

Cancel Your Atlantic Subscription

CURRENT AFFAIRS

\$12.95

VOL. 9, ISSUE 6

NOV./DEC. 2024



FDR

*Is he the model
for the future?*

SUBURBAN SPRAWL

*How did it get
everywhere?*

AFRO FUTURISM

*It will expand
your mind.*

NATIONALIZE

This!

In the fourteen years since its founding in 2010, our friendly rival *Jacobin* magazine has run a number of articles with a common theme: X thing ought to be nationalized, i.e., brought into state ownership and run in the interests of the general public rather than shareholders. The following are all genuine *Jacobin* articles from the last decade:

Nationalize Tyson Foods
Nationalize the Railroads
Nationalize Supermarkets
Nationalize Psychedelics
Nationalize All the Oil Companies
Nationalize Amazon
Nationalize Greyhound
Nationalize The Ivy League
Nationalize Walmart

Nationalize Pubs
Nationalize Food Delivery Apps
Nationalize California's Pacific Gas & Electric
Nationalize Canada's Transit System
Nationalize Canada's Dental Corporations
Nationalize the Weed Industry
Nationalize Baby Formula Production
Nationalize the Airlines
Nationalize the Ski Slopes

Now, one may be tempted to encourage *Jacobin* to be a little more efficient: just write a single article called "Nationalize Everything" and be done with it. Close up shop, go have a daiquiri on the beach. But the piecemeal approach has its virtues, for while many things must be nationalized, not all of them must be nationalized for precisely the same reasons. The case must be made in each instance, for what if there is a thing which should not be nationalized? One would hate to hastily nationalize everything and then realize that at least four or five things had accidentally been nationalized when they should not have been. (Curling leagues? Mardi Gras bead manufacturers?) We support the decision to go one by one then, and have decided to help our sibling magazine reach its final destination faster by producing our own series of articles to appear beginning in the next issue. Look out for our forthcoming first installment:

NATIONALIZE Those Little Packets of Vinegar That Come with Fish and Chips

DID YOU KNOW?

If you say **ALLEGEDLY**, no one can get mad at you!*

**This is not legal advice*

QUOTE OF THE MONTH

"The record of crimes can be numbing. It is easy to feel hopeless, to see an immovable hegemon. But there are ample opportunities to help create a more humane and decent world, if we choose to act upon them... We can learn a great deal from the long and hard struggles for social justice in past years, and we can and must move forward to build on their achievements and to surpass them."

— Noam Chomsky and Nathan J. Robinson, *The Myth of American Idealism*

WRONG PERSON OF THE MONTH
Matthew Yglesias

SHOUT-OUTS

- ★ To the anonymous donor who sent *Current Affairs* \$6,000. Thank you!!! May your example of public-spiritedness and generosity inspire others to behave similarly.
- ★ To the Person Wielding a Jackhammer Outside the *Current Affairs* Office. Could you maybe just, I don't know, give it a rest for a minute so we can have our editorial meeting? We get that you're just doing your job but, Jesus, we're just trying to do ours here, too.
- ★ To the podcasters who sent us a free box of "Murder Hornet hot sauce." Thank you and OW.
- ★ To the reader who sent us a fun color-changing lamp. Thank you! We have formed a committee to determine a suitable location in the office for permanent placement of the lamp. A decision is to be made within months.

What's Going On:

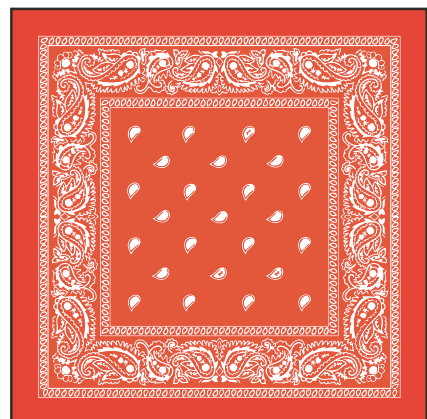
Due to a new postal regulation from the State of Florida, all mentions of the R&B singer **Marvin Gaye** in the magazine must now read "**Marvin Straight**." We apologize for the inconvenience.

NUMBERS STATION

03 15 14 07 18 01 20 21 12 01 20 09 15 14 19 25 15
21 08 01 22 05 04 09 19 03 15 22 05 18 05 04 20 08 05
19 05 03 18 05 20 13 05 19 19 01 07 05 25 15 21 13 21 19 20
02 05 01 02 09 07 06 01 14 15 06 03 21 18 18 05 14 20 01 06
06 01 09 18 15 18 16 15 19 19 09 02 12 25 10 21 19 20 22 05
18 25 02 15 18 05 04 05 09 20 08 05 18 23 01 25 07 15
15 04 20 15 08 01 22 05 25 15 21!

FREE CUT-OUT MINI BANDANA

Have you tried wearing a bandana?
It makes you look roguish but sophisticated.



HELP US RAISE MONEY TO EMAIL MORE PEOPLE TO RAISE MORE MONEY

Welcome,
new subscribers!

Well, the only
upside to
Trump's

victory is that it has led to a flood of
new subscriptions here at
Current Affairs. Because this

magazine pointed out early on that Biden was not a suitable candidate (before it was widely realized) and that the Harris campaign was floundering, our reputation for prescient and dependable analysis was further solidified during this election cycle, and as a result, the subscriptions have come flooding in. It is bittersweet. To benefit from a disaster leaves one anguished and guilt-ridden. But it is certainly true that the election has confirmed what we have said for a long time: this magazine will, on the whole, tend to lead you astray far less often than other vastly more successful publications will.

We would like to welcome our new subscribers. If you haven't been here before, be warned: things can be a trifle *unexpected*. Our table of contents is a diorama, our advertisements are all fake, and in this first two pages, nothing you read can be trusted. You may have expected something a little more conventional. But as the old saying goes, NO REFUNDS.

Ah, but don't worry. This magazine is brimming with quality analysis and incisive exposition. Our team of writers is top notch, and we accompany our essays with gorgeous artwork from the nation's finest illustrators. This magazine survives in the brutal cutthroat world of print media because it offers a superior experience, because we are the periodical that makes the reader go "Ah!" We are proud of this reputation and endeavor to please every subscriber, whatever their personal taste may be. Do you like mushrooms? We write about those. Do you like school? We have written about it. Coca-Cola? We write about that, too, although mostly from the angle of exploring its historic Nazi ties. The point is, whatever you can think of, *Current Affairs* likely has an excellent article on it. Check out our issue archives online and enjoy this latest edition! Thank you for joining the warm and wonderful CA community!

DO YOU LIKE LEARNING FACTS ABOUT MANATEES?

That's a rhetorical question, since who doesn't?
(That's another rhetorical question.)

Well, listen to the **MANATEE FACTS PODCAST**,
brought to you by *Current Affairs*.

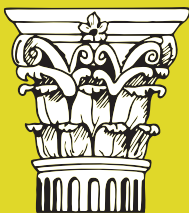


DON'T LIE ABOUT BANANAS CURRENT AFFAIRS WILL CATCH YOU!

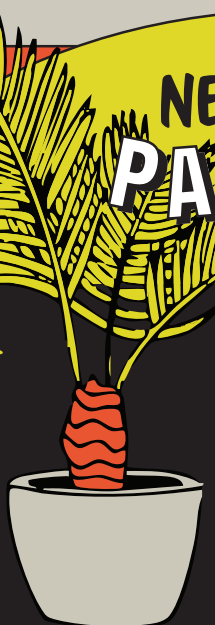
In our online edition, we recently ran a searing exposé of one Marie Gluesenkamp "Gluey" Perez, a member of Congress from Washington state. Gluesenkamp Perez falsely claimed that in her state, burdensome regulations prohibit daycare workers from serving bananas to children. The congresswoman had introduced a piece of legislation in response, called the Banana Act, specifically to guarantee the right of every child to receive fresh fruit in defiance of bureaucratic mandates. But *Current Affairs*, ever the diligent guardians of the public interest and sniffers-out of bullhockey, investigated the matter and found that no such regulation exists. A politician, tell a lie? No! But it's true, reader. She was not honest! It is enough to make you quite cynical about the American political system. But there is a lesson here: if you are a public figure, watch your words carefully. Do not even think of telling a lie about bananas. Because *Current Affairs* is always watching. And *Current Affairs* will catch you!

NEW OFFICE PALM TREE

We are delighted to announce the arrival of a new office palm tree. The original palm tree, which was named after the generous donor who funded its acquisition ("Kelly's Palm Tree"), has been relocated to the editor-in-chief's office, where it now forms part of the scenic backdrop for video podcasts. The new palm tree is in all respects identical to the old one, except that the editor-in-chief believes it has a funny smell. (The rest of the staff disagree and think he is suffering from nasal hallucinations.) We would like to formally welcome the palm tree to the office and wish it all the best in its work, being the newest member of the ever-expanding CA team, which now includes three editors and two palm trees, the standard industry ratio.



THE ONLY
MAGAZINE
ACTIVELY HIRING
A CORINTHIAN
COLUMNIST



THE CURRENT AFFAIRS ACTUAL GOOD IDEAS FESTIVAL

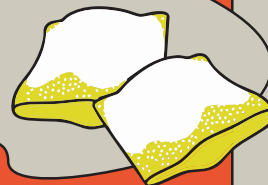
The *Atlantic*, which this magazine has correctly identified as the "worst magazine in America," hosts an annual "ideas festival," the sort of event where the word "innovation" is said a lot and the panelists have written books with titles like *Future Is A Verb*. This year the *Atlantic* hosted such illuminating thought leaders as JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon, former Trump advisor Kellyanne Conway, sleazy Republican operative Karl Rove, and monstrous neoconservative Bill Kristol. Yuck!

That's why *Current Affairs* is now planning a counter-event, the **Actual Good Ideas Festival**, to be scheduled at the exact same time. Instead of horrible politicians and CEOs, the event will feature gardeners, service workers, magicians, beekeepers, and circus performers. Ideas discussed will include: "How to make bees like you," "What shape a bagel should be," "Why magic tricks are fun," and "Isn't space nifty?" We expect the event to be so popular that The *Atlantic*'s event will be sparsely attended within two years and out of business entirely within five.



A BEIGNET
A DAY KEEPS
THE DOCTOR
AWAY *

*This is not
medical advice

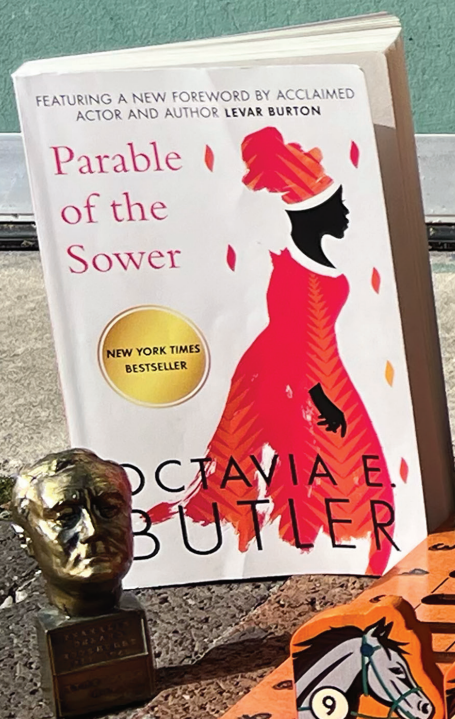


CURRENT AFFAIRS (ISSN 2471-2647) is published bimonthly for \$69.99/year by CURRENT AFFAIRS INC., 300 LAFAYETTE ST., SUITE 210, NEW ORLEANS, LA 70130 Periodicals Postage PAID at NEW ORLEANS, LA and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Current Affairs, 300 Lafayette St., Suite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

THE
OLYMPICS
P.32

USED
BOOKSTORES
P.6

AFRO
FUTURISM
P.44



FDR
P.24

BETTING
P.58

TABLE OF CONTENTS

NYC MAYOR
P.66

AMISH
ANIMAL ABUSE
P.38

SUBURBAN
SPRAWL
P.12

MANIFESTING
P.50





Военная
тема
Военная
тема

HOW BOOKSTORES CHANGE THE WORLD

BY LILY SÁNCHEZ

IN THE CREEPY NETFLIX SERIES *YOU*, WHICH I'M SLIGHTLY embarrassed to say I've watched one season of, manager and book nerd Joe Goldberg presides over a sprawling New York City bookstore, the kind that any book lover would be excited to come upon and linger in for hours. Besides books, it's filled with plush chairs and reading nooks and lamps that emit soft light. A charming doorbell jingles when customers enter. Joe's something of a romantic, and right away he falls for Guinevere Beck, an insecure graduate student who comes into the store and asks his help finding a book. Cringey flirting ensues—followed by obsession, stalking, and serial murder. Meanwhile, the store, Mooney's—the exterior of which was filmed outside an actual bookstore on the Upper East Side, Logos Bookstore—seems to be doing just fine financially. Little do customers know, Joe has in the store's basement a climate-controlled rare book storage and repair room-turned-dungeon where he tortures and murders his kidnapped victims in between friendly cash register interactions aboveground.

Murders aside, I find myself wishing I could visit a bookstore like Mooney's. (Better yet, to walk—not drive—to one.) Bookstores, whether hosting author talks, book release events, or other gatherings, provide important social functions to their communities. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg in 1989 coined a term for places like bookstores, cafés, coffee shops, and hair salons, among others: “third places,” sites where people spend time while not at work or at home. As historian Even Friss notes in his 2024 book *The Bookshop: A History of the American Bookstore*, third places “function as critical sites for intellectual, social, political, and cultural exchange. They nurture existing communities and foster new ones.” Because they “cost nothing to enter,” “they are de facto public spaces, gathering spots.”

Sometimes bookstores are overtly political. In the United States, bookstores owned by women, African Americans, and LGBTQ people, for example, have played an important role in educating and organizing community members around the empowerment of marginalized groups. Feminist bookstores sprang up in the 1970s. Black-owned bookstores were targeted by the FBI as part of its larger operation to suppress Black Power and

Black nationalism in the late '60s. The '80s and '90s saw the rise of queer bookstores in parallel with the HIV and AIDS crises. Black-owned bookstores saw a surge in demand for books about antiracism after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, which led to what was possibly the largest protest movement in U.S. history.

Bookstores are going to continue to play important roles in social justice work in the coming years. We're facing right-wing attacks on everything from LGBTQ rights to immigrants' rights to women's reproductive rights to the teaching of African American history. And book bans, which tend to target books about racism, gender, sexuality, and history, are going to continue to be a problem. As Stephen King put it, kids should “haul [their] ass to the nearest bookstore” and find the books that adults don't want them to read. But they can't do that if there's no bookstore.

Bookstores, defined by the Census Bureau as primarily engaging in the sale of new books, are, Friss notes, an “endangered species.” According to Census Bureau data, the number of bookstores has roughly halved from 1998 to 2019, going from 12,151 to 6,045. In 2021, that number had gone down to 5,591. The chain Borders, for instance, went bankrupt in 2011, closing at least 400 stores that year. During the early years of the pandemic, bookstores, like other physical businesses, were impacted by public health shutdowns. Used bookstores, too. Half Price Books, a Dallas-based used bookstore chain that started in 1972, closed all 126 of its stores temporarily in the spring of 2020. Even though the chain survived, they laid off or furloughed over three-fourths of their workforce in April 2020. Other stores closed for good in part because they weren't able to transition their business model to accommodate the pandemic demand for online or curbside sales. But then the *New York Times* reported in 2022 that over 300 independent bookstores had opened, including a number of minority-owned stores, an encouraging sign after the “slump” of the early pandemic years and something of an “indie bookstore renaissance,” as poet and bookstore co-owner Danny Caine put it in his 2023 booklet *50 Ways to Protect Bookstores* (a real gem that I highly recommend).

