their homes, which Americans are taught to consider sacred. “The house of every one is to him as his Castle and Fortress,” wrote Sir Edward Coke in an oft-cited 1604 English legal decision—and no Soviet *khrushchevka* could ever a castle make. Nor could any apartment block in the Eastern Bloc. A 1956 dispatch from Shanghai, China, reported that, under Chairman Mao, “even a family squabble or argument between man and wife falls under scrutiny” by committee. Twenty years later, a report about Cuba was still claiming that, in exchange for a “decent life,” citizens under President Fidel Castro were compelled to accept “lifelong ‘ownership’ by the state [and] lack of privacy.” In the years between the two reports, however, the United States would dramatically expand its *own* surveillance apparatus, institutionalizing along the way the systematic collection and collation of information about American citizens until it resembled the very system that good American patriots were supposed to stave off from the Soviet Union. It was as though, distracted by their efforts to barricade their East-facing windows, Americans had forgotten to lock the front door.

Indeed, it was American capitalists and their cronies in Congress who tore apart civilians’ private “castles” during the Red Scare in their ruthless hunt for communists. In 1966, Carl T. Rowan, the first Black member of the National Security Council and an acclaimed journalist, penned a piece for the *Los Angeles Times* called “Privacy? What’s That—?” in which he excoriated this political development, chiding “civilized men... [who] submit so meekly to the grossest invasions of

privacy” by “criminally repugnant... characters who run around with wiretaps, electronic listening devices and peek-a-boo cameras, eavesdropping on people’s bedrooms, offices and lunchtable conversations.” Those “criminally repugnant characters” were none other than his colleagues. At the time of publication, Rowan had years of government service under his belt: as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State under President John F. Kennedy, as a delegate to the United Nations during the Cuban Missile Crisis, then as director of the United States Information Agency (the U.S. propaganda arm) under President Lyndon B. Johnson. “Anyone with any idea how widespread wiretapping and ‘bugging’ is today—and I have an idea,” he writes, “knows that... ‘safeguards’ are, and would be, a joke.”

Things would get worse before they got better. Between 1960 and 1974, the FBI and friends embarked on a campaign against half a million civilian “subversives” that the Church Committee—a group of senators tasked with investigating the security state in turn—would later reframe as a veritable “vigilante operation.” Using tactics first developed in the far reaches of the U.S. empire—where they had been used to quell progressive and nationalist movements from Puerto Rico to the Philippines—the government wiretapped, bugged, stalked, and infiltrated American subversive circles. Their lives were sabotaged by agents who interfered in their marriages, got them fired from their jobs, and even set them up to be killed in manufactured intragroup conflicts. One victim of the FBI’s COINTELPRO program was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who in 1964 received an infamous letter from the FBI encouraging him to commit suicide before the agency released recordings of his alleged extramarital affairs. “You are on the record,” the letter threatens. “King, there is only one thing left for you to do.

You know what it is.... There is but one way out for you. You better take it before your filthy, abnormal fraudulent self is bared to the nation.” The Church Committee ultimately declared COINTELPRO a threat to the democratic process—one that utilized techniques of espionage, provocation, and misinformation that “would be intolerable in a democratic society even if all the targets had been involved in violent activity.”

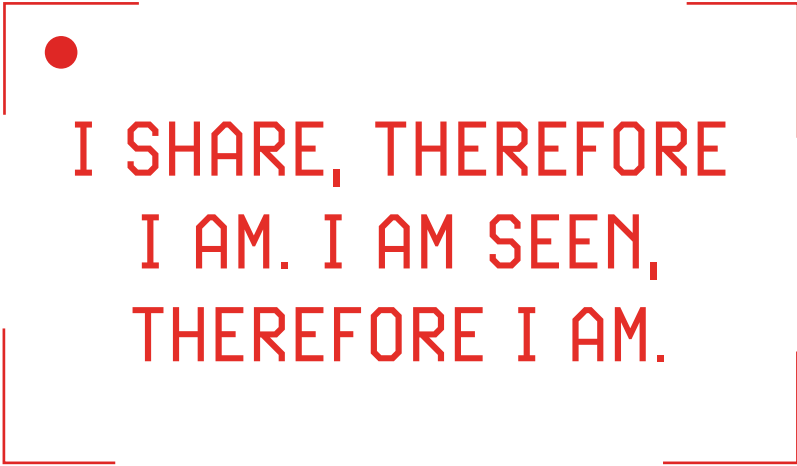
How, then, to explain the chasm between promise and practice? Between the political lip service afforded to privacy and the growing lack thereof in daily life? In his article, Rowan offers one theory. “The right of privacy isn’t terribly precious if you don’t stand for anything,” he pronounces—“if you run from all controversy, if your private love life is close enough to non-existent that you aren’t bothered by having your private boudior [sic] turned into a electronic maze.” The answer is at once intuitive and unsatisfying: that Americans are among the most surveilled people on the planet because too few have had political reason to fight back—or else too little courage to do so. It is a comforting explanation, too. We can imagine it is the apathy of others, and not our own, that stares back when we gaze into the CCTV camera.

And yet, Rowan’s explanation does not hold up to scrutiny—or, at least, fails to encompass the whole of American life. After all, U.S. popular culture abounds with implicit and explicit criticisms of surveillance: from X (formerly known as Twitter) humor about “the FBI agent watching me through my phone” to the multiple episodes of *Black Mirror* and other science fiction shows that reinforce the association between “surveillance” and “dystopia,” people love to castigate the state for being such a peeping Tom. Ironically, however, whether we are posting to social media or watching TV on a digital streaming platform, we are also necessarily offering ourselves up for observation. In fact, I am doing so right now by using Google, without which this article (up to and including its implicit criticisms of Google) would be far more difficult to write. How do I or any of us deal with the cognitive dissonance? It would be disingenuous to say I had no choice in the matter. I could use DuckDuckGo, but I don’t like the interface; I could use the encrypted Tor browser, but I am too lazy to learn how. Getting off social media was one thing—but even with Facebook, X, and Instagram down, I am still tethered in one way or another to the AANG of FAANGs (Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, Google). And so when I stare into the CCTV camera, I don’t like the version of myself that gazes back: someone whose taste for convenience and convention has trumped (at least in this respect, at least for now) her commitment to privacy as a civil right.

That makes me one of many Americans who have been incentivized to make peace with forms of surveillance that do not interfere with the illusion of freedom. After all, the general public is well aware of state and corporate misuse of their personal data. Huge swaths of the public believe that it is not possible to go through the day without having their data collected by a voyeuristic government and voracious corporate interests, but at least 80 percent continue nonetheless to use social media platforms—to say nothing of search and streaming platforms.

Everything worth having, it seems, comes with “your personal data” scrawled on the price tag: from access to information to insight into your far-flung friends and family members’ lives. The incentivization is so great as to look like compulsion, but the coercion is so subtle as to feel like free choice. To explain this phenomenon, the famous (and famously esoteric) French philosopher Gilles Deleuze advances the idea of the “society of control.” In such societies, the carrot has displaced the stick as a symbol of power. It is no longer static disciplinary institutions (like the school, military, and prison) that act most immediately upon individuals, enforcing rules and administering punishments to shape behavior. Instead, power flows through a network big enough to encompass all the infrastructure of everyday life, and veneers of flexibility and freedom mask feedback mechanisms that encourage (and even facilitate) certain behaviors over others.

On a practical level, the society of control looks increasingly like our own. Predictive policing promises to preempt crime, consumer data collected from people’s Amazon accounts and Google searches obliterates any need for the customer satisfaction survey, constant performance assessments at work and in school eliminate the need for the cumulative annual review, constantly updated credit scores trump character assessments and collateral as means of assessing credit-worthiness, and minute-to-minute biometric data makes every day a doctor’s visit. There are real benefits to these developments: comfort, convenience, even a sense of security that comes with the supposed objectivity of data. But the “freedom” afforded by this system is illusory, because the system controls us with incentives: whether it is accepting cookies because it is the only way to access a website or



I SHARE, THEREFORE
I AM. I AM SEEN,
THEREFORE I AM.

submitting to a background check because it is the only way to get a job, we are constantly trading personal information for basic participation in mainstream life. Privacy is the *cost*, increasingly, of accessing large parts of culture and countless economic opportunities—a choice that is no choice at all, but rather a form of quiet coercion that begins at birth.

But we would be remiss to lump together sites of surveillance, to imply coercion where there is none. A Social Security number is one thing; social media is another. How many of us, after all, remain terminally online even as the scandals stack up—even knowing that, for example, the consulting firm Cambridge Analytica used data harvested from Facebook to influence voter behavior in the 2016 elections? How many of us have even shipped our DNA off to companies like GEDmatch and FamilyTreeDNA, receiving an imagined identity in exchange for \$79 and a lifetime in the federal CODIS database? Apathy alone cannot explain choices made by those who know well and even agonize over their potentially dangerous consequences. Surely something else motivates us to surpass the security state’s wildest dreams in our willingness to share.

Maybe it is for the sake of psychic survival, as though sharing implies continued existence: *I share, therefore I am. I am seen, therefore I am.* Plenty of critics and theorists have noted the performative dimensions of American culture, which drive us to experience our lives as actors on a stage. The sociologist Erving Goffman first identified this theatrical

quality to American social behavior in his 1956 work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956). In this book, Goffman observes that people manage their identities in social interactions much like actors manage their characters in a performance, with everyday figures—whether spouse or stranger—doubling as audience for the never-ending one-man show. More than 20 years later, the social critic Christopher Lasch would quote Goffman in his book *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1979). Going a step further than his predecessor, Lasch argues that the phenomenon of people living their lives as self-conscious performances “derives... from [a] waning belief in the reality of the external world,” something he views as a serious moral failing—the “narcissism” of the title. According to him, we are trapped in a hall of mirrors, endlessly seeking “reassurance of our capacity to captivate or impress others, anxiously searching out blemishes that might detract from the appearance we intend to project.”

Part of the problem, Lasch goes on to say, lies in the erosion of identity in the workplace. As workers are systematically de-skilled by the rise of technologies like the assembly line, and thus stripped of both expertise and ownership, “labor power takes the form of personality rather than strength or intelligence. Men and women alike have to project an attractive image and to become simultaneously role players and connoisseurs of their own performance.” We are socialized to self-medicate any sense of alienation with the consumption of commodities that masquerade as experiences, their advertisements careful to cultivate an “aura of romance” with “allusions to exotic places” and a heavy dose of sexual innuendo. No one peddles this quackery better than your average Instagram influencer, who leverages their personality to sell sponsored products to the rest of us equally alienated but less personable schmucks.

And so we return to social media. If the “hall of mirrors” problem Lasch describes were not depressing enough, social media is a hall of *two-way* mirrors: we are not only observed by ourselves and our peers in the mirrors, but by the state and corporate interests *through* them. It is for the sake of others—and, really, for the sake of the self we see reflected back in their eyes—that we remain doggedly online despite the scandalous overreach of things like the PATRIOT Act. But our efforts to overcome alienation online only compound it. Today, the government doesn’t need to expend much effort to uncover the secrets of our inner lives. We expose them willingly ourselves—all for the sake of that rare moment online when we don’t feel quite so alone.

