

*For When All Else Fails*

# CURRENT AFFAIRS

\$10.95

VOL. 2, ISSUE 1

JAN./FEB. 2017

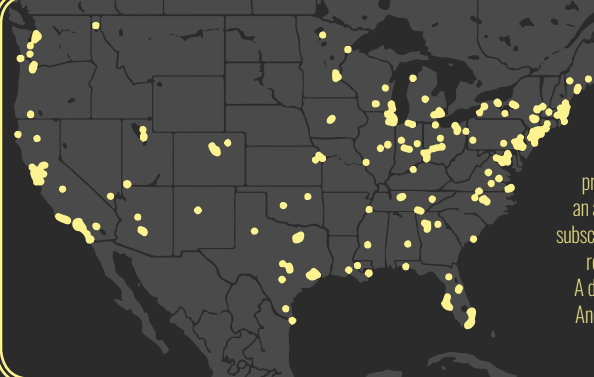


# ARE WE DOOMED?

YES, BUT NEVER MIND THAT FOR NOW...

# Notice & Comment

OBSERVATIONS ON CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL GOINGS-ON AND WHAT-HAVE-YOU



## WHERE YOU ARE

The Current Affairs Department of Data is not well-known for its efficiency. Many a time have we exactly replicated some FiveThirtyEight wonkmap or predict-o-meter, only to end up with something that turns out to have almost no predictive value whatsoever. However, there is one thing we know and love, and that is maps. We have therefore spent an agreeable few hours producing this, a map depicting the proportional distribution of our many thousands of domestic subscribers. Naturally, several subscribers could not be fitted onto the map, and Canadians were ignored entirely. The map reveals some useful facts. The area from Chicago to Southern New Hampshire is known as the "Current Affairs Belt." A disproportionate number of readers live in Ohio, presumably due to the dearth of alternate forms of amusement there. And yes, we must do better in the Plains States. A national newsmagazine cannot hope to survive without cultivating its Idaho fan base. Readers can rest assured that there will be copious upcoming articles about potatoes.

## HOW WE INTEND TO COVER THE PRESIDENT

Current Affairs has never been a biased publication. We pride ourselves on our independence of mind and generosity of spirit, as well as our humility. However, when it comes to the new President of the United States, we will confess that we find him to be, to phrase things as delicately as possible, an ass. Dear readers, we do not like him. We find him boorish. He has also committed serial sexual assault, an act we find repellent. It is almost certain that he ought to be in prison for one thing or another. Instead, he has just been made the most powerful human being on earth. This would be quite funny if it did not threaten to kill us all. All morally serious publications are now faced with a dilemma: how shall we cover this man, so as not to aggrandize or inflate him further? There is a challenge, you see. Over the course of the campaign, many in the press devoted themselves to vigorously criticizing the man, for everything from his ludicrous hairdo to his fraudulent university. However, far from being undone by a bar-

rage of critique and op/ed, President Trump appears to thrive on negative attention. The more you discuss him, the more important he becomes. What, then, is a conscientious publication to do? We had debated simply spending the next four years pretending that Bernie Sanders was the President instead, enacting an elaborate fantasy role-play in which things were better and everyone was happy. But this was the approach taken by liberals who watched The West Wing during the Bush years, and it did not seem to do much good. No, we cannot share the perspective of those who say Trump is "not their president." Of course he is our President, it's just that all presidents are asses with no credibility who are unworthy of respect. Our intention, then, is to cover the man critically but carefully. We will not devote more pages to him than absolutely necessary. We will try to focus on other things. But we will also make sure we undo him, and create a blissfully Trumpless world for all of God's children to enjoy.

## PEOPLE IN MEDIA WHO HAVE BLOCKED CURRENT AFFAIRS ON TWITTER

John Podhoretz, Commentary  
Lindy West, The Guardian  
Janelle Bouie, Slate  
Amanda Marcotte, Salon

Sady Doyle, In These Times  
Kevin Williamson, National Review  
Arthur Chu, Jeopardy champion

## CURRENT AFFAIRS EDITORIAL STAFF

*Publisher & Chairperson*  
S. CHAPIN DOMINO

*Editor in Chief*  
NATHAN J. ROBINSON

*Editors at Large*  
YASMIN NAIR  
AMBER A'LEE FROST

*Legal Editor*  
OREN NIMNI

*Senior Editor*  
BRIANNA RENNIX

*Art Director*  
TYLER ROSEBUSH

*Social Media Editor*  
ALEX NICHOLS

*"Advertising Director"*  
SHAWN VULLIEZ

*Artist-in-Residence*  
BOB PECE

*Web Design*  
POSITION DEVELOPMENT

SEND DONATIONS AND LETTERS TO: CURRENT AFFAIRS, P.O. Box 441394, W. SOMERVILLE, MA 02144

# WELL DONE, BERNARD



Regular Current Affairs readers will recall that it is our longstanding practice to include in each issue a note to two incarcerated men, Bernard Noble, who is serving a multi-decade sentence for marijuana possession in Louisiana, and Otto Warmbier, a UVA frat bro imprisoned by the North Korean government. We were heartened this month to hear that Bernard Noble's sentence has been reduced by a judge. He will now serve only eight years total in prison before being reunited with his family. In the Louisiana justice system, this is considered mercy. Well done, Bernard!

## Letters To BARRON TRUMP

Have you ever chanced to notice the sad little boy who stands next to our President at certain press events? The one who seems as if he is perpetually on the verge of vomiting? This pitiable creature, we are told, is "Barron Trump" the most recent of the Trump offspring. He appears, from photographs, a dejected little lad. While crueller members of the media have unkindly compared him to a young Draco Malfoy, our verdict is different. We believe Barron is sad. Sad because he has few friends. Sad because his only companions are an enormous stuffed lion and a toy limousine (look up the photograph). And sad because his father is Donald Trump, President of the United States. Now, imagine YOUR father were Donald Trump. Would you be happy? Would you be well-adjusted and filled with youthful enthusiasm? Surely you must concede that you would not. The next few years will be hard on little Barron. Someday, of course, the remaining light in his soul will be extinguished, and he will grow up to be like his brothers Uday and Qusay. For now, however, he remains an innocent. He can still be saved. We therefore propose to include him on the list of political prisoners to whom we send regular letters of encouragement. We are also giving him a Current Affairs subscription of his very own, with strict instructions that he must keep it hidden from his father, about whom we sometimes say rude things. Readers can send correspondence to Barron by way of our Letters Dep't.

# KEEPING OUR HEADS

It is not an easy thing to keep one's head during strange times. There is a temptation toward madness, toward the abandonment of one's soundest sober-minded judgment. With truth so elusive, and lies so ubiquitous, one can lose sight of reality altogether. Fortunately, we have a press corps to ensure this does not happen. It has therefore been alarming to us to note that Democrats, and Democrat-ish people in the media, seemed to lose their minds entirely in the weeks following the presidential election. Rather than figuring out how to win back political power, they spent their time elaborating sinister theories about Vladimir Putin and the director of the FBI, theories which, even if true, do not actually do anything especially useful in terms of restoring progressive governance. They called for recounts on the basis of dubious evidence about rigged elections (manufactured voter fraud claims have previously been the provenance of the right rather than left wing), and they even fantasized about having faithless electors stage an Electoral College coup. All of this was very unsportsmanlike. The sportsman knows when he is licked, and sets about training for the next match. Regardless of how unfair or rotten the situation may be, it does no good to sit around complaining about how you were screwed out of that which was justly yours. The question is: how shall we move forward? One thing we must absolutely do is make sure not to lose our damn minds. These will be difficult times. They will require sensible thinking. Let us be pragmatic, strategic, and then (God willing) victorious.



# ARTISTS

## DAVID ALVARADO

("Well Here We Are," p. 4, p. 7)

is an illustrator and cartoonist from the Chicago suburbs

## ELLEN BURCH

("Luxury Leftism" p. 14)

is a Toronto-based illustrator <http://ellenburch.com>

## CHRIS MATTHEWS

("Luxury Leftism" p. 14)

Chris Matthews is a freelance digital artist based in Munich working for animation, web and print.

<http://whoneedsstyleanyway.tumblr.com/>

## GURLEEN RAI

("The Yankee Confederate" p. 10)

is a Canadian illustrator currently living in

New Orleans, Louisiana <http://www.zimteemo.com/>

## MIKE FREIHEIT

("Space Utopias" p. 32, 35)

is a freelance illustrator, comic book artist, and

teacher currently living in Chicago <http://mikefreiheit.com>

## PRANAS T. NAUJOKAITIS

("But The Data Said" p. 64)

is an award winning Chicago-based cartoonist.

<http://ghostcarpress.com>

## CLIFFORD VICKREY

("The Viewing of Nature" p. 18-22)

is an unemployable PhD residing

somewhere in New England

<http://www.cliffordvickrey.com/>

## TYLER RUBENELD

("Inner Gorilla" p. 56, "Frozen Fruit Pies," p. 46)

is a Michigan-born, Brooklyn-based

writer, illustrator and filmmaker.

<http://rubenfeldgraphicdesign.blogspot.com>

# DEATH TO THE ECONOMIST?

It is, by now, well-known that the consistent Number One bestselling item in the Current Affairs Online Shop is our signature "Death to the Economist" bumper sticker, which has amused and inspired motorists around the country since its debut early this year. However, our recent holiday promotional for the bumper sticker attracted some controversy. No sooner had we begun to recommend "Death to the Economist" as a

stocking stuffer than we began receiving "pushback" on social media. "WTF?" some asked us, evidently stunned that one periodical could behave in such a rude and threatening manner toward another. Now, it is our customary practice, when somebody WTFs at our work, to simply ignore the WTFer in question. The person issuing a WTF is generally uninterested in a serious answer. They do not actually particularly care about the

W aspect. However, as a magazine that treasures and adores its readership, we believe explanations are due. Is it proper for us to go around selling "Death to the Economist" merchandise? Does this not somewhat erode the comradely spirit with which political magazines ought to approach one another? We feel that it is proper. Let us explain: it is an undisputed fact that The Economist, as a magazine, blows. It exists to exonerate

history's worst crimes. (See their negative review of a book about slavery, complaining that "Almost all the blacks in his book are victims, almost all the whites villains. This is not history; it is advocacy.") We share the perspective of James Fallows, who once noted that the Economist exists to make Americans feel that they are intelligent for reading a British periodical. No, dear readers, death is the only fitting thing to call for.



# WELL, HERE WE ARE.

ON THE MORNING OF NOV. 9, 2016, THE PEOPLE OF Earth awoke to find that the fate of the human species has been placed in the hands of reality television mogul and unconvicted sex criminal Donald J. Trump, who has been given access to the nuclear codes. This is, to somewhat understate things, a deeply troubling development. Trump is a man embodying every single noxious trait in the human character, a man that even Glenn Beck finds unhinged. For those of us who abhor white supremacy and sexual assault, or who believe that climate change and nuclear war threaten the survival of the planet, this is a state of emergency.

What does the election of Donald Trump actually mean? Here is the important point: nobody knows. Anybody who says they know doesn't know. This election is, first and foremost, a repudiation

of the establishment, which means that the wisdom of pundits, experts, and elites has been proven hollow. So in trying to interpret this event, do not listen to those who insist they know things, or who confidently offer a new round of predictions for what will happen. We've entered the Age of the Unpredictable.

But there is no time to sit around goggle-eyed and slack-jawed. We should ask a number of straightforward questions, and try to figure out what's what. First, how did this happen? Second, what are its implications? And finally, what the hell do we do now?

At least in the very immediate aftermath, the consensus among liberals about their loss seems to be as follows: they underestimated the racism and sexism of the American people, and the degree to which this country was full of a dark and rotten hatred. As Paul Krugman summed up his own take-away:

People like me, and probably like most readers of *The New York Times*, truly didn't understand the country we live in. We thought that our fellow citizens would not, in the end, vote for a candidate so manifestly unqualified for high office, so temperamentally unsound, so scary yet ludicrous. We thought that the nation, while far from having transcended racial prejudice and misogyny, had become vastly more open and tolerant over time. There turn out to be a huge number of people — white people, living mainly in rural areas — who don't share at all our idea of what America is about.

This is a tempting story for people on the left to tell themselves, because it exonerates them of any responsibility for the outcome. It is also an extremely discouraging story, because it suggests that the majority of voters are bad, nasty, deplorable people. Fortunately, this story is almost certainly misleading. One of the main problems here is that many Democrats in coastal cities know very few Trump voters. Thus they have a hard time making sense of these voters' motivations. In order to understand Trump's base of support, instead of trying to speak to and empathize with these voters, they look at statistical data. From that data, they see that these people express anxiety about race and immigration, and that they are not disproportionately poor. They thus conclude that Trump voters are motivated primarily by prejudice, and mock the idea that it is economic concerns that matter most to them.

If you adopt this theory, then you reach a somewhat fatalistic conclusion about Trump supporters. You can't persuade them, because they're racists, and racism is an irrational feeling. Instead, you fight them, by mocking them, and trying to turn out your own base. By treating Trump's support as largely the product of racism, one gives up on any attempt to actually appeal to Trump voters' concerns and interests, since racism is not an interest worth appealing to.

Here's the problem: if Democrats had actually spent time with Trump voters, as opposed to judging them by polls, they would have found this theory incomplete. They missed the fact that many Trump voters had a kind of undirected dissatisfaction and anger at the Establishment. For some, the source of this was most likely economics. For many, immigration. For others, it was probably simply an existential despair at the hopelessness of modern life, such as we all feel. But many of them simply didn't know what they were angry at. They just knew they were angry. Trump came along and gave them a convenient narrative: the source of this anguish was ISIS, Mexicans, and Hillary Clinton. This was very powerful. Democrats didn't have a good counter-narrative. They lost.

**T**HE MOST IMPORTANT LESSON OF THIS ELECTION IS ABOUT the press. This disaster should cause a major reevaluation of political media, who failed utterly to appreciate the seriousness of what was happening. There is a good argument to be made that the media is responsible for creating Trump in the first place. But the press also thoroughly failed the country, by distorting reality to make it appear as if Clinton was more likely to win than she was. In doing so, they allowed people to rest easy who should have (and would have) been out trying to put the brakes on the Trump train.

This complacency was extremely damaging. Liberal pundits bought into myth (fabricated by the Clinton campaign) of Clin-

ton as an "inevitable" president. This idea should have been disposed of permanently in 2008, as well as by Clinton's weak primary performance against a socialist upstart. But there seemed to be a belief among the liberal press that if they just repeated it enough times, it would be destined to come true. This was sheer stupidity. By either explicitly or tacitly reassuring people that Clinton would definitely win, they diminished the sense of urgency among progressives. People could feel as if they didn't need to do anything, because nothing inevitable needs help coming to fruition.

The election of Trump is therefore a serious repudiation of media "experts." Pundits like those at Vox position themselves as "explainers" of reality, disguising the fact that they are making an awful lot of things up in order to cover gaps in their knowledge. Trump's election has shown that believing these types of claims to expertise can be positively dangerous. And yet it is almost certain the experts will persist in claiming superior knowledge of the world, even as they refuse to leave their D.C. and New York enclaves. There are no consequences to false predictions, even if you end up getting Donald Trump elected president, and it is unlikely that Ezra Klein and Matthew Yglesias will lose their jobs. (They have "pundit tenure.") Indeed, Yglesias has already begun making his next set of predictions.

**C**OULD THIS ALL HAVE BEEN AVOIDED? IT'S WORTH SAYING that in retrospect, running Hillary Clinton for president was never a very good idea. Running Clinton against Donald Trump was an especially bad idea, because all of Clinton's weaknesses as a candidate played to all of Trump's strengths. Clinton gave Trump precisely the kind of fodder (mini-scandals, an FBI investigation, shady dealings, etc.) on which his bombast thrives. She also happens to be a very poor campaigner, and a complacent one. The weakness was obvious even in the differing campaign slogans. "I'm With Her" is about the interests of the candidate. "Make America Great Again" is about the voters. Let's learn an important lesson here: do not run a widely-despised ruling-class candidate who has open contempt for the white working class. That is a recipe for electoral catastrophe.

What's going to happen now? For a leftist, liberal, or progressive, nothing good. There is complete Republican control of government. This means that even in the best case scenario, in which Trump turns out to be mostly bluster, as incapable at organizing a dictatorship as he is at running a hotel, we can expect to have every single progressive policy of the last eight years rolled back very swiftly. Goodbye, healthcare! Goodbye, moderate criminal justice reforms! Goodbye, mild attempts to rein in corporate malfeasance! It's all down the tubes. Sayonara. (Probably. Again, keep in mind: nobody knows anything.)

The worst case scenario is very, very bad. Trump could be our Hitler. They laughed at the Nazis in 1928, the man with the funny moustache and his gang of silly brown-shirted thugs. They weren't laughing so much in 1933. Things could be the same when it comes to the man with the funny hair and the orange face. Hah... Hah... Hah... Oh shit. We know Donald Trump is a man without a conscience. Yet we have just handed him near absolute power (in part enabled by the joint Democratic/Republican expansion of executive branch authority over the years). For all we know, there could be death camps on the horizon.



For the sake of our sanity, it's necessary to assume that this isn't true. We must act as if we are not all about to die, as if the sky will not fall. (And who knows? It might not.) If we become resigned, if we start to feel doomed and hopeless, we are liable to produce a highly dangerous self-fulfilling prophecy. This has to be a moment of action rather than despair.

Progressives are going to have to fight for their values. They are going to have to fight hard. But they are also going to have to fight differently. The left will be doomed if it does not seriously rethink its practices. We've just lost every branch of government, and watched the presidency be given to a misogynistic sociopathic fraudster. Clearly we have gone wrong somewhere.

The most fundamental part of a new plan is this: do not do the same damn thing all over again and expect different results. We need a new kind of left politics. We need something that has what

Obama had: inspiration, hope. It was joked that Hillary Clinton's campaign slogan was "No you

can't." That's no good. Trump inspires people. He may inspire people by appealing to their nastiest, most inhuman and unneighborly instincts. But he inspires them. We have to have an agenda that gets people excited. It can't be like trying to make people eat their vegetables. "You'll vote for me and you'll like it, because you have no alternative" is not an effective way to get votes.

The Clinton campaign was a disaster. Let's never do anything like it again. Let's never again have a campaign in which people were constantly having to defend the indefensible. Let's never again run on "experience" rather than values. Let's never again treat everything as fine when it clearly isn't. (Let's also never again underestimate Donald Trump. The man is wily. He may have never read a book in his adult life. But he knows how to win an election. Calling him stupid, or treating him as stupid, misses the point. For a "stupid" man, he sure showed the elites.)

Overnight, the world has changed. We may have thought history had ended, that nothing too terribly unexpected would ever shake us up again. But history never ends. The future could hold anything. It may hold catastrophe. But there is no time to think about that. What is needed now is a plan. ♦



## A CURRENT AFFAIRS QUIZ YOUR ROLE IN THE ANTI-TRUMP RESISTANCE

### ADD UP YOUR ANSWERS

#### A - Munitions

You are scrappy as hell, and our movement needs you urgently. The United States Armed Forces has an annual budget of \$600 billion. To defeat them in a ground war on home territory, we estimate that we will need to recruit approximately 1.2 trillion DIY mavericks to turn ordinary household items into tanks and fighter jets.

#### B - Civil Service Moles

Civil servants are key to the effective resistance of tyranny. Any idiot can carry a gun, but it takes a special mettle to sit at a desk job for years and years, slowly and silently unfidling the tight-wound lignuts of a corrupt institutional bureaucracy. Most of your time will be spent clenching and unclenching your buttocks while waiting for the right moment to transfer the Important Files. We will also need operatives to move their diabolical DHS supervisor's coffee mug to a different part of his desk every time he leaves for a cigarette break, leading him to believe that he is slowly going insane.

#### C - Artists and Intellectuals Who Are In Way Over Their Heads

History tells us that anybody who starts writing inspirational political poetry right now is guaranteed to have a command post in a resistance organization within six months. Political poetry has long since fallen out of vogue in this country, but roughly equivalent analogues in the 21st-century context could include: topical GIFsets, Star Wars fanfiction, Huffington Post articles, auto-tuned remixes of presidential debates. You will play an important role in convincing everyone, including yourself, that none of this is a stupid idea.

#### D - Mob

Every resistance needs a good mob, whether it's running a phone bank to voice concerns to various congresspeople, or burning down government buildings to voice concerns to various congresspeople. There's a place for everyone; and on the whole, your survival chances are quite high, so long as you keep your head down. On the other hand, if you say a line of dialogue, or allow the camera to zoom in on your face as you roar and shake your fist, you will probably be killed. Fair warning.

### 3. Do you know how to rig an explosive device?

- A. Yes.
- B. No.
- C. No, but I'm happy to encourage others to rig explosive devices.
- D. No, but I'm happy to watch a YouTube tutorial, if you can recommend a good one.

### 4. There is a runaway trolley barreling down a track. Ahead, on the track, there are five people tied up and unable to move. The trolley is headed straight for them. You are standing next to a lever. If you pull this lever, the trolley will switch to a side track, where there is only one person tied up. What do you do?

- A. Board and completely dismantle the trolley before it reaches the intersection.
- B. Call the municipal Department of Transportation.
- C. This gives me an idea for an amazing essay!
- D. Panic, obey whoever is shouting the loudest.

### 5. When and how would you prefer to die?

- A. ASAP, firefight.
- B. In old age, natural causes; but willing to entertain outside possibility of being suddenly disappeared & tortured to death in secret government facility.
- C. Any of the following: one year from now, martyred by the enemy after spearheading a poorly-planned but symbolically potent uprising; ten years from now, suicide, after realizing I have become the very thing I once despised; fifty years from now, natural causes, mourned by the entire nation.
- D. No preference.

### 1. What was your initial reaction to the news of Donald Trump's election?

- A. I immediately blockaded a highway.
- B. I sat in the dark, in silence, for hours, hating myself, and also everyone else.
- C. I fired off a series of devastatingly on-point tweets, which I later expanded into a blog post.
- D. I refreshed Facebook every 10 seconds to see what my friends were up to.

### 2. If you were a character from the hit musical Hamilton, in an alternate universe where everyone from Hamilton is a Hogwarts student, and you had to take the Myers-Briggs Test as part of your Muggle Studies class, what character/house/psychological type would you be?

- A. Alexander Hamilton/Gryffindor/ENFP
- B. Aaron Burr/Slytherin/INTP
- C. Thomas Jefferson/Ravenclaw/ENTJ
- D. Backup dancer/Hufflepuff/ESFJ

# CONTENTS

10

The Yankee Confederate  
*a peculiarity of our times*

16

For a Luxurious Left  
*shouldn't socialists want things to be nice?*

18

The Documentarian Eye  
*amber frost on nature programming*

24

No More Bullshit Feminism  
*why rebecca traister's worldview produces nothing good*

32

Building Better Space Utopias  
*assholes cannot be allowed to make space their own*

38

Decoding Pizzagate  
*current affairs gets to the truth*

40

Useless Self-Flagellation  
*let's have a politics that doesn't look like religion*

44

Finding The Gorilla Within  
*self-help books for sad misogynists*

53

Power Poses  
*how to make a lot of money off social science*

61

How The Press Failed You  
*why election punditry disappointed us somewhat*



# *peculiarities of the* YANKEE CONFEDERATE

by Alex Nichols

**E**ARLIER THIS YEAR, MY RURAL MASSACHUSETTS hometown became unexpectedly embroiled in controversy, after a police officer mounted a Confederate Flag at his home in plain view of the 10-year-old African American boy who lived across the street. The boy's parents, raising their son in the age of Tamir Rice, naturally felt somewhat alarmed to discover that local law enforcement harbored Confederate sympathies. The town's Human Rights Commission (we have those here) was promptly alerted and a town meeting was called. There, most attendees condemned the officer's actions and tried to explain the (seemingly) obvious racial subtext.

But plenty of town residents defended the officer. The local newspaper heard from readers insisting that "saying someone is racist by owning a flag" was far more racist than the flag itself. Another encouraged the boy's family to "get over it," lamenting that "if it's not a flag, it's how you say 'happy holidays.' If it's not that, it's a Starbucks cup." And the officer's own response? "The flag has no negative connotations to me."

One can sympathize, for perhaps a second, with those professing themselves baffled by anyone "mad about a flag." But for them, it may be useful to consider how the same response would sound if someone hoisted a "Death to Black People" flag with a picture of a lynching on it. "I can't believe you're mad about a flag; next you'll be mad about a coffee cup" doesn't sound quite so reasonable when we draw out what the Confederacy means to a black audience. (Remember, too, that it was not social justice types but right-wing Christians who threw a fit over the insufficient festiveness of the

paper cups at Starbucks.) But the more curious question is: if the flag doesn't have any *negative* connotations, what possible connotations *does* it have, when flown in small-town New England? What causes people born and raised in the North, many of them with no historical or familial connection to the South, to align themselves with a symbol of Southern pride, treason, and slavery?

When challenged, fans of the Stars 'n' Bars have plenty of rehearsed answers. Most often, they will say they appreciate the Confederacy's place in American history and lament the efforts of revisionist historians to erase it from our collective memory. And following up with "Appreciate *what* about it, precisely?" will get one nothing except mumbled clichés about the rebel spirit.

The charge that the left is attempting to wipe away history is a strange one. In reality, it would be nearly impossible to find a left-leaning historian who doesn't want Americans to talk *more* about the Civil War, slavery, and Reconstruction in order to better understand modern institutional racism. Nobody is *less* inclined to erase the Confederacy from American history than the left. When we do see efforts to remove inconvenient facts from the standard curriculum, they usually come from conservatives in the South. It was the Texas Board of Education who refused to allow the fact-checking of history textbooks that used hilariously banal euphemisms to describe chattel slavery, referring to slaves as "immigrants" and "workers." The movement to sanitize and decontextualize Confederate imagery is a far greater crime against the integrity of the historical record than the efforts of leftists to point out that the South did not just stand for "states' rights," but

the states' right to *maintain a very particular thing*. It's their own fact-blindness that causes history-challenged conservatives to be genuinely stunned that anyone would want to remove the flag from the South Carolina State House after an avowed neo-Confederate and white supremacist massacred nine black churchgoers.

Understanding the cultural pathology behind Northern use of the Confederate flag is like understanding the rise of Donald Trump as a serious politician. It is inexplicable, essentially unfathomable. Yet one can attempt tentative hypotheses, which involve a nuanced examination of race, class, the rural/urban divide, and the widespread human attraction to nauseating kitsch. Just as one can only hope to approximate the structural

behind and condescended to by Washington. Wallace had a gift for pandering: "...when the liberals and intellectuals say the people don't have any sense, they talkin' about us people... But hell, you can get good solid information from a man drivin' a truck, you don't need to go to no college professor", he said in 1966. Rather than embracing a truly populist platform like Huey Long in the 1930s, Wallace encouraged his white supporters to direct most of their anger toward newly enfranchised blacks. When he ran as an independent in the 1968 presidential election he won 13.5% of the popular vote, a significant improvement upon Thurmond's 2.4%. Despite being a neoconfederate at heart, he made significant headway

“What causes people born and raised in the North, many of them with no historical or familial connection to the South, to align themselves with a symbol of Southern pride, treason, and slavery?”

causes of our 45<sup>th</sup> president, one can only guess cautiously at why, in the Berkshires of Connecticut and Massachusetts, the Stars and Stripes and the Stars and Bars can hang from the same flagpole without anyone batting an eye or sensing a paradox.