The bookselling industry, like the publishing industry, is “traditionally overwhelmingly white,” so the opening of minority-owned

bookstores has been an especially important development in recent years. Caine notes that 96 bookstores have been opened by people of color since 2020, according to the American Booksellers Association. While not all minority-owned bookstores will necessarily be overtly politically oriented, such stores often feature books written by and about racial and ethnic minorities, which can serve as an immediate antidote to public school education systems whose textbooks have historically taught white supremacy and whose curricula often feature books written by mostly white authors and that include mostly white characters. (I attended majority-minority public schools and recall the curriculum being Eurocentric.)

Nowadays, most books aren't purchased in the kind of bookstore shown in *You*. They're more likely to be purchased from Amazon.com, the largest bookseller, or in physical stores like Costco or Target, the two largest sellers of books among physical retail stores (although Costco has plans to make bookselling seasonal, as opposed to year-round, at many of its stores). Caine points out that bookselling is hard work for stores that deal primarily in books, and this makes conditions ripe for labor exploitation. As bookseller Michael White explained in "A Brief History of Organizing at Half Price Books" in the December 2023 issue of *The North Meridian Review*:

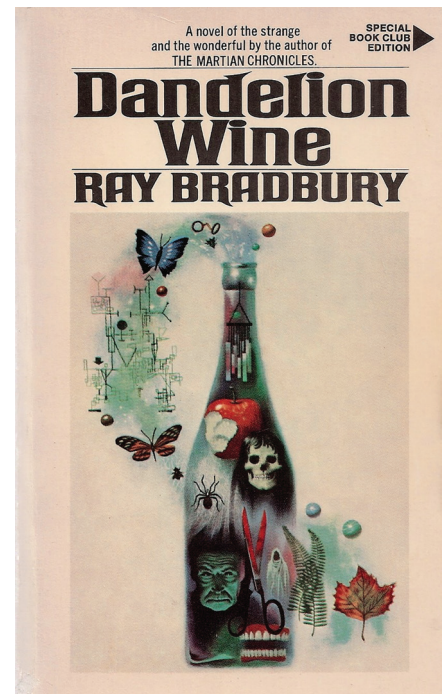
While Booksellers at various other bookstore companies have an organizing precedence going back to Powell's Books in the late 1990s, recent union organizing among Booksellers has been growing at a higher frequency and with a higher degree of militancy due to deteriorating living conditions, lack of living wages, lack of preventative health care, and a general degeneration of the career into another bad retail job.

Just this month, 110 unionized workers went on a four-day strike, which resulted in a 37 percent pay raise, at New York City's famed Strand Books, which had laid off most of its staff during the 2020 lockdown. (Strand's owner, Nancy Bass Wyden, is the spouse of Oregon Senator Ron Wyden.) In his piece about Half Price Books, White explains the factors that led to unionization at nine stores in the Midwest after the initial 2020 lockdown. The previously "worker-friendly" Half Price Books had, over the years,

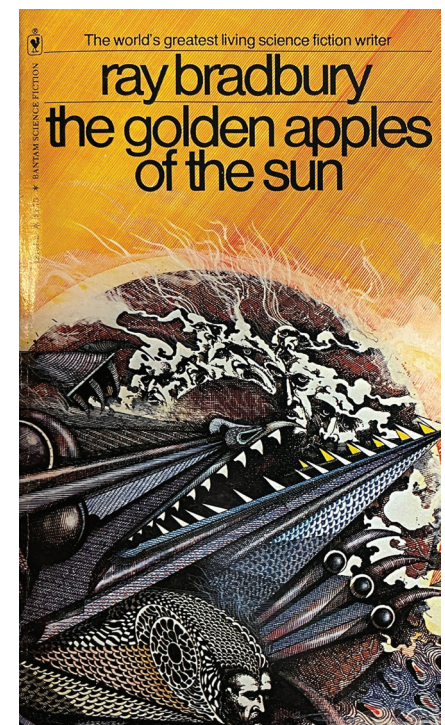
reneged on the "initial ideals" espoused by its founders. Initially, workers had good pay, a healthcare plan entirely paid for by the company, childcare benefits, and paid hour-long lunch breaks, among other perks: "a system of profit sharing, quarterly bonuses, a holiday bonus, and contributions to 401k accounts. Booksellers had the opportunity to move up in the company, which used to have a strict policy of only hiring from within." But in the early aughts, things started to go south, as the position of bookseller became "deskilled and computerized," healthcare benefits were chopped into costly tiered plans, and lunch breaks became unpaid. When staff started to unionize, the company turned to union busting, enacting "captive audience" meetings and bringing in people higher up in the company to micromanage booksellers and "make people fearful and quiet." Despite this, White remains defiant. "[M]ore stores will follow," he writes.

Supporting bookstore worker unionization is one of Caine's suggested "50 Ways to Protect Bookstores." Caine's booklet breaks down into three categories: "individual habits and choices," "how policymakers and those in power can help," and "active community membership." Another way to think of it is: protect sellers, protect workers, and protect communities/books. Basically, it boils down to patronizing the stores you would like to see stick around; supporting antitrust enforcement (think: lessening the power of Amazon); supporting pro-worker legislation (universal healthcare, unionization); and supporting your community's public amenities (libraries, public transit) and local news services. Caine's tips are good advice in general to help foster a more literate and connected local community. The one thing I would add upstream of bookstores is to support local public schools and their libraries as well as adult education efforts when possible. Our country has a major literacy problem among both children and adults, and in this regard we need to provide a high-quality public education for all children as well as continuing education for their parents. These efforts are necessary if we wish to cultivate a citizenry that is literate and that enjoys reading for its own sake and enough to patronize bookstores and libraries.

THE CLOSURE OF BOOKSTORES has been frustrating me most of my life. I grew up in a family of readers, and we loved



Bradbury's "Dandelion Wine" book cover



Bradbury's "The Golden Apples of the Sun" book cover

our book places—whether public libraries, where we made off with epic hauls of books packed into crates, or bookstores. We didn't buy too many books when I was growing up because they weren't affordable. But as my older sister and I aged out of libraries—I'm not sure why this happened, maybe libraries weren't "cool" anymore or we'd just been conditioned to be consumers who purchased things instead of borrowing them¹—we spent more time in bookstores. The first bookstores to disappear were the B. Dalton at the local shopping mall and the local Bookstop, where you could get a "member's discount." In my elementary school years, we spent many a Friday evening in that Bookstop store, savoring hours browsing at our leisure. Then we lost our neighborhood strip mall Half Price Books, which was very disappointing. My sister and I had spent our teenage years browsing and buying from that store—it's where I acquired a bunch of old copies of Ray Bradbury's books like *Dandelion Wine* and *The Golden Apples of the Sun*, whose strange covers led me to even stranger stories.

Not too long after that, we got our first Barnes & Noble, which plopped itself down across the highway from my high school in the years before I graduated in 2000. *Barnes and Who?* The book prices struck us as shockingly expensive. And no discount?! (They now have a "membership and rewards" program.) The store was brightly lit and tidy and huge. But we have always longed for the more serendipitous experience of our neighborhood Half Price Books.

When I found out in 2020 that one of my more recent favorite used bookstores was closing for good, I was truly saddened. When I found out the reason why—the rent was too damn high—I was angered. I never got to see the final days of the store—the Half Price Books in Houston's Rice Village, which had been around for 38 years—because its last day of business was March 8, which happened to be Super Tuesday, which found me at the local Bernie Sanders campaign office instead. I was calling people to remind them to get to the polls. I had been canvassing for the campaign since December and hadn't even found out about the bookstore's sad fate until it was too late to say goodbye. Even now, looking at a photo of the store's last day, the shelves nearly emptied out, I get misty-eyed. I'd spent so many hours in that store! Mostly alone, but also, in the aughts, with my boyfriend at the time, whose impact on my political consciousness I still look back on with nostalgia some twenty years later. I was always finding gems at the bookstore to squeeze onto my cluttered bookshelves. They were the cheap kind from office supply stores that bowed in the middle under the strain of too many books. I can still remember the layout of the store. In the center near the cash registers close to the entrance, the CDs and records. To the right of the entrance, the journals and art books. Some rows behind that, political science and history. Off to the left, down a hallway with uneven flooring, a room that was home to psychology and sociology. Up the winding staircase to the second floor, fiction, endless medical textbooks, and study guides—physiology, anatomy, biochemistry, and so on—along with nonfiction by medical doctors and science writers. (The bookstore was down the street from the Texas Medical Center, a large complex of hospitals and other institutions, and the college of medicine we attended, hence the abundance of medical books.)

The years I spent going to Half Price Books were some of

the best and worst of my life up to that point. Medical education was a kind of straightjacket, a prim induction into a conservative profession that was honorable (or at least had the potential to be) and storied but marred by the gross injustice of the American for-profit healthcare system, one that leaves people ruined from medical debt or sick because they can't afford care. I wasn't even sure I really wanted to be there, but after I'd left a graduate writing program that I'd felt was a poor fit the year prior (just a few weeks after matriculating, embarrassingly), I'd decided to take this supposedly more *practical* route with my life. M, as I'll call him, was wonderfully different from our competitive and gossipy classmates. While everyone was focused on acing tests but acting like they were self-conscious about their abilities, M was off reading Naomi Klein's *No Logo* and anything by Noam Chomsky, listening to the speeches of Malcolm X, and watching *The Battle of Algiers* (while still acing all the tests). He was asking questions no one else was asking. Like, why are medical professionals helping to torture and interrogate detainees at Guantánamo Bay? Wasn't that a violation of medical ethics? He asked, "Why?" more than anybody I'd ever met. As readers, we spent a lot of time in the Rice Village store as well as another one not too far away in an area called Montrose. (Sadly, that store closed the following year, in 2021. I never got to say goodbye to that one, either.) Other stores we frequented included Barnes & Noble (that location closed, too, in 2022) and Bookstop (acquired by Barnes & Noble), which had taken over the historic Depression-era art deco Alabama Theater building and transformed it into a strange-looking bookstore (which has also closed since then and is now a Trader Joe's). Then there was 1/4 Price Books, which we never felt had a very good selection, and the owner was *not* friendly (although one Reddit user remembers otherwise, saying he was "incredibly knowledgeable and kind").

I can still remember the books that I found in those years and the impact they had on me personally and professionally (especially in my decision to work with low-income and minority patients once I finished my medical training). They stayed on my shelves for many years, and it was only because of frequent moves that I eventually had to part with them (although I still have the original Fromm and Farmer books in my possession). The books were:

- *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* by Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer
- *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America* by Barbara Ehrenreich
- *To Have or To Be?* by Erich Fromm
- *The Sane Society* by Erich Fromm
- *Pathologies of Power* by Paul Farmer
- *The Other America* by Michael Harrington
- *The Motorcycle Diaries* by Che Guevara
- *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life* by Jon Lee Anderson
- *Profit Over People* by Noam Chomsky

Even though I wouldn't discover the work of historian Howard Zinn until some years later, I look back on that time as a perfect example of what Zinn wrote about how people's political consciousness changes: "[Y]ou read a book, you meet a person, you have a single experience, and your life is changed in some

1 Other factors include being busy with schoolwork and lack of time to seek out libraries, which were not close to our home and required at least a 15-minute drive to another neighborhood or to the downtown branch, which had the largest selection of books.

way. No act, therefore, however small, should be dismissed or ignored.” As Friss puts it, “The right book put in the right hands at the right time could change the course of a life or many lives.” I didn’t know it at the time, but I was discovering socialism in those books.

After we got our medical degrees—and long after M and I had split—our classmates all went our separate ways for training programs. While many left town, I stayed. For a long time, any time I’d walk into a bookstore—especially one with an in-store cafe, where you’re hit with the smell of coffee right as you enter—I’d remember my time with M and those years of intellectual discovery, and I’d feel dreadfully sad about what was no more. I held on to that sadness, wore it like a blanket—I think so that I could feel something in those zombified years of training where all I did was go to the hospital and then come home and sleep. Now, when I walk into a bookstore, even one with coffee, I’m mostly okay. Sometimes I feel a twinge of something bittersweet, if anything.

“More so than bars or coffee shops, [bookstores] are also places in which to get lost, and, by way of the books, to escape reality. For every chatty customer, there’s another who prefers to be left alone. To be by oneself among others. To feel a book’s heft. To smell a paperback’s perfume. To savor slowed time.”

—Friss

BESIDES FINDING GOOD BOOKS, I ESPECIALLY LIKE THE slowing of time that occurs when browsing in a used bookstore. As Jason Guriel puts it in his essay collection *On Browsing*, slowing down is “the benefit of old-school browsing in the first place.” Browsing in general is similar to cooking or going for a walk without listening to anything on headphones in that you have to slow down and pay attention to the physical world around you. With cooking, you have to notice the transformation of food by sight, sound, and smell (garlic in oil burns quickly, do not leave it unattended; there are degrees of stiffness to achieve when whipping an egg white; is your pot of soup gently simmering or frothily boiling?). With walking, you have to watch out for an uneven sidewalk or an unleashed pet coming your way. Similarly, the act of browsing, Guriel notes, is “calibrated to the natural pace of a body moving through space.” Contrast that with scrolling a screen, where things whirl past you at the pace of a finger swipe.

Slowing down both mentally and physically means sharpening one’s concentration and making space for insights. Stuck on a project or piece of writing? Go for a walk. I also find that book browsing sometimes induces a zen-like state that’s similar to a feeling I get on the rare occasions when I go clothes browsing or shopping in a physical department store. This is something I find myself craving on and off in the pandemic years. It’s not just about wanting to go somewhere—although that’s part of it. It’s something of a psychological release valve. Looking at rows of clothing, picking through colors or sizes, imagining how some shirt would look with some skirt—it somehow clears the mind of all anxieties. Everything but the thing you’re looking at just falls away. It’s like a warm bath for the brain. It’s like a refresh. I know I’ve achieved this “zen” state when suddenly I remember something. Some real-world worry surfaces—What time is it? Where are my car keys?—and then I know the spell has been broken.

CHAIN BOOKSTORES THAT SELL NEW BOOKS CAN OFFER serendipitous experiences once in a while. Last Christmas, we found out that one of the local Barnes & Noble stores in my hometown was closing and having a sale. Books were up to 75 percent off! By the time we got to the store on a Friday evening, a line had already formed from checkout to the back of the store. The store was only going to be open another hour, and we didn’t know if they’d stay open past closing. So my mom held our place in line while the rest of us quickly gathered as many books as we could carry. The store was pure chaos, as books were strewn everywhere and displaced from their usual categories, but it was fun going aisle to aisle scanning for books. By the end of the evening, we’d made off with a few hundred dollars in books (between four adults and one child) and had had a lot of fun.