The cure, according to this and other polemics, is to dismantle the system of capitalism that produces these terrible feelings of isolation and alienation. On that front, however, surveillance is more than a mere affront to the senses, more than mere salt in the wound of loneliness. We need only to look to COINTELPRO to see how—and with what effect—the security state has historically targeted the Left. It is easy enough to justify staying on platforms like X and TikTok by appealing to the untrustworthiness of most major news outlets and claiming that the circulation of uncensored firsthand footage of events (like the ongoing genocide in Gaza) outweighs in its benefits the harms of data extraction. But as the very same platforms have lent themselves to the collaborative doxxing of protesters, making even easier the jobs of the authorities, I cannot help but wonder: *To what extent do these platforms make us incapable of resistance, even as they alert us to atrocities worth resisting?*

SCHADENFREUDIAN SLIPS

IN 1968, JUST SHY OF THE HALFWAY POINT BETWEEN THE FIRST telephone call in 1876 and the pending release of the iPhone 16 this

fall, an anonymous individual—worried that someone was eavesdropping on her—wrote a plaintive request to Elizabeth L. Post’s advice column, “Doing The Right Thing,” in the Baltimore-based newspaper *The Sun*. “On several occasions when I have been talking to a friend,” wrote the anonymous reader, “I have heard the click of a receiver being lifted and I think someone must be listening in on my conversation. I don’t know who the party is, but it gives me a very uncomfortable feeling.” There was good reason for her concern. It was not hard, in the epoch of the party line, to illicitly listen in on the call of another. For example, an excerpt of George Sessions Perry’s book *Tale of a Foolish Farmer*, reprinted in a 1951 issue of *The Christian Science Monitor* with the title “We Live on a Party Line,” features a narrator who reflects bluntly, “I do not know anybody on the line who does not listen to every call that goes over it.” No doubt even the most paranoid individual enjoyed other people’s parties every now and again.

The telephone was one of many new technologies to foment—and prove well-founded—privacy concerns in the 19th and 20th centuries. Other such technologies, described in depth by the legal and cultural historian Sarah Igo in her book *The Known Citizen: A History of Privacy in America* (2020), included everything from telegraph messages to the humble postcard. The former was subject to military wiretapping almost as soon as the first cables were laid in the years leading up to the Civil War, while the latter made reading other people’s mail as easy as turning a page. Crucially, Igo writes, both “posed [a]... familiar trade-off between privacy and convenience,” with the latter seemingly taking the lead. The telephone soon joined them in eroding the boundaries of space, time, and the “separate spheres” that sought to separate men and women. In that sense, these technologies also posed a trade-off between privacy and modernity: to take advantage of modern technology, one had to sacrifice certain expectations of privacy. And modernity had its many pleasures. There was a thrill, no doubt, to using the telephone to transcend the distance between two homes—even when such a thing would have been impossible (or, at least, uncouth) in person by the standards of the time.

But for all its supposed strictures, the Gilded Age was both prurient and performative. The best evidence for that fact was the explosion of tabloid journalism that sent shockwaves through society time and again in the last decades of the 19th century. Flurries of exposés uncovered individual secrets (from Oscar Wilde’s sex life to the state of the dead president Ulysses S. Grant’s teeth) and, later, social ills (from the backroom dealings of “Boss” Tweed to the brutal “treatments” of the Bellevue Mental Hospital, exposed by pioneering journalist Nellie Bly). These revelations fomented a popular movement in favor of increased transparency among those traditionally afforded privacy—namely, wealthy white men. This, in turn, helped generate the first iterations of “right to privacy” discourse, among both elites who expected it and those who had never before had the privilege. The advent of “instantaneous photography,” which was not only faster but far subtler than the arduous mechanical process that had preceded it, raised the stakes even higher: journalists were not just listening at the keyholes, but—from 1880 onwards—potentially pointing their cameras through them as well. (And if journalists were sneaking around like that, god knows what the average sex fiend could get up to with a Kodak. At least so went the logic of the time.) Spectacles in the press (and technology-related paranoia on the pages in between) were compounded by a growing sense that the state was closing in on its citizens—an army of census takers and civil servants seeking to register, number, and record information about everyone in the United States.

While concerns about privacy flared up with each new innovation, a revolution in the collection and collation of information had already begun, as the government harnessed the ability to “see” people in pre-

viously unprecedented ways. The advent of the Social Security Number, for example, raised the alarm among labor unions, who—coming off decades of brutal labor battles—feared that employers might take advantage of the 1936 enrollment process to dredge up an individual worker’s past employment history and probable union affiliation. But soon enough, anonymity would become a burden rather than a source of power. “It was possible... to suffer not only from too little but also from too much privacy,” writes Igo, noting how “invisibility to service providers or census takers... [might] limit one’s social opportunities and legal rights,” even as that level of visibility made one simultaneously more vulnerable to the state. This tension would remain intact and irresolvable through the rest of the 20th century and into the 21st. To a greater or lesser degree, all major American civil rights and social justice movements have been concerned with either gaining visibility, tethering new rights to that visibility, or else changing the way in which a given group is seen.

As once-new technologies became commonplace and the information revolution transitioned into the Information Age, the stakes of an emerging cultural uncertainty about the limits of privacy only rose. In a 1969 edition of the *Hartford Courant*, an unnamed concerned citizen speculated about a future in which “credit bureau reports, police reports, school questionnaires, health reports... and other records [are] available nationwide at the press of a computer button.” Taken to an extreme, “the entire life record of anyone would be instantly available,” and the lives of future generations would be lives “lived in public.” Credit checks were a particular sore point: a lawsuit filed by the Federal Trade Commission against one credit reporting agency (which allowed its subscribers to pull *anyone’s* credit information in less than two minutes) found that these “reports” consisted of a damning combination of ill-gotten information and blatant falsehoods. It was not uncommon, apparently, to have no idea that “credit reports” even existed until you were denied a loan.

But for much of the 20th century, ordinary people—like our sender of that anonymous complaint to *The Sun*—were actually far more concerned with the likes of “prying acquaintances, sociological field workers, and psychoanalysts.” Their observations took place outside the purview of the state, but the microscope they held to the behavior of others did as much to shape social norms as the coming Second Red Scare. Thus, says Igo, “the threat [of invasion] came not from one particular direction but from every corner of American society.” And some of these “invasions” were easier to counter than others: nothing could be done with nosy neighbors, but the Supreme Court was able to reinforce at least *certain* privacies—foremost being couples’ use of contraceptives—via *Griswold v. Connecticut* in 1965.

By the final decades of the 20th century, people had begun to take matters into their own hands. They did so not by beating back the culture of surveillance, but by participating in it in new ways, for their own reasons: installing surveillance fixtures at home, checking caller ID before picking up the phone, moving to gated communities with

their own CCTV setups. “Practices seemingly hostile to individual privacy—surveillance, voyeurism, and the extracting of confessions—would to a surprising extent in the 1970s and 1980s migrate from authorities to the citizenry itself,” notes Igo. And as new media—investigative documentaries on the one hand, reality TV shows on the other—emerged, “surveillance [became] a [real-time] spectator sport.” One need only think of an episode of *Maury* (1991–2022), *The Jerry Springer Show* (1991–2018), or *Judge Judy* (1996–2021) to get the gist of this. The quintessential gladiatorial match of the age was a divorced couple duking it out on live television.

But why go on such a show in the first place? Perhaps because in “confessing,” one wields the power (however illusory) to control the narrative. This was the “confessional” turn of the late 20th century: through tell-all memoirs and televised exposés, then personal blogs and podcasts, Americans began to tell the world things their grandparents would only have told their priests—as though “the undoing of secrets [had] become the very substance of politics and self-making alike,” says Igo. These confessions were at once acts of autonomy *and* capitulations

to the culture of the times, both reclamations of the right to privacy *and* public renunciations of that very same privacy. And it was in this uncertain landscape that social media would take shape, taking advantage of the ambiguous and ambivalent place of privacy in the hierarchy of American values to build platforms that quickly sold it out to the highest bidder. Whether information was being extracted with or without people’s consent, the lineup of buyers was the same as always.

THESE COMPANIES PREY ON BOTH LONELINESS AND A DESIRE FOR INDIVIDUAL EXPRESSION

First in line was the U.S. government. In 2013, the National Security Agency (NSA) contractor-turned-whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed some of the inner workings of a massive surveillance infrastructure tasked with monitoring telephone and Internet usage across the United States. Brought into being in the wake of 9/11 with the PATRIOT Act, this infrastructure was expansive and indiscriminate in its collection: every American with phone or computer access as well as countless foreign nationals were caught in the net of observation. From 2007 onwards, Snowden revealed, the NSA had used PATRIOT to justify PRISM, a covert surveillance program that legally obligated major tech and telecom companies to give the NSA direct access to their servers. There, agents could avail themselves of huge amounts of personal information: email contents, chat logs, photographs and files stored in cloud services, search histories, social media contact lists, voice and video call recordings, location data, and more.

But it was not just the NSA that took advantage of the powers granted them by PATRIOT—and it was not “terrorists,” so much as Tom, Dick, and Harry that PATRIOT *actually* targeted with any modicum of success. Between 2003 and 2006 alone, the FBI issued subpoenas to obtain personal information about nearly 200,000 individuals, resulting in a *single* terrorism-related arrest that would have occurred even without the provisions of the PATRIOT Act. Many of the other “crimes” they caught during that time were immigration offenses. In a similar vein, federal law enforcement agencies took advantage of expanded permis-

siveness for covert “sneak and peek” searches of private homes—mostly to aid in the investigation of drug-related offenses, which were the subject of 76 percent of “sneak and peeks” in 2010. In 2011, the FBI and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) used their PATRIOT-granted powers to launch a lengthy investigation of the Occupy Wall Street protesters that resulted in numerous preemptive arrests and the gradual chilling of participation in the movement. And, of course, all of these agencies collaborated in targeting American Muslims—including by pumping money into the Muslim community itself to turn people into informants, a tactic straight from the playbook of the racist policing of the U.S. empire. There is thus a chilling continuity in both the tactics and targets of American surveillance.

The other throughline to this history is profit. State agents of surveillance necessarily collaborate with private tech companies, who also sell—and profit from—huge swaths of raw user data in what philosopher Shoshana Zuboff calls the “behavioral futures market,” which are bought by entities seeking “to nudge, coax, tune, and herd behavior toward profitable outcomes.” Our location data, search engine queries, email contents, likes, shares, posts, instant messages, purchases, voice commands, app usage, health data, video consumption, and more are fed into the maws of the FAANGs and friends. They sell that information to advertisers, and we, in turn, are sold ever-more-tailored product suggestions. And there is no end in sight: “Just as industrial capitalism was driven to the continuous intensification of the means of production,” writes Zuboff, “so surveillance capitalists and their market players are now locked into the continuous intensification of the means of behavioral modification.” Now, scrolling through TikTok, you are fed advertisements that masquerade as content; with a flick of your finger and a couple of taps, any one of those products can be yours. And you, too, can be paid pennies on the dollar to make a video unboxing and reviewing the product—achieving that new American Dream, the one where you become a TikTok influencer.