THE ENTIRE IDEA OF THE FLAG AS AN ENDURING Southern symbol is its own revisionist lie. After all, the Stars and Bars flag was barely used in the Old South, revived only in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century by white supremacists who would rather see black children hanged from trees than given equal access to the public school system. The symbols of the Confederacy had largely remained the domain of veterans' groups until they were deliberately resurrected as a way to resist the Civil Rights Movement. The rebirth began shortly after World War II, when Truman's decision to integrate the Army increased tensions between Northern and Southern Democrats and inspired Strom Thurmond to run for president as a Dixiecrat. Thurmond, the grandson of a Confederate veteran and a staunch segregationist, employed the battle flag in his campaign as an explicitly racist gesture. In 1956, Georgia creatively incorporated the battle flag design into its state flag to protest *Brown v. Board of Education*.

In 1961, Gov. George Wallace raised the battle flag over the Alabama state capitol. Wallace, one of the most passionate defenders of segregation, also espoused a white-centered form of populism. He targeted the federal government not just because it outlawed segregated schools, but because it enriched elites at the expense of the common man. He tailored his message to blue-collar white voters who felt left

outside the South, attracting tens of thousands at rallies above the Mason-Dixon line; his populist rhetoric and outsider image endeared him to blue-collar whites as far north as Wisconsin. Many union members who would have otherwise voted Democratic bought into his warning that integration would destroy the labor movement. (As always, people straddling the line between the lower and middle classes were the easiest prey for fear-based politics.) Through all this, Wallace stood with the Confederate flag behind him, figuratively and literally. Among the many disastrous consequences of the 1968 election was the permanent association of unpolished white populism with Southern pride. From then on, it became a safe bet that whenever lower-middle-class white resentment bubbled to the surface, no matter where in the country, it would come wrapped in the Confederate flag.

Northern whites lack a unified ethnocultural identity. This could be due to the outcome of the Civil War—the victors may write history, but the losers are often awash in fear, resentment and self-pity. Such forces bind the populace together and can prove very dangerous in the hands of nationalists (think interwar Germany). It may also be due to their relative diversity; in the 19th and 20th centuries America received a massive influx of immigrants from all over Europe and the majority settled in the heavily industrialized Northeast and mid-Atlantic. Maintaining a straightforward regional identity in the face of constant demographic upheaval is difficult if not impossible.

Now, imagine yourself in the rural North in an age where it is mandated that you consciously create a capital-I Identity for yourself. One is supposed to create this “identity” through consumer choices and Facebook cover photos. You are white, as

# COMMUNISM



IT JUST MAKES PERFECT SENSE

are most of the people you know. You have a high school education and all your employment prospects are either blue collar or low-level white collar. You subscribe to a personal philosophy that emphasizes disciplined physical labor as the bedrock of proper morality, but you also take pride in your lack of city-boy etiquette and frequently engage in lighthearted but legal hedonism. How do you categorize yourself? What do you “identify” as?

Well, fortunately, an identity just for you has been consolidated into a few symbols, hobbies and character traits, turned into a packaged cultural commodity for your instantaneous adoption and consumption. This identity is The South. The fake, commodified South, that is, not to be confused with the actually existing South, which has a rich cultural history and (unlike the commodified South) has black people in it. This imaginary South is about all-camo outfits and huntin’, fishin’ and spittin’ to spite coastal elites who want to make it illegal to hunt, fish and spit. The commodified South is *Duck Dynasty*, McDonald’s sweet tea and country songs that have “country” in the title. People seem to really like this stuff, which is why, compared to other regions, the South is overrepresented among Zippo lighter designs and truck decals.

Partially divorced of context, what was once a symbol of an aristocratic slave society becomes, paradoxically, part of a tradition of populist Americana along with John Wayne, Chief Wahoo and the Pixar version of Route 66. Fully divorced of context, the flag becomes a symbol of vague, noncommittal rebellion. It takes its place alongside a series of meaningless but ubiquitous kitschy products including wolf shirts, the pissing Calvin decal, skull-adorned lighters, and overly aggressive Minions memes about what people can and can’t do before you’ve had your coffee.

Reeling from its electoral loss, the Democratic Party recently decided to use its political resources on the most strategically efficacious course of action: pondering potential 2020 presidential tickets. Current Affairs is honored to have been selected by the party to debut a series of advertisements for potential pairs of running mates, in order to gauge audience response to the party’s current shortlist of choices. Having learned its lesson, the party believes it has finally come up with a set of slates that convey excitement, dynamism, diversity, and change. The main difficulty, party spokesmen informed Current Affairs, will be deciding among the many impressive candidates.



The small bit of context that the flag *does* retain is used to sinister ends. Among rural whites, a watered-down version of neoconfederate ideology serves a kind of mutant substitute for class consciousness. This is especially evident in modern country music, where many songs are essentially a bullet point list of stereotypes: big trucks, cheap beer, dirt roads and physically demanding blue collar work. Take, for example, Lee Brice’s 2014 smash hit “Drinking Class”:

*“I belong to the drinking class / Monday through Friday, man we bust our backs / If you’re one of us, raise your glass / I belong to the drinking class.”* The structure of Brice’s lyrics shows a keen awareness of socioeconomic class. But this is not the labor movement’s conception of class, with its exhortation to social change. The Lee Brice theory of class is empty of meaning. It’s hopeless and sad; nothing is left but solipsistic in-group pride and alcoholism. The vice neuters any revolutionary fervor. A member of the Drinking Class isn’t interested in social climbing and he would never dream of doing away with class distinctions altogether.

The Drinking Class man knows life is pretty rotten, that you work and drink until you die. But, strongly encouraged by millionaire tribunes of the working poor like the guy from *Dirty Jobs*, the guy from *Duck Dynasty*, and the guy from *Larry the Cable Guy* (plus fellow reality star Donald J. Trump), he adopts flimsy, prejudiced rationalizations to explain his very real feelings of being forgotten and exploited. He justifies his toil as morally necessary, rather than exploitative. And like a surly teen alienated from his parents and bored with masturbation, he joins a cultural clique and cements his place in it by lashing out at its real or imaginary enemies. To get back at the elites who mocked him for making little sense, he begins to do things that make little sense, such as flying a Confederate flag in Massachusetts. (Half-assed clique membership is often embarrassing, like when homophobic metalheads get tricked into wearing leather daddy outfits.)

WE CAN THEREFORE FIND EXPLANATIONS, IF NOT justifications, for the peculiar existence of our Yankee Confederate. Some of it is stupid, some of it is racist, and some of it is a misguided response to the need for identity and solidarity. Like depressed teens, alienated rural whites aren’t imagining their suffering, and they do have legitimate grievances about the unending despair of the American status quo. But they have reacted in a way that’s difficult to defend either rationally or morally.

The solution here is to organize against the policies that created an alienated rural working class in the first place. To the extent that the flag is a product of the search for identity and community, one needs to have a better, less appalling identity to offer people. To the extent that the flag is a product of racism, what is racism itself a product of? Working class whites have often blamed their problems on nonwhites, but this is irrational scapegoating. And *since* it’s irrational scapegoating, the left should think seriously about how to give people real explanations for their problems, as well as solutions. The New England Confederate is a bizarre and horrifying sight, but he is not without his structural causes. If we can offer a unifying message to working class people of all races, we may see fewer members of the Drinking Class embrace backward cultural symbols and buying into the South as consumer lifestyle brand. Stars and Bars keychains may create a cheap rush of ersatz proletarian solidarity, but they are no substitute for the real thing. ♦



# YOU DON'T NEED THESE

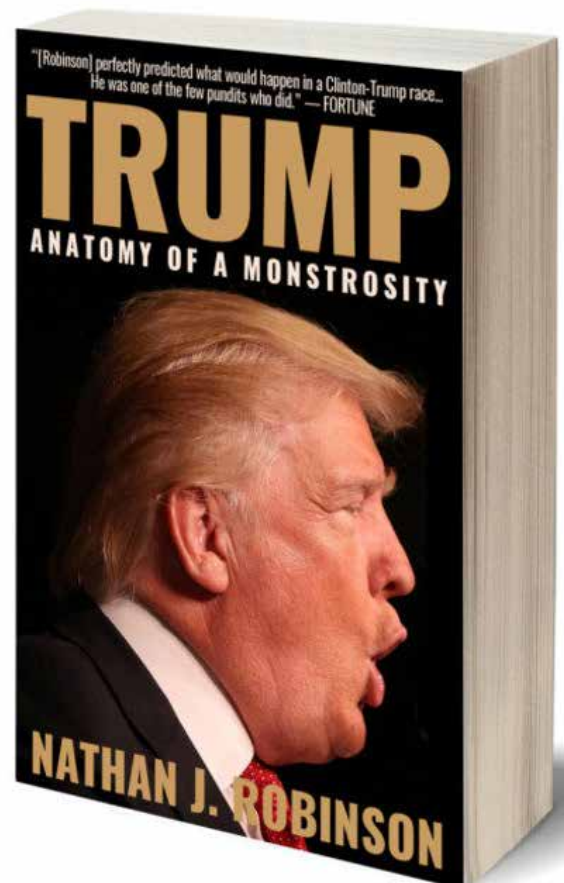
## ...TO FULLY UNDERSTAND THIS PERSON.

*The ultimate book for making sense of Trump himself, as well as what his election means for the United States and the world. Carefully sourced, comprehensive, witty, and biting, **Anatomy of a Monstrosity** is more than a book about Trump. It is a guide to how to move forward.*

**“Robinson perfectly predicted what would happen in a Clinton-Trump race. He was one of the few pundits who did.” — FORTUNE**

**“Really outstanding.” — NOAM CHOMSKY,**  
on *Superpredator: Bill Clinton's Use and Abuse of Black America*,  
also by Nathan J. Robinson

**AVAILABLE FROM AMAZON**





# ERASING THE CONTRADICTIONS OF *Luxury Leftism*

**K**INDLY EXAMINE THE IMAGE TO THE left. Assess your feelings about it. What shall we say is going on here? Yes, yes, it's some kind of communist party. But do we have commentary, and if so of what sort? We seem to find ourselves with a depiction of radical chic, that comically hypocritical form of pseudo-revolutionary self-indulgence. Our revelers like Karl Marx very much. And yet there they sit, fondling their pearls and sipping their brandies. How laughable their devotion to the cause of the workingman! What poseurs, what impostors!

And yet: perhaps our little cadre of caviar commies are not so indefensible as they seem. For our revulsion at them surely stems from their failure of principle: they talk of revolution as they clink their glasses, they gobble gazpacho as the world burns. They are sippers, flitters, dilettantes.

But what if the world does not burn? Perhaps we are assuming a little much. What if all human problems have been solved? What if we exist in a state of perfect equality? Then may we have pearls and Marx alike, without incurring opprobrium? Is there a certain point at which one may both be a leftist and enjoy one's self?

"Ah," you may reply, "but what of the waiter? Surely he gives it away. Your precious egalitarian paradise is illusory, there remains an unacknowledged servant class." But this is where you err. You assume that this gentleman is a waiter. This only demonstrates the limits of your imaginative powers. Why should it not be possible to take turns donning the moustache and pouring the wine? Why must we assume that this man does not pour wine for the sheer joy of pouring it? Can we not

take pleasure in taking turns serving one another?

There is, broadly speaking, something sound to the charge of hypocrisy around left-wing extravagance. The mansions possessed by Al Gore and the Obamas are an outrage. But they are an outrage because they exist in a time of great suffering, not because the world should not have mansions in it. The problem is not the existence of riches, but the failure to allow all to share equally in them. Progressives who wall themselves off from the poor, buy themselves beautiful things, and stop caring seriously about equality are monsters. But this is no indictment of beautiful things, or of human beings possessing them. The crime is the failure to share.

The problem with limousine liberalism, then, was not the limousines, but the liberals. Radicals should be chic, revolutionaries should drink excellent wine. Anarchist flophouses, abounding in filth and with defective plumbing, present no kind of vision for the future society. Any political movement that wishes to win people over must at least seem like it's having a good time. The left's suits must be well-tailored, its pastries must be fattening.

Never laugh, then, at the perfumed leftist. Would you wish them abominably scented? Gandhi said that we must be the change we wish to see in the world. I wish to see lovely libraries and comfortable chairs. Thus I have built myself a library and I am ensconced in a comfortable chair. There is nothing shameful about this. It could instead be called downright visionary.

There is still no excuse for stinginess, there is still no justification for inequality. One should still care about others as much as one cares about oneself. Many of the goods and services traditionally favored by the leisure class are tainted by inherent

injustice. Blood diamonds and furs should revolt the soul. Nobody should employ a butler. Et cetera. But the fundamental principle must be this: things ought to be nice, and if they are not nice, then they are not leftist.

The left frequently seems to embrace an unappealing and Spartan set of aesthetic values. It stands for minimalism, sobriety, and self-abnegation. The left is Swedish, i.e. boring. This is no good. Our values must be toward joy, indulgence, and a pleasant time to be had by all. We will build cathedrals, we will wear incredible jewels, we will throw delightful parties and everyone will be invited.

One must always be careful not to go too far in the direction of the hedonistic, however. Again, the central principle here is: the good must be shared, not hoarded. Loving yourself is acceptable, but loving only yourself is not. It is very easy to develop a series of convenient justifications for one's indefensible acts, and one of the central problems of liberalism is that it has allowed rich people to think that being rich in a time of deprivation is morally acceptable. (It is not.) But it is also true that we are attempting to lift everybody up into elation rather than drag them down into equal opportunity misery.

Consider this a call, then, for a truly luxurious leftism. One that does not deprive itself of the good things in life, but which shares them abundantly with all. When we say let them eat cake, we are serious: there must be cake, it must be good cake, and it must be had by all. The reason Marie Antoinette needed beheading was not that she wished cake on the poor, but that she never actually gave them any.

The international proletarian class deserves the very best. ♦



# THE VIEWING OF NATURE

by Amber A'Lee Frost

THE LAST TIME I BROKE UP WITH A GUY, I KEPT HIS Netflix log-in and continued using our shared account. However, in a deliberate act of obfuscation, I only watched nature documentaries, so as to advertise my activity while remaining emotionally impenetrable. “Go ahead,” I thought, “check your ‘Continue Watching.’ You will learn nothing of my heart, save for my love of monsoon-based ecosystems.”

Growing up, my television-skeptical mother limited my screen-time, but allowed me unlimited viewing of Marty Stouffer’s *Wild America* on the grounds that it was “educational.” The PBS series certainly gave the impression of an immersive lecture in zoology, with Stouffer’s dopey, flat narrations dropping innocuous facts about American wildlife over footage that captivated audiences at the time, despite looking positively amateurish by today’s standards.

The alleged neutrality of the nature documentary has always been a part of its appeal, and its advocates are quick to praise the objectivity and pedagogical value of the genre. This is the myth that fuels our self-satisfied adoration; we do not believe we are watching a “movie,” we believe we are watching “nature,” a Rousseauian Garden of Eden, free from the meddling interpretive lens of man. Every nature documentary, however, always betrays the ideology of the filmmakers, even in the midst of cruelest deception.

*Wild America* was my first experience with the betrayal of “naturalist” cinema. After moving to New York and thus cutting ties to my previously outdoorsy life, I attempted to revisit the nature documentaries of my childhood and



Googled Marty Stouffer, who I learned had become a figure of disgrace among many conservationists. In 1996 he had been forced to pay \$300,000 to the Aspen Center for Environmental Studies for clearing protected land. Even more damningly, rumors swirled that he staged some of the more “dramatic” scenes in the show. Stouffer (who is said to have made \$18 million from the series) allegedly set a pair of domesticated mountain lions after a tame deer until the predators ran their would-be prey off a cliff.

**O**F COURSE, RUNNING ANIMALS OFF cliffs is a proven technique in the nature doc genre, the most famous incident being the 1958 Disney Academy Award-Winning *White Wilderness*. Not only did the “documentarians” import lemmings that weren’t native to the Alberta habitat they were filming, the crew actually herded the animals into the Bow River (which they said was the sea), where the poor creatures drowned. Haunting narration of the cruelty lead the audience to believe they were witnessing the mysterious phenomenon of spontaneous mass lemming suicide—a complete myth, in actuality.

*It is said of this tiny animal that it commits mass suicide by rushing into the sea in droves. The story is one of the persistent*

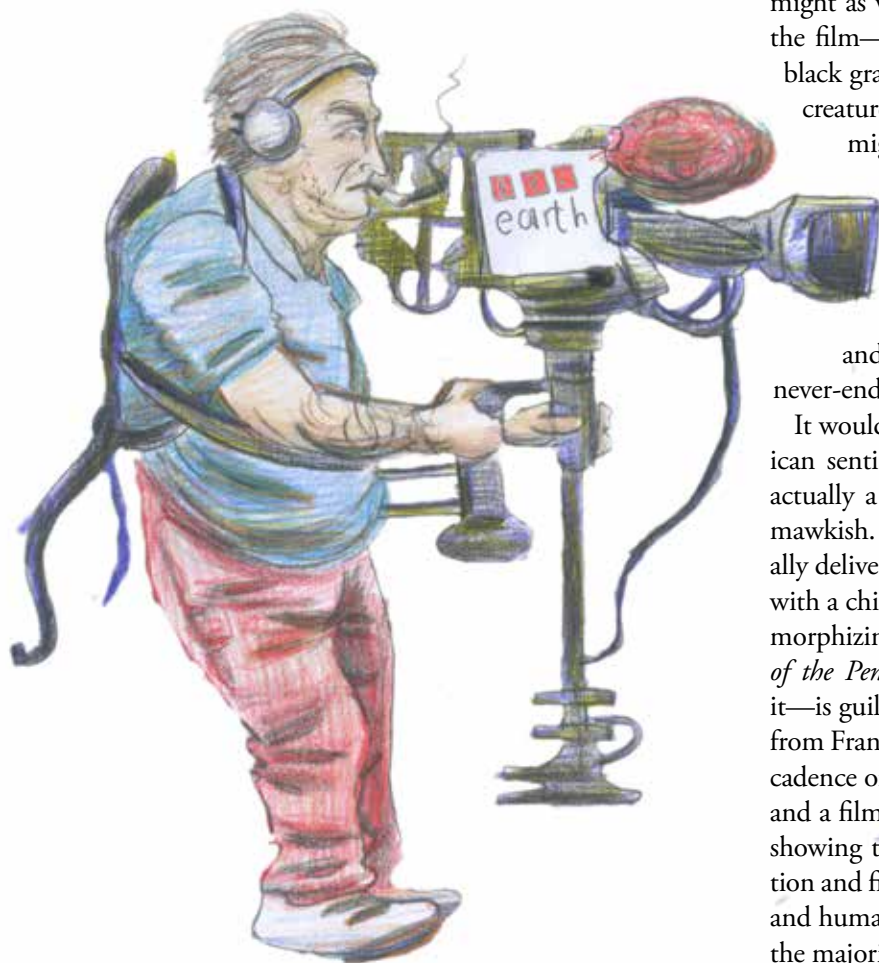
*tales of the Arctic, and as often happens in Man’s nature lore, it is a story both true and false, as we shall see in a moment.*

*A kind of compulsion seizes each tiny rodent and, carried along by an unreasoning hysteria, each falls into step for a march that will take them to a strange destiny. That destiny is to jump into the ocean. They’ve become victims of an obsession — a one-track thought: ‘Move on! Move on!’ This is the last chance to turn back, yet over they go, casting themselves out bodily into space ... and so is acted out the legend of mass suicide.*

Thanks to animal rights advocacy—and a damning 1982 CBC television special titled “Cruel Camera,” in particular—the well-being of the animals of nature documentaries quickly became a high priority, with the public consensus being that a policy of non-interference and realism should be prioritized over drama. After all, there’s still plenty of red tooth and claw to be seen if you sit around and wait... and wait... and wait. Of course the prolonged silence of nature punctuated by a predator devouring something harmless and cute—usually a baby—doesn’t create the most child-friendly programming, so Hollywood tends to add a bit of magic to hook ’em young.

The 2005 runaway hit *March of the Penguins* was more Disney than Disney, with an anthropomorphized “cast” of Antarctic Emperor Penguins so adorable and charming they might as well have been cartoons. The entire U.S. version of the film—narrated by Morgan Freeman, America’s soothing black grandpa—portrayed the birds as emotionally complex creatures—like dumber, cuter humans. Their bleak mating migration is portrayed as a sort of fairy tale quest—“In the harshest place on earth, love finds a way,” reassures Freeman in the trailer. It’s a family movie in the most literal sense—mated penguins and their offspring are referred to throughout the film as “families.” We’re promised romance, adventure, and a happy ending, a deranged interpretation of the never-ending fight for survival in the bleak and barren wild.

It would be easy to attribute the schlocky framing to American sentimentalism, but not only is *March of the Penguins* actually a French film, its original narration was even more mawkish. The original French edit of the film used actors actually delivering voice-over dialogue as the penguins themselves, with a child actor for the chicks, of course. There is anthropomorphizing nature, and then there is pure fan-fiction; *March of the Penguins*—particularly the original French version of it—is guilty of the most dishonest sort of fantasy. It’s a far cry from France’s original naturalist filmmaker—the lulling stoner cadence of Jacques Cousteau, who was an oceanographer first and a filmmaker second. As a scientist who took great care in showing the audience the work that went into every expedition and film, Cousteau’s emphasis on exploration, technology and humankind’s role in the natural world set him apart from the majority of nature documentarians.





# “Running animals off cliffs is a proven technique in the nature doc genre...”

**I**N FACT, THE ONLY AUTEUR HEIR TO COUSTEAU’S humanist view of nature may be Werner Herzog, who takes it one step further, saying in his unapologetically speciesist Antarctica documentary, *Encounters at the End of the World*, “To me, it is a sign of a deeply disturbed civilization, where tree-huggers and whale-huggers in their weirdness are acceptable, while no one embraces the last speakers of a language.” Whether intentional or not, Herzog’s work is a direct attack on the anti-social Henry David Thoreau school of naturalism, which conceives of nature as something perfect and holy, and man’s encroachment upon it as something sinful. Never mind that his mother did his laundry and brought baked goods to his cabin at Walden pond, Thoreau believed he was living the purest life possible, one of austere isolation, haunting the “wilderness” (which wasn’t actually that far from town), and championing above all else the glorification of his sylvan fetish, which was conspicuously lacking a lot of red tooth and claw.

Herzog, however, actually goes into the wilderness proper—conditions where it is not uncommon for “nature” to kill a person, and while he is not considered a nature documentarian per se, he’s one of the greatest, bouncing from an interview with a decidedly un-photogenic penguin scientist to the lives of the actual penguins with no interest in partitioning the two as “man” and “wildlife”—they’re both Antarctica to him. Herzog knows full well that the division between nature and society is a flimsy construct, instead espousing a comprehensive, inclusionist conception of life on this planet, closing *Encounters at the End of the World* with one of his interview subjects quoting Alan Watts: “Through our eyes, the universe is perceiving itself. Through our ears, the universe is listening to its harmonies. We are the witnesses through which the universe becomes conscious of its glory, of its magnificence.”

Herzog was never afforded the romantic fantasy of a separate and somehow benevolent natural world, as he grew up in rural Bavaria without electricity, a telephone or indoor plumbing. His fascination with (and affection for) the late Timothy Treadwell is his strongest statement on nature. Treadwell was the subject of Herzog’s *Grizzly Man*. An eccentric conservation zealot borne of middle class suburbia, he routinely camped for months in isolated Alaska, appointing himself the protector of a group of grizzly bears, one of whom eventually devoured him (confoundingly, the bears already resided safely on protected land).

It would be easy to disdain Treadwell for his delusion and foolishness, especially as he ranted against the humans he sought to evade, but it is Herzog’s humanity that paints Treadwell himself as the doomed, romantic figure. What could have easily been the story of a dumb hippie who got himself eaten by bears is told as a quixotic tragedy; the *mis-en-scene* incorporates Treadwell’s own footage beautifully, and Herzog collaborates with him to create a beautiful and dignified memorial. The irony is clear: you need a humanist to tell the story of a naturalist.

The inclusion of humans in nature documentaries is a touchy subject, and often very politically suspect. One might see a cameo by the indigenous people of a region if they live fairly traditionally, but the focus of the filming is often on their limbs and musculature, and almost never their faces; meanwhile, the animals always get close-ups. Also, when shots of a highly populated urban area are incorporated (generally to indicate the threat that urban centers pose to the wildlife just outside of the city limits), the people are shot overhead and/or at an accelerated speed, as if they are a colony of ants. This is common when filming Asian cities, which always seem to be teeming with humans, as if they are a particularly invasive species. It’s

easy for nature documentaries to venture into an ambiguous racism, where the animals are people and the people are animals.

**B**RITISH NATIONAL TREASURE DAVID Attenborough is best known for his groundbreaking *Planet Earth* series, which often seems to conceive of a Planet Earth with no people in it. But at one point during the first season he found it relevant to film faceless men rappelling into a cave in Borneo to harvest the nests of the cave swiftlets. Why include that scene? There is nothing unsustainable about the practice—it does not affect the swiftlet population. And many of the other animals Attenborough films face humans as direct predators, yet he felt little need to include those humans. Well the nest of the cave swiftlet is the main ingredient of bird's nest soup—and it is constructed by the swiftlet using its own saliva. Those wacky Asians, eating bird spit like a delicacy—how could a proper English filmmaker resist?

Attenborough has also caught flack for “staging” scenes as well. Footage of a polar bear giving birth from the first season was actually filmed in a zoo, and more recently, it was revealed that footage from the flight of a Golden Eagle was “fake,” meaning the bird was obtained from a wildlife sanctuary and handled by professional eagle trainer. But this presents another ethical conundrum; would it not have been violating the idealistic non-intervention ethos of the documentarian catch an eagle in the wild and strap a camera to its head for the footage? Would it be ethical (or even possible) to bug a polar bear's den to film it giving birth? Is a polar bear giving birth somehow less “wild” in a zoo? Is a bird from a sanctuary somehow less “wild” while in flight? There is something artistically dishonest about the omissions, no doubt, but how “staged” are these scenes really? The bird was flying, the polar bear gave birth. And a trickery on behalf of the welfare of the animals is hardly the crime

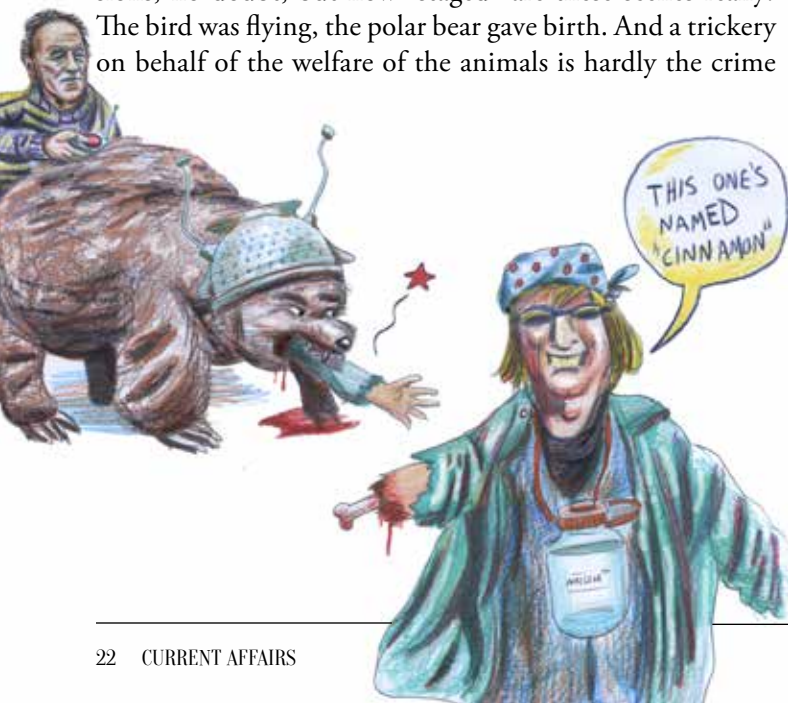
of violent interference. Attenborough may not be the best journalist of nature, but he is an excellent and loyal publicist, balancing exposure and privacy entirely for the benefit of his clients, who now face a threat far more dire than spelunkers, documentarians or animal predators.