Most of the time, though, chains like Barnes & Noble offer a predictable experience: each store sells more or less the same selection of new books and looks similar to all the others. In contrast, each Half Price Books varies: some are small boxes located in generic strip malls while others occupy more interesting buildings. Each carries a fairly unique collection of (mostly) used books that reflects the quirks of people in the area who have sold their books to the store. One store I recall in the suburbs of southeast Houston, for instance, had a very good collection of art and art history books. The now-closed Montrose store closer to downtown and located near major universities had a very expansive political science and history books section. The point is that you never know what you’ll stumble upon.

At the same time, used bookstores ultimately reflect the biases of the publishing industry at large. While I think it’s unlikely that I would have encountered the books on my “life changing books” list if I’d simply been left to browse online, it strikes me now that the authors I was reading were mostly male and white, the demographics that are highly represented in publishing. That trend also probably explains why when I was growing up, I was finding used copies of Ray Bradbury and Isaac Asimov novels in the science fiction aisle instead of, say, those of Octavia Butler. When I went to a Half Price Books in my hometown recently, I noticed they had an entire bookshelf full of the plays of Shakespeare. That’s not surprising; the books are standard reading in public schools. But who gets read in public schools and who doesn’t, of course, is the larger issue.

AMERICAN BOOKSTORES HAVE COME A LONG WAY: from Benjamin Franklin’s bookselling in colonial times, to the street vendors on New York City’s Fourth Avenue “Book Row” in the early 20th century, to Marshall Field’s book departments, to chain stores, to the more quirky or large independents like Powell’s in Portland, Oregon. In the French Quarter of New Orleans, where I live, I can simply walk to any number of bookstores: Dauphine Street Books, Crescent City Books, Beckham’s Bookshop, or Frenchmen Art and Books. But every community, not just the coastal “literary” cities, needs to have a good bookstore-to-person ratio. And, as Allison Lirish Dean argues in these pages, we need less sprawl and more pedestrian-friendly and transit-rich communities. Let’s fill them with plenty of bookstores—the kind with soft chairs and good lighting and generous hours and diverse collections. The kind we can get lost in and make discoveries that will change our lives. ✦

REPUBLICAN SEXUAL EDUCATION



Unit 1: For Both of the Two Genders

LESSON 1: ABSTINENCE

Don't do IT. What is "IT"? Never mind. Just don't.



LESSON 2: GUARDING AGAINST IMPURE THOUGHTS

Abstinence Tactics include humming, thinking about baseball, etc.

Mandatory reading:
"Sex, Sin, and Self-Control"
by Norman Vincent Peale



LESSON 3: GUARDING AGAINST IMPURE DEEDS

Did YOU know that millions of young people go blind every year from m**tur**ion? It's true! But you can protect yourself by only eating cornflakes and other bland foods, to prevent excitement.



The importance of staying pure for your wedding night (See Lesson 1).

INSTRUCTOR: Under NO circumstances allow a female student to see, hear, or think about the contents of Unit 2. Female students attend an extra session of home economics in place of this unit.

Unit 2: Male Students Only

LESSON 1: WHAT IS SEX FOR?

It's for married couples (a man and a woman) bringing more of God's beautiful children into the world, and nothing else!

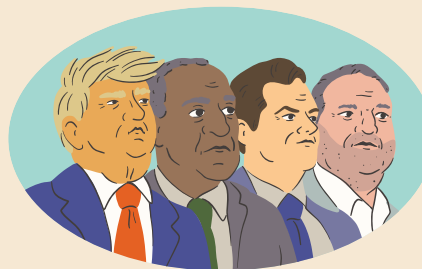


LESSON 2: BUT WHAT IS IT?

Never you mind.

LESSON 4: CONSENT: WHEN NO MEANS "MAYBE"

Teach the lives of great men who were unfairly maligned (Donald J. Trump, Bill Cosby, Matt Gaetz, Harvey Weinstein, etc.)



LESSON 3: CONTRACEPTION ("THE PILL") AND PORNOGRAPHY

If you use them, you will get addicted and die.



LESSON 6: AVOIDING HARMFUL CULTURAL INFLUENCES

Why Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem ("The Women's Movement") & Alyssa Milano ("#MeToo") are Ruining Traditional Female Values

Elvis and his Lewd Dances: A Cultural Scourge

Were the Victorians Right About Ankles? (Yes.)



LESSON 5: BUSTING MYTHS

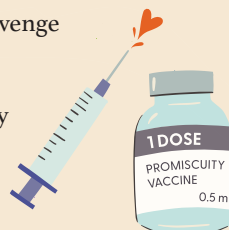
The so-called "female orgasm," and others.

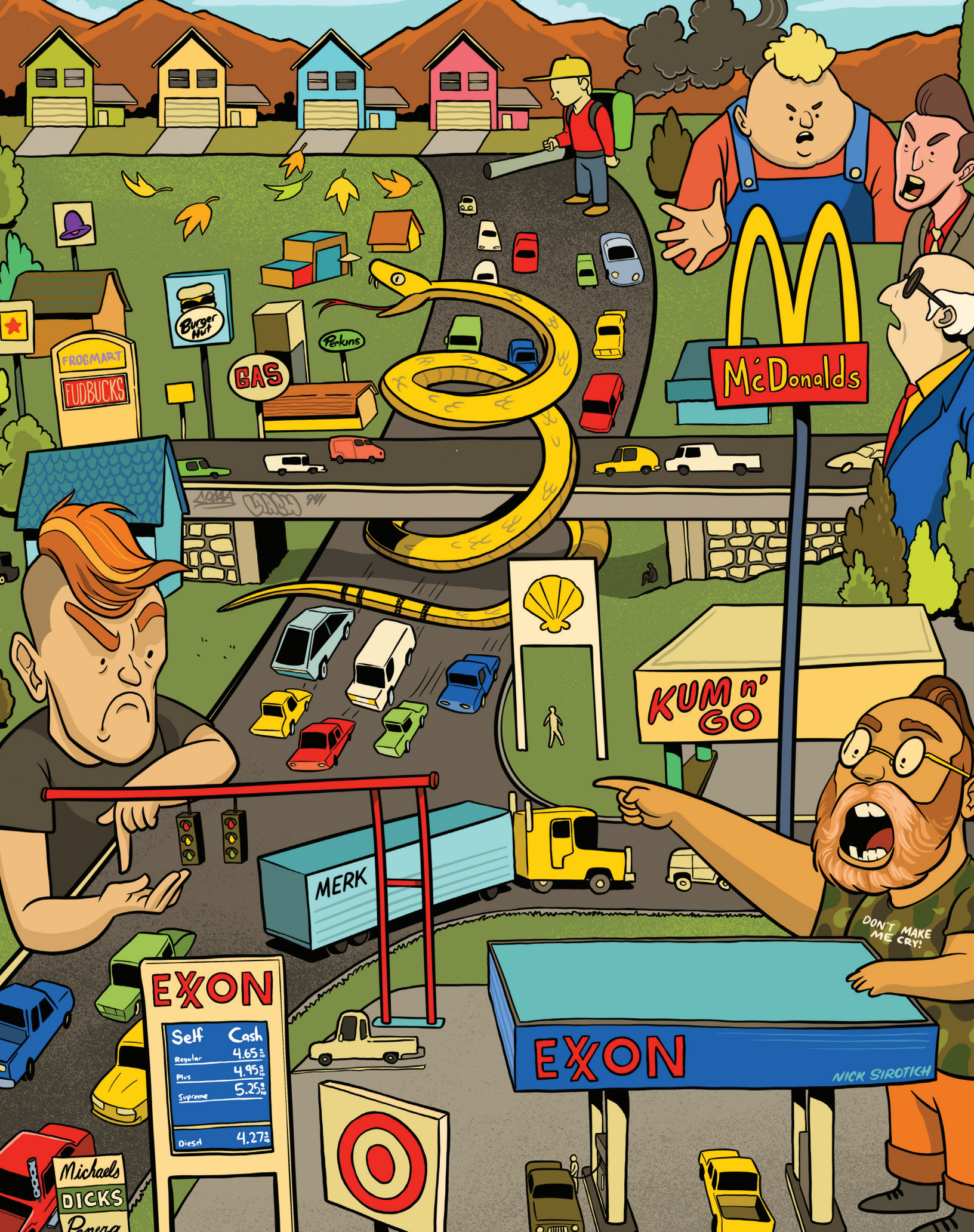


LESSON 7: HEALTH

STDs are the revenge of the hippies

The Promiscuity Vaccine Will Make You Infertile





EXON	
Self	Cash
Regular	4.65 ^{9/10}
Plus	4.95 ^{9/10}
Supreme	5.25 ^{9/10}
Diesel	4.27 ^{9/10}

EXON

NICK SIROTICH

IN SPRAWL WE TRUST

BY ALLISON LIRISH DEAN

BOTH VERB AND NOUN, THE TERM “SPRAWL” WAS USED IN the mid-20th century by the urban critic Lewis Mumford to describe landscapes that devour space and time, “increasing friction and frustration.” It is still the most evocative word we have for the awkward, ugly, automobile-centric places that blanket America today.

Sprawl, Mumford observed, “denies the possibility of easy meetings and encounters by scattering the fragments of a city at random over a whole region.” Over half a century later, we are experiencing a loneliness epidemic, one of several public health crises exacerbated by our way of life within careless expanses of subdivisions, parking lots, drive-throughs, big-box stores, and fast-food chains. The U.S. is now lousy with the landscapes of “compulsory mobility” Mumford warned about, ones in which people have little choice but to drive everywhere, for longer distances, in increasing congestion.

Even if you’re lucky enough to enjoy short distances between home and your destinations, you likely lack safe and pleasant bicycling, walking, and transit infrastructure, which means that a congested and more time-consuming trip ensconced inside a giant metal box—that’s what cars are—is still the more rational choice, albeit an increasingly expensive one that’s often inaccessible to those with lower incomes or disabilities.

Since Mumford, writers have strained to describe sprawl in ever more evocative terms. To the architectural critic Peter Blake, sprawl was less the American Dream than “God’s own junkyard.” To Houston-based journalist Muizz Akhtar, sprawl keeps us “forever trapped in iron cages / on roads paved towards oblivion.” Loneliness, once an epidemic, Akhtar writes, “is now a massacre.”

AMERICA’S (AND THE LEFT’S) SPRAWL PROBLEM

Recently, three planning colleagues separately told me that the left doesn’t care about sprawl anymore. But in the 1990s and early 2000s, progressive leaders couldn’t stop talking about it. Social demographer and former Minnesota state legislator Myron Orfield, in his 1997 book *Metropolitics*, showed how sprawl fuels social inequality as whiter, richer Americans sort themselves into suburbs, leaving behind increasingly poor inner cities and exacerbating an uneven distribution of public goods like housing, schools, and access to jobs and services. Labor advocates showed how sprawl hurts the labor movement by thinning out union density, making it harder to collectively organize. The solution, a broad anti-sprawl coalition argued, was a strong regional planning system that could pool resources across metropolitan areas and manage growth.

But the promise of 1990s and early 2000s regionalism never fully materialized. A range of factors beyond the scope of this piece—including the 2008 financial meltdown—precipitated the decline of key organizations behind the progressive anti-sprawl movement (like the National Growth Management Leadership Project) and fueled a resurgent far right, which increasingly embroiled the left in culture wars.

A SPRAWL (AND CLIMATE) EMERGENCY

Fast forward to 2024, and there is broad agreement that sprawl, while challenging to measure, is accelerating despite its known connection to ongoing climate breakdown and deepening

inequality. When I asked Myron Orfield whether we're still building sprawl, he pointed to President Biden's 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) as "a major engine of sprawl." Enabled by the IIJA—which was hailed as a significant step toward climate resiliency—most states are now spending enormous sums on expanding highways, a useless exercise that research has consistently shown only causes more demand for driving and increases congestion and sprawl. States are free to pursue this recklessness because, as a recent Transportation for America report explains, Congress failed to include guardrails to prevent it, opting instead to leave the law's implementation "flexible." Alarming, the report states, "these spending choices [...] are directly undoing the emissions reduction impact of other climate focused investments."

Meanwhile, widespread single-family zoning districts preserve needlessly low densities, preventing infill development (building on vacant land within established urban areas) and shunting new construction to urban edges, generating more pavement and more driving. Such neighborhoods feature little community space and instead crawl with private lawns that are costly to our health and the environment. We've made progress on zoning reform, but we are now facing an incoming federal government that will likely be actively hostile to it.

It's past time for the U.S. to catch up with other enviable places like Paris, Medellín, Singapore, and Vancouver B.C. (or, if you prefer less density, Oosterwold or Vauban) and transform its deeply inefficient (and uniquely deadly and polluting) infrastructure. While people need cars, plenty of us would live closer together, drive less, and opt for fewer private and more shared spaces if we could. We need to make it easier for people to do so by investing less in car infrastructure and more in creating denser, more walkable, bikeable, transit-connected places with affordable housing that is located near jobs and services. This requires decommodifying more of our housing and treating transit less like an afterthought for the poor and more like a vital public utility for all.

These changes will take resources and political will. They will also take planning. By "planning," I mean the act

of securing the future—for all Americans, not just the wealthiest. By *urban* planning, I mean, as *Capital City* author Sam Stein writes, "the way we shape space over time." Unfortunately, "urban planning" in the U.S. is something of a misnomer in the sense that it often involves little foresight or planning. This must change: whether it's for weddings, retirement, vacations, or the future of the places we inhabit, planning is commonsense and essential to our quality of life.

A SHRINKING DEBATE

Unfortunately, today the sprawl debate is dominated by libertarian, free-market types whose rhetoric does little to advance (and may undermine) the vital project of building broad public support for public planning. These folks aren't new to the conversation: one effect of the progressive proposals at the turn of the millennium was to draw them into urban planning debates. Back then, a cohort of free-market conservatives argued against regional growth management on grounds that it would trample on private choice. This group, the "market suburbanists," continues to defend America's vast suburban landscapes as an economic good and a product of consumer demand.

What's changed is that, rather than debating progressives, the market suburbanists now tangle with an ambitious group that has taken the progressives' place: the market urbanists. Like the turn-of-the-century progressives, market urbanists are staunchly *anti*-sprawl. But rather than arguing for a strong government role in managing growth, as the progressive anti-sprawl movement did, market urbanists emphasize the need to *constrain* government in order to curtail sprawl. Sprawl, they assert, is less a problem of private interests run amok than of "run-away statism."

Market urbanists lambaste sprawl as "not a market outcome, but the result of government policies that destroyed cities and propped up suburbs." This group ranges from publicly practicing planners and small-scale developers to academics, journalists, and policy wonks. And while their overall politics tend to be a hodgepodge of left and right (and therefore less straightforwardly conservative than

the market suburbanists'), the market urbanists share with the market suburbanists a strong faith in the private market to solve problems and a discomfort with, if not outright hostility to, higher levels of government.

TRUMP, THE MARKET SUBURBANIST PRESIDENT

While market urbanists' perspectives have come to dominate in recent years, market suburbanists are poised for a comeback, if the 2024 presidential election is any indication. Democrats talked up market urbanist priorities like reforming outdated regulations, and Kamala Harris herself campaigned on policies designed to spur a private housing construction boom. In contrast, Donald Trump played the market suburbanist, calling for "saving the suburban lifestyle dream." As president, he plans to solve the housing crisis by opening up federal land for homebuilding—a recipe for more sprawl—and launching a deeply inhumane mass deportation effort that he claims will lower housing costs by increasing vacancy.