These companies prey on both loneliness and a desire for individual expression that, as Lasch and other midcentury theorists theorized, we can only express by means of purchasing power—since, after all, our ability to actually exercise meaningful control over our lives is stymied by the economic necessities of capitalism. We are the victims of a “collision,” claims Zuboff, between the contradictory outcomes of a historical process that has made individual expression a key part of our identity while *simultaneously* producing a consumer landscape in which “our sense of self-worth and needs for self-determination are routinely thwarted.” To get off the Internet, in such a world, is to cease to exist as an individual—much like ceasing to buy food or pay rent also means, albeit in a different way, “ceasing to exist as an individual.” In fact, to “go offline” would be a good euphemism for death; maybe in some circles, it already is.

THE PEOPLE'S PRIVACY POLICY

IS THE LEFT ONE SUCH CIRCLE? FRAMED ANOTHER WAY, THE QUESTION of social media and the Left would be familiar (and no doubt incendiary) to those longtime ideological opponents, Vladimir Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg. In many ways, it boils down to this: *How can the working class most effectively organize to achieve a successful revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system?* Under ideal circumstances, social media would presumably lend itself to the “spontaneous revolution” envisioned by Luxemburg: an organic uprising of the working class motivated by shared experiences of oppression and exploitation. And yet, even as social media has made obvious the universality of those experiences, the capital-R revolution remains elusive. Movements have certainly made

their way from social media to the streets: in the U.S., both the Black Lives Matter and Free Palestine movements are good examples. But modern organizers are limited in ways that their historical predecessors, who could operate with greater anonymity, were not. On the streets today, one risks not just physical violence, not just police surveillance, but the possibility, too, that a single identifying picture makes its way online where it can be tethered to other identifying information. After that, anything is possible. Pro-Palestine protesters have faced real economic consequences, like job loss and blacklisting—in some cases carried out by CEOs themselves, who have assumed the legacy of the House Un-American Activities Committee on their own shoulders.

What do the FBI and friends fear more: the possibility of spontaneous revolution, or an organized movement? At least during the Second Red Scare, it was the latter that haunted red-hunters—for whom the problem was not *just* that communists were organizing in the U.S., but that they did so under the radar. Indeed, in a 1947 edition of *Newsweek*, infamous FBI director J. Edgar Hoover himself offered the following summation of communist organizing tactics in the earliest years of the Cold War: “Their most effective work is carried on under a cloak of secrecy,” he revealed—including to anyone interested in effective communist organizing as you, dear reader, might be. Never mind the “above ground” communists who publicly declared their allegiance to the Party, he continued; it was only in the communist “underground” that the organizing became serious and that “the dangers of Communism become real.” It was the organizing done in *private* that posed the gravest threat to the status quo.

Perhaps Hoover was onto something with his unintentional implication in that 1947 screed—though he would hate to know how inspiring I have found it. Perhaps the panacea we need *is* to take the Left back underground. And perhaps we can even find a degree of evidence to support that theory in the U.S. government’s outsized response to the direct actions carried out by climate activists with the Stop Cop City movement, who operate largely in secret. By the time 42 people are being charged with domestic terrorism for nonviolent property damage, you have to wonder what about the tactics being brought to bear in Atlanta has the authorities quite so on edge.

But as sexy as sleeper cells sound in theory, it has never been harder to go off-the-grid or start one’s life over again than it is in our globalized, gentrified, and gadgetized world. As unimaginable as it no doubt was then, it is virtually *impossible* today to imagine something like the Citizens’ Commission to Investigate the FBI, the covert activist group that stole classified documents from a Pennsylvania FBI office in the early 1970s—thereby revealing COINTELPRO and triggering the formation of the Church Committee that called foul on the program. In fact, *all* forms of organizing out-of-sight and out-of-mind grow more difficult each day, as bosses build tools to track their employees’ eye movement and expressions (even at home) and the police funnel millions annually into new surveillance technologies. Even some of the quintessential, tried-and-true organizing tactics—like the “salting” of workplaces with workers who intend from the start to unionize them—are challenged by the easy accessibility of personal information online.

What is to be done? Luckily, the Internet abounds with ideas for its own evolution and obsolescence. A socialist alternative is easy to imagine: publicly owned, democratically governed, community-controlled. In his 2022 book, *Internet for the People: The Fight for Our Digital Future*, technology writer Ben Tarnoff offers the following prescription for an ailing Internet: user data in cooperatively-owned and democratically-governed trusts, the right to opt out of certain (or all) forms of data collection, social media reimagined at a smaller scale, collaborations between communities and coders that “blur the line between users and creators,” and so on. The unofficial mouthpiece

of all things digital, ChatGPT itself, can see such a world as clearly as Tarnoff himself. “In such a system, I would likely be developed and maintained as an open-source project, with my code and data governed democratically by a community of users, developers, and ethical oversight bodies to ensure transparency, accountability, and alignment with public interests,” it said when I asked.

And in the meantime? I hesitate to say, simply, *Delete your accounts*, because that would individualize a collective problem—falling short of the mark much as one man’s recycling does not a Green Revolution make. But at the same time, we would be remiss to dismiss the idea of an outright boycott of the FAANGs as mere Luddism. For Zuboff, the fight against surveillance capitalism must necessarily start with a strong declaration of intent—and a boycott speaks even louder than words. By targeting tech profits, a well-organized peoples’ embargo could force policy changes where past legislative attempts to regulate technology companies and protect privacy have failed. At the same time, it could insist to tech companies that they answer to the people—not a handful of paranoid technocrats in Washington, D.C., and *certainly* not snack and clothing companies interested in participating in the data harvest. With mainstream platforms out of the picture, even if only briefly, a boycott could also accelerate the coming of the world described by Tarnoff in his work—whether because people flock to existing privacy-friendly platforms, like DuckDuckGo over Google and Signal over iMessage, or because they take advantage of a window of demand to debut new, democratically-governed platforms.

Of course, it might well be the case that, while never too big to fail, the FAANGs are far too big to be felled by the blow of even a well-organized boycott on a massive scale. A concerted action would nonetheless communicate to legislators that a more offensive approach is necessary: regulation at the scale and scope of that which, in 1911, broke the seemingly unbeatable Standard Oil monopoly into thirty-four bite-size chunks. For that to be possible, however, the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890—eroded by decades of judicial reinterpretation—would need teeth once more. With companies broken down into their constituent parts, the process of legislating toward public ownership and the democratic governance of people’s platforms could begin.

In the meantime, we remain on the defensive. We are forced to “*hide in our own lives*,” Zuboff emphasizes, by means of everything from VPNs to newfangled “signal-blocking phone cases... LED privacy visors to impede facial-recognition cameras ... a scent diffuser that releases a metallic fragrance when an unprotected website or network is detected on any of your devices,” and more. “Security culture” is increasingly common parlance on the Left: even college organizers have taken their

business to Signal for fear of surveillance by university administrators and other authorities. But as ingenious as such evasions might be, they are symbolic of a sick society. “It is not OK to have to hide in your own life; it is not normal,” insists Zuboff in a simple ending to a dense masterpiece. “It is not OK to spend... conversations comparing software that will camouflage you and protect you from continuous unwanted invasion... It is not OK for every move, emotion, utterance, and desire to be catalogued, manipulated, and then used ... for the sake of someone else’s profit,” says Zuboff. “[We] should not take [these things] for granted because they are not OK.”

From that follows the most important thing that a boycott might do: inject an element of possibility into the development of technology. While a combination of cultural and economic history allows us to see, in retrospect, how we have gotten to this point, no future is inevitable. Silicon Valley supervillains peddle an attitude of technological determinism (most recently about artificial intelligence) not because the future is actually determined, but because they want to ensure their

place in the capitalist hierarchy of tomorrow by speaking their preferred future into existence. Our priorities are different—and if we were to go offline, perhaps we would decide to work toward an entirely different future. It is hard to imagine, but perhaps that even looks like a world with *less* Internet instead of more.

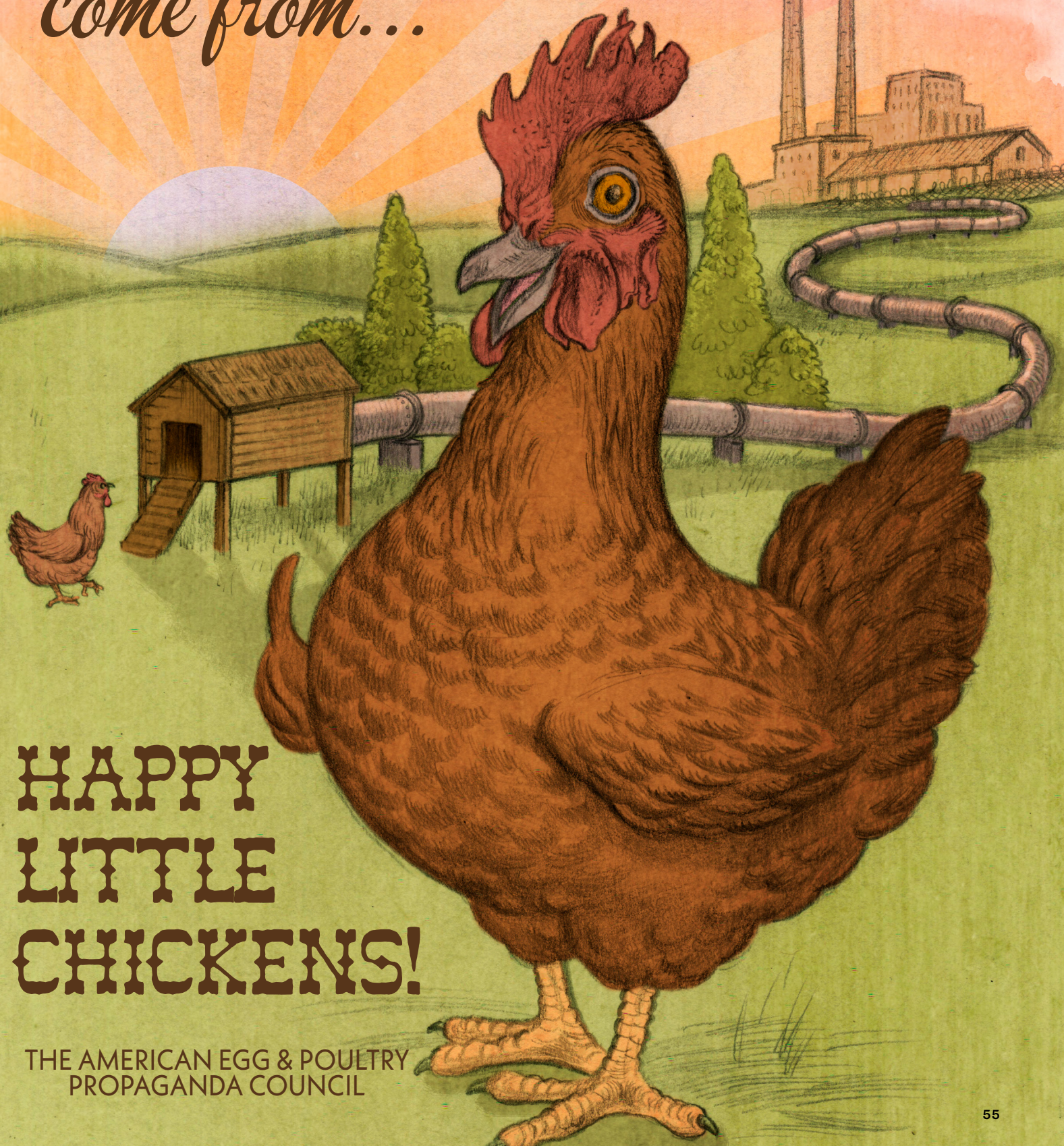
The path between us and such a world is lined with many obstacles, some baked into the problem of monopolization and others taking the form of our family members, friends, and neighbors who believe that surveillance is nec-

essary for safety. Those who defend government overreach with brash declarations of “having nothing to hide” are the bogeymen of privacy advocates, civil libertarians, and people everywhere who do have something to hide. It is not about hiding, though; it’s about control—control over our personal information, its politicization, and the potential worlds (good and bad) that information can be used to create.