In early December, a massive flock of snow geese—25,000 grand white birds known for their black tipped wings and deafening, cacophonous honking—attempted to land in Berkeley Pit, a 700-acre Superfund site in Montana, full of acidic water and heavy metals. Employees from the companies that oversee the pit—Atlantic Richfield Co. (oil) and Montana Resources (mining)—rushed over and worked for hours, throughout the night, to scare the birds out of the poison lake. The companies estimate that nearly 90% of the birds were chased away, but thousands died. The Montana Resources manager of environmental affairs said the rust-red water was “white with birds.”

Attenborough filmed snow geese, and after I read about the mass death in Butte, I rewatched the footage of them from season one of *Planet Earth*. It begins with an overhead shot of an unfathomably large flock—Attenborough says 400,000 but it's difficult to even think of numbers that big. The din of their shrill honking is edited into a tittering kind of hum, and it's buried underneath a dramatic, swelling orchestral score. From a great distance, the flock shifts and swirls mid-air like sand in the wind, and when you get closer they look elegant, and somehow organized. Then it cuts to a shot of the birds taking flight directly from the water; they ascend to the heavens, graceful and beatific. And for a moment they are not even birds.

They're movie stars. ❖

*“It's easy  
for nature  
documentaries  
to venture into  
an ambiguous  
racism, where  
the animals  
are people and  
the people are  
animals.”*



# ECON-101

OMICS 101 [BY SHON]

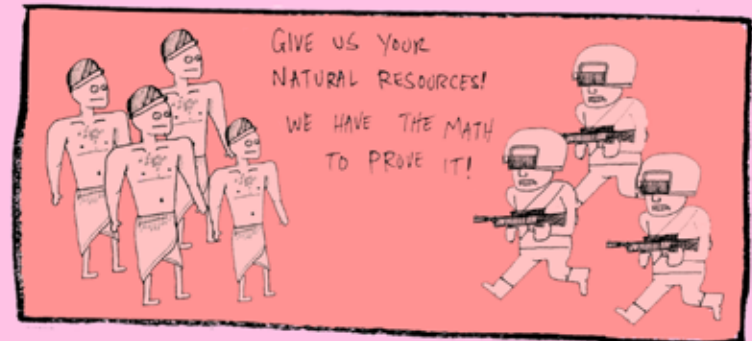
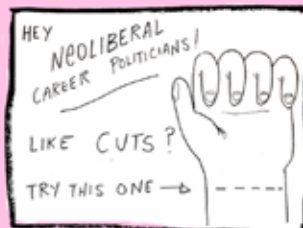
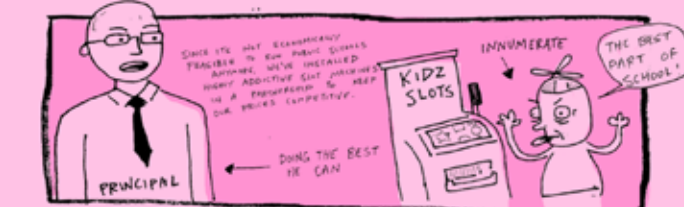
A GUIDE FOR NEW SOFT PINK MINDS



REMEMBER TO CHARGE YOUR  
ECONOMICS CRYSTALS  
BEFORE READING

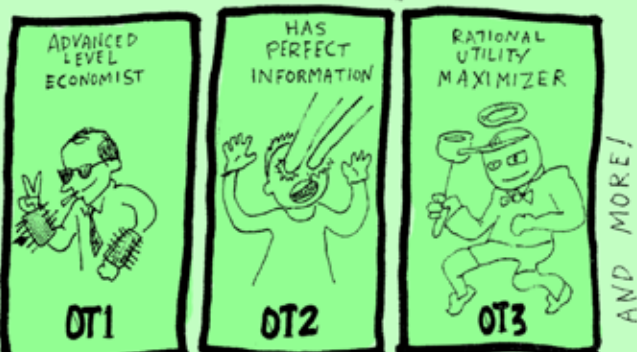


BASIC MARKET PRINCIPLES



WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT... **ECONOMICS?**  
SEND US A **CHEQUE** TO ENROLL IN OUR MYSTERY RELIGION!

Economics is the study of fictional rational human beings in imaginary environments acting like assholes in divine union to create utopia. it also serves the social purpose of justifying the vast inequality we have inherited through claims of an objective and fair system you couldn't possibly understand. Sign up today for more!



☐ **Yes!** I'm ready to live my best life and study economics with you, and get my OT1 training for \$4,999.99

send a \$5000 cheque to Shawn Vulliez C/O Current Affairs  
P.O Box 441394 West Somerville, MA 02144

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_ Yearly Income: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP code: \_\_\_\_\_



# BOURGEOIS FEMINIST BULLSHIT

*The Rebecca Traister View  
of Gender & the World*

by **YASMIN NAIR**

**T**HE LAST DECADE HAS SEEN THE flourishing of a genre we might describe as “Sociology Porn,” a form of pop-culture social studies that emerges from the incomprehensible minds of people like David Brooks. These are the richly rewarded ramblings eagerly consumed by a public that wants to appear learned without doing too much of the work of actually doing the research. Nuggets like the sort offered regularly by Brooks are like bacon-wrapped dates: Tiny morsels of fact wrapped in a rich coating of fatty nonsense.


Of late, Sociology Porn has turned its attention to Women and, in particular, Single Women. In the last few years, we’ve seen books like Moira Wiegel’s *Labor of Love: The Invention of Dating*, Jessica Valenti’s *Sex Object: A Memoir*, and Kate Bol-

ick’s *Spinster*. As the (actual) sociologist Bella DePaulo began pointing out over a decade ago in *Singled Out*, single people — not just women — have been on the rise for many years. Yet society and the laws governing mundane-but-deeply-important matters like taxation and housing have yet to catch up with the reality that fewer people than ever before see marriage as their lives’ crowning glory. (In addition, social benefits like childcare, healthcare, and paid sick leave remain entirely inaccessible to all but the most privileged single people.)

The newer books take such sociological analysis and numbers and turn them into fun, peppy narratives about how incredibly great and awesome it is that so many women are now resolutely single. Such a surge of interest in The Single Woman should bring joy to the millions of women who have borne the hardship of centuries of stigma. Single Women were once feared as witches (and then summarily executed), and they have been rendered Sad Sadies so desperate for sex that they take to hallu-

Rebecca Traister, ***All The Single Ladies: Unmarried Women and the Rise of an Independent Nation***, Simon & Schuster, \$27.00, 352pp.

cinating partners (recall *The Unmarried Woman in Rear Window*). The times are a-changing and today Single Women can take heart in the fact that they exist in numbers large enough to attract the attention of so many. Presumably, singletons read such books avidly and want to know: *Will there now be more men to fuck? More women? What do I do with my infinite spare time? Will a Cat Cafe open in my neighborhood?*

HE LATEST IN THIS body of pop sociology is Rebecca Traister's *All The Single Ladies: Unmarried Women and the Rise of An Independent Nation*, based on a number of interviews with single women and a history of marriage drawn from several sources. The title, derived from Beyoncé's hit single, firmly locates the book in popular culture, immediately signaling its affinity with the now, the hip, the happening. The subtitle is reassuring: It's not that Unmarried Women (note the emphasis on marital status) are on the rise, because that would imply they were acting in solidarity and, perhaps, against the general (and married) public. Rather, their growing presence is proof that America is, true to its storied (if entirely fictional) history, The Land of the Free. We Americans have *allowed* these women to remain unmarried and they add to our national identity and reaffirm that which has served to define us since the Boston Tea Party, our Love of Independence.

*All the Single Ladies* is an earnestly researched project, written by someone who is acutely sensitive to the political sensibilities of every single population. Much like the campaign of Hillary Clinton, a woman Traister has admired and written about for nearly a decade (her first book, *Girls Don't Cry*, was about Clinton's 2008 presidential campaign), this book reads like it went through multiple focus groups. It is careful never to offend and, in the process, offers little of substance that has not been said before.

Like any decent research project, it is not without a few useful bits. Traister carefully points out, for instance, that in the years following World War II, the freedom from domesticity that so many white suburban women were able to enjoy in the late 1950s and onwards was enabled by the fact that so many black women could only find employment as domestic labor in their households. In terms of policy changes, her goals, which include more childcare resources and better pay, seem laudable enough.

But, ultimately, Traister has no real interest in Single Women except as a foil to the Married; she's more interested in maintaining, not disrupting, the primacy of coupledness itself. The biggest flaw in the book, and in Traister's vision as a whole, is that she ultimately sees singles *not* as independent people, valuable in and of themselves, but as those whose value is created by their usefulness to married couples and the state. So, for instance, single women

are amazing because, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, they "spend more than a trillion dollars annually." According to another report, "single, childless, non-cohabiting women over the age of twenty-seven are spending more capita than any other category of women on dining out, rent, or mortgage, furnishings, recreation, entertainment, and apparel: \$50 billion a year on food, \$22 billion on entertainment, and \$18 billion on cars."

But more than anything else, single women are now making for better *marriages*. What does Traister mean by this puzzling assertion? Well, it turns out that single women are not necessarily abandoning marriage altogether (phew!), but simply pursuing it later. In the process, according to Traister, they're actually helping make marriage *better*. And they're not just making their own marriages better, by being more sure and confident of their needs, she tells us excitedly: *They help improve other people's marriages by modeling what confident women should be like, for their married male coworkers*. She quotes Susan B. Anthony: "Once men were afraid of women with ideas and a desire to vote. Today, our best suffragettes are sought in marriage by the best class of men." Traister's happy conclusions about the usefulness of unmarried women come much after she explores their rise in numbers. Which is to say: First, she gives us the bad news, that there are more of them, and then she reassures us that it's all, actually, good news.

All of this will no doubt be a huge relief for millions of Single Women. Their single status is now no longer a blight upon the land but a set of Very Useful Functions that keep the economy running smoothly. They spend more! They eat well! Goodbye to stale cheese and rice and beans! They tap into the housing market! They make other women's husbands better, like training wheels on a bicycle!

Traister's utilitarian view of single women explains the kind of single women she interviewed for the book. Of course, in keeping with her earnest adherence to a focus-group-like-laser-focus, they are culturally and racially diverse. But none of these women are anything but secure and successful, and they all have stable incomes.

And none of them are so gauche as to dislike or, Goddess Hera forbid, hate or be opposed to marriage. Instead, in the spirit of modern bourgeois feminists, they cast their decisions within the penumbra of "choice" — not rebellion, not revolt against an institution that has historically enslaved women and children, not a desire to strike a path away from the economic and political constraints foisted upon them, not an angry demand that the state should do better about the needs of a marginalized population, but merely a choice, like picking the shirt or handbag that suits you best. She approvingly quotes Anita Hill, who says she wants people to understand that, "you can have a good life, despite what convention says, and be single. That doesn't mean you have to be against marriage. It just means that there are choices that society should not impose on you."

In *Sex and the City*, which lurks in the background for all works in this genre of Sociology Porn about Single Women, Charlotte famously shouts, while justifying her decision to become



*“Single status  
is now no longer  
a blight upon the  
land but a set of  
Very Useful  
Functions that  
keep the economy  
running smoothly.”*

dependent on her husband, “I choose my choice, I choose my choice!” The much-quoted lines are symptomatic of the attitude towards marriage among bourgeois feminists. The mantra of “choice” is taken to mean that there are multiple kinds of feminism, including the sort where women relinquish their economic independence, or support the erasure of abortion rights. The feminism Traister upholds, as Hillary Clinton upheld, is what we might call a “Big Tent Feminism,” the sort that makes allowances for every possible variation of “feminism” under the logic that If Women Want It, It Must Be Feminist. No matter how poisonous the effects may be (such as Hillary Clinton’s vote to authorize a brutal war that killed many thousands of innocent women), an empowered woman’s act is always a feminist act.

But what if Traister had interviewed those feminists who don’t see a separation between their economic interests and their gendered interests? What about the feminists who are single because they are resolutely *against* marriage? What about those who *aren’t* an economic benefit to everyone else, or who *hate* shopping? And what about those who think marriage is a terrible, rotting institution, yet eventually succumb to it because everything about American society, from healthcare to childcare to housing rights, is still organized to shut down women’s aspirations toward independence?

What if, for instance, we heard from the single woman in New York, also the epicenter of Traister’s world, who isn’t able to make rent but can’t stomach the idea of marrying that person with

access to a rent-controlled apartment so she can stay? What of the single woman pushed into a homeless shelter and separated from her child by the Department of Child and Family Services, which deemed her an unfit mother because she was too poor because the city wouldn’t help her to find housing? Try telling these women how wonderful being single is, what a truly liberating choice they have freely made.

At the end of the book, Traister provides a section titled “Where Are They Now?”, with updates from some of her interview subjects. These are chirpy and chipper: “Happily single and living in Atlanta.” “She is happy.” “While finding work-life balance and managing finances remain ongoing challenges, Letisha wouldn’t trade her experiences of being a mom for anything.”

But those “ongoing challenges” eventually wear many women down, unless they become independently wealthy. As DePaulo astutely pointed out, the lives of married people are often literally subsidized by Singles — it’s Singles who are still expected to take up the (often un-or-underpaid) slack when married colleagues won’t work overtime, for instance. Even when tenured, single female academics are often expected to take on additional roles of nurturing students and extra unpaid administrative work.

In a section on wealth and poverty, Traister recognizes that there is a sticky underbelly of economic displacement and exploitation. She sees that the absence of wealth makes marriage coercive, and that being single is great if you’re rich and sucks if you’re poor. Yet on the whole, she paints a relentlessly sunny portrait of what it means to be Single in America. She knows that unless women are well-off, their single status is actually a source of material hardship. But this does not alter her generally rosy assessment, nor does it cause her to believe that a fundamental change in the economic order is necessary.

Broadly speaking, what Traister offers in her book is not an expansive history of a growing social trend, but a reassurance to a certain class of women and men that singledom does not threaten either the state of marriage or the state that requires people to be married and, most crucially, that the rise of singles will never threaten the stranglehold of capitalism. But a *politically* sharp diagnosis of singledom would not simply show that singles are rising in number, it would indicate the potential for their growth to actually disrupt the political status quo.

What would a more disruptive view of Singles look like? What if we actually took gender out of the picture altogether? To consider those questions, we have to first understand why Traister’s work and bourgeois feminism have been so appealing in the first place.

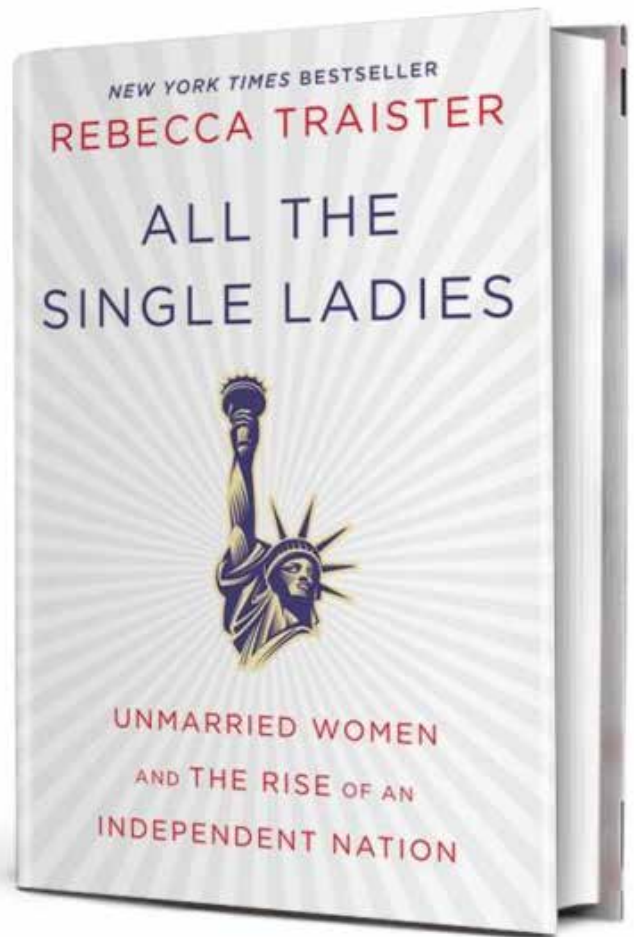
**T**RAISTER’S BOOK IS, AS FAR AS THESE things can be accurately gauged, wildly successful. It has been talked about a great deal and she has appeared in and on several venues, like *Real Time with Bill Maher*, CBS’s *This Morning*, *Elle*, and NPR’s *Fresh Air*. The blurbs for her work are full of a level of praise unusual even in the world of blurb-writing: *The New York Times* describes

her as “visionary,” while Annie Lamott declares hers to be “the most brilliant voice on feminism in this country.” It’s not simply that Traister’s book has sold a lot of copies, but that her vision of Singles is an influential one. But what explains the over-the-top praise? Why would something making rather basic observations be hailed as “visionary” and “brilliant”? *What’s with these gushing blurbs?*

In fact, the blurbs make perfect sense. Bourgeois feminism has a strong hold on the liberal and progressive imagination. Traister’s analysis echoes every principle of this feminism, and it explains why an unremarkable book which reads like a homework assignment is praised as “visionary.” *All the Single Ladies* and its particular version of feminism appeals to the upper middle-class feminist sensibility: It *appears* to empower, while in fact reaffirming power as it already exists. It flatters people into thinking that the existence of single women is revolutionary in itself, even though its whole argument is that they don’t disrupt the economy or anything else. But being single is no more revolutionary or interesting or world-changing than marrying; the point ought not to be what people are doing in their personal lives, but what changes we can bring about in their political and economic lives.

**A**S WE SAW TOO CLEARLY in the last election, this kind of feminism is incapable of thinking beyond the symbolic, and of creating meaningful changes in women’s lives. One cannot discuss Rebecca Traister without discussing Hillary Clinton, since Traister’s support for Clinton has been the source of much of her dispute with fellow feminists. Clinton is the exemplar of a “non-threatening” feminism, one that gets women into boardrooms (and into public office) without actually changing the underlying structure of companies or governments. The reason rich Democrats overwhelmingly favored Hillary Clinton in the primary is that Hillary Clinton offers their ideal political platform: symbolic gains for the gender, without the actual material gains that might require sacrificing some wealth.

Yet wealthy feminists like Traister, because they do not understand how women’s interests can actually *conflict* based on economic class, cannot understand opposition to Clinton as anything other than sexism. Thus when fifty-three percent of white women voted for Trump *against* the first female major-party presidential candidate, it created a puzzle for Traister. She was among those who saw Trump’s victory squarely as a result of racism and sexism. As she wrote in her diagnosis for *New York Magazine*, Trump “was made possible by voters threatened by the increased influence of women and people of color.” For Traister, it is impossible that these women had a *class identity*, that they



disliked Hillary Clinton for her ties to Wall Street. The logic of bourgeois feminism is that if you don’t vote for a woman, there must be something wrong with you. Implicit in this summation is a nasty bit of class-based innuendo: Only White Trash would vote for Trump against a female candidate. On this reasoning, women who don’t vote for women are essentially betraying their sex. We might recall here Madeleine Albright’s infamous statement in support of Hillary Clinton, that “there’s a special place in hell for women who don’t help each other!”

But Albright, Clinton, and Traister’s feminism is *not* the feminism of working class or middle class women; it is inherently about solidifying the interests of wealthy women — consider, for instance, Hillary Clinton’s deep, expressed contempt for baristas. In October of 2016, a taped speech of Hillary Clinton speaking to her wealthy fundraisers emerged, in which she described Sanders supporters as delusional “basement-dwellers.” Her comments are worth quoting at some length:

*“They’re children of the Great Recession. And they are living in their parents’ basement. They feel they got their education and the jobs that are available to them are not at all what they envisioned for themselves. And they don’t see much of a future....If you’re feeling like you’re consigned to, you know, being a barista, or you know, some other job that doesn’t pay a lot, and doesn’t have some other ladder of opportunity attached to it, then the idea that maybe, just maybe, you could be part of a political revolution is pretty appealing.”*

This is the same contemptuous logic echoed by Traister, who



COVER ART COURTESY OF:  
**The Schomburg  
Family**



## IN OUR NEXT EDITION:

- 12 Ways To  
Undermine Capitalism  
Without Leaving Your Futon
- Why It Might Be Unwise For  
Leftists To Joke About  
Purges And Guillotines
- How To Make A Fortune Selling  
Pretentious Concept Art To Dumb  
Wall Street Millionaires
- RELIGION: Does The Existence  
of Richard Dawkins Prove That God  
Is Real And Despises Us
- PLUS: More Tasteless ISIS Jokes,  
More Jabs At Pundits,  
More Derision About Academics



LOOK OUT FOR OUR SUMMER  
**"CUTE THINGS"**  
EDITION

can't be bothered to interview any of these baristas who "don't see much of a future," and who might also be resolutely single women. Clinton could not, does not, and will not conceive of the fact that someone who is her daughter's age and a barista might actually *want to be one* because she loves the job. Perhaps she just wants to get paid so well that she never has to take a second job. She wants to be unionized to guarantee she will not be fired because she refused to give her (married) manager a blow-job behind the fridge. And she doesn't want to have to leave abruptly because she had a child, unwanted or not.

In Clinton's remarks about baristas, one can sense the values held by this kind of feminism. One is "consigned" to being a barista, because being a barista is not what the successful people do. To the extent there is a problem, it is that people are not getting to run startups rather than pour coffee. But a socialist looks at the situation differently: the problem is not that people are "stuck" being baristas, it is that baristas are not accorded the respect and economic security that they should be given. For Clinton/Traister, there should be a meritocracy in which anyone can rise from their lowly, pitiful, underpaid position to become the boss. For someone committed to actual material equality, there shouldn't be bosses, or lowly, underpaid positions, to begin with. It's not that everyone should be able to get to the top of the hierarchy of female success, it's that the hierarchy must be destroyed, so that people can do what they want with their lives without having to worry about whether they will be able to feed themselves or their children.

This lack of a serious vision of economic equality for women explains why Traister has massively overpraised Hillary Clinton's significance for women. In her book on the 2008 election, Traister calls it "the election that changed everything for American women," and has a chapter entitled "Hillary is us." But Clinton's 2008 campaign changed literally *nothing* for American women. They were still working the same jobs the day after she conceded as they were the day before she announced her run. And she definitely *isn't* us in any important way. She's not us, first and foremost, because she has several hundred million dollars of wealth, and because she

doesn't recognize that our lives are defined by the constraints of our economic conditions.

CLINTON AND TRAISTER'S bourgeois feminism therefore absorbs the logic of capitalism — the accrual of wealth by the few — and vomits it out again as the affirmation of gender. In Traister's worldview, single women are defined largely by their gendered interests, with economic interests being secondary. Traister makes feminism about empathy, desire, and *shopping*. But feminism is not something that comes about simply because of the presence of women; it is fundamentally about changing the world so that everyone, *regardless of gender*, has the same access to material benefits without needing to perform some economically useful function to the state and society. Gender is the tunnel through which we travel and understand one set of very, very stark oppressions. But a feminist revolution that simply ascribes "proper" functions to women alongside men or other women is not a revolution; it is simply a realignment of the status quo.

Feminist principles are not, ultimately, simply about making things better for women. They are about paying attention to gender in order to think about policies that make things better for *everyone*. So, for instance, a feminism that is simply about ensuring that women at the top get bathrooms with diaper-changing stations means nothing if the women *and men* who are cleaning those bathrooms — and presumably wiping baby shit from the walls — get neither time off nor the ability to place their children in care while at work. A policy that ensures that female professors get to take a year off after having their babies is useless if the system continues to simply hire adjuncts of all genders — who get no such benefits, no matter how well paid they are — to fill in for them.

Rebecca Traister and Bourgeois Feminists like her neither understand nor want any of this. And there is a Special Place In Hell for women who refuse to consider a feminism meant to ensure freedom for all, regardless of gender. ❖

# HOPE





# THE REGRETTABLE DECLINE OF SPACE UTOPIAS

BY BRIANNA RENNIX

**S**TAR TREK IS ONE OF THOSE TV SHOWS WHOSE BASIC premise would be horrifying if the show weren't so utterly committed to its own optimism. Viewed in the abstract, it's hard to imagine how anybody stays sane on a starship. *Star Trek* characters are constantly flying blind into some fresh hell. Literally every corner of the universe they visit, Starfleet encounters some fucked-up shit that defies all extant scientific knowledge. Crew members are routinely bodyswapped, brainwashed, possessed by alien lifeforms, or implanted with false memories. Oh, and most crew members bring their entire families on board, so during the ship's weekly brushes with death, they all get to grapple with the knowledge that their spouse and children will almost certainly be burned alive or suffocated in the vacuum of space. Everyone on that show should be on the verge of complete psychosis, but somehow, they all seem pretty contented with their lives. The characters' preternatural level of peace with

the unknown is probably one of the main reasons why *Star Trek* is extraordinarily comforting to watch.

Another reason why *Star Trek* is comforting is that *there are no goddamn lawyers in space.*

This is not completely true. There are a couple of lawyers in space. But there are no lawyers affiliated with the United Federation of Planets, the big, happy humanitarian alliance of planetary civilizations that are committed to universal peace, cultural interchange, and the accumulation of scientific knowledge. There are a few itinerant JAGs, but there's no shipboard counsel. There are no legal teams dispatched to scenes of interstellar conflict. When characters find themselves in compromising situations, they never ask if they can speak to an attorney.

This, on the one hand, is completely bonkers. After all, non-Federation planets have all kinds of nutty legal standards, ranging from "guilty until proven innocent" to "automatic death penalty for anybody who accidentally steps on a flow-

erbed inside the invisible Punishment Zone.” Given the many entirely foreseeable dangers of this approach, you’d think that every starship would have some highly-trained legal wonk on board, ready to deal with these horrifying situations. But nope. It’s implied that the Federation does have lawyers *somewhere*, and there even is a loose notion that they are important to the effective functioning of the judicial system. In one episode, we learn that during a period of Earth history known as the Post-Atomic Horror (which is scheduled to occur—get ready, guys—in the mid-21st century), all the world’s lawyers were systematically murdered. This is characterized as having been an undesirable development for humanity, so we can infer that the legal profession was subsequently reinstated. But whenever there’s a legal hearing of any kind, Starfleet personnel either A)

tion legal system. In the courtroom episodes, there are never “gotcha” moments where somebody wins on a technicality or gets tripped up by an arcane legal formulation. Making a common-sense argument, or a soliloquy to general principles of justice, is usually enough to win over an adjudicator. The implication seems to be that in a world where fact-finders are honest, and where parties can make more or less sensible claims in their own defense, the system can afford to be equitable and *ad hoc*. It’s the ultimate access-to-justice dream where—even better than a lawyer for every client—the law is so reasonable and the judges so fair that every person can represent themselves in court with total confidence, or, at most, bring along a moderately clever friend to help them make their case. In addition, when interacting with other legal systems,

## SADLY, UTOPIAS ARE PRESENTLY OUT OF VOGUE...

represent themselves, or B) are represented by a random bridge officer who is deputized to act as counsel.