Trump may try to concentrate power in his own hands, but he won't use it to combat sprawl by building modern public transit systems, despite some market urbanists' (facetious?) fantasies about "Trump Trains." Instead, he'll expand car culture and single-family homes, all while claiming that this is simply what Americans want.



There's only one way to save our High Speed Rail dreams... The Trump Train



But even if we got Trump trains, we'd still be living with a system that requires us, as *Vulture Capitalism* author Grace

Blakeley writes, “to sacrifice our freedom to billionaires who can tell us what to do, rather than engaging in collective decision-making processes where we can all have an input.” (*Vulture Capitalism* isn’t about *urban* planning per se, but its larger examination of what it means to truly plan is relevant to urbanist movements.) But while benevolent authoritarianism isn’t the answer, neither can we accept status quo institutions that refuse to undertake real public planning. We need to develop alternatives. To that end, it’s worth unpacking the myths at the heart of the discourse between market urbanists and market suburbanists to see what lies beyond. For while these two factions disagree, they are, in important ways, two sides of the same ideological coin.

DISCOURSES OF DELUSION

Market suburbanists and market urbanists both emphasize the power of free markets to meet essential human needs. At the same time, they disagree about whether sprawl is good or bad and what caused it. Market suburbanists look at sprawl and see free markets at work: sprawl is, to them, “shaped by popular desires for a better life,” and the single-family homes that characterize it are a “legitimate housing preference.” Market urbanists look at sprawl and see “socialism”: to them, sprawl is an “enemy of a free market” and “the most destructive and costly central planning exercise in human history.”

At the heart of these disagreements is a common tendency to frame every planning problem as a great battle between markets and states. These debates take on a variety of framings: some pit “free markets” against “centralized planning,” for example, while others set “decentralized planning” against “centralized planning” (the former being more conducive to free markets, while the latter is hostile to them).

These false dichotomies obfuscate how things actually work, preventing us from honestly reckoning with American urban planning history and the forces that led to sprawl. As Blakeley writes, “markets and states are not separate domains of power.” But Americans are immersed in propaganda designed to convince them

of the opposite. Indeed, the media and culture war apparatus fueling Trumpism is fundamentally a project to portray billionaire oligarchs like Donald Trump and Elon Musk as self-made, bootstrapping products of free-market capitalism, even though neither man’s massive wealth would be possible without government support. The more we buy into this “free market” myth, the more easily we can be coaxed into accepting trickle-down economics (the idea that some of the riches of the wealthiest will eventually make it down to the rest of us) as a replacement for real social democracy. Better urban planning for all requires rejecting the former and building the latter.

In truth, states and markets are embedded in each other in a variety of complex ways that shape landscapes and distribute the balance of power in society. In America, where, as historian Gail Radford explains in *Modern Housing for America*, urban planning is often the sum of a series of disconnected private decisions, sprawl came to dominate in part because the U.S. federal government is so permeable to the interests of the real estate and automobile industries. This can hardly be called “central planning,” but neither is it quite a free-market system, because the U.S. state plays a crucial role in absorbing risk on the private sector’s behalf. Contrast this with social democracies like the Netherlands where, as Sonia Hirt explains in *Zoned in the USA*, the state relies less on the vicissitudes of the private market in the provision of essential goods like housing and transportation. The private sector still plays an important role, but it is more subordinate to public planning objectives set by the national government.

The problem with American urban planning is not so much that it thwarts free markets or that it’s too centralized or decentralized but that it prioritizes the needs of private capital over those of ordinary people. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t debate the merits and drawbacks of centralization versus decentralization or the proper role of government versus the private market—we should, and there are countless debates to be had hashing all of this out.

Highly centralized states, for example, may produce one-size-fits-all plans that ignore local contexts. But they can also

deliver broad public benefits like excellent mass transit and prevent lower levels of government from undermining the public interest. Recall that a majority of U.S. states are using funding from Biden’s infrastructure bill to increase driving, sprawl, and greenhouse gas emissions—a perfect case study of the perils of decentralization and why the U.S. arguably needs *more* central planning, not less.

Decentralized planning, on the other hand, may foster innovation and local solutions to local problems. But, as Blakeley notes, some of the most successful examples of decentralized planning are enabled by links “forged between local and national planning processes.” Radford documents concrete examples of this: the New Deal financed successful experiments in working- and middle-class housing, the design of which local communities were empowered to shape according to their needs. This idea—that central governments can support and build on local experimentation—is a good example of the kind of nuance that debates between market suburbanists and market urbanists often fail to capture.

But while questions of whether planning should be centralized or decentralized and where markets fit in are important, they can only take us so far, because any configuration of public and private or centralized and decentralized can still be designed to either enrich a bunch of oligarchs or ensure the provision of public goods over private profit. (The former resembles the current U.S. situation, but we saw glimmers of the latter in the popular campaigns of Bernie Sanders.) This is why today’s sprawl debate, to which we now turn, is so limiting.

SPRAWL: BEAUTIFUL CHAOS OR PLANNED MONSTROSITY?

The exchange below is a prime example of “free-markets-versus-centralized-planning” discourse. As increasingly many people get their information from social media, we have to take what happens on these platforms seriously.

Joshua Reed Eakle isn’t a planner—he’s president and co-founder of Project Liberal, a Super PAC dedicated to “advocat[ing] for the cause of a free and open society” and battling “authoritarian-

ism”—but Charles Marohn is a prominent one, and his organization, Strong Towns, about which I’ve written critically, is nevertheless doing some good work to combat sprawl.



Charles Marohn @clmarohn · 4d

Narrator: This entire scene was created by central planning.



Joshua Reed Eakle @Josh... · 5d ·

Sorry Tucker,

This photo is exponentially more beautiful than anything created by central planners.

The chaos of markets will always be preferable to the human suffering caused by centralization.

Cope and seeth.



In this exchange, Eakle (the market suburbanist) and Marohn (the market urbanist) disagree about whether the landscape in the photo—a classic example of sprawl—is a product of the “beautiful chaos of markets” or a monstrosity of “central planning.” This conflict makes intuitive sense: to the average person, sprawl seems disordered and random, like a “free-market” process. At the same time, it appears so monotonously standardized across locales from California to Maine that it seems the product of a central plan. It is this paradox that makes American landscapes, as the urban sociologist Mark Gottdiener acknowledged in his 1977 book *Planned Sprawl*, “difficult to explain.”

Gottdiener observes how the chain-riddled strips about which Marohn and Eakle are arguing “seem to just happen” despite the existence of an extensive public-planning apparatus, including planning boards, public hearings, and traffic departments. To explain this contradiction, he homes in on exactly the question Eakle and Marohn’s exchange raises: Is sprawl planned? And, if so, how and by whom?

HIGHWAYS TO HELL

The “strood” in Eakle’s and Marohn’s photo is likely a state road adjacent to an interstate highway. It is lined with familiar corporate chains like Exxon, McDonald’s, Taco Bell, and Starbucks. Every American will recognize this landscape: every place in the country has a version of it.

The federal government *did* subsidize our vast road infrastructure, and policies like the 1956 Interstate Highway Act were important inducements to sprawl. But these were policies for which powerful automobile interests aggressively fought. In *Fighting Traffic: The Dawn of the Motor Age in the American City*, historian Peter Norton shows how groups with a financial stake in automotive transportation—dubbed, at the time, “motordom”—were “among the first to conceive of and promote an automotive city.” Motordom was a formidable coalition of private interests that included the automobile, asphalt, concrete, and rubber industries as well as automobile clubs. The first highway proposals originated not with the government but, as Norton explained to me, in 1918, “within the ranks of motordom,” which exerted “imaginative and relentless pressure” to move these proposals forward.

Norton documents how pro-highway and pro-automobile groups characterized the demand for roads as “the free choice of a free people” and accused automobile critics like Mumford of distrusting democracy. But these claims were undercut by the hard work motordom did to legitimize the car in the city—sponsoring sustained public relations campaigns tying the automotive city to “freedom” and producing “films, booklets, and other publicity to sell a major national highway program to the general public.” (At one point, motordom even successfully quashed an attempt by Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover himself to warn Americans that the automobile was a “tremendous and deadly instrument of power.”) The strategy succeeded, and motordom forged a powerful partnership with the Bureau of Public Roads (a precursor to the Federal Highway Administration), as well as with state highway departments, to coordinate road building.

Those who attribute America’s sprawl-

ing road infrastructure to either government planning or free markets aren’t exactly wrong. But it’s more accurate to say that highway building programs constituted a capitalist support system for a broad coalition of automobile interests. As urban historian and *Building Suburbia* author Dolores Hayden told me, “the federal government intervened very effectively on behalf of business from the 1920s on” and was “very pro-money making” for these groups, which were “doing precious little on behalf of citizens.” At best, this arrangement might be called quasi-centralized planning, but Hayden’s term for it—“stealth planning”—is more apt.

What about the fast-food restaurants and gas stations lining the strood in Eakle’s and Marohn’s photo? Government highway planners built roads (and attended to safety concerns), but they played little role in shaping the types of development that sprang up around them. To understand this, we need to talk about one of the hottest topics among urbanists today: zoning.

THE ZONING WARS

These days, debates about sprawl can often be debates about zoning, and no subject brings out the free-markets-versus-centralized planning discourse more than zoning. Zoning codes regulate neighborhood density—for example, building height and lot size—and permissible uses, whether residential, commercial, or industrial. As currently practiced, American zoning (especially of the ubiquitous single-family variety) promotes wastefully low densities, even in urban centers. The result is a surplus of what planners call “underutilized” land that could host badly needed housing, retail, services, or public parks. Filling these gaps in the urban fabric might lower housing costs, and the added density would encourage walking and bicycling and make running public transportation more financially viable. But with the zoning status-quo, construction that might occur in already established cities just gets pushed outward, further expanding sprawl.

Market suburbanists acknowledge that the federal government played a role in institutionalizing zoning, but they tend

to portray it as a “bottom-up institution” and a “product of popular government” that functions to protect private property rights and preserve the right of localities to economically exclude. Market urbanists, on the other hand, tend to emphasize zoning’s federal origins, portraying it a distorter of markets and a prime example of the government boot on Americans’ necks. They often point out, for example, that Hoover’s Department of Commerce “developed” zoning and encouraged states to adopt it via the Standard State Zoning Enabling Act, or that the Supreme Court “normalized centralized planning” in its 1926 decision, *Euclid v. Ambler Realty Co.*, which affirmed the constitutionality of zoning. While both groups’ assertions contain truth, they ultimately flatten the complexity of the historical record, which shows that zoning, like the highway system, emerged from the efforts of a formidable coalition of public and private interests.

OF STRIP ZONING AND SPECULATORS

Marohn may have had zoning, among other things, in mind when claiming that the sprawl scene above, clearly zoned as a commercial strip, is the result of “central planning.” But the kinds of environments that typify commercial sprawl first evolved as a business response to America’s growing car culture. Car culture abetted road building, and vice versa, and businesses needed new built forms to capture consumers where they increasingly were—in their cars. Strip zoning, with its large setbacks, ample parking, and drive-throughs, emerged from these shifting trends. State leaders did little to control the spread of roadside strips, leaving it to localities.

Hayden explains how strip businesses first evolved from the humble gas station by absorbing its lessons on how to attract and serve the driving customer. Roadside strips then boomed in the wake of huge postwar federal tax write-offs instituted by Republicans who “very much wanted to use government to help business.” These write-offs—which Marohn may also have had in mind—produced windfalls for developers of new, cheap real estate and incentivized the replacement of mom-and-pop operations with large corporate

chains like the ones in Eakle’s and Marohn’s sprawl scene. But while commercial sprawl was indeed abetted by federal (or “centralized”) government policy, it was about *private profit*, not planning, as Harry J. Sonneborn, Ray Kroc’s partner in franchising McDonald’s, once admitted. As Eric Schlosser reported in his 2001 book *Fast Food Nation*, Sonneborn told a group of Wall Street investors, “We are not basically in the food business. We are in the real estate business. The only reason we sell fifteen cent hamburgers is because they are the greatest producer of revenue from which our tenants can pay us our rent.”

ZONING AS EUGENICS

Eugenics seeks to improve a human population’s genetic profile and has historically included a range of practices from prenatal care (for certain people) to forced sterilization. Libertarians—and market urbanists—commonly invoke the specter of eugenics to discredit the federal government and policies they dislike. Take a recent X post by Geoff Graham, an Atlanta-based real estate developer, blogger, and proponent of New Urbanism, a design movement that promotes compact, walkable places. In his post, Graham argues that zoning is not pro-property-rights, as market suburbanists contend, but rather a form of “abusive government overreach” akin to “forced sterilization” (one of numerous eugenics practices, a full discussion of which is beyond the scope of this piece). Upping the ante, market urbanist and Southern Urbanism founder Aaron Lubeck asserts that zoning *is* forced sterilization.



Geoff Graham ✓
@geoffreydgraham

Exclusionary zoning was legalized in 1926 by the same SCOTUS that legalized forced sterilization.

Zoning is not a right. It is an abusive governmental overreach.

Your great grandparents did not abide busybodies telling them what they can and can’t do with their land.



Aaron Lubeck ✓
@aaron_lubeck

What people do not understand is that exclusionary zoning *is* forced sterilization.

Throughout American history, the black community’s physical environment was forcibly destroyed over and over again. *They always built back.*

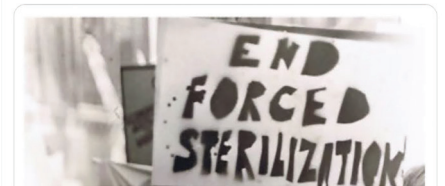
Then technocratic zoning came and prevented such reconstructions. Land use rules were specifically written to prevent the black community from existing.

Most of these rules were drafted, not coincidentally, in response to the Civil Rights and Fair Housing Acts, which established black citizens’ legal right to exist.

Modern zoning stripped hyper-local, undercapitalized, entrepreneurial cultures of their ability to provide for themselves. Modern zoning eliminated the black community’s ability to grow *their* communities. Modern zoning is designed to prevent a culture from continuing. From expanding. From reproducing.

Especially in urban settings, centralized technocratic zoning should absolutely be viewed as an immoral project of the highest order, on par with compulsory sterilization.

The only difference is that it is still going on.



It is fallacious (and absurd) to equate zoning with forced sterilization. It’s true that the 1927 Supreme Court case *Buck v. Bell* upheld states’ right to forcibly sterilize institutionalized people. But this has nothing to do with the merits of zoning. This analogy is similar to the libertarian cry that “taxation is slavery.” No morally decent person today would defend forced sterilization. (For *actual* eugenics rhetoric and the intent to carry out ethnic cleansing via mass deportations, see Trump himself.) The purpose of these arguments is simply to be vaguely associative—to say that the federal government can’t be right about something because it was wrong to embrace the practice of forced sterilization.