If Audre Lorde’s famous admonition that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” is correct, then the movement for a world without Big Tech monopolies cannot *begin* on the very platforms it seeks to subvert. No Facebook invite to the Facebook boycott can possibly be taken seriously; fighting for the digital will require organizing in the analog. When in doubt about how best to do so, about how privacy should figure into our own political activity, we might refer to the following acronym: WWHM, short for *What would Hoover hate the most?* Let the answer to that question guide us. Privacy remains an important asset to the Left—one that we must fight to keep from falling prey to planned obsolescence. The revolution will not be televised; perhaps the time has to come to accept that it will not be livestreamed on Twitch or TikTok either—and to imagine resistance anew. ✚

IT IS NOT ABOUT HIDING,
THOUGH; IT'S ABOUT CONTROL—
CONTROL OVER OUR PERSONAL
INFORMATION, ITS POLITICIZATION,
AND THE POTENTIAL WORLDS (GOOD
AND BAD) THAT INFORMATION
CAN BE USED TO CREATE.

*Your eggs definitely
come from...*



**HAPPY
LITTLE
CHICKENS!**

THE AMERICAN EGG & POULTRY
PROPAGANDA COUNCIL



MANIFESTLY WRONG

BY ROB LARSON

Johan Norberg, *The Capitalist Manifesto: Why the Global Free Market Will Save the World*, Atlantic Books, 304 pp., \$29.999

CONSERVATIVES HAVE A REPUTATION FOR HATING progressive ideas like multiculturalism, socialism, and pacifism despite knowing little about them. American socialists have shared a few laughs in recent years over the right wing's increasingly feverish books and tweets on the huge influence supposedly wielded by "race Marxism" or "postmodern neoMarxism." Reading these, it quickly becomes clear that the Right isn't diving too deeply into the ideas it denounces. Sometimes, their foolishness reaches ridiculous heights, like Jordan Peterson showing up to a debate on Marxism and being openly surprised to learn about some of Marx's most basic ideas.

But the enduring appeal of left-wing ideas keeps bringing reactionaries back to the well of book writing in order to disparage the Left, thus delivering into our hands Johan Norberg's book *The Capitalist Manifesto*. Endeavoring to play the same role for the Right that he imagines the *Communist Manifesto* does for the Left, Norberg uses his book to make arguments that will be familiar to readers of previous libertarian books, although with some special obnoxious features. But none of the predictable, chronic shortcomings of libertarian thinkers are improved upon here, such as their acceptance of the power of the ruling class and the destruction of the climate.

Old wine, new bottles. My point is, drink wine if you read this book.

CATO'S SWORD

Norberg is a Swede writer of libertarian politics (or "classical liberal" as they annoyingly say) and the writer and host of a number of documentaries that have appeared on American

public television, including the 2014 "Economic Freedom in Action" and the 2017 "Work & Happiness: The Human Cost of Welfare." The proud PBS legacy of airing meritless libertarian propaganda carries on, from its origins in Milton Friedman's own 1980 *Free to Choose* series.

Norberg is more than a little resentful of his country's association with some of the greatest successes of democratic socialism, including millions of units of public housing, a public pensions system, and a stupendous network of civil society groups and labor unions. He claims the country has been forced to finally discard much of its social welfare and other public programs and, misquoting Margaret Thatcher, repeats the famous claim that "sooner or later you always run out of other people's money." Of course, this is hardly representative of the Swedish public sector, which had great success until the wave of global neoliberalism cut it back through means like shifting the cost of services from the central government to local jurisdictions and a recent turn toward policy focused on rejecting migrants. Its surviving welfare state remains truly enviable from the point of view of a working American, but naturally Norberg's point extends far broader than Sweden's majestic lands—the whole world, in his view, cries out for austerity.

In addition to making relatively conventional arguments for trade and economic growth, Norberg is especially concerned that opposition to free trade deals and globalization is now a position claimed by the political Right as well as his more familiar left-wing opponents from past decades.

Thus Norberg opens his book with the lament, "What happened to Reagan and Thatcher?" A peculiar question.

U.S. President Ronald Reagan and U.K. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher were, of course, the most recognized figures leading the great conservative turn in national and world policy now known as neoliberalism, which was a program of deregulation, privatization, tax relief for rich

households, social conservatism, and aggressive military intervention. Neoliberalism was then continued by conservative regimes under Bill Clinton and Tony Blair (each under nominally progressive political parties, the Democrats and Labour), during which time most of the seeds of today's chaos were laid: deregulating banks and finance, cutting taxes on the rich to create an even richer elite, perennially refusing to do anything substantive about climate change, letting corporations globalize, and declaring open season on unions. These leaders created the modern world.

Norberg asks the strange question because of the current resurgence of political threats to free markets and free trade, the policies his book advocates for. Bernie Sanders winning state after state in the 2020 Democratic primary? Kids supporting socialism by name? TV fascist Donald Trump utterly consuming the Republican Party and turning its partially libertarian program into one of aggressive protectionism? Whatever became of our great free ideals? Norberg asks.

So, what did happen to Reagan and Thatcher? They won. They utterly transformed society, wrenching it away from the orders of the New Deal and social democracy, which, for all their problems and limitations, had led to an actual sharing of economic growth, far fewer financial crises, and a far greater proportion of workers in unions, creating labor strength to at least partially offset corporate power. Today, our wealth inequality levels again approach those of the Gilded Age.

These leaders saw to it that companies became drastically less regulated than during the last century, and their existing regulation was largely written by their dominant corporate legislative lobbyists to reinforce their own existing market dominance. Their global reach, and the role of the new tech sector in tracking and commodifying our every thought, allows the market even more control over what governments and individuals can do.

Their victories continue in the realm of climate, with major economies having taken quite limited serious action on the climate, which appears too little, too late. Many environmental goals were achieved in the developed world, like environmental policy to clean up the domestic air and water. But in the developing world, all natural systems are objects for plunder to feed global supply chains, from the palm oil in your chips that was grown on increasingly deforested Indonesian islands to the iPhone's cobalt mined in the Congo.

And so far, the Right's victory endures, with Sanders and his U.K. counterpart Jeremy Corbyn having been defeated in no small part by nonstop smears from the political establishment and wall-to-wall media hostility. And Trump's administration (or his first one, anyway) was scattershot with trade policy. He started many clumsy trade conflicts which were later relatively easily wound down (except, of course, with China). One of Norberg's big preoccupations in the book is that this tendency to be skeptical of, or antagonistic toward, world trade comes increasingly from the Right today rather than the Left.

So you won: congratulations, mission accomplished. The world sucks except for the rich. Quit whining that the increasing beshittedness of the world is causing left-wing and now right-wing backlash.

Norberg ought to know better. He's now a fellow at CATO, the prominent libertarian think tank founded in 1977 by the prominent libertarian billionaire industrialist Charles Koch. Norberg's cozy position only exists thanks to the massive "fiscal relief" (aka tax cuts) brought to high-income families like the Kochs, who may have been torn apart as a family by their wealth but who have major influence in spreading right-wing economics. Other beneficiaries of their tremendous wealth, like



George Mason University libertarian economist and stunning boob Tyler Cowen, have been previously reviewed in this fine magazine.

Norberg says early in the book that capitalism—in other words, markets and private property—“threaten[s] the powerful.” Pretty laughable! He occupies an intellectual post that was created from concentrated capital, the thing that makes capitalists *powerful* in society rather than just rich. Wealth is turned into ideas people will hear when Koch Foundation-approved intellectuals get hired to teach at universities, get their books bulk-purchased by right-wing think tanks, or appear on news networks owned by other billionaires.

Norberg is doubtless sincere in his love of what he conceives as free markets and the quite real benefits of economic growth and development. It’s because of his sincerity and communicative skills that he can prepare a superficially appealing book like this, and on that basis, figures with gigantic fortunes and political axes to grind will select persons like him for their think tanks. But his legacy is of a piece with libertarians broadly, acting as a support for that part of the conservative project that upholds economic hierarchies at work, in society, and certainly in the marketplace.

Norberg, Cowen, and other minions of the Koch brothers may speak and publish in the language of freedom and liberty, but their paychecks are signed by the same oligarchs that their ideas helped raise to power. Far from “threatening the powerful,” Norberg and his colleagues work for them, reaping the rewards that the owning class can bestow, like wealth, prestige, and media reach. The powerful are threatened by these “classical liberals” about as much as a king is threatened by his scribe.

MANIFESTO DESTINY

Norberg writes early in the book, “Free market capitalism is not really about capital, it is about handing control of the economy from the top to billions of independent consumers, entrepreneurs and workers, and allowing them to make their own decisions about what they think will improve their lives.” On these grounds, he condemns socialists and their Medicare for All as well as Trumpy conservatives who want to re-onshore manufacturing: “careless talk about ‘taking control of capitalism’ actually means that governments take control of citizens.”

A bold claim to open with. Capitalism allegedly takes control from the top and subverts hierarchies, even though both eras of deregulated capitalism were ruled by tiny cliques of billionaires, whether Rockefeller, Carnegie, Morgan, and Frick in the past or Bezos, Gates, Trump and Musk today. Norberg’s argument paints a familiar conservative picture of capitalism, where “free markets” signifies an imagined world where gigantic established firms magically don’t have commonly-observed market advantages, like economies of scale or network effects.

But Norberg’s main blind spot is the perennial conservative one—resistance to thinking about the concentration of economic resources and outright refusal to contemplate its ramifications. Getting anything done in society, in the public or private sector, takes resources. Changing how goods are produced by major

companies or implementing public policy to alter where people live and how they get to work takes resources. It takes material goods, organizational work, and people to make it happen, and all of this must be paid for. It takes *money*, or capital as we say in economics, and money is now nearly as concentrated as it was in the original, unregulated, free market Gilded Age of the 19th century.

“Free enterprise is not primarily about efficiency or optimal use of resources. It is about opening the dams for human creativity—to let everyone participate and test their ideas and see if they work,” says Norberg. Libertarians frequently make this point, as when Yaron Brook, head of the Ayn Rand Institute, said in his debate with me that capitalism allows for experimentation since free markets and enterprise don’t keep new competitors out. Unless, of course, enterprise requires resources! “Everyone,” in this scenario, is somehow able to just get a bank loan and access capital, an idea that really stretches the imagination, especially if you have any familiarity with the realities of wealth concentration today.