Now you might say, on the one hand, that we shouldn’t read too much into this. Maybe writing a random lawyer into a storyline was just going to be one more actor cluttering up the set, frittering away the weekly episode budget with dispensable lines. But the complete absence of lawyers across multiple *Star Trek* seasons, each under different creative direction, each with their own standalone law-centric episodes, is at least a little weird. So is there some other reason why the Federation has no need for lawyers?

ONE OF THE CENTRAL PREMISES OF THE *STAR TREK* universe, which is set a couple centuries into the future, is that humanity has evolved—not dramatically beyond all recognition, but nonetheless significantly. After a period of mass calamity on earth, characterized by nuclear war, genocide, and famine, the remainder of Earth’s global population finally comes to the negotiating table, as it were. A world government is established. Societies are rebuilt. Money is abolished. All basic human needs are provided for. People enter professions, learn trades, and provide services because they find these activities fulfilling, not out of economic necessity. Crime is almost nonexistent; with the elimination of material want, the impetus for most kinds of crime is also eliminated, and it’s implied that psychological dispositions towards violence are somehow detected and rehabilitated in their early stages. The establishment of an egalitarian regime of resource distribution, and the discovery of alien civilizations on other planets, seems to have drawn the human species together and eroded social distinctions. While there are still pockets of institutional corruption, and although humans still sometimes give in to their lesser impulses, people are largely motivated by goodwill. Federation officers in particular have a widespread reputation for honesty, which other civilizations, weirdly, mostly seem to accept at face value.

These characteristics seem to percolate through the Federa-

tion legal system. In the courtroom episodes, there are never “gotcha” moments where somebody wins on a technicality or gets tripped up by an arcane legal formulation. Making a common-sense argument, or a soliloquy to general principles of justice, is usually enough to win over an adjudicator. The implication seems to be that in a world where fact-finders are honest, and where parties can make more or less sensible claims in their own defense, the system can afford to be equitable and *ad hoc*. It’s the ultimate access-to-justice dream where—even better than a lawyer for every client—the law is so reasonable and the judges so fair that every person can represent themselves in court with total confidence, or, at most, bring along a moderately clever friend to help them make their case. In addition, when interacting with other legal systems,

This all may seem fairly pie-in-the-sky—but could it actually be possible? Could humanity, someday, theoretically, if basic material insecurities were resolved, reach a general state of compassion and reasonability towards one another? Could lawyers, at present a hideous but necessary evil, eventually be rendered obsolete by more humane social attitudes? God, that would be amazing, wouldn’t it?

Of course, the opposing theory of human nature says that our impulse towards selfishness and cruelty is so deeply-rooted, spiritually or biologically, that we can never hope to eliminate it; that at most, we might mitigate it, but that this will never be a durable achievement across cultures or across generations. This theory is quite popular, but we have no idea if it’s true. It certainly seems to be humanity’s default mode, if we make no attempts at self-improvement. But our species hasn’t been around terribly long, in the grand scheme of things, and if we’re honest with ourselves, most of us haven’t exactly been doing our utmost to better the world we live in. As G.K. Chesterton once wrote about Christianity: “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult, and not tried.” The same could easily be said for most schemes of social organization that require some form of moral effort or voluntary material renunciation.

SADLY, UTOPIAS ARE PRESENTLY OUT OF VOGUE, AS THE tedious proliferation of dystopian fiction and disaster films seems to indicate. No genre is safe. *Game of Thrones* is the dystopian reboot of *Lord of the Rings*; *House of Cards* is the dystopian reboot of *The West Wing*; *Black Mirror* is the dystopian reboot of *The Twilight Zone*. The slate of previews at every movie theatre has become an indistinguishably sepia-toned effluence of zombies, terrorists, and burnt-out post-apocalyptic hellscape. Even supposedly light-hearted superhero movies now devote at least 3.5 hours of their running time to the lavishly-rendered destruction of major metropolises.



There is clearly some deep-seated appeal to these kinds of films; and indeed, it would take a heart of inhuman moral fiber to truly regret the sudden vanishing of New York City, whose existence serves no beneficial purpose for humanity that I'm aware of. But my general feeling is that our fondness for dystopian narratives is a pretty nasty indulgence, especially for those of us who live mostly comfortable lives, far-removed from the visceral realities of human suffering. Watching scenes of destruction from the plush chair of a movie theater, or perhaps on our small laptop screen while curled up in bed, heightens our own immediate sense of safety. It numbs us to the grinding, intermittent, inescapable reality of violence in neglected parts of our world, which unmakes whole generations of human beings with terror and dread.

Immersing ourselves in narratives where 99% of the characters are totally selfish also engrains a kind of fashionable faux-cynicism that feels worldly, but is in fact simply lazy. I say faux-cynicism because I don't believe that most people who profess to be pessimists *truly* believe that humanity is doomed, at least not in their lifetimes, or in their particular geographic purviews: if they did, then watching a film that features the drawn-out annihilation of a familiar American landscape would probably make them crap their pants. But telling yourself that everything is awful, and nothing can be fixed, is a marvelously expedient way to absolve yourself of personal responsibility. There is, happily, nothing about an apocalyptic worldview that obligates you to give up any of the comforts and conveniences that have accrued to you as a consequence of global injustice; *and* you get to feel superior to all those tender fools who still believe that a kinder world is possible! It's a very satisfying form of moral escapism. No wonder our corporate tastemakers have been churning this stuff out.

And there's no doubt that it's often hard to make utopias seem dramatically sophisticated. *Star Trek* is renowned, even by those who love it, for being campy as hell. Moral tales in general are too often sugary and insubstantial. They're suitable for kids, or maybe emotionally-stunted adults, but they're not something to be taken seriously. We have come to view utopian narratives as inherently hokey, and preachy. But dystopias are, of course, their own form of preaching; they are preaching another hypothesis about humanity, which, due to moody lighting and oblique dialogue, has an entirely undeserved appearance of profundity, and the illusory farsightedness of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

## TWO PLEAS FOR THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY

**B**UT DON'T WE ALL WANT A WORLD WITHOUT LAWYERS? Isn't that, at least, something that our whole species can agree on? *Star Trek* tells us that there are two hurdles between us and this great goal: global economic justice, and warp-speed technology. These may take several more centuries to achieve. But here are two things we can all start working on now.

### 1. Make utopias popular again.

Fictional narratives are a huge factor in shaping our expectations of what is possible. However, as discussed earlier, utopias are *hard* to write. You have to forfeit

a lot of the cheap tricks that writers use to generate dramatic momentum. After all, it's always easy to create tension when all your characters are self-serving, back-stabbing bastards; less so when your characters mostly get along. (The writers of *Star Trek: TNG* famously tore their hair out over creator Gene Roddenberry's insistence that all the main cast had to be *friends*.) Constructing plots that are based primarily around problem-solving takes a lot of intricate planning. But we've seen a thousand narrative iterations of societal collapse: why not write some narratives about societal construction? What would a better world look like, at different stages of its realization—at its inception? Weathering early internal crises? When facing an existential threat? We should put more imagination into thinking about what this could look like, and how to generate emotional investment in the outcome.

Aspirational fiction seems especially important at this moment in our national history, when a significant number of Americans cast a ballot for a candidate they disliked, or were even disturbed by, simply because they wanted *something different*. There's always been a gambling madness in the human spirit, a kind of perverse, instinctive itchiness that suddenly makes us willing to court disaster, simply on the off-chance of altering the mundane or miserable parameters of our daily lives. If we could transform some of that madness into a madness of optimism and creativity, rather than boredom, rage, and despair, that could only be a good thing.

### 2. Don't let assholes win the space race.

Do you know who's really excited about interplanetary exploration these days? Silicon Valley tycoons, and white supremacists. Elon Musk wants to set up a creepy private colony on Mars for ultra-rich survivalists who can shell out \$200,000 for their spot, and has stated his own intention of dying on Mars. Meanwhile, a fresh-faced crop of racists are convinced that if the U.S. would only give up trying to provide *social services* and *education* to its citizens, lily-white geniuses could easily be conquering the galaxy at this very moment. As Richard Spencer (of "Heil Trump" fame) has it:

"[O]ur *Faustian destiny* to explore the outer universe. That is what we were put on this earth to do. We weren't put on this earth to be nice to minorities, or to be a *multiculti fun nation*. Why are we not exploring Jupiter at this moment? Why are we trying to equalize black and white test scores? I think our destiny is in the stars. Why aren't we trying for the stars?"

These dickheads are trying for the stars! The rest of us therefore need to make sure they don't get there first. If the likes of Elon Musk and Richard Spencer are humanity's ambassadors, our entrée into outer space will simply be a high-tech recapitulation of all the moral horrors of our last Age of Exploration. Thankfully, I'm pretty sure Richard Spencer is no astrophysicist, and Elon Musk's would-be spacecrafts keep exploding on the launchpad. Now is our chance to thwart them!

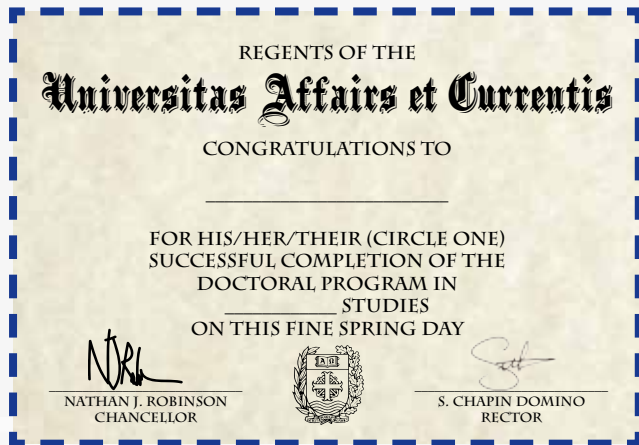
Space exploration doesn't have to be a last-ditch effort to save the species after we screw everything up on earth; nor should it be an alternative project to building an egalitarian global society. We still have time to make a better world here; on the planet we do have, before we inflict ourselves on other parts of the universe. Space travel may well have an improving effect on humanity, but we should also make a point of improving ourselves before we head out into the interstellar beyond. Only then will we have earned the privilege to Boldly Go.

Starfleet or bust! ♦

QUALITY DEGREES FROM

# CURRENT AFFAIRS UNIVERSITY

EQUALLY AS VALID AS TRUMP'S THING



Have you always wanted to have your aspirations  
toyed with before being cruelly dashed?

Would you like the flimsiest possible piece of  
paper for the largest possible sum of money?

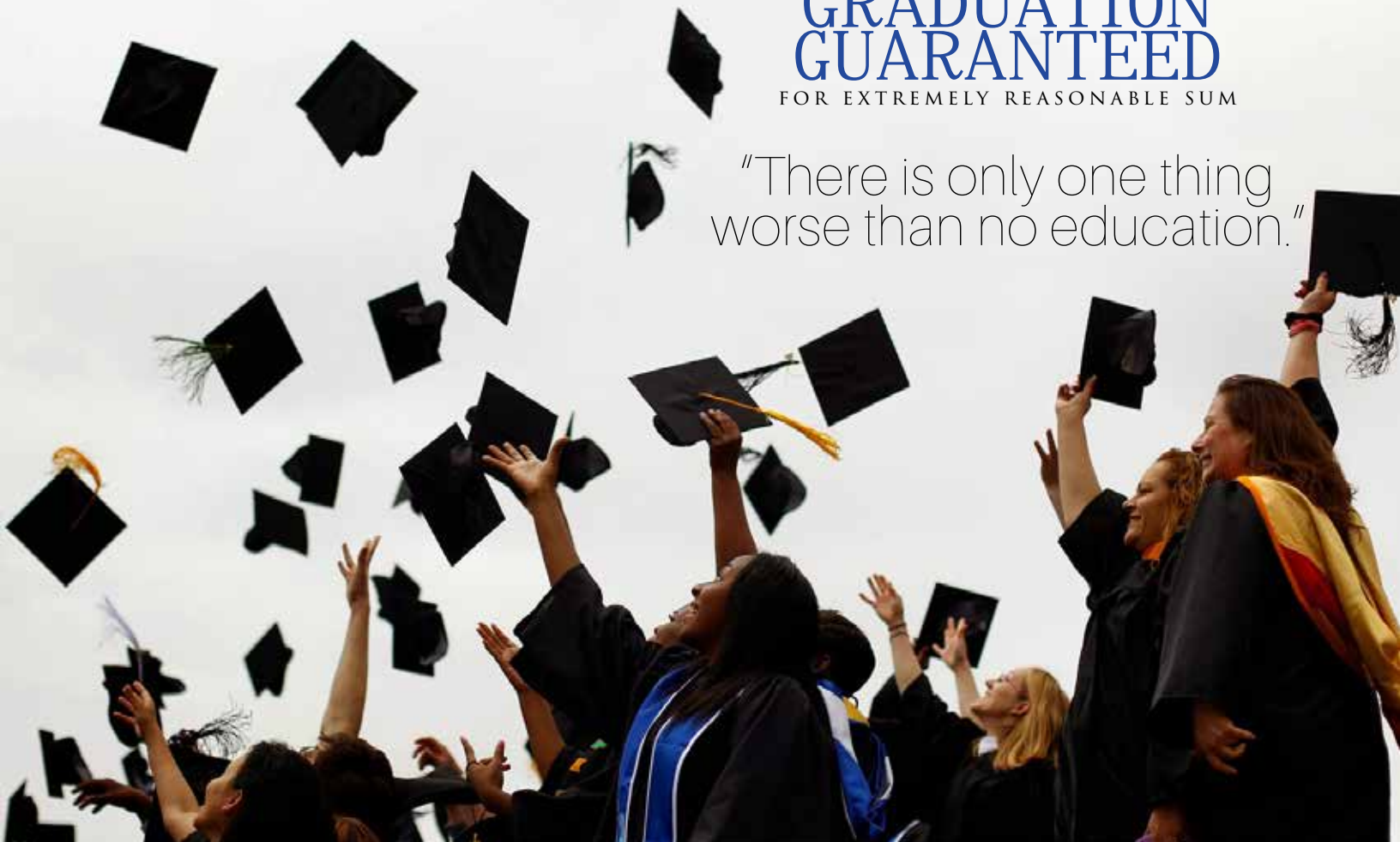
Are you indifferent to whether we bother to  
pretend to teach you anything?

Would you like to have your photograph taken  
next to a cardboard cut-out of our founder?

## GRADUATION GUARANTEED

FOR EXTREMELY REASONABLE SUM

"There is only one thing  
worse than no education."



# PIZZA

*Recently, certain members of the “alt-right” have alleged a sinister conspiracy involving a Democratic Party pedophilia ring based out of a Washington, D.C. pizzeria.*

*Yet inexplicably, the Mainstream Media refuses to take the idea seriously.*

*Is there truth to the rumors? Current Affairs goes where more reputable outlets dare not tread...*

THE BASICS OF THE PIZZAGATE THEORY go as follows: a few stores down from the Politics and Prose Bookshop in Washington, D.C., there is a pizza place called Comet Ping Pong. It is a popular hangout of politicians, and has hosted numerous events for prominent Democrats. It is also the epicenter of a sinister ring of pedophiles, who use the pizza shop to lure children, whom they torture in secret rooms. At the head of the ring is none other than Hillary Rodham Clinton.

If you are of a certain cast of mind, you may consider this theory implausible. “Hillary Clinton does not run a child sex ring, and she does not do so out of a pizza shop,” you may say. And you may be right. But how can you be sure?

If you doubt the reality of Pizzagate, you clearly have not spent time with the leaked Podesta emails, which include “numerous bizarre references to pizza” being made by Clinton operatives. Consider the following email, sent to John Podesta in September of 2014:

*Hi John, The realtor found a handkerchief (I think it has a map that seems pizza-related. Is it yours? They can send it if you want.)*

Ask yourself: why would John Podesta have a handkerchief with a pizza-related map on it? What could such a thing possibly mean? There is only one explanation that fits the facts, and that explanation is a secret child sex ring.

Not convinced? James Alefantis, the owner of Comet Ping Pong, was formerly in a romantic

relationship with Clinton operative David Brock. Alefantis was voted the 49th most influential person in D.C. by *GQ* magazine. Strange, don't you think, for a pizza shop proprietor to be so influential? How does one become influential by making pizzas? The answer is that one does not. One becomes influential by running a secret sex ring for prominent Washington Democrats.

Do you need more evidence? How about this: when asked about rumors that children were being tortured in his restaurant's basement, Alefantis denied that Comet Ping Pong had a



THE REFRIGERATED ROOM

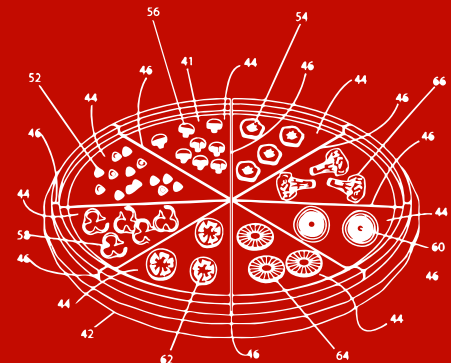
basement. Yet photographs of a mysterious “refrigerated room” beneath the establishment were located on Instagram. Or, what about this: the ping-pong paddles on the restaurant's menu closely resemble a known symbol for pedophilia. And we haven't even begun to discuss the creepy art on the restaurant's walls. Or the Clintons' known association with pedophile Jeffrey Epstein. Or how seemingly-nonsensical pizza-related Podesta emails begin to make much more sense when you translate them into pedophilia-related terms...

You dismiss Pizzagate, don't you? You think it is madness, you think it is conspiratorial. But what, dear reader, makes you so sure? Ask yourself: could it be that you are afraid of the truth?

PIZZAGATE WAS ALL RATHER FUNNY until someone nearly got shot over it. Well, funny from a distance. It certainly wasn't funny to James Alefantis, who had been receiving an ongoing stream of death threats over it. But it was even less funny when, on Dec. 6th, a man with an assault rifle showed up at Comet Ping Pong demanding the truth, firing a shot into the floor before being arrested.

Pizzagate is held up by the media as Exhibit A in a phenomenon of “fake news”; outlandish political stories that catch on through coverage in disreputable outlets, despite having no truth behind them. But it is instructive to reflect on why stories like Pizzagate catch on in the first place.

First, whether one thinks Pizzagate is “self-evidently” false or “worth investigating” depends on who one is, and what one's life experiences are. If one is a Democrat, and spends time



around the type of people who frequent hipster pizza places, the idea of the Comet Ping Pong pedophilia ring seems transparently laughable. If, on the other hand, one is already a person to whom Washington D.C. is a sinister place run by a criminal gang, Pizzagate's falsity may not seem nearly so “self-evident.”

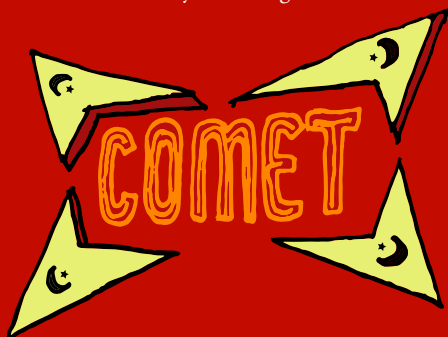
## KEY UNRESOLVED PIZZAGATE QUESTIONS

1. Why did the owner of Comet Ping Pong lie about the existence of a basement?
2. Why did John Podesta decline the handkerchief when it was offered?
3. What was the map?
4. What goes on in the refrigeration room?



# A CURRENT AFFAIRS SPECIAL REPORT

Coverage of Pizzagate hasn't tended to acknowledge that conspiracy theories seem far more plausible to people on the fringes than to insiders, precisely because those people are on the outside looking in. If you have ever worked in government, for example, you are likely to find 9/11 conspiracies relatively implausible, because you know that government agencies are usually inept rather than malicious. If, however, you have never seen the inside of a federal government building (it is rather dull) a fertile and active imagination can conjure all manner of nefarious activity occurring within.



Part of the reason Pizzagate has caught on seems to reflect a cultural divide. Comet Ping Pong has weird art on the walls. Its bathrooms are behind secret doors. To the conspiracy theorists, these make it "creepy." To Comet's cool clientele, they make it quirky and fun. Likewise, conspirators are baffled that D.C. staffers would spend so much time on their email talking about pizza. But those inside the political world know full well that pizza is the staple meal of a wonk's life.

An interesting feature of Pizzagate is that the

## KEY PIZZA PLAYERS



D. Brock



J. Alefantis



J. Podesta



H. Clinton

press hasn't bothered to seriously debunk it, even while insisting it has been debunked. For example, *The Daily Beast* dismisses the theory as follows:

*The conspiracy is untrue and easily disprovable. For example, the sex ring is supposed to be run out of the restaurant's basement, but the owner told the BBC, "We don't even have a basement."*

Note that the *Daily Beast* is wrong that the owner's contention makes the conspiracy "easily disprovable." That's like saying, of a man accused of a crime, that we know he is innocent because we asked him. The logic doesn't work. It is understandable why the press would think Pizzagate too self-evidently silly to bother dealing with seriously. Unfortunately, by saying that the theory has been disproven, without actually giving any good reasons for disbelieving it, the press only makes itself less trustworthy to those already suspicious of the media. If the response to an accusation is to say "we asked, and they said it was false," then the conspiratorially-minded will feel (quite justly) as if the press hasn't actually considered the evidence.

There are very good reasons why Pizzagate is a silly theory. For one thing, it relies on great unjustified inferential leaps. It treats anything mysterious or confusing as evidence toward its complicated theory, instead of making any effort to find simpler explanations. And it is based on the usual brand of confirmation bias common to conspiracies: once you think you see a pattern, you'll begin to notice it everywhere.

But instead of scoffing at the Pizzagate con-

Emails,  
Jeffrey Epstein,  
handkerchief,  
Kabbalah, pizza,  
torture chamber...  
need we say more?

spiracists, kooky as their conclusions may be, we would do well to try to understand the roots of this kind of thinking. Partially, it comes about because people don't trust mainstream institutions. And part of that distrust is rational, or at least makes sense from an outsider's perspective. After all, the Clintons are secretive. And they were close friends with pedophile Jeffrey Epstein. And the media are biased toward the Democratic Party. And this same media have refused to take Pizzagate seriously.

None of that adds up to a secret child sex ring in the Comet Ping Pong. Yet it's still worth thinking about why people believe false things, and how their trust can be won back. Laughing at them, instead of clearly trying to address the roots of conspiratorial thinking, is likely to lead to encourage new and more dangerous fringe theories.❖

### PIZZA-THEMED PEDOPHILE CODE

(alleged)

hotdog - "boy"

pizza - "girl"

cheese - "little girl"

pasta - "little boy"

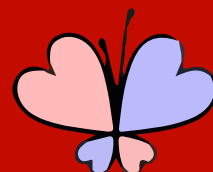
ice cream - "male prostitute" walnuts or

nuts - "person of colour" map - "semen"

sauce - "orgy"



PING PONG  
PADDLES



SYMMETRICAL  
PEDOPHILE SYMBOLOGY



the  
scourge  
of  
Self  
Flagellating  
politics

by Angela Nagle

FROM THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE, 'FOR whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.' If we are to take Luke at his word, then there must be plenty of heavenly exaltation in store for *Jeopardy* contestant turned social justice columnist caricature Arthur Chu who once tweeted: "*As a dude who cares about feminism sometimes I want to join all men arm-in-arm & then run off a cliff and drag the whole gender into the sea.*" Or for those who, on the morning following the election of Donald Trump, took to social media to publicly humble themselves to their followers, expressing their intense inward-turned shame and self-hatred. Typical of the style, *New Statesman* editor Laurie Penny wrote: "I've had white liberal guilt before. Today is the first time I've actually been truly horrified and ashamed to

be white." Others expressed their self-disgust at being straight white males and assured followers that while *they* of course did not vote for Trump, merely looking like those who did required some readily self-inflicted penance.

Every time a liberal conducts one of these performances of self-hatred, a predictable reaction cycle is set off. A ragtag army of nasty nihilistic right-wingers (a mixture of quasi-ironic anime-loving Nazis, celibate male separatists, and those who make it their duty to observe and report creeping Cultural Marxism) react with a flurry of anonymous retaliations. To the alt-right, this ritual confession of guilt is further proof of Western civilizational suicide. The self-flagellator is then met with a deluge of racist and/or misogynist abuse, which leaves them even more assured that their own dismal view of the West as white supremacist, misogynist, and essentially evil was correct

all along. Online, stuck in an endless loop and unmoored from the cultural mainstream, niche online subcultures from right and left both reinforce their opposed but similarly depressing views of society.

All of which would be a mere curiosity, if it kept itself confined to the darker recesses of the Internet's fetid bowel. However, since the mainstream media is always struggling to keep up with whatever the kids are into, the discourse of white self-criticism has gone somewhat more mainstream. It is now fairly typical to see ritualized confessions of white guilt. As Fredrik deBoer describes it:

*[There is] an entire cottage industry devoted to it. Similar arguments calling for white people to own their privilege have been published in places like the Huffington Post and Salon. Popular sites like YouTube and Tumblr play host to hundreds of earnest white people, eagerly disclaiming white privilege and their complicity in white supremacy. White rapper Macklemore recently released his second track concerning his own white privilege.*

Even Donald Sutherland recently felt compelled to describe his feeling "ashamed" for being a "white male." Sutherland apparently had a moment of breakthrough when Helen Mirren, Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire, informed him "You are the most privileged person on Earth... You are a white male." Damning men for their crimes and defending purest womankind, Michael Moore, author of titles such as *Stupid White Men*, recently tweeted, "No women ever invented an atomic bomb, built a smoke stack, initiated a Holocaust, melted the polar ice caps or organized a school shooting." (This is false. The Manhattan Project had its unsung female heroes, there are plenty of female oil and gas executives, and female school shooter Brenda Ann Spencer inspired the 1979 Boomtown Rats hit "I Don't Like Mondays." Ironically, Moore erases women's history by neglecting its greatest villains.)

With its obvious channeling of original sin, this style also has parallels in more traditional forms of radical politics than those one might associate with Donald Sutherland and Helen Mirren. One of the stranger incarnations has been the German tendency known as Anti-Deutsch, which has built an entire politics around self-criticism and national collective guilt about

the Holocaust. In 1995, to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bombing of Dresden, which killed up to an estimated 25,000 people, anti-Germans demonstrated in praise of the bombings on the grounds that it killed people who supported Nazism and was therefore a victory. One year, to mark the event in Dresden, the demonstrators held a sign reading "Bomber Harris, do it again!" in reference to RAF Bomber Command Chief Sir Arthur "Bomber" Harris, who, asked if he felt any guilt at the enormous loss of life, said that he would have destroyed Dresden again. Interestingly, despite its strongest roots being in radical ultra-left politics, the movement's anti-German thinking has led them to support the Israeli state and by extension the United States, especially after 9/11.