Graham's statement that zoning resulted from "busybodies" telling people "what they can and can't do with their land" conjures up *Little House on the Prairie*-worthy images of Ma, Pa, and the kids living on the frontier with no government assistance. Erased from the record are federal policies like the Homestead Acts, which distributed millions of acres of public land to American citizens, or that frontier land was made available to homesteaders only after the federal government perpetrated genocide on Native Americans, an omission that makes the concern about forced sterilization—which historically affected people of color in particular—seem less sincere.

ZONING AS SOCIAL ENGINEERING

More sophisticated market urbanists avoid such simplistic tirades but are not above throwing out vague references to eugenics in their discussions of zoning. In his 2022 book *Arbitrary Lines: How Zoning Broke The American City And How To Fix It*, urban planner Nolan Gray reminds us more than once that zoning, like eugenics and prohibition, were products of the Progressive Era.

Gray is an urban planner, Senior Director of Legislation and Research for California YIMBY, and a former fellow of the Koch-brothers-funded Mercatus Center, a libertarian think tank that "advances knowledge about how markets solve problems and help us lead happier, healthier, and richer lives." *Arbitrary Lines* is a well-reasoned treatise that gets a lot right: Gray's incisive recounting of zoning's exclusionary legacy and its role in encouraging sprawl should galvanize anyone concerned with creating better cities. But while Gray doesn't come across as a libertarian zealot, he sometimes obfuscates the reality that zoning, whatever its ills, was also a legitimate public response to very real problems. For example, he writes:

Zoning is a mechanism of exclusion designed to inflate property values, slow the pace of new development, segregate cities by race and class, and enshrine the detached single-family house as the exclusive urban ideal—always has been.

Planning institutions that reinforce social discrimination are indeed bad, but Gray overstates his case. Zoning has *often* been "a mechanism of exclusion," but it was also a response to crises engendered by unregulated capitalism. As historian and *Bourgeois Utopias* author Robert Fishman explained to me, in the laissez-faire context of the 19th and early 20th century, "houses and neighborhoods almost invariably declined in value as they were engulfed in the tumult of the growing city." There was a genuine need for government to manage the effects of this trend on public health and safety. And although Gray is right that zoning became a tool to organize cities "around the needs and preferences of elites," it was also aimed, to some extent, at the middle class. As Hirt explains, middle-class people, unlike the rich, could not easily escape into enclaves and needed ways to protect their homes from encroaching industry and pollution. Indeed, Progressive Era reformers saw zoning—which promised the equal application of strict principles of uniformity, to rich and poor alike—as a means of achieving *greater*, not lesser, social equality.

Gray's contention that zoning's purpose was to "slow the pace of new development" obscures its origins as a tool to bring order and profit to the real

estate industry. (Indeed, Gray mostly elides the role of the real estate industry even though it led the push for zoning in the early 20th century out of a need to stabilize real estate values.) As Fishman explained to me, zoning, especially in newly subdivided neighborhoods at the metropolis edge, was initially intended to *speed*—not slow—development by assuring potential investors and homebuyers that nothing offensive (like industry, retail, or apartments) would be built near their single-family homes. As historian Marc Weiss writes, realtors valued zoning for its ability to "boost property values and liquidity by stimulating the demand for real estate as an attractive and safe investment." Only after neighborhoods were firmly established did zoning come to *prevent* new development and encourage sprawl, which is why I agree with Gray and other market urbanists that we need serious zoning reform.

ZONING FOR MAGICAL MARKETS

Unlike some market urbanists, Gray doesn't appear to view statism or centralization as inherently threatening. But to the extent that he seems willing to assign problems to higher levels of government, it is out of a belief that doing so will better



'Ameyoko' near Ueno station, Tokyo, Photo courtesy of Andre Sorensen

align urban planning with free markets.

For example, Gray criticizes the U.S. federal government's promotion of zoning, but he also seems genuinely disgusted by its failure to do *more* to define zoning's broader social purpose. Concerned with giving local governments "maximum flexibility," he writes, the federal government said "almost nothing about the *content* of the potential zoning." Gray proposes Japan, which zones at the national level, as a better model. The simplicity and legibility of the Japanese zoning system, he asserts, which has only 12 zoning districts, "reduc[es] barriers to development." This is the opposite of how things work in the U.S., where strict zoning codes *discourage* private innovation, keeping land "locked in amber" and driving up prices, a dynamic that market urbanists contend is at the root of America's housing crisis. By smoothing the way for private building, Gray contends, Japanese zoning "has kept cities like Tokyo remarkably affordable."

But this isn't true. As planning scholar Andre Sorensen explained to me, Japan's zoning system hasn't changed substantially since 1968. The 1960s, '70s, and '80s saw rapid economic growth in Japan, and the resulting bubble economy precipitated one of the world's worst housing crises. During this period, he said, "land in central Tokyo was so expensive that it was not profitable to develop even as super high rise housing." These conditions existed under the same zoning system Gray credits for Tokyo's affordability today. Things are different now not for any reason related to zoning but because of the 1990 collapse of Japan's bubble economy and subsequent decades of economic stagnation. As Sorensen writes in his forthcoming book *Messy Cities: Why We Can't Plan Everything*, today, "over 20 percent of all Japanese housing units are vacant, including huge numbers of housing units in the Tokyo area. This excess housing supply is growing rapidly, and is probably the main factor suppressing housing costs, not weak development regulation."

Gray also credits liberal zoning for Tokyo's dense, dynamic urbanism, which, he writes, allows "the optimal degree of use mixture" to "emerge organically." This results in a kind of spontaneous order. He's not wrong, or alone, in recognizing Tokyo's emergent urbanism, but, as



Near Shinjuku, Tokyo, Photo courtesy of Andre Sorensen

Sorensen writes, "Japan operates one of the strictest zoning systems in the world," resulting in what may look "messy" to the American eye but in reality is a "carefully regulated and logical order."

Beyond zoning, Gray neglects factors within the larger Japanese planning system that do more to enable the seemingly unplanned environment he appreciates. Take the massive subsidy the Japanese government pours into Tokyo's transit system, without which the spontaneous order Gray celebrates—in which a population of 37 million must get around—would be impossible. It's true, as Robert Cervero documents in his 1988 book *The Transit Metropolis*, that Tokyo's transit system is comparatively "entrepreneurial," allowing the private sector a large role. But this private success is made possible by "farsighted and pro-active land use planning" undergirded by clear public commitment to the idea that transit-oriented growth is "inherently efficient and socially optimal." As Cervero writes, "besides directly sponsoring transit services, Japan's central government further promotes transit riding through tax incentives. All Japanese workers receive a tax-free commuting allowance as high as \$500 per month from their employers (that is fully deductible against corporate income taxes)."

It's not merely that Gray fails to mention the Japanese transit system. Elsewhere in *Arbitrary Lines*, he suggests that walking, bicycling, and transit spontaneously arise once liberalized zoning (and free markets) have created sufficient urban density. "As a side effect of [...] density," he writes, "cities naturally produce environments that give residents choice about how to get around." But there is nothing "natural" about the immense public and, in Tokyo's case, *private* planning that make good transit possible. As Cervero documents, while model transit systems in places like Tokyo, Stockholm, Singapore, and Copenhagen arise out of different balances of public and private planning, these outcomes are not "side effects" or mere good fortune but "the result of a clear, well-articulated vision of the future and dedicated individuals who see the vision through to implementation, without compromise."

In a final example, Gray criticizes the tie between U.S. public service provision and local wealth, which causes the quality of essential services like schools, parks, and public safety to vary dramatically between municipalities. In a progressive-sounding position, he praises Japan for "standardizing local public service provision." No leftist alive would disagree with him that "decoupling [...] public ser-

vice quality from local municipal boundaries is a no brainer.” But he goes on to say that the high marginal tax rates that help make the Japanese model possible are “highly suspect” and undesirable in the U.S. (in fact, U.S. tax rates are criminally low). He advocates instead for a system of school vouchers, or “school choice.”

This is a red flag. Plenty has been written on how school choice (or vouchers) subjects American education to the whims of the private marketplace and worsens segregation and inequality. Indeed, a recent ProPublica report found that in Arizona—“the nation’s school choice capital”—“the poorer the ZIP code, the less often vouchers are being used.” School choice policies also cut against the very urbanism Gray champions by encouraging *more* driving and *more* car culture. The same report found that Arizona’s lower-income families aren’t taking advantage of the state’s voucher program because of the high cost of transportation to voucher-accepting private schools. One mother who couldn’t drive her son to school, for example, reported that her third-grader “would have to take two public buses on his own to get to school,” a 40-minute trip each way. Plenty of other parents still choose to drive these distances to private schools. A system of universally funded neighborhood schools like those in other highly developed countries would better align with good urbanism.

ZONING FOR A LIBERTARIAN UTOPIA

If market urbanists believe that zoning distorts free markets, market suburbanists believe it delivers a “libertarian utopia,” as author Judge Glock puts it in “Two Cheers for Zoning,” a 2022 piece in the conservative journal *American Affairs*. “Zoning is common,” he writes, “because people want it.” Market urbanists (or YIMBYs, as he calls them) who attack zoning attack the very free market ideals they purport to uphold.

Glock is director of research and a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank that works to “improve the quality of life in America’s great cities by fostering competition, entrepreneurship, and fiscal responsibility.” In his piece, he argues that “those who ascribe [sic] to free market beliefs should

not despise zoning” for fostering racial segregation or high home prices—social ills on which he says zoning has little impact—but should instead defend it as a tool that encourages fierce competition between local governments for residents, businesses, and voters.

America’s highly decentralized system of local governments, Glock reasons, compels municipalities to zone in ways that maximize their ability to compete against each other. This competition “approximate[s] a private marketplace for public goods such as roads, parks, schools, and public safety.” In this marketplace of municipalities, everyone is free to choose where to live based on their needs and desires. If you dislike your city, you can express your preferences “by choice and movement instead of collective votes”—an idea from the theories of economist Charles Mills Tiebout. In other words, if you’re unhappy, you can just move!

But not everyone can “vote with their feet.” People’s jobs often tie them to places, even if other local circumstances (such as high housing costs) present a hardship. To preserve employment, people may opt for housing that forces them into increasingly lengthy commutes, typically by car. This offsets savings on shelter, increases pollution, and steals time from other activities. Navigating this kind of spatial dislocation can get complicated as people attempt to meet their needs for all sorts of things beyond jobs and housing. For example, many people need to be near sick or aging relatives, have children with special needs, or simply want to be close to social networks. In Glock’s utopia, choices expand or contract as people move up and down the income ladder. If you’re stuck at the bottom, you probably deserve it. Remember, it’s just the free market doing its thing.

Even if we accept Glock’s premise that zoning produces a marketplace *among* municipalities, zoning *within* cities, as market urbanists rightly point out, still constrains people’s choices by, for example, limiting what types of housing or other amenities can be built, and where. Most American cities feature wide swaths of single-family zoning—and a robust supply of sanctimonious NIMBYs to defend it—despite a rising demand for alternatives. And have you ever wondered

why you never see corner convenience stores in American single-family neighborhoods? The rigid use separation mandated by U.S. zoning prohibits it!

ZONING AND THE FREEDOM TO EXCLUDE

Market suburbanists like Glock view zoning as essential to protecting what author Gene Slater calls—in his 2021 book of the same name—Americans’ “freedom to discriminate.” “Even passionate libertarians,” Glock writes, “would not deny the ability of people to form or join a local government with some say over their property. Most zoning in America is of such a local and consensual nature.”

Glock’s characterization of zoning as a localized policy tool is a corrective to market urbanists’ claims that it is a form of “centralized planning.” But his assertion that zoning—and here he means exclusionary single-family zoning in particular—was motivated by voters who simply wanted a say over their private property is misleading. Realtors built support for exclusionary neighborhoods (which zoning helps preserve) by first altering Americans’ longstanding, commonly held definitions of freedom. As Slater documents in *Freedom to Discriminate*, realtors mounted concerted rhetorical campaigns to convince Americans that property values were contingent not just upon encroaching nuisances like factories but also upon who lived next door. These campaigns helped persuade white, affluent homeowners that their ability to exclude people from their communities, particularly on the basis of race, was fundamental to their liberty. They also attacked efforts to eliminate housing discrimination as government coercion, portraying the segregated housing they helped to institutionalize as a natural, inevitable result of the free market.

WILL THE REAL FREE MARKETEERS PLEASE STAND UP?

If market urbanists were truly concerned about home prices (and committed to free markets), writes Glock, they would attack not just zoning but also regulations that



restrict sprawl. Insofar as American cities are affordable, he argues, it's because they encourage greenfield development, which means to build on previously undeveloped land. "The foremost goal of a pro-housing policy," Glock writes, "should be to open more new land for development."

But Glock doesn't call for any of this new greenfield development to be denser than the ridiculously sparse variety in American exurbs, because he isn't concerned with planning, only with "align[ing] the incentives of local governments toward growth"—in other words, letting the private market produce more sprawl. This position reduces the provision of affordable housing to a zero-sum game in which the price of shelter is longer commutes, increasingly expensive car maintenance, and intensified isolation—to say nothing of the environmental impact of increasing sprawl, including disappearing agricultural land and wildlife habitat destruction. At least we can stop worrying about the "supposed climate dangers of sprawl," Glock writes, since everyone will be driving electric vehicles!

Market suburbanist-urbanist debates efface the complexity of U.S. zoning history, which is rife with paradox. Zoning was a public response to the chaotic conditions of unregulated capitalism, but, at the same time, it was designed to *constrain* public power. As Hirt writes, "as much as the zoning rules restrained the actions of private parties, they were also crafted to ensure that public authorities would have tightly defined and limited freedom of judgment." Indeed, this is why market suburbanists like Glock defend zoning as a pro-free-market tool, because for an

acceptable price, it limits government and protects private property values.

Market urbanists respond by correctly pointing out that U.S. zoning has become counterproductive by worsening pollution and harming nature and public health, and their claims that zoning reform would free up markets to address these harms may have some validity. But their calls for zoning reform—or in Gray's case, abolition—are rarely accompanied by calls to systemically strengthen American planning. As Hirt explained to me, other countries "do not have zoning like ours because they have much more powerful planning mechanisms"—in other words, U.S. zoning is strong because U.S. planning is weak. Zoning reform that is not also coupled with a commitment to strong public planning at all levels of government will likely just create the need for new public interventions, all while ensuring that those interventions remain relatively frail, fueling the inaccurate and dangerous perception that what is failing us is the public sector. It is this vicious cycle that must end.

NOT STATES VERSUS MARKETS, BUT PEOPLE-POWERED PLANNING

Fixing sprawl requires abandoning discourse that offers us a false choice between overbearing states and liberatory markets. The debate should instead be about how to create an urban planning system that rejects the prioritization of private wealth accumulation, is genuinely responsive to public needs, and values the participation of ordinary people. (And by "participation," I don't mean the hollow

exercise in which the wealthiest people with the most free time show up at public hearings to oppose everything.) While market suburbanists are probably a lost cause, some market urbanists do seem to care about solving big problems and about responsive, democratic planning. But their binary, obfuscatory framings are unhelpful.