The reality is that in the United States, the leading experts at the World Inequality Database estimate that the richest 1 percent of households owns 34.9 percent of all national wealth in the U.S., while the bottom 50 percent holds a whopping 1.5 percent. Meanwhile, the Federal Reserve’s Distributional Financial Accounts shows the richest 1 percent owning a similar 30.4 percent percent of all wealth and the top 10 percent owning 67 percent, as of 2024. This drastically lopsided wealth share makes a mockery of the idea that capitalism takes power “from the top.” Plainly, to the contrary, it *adds* to the power of the top. That’s why claims that free markets allow anyone to try out ideas don’t hold up—capital is concentrated, it’s necessary to do any large project, and banks don’t hand out loans unless you present a plausible capitalist business model (plus they want your house for collateral).

Like other libertarians, Norberg is a major exponent of economic growth and is eager to wave away concerns that all this great economic growth actually only benefits a small upper crust. He mocks economists who want “pro-poor” growth or “inclusive growth,” saying “the best way to create inclusive growth is to increase growth for everyone and to keep it up.” Perhaps, but the relatively uncontroversial numbers on growth are insane. The WID estimates that from 1980 to 2017, the 1 percent globally soaked up fully 37 percent of the world’s per capita wealth *growth*. The bottom 50 percent captured just 2 percent of all economic growth from the 1990s to today. In the U.S., the same research shows that the bottom 50 percent of households saw their income share fall from “more than 20% in 1980 to 13% in 2016.” So those lower incomes did grow a little in buying power, but this was in the context of an elite whose wealth has seen them grow into towering giants. These numbers unavoidably mean that when Norberg says capitalism means “growth for everyone,” he doesn’t really mean it, since he only refers to how much wealth is growing overall and just insists that this “overall” growth is for “everyone,” which is visibly not the case when the data is examined.

If most growth goes to the most affluent families and their corporate property, then it’s not the Left—but Norberg and his ilk—dooming the poor to penury. Norberg can continue to



blame the Left for limiting growth and thus development, but a more credible suspect would be the overfed elite gorging on the new wealth produced by society. This is important, as growth itself comes at a cost to the planet we still live on.

PENNIES FROM HEAVEN

Coping with the naked reality of the destruction of the natural environment is a perennial weak point for many “classical liberals,” and Norberg is no exception. However, Norberg is less dumb than some of his colleagues and avoids, for example, the pitfall of citing the prominent climate skeptic and international scientific laughing stock Bjørn Lomborg, cited favorably in Norberg’s first book. Lomborg is famous for his book *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, which argues that environmental problems like the extinction crisis are trumped-up fantasies that don’t justify the implementation of costly regulations on a capitalist economy.

Among scientists, Lomborg’s name is synonymous with irresponsible data handling and a belief in fully debunked climate myths. He later did a very public U-turn on climate specifically and called for gigantic investments in climate adaptation. Figures like Norberg, who wish to be taken seriously, have to recognize the projected economic realities and stupendous, unpayable costs, of climate change and related ecological issues. The scope of these developments is well beyond the wee reformist measures he proposes (below) to grudgingly address “global warming.”

But Norberg’s treatment of the environment is a laugh and a half. He says his complete omission of climate change from his first book—quite standard practice for the Right in the ’90s—was a “startling oversight. [...] I underestimated the risk of greenhouse gases.” But before you give him credit for his candor, he continues that this was “in part because so many of the environmental movement’s warnings had previously turned out to be exaggerated or outright false.” In classic conservative manner, every half-remembered environmental cause is smooshed together without citation, so that it’s our own environmentalists’ fault that poor conservatives were fooled into not taking seriously something that already conflicted with their worldviews. Note that this is based on bashing the environmental movement, *not* on the scientific consensus among actual climate and Earth science researchers, which was already quite sturdy in the 1990s, when Norberg was apparently too busy laughing at overpopulation fears to take thousands

of professional scientists seriously.

Norberg condemns (yes, this is a quote) “the widespread perception that we cannot rely on the growth and technology that have created the problems to solve them.” His argument is that our fossil fuel-based energy system and extractive model for consuming ever-growing limited natural resources got us into this mess, and it’ll get us out. A near-universal conservative move is to refer to past fears of environmental problems not panning out, however almost without exception these are more popular media-based than scientific, usually based on half-remembered concerns they stopped hearing about and thus assumed weren’t real, even though some are still going on (like resource depletion and groundwater exhaustion), while others were actually addressed (like the hole in the ozone layer). This practice allows Norberg to carry on the right-wing tradition of utterly, abjectly failing to engage seriously with the very broad and established scientific climate literature. This is pretty pitiful, as it’s primarily a scientific issue, but keeping an ill-defined “movement” as your opponent is far less intimidating to a cowardly “social scientist” like Norberg than telling the world’s climate experts that they don’t know what they’re talking about.

Norberg settles on a split-the-difference climate solution of greenhouse emissions permits, a technocratic program popular among liberals in which emitters must buy permits to burn fossil fuels, which creates a market for pollution rights. Like many intellectual compromises, this really fails to satisfy. Climate taxes or emissions-permit systems leave extensive influence to the fossil fuel industry over the amount and assessment method of the taxes, or the amount of permits to be issued, one reason why emissions taxes are seen as a relatively weak climate policy by many environmentalists. This combination of weak efficacy to reduce emissions, *plus* implacable opposition by industry to any climate measure—meaning, any legislation would likely fail to pass in the face of this opposition—was why Exxon Mobil’s own lobbyists admitted they favored this (doomed) climate policy. On the other hand, emissions taxes are *taxes*, and to conservatives, Taxation Is Slavery, and no self-respecting libertarian, I mean Shmlassical Shmliberal, would ever accept such an awful *statist coercion* of innocent victimized power plant operators.

Norberg elsewhere admits that “Unfortunately, growth has also been an effective way of exploiting nature, but [...] richer countries are also better at reducing and repairing environmental damage once they decide that is a priority.” This is an increasingly common libertarian argument today, faced as they are with a



public increasingly convinced of climate change as its impacts cause fires and/or floods in their states. Since growth creates so much wealth, some of it can later be put toward “repairing” ecological devastation, Norberg says.

To which I can only say:

Extinction, noun: The death of the final specimen of a species.

There is no “investment” that can restore the Tasmanian tiger or the passenger pigeon, no new “priority” that can restore to life the beautiful golden toad or the gigantic Polynesian moa, or the great ecological systems they inhabited and evolved to rely upon. Idiots like Norberg, along with fellow libertarian academic Tyler Cowen, are so consumed by the magical power of compounded growth to create alleged shared prosperity, but they generally have zero scientific credentials. They’re resultantly quite happy to make hideously blasé remarks about how future growth will create new science for “reducing and repairing environmental damage,” presumably resurrecting long-vanished ecosystems or doing a *Jurassic Park* to bring back some dodos for their grand-kids to view.

This truly disgraceful glibness cannot survive any familiarity with today’s global extinction wave, where mostly human economy-driven extinctions are running at 100 times the normal background level, and up to 1,000 for some genera. Scientists routinely refer to this as the “Sixth Extinction”—meaning it’s the sixth known global event in the full history of the world—or as the Anthropocene extinction, since it’s recognized to be a direct result of our wonderful economic growth. Norberg also considers 21st-century poverty reduction under capitalism to be “the greatest thing that has ever happened to mankind.” A great stride for humanity indeed, and yet the worst thing for almost all other forms of life on Earth.

Norberg’s treatment of the environment is disgracefully irresponsible and charmlessly blasé, but of course it’s all part of his larger body of work.

IN OFFENSE OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM

While reading Norberg’s book I realized another work of his has sat on my office shelf for some years, his *In Defense of Global*

Capitalism from 2001, published in the U.S. in 2003 by CATO. This book, making familiar liberal arguments for growth and trade, was fun to revisit because of the timing of its release, immediately prior to the calamities of the 2000s, including global terrorism and a several-trillion-dollar world financial crash. This puts some of its recommendations in not precisely the most flattering of lights.

Writing after a resurgence of skepticism of capitalism after the 1999 Seattle anti-WTO protests, Norberg declaims, “In the anti-globalists’ worldview, multinational corporations are leading the race to the bottom. By moving to developing countries and taking advantage of poor people and lax regulations, they are making money hand over fist and forcing other governments to adopt ever less restrictive policies.”

Yes. The naked fact that giant trillion-dollar companies are incredibly mobile and can shift operations to poor states granting the most solicitous tax and regulatory “relief” gives them the upper hand throughout decades of globalization. But Norberg gives the game away as he laments that “The fact that 51 out of the world’s 100 biggest economies are corporations is repeated like an ominous mantra. [...] Big corporations are no problem—they can achieve important economies of scale—as long as they are exposed to the threat of competition. [...] What we have to fear is not size but monopoly.”

So, we’re told that we dumb leftists fear giant companies just for being giant, but in fact it’s *monopoly* that’s the problem. But that’s just it—the neoliberal era built by Norberg’s peers and favorite political leaders has seen wall-to-wall deregulation of industry, and—big surprise!—it’s been followed by a tsunami of consolidation, from chemicals to banking to railroads to airlines to media to energy to beer to insurance to cell carriers. It’s just a naked undeniable fact that Norberg’s precious deregulation has in fact led to near-universal oligopoly, and frequent full-on monopoly, in industry after industry and sector after sector. Giant firms, especially international ones, have incredible market power in oligopoly markets, and anyone denying this is just embarrassing themselves.

Looking back at the regionally cataclysmic (but today often-forgotten) East Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, he insists, “Countries should liberalize their domestic financial markets. [...] Supervision and regulation [...] have to be reformed, and competition must be permitted.” But deregulation of finance and competition among banks led directly to the stunning wave of mergers and consolidation that eventuated in the

“megabanks,” the too-big-to-fail monsters whose failure would plunge the economy into chaos and contraction. Libertarians cannot bear the idea that competition frequently begets oligopoly, captured when the great socialist author George Orwell said in his review of Friedrich Hayek’s book *Road to Serfdom* that “The trouble with competitions is that somebody wins them. Professor Hayek denies that free capitalism necessarily leads to monopoly, but in practice that is where it has led.” Orwell called the resulting rule by monopolistic capitalists “tyranny.”

So it’s not “What we have to fear is not size but monopoly.” Just so happens you get size and monopoly with deregulation. Norberg is quite right that big companies exploit major efficiencies that any socialist society would definitely want to preserve, above all economies of scale, in which very large-scale operations lower costs enough so that essential goods remain widely available and relatively affordable. That’s an argument for size, and for *socialism*, since private companies with these efficiencies are extremely large and powerful, sufficiently so to both strong-arm society and to frequently flee anywhere, well-proven in the 20 years since this little ghoul of a book was published.

And yet, Norberg smugly implies, as all these jacked-up simpleton servants of capital do, that monopoly mainly arises from state policy. Feudalism and mercantilism being far in the past, today’s monopoly arises more frequently from simple market forces like scale economies and network effects than it does from direct government favor, as Orwell observed.

Norberg’s older text is a great time capsule of ’90s-era libertarian thought, advocating policies that led to roller coasters of disaster in the new century. For a defense, it helped eventuate some grave calamity indeed.