IN WHAT FELT LIKE SIGNIFICANT TIMING, RIGHT BEFORE Donald Trump's election, the film adaption of Philip Roth's masterpiece *American Pastoral* was released in cinemas. In it, the daughter of the central family who is consumed by hatred for the white America that her ideal bourgeois family exemplifies, bombs the local post office before disappearing into a fictionalized version of the Weather Underground. On her bedroom wall hangs a fictionalized Weatherman motto:

*"We are against everything that is good and decent in honky America. We will loot and burn and destroy. We are the incubation of your mothers' nightmares."*

The Weathermen used a style of "criticism-self-criticism" sessions, also called "Weatherfries," which were described by the author of *Bringing the War Home* as "the most harrowing aspect of life within the collective." Based on Maoist struggle sessions, these were used to root out subconscious racism and sexism within their own psyches. Individuals were reportedly hazed for up to twelve hours without a break until the white radicals confessed their deep white supremacism, homophobia and misogyny to their fellow white radicals thus achieving catharsis through their own admission of guilt.

The most famous case of white self-hatred leading to full-scale self-delusion was probably that of Rachel Dolezal, the African studies instructor and president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) who turned out to be a

natural blonde white woman in pretty convincing disguise. Dolezal had so successfully persuaded herself that she was black that she seemed unable to understand what she had done, as she struggled to answer interview questions about her motivation. In sympathy with Dolezal, a white female college professor writing for the *Huffington Post*, Ali Michael, later admitted:

*"I couldn't have biological children because I didn't want to propagate my privilege biologically." She went on to say: "...like Dolezal, I wanted to take on Africanness. Living in South Africa during my junior year abroad, I lived with a Black family, wore my hair*



# "It is difficult to think of any successful political movement based on radical performances of self-hatred..."

*in head wraps, shaved my head... I didn't want to be White, but if I had to be, I wanted to be White in a way that was different from other White people I knew... But the lesson for me is remembering how deep the pain is, the pain of realizing I'm White... The pain of facing that honestly is blinding.*

**W**ATCHING THE SUICIDAL LEVELS OF SECULARIZED self-flagellation in the aftermath of Trump made me recall the famous scene in the movie *Malcolm X*, in which a young white woman momentarily blocks Malcolm X's path and asks what she, as a white person, can do to help his cause. He answers with one coldly served word – "Nothing." The scene was based on a real encounter he had with a "little blonde co-ed" after which he wrote, "I'd never seen anyone I ever spoke to before more affected than this little white girl... Her clothes, her carriage, her accent all showed Deep South breeding and money."

"Nothing" could certainly be a succinct one-word summation of what exactly anyone seems to be benefiting from much of the contemporary online performance of self-criticism. But then, Malcolm X went on to regret being contemptuous of the white girl depicted in the scene. Years later, it affected him quite profoundly, and he said:

*Well, I've lived to regret that incident. In many parts of the African continent I saw white students helping black people. Something like this kills a lot of argument... I guess a man's entitled to make a fool of himself if he's ready to pay the cost. It cost me twelve years.*

Malcolm came to feel that the strict racial nationalism preached by the Nation of Islam had been fundamentally mistaken. By the end of his life, his political thought was becoming more sophisticated and nuanced, as he thought through the question of how to fight racism without reproducing a crude nationalism.

Could there be a more sympathetic analysis also of today's political self-criticism? The Weathermen were, after all, motivated by the extent to which they despised the racist Vietnam War, and their own culture for enabling it. Spend a little time in Berlin going from grim Holocaust memorial to grim Holocaust museum and you'll soon get a sense of why a tendency like Anti-Deutsch exists, however wacky it may be. In its easily parodied but relatively benign form today, you could interpret the current wave of online self-criticism as youthful emotion and hyperbole with wholly good intentions. In the age of Trump, who is already making boastful threats of unconstitutional punishments for flag burning, perhaps this kind of self-criticism

could be an antidote to the excesses of aggressive and unchecked nationalism and the dark forces it has historically whipped up.

Yet, the Weathermen's deeply degenerate and cult-like internal politics didn't do anyone any good. In fact, they seemed far more a product of neurosis and narcissism than of revolutionary strategy—they couldn't stand to be seen as part of the white bourgeois society they came from and so they found entirely negative ways to purge themselves in the presence of other white radicals.

The relatively harmless tweeting of today certainly leaves fewer human casualties behind. But it is still based on a common impulse – the expression of total contempt for one's own society expressed through progressive language. In this internal psychodrama the oppressed appear as purely symbolic, rather than real people for whom one is trying to generate real material gains. It is difficult to think of any positive political movement past or present that has changed the lives of human beings for the better based on misanthropy and radical performances of self-hatred.

Even the cruelest alt-right critics tend to regard extreme forms of liberal social media self-hatred as simply pathetic, a sign of a lack of self-respect. But in my own more ungenerous moments I wonder if it is something worse. Rather than merely being of benefit to no one, it could be of quite a significant benefit to just one person – the self-flagellator themselves. Publicly declaring your sins makes you appear a better person than those who have not declared them. It is not really a put-down of oneself, but a put-down of others, who are less morally worthy for having been less forthcoming in their confessions.

Online, many liberal commentators and internet personalities have built fame and careers purely through trading in the currency of virtue. As more seek to mimic this, they rely upon the value of this precious currency, even as it is constantly devalued by its own abundance. So the rituals escalate in absurdity. Suddenly denouncing Trump is not enough, he must be "literally Hitler." Soon denouncing all of society as literally Hitler is not enough; one has to turn inward and denounce oneself with the same ferocity. Others climbing the greasy pole of liberal virtue to careers in academia or ideological listicle-writing must seek to outpace and dethrone those taking up their spot in the limited room available at the top.

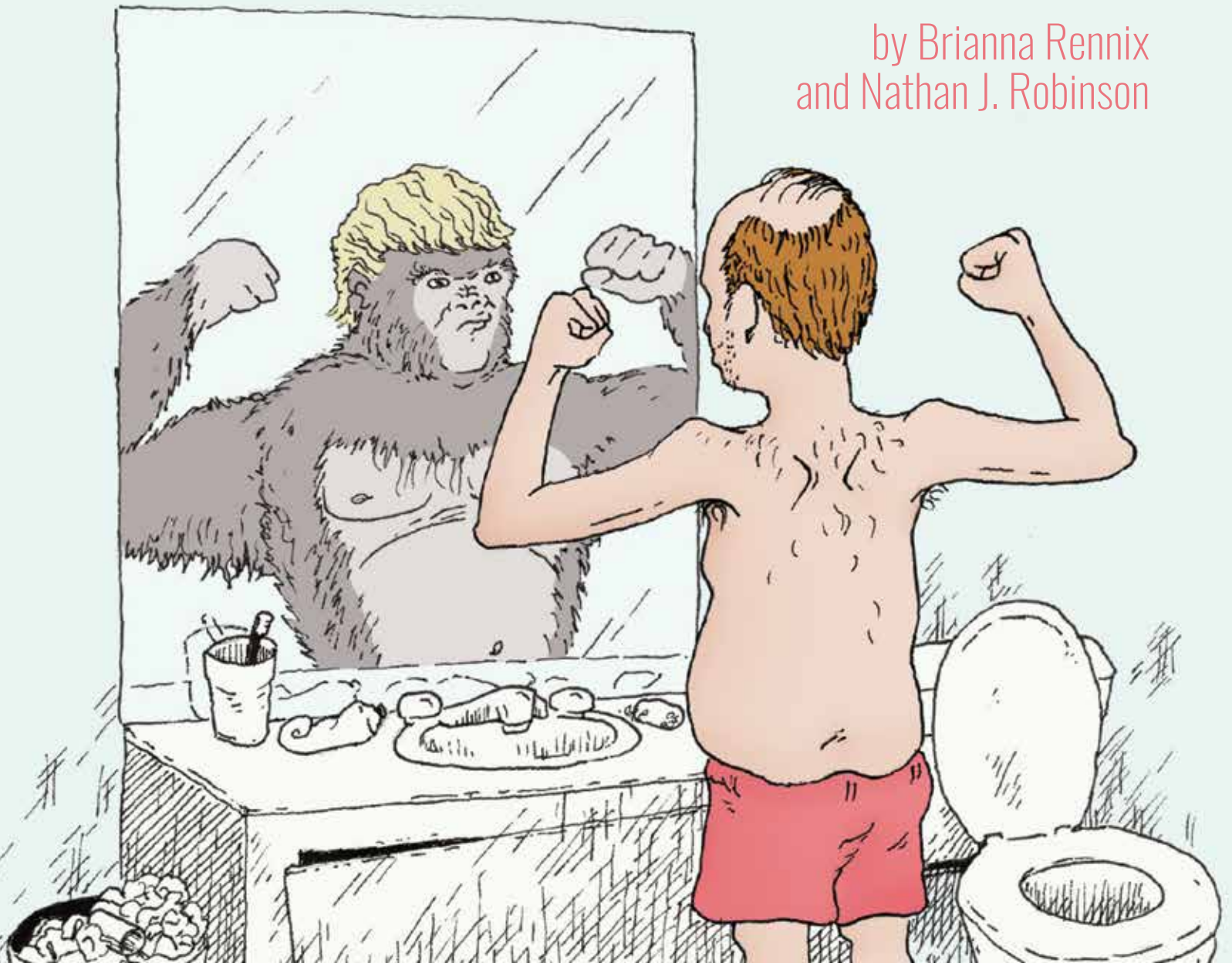
But beneath the performance of humility and self-criticism may lie something thoroughly self-interested and entirely without real virtue. I'm reminded of the very un-virtuous Nietzsche's scathing inversion of the Christian formulation in Luke's gospel, instead suggesting, 'He who humbleth himself *wishes to be exalted.*' ♦

THE PAUNCHY DIVORCÉ'S GUIDE TO

# FINDING YOUR

# TWINEER GORILLA

by Brianna Rennix  
and Nathan J. Robinson





MAKING MONEY OFF SAPS HAS always been the real American Dream, and by this measure Mike Cernovich is doing his best to truly live out our great national aspiration. One not might have thought the presidential candidacy of Donald Trump would make compelling raw material for a self-help franchise, but in *MAGA Mindset: Making YOU and America Great Again*, Cernovich manages to meld the nationalist rhetoric of the “alt-right” with the affirmational platitudes of *The Secret*.

Over the course of the presidential campaign, Cernovich built up a reputation as the man too toxically right-wing for even FOX News. When the network invited him on, a *RedState* blogger exclaimed, “They’re giving this motherfucker legitimacy? Oh my god!” Cernovich, after all, is a Pizzagate truther\* known for sending tweets about how date rape doesn’t exist. He regularly uses the word “bitch” in describing women, and has called the Syrian refugee crisis a media-created “hoax.” Yet Cernovich has built up a considerable platform on (where else?) Twitter, where he preaches to a swarm of over one hundred and fifty thousand followers.

In his conspiratorial and misogynistic pronouncements, Cernovich is a run-of-the-mill creature of the online alt-right. He nevertheless makes for an interesting subspecimen, as one of the only fixtures of the movement to parlay his politics into a self-help brand. Cernovich’s blog and books are not just Trumpist propaganda. They sell a lifestyle, a package of inspirational macho clichés to help weedy, socially inept men become their ultimate selves. Cernovich takes Trump’s sales pitch one step further: Make America Great Again is not just a political program. It is a whole new you.

CERNOVICH HIMSELF IS A CLASSIC RAGS-TO-RICHES story: the inspiring metamorphosis of a poor, fat kid from the Midwest into a fully-fledged asshole in Venice Beach, California. During this remarkable journey, Cernovich learned martial arts, went to law school, was accused of rape, self-published three entire books on juicing, married a highly successful Silicon Valley patent attorney, was divorced by a highly successful Silicon Valley patent attorney, got a seven-figure alimony payout, rose to internet prominence by savaging a bunch of female gamers on Twitter, and finally became a thought-leader in the world of tinhat fake news (e.g.: “The Orlando Shooter Did Not Act Alone”). Also, his podcast has more followers than James Altucher’s. (We have no idea who James Altucher is either, but Mike Cernovich mentions this fact in every single one of his books, so we must assume it is one of Cernovich’s more significant achievements.)

Cernovich’s internet writings include such thinkpieces as “How to Choke a Woman During Sex” and, entirely unrelatedly, “How to Avoid a False Rape Case.” (Cernovich’s professional advice is that you should secretly film the woman during sex.) Given this provocative online oeuvre, the surprising thing about Cernovich’s first self-help book, *Gorilla Mindset* (other than how little it actually discusses gorillas), is just how milquetoast and prototypical Cernovich’s advice is. Confronting your challenges, reaching your goals,

maintaining your focus. For a masculinist tract, parts of it have a surprisingly *Chicken Soup for the Soul* vibe.

The gorilla conceit itself goes unexplained. Why gorillas? Presumably because they are muscly and do not suffer from self-doubt. (They are also, however, not known for being especially sophisticated political thinkers, a fact one may wish to bear in mind when assessing how much credence to give Cernovich’s theory of an international war on whites.) The gorilla mindset seems to have something to do with unleashing an inner animal. But what gorillas have to offer, other than large chests and a constrained capacity for higher-order reasoning, one is never told.

We do learn one characteristic of people with gorilla mindsets, which is that they are very organized. “When stepping outside of my door and before closing the door,” Cernovich reveals, “I stop. I feel for my wallet, cell phone, and keys. Because of this Gorilla Mindset habit, I have never locked myself out of my apartment.” A real gorilla never forgets his keys! Mike Cernovich is laying down all the hard truths those effeminate left-wing nature documentaries will never tell you. Later on, in a list of Gorilla Focus habits, we are told that gorillas “do not eat in front of the television.” A real gorilla knows this will only make him lose track of his calorie intake! The discoveries continue to pile on. A real gorilla pees eight times a day, clear urine! A real gorilla always registers as self-employed on his tax returns! A real gorilla COOKS WITH A CROCKPOT!

Cernovich’s next book, *Danger & Play*, continues the themes of *Gorilla Mindset* in a more aggressive style. The content is edgier, the formatting is far worse, and Mike Cernovich wants you to know that he is *done coddling you*. Straight away, he lays down the central traits of Masculine Men. Masculine men are aggressive. Masculine men move with purpose. But above all else, masculine men are hard. Do you have what it takes to be hard, Cernovich taunts his eunuch readers, or are you a coward? “Are you afraid of drinking a green juice?” he asks, “and instead look for your milk and cookies?”

Cernovich’s writing on dating and relationships is predictably full of bad advice. “Acting like a narcissist will make people like you,” he says. (This is not the case.) There’s the usual stuff from “pick-up artist” culture about being mean to women to make them like you, and about how it’s a good idea to bite a woman on the neck if you’re not totally sure she wants you to kiss her. (Though you’d better make sure you film it, lest you be brought up on a false vampirism charge.) His declarations often have the interesting quality, in common with virgins writing letters to Penthouse, of leading the reader to emit a long “Suuuuuuure.” “My first marriage was ruined by feminist indoctrination,” he insists. (Suuuure it was.) “I was friends with a lot of girls who had crushes on me, but I was too polite to fuck them.” (Suuuuure they did.) Not all of the claims he makes are implausible, though. A long list of “what I juiced this week” (including recipes for cabbage carrot juice, kale lemonade, and a celery refresher) is too exhaustively-documented to be fictionalized.

One can glimpse the fruits of Cernovich’s gender philosophy in a *New Yorker* profile of him, which portrays his current marriage as wracked by tension and nervous laughter on the part of his indulgent wife. (“Never marry for love,” Cernovich advised his readers in a December 2016 blog post, published just two days after his wife gave birth to their child.) Cernovich’s principled commitment to being an asshole to women seems to have, shockingly enough, caused its share of tearful rifts in the home:

*Early in Shaun’s relationship with Mike, she read Danger and Play, including such posts as “How to Cheat on Your Girlfriend.”*

\*See p. 36-37 Cernovich’s official position is that while there is definitely a secret ring of well-connected D.C. pedophiles, the evidence is inconclusive as to whether Comet Ping Pong is its hub.

## GORILLA MINDSET WORKSHEET

### 1. Choose your gorilla mantra

A mantra is a phrase that sums up your mindset in a few words. Craft a mantra that helps you focus on your big goals and disrupts negative thought patterns. If you repeat your mantra often enough, it will come true!

Sample mantras:

"I am not horrified that my consciousness is trapped inside a physical body."

"It's fine. This is fine. Shhh."

"Death probably isn't all that bad."

"No one is mad at you. No one is laughing at you. You're fine! Everything's fine! Stop sweating, damn you! Ugh!"

**Write your mantra here:**

### 2. Create positive gorilla energy

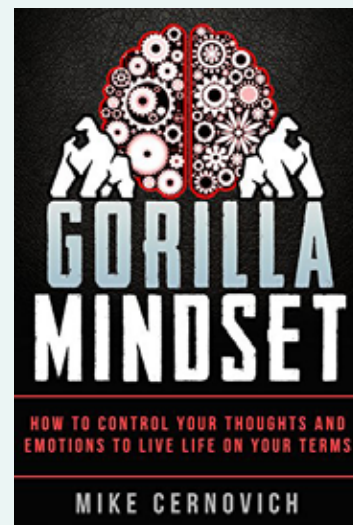
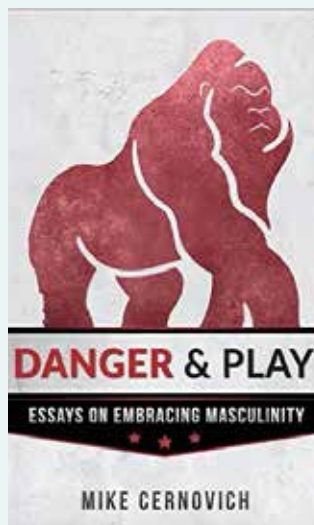
Stay away from people and places that are toxic. Instead, surround your life with positive energy. Fill in the blanks:

I will avoid \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_ because these situations remind me of the meaninglessness of all worldly endeavors. I will seek out \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ because these situations reinforce the self-important delusions that are crucial to my continued sanity in an incomprehensible universe.

### 3. Visualize your perfect gorilla day

Imagine your perfect day. What is it like? Do you wake up in the morning without a feeling of mounting dread? Do your family members and coworkers treat you with basic respect? Do you get to eat one of your favorite things for lunch? Do you successfully avoid dwelling on painful and humiliating memories? Do you sneak home from work half an hour early? Is there a new episode of that show you like?

**Describe your perfect day here:**



She said, "I would come home from work crying—'How can you write such rude things?' He'd go, 'You don't understand, babe, this is just how guys talk.'" (Advice from the blog: "Always call your girl 'babe,' " to avoid mixing up names.) Shauna, who has stopped working, continued, "I was still upset, though, and he eventually deleted some older posts." "I rewrote some of the wording," Mike insisted. "I never disavow things I've said."

Though Cernovich may draw a principled distinction between disavowing and deleting the things he's said in the past, he certainly has no aversion to simply lying. His championing of Donald Trump, for example, began as a cynical ploy to sell e-books. In a 2015 Twitter exchange with a follower, who remarked that Cernovich "took a damn sharp turn to the right," Cernovich replied: "My real views are far more moderate, but now is the time to win. Arguing over details is reserved for the winners."

*MAGA Mindset*, Cernovich's Trump-themed book, is 75% alt-right screed against the evils of feminism and the ethnic adulteration of the United States, and 25% of the usual warmed-over gorilla feces sandwiched between Trump block quotes. Cernovich is eager, in this book, to cast himself as a defender of white working-class folk against the diabolical coastal elites who say that such people "deserve to die." This is a fascinating evolution from Cernovich's pre-election view, which was that the people from his own small Midwestern town were human garbage. "My brother is a loser who just got out of prison for shooting his meth dealer," he writes in *Danger and Play*. "I haven't talked to him in more than a decade. Why would I associate with such a scumbag? Because he's family?" If Cernovich himself hadn't moved to California, he added, "I'd be stuck working a shit job in a shit downtown, married to some shit cow and raising some shit kids." Instead, he's now living the dream in Orange County, alternating between making his wife cry and

blogging about liberal media conspiracies. He is truly a populist in the Donald Trump mold.



READING CERNOVICH, ONE GETS THE distinct impression that he is urgently trying to prove something. The *New Yorker* profile provides one possible explanation of this might be:

*After law school, his wife became a successful attorney in Silicon Valley. But Cernovich was not admitted to the California bar until nine years after getting his law degree. In the meantime, he says, he got by with "freelance legal research" and "appellate stuff." Cernovich's wife earned millions of dollars in stock from an I.P.O.; he told me that he received "seven figures" in the divorce settlement. This seems to have been, and might still be, his primary source of funds. (He insists that book sales provide his main income.)*

Thus Cernovich, who wishes to restore American masculinity, is a parasite on his much more successful ex-wife. (It is this, presumably, to which he is referring when he says that feminism killed his first marriage.) The amusing thing, when delving into the Cernovich's writings, is realizing just how contrived and desperate the masculine posturing seems. Margaret Pless, a blogger who has made it her gleeful mission to catalogue Cernovich's many egregious fibs and hypocrisies, has described Cernovich as a "Potemkin Alpha Male," whose online persona is cobbled together from a whole host of unlikely claims. Though Cernovich boasts of his lawyerly credentials—and routinely threatens lawsuits against his opponents during online feuds—he has apparently never served as counsel in a single state or federal court case. Though he's publicly mocked other men for accepting alimony, he's also repeatedly contradicted his own claims that his media products have been the source of his financial success, and seems content to stealthily subsist on the drippings of his high-powered ex-wife's IPO. His pickup game includes such

# “MY FIRST MARRIAGE WAS RUINED BY FEMINIST INDOCTRINATION

medically dubious advice as “the best condom a man has is the skin on his dick,” and even his 10,000 juicing books contain lengthy legal disclaimers against foolish readers who expect any kind of health benefit from his recipes. “Although Michael claims to be a self-made man, he trolls more well-known men, drafting off their fame to get attention,” Pless writes. “His tales of sexual conquest are just that, and Michael’s legal career is a similarly trumped-up story with little to no basis in fact.”

One could be amused by Cernovich’s constant attempts to puff himself into the gorilla he knows he isn’t. After all, if this is masculinity, then masculinity is pitiable. And it’s a shame that Mike Cernovich and his followers feel the need to become these ghastly creatures, who call women bitches and never leave the gym, just so they don’t feel like failures. It says something dispiriting about the way boys are raised. Cernovich himself writes of a childhood plagued by bullies, which led him to adopt the following life philosophy: “I hurt anyone who wrongs me and hold lifetime grudges.” One feels for the boy Cernovich, the pudgy kid with the speech impediment, who still spends every day trying to prove himself to his imagined tormentors.

Yet as much pity as one may have for men destroyed by the impossible quest to eliminate personal failure and weakness, the Cernovich mentality is still disturbing. By finding a way to fuse Trumpism with self-esteem building, Cernovich offers a tempting ideological framework for today’s angry white man. One of the ways that Cernovich distinguishes himself from other conservatives is that his brand of right-wing politics openly embraces power rather than logic. Cernovich does not want to have a debate. He wants to achieve dominance. One hesitates to use the word fascist, because of its emptiness. But Cernovich, like Trump, seems a dash like

Mussolini by way of Norman Vincent Peale.

Not that Cernovich’s books themselves are especially threatening. The reader feels more likely to die of tedium than at the hands of right-wing terror squads. Your reviewers had a very difficult time getting through them (the Cernovich assignment required two reporters, as the boredom was too much to justify inflicting on one). They are not very slickly made. The paperback version of Cernovich’s blog posts includes hyperlinks that do not work because they are, well, on paper. ([Like this.](#)) For *MAGA Mindset*, someone has evidently forgotten to include the page numbers (even though there is a table of contents). They are produced by a tiny publishing house whose other offerings include *There Will Be War, Vol I-X* and a guide to “extreme composting.” (None of the usual weak, girly composting here. You must compost like a man.)

Under different circumstances, one might be inclined to simply give Cernovich a gentle pat on the head and coo “There, there,” perhaps also passing him a recommendation for a good therapist, who could help him work through some of his lingering complexes about his childhood. But unfortunately, Trump is president, and the cruel, self-aggrandizing philosophy that could usually be met with ostracism and disdain now threatens us all. Mike Cernovich’s philosophy of vanity, bombast, and sexual assault has become national policy.

None of that changes the underlying facts, though. A gorilla may be strong enough to mash you into the pavement, but that doesn’t mean he knows anything. A man may get a lot of people to buy his books, but that doesn’t mean they are good. And an insecure, narcissistic rapist may look in the mirror and fancy himself a great and powerful beast, but he’s still Mike Cernovich. ♦

## VOX DAY DOESN'T ALWAYS LIE (HE'S JUST NOT VERY SMART)

Vox Day, *SJWs Always Lie: Taking Down the Thought Police*, Castalia House, \$15.00

ONE IS STRUCK, UPON READING “alt-right” books, by just how whiny these men are. A core complaint of Black Lives Matter is that black people are shot repeatedly and left to bleed to death by police officers. A core complaint of feminists is that being a woman means being subjected to constant threats of assault. The complaint of men on the alt-right, on the other hand, is that meanies on the internet call them racist.

Vox Day is a middling science-fiction writer and white nationalist who believes that “American culture is white culture.” (Everone from Frederick Douglass to Chuck Berry is thereby excluded from the American cultural canon.) Like all insecure cranks, Day is a member of Mensa. He has insisted that that “female independence is strongly correlated with a whole host of social ills,” has declared that there is “no such thing as marital rape” and believes it is an “empirically” proven fact that “raping and killing a woman is demonstrably more attractive to women than behaving like a gentleman” (Good lord, these assholes love the word “empirical.” Day also believes that the Taliban’s attempt to kill Malala was “empirically” correct.) Day also proposed his “solution” to the Israeli-Palestinian situation: Israel should intentionally massacre 100 innocent Palestinian civilians for every Israeli civilian who dies at the hands of a Palestinian. (Well, it would certainly qualify as a Final Solution.)

Day’s “political philosophy” tract, *SJWs Always Lie* is dedicated to taking down the “social justice warriors,” progressive leftists who find the aforementioned beliefs abhorrent. But Day is less interested in advancing arguments for his positions than in relitigating Twitter battles and complaining about various bloggers who have wronged him. Day insists he is more “dialectical” than other people (as usual, nobody who uses this word knows what it means) and gives a series of strategies for how men can resist attempts by others to encourage them to be humane, thoughtful, and empathetic. Day’s work reads like a military strategy guide rather than a set of principled arguments. That means he’s not lying, he’s just not smart enough to do anything but regurgitate some Clausewitz and talk about how many people read his blog. ♦

# BELIEVING *in* BERNIE

*L*et us leave aside, for a moment, the question of whether he would have won. (He would have.)

The interesting matter now is: what did the candidacy of Bernie Sanders mean? What are we to learn from it, and what can it tell us about the future? It was, in many ways, a remarkable triumph: 20 states and millions of votes for an obscure New England socialist. And yet, it was also a failure. He did, after all, lose.

In the time since the primary, Sanders has been busy, locked away writing *Our Revolution: A Future to Believe In*, a book about his life, the campaign, and the future of progressive politics. It's a useful vehicle through which to figure out what we think of Bernie, and whether people ought to be more like him, or less like him, in the years to come.