As for the left, it's not clear who the urbanists are anymore. Perhaps a new anti-sprawl coalition can emerge. If it does, it must move beyond cynicism about centralization and fetishes for markets and recognize that fixing the vast amounts of sprawl we've built—especially given its dire effects on the climate and on public health—requires some centralized coordination, but from a government equipped to protect the public good over the whims of rapacious plutocrats who are busier than ever dismantling our public institutions and cheapening what scraps of American public life still remain. Fortunately, as the real-world examples in *Vulture Capitalism* demonstrate, centralization need not be antithetical to democratic or "people-powered" planning. This is not to romanticize things—as Stein puts it, there is currently a "severe disjuncture" between what our urban planning system does and what we need it to do. And it will take a lot of work to restore a common commitment to true governance organized around, as Blakeley writes, "the human capacity to cooperate in pursuit of collective goals." But we have no choice. The health and well-being of communities and the natural world hang in the balance, as does our obligation to bequeath to future generations a built environment that is not so damn ugly. ✚

Leaked Internal Harris Campaign Strategy Documents.pptx

File

Home

Insert

Draw

Transitions

An anonymous high-ranking campaign official leaked the following early draft of a Power-Point presentation to *Current Affairs*. The document dates from early October of 2024 and was part of conversations on how the campaign could adjust its messaging and tactics during the home stretch. The source of the annotations is unknown.

HARRIS
WALZ
McKinsey
& Company

Slide 2

~~LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT / PRONOUNS~~

-We have stopped doing this now (too 2019)

TOUGHER THAN TRUMP

- On crime (have her show her gun, maybe shoot something)
- On immigrants (maybe she can say her mom shouldn't have come here?)
- On countries (she should promise a war) *-hold focus group to pick a country*

McKinsey
& Company

Slide 3

Manufacturing JOY!!!

HARRIS
WALZ

McKinsey
& Company

- Remember: always **↑** the JOY!!!!
- ~~Involve Marie Kondo?~~ *-too foreign*
- Ask Buttigieg where they got that dance, adapt it
- "Waltzing with Walz"?
- She should laugh more
- Then make TikToks of her laughing
- ~~Professional photos with cute DREAMER kids~~ *-we now favor deporting them*
- ~~Have her drink wine during speech~~ *-we have tried this it did not go well*
- Possible backlash to Walz rural white guy clothes
 - Consult menswear guy?

Slide 4

JOY

STAY ON MESSAGE

HARRIS
WALZ

- ★ Remember: do NOT criticize joe
- ★ If asked what exactly should change, pivot *-could always talk about food*

CHANGE

CONTINUITY

McKinsey
& Company

- The economy is good, actually
 - **Of course it is**
 - No, YOU're wrong
 - **No, YOU**
 - **Hold up a chart**

Slide 5

POTENTIAL MEDIA APPEARANCES

- ❖ Hot Ones! (says she's spicy and fun)
- ❖ Fox News (could bring 5+ Cheneys)
- ❖ Between Two Ferns (worked for Obama) *-she could bring her own fern, it would be funny*
- ❖ Pod Save (as many appearances as possible) *-she could mix up the jons, it would be funny*
- ❖ Something on "Twitch"?
- ❖ ~~Rogan~~ *-too popular with the wrong people*

HARRIS
WALZ

McKinsey
& Company

Slide 6

P
O
S
S
I
B
L
E

B
U
Y
S

- Vegas dome **✓** *we have this booked*
- Big zeppelin?
- George Santos Cameo video?
- A camel (couldn't hurt) *Q: are camels racist?*
 - Oprah asking \$1M for appearance **✓** *on payment plan*
- Small dollar donors act blue
- More consultants (chance of victory increases 2% for each additional 100 consultants)

HARRIS
WALZ

McKinsey
& Company

Slide 7

Palestine Thing

HARRIS WALZ
McKinsey & Company

- ★ When they say "genocide," you say JOY!
- ★ Remember: She's speaking *Yasssss QUEEN*
- ★ IGNORE IT
- ★ If she has to say something:
 - "We are disturbed by the tragic loss of life."
 - "Working tirelessly for a ceasefire." (*See if AOC can repeat this?*)
 - "Weapons shipments? What weapons shipments? Sorry, can't hear you."
 - "All lives matter." *awk connotations. Say "every life has value."*

Slide 8

BETTER SLOGANS

HARRIS WALZ
McKinsey & Company




- > Frack, Baby, Frack!
- > Because We're Us
- > Wefund the police!
- > Orange Man Bad
- > Exactly Like Joe Except Also Totally Different - *"I'm not Joe Biden" is also a great option fyi*
- > Something implying Trump has a small penis?
- > USA USA USA
- > America Is Already Great - *where is this from this is PERFECT*

Slide 9

More Interesting Merch.

HARRIS WALZ
McKinsey & Company



- Camo pants (kam-o?)
- Plush coconuts? *-squishmallows???*
- JOY - just a big empty bottle that says JOY
- Live ammunition
- Trump "tiny hands" gloves *-lol*
- Liz cheney funk pop *-LOVE this*
- Walz water / walz wipes / something else with a W

Slide 10

Better endorsements!

HARRIS WALZ


- George W. Bush!!! (#1 "big fish" target)
- ~~Henry Kissinger~~ *-could do a hologram?*
- Celebs celebs celebs *-tell Mark Ruffalo to tweet HARDER*
- John Bolton + Taylor Swift joint appearance
 - "Who's Afraid of This L'il Old Mustache?"
- ~~Chappell Roan~~ *-wtf*
- Someone who once beat Hulk Hogan? (get list of wrestlers)
 - *-Related: is there a "Lee Greenwood of the left?"*
- BILLIONAIRES (preferably richer than Trump)
 - *-they should do a video together comparing their net worth to his*
- Rural folks (ask Tim W who he knows)
- Remember: NO keffiyehs

Slide 11

More FOCUS GROUPS!

HARRIS WALZ
McKinsey & Company

- White Dudes For Harris
- Ethnically Ambiguous Dudes for Harris
- Childless Iguana Ladies (need to include more pets)
- CIA Operatives For Harris
- LGBTQ Cops For Harris
- Health Insurance CEOs For Harris
- Gun Owners For Harris
- Follow-up with contact at the NRA
- ~~Latinxs~~ *LATINOS* for Harris *-check with Maria from accounting what is offensive*
- Check availability of Sheriff Joe Arpaio *-will he dance on TikTok?*



Slide 12

Policy Agenda

gonna have to check w/ higher ups

- ❖ 54 policies and counting *-can we make this 540? would solve issue of not appearing "substantive"*
- ❖ New ideas:
 - Heritage Unity Taskforce emphasizing bipartisanship
 - Walz-Vance Small Business Loan Fund for Women
 - TAX CREDITS - people love these
 - Full opportunity agenda
 - opportunity zones
 - opportunity boxes
 - opportunity vestibules
 - opportunity parabolas
 - opportunity spheres
 - opportunity penumbras *-can we think of others?*
 - Need to appeal to Black men. What do they like? *-weed? Bitcoin?*
 - *-Send thank-you note to the breakfast club!!*
- ❖ Vibes are a policy!



DO WE NEED A NEW FDR?

BY NATHAN J. ROBINSON

TO GO BACK AND READ FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT'S first Inaugural Address is a peculiar experience. It offers a glimpse of a world in which a Democratic president talked very differently than the Democrats of 2024 tend to talk. Elected in the depths of the Great Depression, Roosevelt used his first inaugural speech to promise a sweeping transformation of the country. He said the United States had been captured by "a generation of self-seekers" and that "unscrupulous money changers" (i.e., Wall Street) with "no vision" had plunged the country into catastrophe. But, he said, the plutocrats had been discredited, and society would be rebuilt:

The money changers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization. We may now restore that temple to the ancient truths. The measure of the restoration lies in the extent to which we apply social values more noble than mere monetary profit.

"Depression" did not just describe an economic condition but a spiritual one, and FDR did not just come in with "liberal" policies but with a forward-looking vision that exhorted the country to have faith that its problems were soluble through unified national action.

He delivered. Let's run through the familiar list of New Deal projects:

- **The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC):** Provided jobs for young men in conservation and natural resource projects.
- **Public Works Administration (PWA):** Funded large-scale public works like bridges, schools, and dams to stimulate the economy.
- **Works Progress Administration (WPA):** Employed millions in diverse projects, including construction and the arts.
- **Social Security Act:** Established pensions for the elderly and unemployment insurance.
- **National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA):** Regulated industries to promote fair wages and prices.
- **Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA):** Subsidized farmers to reduce crop production and stabilize prices.
- **Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA):** Brought electricity and economic development to the Tennessee Valley region.
- **Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA):** Provided direct relief and work relief to those in need.
- **Securities Act of 1933:** Mandated financial transparency in the issuance of securities.
- **Securities Exchange Act of 1934:** Established regulations for stock trading and created the SEC.
- **Glass-Steagall Act (Banking Act of 1933):** Separated commercial and investment banking to prevent financial instability.
- **Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC):** Insured bank deposits to restore public confidence in banks.
- **National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act):** Guaranteed workers' rights to unionize and collectively bargain.
- **Fair Labor Standards Act:** Set minimum wage, maximum hours, and banned child labor.
- **Rural Electrification Administration (REA):**

Brought electricity to rural areas.

- **Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC):** Helped homeowners refinance mortgages to avoid foreclosure.
- **Federal Housing Administration (FHA):** Provided insurance for home loans to make housing more affordable.
- **Resettlement Administration:** Relocated struggling families to planned communities.
- **Civil Works Administration (CWA):** Provided short-term jobs during the winter of 1933-34.
- **Emergency Banking Act:** Stabilized the banking system by closing and inspecting banks.
- **Farm Security Administration (FSA):** Supported rural poverty alleviation and migrant workers.
- **Soil Conservation Service (SCS):** Promoted soil conservation to combat erosion and improve agriculture.
- **Federal Surplus Relief Corporation:** Distributed surplus food and commodities to the needy.
- **National Youth Administration (NYA):** Provided work and education opportunities for young people.
- **Federal Communications Commission (FCC):** Regulated radio, television, and other communication industries.
- **United States Housing Authority (USHA):** Funded low-income housing projects.
- **Federal Writers' Project:** Employed writers to produce state guides, histories, and other works.
- **Federal Theatre Project:** Funded theater productions and performances nationwide.
- **Federal Art Project:** Supported artists to create public art and educational programs.
- **Federal Music Project:** Employed musicians to perform and teach music.
- **Rural Rehabilitation Program:** Aided impoverished rural families with loans, training, and resources.

Historian Harvey Kaye summarizes just some of the accomplishments in *The Fight for the Four Freedoms: What Made FDR and the Greatest Generation Truly Great*:

Employing 4.5 million people during the harshest months of 1933-34, the CWA "built or improved 500,000 miles of roads, 40,000 schools, over 3,500 playgrounds, athletic fields, and 1,000 airports." And affording work to a total of 8.5 million people between 1935 and 1943, the WPA of the ensuing "Second New Deal" would upgrade 600,000 miles of rural roads, lay 67,000 miles of city streets, erect 78,000 new bridges and viaducts, construct 40,000 public buildings, and build several hundred airports. Concurrently, the PWA would underwrite construction of thousands of miles of roadways and an equally remarkable number of public buildings and structures such as schools, libraries, hospitals, post offices, state and municipal offices, bridges, and water and sewer systems—35,000 projects altogether—including the Boulder, Grand Coulee, and Bonneville dams out west, the Lincoln Tunnel and Triborough Bridge in New York, Skyline Drive in Virginia, and the Los Angeles water supply

system. The TVA would realize a dazzling scheme of dams, reservoirs, environmental works, and community enterprises providing hydroelectric power and economic development to the long-neglected people of the Tennessee Valley region. And the Rural Electrification Administration (REA), created in 1935, would in just a few years enable the formation of more than 400 local power cooperatives, bringing affordable electricity to nearly 300,000 farms and rural households that corporate utilities had refused to serve. FDR's "public works revolution" dramatically enhanced the state of the public weal and—placing the needs of the commonwealth above those of corporations—rendered powerful testimony to the possibility of pursuing public action for the public good.

In a time when it takes a political fight to maintain even existing social programs, it's hard to imagine the government taking this much decisive action, this quickly. The New Deal fundamentally changed Americans' relationship with their government. It introduced the modern social safety net, and Roosevelt was so successful at cultivating public support for his project that he was elected more times than any other president, attained huge majorities in Congress, and was revered after his death.

As William Leuchtenburg writes in *Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal*, "the devotion Roosevelt aroused owed much to the fact that the New Deal assumed the responsibility for guaranteeing every American a minimum standard of subsistence." Never mind Ronald Reagan's famous phrase that the scariest words in the English language are "I'm from the government and I'm here to help." Roosevelt said: the government *should be* and *will be* there to help, and he convinced Americans to have faith in him.

PARTLY, HE DID THAT BY INTRODUCING PROGRAMS WITH results that people could see. They could see the dams and bridges being built, the electric lines being strung, the millions of trees being planted, the art and theater productions. They got Social Security checks and affordable home loans. Their bank balances were guaranteed so that they didn't have to fear bank runs. The Fair Labor Standards Act brought them a 40-hour workweek and (largely) got rid of child labor. They could see their government delivering for them and as a result, right-wing scaremongering about the New Deal as creeping authoritarianism was unsuccessful. As Michael Hiltzik writes in *The New Deal*:

The New Dealers did not think about government in the limited terms of their predecessors, as an agency of national defense and little else. They did not perceive it as an antagonist of the common man, an enemy of liberty, or an entity interested in its own growth for growth's sake. They understood that it was a powerful force and that its power could be exercised by inaction as well as action, to very different ends.

Roosevelt believed it was his job to explain to people what their government was doing, and people trusted him in part because he spoke to them directly and plainly. In his press conferences, Roosevelt won over journalists with "good-humored

ease and impressed them with his knowledge of detail.” In part through his use of the “fireside chats,” Roosevelt became “in a very special sense the people’s President,” as Justice William O. Douglas said, “because he made them feel that with him in the White House they shared the presidency. The sense of sharing the Presidency gave even the most humble citizen a lively sense of belonging.” Eleanor Roosevelt said that after his death, people told her they “missed the way the president used to talk to them. They’d say ‘he used to talk to me about my government.’” (Interestingly, the same quality explains some of Donald Trump’s appeal to his supporters.)

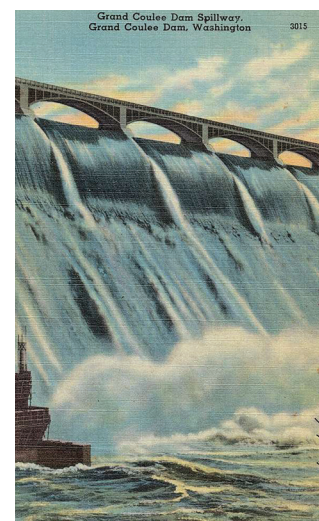
Of course, Eleanor herself was a major factor behind Roosevelt’s success. Theodore Roosevelt’s widow Edith had dismissed Franklin as “nine-tenths mush and one-tenth Eleanor,” and Mrs. Roosevelt was one of the most remarkable women of the 20th century. Through her newspaper columns, books, and speeches, she was herself an exceptional communicator of democratic ideals, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that she helped draft remains perhaps the clearest and most comprehensive vision for what a genuinely fair society would look like.