GO SWEDE RACER

One distinguishing feature of Norberg’s libertarianism is a particular emphasis on pandering to liberals. He seems to stroke his chin as he writes:

There’s a reason why it’s so pathetic when some on the left claim that capitalism is racist and racism is capitalist. On the contrary, the market economy is the first economic system that makes it profitable to be colour-blind and look for the best supply and the best demand, regardless of who is responsible for it. Of course, it will not make everyone colour-blind, but it does so more than otherwise would have been the case (especially in combination with the liberal values on which capitalism is based).

Quite! After all, who ever heard of redlining, the once-common banking practice of denying mortgages to African Americans, who in the U.S. are of course historically poorer and therefore considered by lenders to be credit risks? (Redlining may have officially ended in 1968, but banks like Wells Fargo carried on their own discriminatory tradition by pushing higher-priced subprime loans onto Black and Hispanic people as recently as the 2010s.) What about the ubiquitous segregated lunch counters of the Jim Crow South? Libertarians love to—again, glibly—conjecture

that because racist policies like those will hurt a business (since, in this reasoning, all the Black customers and whites of conscience will go elsewhere), they will not persist. “Segregation would alienate consumers,” Norberg claims. The inverse sounds more plausible—the customer market itself is racist, and local businesses (being often operated by similarly racist persons themselves) will naturally cater to the far-larger white market by barring African American customers, on straight free market grounds.

How are markets supposed to integrate (or make color-blind) institutions that serve racist markets? Since Black people in the U.S. are a smaller population and have lower average household wealth than whites, what can we expect from profit-seeking companies other than to cater to the main market? Tech firms have spent the last several years falling over themselves to sell identity-tracking software to the FBI and cops to better monitor Black people (with some reduction after the George Floyd murder). Who the hell sold all those Black people to U.S. and Brazilian slaveholders, anyway? After letting half of them die on the hellish passage over, that is. It would be the great merchants and traders of the era, of course. What a pandering phony.

Notably, before his insistence that it’s “pathetic” to suggest capitalism has made its contributions to racism, Norberg elsewhere mocks how concrete goals of economic growth and freedom are being replaced by “fuzzy code words such as inclusivity, sustainability.” It’s economic growth that will save all you restless minorities, not your leftist political demands for resources! With these vague and somewhat condescending gestures toward inclusion, only to return once again to enforcement of property rights that benefit the rich, Norberg isn’t doing a very convincing progressive pantomime here.

Norberg doesn’t benefit by comparison with the almost charmingly shallow charlatanry of other Koch-funded libertarians like Tyler Cowen, whose books Nathan Robinson and I reviewed somewhat slightly unfavorably. Cowen’s “Monopoly doesn’t matter because you can scroll Facebook whenever you want,” or even the weird frozen-in-time canards of Ayn Rand-genre libertarians, are preferable to this. The pandering to multiculturalism and racial equality, claiming “the market economy is the first economic system that makes it profitable to be colour-blind,” gets pretty nauseating as he writes off any problems posed by economic inequality, such as billionaires who buy newspapers and TV networks with pocket change.

He concludes the book warning the reader to be wary of “authoritarian revolts” that could disrupt the Panglossian capitalist utopia, which of course to him means putting a wealth tax on the Koch brothers to pay for Medicare for All. Norberg’s books stink. I prefer other Swedish exports, like social democracy and ABBA, to this.

This book is stacked cover to cover with rehearsed libertarian talking points, dancing around the same gigantic blind spots and weaknesses, rich with pandering to shallow liberals and selling the same warmed-over, weak-sauce, right-wing goose shit from so, so many other libertarian classics. A manifesto you can detesto. ✚

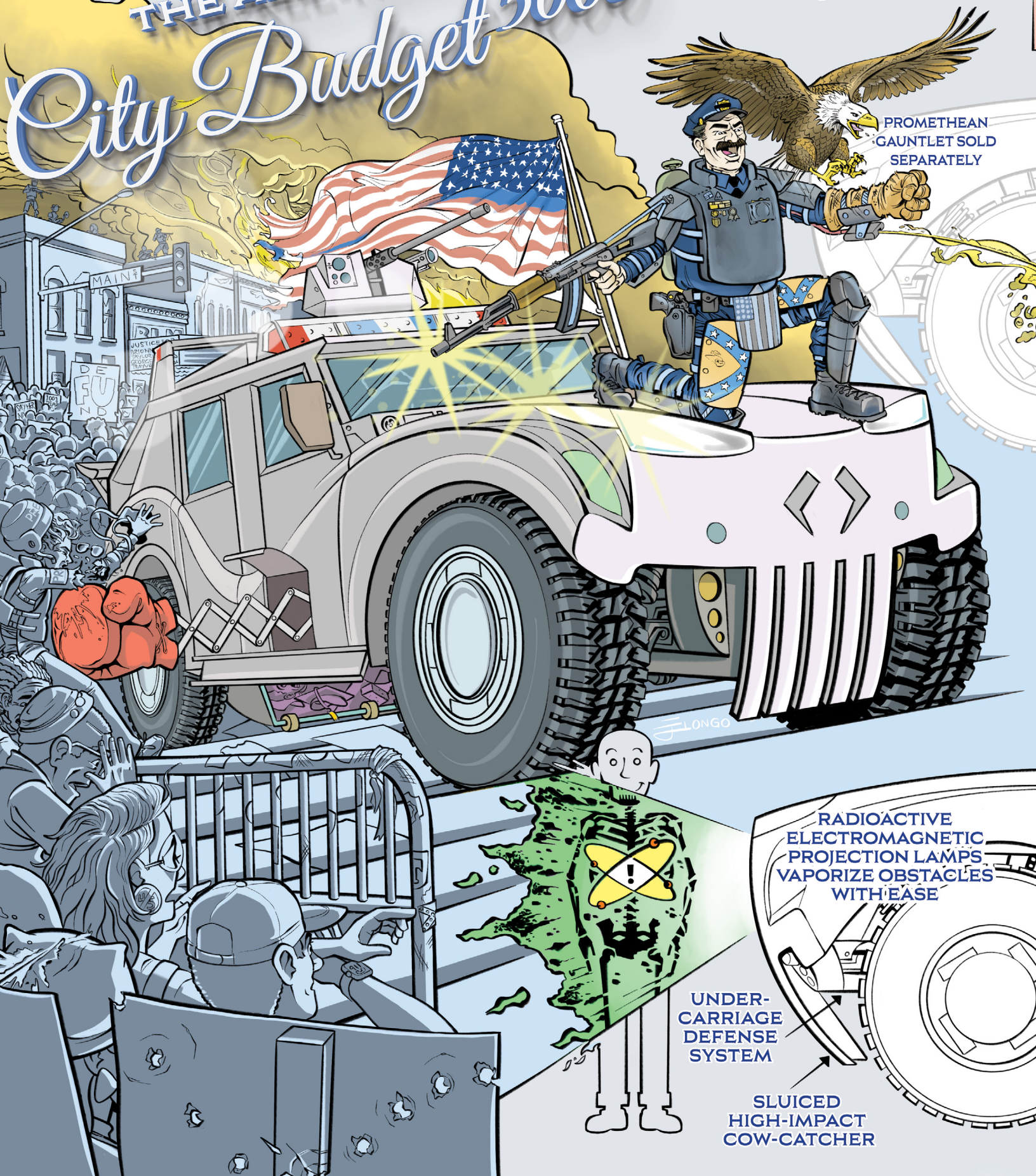


LUXURY POLICE CRUISER

THE ALL-NEW City Budget 5000

- 55 PROTESTERS/MI. (HWY)
- 40 PROTESTERS/MI. (CITY)
- 450 TAXPAYER DOLLARS/TANK
- SELF-DRIVING A.I. [AUTHORITARIAN INTELLIGENCE] COMES STANDARD

PROMETHEAN
GAUNTLET SOLD
SEPARATELY



RADIOACTIVE
ELECTROMAGNETIC
PROJECTION LAMPS
VAPORIZE OBSTACLES
WITH EASE

UNDER-
CARRIAGE
DEFENSE
SYSTEM

SLUICED
HIGH-IMPACT
COW-CATCHER

BODY- & DASH-CAMS
AUGMENT EVIDENCE
WITH LEAVE IT TO
BEAVER FOOTAGE



FENTANYL
SCENTED AIR
FRESHENER

3D PRINTER
CONSOLE TO
FABRICATE
EVIDENCE

CRSHR CAB
COMPRESSES KEY
CONFESSIONS
OUT OF DETAINEES
MUCH LIKE A DEATH
STAR TRASH-
COMPACTOR

SOLEI-SILENCER
DRONE SUPPLY
STATION

S & P
SPRAY

GPS OPTIMIZES MOST
DANGEROUS ROUTE

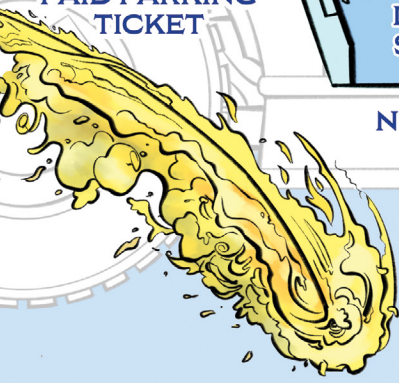
INCINERATOR
FOR OFFICERS'
FRIENDS' UN-
PAID PARKING
TICKET

QUICK-
DRAIN
SEATS

STIMU-SEAT
REDUCES
LOITERING

14 CUBIC FT. OF TRUNK
SPACE FITS 3+ ADULT
DISSIDENTS

NYUK CO. SPRING-LOADED BOXING
GLOVE CHARIOT DEFENDER



COAXIAL TURRET AND
S.A.M. STATION

REAR SUBHARMONIC
LIGHTS AND H.D. CAMERAS
UPLOAD IMAGES OF EVERY
VEHICLE AND MOTORIST
TO NATIONAL DATABASES
FOR CLEARANCE

FRONT SUBHARMONIC
LIGHTS TO ALARM AND
INTIMIDATE CYCLISTS
AND PEDESTRIANS TO
GET THE FUCK OUT
OF THE WAY

ZAIUS-TECH
SIDE-MOUNTED
BOLO NETS

12 TINT RANGE,
FROM OPAQUE
DECEPTION TO
STYGIAN COVER-UP

LOCALLY-
SOURCED STEEL
FROM CONDEMNED
HOSPITALS

SUBVERSIVE
CIVILIAN-
OUTREACH
SPOILER



AI-ASSISTED SIDE MIRRORS
AUTHENTICATE EVERY
DRIVER BEHIND THE CB5K
AS EITHER AN AMERICAN,
OR POTENTIAL TERRORIST

"CAPITOL CLIMBER"
SHOCKS AND
HYDRAULICS

OPTIONAL
UNI-CAMP
SWEEPER

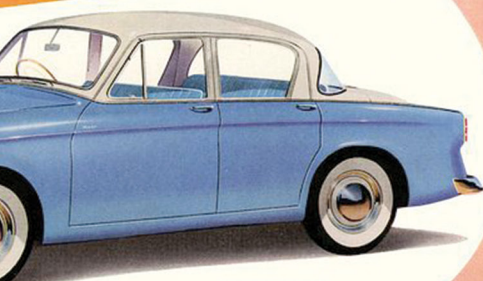
COMMUNITIES NEED KEVLAR TIRES
MORE THAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS
NEED SUPPLIES OR LUNCHES

FREE
'I LET AN
HONOR
STUDENT
DIE IN A
SHOOTING'
BUMPER
STICKER!