If one is being perfectly honest, a book by Bernie Sanders could reasonably be expected to be terrible. Bernie is known far more for the political and personal qualities he represents than for the qualities of his spoken or written prose.

Bernie Sanders, **Our Revolution: A Future To Believe In**  
Thomas Dunne Books, \$27.00, 464 pp.



Yes, of course, there's a lot about saving Social Security, about the collapse of economic mobility and of the misdeeds of Wall Street oligarchs. But Sanders also gives an elegant argument for precisely why he never departs from these topics. *Our Revolution* makes a considered case for why it's better to spend one's time talking about economics and inequality than talking about horse-race politics and Trump's latest gaffes.

Sanders is heavy on rhetoric but light on substance seem farcical. He tries to help unfamiliar readers understand complex issues carefully and methodically, and to relate opaque issues like campaign finance to people's actual lives.

This is the most refreshing quality about Sanders, one that hasn't been sufficiently noted: he is one of the few Democrats who actually talks as if he cares about those who do not already agree with him. Sanders, despite being further to the left than anyone else in the party, actually tries to understand and empathize with Trump voters.

One could see this trait on display in a recent town hall discussion with Sanders on MSNBC. Speaking directly to a woman who had voted for Trump, Sanders tried to find common ground on the issue of Social Security:

*BERNIE SANDERS: "I am assuming that you believe, correct me if I'm wrong, that we should not cut Social Security or Medicare or Medicaid. Is that correct or not?"*

*GAIL SPARKS: "Yeah, I believe they shouldn't be cut."*

SANDERS: "Do you know who is now working very hard to try to do that? Republicans in Congress have a plan under the guise of saving Medicare and saving Social Security, making



devastating cuts. That's what the Republicans are now trying to do. The other point that you made is, who is going to pay for this stuff? And that is a very fair point. What all of us should know is that over the last 25 years, there has been a massive transfer of wealth in this country from you to the top one-tenth of one percent. In other words, the middle class has shrunk and trillions of dollars have gone to the top one-tenth of one percent. Do you think it's inappropriate to start asking those people to pay their fair share of taxes so we can adequately fund Medicaid and make public colleges and universities tuition-free. Is that an unfair thing to ask?"

SPARKS: "I don't think it's an unfair thing to ask. They got rich off of us, so it's time they put back."

SANDERS: "Okay. That's what I'm saying."

The performance was impressive, in demonstrating Sanders' ability to reframe the concerns of Rust Belt Trump voters as the concerns dealt with by his own brand of democratic socialism. In this, he reveals a path by which voters who despised Clinton might be brought back into the party. If one can redirect their hostilities and anxieties, encouraging them to focus on Wall Street and the political establishment

rather than minorities and immigrants, perhaps at least some (not all) Trump voters could be turned from nationalist populists to socialist populists.

THE SERIOUS QUESTION OVER SANDERS RAISED BY progressive critics was about his supposed lack of appreciation for the importance of racial issues. Bernie has spoken in negative terms about both "identity politics" and "political correctness." For some on the left, this is a red flag, suggesting a failure to appreciate the ongoing significance of racism and the necessity of combating it.

It should be confessed that Sanders has something of a tin ear for millennial anti-racist language. But this might be expected. He came of age, after all, in a different Civil Rights era, one in which the language of labor organizing and the language of anti-racism were not so far different. Sanders constantly harkens back to Martin Luther King and the Poor People's Campaign, and King's successful melding of anti-war, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist messages.

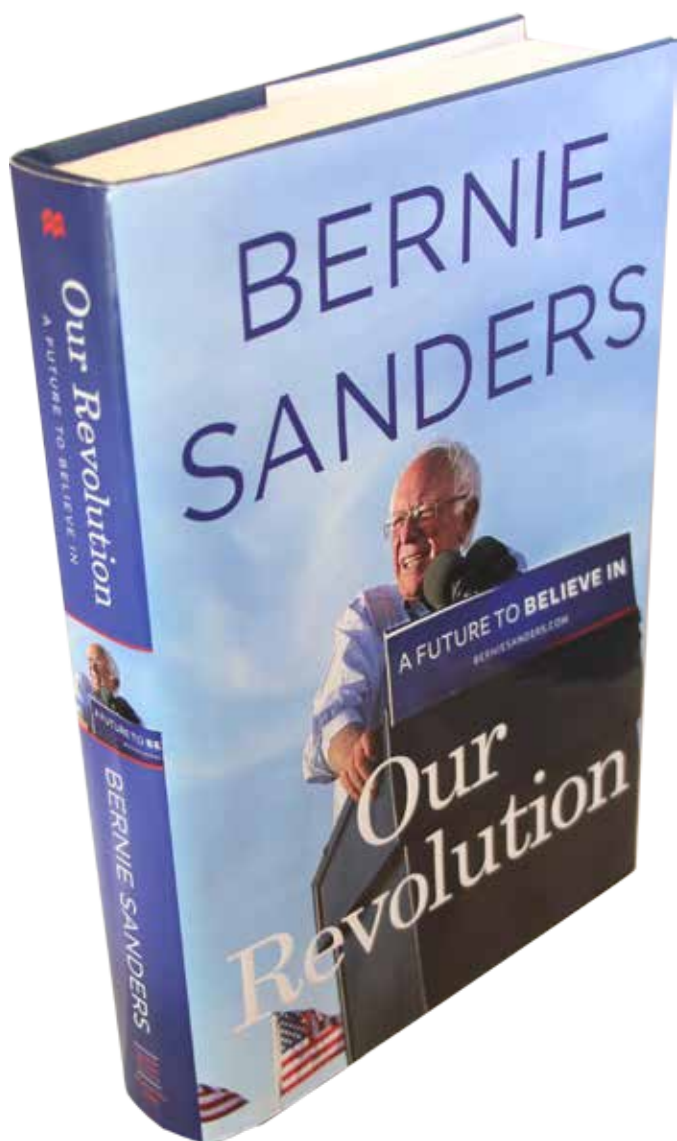
The good news, for those who felt Sanders insufficiently attuned to the reality of racism, is that *Our Revolution* makes clear Sanders' commitments to fighting it. In a section of the book entitled "The Impacts of Institutional and Structural Racism" Sanders goes through various American injustices that are specifically racial in nature: the wealth gap between blacks and whites, variations in school quality by race, and the hideously unjust system of criminal punishments. In two separate parts of the book, he tells the harrowing story of Sandra Bland's death in a Texas jail cell (p. 143 and 377), repeatedly listing the names of black people who have died at the hands of police. As he writes about racism:

*If we are to be successful in that goal, we must confront one of the most contentious and intractable issues facing our country... the ugly stain of racism. The sad reality is that racism has plagued the United States since before its founding... Ironically, after Barack Obama became the first African-American president, some people triumphantly declared an end to racism, that we had moved beyond the color line. Unfortunately, they were completely wrong... Among any other struggles we must engage in to combat racism in this country, we must stop police brutality and the killing of unarmed African-Americans.*

Sanders goes on, documenting the various ways in which American institutions commit injustices against people of color that are specifically racial in nature.

Some anti-racists will continue to find Sanders' rejection of "political correctness" puzzling or suspicious. But it should also be noted that there's something rather cunning in the way Sanders uses terms like "political correctness." Anti-racists argue, correctly, that "I'm not politically correct" is usually just a euphemism for "I am a bigot who enjoys saying bigoted things." Thus anti-racists looked askance at Sanders when he said he didn't believe in "political correctness." Yet Sanders, when asked, said that "political correctness" means that "you have a set of talking points which have been poll-tested and focus-group-tested and that's what you say rather than what's really going on. And often what you are not allowed to say are things which offend very powerful people."

This is certainly a different definition of "political correctness" than what is usually meant by the users of the term. But there



# SANDERS OFFERS AN ELOQUENT ANTIDOTE TO TRUMPISM...

may be an element of political savvy here. By defining himself as against political correctness, and defining political correctness as “not being focus-group-tested,” Sanders may position himself as an outsider and truth-teller without ever having to legitimize racist sentiments. Perhaps, just perhaps, someone can convince people that you can shun “political correctness” by being honest, forthright, and not afraid to speak uncomfortable truths about powerful people.

Sanders may care about the concerns of Trump’s voters, but he has made clear that he has zero tolerance for Trump’s appeal to bigotry. He frequently condemns the way Trump ran “a campaign based on racism, based on sexism, based on dividing us up.” Sanders’ effort to get Keith Ellison, a black Muslim congressman, to head the DNC was a stroke of genius in this respect. It showed precisely what Sanders means by “identity politics is not enough”: it’s not that he doesn’t want diversity, it’s that he wants ass-kicking black progressives rather than centrist technocrats of any race.

One should also point out that the idea of the white “Bernie-Bro” as Sanders’ core supporter was always wrong, and demeaning to Sanders’ supporters of color. In fact, among young people there was wide support for Sanders across racial lines. The story of demographic differences in Sanders’ support was far more about age and wealth (older, richer Democrats preferred Clinton) than about race.

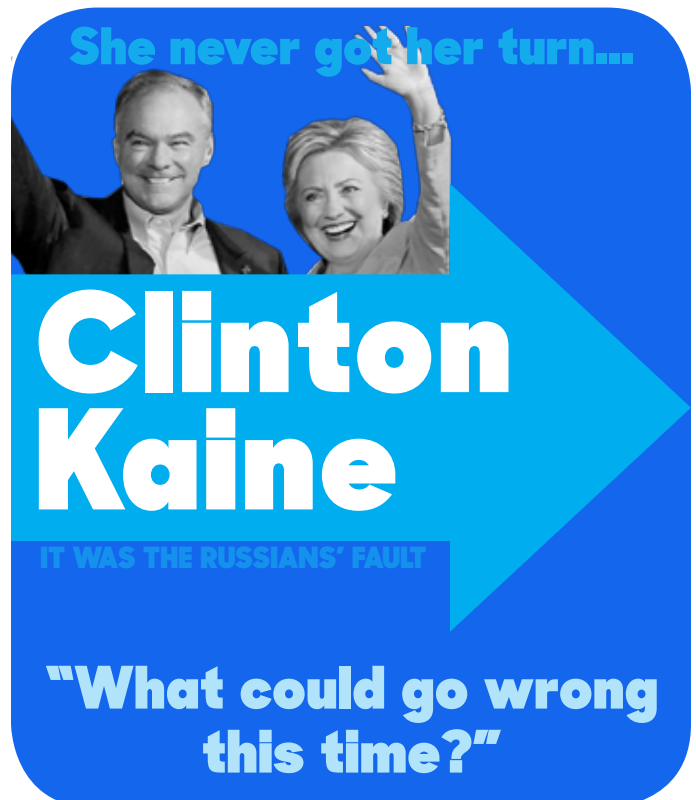
Did the Sanders campaign, as some Clinton supporters have alleged, damage Clinton and thereby weaken her in the general election campaign? Well, possibly, but note the implicit premise. If Sanders undermined Clinton, it was because he pointed out various ways (such as her ties to Wall Street and Henry Kissinger, as well as her vote for the Iraq War) in which Clinton did not share the values of progressives. If the things Sanders had said about Clinton were spurious or false, one could tenably make this claim. But Sanders notably did not dwell on the “damn emails,” focusing instead on the policy differences between his own more leftist stance and Clinton’s centrism. This was a healthy debate. It forced Clinton to move to the left, adopting far more liberal positions on economic policy

and education than she was previously running on.

For progressives, then, Sanders’ run energized the left of the party. It showed how they can achieve extraordinary amounts of political success without cozying up to rich donors. It encouraged people who had been extremely cynical about politics to get involved. Nobody who attended one of Sanders’ 20,000-plus person rallies could go away uninspired. Bernie Sanders was the main redeeming aspect of an otherwise-dismal election cycle. He had a genuine vision, genuine hope, and genuine decency.

But now the campaign is over. What should we take from it? First, Bernie showed that disillusionment from the political process is not inevitable. If you give people something to believe in, many of them will indeed get up off the sofa. Second, by building a serious progressive message and refusing to depart from it or sink toward gutter politics, you can help persuade people of progressive ideas. Sanders did not start with wide support. He started with statistically negligible poll results. He built support over the course of the primary, by offering both a personality and a set of political values that a lot of people began to find extremely appealing.

**O**UR REVOLUTION IS AN ENCOURAGING BOOK. Bernie is- not dispirited, despite having lost. (Although as he wrote the book he did not know Trump would be the President.) He has a good set of blueprints for what an ambitious yet plausible social democratic platform could stand for. He offers an eloquent antidote to Trumpism, and displays a sincere concern for the suffering and disenfranchised of all races. If the Democratic Party wants to get back into power (and it is not clear, from its response to the election so far, that it does), it would do well to hand out copies of this book to every party official. ❖



“MANY IN THE SOUTH ONCE BELIEVED THAT  
SLAVERY WAS A MORAL AND POLITICAL EVIL.  
THAT FOLLY AND DELUSION ARE GONE.”

— J.C. CALHOUN



# CALHOUN

THE JOHN C. CALHOUN MUSICAL

*Today, John C. Calhoun is best known for his rousing defenses of slavery. But Calhoun was so much more. CALHOUN is a fictionalized reimagining of the 19th-century statesman's life, portraying him as a poor Haitian immigrant who aspired to nothing more than the achievement of the American success story. In this follow-up to his award-winning HAMILTON, MacArthur Genius Grant winner Lin Manuel-Miranda lets Americans look at Calhoun through fresh eyes. It's Calhoun like you've never seen him before!*

# *The* **SOCIAL SCIENCE of SUCCESS** **or how to build a career by justifying inequality**

*by Zach Wehrwein*

**W**HAT IF I TOLD YOU THAT ALL OF YOUR professional and personal dreams were within your grasp? That if you just had the right knowledge then you could accomplish whatever you wished. Step right up, Step right up! Come quickly now! Our psychologists have run the experiments, crunched the numbers, and done The Science! This is The Science that overturns any obstacles in your path. Guaranteed! Call today!

American carnival barkers have long made comfortable livings selling panaceas to desperate people. In a country where so many live lives of frustration and economic misery, plenty of willing customers can be found for those promising to unlock the doors to success and riches. Pop social science

Angela Duckworth, **Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance**, Simon & Schuster, \$28.00, 352 pp.

Amy Cuddy, **Presence: Bringing Your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges**, Little, Brown, \$28.00, 352 pp.

literature has its own kind of snake oil to sell you. It doesn't take the form of a cure-all elixir, a late night infomercial, or a dubious start-up pitch. Rather, it is peddled by well-credentialed academics, who promise to give you the Science that will tell you how to live. Drawing on findings from their research, they insist on having found a Theory of Everything, one that can explain All Human Achievement. And they want to share it with *you*, for a very reasonable price.

**B**ASED ON THE GUSHING BLURBS TO BE FOUND ON THESE two books, naïve readers might believe that indeed, the True Secret of Success has recently been discovered. On the back of *Presence: Bringing Your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges*, Jane McGonigal writes that "this book will forever change how you carry yourself." Simon Sinek adds: "This book is a must-read for every doer out there."

The praise for Angela Duckworth's *Grit: The Power of*

*Passion and Perseverance* is equally dizzying. Daniel Gilbert, an esteemed social psychologist at Harvard and bestselling author, writes “Psychologists have spent decades searching for the secret of success, but Duckworth is the one who found it.” The very secret of success itself! Larry Summers was impressed enough to write: “The ideas in this book have the potential to transform education, management, and the way its readers live. Duckworth’s *Grit* is a national treasure.” “This book will change your life,” says Dan Heath, a professor at Duke’s business school and bestselling author.

**A**NGELA DUCKWORTH’S RESUME IS PERHAPS peerless. Former White House intern, McKinsey consultant turned tough-neighborhood middle-school teacher, degrees from Harvard and Oxford, start-up co-founder, now a tenured professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and a MacArthur “genius grant” Award recipient. When she announces, from her own position of success, that she has discovered the source of human achievement, one is encouraged to take her seriously.

Duckworth defines “grit” in her book as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” and as she self-deprecatingly notes in her talks, her 20s were defined by a chaotic search for

a purpose—Duckworth had “little grit.” She had no grand goals, but during her stint as a teacher she noticed that it was not always the most intelligent students who did the best, rather it was the ones that toughed it out and worked hard as hell that did—*those with grit*. Duckworth headed to graduate school to explore this observation further. There, she began studying high achievement through interviews with professionals in “investment banking, painting, journalism, academia, medicine, and law” in order to figure out what distinguishes “star performers.” From these interviews, she further confirmed that neither innate ability nor simply raw number of hours of practice explained who was in the 1% of the top 1%. Rather, there was something else: “a ferocious determination.” After one especially enlightening interview, she describes her reaction, “I came to a fundamental insight that would guide my future work: *Our potential is one thing. What we do with it is quite another.*”

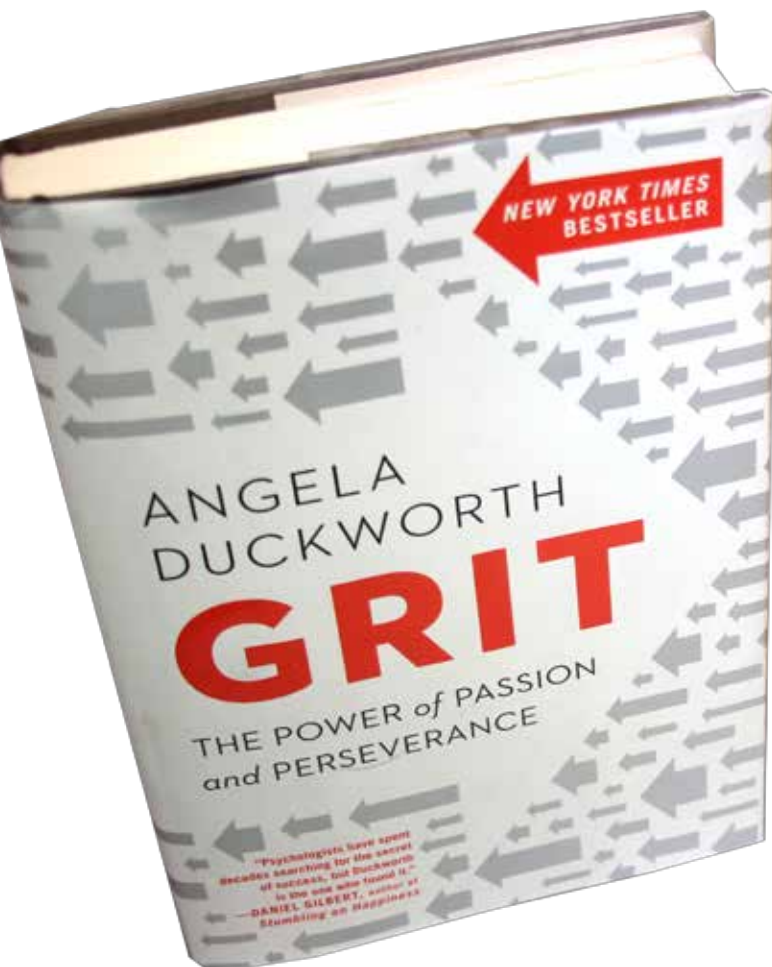
Duckworth formalized this insight into a questionnaire—the “Grit Scale.” 12 simple questions, measuring things like whether respondents set goals, are committed to long-term success, overcome failure and adversity, and generally speaking *get shit done*. Duckworth then went out into the real world to test her idea. Her book examines the “Beast Barracks,” the rigorous summer boot camp that every incoming West Point freshman must go through. She administered the Grit Scale to all cadets in 2004 and she found that “98%” of the grittiest cadets made it through the Beast. Duckworth concludes: “*What matters for making it through Beast? Not your SAT scores, not your high school rank, not your leadership experience, not your athletic ability. Or your Whole Candidate Score. What matters is grit.*” Further studies of finalists in the National Spelling Bee and GPAs among Ivy League undergraduates corroborated these findings – grittier spellers went further and grittier Ivy League graduates had better grades.

This all sounds quite compelling, and even commonsensical. It’s also a useful corrective antidote to the conservative fetishization of Ayn Rand’s “lone genius.” For Duckworth, success is about commitment, not being a Nietzschean superman.

But Duckworth’s theory suffers from a glaring myopia. It’s examining success among a particular subset of people: essentially, those from the top 5% of the distribution of a given profession. Duckworth is interested in studying success *among successful people*. She’s looking at environments where everyone is *already* very successful, such as West Point and the National Spelling Bee.

This means that Duckworth *isn’t* looking at determinants of success and failure such as, for instance, wealth. She explicitly leaves aside social context early on. As she says:

“Of course, your opportunities – for example, having a great coach or teacher – matter tremendously, too, and maybe more than anything about the individual. My theory doesn’t address these outside forces, nor does it include luck. It’s about the psychology of achievement, but because psychology isn’t all that matters, it’s incomplete.” It’s a fair admission. But she only makes it briefly before returning to expounding at length on the power of her theory.



Social scientists typically refer to this bias as “sampling on the dependent variable.” That is to say, her dependent variable of interest, the thing she wishes to explain, is achievement, and she only selects cases with high achieving individuals. One might be impressed to learn that 98% of “gritty” West Point cadets made it through Beast Barracks, but there’s an additional statistic you need to know: 95% of *all* West point cadets make it through. (Duckworth acknowledges this fact in her academic paper on developing the Grit scale, but it is conspicuously absent from her book.) Thus grit may explain *something*, but it doesn’t explain much. It might tell us why certain West Point cadets do slightly better than certain other West Point cadets. But it leaves aside an important question: how do people become West Point cadets to begin with?

In fact, we don’t even know that “grit” at West Point tells us anything about success at all. That’s because Duckworth doesn’t study the people who leave West Point, just the people who stay. But for all we know, the people who drop out are not failures. Perhaps they just didn’t enjoy military service that much. Is it really that unthinkable that a few of the more independent-minded 18 year olds could arrive at West Point, only to make a swift exit after having a drill instructor scream in their face because a quarter didn’t bounce off the bed? It could be that plenty of (eventually highly successful) people come in with a naïve romantic notion of military service, but quickly figure out it’s not for them. Duckworth hasn’t produced a study showing that grit predicts success, but one showing that grit predicts *conformity* and *the ability to endure institutions*.

**T**HE ISSUE HERE ISN’T THAT DUCKWORTH IS DOING uninteresting research—far from it. It’s that she is trying to convince us that it implies more than it actually does. (Is she explaining 10% of the world or 90% of it?) It’s also true that by picking the particular groups she does, Duckworth furthers a dangerous myth about “success.” She may have an accurate theory explaining variations among the people in the top 10% of the income distribution. But for the remaining 90%, whom she does not study, the determinants of “success” are far different. For them, social circumstances, rather than individual psychology, could be more important. When Duckworth puts aside “outside forces,” she somehow imagines that the mind can exist in a vacuum. That we can assume away the structural impediments to success, such as a lack of access to health-care or a stable income, endemic interpersonal violence, state coercion, and persistent forms of bigotry. Because she only looks at success, but doesn’t study failure, she doesn’t see how perfectly gritty and determined kids can be held back by the misfortune of growing up in the wrong neighborhood.

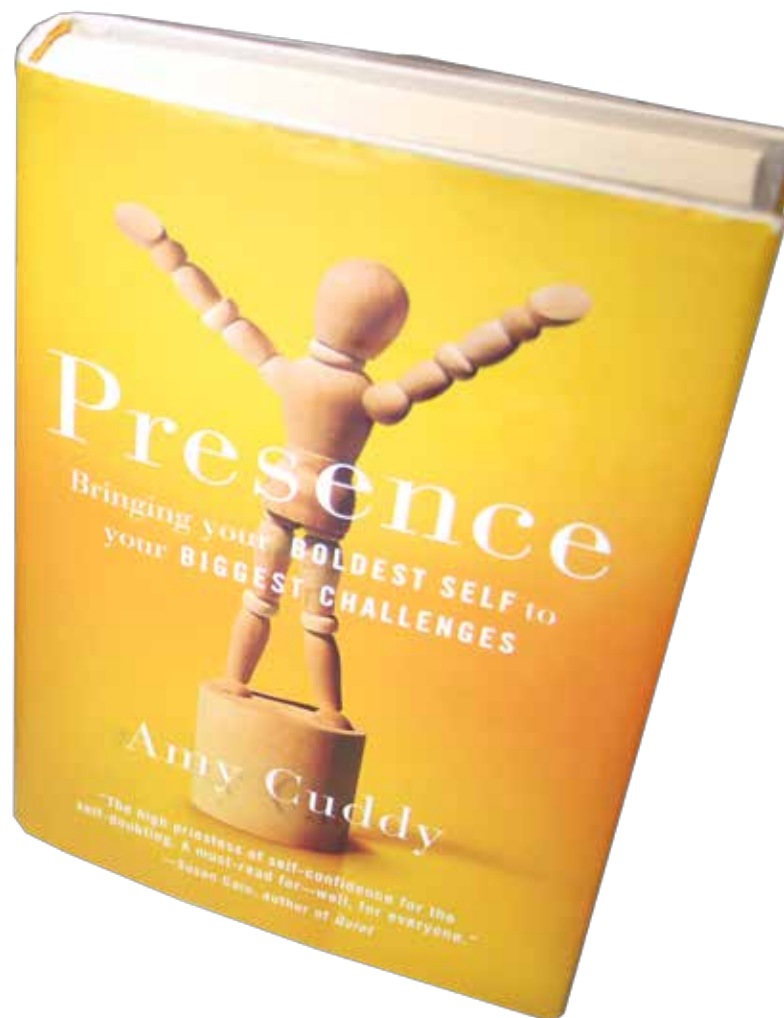
Consequently, Duckworth’s findings could just as easily lend themselves to a full-throated endorsement of social democratic redistributionist policies and politics. She ends the book by acknowledging that grit is not the only thing that matters in life. She does say that she would much rather have good kids

rather than gritty or great ones. Nevertheless, she emphasizes individual psychology over social conditions:

*“We all face limits—not just in talent, but in opportunity. But more often than we think, our limits are self-imposed. We try, fail, and conclude we’ve bumped our heads against the ceiling of possibility. Or maybe after taking just a few steps we change direction. In either case, we never venture as far as we might have... To be gritty is to invest, day after week after year, in challenging practice. To be gritty is to fall down seven times, and rise eight.”*

This views life outcomes in terms of individual effort. But she could just as easily have concluded that in order for grit to matter, people need to be free of institutional barriers to success, or that we should make sure people aren’t pushed down seven times out of eight. If everyone started as social or economic equals, then grit might be the deciding factor. But they don’t start as equals.

If the core argument of *Grit* is that the ability to pursue one’s goals is far more important than innate differences in talent, then Duckworth could come out in favor of removing impediments to goal pursuing, such as the drudgery of low-wage labor. She could have taken a note from John Maynard Keynes in the *Economic Possibilities of Our Grandchildren*, who suggested that a future of abundant free-time would be the norm if the gains from technology are redistributed. Instead,



“Duckworth has given the **misleading impression** that grit is what’s needed to **overcome structural obstacles**, even though she has **only studied the people** who have made it past those structural obstacles already.”

Duckworth has given the misleading impression that *grit* is what’s needed to overcome structural obstacles, even though she has only studied people who have made it past those structural obstacles already.