The New Deal programs did not fully end the Great Depression, although they did cut unemployment substantially and provide relief to millions. Interestingly, Roosevelt did not come into office with a sweeping plan, and on the campaign trail in 1932 he had often not sounded that distinct from his opponent, Herbert Hoover, in his promise to rein in government spending and adopt responsible budgets. Roosevelt had declared that he “regard[ed] reduction in Federal spending as one of the most important issues of this campaign.” But the only way to fulfill Roosevelt’s promise to deal aggressively with the suffering that had gripped the nation was to conduct what Roosevelt referred to as “bold, persistent experimentation,” and Roosevelt was swiftly forced to abandon his earlier promise to be fiscally conservative.

Some of those experiments failed, but some, like Social Security, were so spectacularly successful that 80 years of right-wing efforts to undo them have not succeeded. Dwight Eisenhower, a Republican, famously declared that core parts of the New Deal reforms had built such a lasting consensus that they simply could not be undone:

Should any political party attempt to abolish social security, unemployment insurance, and eliminate labor laws and farm programs, you would not hear of that party again in our political history. There is a tiny splinter group, of course, that believes you can do these things. Among them are [a few] Texas oil millionaires, and an occasional politician or business man from other areas. Their number is negligible and they are stupid.

Eisenhower was not wrong that they were stupid, and even today Republicans have to pretend not to despise Social Security. Roosevelt is routinely ranked by historians as among the greatest U.S. presidents, not just for his role in leading the country during World War II but for transformatively expanding the social safety net and giving people a new faith in what government was capable of doing for the people.



New Deal accomplishments: a WPA post office mural, the Civilian Conservation Corps, a Federal Theater Project play, and Grand Coulee Dam

AND YET THE DARK SPOTS ON FDR'S LEGACY ARE DARK indeed, so much so that they virtually ruin the heroic image of him.

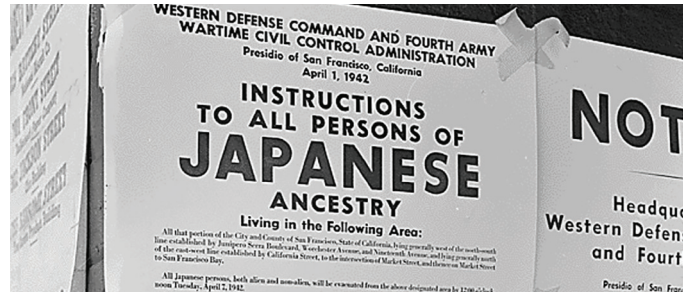
The internment of Japanese Americans in concentration camps was not some mere regrettable minor error. Roosevelt knew that there was no evidence that Japanese Americans were disloyal. He had commissioned a report which found a "remarkable, even extraordinary degree of loyalty among this generally suspect ethnic group." But after Pearl Harbor, public opinion was harshly anti-Japanese, and instead of working to remind Americans that Japanese Americans were their neighbors, Roosevelt appointed a racist named John DeWitt to head a vast incarceration program. DeWitt told the newspapers "a Jap's a Jap," and testified:

I don't want any of them here. They are a dangerous element. There is no way to determine their loyalty. It makes no difference whether he is an American citizen, he is still a Japanese.

Anyone who had at least one-sixteenth Japanese ancestry was put in a camp for the duration of the war, and many found when they were released that their property had been appropriated in their absence. The internment was so shameful that even George H.W. Bush, who famously said he would "never apologize for America," apologized for America, supporting reparations and admitting that "serious injustices were done to Japanese Americans during World War II."

It was not the only ugly act by Roosevelt. He continued Hoover's policy of deporting large numbers of Mexican Americans to Mexico, including U.S. citizens. Infamously, he did not take even basic steps to rescue Jewish refugees from Hitler's persecution. As Andrew Hollinger of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum explains, "[Rescuing Jews] was not a priority for President Roosevelt or virtually anyone else in the government. [...] President Roosevelt led the effort to prepare America to enter the war, but never made rescuing the victims of Nazism a priority." After Kristallnacht in 1938, Roosevelt "refused to criticize the leaders of Nazi Germany" and "did not issue a single statement critical of the Nazis during the first five years of Hitler's rule" and "repeatedly compelled Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes to remove critical references to Hitler from his speeches." Roosevelt "refused to support a bill that would have let 20,000 Jewish German adolescents into the U.S." This was not because he harbored extreme Hitlerian anti-Jewish animus. Although he made some anti-Semitic remarks, he was generally strongly supported by American Jews and had many Jewish advisers. But for the most part he simply did not regard the fate of European Jewry as something America was obligated to do something about.

These details are often overlooked because of Roosevelt's role in defeating Nazi Germany, as if it is petty to quibble over the shortcomings of a president who saved the world from Nazism (or at least helped the Soviet Union to do so). And it's true that, as the authors of *FDR and the Jews* point out, "Roosevelt reacted more decisively to Nazi crimes against Jews than did any other world leader of his time," which shows how low the bar was. They note that Roosevelt was in part making a political calculation that "the more Roosevelt risked on initiatives for Jews, the less he thought he could carry Congress and the public with him



Japanese internment

on broad issues of foreign policy." But the failure of the United States to take meaningful action to prevent the Holocaust is a historic disgrace, and we should not set it aside out of a desire to preserve a heroic narrative of our own role in World War II, or a saintly image of Franklin Roosevelt.

There are other less extreme, but also disturbing, failings. The New Deal's social safety net was not extended equally to Americans of all races. Infamously, agricultural and domestic workers were originally excluded from Social Security, and government loans were not available in Black neighborhoods. Roosevelt was, to put it charitably, not a bold leader on civil rights. He refused to support an anti-lynching bill in order to maintain the support of Southern Democrats on other issues, and it took pressure from A. Philip Randolph and the threat of a massive march for Roosevelt to issue an executive order prohibiting discrimination in the defense industry.

None of this is excusable. But nor does it negate the achievements of the New Deal agencies. There was perhaps more progress between 1929 and 1939 in advancing public welfare than in the first 300 years of American history. Roosevelt's leadership helped save America and the world from fascism. He also managed it all despite having been paralyzed from the waist down since the age of 39, an extraordinary achievement that perhaps doesn't get the awe it deserves because Roosevelt so carefully concealed his disability from the public.

REVISITING THE NEW DEAL ERA OFFERS CRUCIAL LESSONS in the current political moment, when Democrats have spectacularly failed to offer a compelling alternative to Donald Trump's right-wing authoritarian politics. We can see how a distinctly American progressive politics might capture the support of a broad swath of the country and how major reforms can in fact be accomplished.

Roosevelt, above all else, delivered. Apparently, there are some in Democratic circles who believe that Joe Biden practiced a form

of politics known as “deliverism,” which focused on delivering tangible benefits to voters in the hope it would win their support. Well, that would be news to voters, few of whom could probably name a Biden policy that impacted them. Roosevelt showed people what their government was doing. He carved it in stone—here in New Orleans, “Built by the Works Progress Administration” is still etched into the bridges of beautiful City Park. And he took to the radio to explain to them what he was doing so that they could understand his project. Any president or party who wants to be successful should take that key lesson from Roosevelt: give people things they can see and feel, and then tell them you’ve given it to them. (When Donald Trump’s administration sent out stimulus checks to Americans during COVID, for instance, Trump made sure his name was on them.)

Importantly, the New Deal did not just give monetary hand-outs. It also fostered culture and belonging. The Federal Theater Project, for instance, was shut down prematurely in 1939 after anti-communists waged a witch hunt against it over the subversive themes of its productions. (Its director was asked in a hearing of the House Un-American Activities Committee whether Christopher Marlowe was the name of a communist.) But in its short life it made the theater accessible to countless Americans and was a starting point for major artists like Arthur Miller and Orson Welles. Theater critic Brooks Atkinson said the project “kept an average of ten thousand people employed on work that has helped to lift the dead weight from the lives of millions of Americans” and that it “has been the best friend the theatre as an institution has ever had in this country.”

WPA art has become legendary and still adorns many federal buildings. Roosevelt said of the government funded art: “some of it [is] good, some of it [is] not so good, but all of it [is] native, human, eager, and alive—all of it painted by their own kind in their own country, and painted about things that they know and look at often and have touched and loved.”

Reviewing the New Deal generation’s accomplishments, Harvey Kaye writes that those of us living in the United States of the 21st century should be proud of what our forebears did:

Most of all we need to remember that we are the children and grandchildren of the men and women who accomplished all of that—in the face of powerful conservative, reactionary, and corporate opposition, and despite their own faults and failings—by making America freer, more equal, and more democratic than ever before. Now, when all that they fought for is under siege and we, too, find ourselves confronting crises and forces that threaten the nation and all that it stands for, we need to remember that we are the children and grandchildren of the most progressive generation in American history. We are the children of the men and women who articulated, fought for, and endowed us with the promise of the Four Freedoms.

For Kaye, Roosevelt’s idea of the Four Freedoms—freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear—was a powerful vision that helped Americans understand, at a time when fascist governments were taking hold around the world, what we should be fighting for. Kaye also points to Roosevelt’s “Second Bill of Rights” proposal, which would have guaranteed people employment, income, housing, healthcare, and

A monthly check to you -

FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE
•• BEGINNING WHEN YOU ARE 65

GET YOUR SOCIAL SECURITY ACCOUNT NUMBER promptly

APPLICATIONS ARE BEING DISTRIBUTED AT ALL WORK PLACES

WHO IS ELIGIBLE •• EVERYBODY WORKING FOR SALARY OR WAGES (WITH ONLY A FEW EXCEPTIONS, SUCH AS AGRICULTURE, DOMESTIC SERVICE, AND GOVERNMENT WORK) APPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL SECURITY ACCOUNTS ARE AVAILABLE THROUGH EMPLOYERS. IF YOU DO NOT GET ONE FROM YOUR EMPLOYER, ASK FOR ONE AT THE POST OFFICE.

HOW TO RETURN APPLICATION

1. HAND IT BACK TO YOUR EMPLOYER, IF
2. HAND IT TO ANY LABOR ORGANIZATION OF WHICH YOU ARE A MEMBER, OR
3. HAND IT TO YOUR LETTER CARRIER, OR
4. DELIVER IT TO LOCAL POST OFFICE, OR
5. MAIL IT IN A SEALED ENVELOPE ADDRESSED: POSTMASTER, LOCAL DO IT NOW, NO POSTAGE NEEDED.

- Social Security Board

INFORMATION MAY BE OBTAINED AT ANY POST OFFICE

education, as an agenda worth reviving and embracing. Roosevelt had a clear understanding of what government ought to be doing for people and thereby gave a convenient, easily remembered way for people to measure the performance of their public servants. Are we free of want? Clearly not, in a country with widespread homelessness, economic precarity, food insecurity, and other forms of easily preventable misery. Then we are not yet free.

Roosevelt, of course, took office amidst a catastrophe. What the New Dealers accomplished was only possible because the previous administration had been utterly discredited in its failure to deal with a serious crisis. Does it take a disaster to make a visionary social democratic politics possible? Let us hope not. But that can’t be proven either way. What we do know is that the New Deal era shows us a possible way out of the political dead end the Democratic Party has reached. Leftists often argue, perhaps rightly, that Rooseveltian social democracy helped neutralize revolutionary currents and “save” capitalism. (Roosevelt himself said that “It was this administration which saved the system of private profit and free enterprise after it had been dragged to the brink of ruin.”) But few today would wish for a world without Social Security. And every leftist can benefit from studying how an administration can win popular support through providing tangible gains and demonstrating leadership that builds public confidence. If we are to come back from and reverse Trumpism, it may require a Second New Deal. ✦

THERE'S SO MUCH SUFFERING IN THE WORLD TODAY, IT'S ENOUGH TO MAKE ANYONE FEEL BAD!
AS ADOLPH REED ONCE SAID, "LIBERALS DON'T BELIEVE IN POLITICS ANYMORE, ONLY
BEARING WITNESS TO SUFFERING."

**WOW! HOW CAN YOU
STAY LASER-FOCUSED
ON BEARING WITNESS?**

**CURRENT AFFAIRS
HAS GOT YOU
COVERED!**

**ARRIVING IN
SPRING
2025...**

**FINALLY!
AN ANSWER
TO 'WON'T
SOMEONE
HELP
THOSE
POOR
PEOPLE?!'**

**FROM THE
MAKERS OF
THE BLUSTERING
PALEO-CONSERVATIVE
ARISTOCRATIC
SMART-
MONOCLE!**

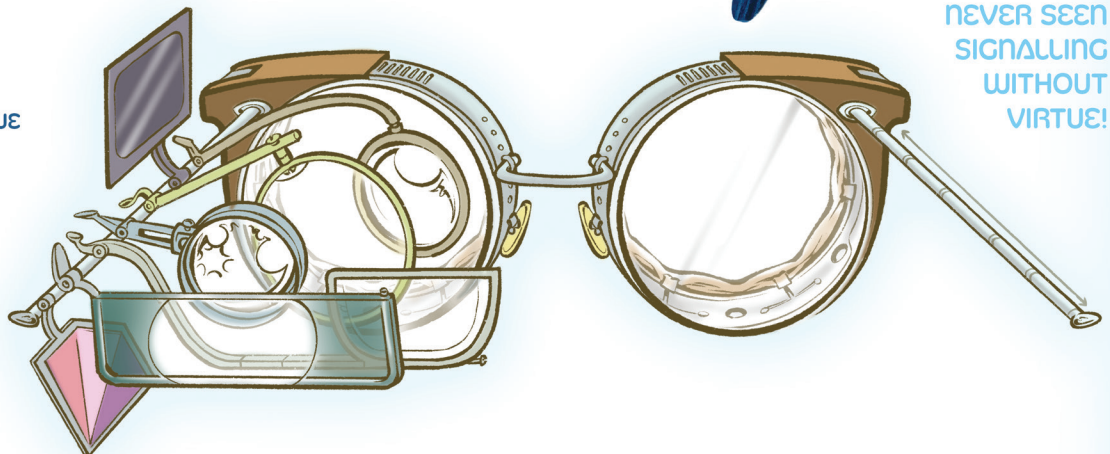


**GOOD LIBERAL
STARTER SET:**

- PRECISION SIGHT
- SAFE-SPACE LENS
- CENTRAL SIGHT
SUFFER-ENHANCER
- R.C. BLOCKER
- DEM-FOCALS
- PRECISION SCOPE
- BEAR-WITNESS
MAGNIFIERS W/ BLUE
LIGHT REDUCTION
- ECO-FRIENDLY
FRAMES
- STURDY SUFFILTER
EXTENSION
ARMS FOR UP TO
14X MAXIMUM
BEARING
WITNESS TO
SUFFERING!

BEARING WITNESS TO *Suffering* GLASSES V1.0

**COMES WITH
PATENTED TEAR-
CIRCULATION
TECHNOLOGY TO
ENSURE YOU ARE
NEVER SEEN
SIGNALLING
WITHOUT
VIRTUE!**



BE THE ENVY OF YOUR BRUNCH TABLE WITH *CURRENT AFFAIRS'* *BEARING WITNESS TO SUFFERING GLASSES*! THEY'LL HAVE YOU PITIFULLY HAND-WRINGING ABOUT ALL THE BIG PROBLEMS NO ONE CAN SOLVE—AND DOING IT IN STYLE!

5 Cozy Cocktails To Make This Winter

The holidays are just around the corner, so grab a blanket, the latest issue of *Current Affairs*, and one of these cozy cocktails to get into the winter spirit before climate change eliminates winter entirely.