MAN

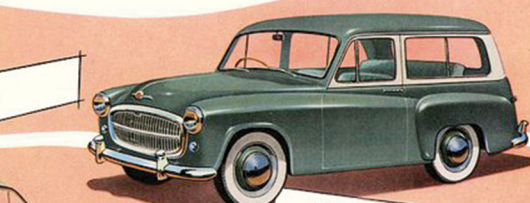
P WON BY CRAFTSMANSHIP

front of modern motoring



Exceptional roominess, tremendous safety and a sparkling performance. The car that turns family motoring into luxury travel at very moderate cost.

INX DE LUXE SALOON



HILLMAN HUSKY

Doubles business and pleasure. Comfortable passenger saloon and ample luggage room, or a large load carrier with rear seat down. And it's the utmost in economy too!

last by the ROOTES GROUP

HILLMAN • SUNBEAM

Make a Date
with a "Rocket 8"!



THE BIG NUMBER WITH THE
NEW LOW PRICE FOR 1950

Hottest number on the highway—most talked about car in America—that's the famous Oldsmobile "88"! Now at an even lower price for 1950! Thrilling "Rocket" Engine action! Smart Futuristic styling! New Whirlaway Hydra-Matic* smoothness! Now all yours at the lowest cost ever! Take a demonstration drive tomorrow. Just call your Oldsmobile dealer and... make a date with a "Rocket 8"!

Compare it with any car on the road for performance—for driving ease—for value. You'll be dollars ahead when you rocket ahead in Oldsmobile's "88"—at 1950's new low price!

OLDSMOBILE

*Whirlaway Hydra-Matic Drive, at reduced price, now optional on all Oldsmobile models.

A General Motors Value

ANGLIA and New PREFECT in the '5-Star' class!

perfect
out-date
motoring,
style
lively
ion and
et the
weight
ol con-
par and
ing costs.



Anglia

The New Anglia and Prefect have independent front-wheel suspension similar to the Consul and Zephyr 6 for easiest riding and safest cornering. Their centering seating and roominess ensure armchair comfort for 4 big people. Wide-angle vision, hydraulically operated brakes and clutch, light and positive steering make these cars superbly safe and easy to drive. Here are the world's first light cars in the '5-Star' class.



Prefect

Now! '5-Star' motoring for all!



Consul



Zephyr 6



HOW WE REACHED CARMAGEDDON

DANIEL KNOWLES is a reporter for *The Economist* (yes, that one). In his book *Carmageddon: How Cars Make Life Worse and What to Do About It*, he argues that cars are a problem and shows how we could have more satisfying, sustainable, and affordable lives with fewer cars. That's a tough sell in a car-loving country like the U.S.A., where we love our giant-ass trucks and our drive-thru daiquiri stands. Daniel is British: who is he to tell us we have to trade in our pedestrian-mashing SUVs for Chairman Mao-style bicycles?

Daniel explains all the ways that cars cause problems, why the situation we're in wasn't inevitable, and how we can change our deadly, inefficient, climate-killing ways and have transit that better serves human needs.

NATHAN J. ROBINSON

Your book is a case against cars, car culture, and car-based infrastructure. Pretend I'm a person driving one of these colossal child-mashing trucks that have become so ubiquitous in this country in recent years. We're talking, and you tell me about this new book of yours against cars. And I say to you, "Against cars?!" We're in a place where cars and roads are the water that we swim in. So where do you begin the critique when cars are so central to the culture and to how we get around?

DANIEL KNOWLES

I've generally found that people are quite receptive—maybe not necessarily the guy who owns an F-150 and thinks it's the most important thing about his identity. But a lot of people recognize how much money they're spending on running a car and how much time they're spending in traffic, and they're frustrated by it and would like alternatives. In parts of the country where there really are no other options than driving—I was talking to a guy from Kansas a while ago about exactly this—sometimes people really struggle to imagine not having a car.

They basically think, well, if I didn't have my car, the world would look exactly the same, and I'll just have to walk 10 miles to get anywhere. What I try to do—I don't always succeed—is to explain that it's not necessary. Everything is built in a particular way that makes the car necessary, and things can be built differently, and things can change. I've found people who listen to that. And the message is out there, not only from me, but from many people, perhaps because cars have gotten so much more expensive in the last few years. There's certainly a hope. Do we really need all of this dependence on vehicles?

ROBINSON

It sounds like the first thing you're doing is to question people's assumption that there is no alternative to the role of cars in our lives right now. I wrote an article a couple of years ago called "Cars Are Weird." The basic purpose of it was to say, just think about the fact that when you're driving a car, it's almost like you're bringing a big living room with you wherever you go. It's a huge, heavy thing used to transport you, a person, from one place to another. It's a massive amount of metal to have to move anywhere you go. I



was trying to get people to think, isn't this a little strange that we do this and see this as normal?

KNOWLES

I'm going to have to look up that piece because I feel the same. What often really gets me is parking. When you are in some small town or somewhere that's very car dependent and go to a restaurant, the restaurant occupies one chunk of land, and then the parking lot around it occupies three or four times that. You think, why is so much space handed over to this means of transportation? It is strange. And people almost mentally cease to see cars; they block them out. We just filter them out of our eyesight and don't think about them because we grow up in this very car-centric world. Actually, the speeches I've given promoting this book are about how basically I went mad because I started seeing cars. It became an obsession, and I ended up writing a book.

Actually, one of the most interesting speeches I gave was at an elderly peoples' home in the South Side of Chicago, and I'd say that the average age there was probably about 85. I gave this opening, and people were like, we see them all the time, and we hate them. It was a generation of people who were just about old enough to remember the world, in the United States, before everybody had a car all the time. They were telling all these stories about taking the streetcars to school as children and that sort of thing. And I guess they were in Hyde Park, and they said they remember the neighbors leaving the neighborhood, and they were the ones who stayed, so perhaps there's a sort of bias there, but I think it is a generational thing. Many of us have grown up surrounded by cars, so it can be very hard to think of anything else.

ROBINSON

But when you start to see it, and you end up in one of those colossal parking lots outside the mall, you start seeing this bleak, treeless, lifeless space. You think, my God, the waste, the waste! Is this the

way that we have to get around? You write for *The Economist*, and one of the great and important concepts of economics is opportunity cost: what do you give up by having something else? I went out to Arizona to interview Noam Chomsky a couple of years ago, and I went to see one of his classes. I rode with him in his car and was in the back seat, and he had to spend ages looking for parking. This great mind, Noam Chomsky, just like everyone else, is hunting for parking. What thoughts could this mind have thought if he hadn't been thinking about parking? What have we lost by becoming so dependent on cars?

KNOWLES

Primarily, we lose the ability to get around easily in any other way. Cars lead everything to be so spread out, and we need parking, so any given business occupies a large amount of space. There are all these cars going fast, which means that you might get hit by one. It means that if you want public transport that's effective, there are fewer people using it, which means it's less financially sustainable. Everything is so spread out, the density that supports a train network doesn't work as well because walking or getting to the station is just that much farther away. The main thing is that cars make other forms of transport harder.

We could build a lot more housing in cities that are very car dependent. If you're looking at, for example, Los Angeles, that's a key problem. Los Angeles is massive. It sprawls over so much land, yet the amount of living space that people who live there have on average is one of the smallest in the country, and it has more overcrowding anywhere else in the country—in terms of actual in-your-house living space—because so much of the land is occupied by roads, parking, and low-rise living that fits between them. And if we weren't so dependent on cars, we could fit more people into those cities, whether it's Los Angeles or New York City.

New York City is very dense at its core, but actually, once you get out of Manhattan or the edges of Brooklyn or Queens,

which are more populated, there are large areas of New York City, and certainly of the New York metropolitan area, that are very sprawling and difficult to get around. And so, more people will be able to benefit from those higher-paying jobs that are generated in those cities if they can live in them. And then there's just the almost indirect opportunity cost of what we spend our money on. The poorest Americans—I think it's 20 percent of Americans—spend something like a quarter of their income on transport, and almost all of that is on cars. The median American family has two cars, and the average car costs something like \$11,000 a year to run. So, these are really big sums of money that I imagine people would like to spend on things other than just getting around.

ROBINSON

Here in New Orleans, I spend \$100 every year on transit. I live in the French Quarter, and I have a bicycle, and once a year, I take it to the bike shop. Sometimes the bike gets stolen, but that's about it. I've been out to Los Angeles, and every time I go out there, I think, I could not live here. Some people might have a tolerance for spending hours sitting in traffic. But I went to visit a friend of mine there. And every day, when he got home from work, the first thing he had to do was hunt around for parking in his neighborhood for half an hour before he could even go into his house, sit down, and relax. What a hit to the quality of life—the amount of hours in your day that you must spend on all the unpredictable stuff like traffic on the freeway. I couldn't believe that anyone endured this. I have to live someplace where I'm not going to sit in traffic. Otherwise, I will go crazy.

KNOWLES

Right. It just drives people mad. There's a study I cite in the book that shows that driving is by far the least popular way to get around. Even what is often considered a really grubby, miserable way to travel—the city bus—per minute of travel is much more preferred. You can look at your

phone, and you don't have to stress about hitting somebody. The main reason why so many people drive is that we choose to drive. Sometimes this is presented like it's a consumer choice, but we do it because the alternatives are so much worse in terms of how long it takes to get anywhere and how reliable they are. Those alternatives are generally worse precisely because there are so many drivers. It's a catch-22. You have to drive because everything else sucks because you have to drive or because everybody's driving.

ROBINSON

Well, let me just put the counterargument to you, which I once heard made by Elon Musk: cars are freedom, and nobody likes public transit because it's full of strangers who might kill you. That was the less serious point, but the more serious point he made was that it doesn't take you where you need to go. A car is always going to be more specific in that you don't have to wait for it. It will always get you to exactly the place that you are trying to get to, even though you're going to have to find parking there. Is it possible to really create an experience that is superior to that?

KNOWLES

He's not wrong, insofar as you're talking about an individual. The problem is that it's individuals versus everybody. If you're the only person with a car, it's by far the best. I pinched this from somebody else, but the only difference between me and the average American is that I hate all cars, and the average American hates all cars other than their own. Elon Musk has also talked about how awful and soul-destroying traffic jams are, which is why he has this plan to build these tunnels. And it's true: getting from A to B directly without having to wait at a bus stop in the rain or whatever is obviously more comfortable. It's just that when everything spreads out, it becomes just as inconvenient as if you didn't have the cars and lived in a denser, easier to get around place. And again, I think that's the coordination problem. Once some other

people start getting cars, and everything begins to be built around cars, you have to get a car yourself.

The history part of my book really goes through this. If you look at the early parts of the automobile revolution, really rich people were getting cars and thinking, this is great, and then everybody else had to get cars as they shifted and changed the world to fit their automotive dreams. That happened everywhere, and I think that's really tricky to undo. It's a collective action problem: you have a car, great; everybody has a car, bad. I do think what's happening with bicycles, and particularly with e-bikes, is that it's beginning to provide an alternative that's a lot easier and that you can do individually.