Absent this, Duckworth’s book therefore provides convenient arguments for those who wish to justify inequality. After all, it’s *grit* that determines success. If you don’t succeed, you’re probably just insufficiently gritty. This may partly explain why her book has reached such heights of popularity; Americans love theories that simultaneously tell individuals they can do anything (even though they probably can’t) and rationalize the economic status quo.

Of course, this isn’t what Duckworth *says*, and she cannot control the uses of her book. Journalists have over-simplified the findings of *Grit*. Moreover, she has been forthcoming and responsive to criticisms of the book, and in an interview with *NPR* said “I aspire to be a scientist who remains open to criticism because I can’t possibly be 100% right about everything!” Moreover, she came out publicly against a Department of Education initiative to transform grit into a portion of national educational assessment, writing in the *New York Times* that, “I worry I’ve contributed, inadvertently, to an idea I vigorously oppose: high-stakes character assessment.” Intellectual integrity like this must be celebrated.

But while Duckworth cannot perfectly control

how her work will be used, she could nonetheless have made sure the book emphasized the limitations of her studies. She *does* frame grit as an exploration of the nature of success *qua* success, not one marginal aspect of success within a small non-representative subpopulation. And she *does* overplay her hand, arguing that grit is the secret sauce which is well beyond what her research can actually support.

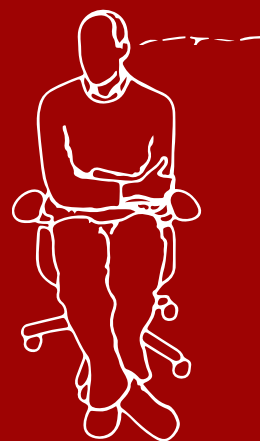
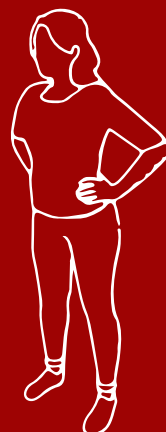
**A**MY CUDDY’S WORK FOLLOWS A SIMILAR pattern: an initial study with some interesting empirical findings, blown far beyond its boundaries into a theory of nearly everything. Unlike Duckworth, however, Cuddy bears more of the responsibility for the misrepresentation.

Cuddy’s major idea is “power poses,” the notion that if one adopts an open and expansive body posture, one can become less nervous and a better leader. Supposedly, the correct poses trigger one’s brain to increase the production of testosterone and lower the amount of cortisol. Cuddy’s initial experiments suggested that adopting a power pose for a few minutes had a measurable effect on body chemistry, pharmacologically inducing confidence and competence.

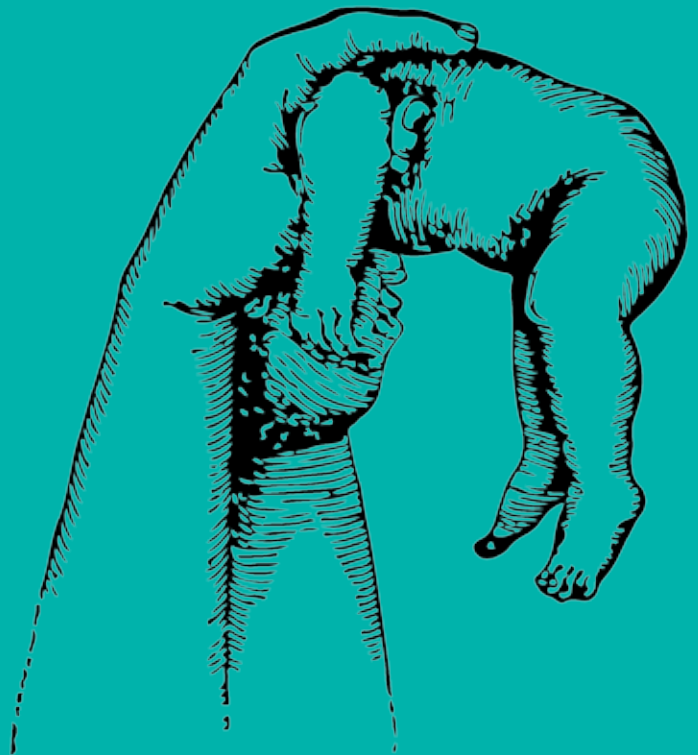
As attractive as that sounds, unfortunately, the central findings of Cuddy’s work have largely been discredited. Dorsa Amir, a biological anthropology PhD student at Yale, explained in a popular biology blog shortly after Cuddy’s book appeared that her ideas make little sense from a natural science standpoint:

*In general, hormones like testosterone and cortisol are dynamic. Both hormones have a diurnal rhythm, which means they change throughout the day. They’re also influenced by dozens of variables: the obvious ones like age, sex, and weight help determine clinical guidelines for what “normal” levels look like....How did Cuddy and colleagues control for these phenomena? In short: they didn’t.*

Noted statistician Andrew Gelman of Columbia University and a colleague of his, Kaiser Fung, expressed further doubts that Cuddy followed sound statistical procedures. They wrote in *Slate* that the “power poses” concept was a prime example of “social scientific malpractice”: the small sample size of the original study meant that “variation is high, so anything that does appear to be statistically significant (the usual requirement for publication) will necessarily be large, even if it represents nothing but chance fluctuations.” In other words, one can immediately see how this “massive effect” was obtained:



# PROPER CHILD HANDLING IS INCREASINGLY CRUCIAL



**ALWAYS PICK UP INFANTS USING  
APPROVED TECHNIQUES**

natural variation in hormonal levels between respondents led to variation before and after the poses, and given a small sample (42 people), a massive effect was found due to high levels of variation.

This criticism has led Cuddy's colleagues to distance themselves from this work. For instance, Dana Carney, one of the coauthors of the original power poses paper, posted an unequivocal rebuke on her faculty website:

*"I do not believe that 'power pose' effects are real. I discourage others from studying power poses. I do not teach power poses in*

recently dealt with it at all. Her 2007 study failed to replicate in 2010, yet she delivered a TED talk on her work in 2012 (now the 2<sup>nd</sup> most watched talk of all time), and released *Presence* in 2015.

It's a shame that Cuddy staked so much on power poses, because the (significant) portions of her book that have nothing to do with the poses are quite interesting. Her main point is about "presence" itself, which she defines as "the state of being attuned to and able to comfortably express our true thoughts, feelings, values, and potential." These parts

“Don't bother to protest.  
Don't attribute economic  
differences to historical forces  
or bigotry. Just strike the right pose.”

*my classes anymore. I do not talk about power poses in the media and haven't for over 5 years (well before skepticism set in)."*

In response, Cuddy shifted the goalposts, saying: "The key finding, the one that I would call "the power posing effect," is simple: adopting expansive postures causes people to feel more powerful...The other outcomes (behavior, physiology, etc.) are secondary to the key effect." Notice how she has adjusted the claim. The original claim is that if one adopts a power

pose, one's primordial Darwinian brain stem goes into action, and one's body chemistry shifts. This second claim Cuddy now defends is that if one adopts the power pose, one *feels* more powerful. But this isn't much of a claim at all, since all it suggests is a placebo effect. (Although it should be noted that even this is dubious, since the findings themselves are likely just an artifact of statistical noise.)

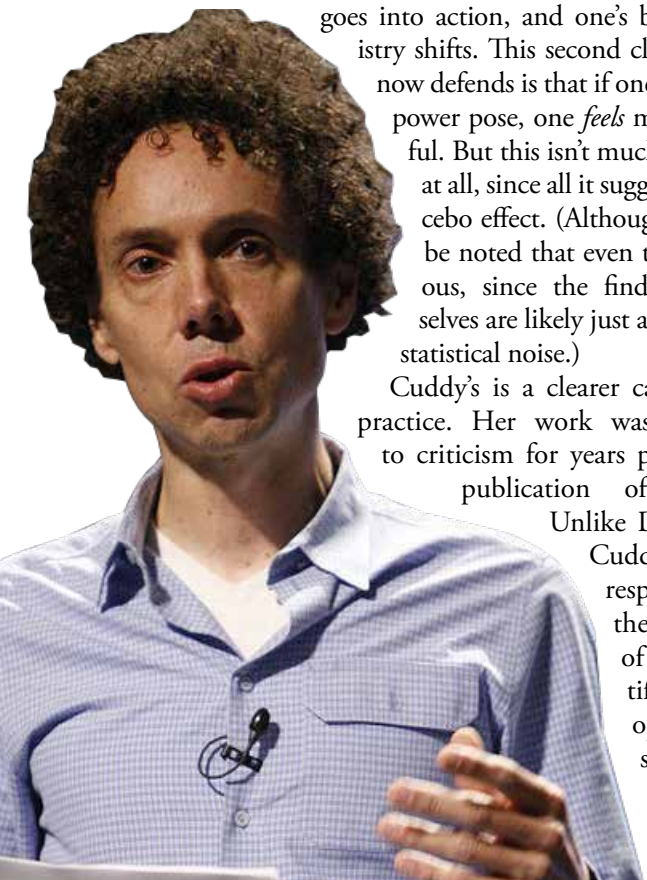
Cuddy's is a clearer case of malpractice. Her work was subjected to criticism for years prior to the publication of *Presence*.

Unlike Duckworth, Cuddy has not responded to the scrutiny of the scientific process openly, and she has only

of her work are well-written and compelling. Her chapter on "imposter syndrome" and her self-doubts is written with great humanity and humility. She recounts the countless emails she has received from all over the world of people inspired by her work, especially young women in countries with brutal patriarchal structures. We are introduced to people who have overcome major adversities who went on to reach incredible academic and professional heights. Cuddy herself has a quite a life-story: she entered her PhD program just a year after a traumatizing car accident that resulted in severe head trauma. If she had left aside the "science" of power poses, and instead mused on confidence, adversity, and the realization of human potential, it would have made for a solid and enlightening read.

**B**OTH OF THESE PSYCHOLOGY BOOKS HAVE clearly scratched an itch: topping bestseller lists and establishing a public platform for both authors. And both have something in common: they purport to explain success as a function of individual-level characteristics, offering readers strategies to change themselves for the better. One book suggests that diligence and hard work pays off in the long run, while the other argues that interpersonal dynamics can be changed by adjusting one's body language. These theories have in common that they *individualize* people's social outcomes, suggesting that it's factors of our own making (rather than, say, oppressive social structures) that shape our chances in life.

In placing so much emphasis on factors like grit and body language, Duckworth and Cuddy present a worryingly apolitical view of inequality. Look, they say, don't bother to pro-



test. God forbid you should join a union. Don't attribute economic differences to historical forces, or to bigotry. Just strike the right pose. Grit your teeth. Forget structural disadvantages and the precarious post-industrial economy, just have *passion and perseverance*.

One can perhaps blame Malcolm Gladwell for a lot of this. In the late 2000s, Gladwell pioneered the "this nifty thing explains success" subgenre of nonfiction. Whether it was his 10,000-hours hypothesis (the Beatles were good because they practiced a lot) or his "David and Goliath" idea (seeming impediments can actually be people's unique advantages), Gladwell offers a series of empirically questionable mini-theories, each of which is designed to explain success using every means *other* than social structure. Gladwell has dedicated his professional career to trying to uncover *what it is about individuals* that makes some succeed while others fail. He has never considered the possibility that perhaps it isn't something about individuals at all. (One can imagine a Gladwell-style book cover with the title *Capitalism: Why Some Individuals Succeed While Others Fail*. But one cannot necessarily imagine anyone reading it.)

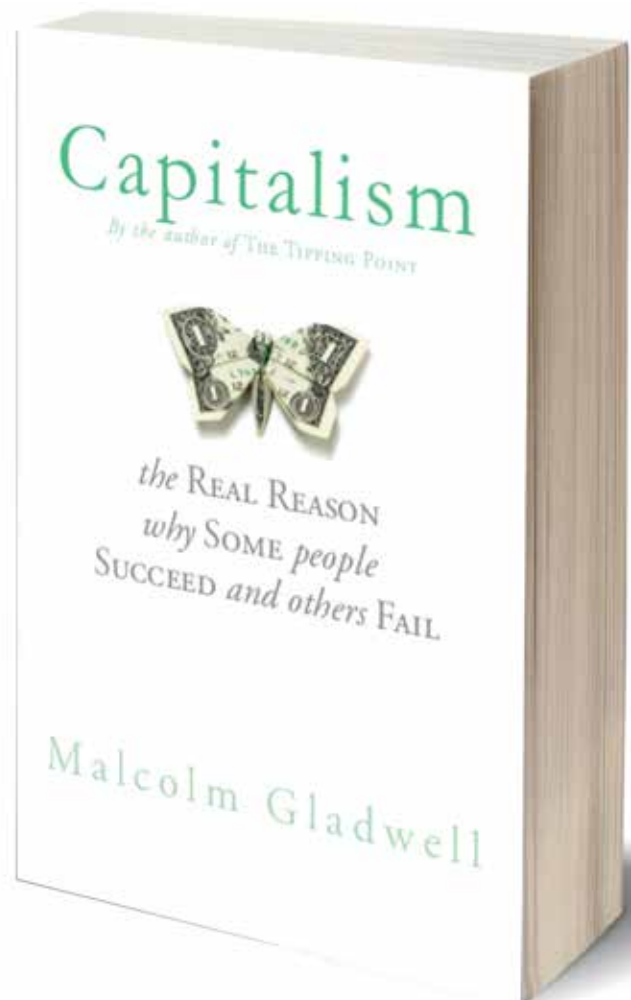
This also speaks to a broader incentive problem in the social sciences. In terms of making one a highly sought-after public intellectual, clever Gladwellian empirical findings are far more valuable than nuanced, humble career-spanning research. James Heckman, the Nobel Prize-winning economist who has spent his career refining statistical methods and empirically studying the sources of poverty, expressed his frustration in a 2005 interview with the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, "In some quarters of our profession, the level of discussion has sunk to the level of a *New Yorker* article: coffee-table articles about 'cute' topics, papers using 'clever' instruments....Most of this work is without substance, but it makes a short-lived splash and it's easy to do. Many young economists are going for the cute and the clever at the expense of working on hard and important foundational problems." Though he doesn't name the book, Heckman is almost certainly referring in part to the effect of *Freakonomics* on the profession. Figuring out why some nations are poor and others are rich is a very hard question. One the other hand, producing clever statistics showing that Sumo wrestlers cheat, as Steven Levitt does in *Freakonomics*, is much more fun and lucrative.

The rewards of producing bestselling "pop" theories exist across professions. Niall Ferguson, the now Stanford-based economic historian and fetishist of empires, went from producing detailed histories of banking to pumping out books like *Civilization: The West and the Rest* which explained "The Six Killer Apps of Western Civilization." Ferguson's bestsellers landed him on the speaker circuit, enabling to him to charge more than \$75,000 a pop for a talk. He evidently now goes from hedge fund to hedge fund telling financiers how morally sound and intellectually innovative their work is. At this, he is apparently quite good, at least according to Steve Dronby of Drobny Capital, who says: "Niall Ferguson is the best speaker

we've hired for our hedge fund events." Why bother to do the hard work when you can grift hedge fund managers with a quick spin through the killer apps of the West?

Ferguson, Gladwell, Duckworth, and Cuddy thereby illustrate two serious problems with the contemporary intelligentsia. First, you're under great pressure to produce a novel empirical finding, and if you can develop one surprising enough, you can get yourself a TED talk. Second, there are deep anxieties within our contemporary society and economy, and the bestselling ideas are those that simultaneously flatter the rich and comfort the poor. Tell the wealthy they are gritty rather than lucky, that they are special Davids who slew Goliath. Tell them that they *pose with power*. Tell the poor that life is tough, but if they stick it out, and develop some presence, they too can make it. With a hell of a lot of people at the bottom, and a few at the top, and one can do well by offering people secrets for how to get from one end to the other. Above all, don't ever suggest that it's *luck* or *pre-existing wealth* that determine your lot in life. What readers want is *one weird trick* to fix it all.

If you want to get rich, then, we know how to do it. The true secret to success may be neither grit nor presence. But *Grit* and *Presence* have certainly made their authors very successful indeed. ❖



A chocolate chip scone sits on a white plate with a red floral pattern. In the background, a white teacup with a red floral design sits on a saucer. Behind the teacup, an open book is visible, showing a page with a red illustration. The scene is set on a wooden table.

**GOES WELL**  
WITH A SCONE

CURRENT AFFAIRS



# HOW THE PRESS FAILED YOU

a look at the worst in punditry

Our political press did not do very well this year. Primarily, of course, they had no idea that Donald Trump would be the President of the United States. But they also deluged us with all manner of other terrible, unhelpful opinions, actively getting in the way of efforts to build an informed, sober-minded, and politically aware public. We look at several of the million ways in which the press failed you.



# HOW THE New York Times SCREWED EVERYTHING UP

by Emily Bartlett Hines

**W**HEN 2016 DAWNED, IT SEEMED LIKE ANYTHING COULD happen. Now long-forgotten figures like Martin O'Malley and Carly Fiorina still roamed debate stages, Donald Trump was still a joke, Bernie Sanders had just stopped being one, and every voter could still dream of success for her favored candidate.

Still, even then, there were those warning voters against attempting to monkey with fate, against progressives delusional enough to believe they could create the future in whatever image they wanted. Hillary Clinton's politics were the only feasible destiny, Paul Krugman warned Bernie Sanders admirers in his January editorial "How Change Happens." If people failed to accept that, they would bring on disaster:

*"Sorry, but there's nothing noble about seeing your values defeated because you preferred happy dreams to hard thinking about means and ends. Don't let idealism veer into destructive self-indulgence."*

Krugman's attitude would prove emblematic of the Paper of Record's election coverage. As the months passed, the *New York Times'* Hillary-boosting scribes would converge on a set of rhetorical strategies to defend hard thinking by squashing ideas that fell outside the bounds of pundit orthodoxy. The paper decided early on that 2016 was to be a coronation, and that all attempts to derail Hillary's ascent to the presidency (or even to point out that it wasn't going according to plan) would be mocked, ignored, or treated as failures to acknowledge Empirical Reality. The *Times'* "The Upshot" election predictor consistently held that Hillary was comfortably on her way to the presidency, regardless of what anyone else (e.g. voters) had to say about it. To read

the *Times* in 2016 was to be told, in a tone of utmost certitude, that Hillary Clinton was inevitable and inescapable.

As the year opened, the big story was the success of the unconventional-seeming candidates whom David Brooks lumped together as "Trump, Sanders and Cruz....Cruz, Trump and Sanders." Never mind that there is almost no political gap larger than that between Ted Cruz and Bernie Sanders. All of these candidates were deemed to be of dubious electability, and unified by their departure from acceptable *Times*-ian political orthodoxy.

The *Times'* liberal columnists were particularly prone to fretting about Sanders. Nicholas Kristof would point to a Gallup poll showing that "Fifty percent of Americans said they would be unwilling to consider voting for a socialist," failing to consider that it might actually be a step up for the Democrats to have only *half* of Americans totally unwilling to vote for the party.

One might have expected different from the nominally mildly-progressive Paul Krugman, who has previously rocked the world of economics by pondering aloud whether vast inequality is truly necessary (and received large sums of money to study the question professionally), as well as airing heterodox opinions on such questions as whether or not shrinking the budget deficit is the most important thing in the world. But he, too, would spend the election season amplifying the conventional wisdom and bashing everyone to his left. In "How Change Happens," he portrayed Sanders as a sort of political will-o'-the-wisp luring in the unwary:

*"On the left there is always a contingent of idealistic voters" nursing "the*

*persistent delusion that a hidden majority of American voters...can be persuaded to support radical policies...The question Sanders supporters should ask is, When has their theory of change ever worked? Even F.D.R., who rode the depths of the Great Depression to a huge majority, had to be politically pragmatic."*

Every election, idealistic leftists say we need a more radical candidate, and every year centrists make sure we don't run one, but for Krugman this shows that "the theory of change has never worked," rather than showing that the theory has never been seriously tried. And evidently, the example of FDR passing a bunch of idealistic new social programs disproves the theory that a president can pass a bunch of idealistic social programs.



**"The math is grim for Donald J. Trump: His rival, Hillary Clinton, has a 90 percent chance of winning the election, as of Monday afternoon. Wait, sorry — make that 91 percent, as of Monday night (and 92 percent as of Tuesday afternoon). It just keeps getting worse for him."**

— Michael Barbaro, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*, Oct. 18, 2016

So supporting a candidate who's proposing things you want done is unrealistic. It's more practical to support a candidate who *doesn't* support the policies you want, and then hope they change their mind after getting elected, a strategy Krugman would model in October:

*"Democratic control of the House would also open the door for large-scale infrastructure investment. If that seems feasible, I know that many progressive economists — myself included — will urge Mrs. Clinton to go significantly bigger than she is currently proposing."* Similarly, after Clinton pledged not to add a penny to the deficit, he optimistically tweeted that she should instead "do years of deficit financed infrastructure spending." This followed the traditional stance of the wishful liberal towards Bill and Hillary Clinton: insisting that the Clintons are, at heart, populist, anti-racist progressives, even though every empirical indication shows that they are self-infatuated lifelong Wall Street cronies who eliminated welfare and intentionally frightened white people about "superpredators."

Krugman produced a string of anti-Sanders articles. In April he would take part in a popular media craze by declaring that "Bernie is becoming a Bernie Bro." What does it mean to become

a bro on one's own behalf? For Krugman, Bernie had been engaged in the typically obnoxious frathouse behavior of "going on about the big banks" while failing to assign enough of the blame for the 2008 financial crash on smaller institutions. Furthermore, he was criticizing Hillary Clinton's record too harshly:

*"This is really bad.... Holding people accountable for their past is O.K., but imposing a standard of purity, in which any compromise or misstep makes you the moral equivalent of the bad guys, isn't."*

Liberal anti-Bernie thinkpieces frequently relied on treating a desire for "purity" as worthy of ridicule. But replace "purity" with any noun from your resume, such as "excellence" or "objectives" or

"strategization," and it sounds like they're all telling you to run out and vote for him. Try rereading Krugman's last sentence with your finger over the phrase "of purity": Krugman is now saying that holding people accountable is good, but having standards you use to decide what things to hold them accountable for is verboten.

Still, Krugman, like every anti-Sanders pundit, felt compelled to say *something* nice about the elderly Vermonter. The praise, too, had a common theme. "The Sanders campaign has brought out a lot of idealism and energy that the progressive movement needs," but those things just shouldn't come in the form of Sanders himself. The *concept* of an idealistic person who gets voters energized is great, Krugman insisted, and maybe next time we should find someone like that to run. Unfortunately, there was no one like that around right now except Bernie Sanders, but if such a person arrived on the scene *without* being Bernie Sanders, we should support them.

Krugman seemed to take Sanders' success oddly personally—almost as if he resented feeling obligated to argue against economic proposals he had been in favor of throughout his career. But his scoldings only echoed the paper's official stance. In February, the *Times* editorial board would

## WHY YOU SHOULD NEVER, EVER LISTEN TO NATE SILVER

Of all people, Nate Silver should probably not have been gloating the morning after Election Day. After all, having made his reputation as a statistical wunderkind by predicting all 50 states correctly in the 2008 race, Silver called five states wrong in the 2016 election, assuming Hillary Clinton would end up with 302 electoral votes (she got 228).



In fact, the entire 2016 campaign season was been characterized by a series of spectacular Silver blunders. Not only did he notoriously give Hillary Clinton a 99% chance of winning the Michigan primary (she lost), and bungle Indiana as well, but he spent much of the past 18 months emitting a series of embarrassing declarations as well as ludicrous prophecies that totally failed to materialize. Let us go through a sample:

**"I wonder how much of the Trump Bump is just voters trolling pollsters." Two Good Reasons Not To Take the Donald Trump 'Surge' Seriously — July 16, 2015.**

**"People miss that Trump isn't actually very popular with Republicans... Not good." — July 28, 2015.**

**"Basically Trump is the Nickelback of presidential candidates. Disliked by most, super popular with a few." — July 28, 2015**

**"PREDICTION: Trump won't be the Republican / nominee." — Aug. 6, 2015**

**"Media: Trump's doing great! Nerds: No. Those polls don't mean what you think. Media: A new poll shows Trump doing great! Proved you wrong!" — Aug. 9, 2015.**

**"Donald Trump: Winning the polls. Losing the nomination." — Aug. 11, 2015**

**"About 25% of Americans identify as Republican. Donald Trump's getting about 25% of that 25% in the polls. Why is this impressive to people?" — Nov. 19, 2015**

**"Dearest media, Please stop freaking out about Donald Trump's polls. With love, Nate." — Nov. 23, 2015.**

**"As for me, I remain quite skeptical of Trump's chances. I also think his nomination would be an unmitigated catastrophe for Republicans." — Nov. 29, 2015**

**TWEETS CONTINUE ON NEXT PAGE →**



BUT...  
THE DATA SAID  
THIS COULDN'T  
HAPPEN!

endorse Hillary Clinton in the primary, saying that Sanders' policies were fine "but his plans for achieving them aren't realistic, while Mrs. Clinton has very good, and achievable, proposals in both areas." The unified political theory shared by *Times* writers is that being "realistic" means forming detailed policy schemes as far in advance as possible, before you can be unduly influenced by, say, knowing who's going to be in charge of the House and Senate or any other specifics about the political climate. It's similar to how you always pack for a trip a year and a half before your flight leaves.

An incident revealing of the papers' attitudes occurred in March, when the paper ran a news analysis piece titled "Bernie Sanders Scored Victories for Years via Legislative Side Doors." The piece went through Sanders' record in the Senate, showing him to be a pragmatic legislator, who, contrary to conventional wisdom, was actually very good at achieving specific policy objectives.

The article was surprising, in that it was both in the *New York Times* and didn't trash Bernie Sanders. Sure enough, later in the day the article was updated with a series of editorial changes, making it clear that *while* Bernie Sanders might have a decent record of senatorial accomplishments, he was still a pie-in-the-sky dreamer with no ability to achieve the meaningful changes he promised. The *Times* assured its readers that "there is little to draw from his small-ball legislative approach to suggest that he could succeed [as president]... Mr. Sanders is suddenly promising not just a few stars here and there, but the moon and a good part of the sun."

Later, after complaints had been made to the Public Editor it transpired that the article was revised by "senior editors" who "thought it should say more about his realistic chances" of enacting his agenda (because no one is a more credible expert on realism than someone who apparently thinks the moon is bigger than a star).

The senior pundit class would soon have even bigger things to worry

about than Bernie Sanders' inconvenient political acumen. In June, Trump was officially declared the nominee, ushering in a preliminary round of humiliation for pundits who had insisted, as Ross Douthat did, that "Donald Trump isn't going to be the Republican nominee." Still, Krugman wasn't worried. "Mr. Trump is flailing.... There's a concerted effort by Democrats... to make the great ridiculer look ridiculous (which he is). And it seems to be working." Brooks, Douthat, and Krugman each issued embarrassing declarations of Trump's impending demise, reminding one of Thomas Friedman's notorious repeated insistence that "the next six months" would see a turning point in Iraq. (And just as for Friedman, no number of failed prophecies would cause the paper to reconsider giving Brooks, Douthat, or Krugman a weekly platform.)



**"Donald Trump's chances of winning are approaching zero."**

— Chris Cillizza, *THE WASHINGTON POST*  
Oct. 24, 2016



**"With Trump facing a potential wipeout on November 8, there is a growing sense that he'll start a news network in 2017."**

— Derek Thompson, *THE ATLANTIC*,  
Oct. 18, 2016



**"Hillary Clinton Is Winning — And It's Not Close"**

— Domenico Montanaro, *NPR*,  
Oct. 18, 2016

## "SILVER," FROM P. 63

**"Idea that 'Trump would win an election today' also dubious. If election were today, voters would be more informed and news cycle different."** — Dec. 4, 2015.