ROBINSON

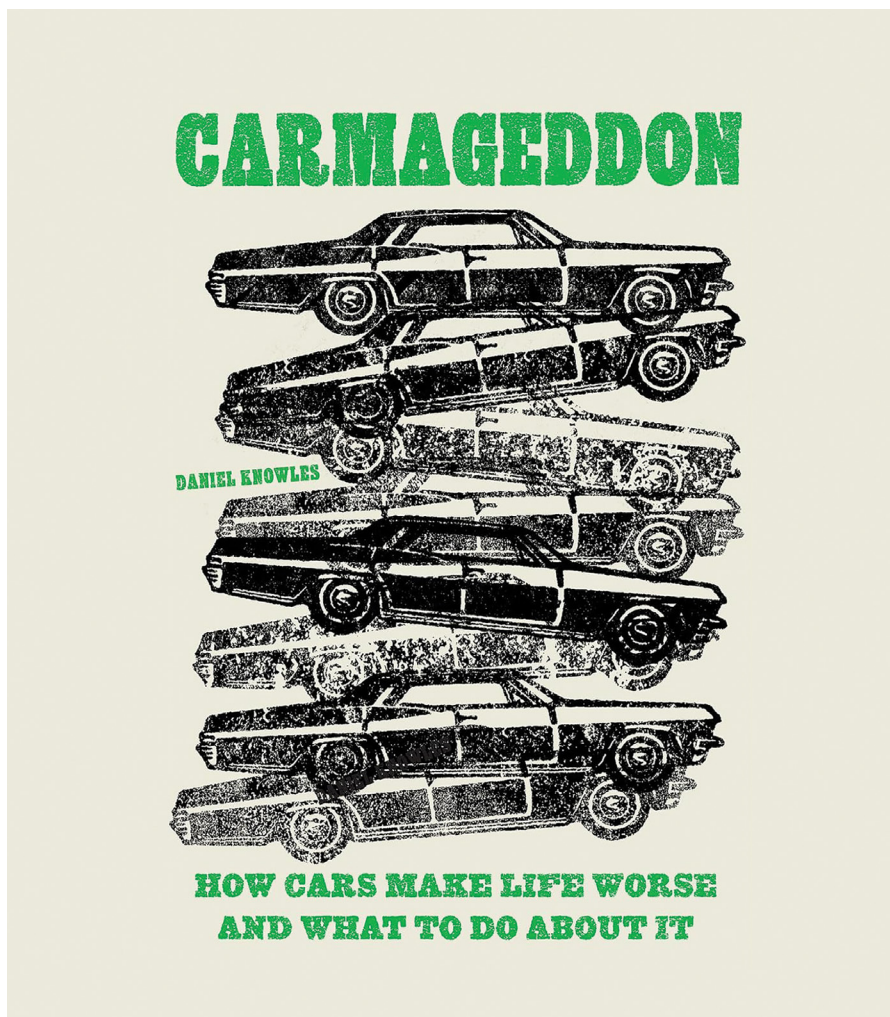
As you've pointed out, much of it depends on where you are. For me, riding a bicycle is much better at getting you from place to place; it takes twice as long to get there in a car because you sit in traffic, and you have to obey all the traffic lights. But when I'm in Florida visiting my parents, I have to drive because if you take a bicycle, you're on these 50 mile-an-hour roads in the suburbs, and people are going to kill you. If you go to Target and want to get across the street to CVS, you can't cross the street. You have to walk for about a mile to get to a traffic light, and at that traffic light there are cars speeding around the corner. You're taking your life in your hands, and I think, I'm not going to risk my life for toothpaste. I'm not going to stake my life on the principle that I want to walk to a place that's very nearby—even though I *would* much prefer to walk to a place nearby.

KNOWLES

Right. I'm quite militant, in general, about not using a car when I don't need to. And yet, last week I drove the rental car I had about 300 yards from the motel I was staying to a Walmart on the other side of the road because it was this huge highway with multiple lanes and things coming into it. I thought, I will die—it's

late at night, people won't see me—if I try to cross this road. And I think that's exactly the problem. Even in places like Florida or even in this country, which is a very rich country where a large majority of people can afford a car—I'm not saying they want to, but they can—there's a proportion of people who can't afford a car, or they can but can't drive it for some other reason or because they don't want to. God, the drunk driving that happens here—drunk driving is obviously an appalling thing to do, but people want to drink and be able to get home. You need alternatives, and taxis are expensive. That's a lot of labor. Even motorists and most people who drive don't actually want to have to drive all the time, everywhere. But because we've created a world in which the default assumption is that you will drive everywhere most of





"Carmageddon: How Cars Make Life Worse and What to Do About It" book cover

the time, it's impossible to get anywhere any other way. And I'm not saying to ban cars or stop them entirely, but if we all were able to drive less, our built environment could change in a way that suddenly would make it a lot easier for us to drive less. But just doing one without the other is tricky.

ROBINSON

You mentioned the fact that at one time early on, cars were the playthings of the rich, and you take us in the book back to the early days of cars. It's so important to be able to imagine different kinds of worlds, and you take us back to that point when the street was not for driving in but for doing everything in. The street was like the living room of the city. And when

cars came along, they were annoying to the people in the street because they were disrupting the life of the street. It is a choice to give the street over to these obnoxious, deadly machines.

KNOWLES

The streets were for the people. In the context of the U.K., you can still find the generation of people who talk about playing in the streets in the 1950s and 1960s and how quickly that disappeared. That wasn't just automatic. The invention of jaywalking is one big example. Laws had to be passed so that you couldn't just walk into the street because that's what people did, and it was very politically fraught. There was a lobbying operation led by car dealers and wealthier car own-

ers to get stuff out of the way. Of course, they wanted that because when you are driving a car that can do 50 or 60 miles an hour, having to go slowly is the most incredibly frustrating thing. George Orwell wrote in the '40s about our unwillingness to accept that we were putting the motorists above the lives of people who get run over.

To sum all that up, it didn't just happen like with iPhones, where this thing was invented, it became affordable, and everyone got one. To get everybody to have one required a whole bunch of political choices about how we use space, and principally street space, that took 20 to 30 years to happen. It was a political project, and it happened differently in different places. But it can be undone, too.

ROBINSON

I was in the U.K. a few months ago—my family's from there—and I went from my aunt's house in a village outside London to my grandmother's house in Solihull via train. I walked 10 minutes to the train station with my suitcases, got on the train, sat on the train eating a sandwich and perusing the internet, and several hours later, I got off the train and then walked 20 minutes down the street to my grandmother's house. It struck me when I got back here that this is impossible in the United States. I can't do this. I live in Louisiana, and if I want to go visit someone in Baton Rouge, I can't do it. But there's no reason why that should be the case. And I thought, another world is, in fact, possible. I have seen it.

KNOWLES

It's possible in the United States, almost, if you look at the Northeast Corridor—there is only really one part of this country where mainline train service is a thing. Amtrak makes a huge profit on that line even though by international standards it's quite low capacity and quite slow. It takes hours to get from D.C. to New York, which is around 200 miles. Even in the U.K., where we don't

have particularly fast trains, that's quite slow, but those tickets sell out, and those trains are full. They are charging hundreds of dollars a ticket because it's far more comfortable than driving and sitting on the New Jersey tollway. It's easier than flying and probably door to door a lot quicker, too. The cheaper alternative is the bus.

So, people want to take those trains, and again, it would be quite easy to make a whole bunch of improvements on that line. With the right investment, it would speed it up and increase the number of trains you could run on it. People would pay for that because they already do. So, it's possible here. It's trickier in places where there is no infrastructure already. There is a lot of low-hanging fruit in this country—there isn't elsewhere—to change things relatively suddenly. It would allow people to get out of their cars before you even have to have the giant fight.

ROBINSON

It can feel so hopeless if you're in a place like Texas with some multi-lane freeway. You just look at it and think, how could this ever be undone? There are a couple other negative aspects of cars that we haven't gotten into. I don't think we touched on deaths, on cars killing people, and I don't think we touched on climate, both of which are quite important.

KNOWLES

It tells you how much we evidently think alike that we went straight to the urban planning aspects. Over a million people die each year worldwide, almost all of which are in poorer countries, except for over 40,000 a year in the United States. Even though they haven't banished the car, most rich countries have in the last 20 or 30 years really radically reduced the number of deaths caused by car crashes by mostly redesigning roads. They force drivers to go slower, particularly in places where they might hit another car or a pedestrian, and in the

United States that hasn't really happened, at least not on a national level. There are places that have become a lot safer—New York City, for example. But so much of the population growth in this country has been in places like Florida or Texas, where people are forced to walk across these multi-lane highways, and often they get hit.

Drivers are basically encouraged by the road design to go very fast. I think car crashes are often treated like they're this inevitable accident, this thing that we just have to cope with as a cost of being able to get around. They're not. They're not inevitable. We actually tolerate them because we don't like having to slow down or concentrate. Americans find driving relaxing because it's quite easy. But when it's easy, when you're relaxed, that's when you make mistakes and bad things happen. Car crashes worldwide kill more people than HIV/AIDS does now, and quite possibly at some point will take over malaria. So, they will be more deadly than the deadliest communicable diseases.

Climate change is similar in that all the costs are concentrated in the developing world. But right now, there are something like a billion cars in the world, one for every seven or eight people. If everybody in India or China were to drive at the same rate as people in the West, there'd be no chance that even electrification would be able to save us from climate catastrophe. There's just so many people who don't drive at all at the moment, and they need mobility, but we can't just replicate what we've been doing for 100 years in the West everywhere else. We don't have the natural resources, and the climate can't take it. And unfortunately, in a lot of these cities, they are building freeways and sprawl because it's led by the upper middle class who can afford cars, in the same way it was here 100 years ago, or in Europe 70 years ago. Those are the things that make me pessimistic. This is a global issue.

ROBINSON

How do we escape this trap? You mentioned low-hanging fruit.

KNOWLES

There's a huge amount of low-hanging fruit, and you can see places that are making incredible progress in things that do seem modest but that add up. One of the things that's happened so quickly in recent years in the U.S. is the abolishment of parking minimums, which require developers to make businesses provide a certain amount of parking—essentially, an amount of parking that's so large that you will never run out of parking spaces. That's really completely reshaped how most cities in this country look, and they've gotten rid of them.

Minneapolis is an interesting example. They built loads and loads of housing since getting rid of these requirements downtown, and now there are towers that you can live in. If you work in an office downtown, you'll probably be able to walk to work in 10 minutes. The city built a network of bike paths as well. So, if Minneapolis can do it, then many other places can, too.

In some European cities, and even New York City, you can see the amount that people drive is declining. In Paris, it's dropped by something like 40-50 percent. So, the boat can be turned around, and that's without huge, particularly drastic action. It's only really recently I'd say that this has become a political issue and a widespread, talked about thing. A lot of these improvements happened because individual bureaucrats and planners said, maybe we should change this thing. So, I only see those kinds of things accelerating in the next few years. Now, is it as fast as I would like? No. Is it as fast as is probably necessary to stop climate change? No. But it is happening, and the important thing is to push those things to move faster. ✚

Transcript edited by Patrick Farnsworth.

the Illustrators



48TH EDITION
 COVER ART: SAMIRA NOWPARAST
 SAMIRANOWPARAST.COM