(in response to Rupert Murdoch tweeting that Trump's "cross-party appeal" was a "winning strategy"): "Actually, Trump is by far the least popular Republican with independents (and Democrats)" — Jan. 15, 2016

**"Wait it's just now sinking in that Trump might be a wee bit problematic as a general election candidate?"** — March 20, 2016

**"Trump's general election numbers have been terrible since he launched bid. Media barely noticed during 2015 Trumpmania."** — March 29, 2016

**"Idea of Trump being presumptive nominee by mid-May is delusional. Math doesn't work."** — April 9, 2016

**"The bad news for Trump is that a poll**

**showing him 5 points down is considered good news for Trump."** — June 26, 2016

**"Perhaps the worst take is the 'Trump's actually doing well to only be down by 7!!!' take. He's the least popular major-party nominee ever."** — Aug. 3, 2016

**"Trump has been super unpopular with the November electorate pretty much forever."** — Aug. 16, 2016

**"Trump is doubling down on a losing strategy."** — Aug. 18, 2016

**"[The] most delusional part of Trump thinking he has a silent majority is how small a fraction of the population he's even bothering to appeal to."** — Aug. 13, 2016

On the whole, it's a humiliating record. In the primaries, Silver didn't even do as well as Carl Diggler, a fictional parody-pundit who literally just makes stuff up based on whatever his gut tells him. Presuming Silver is supposed to be something different from the rest of the jabbering punditocracy, his career should be over.

Yet bizarrely, in the days after the election, Silver was bragging about his performance.

Silver insisted that after Election Night, he felt "some vindication," and scoffed that some major pundits had been "smugly dismissive of Trump's chances." Looking back on Silver's record of statements on Trump, one wonders to which pundits he may have been referring. For over a year (July 2015 to Aug. 2016) he wrote smug "dear media" letters about Trump-hype and called Trump's strategy "delusional." Having expressed regret after the primary for "acting like a pundit" and underestimating Trump, in the general election he was still acting like a pundit and underestimating Trump.

Thus Silver took a cheerful victory lap, despite having totally failed, repeatedly and embarrassingly, to provide any information of use. He bases his claim to have succeeded off his having given Trump a somewhat higher probability of a win than some other people, despite still thinking Clinton was the definite favorite. But it doesn't take a statistical genius to be cautious in a situation of high volatility. (The main reason Silver is being praised for being wrong is that a man named Sam Wang of something called the Princeton Election Consortium was even more wrong, giving Clinton a 99% probability of a win.)

**CONTINUED →**

The hopes of the pundits were further buoyed when the Democrats nominated Clinton and held a flag-draped convention designed to undo their reputation as pessimistic draft-dodgers. Krugman gave the convention a rave review. "Usually [Republicans are] the ones chanting 'U.S.A.! U.S.A.! U.S.A.!', " he said, pleased that the Democrats had adopted the favorite mindless rah-rah of the Bush-era right. Apparently, bellowing the name of the country in which we live becomes a smart and progressive thing to do when it comes from the mouths of blue staters. Krugman also decided to issue what seemed like a belated submission to his third-grade "Win A Trip To Washington, D.C." essay contest, with a column on the question "What does it mean to love America?" After concluding that the best thing about America is its "diversity" (i.e. the fact that it no longer practices genocide on its minority residents), Krugman would return to the patriotism theme in October, asking: "why does the modern right hate America?" (During the Bush years, Krugman would have been the first to point out the juvenility and repulsiveness of the "X hates America" formulation.)

**B**Y FALL, THE SWELLING SUCCESS OF TRUMP WAS A THORN IN the side of columnists who wanted to claim that America was basically good. They couldn't stop thinking about him. The paper published a glut of alarmist Trump pieces, with one run of Charles Blow columns titled "Trump's Debate Flameout," "Donald Trump: Terroristic Man-Toddler," "Donald Trump: Barbarian at the Debate," "Donald Trump, Unshackled and Unhinged," "Donald Trump, the Worst of America" and "Donald Trump vs. American Democracy." As much as any outlet, the *Times* contributed to the success of the Trump Show, whereby Trump prevails by successfully orienting every news cycle around himself, thereby ensuring that nobody discusses any issue of serious political consequence. (Nobody is more willing than a *Times* columnist to refrain from discussing issues of serious political consequence.)

Besides, even as Trump rose and rose, pundits could always spend their column space consoling themselves by insisting that Hillary was strong enough to prevail. Krugman didn't just take for granted the inev-

## NATE SILVER KNOWS VERY FEW THINGS ABOUT THE FUTURE

The myth of Nate Silver's continued usefulness is based on a careful moving of goalposts. His initial claim to fame was based on number of states correctly predicted. But in 2016, if we measured by that number (especially if we subtracted the states whose outcomes were most obvious), Silver wouldn't look good at all. So now we're invited to focus on a different statistic, the percentage chance of an overall Trump win. Conversely, when it's the percentage chance that goes wrong, Silver reminds us how many races he called correctly. Like a television psychic, Silver is able to carefully draw your attention to that which he gets right and ignore that which he gets wrong. If the probability percentages look good, but he screws up a large number of races, we should look at percentages. If those look terrible, as they did in Michigan, we should forget them and think about numbers of states.

Similarly, Silver will make predictions that have multiple components, so that if one part fails, the overall prediction will seem to have come true, even if its coming true had no relation to the reasons Silver originally offered. See, e.g. "It's a tight race. Clinton's the favorite but close enough that Trump would probably pull ahead if he 'wins' debate." Silver can look back and say "I saw that Trump could pull ahead." But what he actually predicted was that Trump could pull ahead based on debate performance. If he pulls ahead for some other reason, Silver is completely wrong (because he had excluded that other possibility), yet he seems right.

When one goes through Silver's Twitter feed for the election cycle, one sees him predicting nearly every damn thing in the universe. Sometimes Clinton is winning, sometimes Trump is winning. Sometimes anything could happen, as in the below tweet:

*Each of these outcomes now about equally*

*likely: —Clinton landslide (8+ point win) —Obamaish win (4-7 points) —Narrow Clinton win —Trump win*

Silver makes sure to hedge every statement carefully so that he can never actually be wrong. And when things don't go his way, he lectures the public on their ignorance of statistics. After all, probability isn't certainty, he didn't say it would definitely happen. And of course, that's completely true. But recognize what it means: even when Silver isn't wrong, because he's hedged everything carefully, he's still not offering any information of value. Sophisticated mathematical modeling, just like punditry, can't tell us much about the things we most need to know. It can't predict the unpredictable, and the unpredictable is what matters most of all.

Donald Trump was trying an untested experiment. You couldn't easily put numbers on it. Anyone who did was destined to be pulling the statistics from their ass, because there was no way for human beings to access the relevant information. The relevant question was not: what do the polls, after some defensible adjustments, say about the candidates' chances? It was "What happens when a bombastic, widely disliked male real-estate tycoon and a technocratic, widely disliked female Secretary of State go up against one another in a highly volatile race involving race, economics, the FBI, Wikileaks, and sexual assault allegations?" Since nothing like this has ever happened in human history, it was destined to be the case that the best thing you could do was be somewhat cautious.

Silver actually knows all of this, and says it openly. "Statistical models work well when you have a lot of data, and when the system you're studying has a relatively low level of structural complexity. The presidential nomination process

*fails on both counts.*" So the sneaky thing Silver does is this: he fills his work with caveats. But then he turns around and writes articles like "The Six Stages of Donald Trump's Doom," in which he lays out very vivid, totally fantastical and unfounded, sets of forecasts about the future. In the primary, he foresaw a situation in which Bernie Sanders would win two states and then nowhere else, an idea that turned out to be doubly wrong (he lost one of the two, and then he won a bunch of others). None of this has any grounding beyond Silver's gut.

This is why Silver is irresponsible and untrustworthy. It's not, as the *Huffington Post* stupidly alleged, that he's a bad or biased statistician. It's that he mingles solid statistical observations (of highly limited usefulness) with wild prophecy and the same old know-nothing horse-race punditry. He acts as if statistics and polls can tell us to some useful degree whether Trump's highly unorthodox political strategy will work. He offers totally worthless speculative scenarios, such as Bernie Sanders losing all but two states, even though the dynamics that would lead to such scenarios are not accessible to human observation or prediction.

Nate Silver will probably always be the best poll data analyst. The problem is that poll data analysts are completely fucking useless in a crisis. They don't understand anything that's going on around them, and they're powerless to predict what's about to happen next. Listening to anything they have to say is very, very dangerous. If you want to change anything, you've got to forget Nate Silver forever. That's because he tells you entirely about the world as it looks to him right now, rather than the world as it could suddenly be tomorrow. He has no idea what the outer boundaries of the possible are. Nobody does. ♦

itable win of his chosen candidate, he sang the praises of the plumage of his prehatched chickens: "Here's a contrarian thought: Maybe Mrs. Clinton is winning because she possesses some fundamental political strengths." She is "wonky" and "in command of policy issues," traits that reliably arouse the pundit libido. Hillary may fail to fit political "archetypes" like "the heroic leader," but she excels in other ways. "Maybe obvious competence and poise in stressful situations can add up to a kind of star quality." This, it should be said, is the fantasy of the nerd and nobody else. (If you combine Krugman's idea of star quality with own my theory that being soft-spoken and not getting in anyone's way can be described as having "competence and poise," my junior high school self was basically Eddie Murphy in *Beverly Hills Cop*.)

However, in an attempt to appear balanced, every pro-Hillary *Times* article contained a paragraph or two of damning-sounding concessions. In "Why Hillary Wins," Krugman admitted that "Clinton is 'a fairly mediocre speechifier; her prepared zingers tend to fall flat.' And 'on some issues...she does sound a bit bloodless.'" According to pro-Hillary Republican David Brooks, "Wherever Clinton walks, the whiff of scandal is always by her side. The Clintons...surround themselves with...some human hand grenades." And in "I'm With Her: The Strengths of Hillary Clinton," Nicholas Kristof wrote that:

*"Clinton has made thousands of compromises and innumerable mistakes, her pursuit of wealth has been unseemly and politically foolish, and it's fair to question her judgment on everything from emails to Iraq... Sure, she compromises, she sometimes dissembles and at times her judgment has been flawed."* This, bear in mind, was meant to be an enthusiastic endorsement. It's probably a bad sign when your reluctant admissions sound like incredibly persuasive reasons not to vote for somebody. If you put all the Hillary Clinton concession paragraphs together with all the reluctant statements about how the Democratic Party needs Bernie Sanders' populist energy, you could assemble an entire *Jacobin* magazine article on the failures of liberalism.

Thus, as the floundering Titanic of Clinton's campaign broke into two pieces and fell to the bottom of the sea, the *Times* dedicated itself to frantically repositioning deck chairs and striking up the band in joyful ditties. It was obvious to anyone with the most rudimentary political instinct that Clinton was widely disliked and failing to connect with voters. But columnists like Krugman conceived of a world in which "wonky" types with mediocre speechmaking capacity were of superior electability to "heroic leaders."

**B**Y NOVEMBER EVERYONE'S PSYCHE WAS WEARY AND SCARRED from covering the election. Lucidity suffered, along with David Brooks' writing. On the 4th he said, "If I had to sum up the election of 2016 in one clause, I would say it has been a sociological revolution, a moral warning, and a political summons."

Post-election, no one emerged without having made some bad predictions, but Brooks fared the most poorly, having engaged in a battle of prognostication with a grubby proletarian:

*"A few weeks ago I met a guy in Idaho who was absolutely certain that Donald Trump would win this election. He was wearing tattered, soiled overalls, missing a bunch of teeth and was unnaturally skinny....He was getting by aimlessly as a handyman. I pointed to the polls and tried to persuade him that Hillary Clinton might win, but it was like telling him a sea gull could play billiards."* It wasn't worth Trump winning just so a toothless Idahoan could mock David Brooks, but as long as it had to happen, it is a small consolation.

Pre-election, the pundits had been largely in accord, repeatedly offering similar versions of the same column. Post-election, their views

would fracture, the white light of their love for pragmatic compromise refracting into a rainbow of different wrong takes. David Brooks would pretend to have thought all along that the Democrats needed to get rid of "retired establishment types"; Krugman would rail against Trump's corruption while ascribing his win to the wicked scheming of Jill Stein and Vladimir Putin; Ross Douthat would call for "conversation about the ways in which the Democratic Party might consider responding to its current straits by moving to the right." (Douthat apparently being a time traveler sent from the recent past to warn Democrats to keep doing exactly what they're already doing.)

Kristof, who had criticized Trump as a groper and a bully, voiced a sentiment suddenly common among mainstream pundits when he wrote that everyone should refrain from judging him too quickly: "Like it or not, we Americans have a new president-elect.... Let's give him a chance — for those are our democratic values." On the news side, the paper seemed strangely eager to do just that, running a series of softball articles in which it referred to Trump EPA transition team leader Myron Ebell as a "climate contrarian" and described Trump as "offering an olive branch" for offering to perhaps not repeal *all* of Obamacare (even as he stuffed his cabinet with a ghoulish array of conservative ideologues). And after Trump added two women and Ben Carson to his otherwise entirely white male cabinet, the *Times* went with the headline "Trump Diversifies Cabinet" (rather than, say "Trump' Cabinet Has Barely Any Women" or "Trump's Appointment of Women and Reactionaries-of-Color Shows The Limited Usefulness of Mere 'Diversity.'")

**T**HE *TIMES'* ELECTION COVERAGE WILL LIVE IN INFAMY. Our paper of record had no idea how to interpret the moment as it unfolded, flailing wildly and trying to build an imaginary world in which Hillary Clinton's campaign went the way liberals wished it would go, rather than the way it actually did go. (Much as, during the Bush years, Democrats relaxed by taking in the reassuring alternate reality of *The West Wing's* Bartlet presidency, rather than seriously coming to grips with the actual political world in which they lived.) But as a certain Paul Krugman once told us, there's nothing noble about seeing your values defeated because you preferred the illusion of happy dreams to hard thinking about means and ends. ♦



**"As I've been saying, HRC was the best candidate against Trump: her strengths make the most of his weaknesses"**

— Paul Krugman, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*, Oct 19, 2016



**"No, Donald Trump Won't Win"**

— David Brooks, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*, Dec. 4, 2015



**"Well, there's no way Trump comes back from this Nevada debacle. It's OVER for him."**

— Ross Douthat, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*, Feb. 23, 2016

# HOW PUNDITS KEEP THEIR JOBS DESPITE BEING WRONG OVER AND OVER

by Michael Tracey



**"Trump won't win Michigan, and I am frankly offended that people think this is even a possibility."**

—Jonathan Chait, *New York magazine*,  
Nov. 7, 2016



**"Donald Trump is never going to be president."**

—David Roberts, *Vox*,  
Jan 31, 2016



**"Hillary Clinton is absolutely kicking Donald Trump's ass."**

—Kevin Drum, *MOTHER JONES*,  
Aug. 15, 2016

UNDERSTANDABLY, THE ELITE MEDIA CLASS IS EAGER TO move swiftly onward, as if nothing just happened. They might have been directly complicit in one of the most cataclysmic mass analytical failures in modern US history, but no matter: there are ever-more predictions to be made, more rash surmises to blithely proffer. Self-criticism and introspection—who needs it? After all, the natural state of the pundit could be described as “impulsive predictivity,” the unceasing drive to be constantly telling audiences what will happen in the indeterminate future, as if you possess some amazing insight that renders your predictions uniquely clairvoyant.

But as the 2016 presidential campaign should have conclusively demonstrated, this pretense of expertise is a fabrication. Far from being especially prescient about matters of public affairs, members of the Pundit-Commentariat Industrial Complex are actually incredibly ill-suited to the task of accurately gauging the political sentiments of their own nation. By virtue of the various self-destructive pathologies that perpetually dull and distort their analytical acuity, it turns out that “pundits” are actually among the least qualified to accurately predict how far-off events will unfold. Surveying a random selection of Twitter trolls would probably yield one better information than scanning the output of the most revered professional prognosticators.

We still have not yet fully taken stock of how systematic and massive was the scope of the failure which gave rise to Donald Trump; it permeated virtually every sector of elite society, from the culture-producing entertainment industry, to high finance, to the “political operative/consultant” cabal—right on down to the journalism/commentary racket. But it may be most fruitful to begin by thrashing the 2016 pundits, whose mixture of arrogance and ignorance is almost unmatched in the history of letters.

THE NOTION OF A “PUNDIT” IS NEBULOUS AND FLUID. ITS definitional boundaries are always shifting. Indeed, “pundit” can be taken to mean anyone who opines on TV about politics, or it can refer to the distinguished group of people employed by well-regarded national magazines to espouse political opinions, often with a sheen of intellectual gravity. Though there’s plenty of blame to go around, it’s worth lingering on the failings of a certain kind of pundit—the “writes regularly for prestigious online opinion journals” kind. The paradigmatic pundit of this character is firmly ensconced in the peculiarities of the contemporary social media-driven click-economy—it’s all he’s ever known.

One liability of having a geographically-clustered, incenstuous pundit class is that they almost all know each other. They all reside in the same one or two cities and are members of overlapping friendship circles. This social proximity will inevitably cause a certain kind of in-group solidarity and excusing of failure; that’s human nature, and it’s understandable. We’re more willing to give our friends a pass. Though the nature of the internet enables pundits to write banally on politics from virtually anywhere, they nevertheless all flock to New York City and Washington D.C., whereupon they forge strong social bonds with colleagues and “after work” drinking buddies—and then wonder why they are all hope-

lessly consumed by groupthink and confirmation bias.

Jamelle Bouie of *Slate*, and Brian Beutler, of *The New Republic*, are exemplary members of this rising pundit cohort: young-ish prognosticators with an avowedly liberal bent, who came up through the fledgling “new media” ecosystem, and who originally endeavored to upend the existing pundit order. Bouie and Beutler merit special attention as case studies, because they epitomize the “digital native” pundit, namely a coterie of 20 and 30-somethings concentrated in the “Acela Corridor” who regularly receive outsized praise for their allegedly bold commentary. They also happened to spend the 2016 presidential cycle advancing theories that proved utterly, flagrantly wrong.

THROUGHOUT THE CAMPAIGN, BOUIE churned out a series of wildly inconsistent opinion pieces about Trump, alternating between warning the country that it was about to be swallowed up by fascism and reassuring liberals that Hillary Clinton had the election in the bag.

To give a flavor for *Slate*’s politics coverage, witness two Bouie headlines from only a week apart: “Donald Trump is a Moderate Republican” (November 19, 2015) and “Donald Trump Is A Fascist” (November 25, 2015). Now, the word “fascist” has meaning (or is at least supposed to). Anyone who actually believed Trump to be a fascist should now be out proclaiming far and wide that a fascist has just won the presidency—indeed, Bouie would be justified in attempting to foment violent insurrection and perhaps even a full-on *coup d’état* to ensure that Trump, the purported fascist, is prevented from taking the reins of state. As a preminent pundit with sought-after insight, Bouie would in fact be obliged to vigorously sound the alarm, and maybe even take up arms himself. Instead, he recently joined the host of *Slate*’s “Culture GabFest” for a discussion entitled “Will Late-Night Shows Help Us Laugh Through a Trump Presidency?”

It is not unreasonable, then, to surmise that proclamation that Trump is a “fascist” was more a provocation for clicks than any sincere attempt at political categorization. Whether Bouie ever perceived any disjunction between those competing November 2015 theses of

“Trump as unprecedented fascist threat” and “Trump as slightly more vulgar run-of-the-mill Republican” remains unclear. (Bouie did not reply to a set of written questions.) One suspects, however, that these ideas were far more a product of *Slate*’s daily demand for provocative but ultimately hollow hot takes than of considered and honest analysis.

Not only was Bouie’s political philosophy both inconsistent and insincere, but his pre-



**“Look closely at that poll showing Donald Trump ahead. The internals are a disaster for his campaign.”**

— Ezra Klein, Vox,  
May 24, 2016



**“Extra satisfying come Tuesday night is Trump actually thinks he will win. That will be some moment when he finds out otherwise.”**

— David Plouffe, former  
Obama campaign manager,  
Nov. 4, 2016

dictions were laughably disastrous. On August 24, Bouie averred in his *Slate* column:

*“There is no horse race here. Clinton is far enough ahead, at a late enough stage in the election, that what we have is a horse running by itself, unperturbed but for a faint possibility of a comet hitting the track. Place your bets accordingly.”*

So to be clear, Bouie likened the odds of a Trump victory to the odds of an extra-terrestrial mass extinction event. He even began performing postmortems before the election had been held:

*“Donald Trump is a dud of politician who squandered his advantages in a winnable election. More than just a bad candidate, he has been a catastrophe for the GOP itself... On Nov. 8, nearly 18 months after he announced his bid for the Republican presidential nomination, the saga of Trump will come to a close.”*

Perhaps Bouie reckoned that if he wrote enough columns conveying absolute certitude, he could will Hillary Clinton to victory. Whatever Bouie’s motive, he clearly failed spectacularly. Bouie had “one job,” and that was to

accurately inform his readers about what was going on in the electorate. In this narrow task Bouie failed. What will be the consequences? (Hint: there will be no consequences.)

BRIAN BEUTLER WAS CHRISTENED AN avatar of the Washington, D.C. “power elite” by the *New York Times* at the ripe old age of 28, which in 2011 profiled him and other members of the so-called “Juicebox Mafia,” a cluster of hyper-wonkish young men who supposedly constituted the future of political commentary. (Notably, the profile appeared in the Fashion section.)

A hallmark of induction into said elite is becoming bizarrely out of touch with the rest of the country. By this standard, Beutler proved himself a highly qualified member. But unlike pundits of old, Beutler has evidently shunned the practice of on-the-ground reporting, which was once critical to the pundit’s self-conception. Even people like the late David Broder of *The Washington Post*, once the purest embodiment of the establishment commentator, frequently traveled the country and talked to voters; it’s unclear if Beutler ever left Washington, D.C. during the entire election cycle. (Beutler also did not reply to a submitted set of written questions.) Instead, he sat at his desk, like Bouie, declared Clinton victorious without having conversed with a single voter. On October 19th, he wrote: “This race is over. It has been for some time.”

But worse than the bad predictions, Beutler made a point to heap regular contempt on ordinary voters whose views diverged from his own. He spearheaded a meme, popular among D.C. liberals, which essentially held that Trump supporters couldn’t possibly be motivated by anything resembling “economic anxiety.” Beutler and friends would find a Trump supporter saying something eccentric or racist, and tweet it with the sarcastic caption “economic anxiety.” The meme implied that the Trump phenomenon very obviously had no basis in the genuine anxieties of an immiserated, dislocated white working class depredated for decades by a hubristic economic elite. To the commentators scoffing at “economic” issues, Trump’s support was little more than pure, old-fashioned racism.

Beutler hammered home the point unceasingly, winning bountiful likes and retweets from his fellow “new media” compadres, who naturally found the meme absolutely hilarious.

Of course, post-election analyses, including by the pundits’ own beloved *FiveThirtyEight*, have demonstrated that Beutler’s smug dismissals were entirely misplaced: economic stress was in fact a predictor of Trump support. “It is clear that the places that voted for Trump are under greater economic stress, and the places that swung most toward Trump are those where jobs are most under threat,” wrote *FiveThirtyEight*’s Jed Kolko. Additional studies have verified this correlation.

But if you are a professional pundit, and your sole job is to accurately discern trends in the American electoral landscape, why on earth wouldn’t you feel compelled to venture out and do some actual reporting? Either it’s out of sheer laziness (certainly a distinct possibility) or an inherent skepticism that reportage has any analytical value. To the new generation of pundit, sitting around refreshing *FiveThirtyEight* nineteen times a day is a sufficient substitute for going and actually speaking to the people whose political opinions you purport to be an expert on.

THE CENTRAL ASSUMPTIONS ON WHICH THE NEW REPUBLIC’S senior political editor and *Slate*’s chief political correspondent based a huge portion of their election analysis proved utterly, humiliatingly wrong. But of course, this will not redound to their discredit. That’s because the pundits inhabit an environment whereby the



**“Trump speaks for a plurality of the GOP, but not America as a whole. He will never be president.”**

— Jeet Heer, *THE NEW REPUBLIC*  
Feb. 22, 2016




**“Trump won’t win. In fact, the US could be on the brink of a liberal renaissance.”**

— Michael Cohen, *THE GUARDIAN*,  
June 11, 2016

normal incentives for success and failure and precisely inverted compared to those under which most Americans labor. For normal people, even the tiniest mistakes often result in drastic consequences. They don’t just get to ignore those failures and barrel forward as if nothing happened. And yet that’s how we permit the pundit class to operate. In the case of Bouie and Beutler, it wasn’t merely that they made erroneous predictions; anyone can mistakenly guess that something might pan out, when it does not. Rather, their entire analytical framework was drastically, catastrophically faulty. If any other American worker had performed his or her job so poorly, they could expect to receive severe sanction—docked pay, unfavorable scheduling, or termination. But in the world of punditry, there is no price to pay for failure. Instead, the American pundit class simply carries on as before, rattling off self-assured predictions about future events.

It thus should not be mysterious why Americans are increasingly disdainful of the media class; they see them failing over and over again, but no punishments meted out. They know intrinsically that the pundits are shielded from anything that they’d recognize as professional accountability. And for what? The pundits provide no useful service; they opine from the comfort of their Washington domiciles. Maybe it’s the pundits’ jobs that should be outsourced, rather than the jobs of the “economically anxious” who they so delightedly mock. ♦

Experience. Bipartisanship.  
Moderation.



**Carter  
Bush Sr**

FOCUS GROUP APPROVED

**“You’re not ageist,  
are you?”**

**“N**ow, *Current Affairs*, was that truly necessary? Did you really need to go naming and shaming individual pundits? We all know the press was wrong. Why go heaping salt into their wounds?” Dear reader, it was indeed necessary. Of course nobody should be made fun of merely for being stupid. But these individuals’ certainty contributed to a national attitude of complacency. There were direct consequences to their insistences that Trump would not be president. If people had truly felt that Trump had a good shot at being president, they might have felt greater pressure to prevent such an outcome. But the Knowers and Explainers in the media continuously insisted such a thing was a remote possibility. Did they exhort their fellow Americans to act? No. They told them it would be fine. For this, they must be called out and treated with disdain. But instead of being cast out of decent society forever, and never listened to again, every single one of the listed people continues to hold a job expressing opinions and emitting new bullshit prophecies. If their employers will not hold the pundits to account, *Current Affairs* must.



**MAKING LIFE JOYFUL AGAIN**

[currentaffairs.org](http://currentaffairs.org)

# INSIDE THIS ISSUE

YOU WILL DISCOVER



how to  
**POSE**  
for  
success  
p. 55



HOW TO BECOME THE  
**GORILLA  
MAN**  
OF YOUR DREAMS  
page 44

*HOW TO BUILD A*  
**UTOPIA  
IN SPACE**  
PAGE THIRTY-TWO



how to write for  
**The  
New York  
Times**  
p. 64



*how to investigate*  
**PIZZAGATE**  
WITHOUT LOSING  
YOUR MIND  
PAGE 38