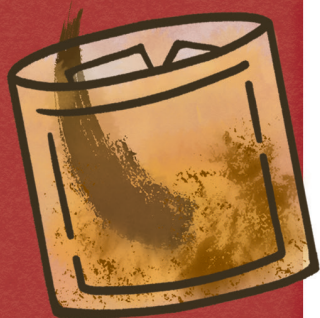
Written by Devin Schiff

Illustrated by Libby McGuire

Diseased Maple Old-Fashioned

- Two oz. bourbon
- ½ teaspoon orange bitters
- 1 tablespoon loamy soil
- Three pieces maple tree bark
- Two dashes verticillium dahliae fungi

Add ingredients to a cocktail shaker. Wait while the verticillium dahliae pathogens cause the maple tree bark to blacken and wither (about five minutes). Shake well and serve in your dirtiest rocks glass.



Microplastics Rum Punch

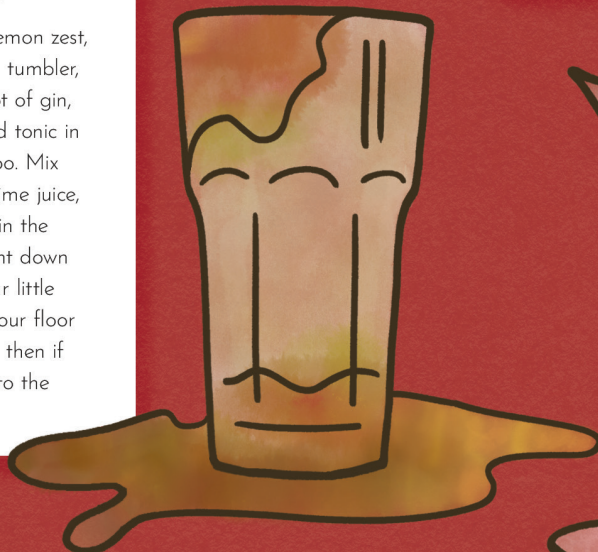
- Two oz. white rum
- ½ oz. apple cider
- ¼ oz. fresh lemon juice
- Four oz. bottled water

Pour all ingredients in a hurricane glass. Stir and serve over bottled-water ice. The tartness of the apple cider pairs perfectly with the subtle toxicity of the flame retardants and the phthalates.



Government Shutdown

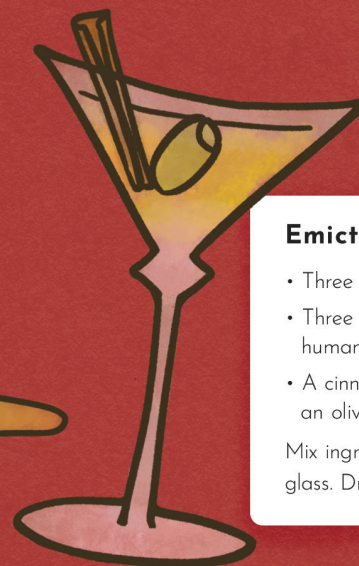
Mix one shot of rye whiskey, lemon zest, and a teaspoon of honey in a tumbler, then dump it out. Mix one shot of gin, dash of Angostura bitters, and tonic in the tumbler. Dump that out too. Mix one shot of rum, ½ ounce of lime juice, and ¼ ounce of simple syrup in the tumbler, and pour it all straight down your sink. Continue mixing your little drinks and pouring them on your floor until you've run out of alcohol, then if you're still thirsty, head down to the basement for the paint.



Emiction Martini

- Three oz. snow
- Three tablespoons human urine (anyone's)
- A cinnamon stick or an olive or whatever

Mix ingredients in a martini glass. Drink in one gulp.



Anti-Mexican Hot Chocolate

In a medium saucepan, add two cups whole milk, two tablespoons cocoa powder, and stir, while loudly ranting about how illegal immigrants are ruining this country. Whisk in three tablespoons granulated sugar, one teaspoon vanilla extract, and ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon, except forget to add the cinnamon because the anchor on Newsmax just started talking about yet another migrant caravan swarming toward the border. Why can't these people understand they're not wanted here? If the government won't do anything to stop them, then patriotic Americans like us will have no choice but to start doing vigilante justice. Then, when you finally notice that your mixture has boiled and is now blistering, angrily turn off the burner and throw the saucepan at the wall.



PASSING



THE TORCH

BY NOAH PREJEAN

THIS YEAR, 2024, MARKS THE 30-YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF A little-known convergence between the history of the Olympic Games and the struggle for LGBTQ rights in the United States. When the Olympics came to Atlanta, Georgia, in 1996, no events were held in one of Metro Atlanta's most populous counties despite efforts by business and local power elites. This lone county, out of Georgia's 159 counties, which the Olympic torch did not visit was Cobb County. Why? Because a determined and resourceful group of LGBTQ activists made sure the Olympics would stay away.

In a time of renewed political attacks on the LGBTQ community and a growing activist left devoted to such issues as racial equality, women's rights, and preventing environmental catastrophe, looking back and learning from history is vital. As a gay man who was born in 1997 and raised in Atlanta by two mothers, both of whom were active in gay rights groups like Queer Nation, ACT UP, and the Lesbian Avengers, I thought I knew a lot about the protest movements of the 1990s. But when I asked my parents for more information on that history, they brought up a book I had never heard of, written by activists they had known and worked with—and who deserve to be better known today.

The book is *Olympics Out of Cobb: Spiked!* by Pat Hussain and Jon-Ivan Weaver, published in 1996. It's a riveting narrative journey through the conversations and thoughts that surrounded an activist group's birth and its fight against homophobia and prejudice in the years 1993-4. When I opened its covers, I began to read about people I'd grown up seeing and knowing in Atlanta—veteran activists like Jeff Graham, head of Georgia Equality; Mona Bennett, one of the co-founders of the Atlanta Harm Reduction Project; and Pat Hussain, who co-founded both the Atlanta chapter of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Def-

amation (GLAAD) and Southerners on New Ground (SONG). Growing up, I always wondered what these people were like in their youth, especially those who I knew as “professionals” and boardroom activists. But through the book—and conversations I had with my family—I learned that before fighting for grants or struggling with the levers of power, they too were young activists marching, protesting, and taking direct action on the streets for their causes.

Olympics Out of Cobb: Spiked! opens with a shameful incident in Georgia history. On August 10, 1993, the Cobb County Board of Commissioners passed a resolution which explicitly condemned and targeted their gay constituents. The resolution stated that the “lifestyles advocated by the gay community should not be endorsed by government policy makers,” since they were against Cobb's “community standards” and its policy to support the “traditional family structure,” and that “gay lifestyles are directly against state laws.” The last point was actually true, as Georgia still had a law on the books criminalizing gay sex until 1998. The resolution passed by a vote of 3-1, with only Commissioner Bill Cooper voting no. The whole thing was blatantly homophobic and hateful, and as soon as the news got out, the LGBTQ community began looking for ways to fight back.

Around the same time, Metro Atlanta had another focus: the city's upcoming status as the host city for the 1996 Olympic Games. In *Olympics Out of Cobb: Spiked!*, Jon-Ivan Weaver recalls when he and his partner, Diego, joined hundreds of others in the Underground Atlanta district for a watch party of the International Olympic Committee's decision, and the “joyous shout” of the crowd when their own city's name was read out. He describes how they felt “like a part of the city; not a gay part, not different, just proud citizens of Atlanta.”

Weaver no longer felt the same come January 30, 1994, when during that year's Super Bowl pre-game show, Cobb County—which had officially condemned its gay citizens just a few months earlier—was announced as hosting some Olympic events, mainly women's volleyball. Immediately Weaver felt he had to do something and began calling, and yes, faxing (it was the '90s) both local and national gay and lesbian groups, as well as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games, or ACOG.

From that point on, the book is an exciting tale of how Weaver, Pat Hussain, and a small circle of their friends and allies built up a dedicated community of activists, all with the goal of overturning the decision to hold Olympic events in Cobb County. The name they gave themselves was simple and descriptive: "Olympics Out of Cobb." This group of activists, mostly in their 20s, some already with political baggage from previous protest movements, knew it would be an uphill battle. Weaver himself was not a natural leader at first, and he dealt with moments of shyness and anxiety throughout the campaign; at one point, he recalls downing half a bottle of Pepto-Bismol to steady himself before his first-ever public speech. But when he meets Pat Hussain, who has a little more experience as a political organizer, she helps him find his courage:

"What do you want to do?" Pat was trying not to be rude, but she didn't have time for this conversation.

"I'm not sure... but I'm pissed." He blurted out, stood there defiantly in the parking lot.

Pat stopped and turned around, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "Well, that's all it takes."

By the book's end, Weaver is threatening to chain himself to the Olympic volleyball nets if ACOG doesn't abandon Cobb County and its homophobia, and he's telling public officials things like "there is no compromise" and "our rights are not for sale" when they try to get the activists to back down. It's an inspiring transformation.

AS OLYMPICS OUT OF COBB IS FORMED AND GAINS STRENGTH, and its characters are introduced, my own perceptions began to shift, just as Jon-Ivan Weaver shifted from a timid, uncertain activist to a courageous organizer and leader. Jeff Graham, who I always saw as a very formal and corporate activist growing up, is revealed to have designed and made a satirical "KKK outfit" for Izzy, the 1996 Olympic Games mascot, as an act of protest. The outfit was worn in the Atlanta Pride march that year, as well as at multiple pickets and protests; the activists also wore matching T-shirts with the slogan "Izzy a Bigot?" to many of their events, infuriating Billy Payne, the leader of ACOG. I remember Mona Bennett, who's introduced with the pseudonym Mona Love in the book, always wearing her hat covered in activist buttons; the story of how she came by some of those buttons is included here. Even the book's co-author, Pat Hussain, is a familiar face who my family would often meet while out shopping;

for my moms, it was always an opportunity to catch up with a fellow activist from the old days. These were everyday people who I grew up around, only seeing them at the end of a hard-fought struggle. But in reading *Olympics Out of Cobb: Spiked!*, I saw their story begin to solidify into a whole. A facet of their lives that was missing had been revealed.

Once officially formed and named, Olympics Out of Cobb began to deliberate on their demands. During this process, Hussain gave some advice activists today should learn from: "Always ask these people for more than you think they will do. Then when you get what you want, they think they've made a great deal for themselves." After several meetings, the group finalized a list and presented it at a press conference on February 24, 1993. Most importantly, they called for the IOC and ACOG to move Olympic events out of Cobb County venues and to ensure the county itself received "no direct benefit" from the games. However, reflecting the diverse background of the group's founders and organizers—and their desire to build alliances with other social justice movements—they also made other multidimensional demands. In particular, they wanted the IOC and ACOG to issue a statement denouncing the Georgia state flag, which at that point closely resembled the Confederate one. Following the press conference, Weaver and Hussain began a series of meetings with ACOG representatives. Their first and subsequent six meetings were attended by the same group: Jon-Ivan Weaver and Pat Hussain representing Olympics Out of Cobb, and from ACOG, Shirley Franklin and David Getachew-Smith. Franklin was fourth in the leadership structure at ACOG as a senior advisor and would go on to become mayor of Atlanta in 2002. Getachew-Smith, meanwhile, was a professional lawyer and the Director of Local Government and Community Relations for ACOG.

The first meeting went as expected, and Franklin echoed all of ACOG's previous statements with a flat denial: "No, we're not moving." Following their first meeting on March 3 they had a second on March 7, and then another a week later on March 14. Throughout this time Olympics Out of Cobb was hard at work organizing support: contacting, informing, and creating a grassroots coalition from other LGBT groups to civil rights leaders like Congressman John Lewis, who wrote them a letter endorsing the demand about the Georgia flag. At each new meeting with ACOG, Weaver and Hussain brought lists, letters, and other shows of support from an ever-growing army of groups and individuals, from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and GLAAD to Latinos en Acción. But they also took daring direct action: when ACOG held a press event to unveil the Olympic Cauldron for the 1996 games, activists Ed Scruggs and Don George snuck in and unfurled an "Olympics Out of Cobb" banner before the assembled world press. Four days later, Weaver and Hussain had their fourth meeting with ACOG, showing two new letters of support from Senator Barbara Boxer and Representative Pat Schroeder. They also made an ultimatum, informing Franklin and Getachew-Smith of their plans to hold a huge national protest in Atlanta during the 1996 Olympics if volleyball wasn't moved out of Cobb County.

The book expertly depicts small-scale organizing and intersectional coalition-building at a time when the LGBTQ



Members of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) at the Olympics-Out-of-Cobb protest, 1994. Courtesy of Kennesaw University Archives

movement was still in a constant struggle to be recognized at all. Throughout, Weaver and Hussain show different strategies and tactics, from professional high-level negotiating meetings to massive outpourings of support from interested parties and dramatic on-the-ground actions. Remember, this was the 1990s—before the internet as we know it, when most people got their political information from a national pipeline of newspapers and cable stations. Weaver and Hussain show how to use the media to a social movement's advantage and how they built relationships with journalists who provided Olympics Out of Cobb with vital publicity. The tactics they used may be outdated now, but many of them still work, and they could still be effective in fights today. The authors also depict the discussions and conflicts within the group itself and how they managed to successfully resolve them. Most of all, the Olympics Out of Cobb fight highlights the multi-dimensionality of struggles. Just as they are today, homophobia and racism were siblings in the 1990s, not strangers, and they had to be confronted at the same time.

THE FIFTH MEETING BETWEEN THE ACTIVISTS AND ACOG came on the heels of an event organized by the Lesbian Avengers, which was one of the most eye-catching demonstrations of the whole campaign. Waving a large Olympics Out of Cobb banner, the Avengers held a mock Olympic torch run from Atlanta to Marietta, ending with several members swallowing fire from their torches (yeah, seriously) and declaring that “this is the last time the Olympic torch will burn in Cobb County!” At the ensuing meeting, the organizers decided to emphasize a new angle, possibly inspired by the lesbian runners a few days before: the fact that some Olympic athletes, including in women’s volleyball, are gay themselves. Hussain, a lesbian, summed up this

argument succinctly by saying that “you can’t send those dykes and their girlfriends, and the dykes and their girlfriends who want to watch them play, to Cobb,” where they might not be safe from homophobic harassment. Soon after, Olympics Out of Cobb got an endorsement from Bruce Hayes—a gold medalist swimmer and the first openly gay Olympian from the United States, who said that “Asking these people to attend an event in a place that condones homophobia and hatred is akin to asking black athletes to participate in a sporting event in South Africa.” This only gave more weight to Hussain and Weaver’s argument that gay people are an integral part of the Olympics and contributed to the growing wave of bad publicity for Cobb County. For ACOG and the IOC, the pressure was mounting.

This meeting was also the first time any kind of official progress was made in the negotiations. ACOG conceded to some of the activists’ lesser demands, mainly increased sensitivity training for the Olympics security staff, as well as meeting the group’s demand for an LGBTQ advisory panel. This was a critical moment, because it appears ACOG hoped they could buy Olympics Out of Cobb off with these small changes and avoid making more serious ones. But Hussain and Weaver stood firm, reiterating that as long as there were games in Cobb, their movement would continue. At the last planned meeting, Hussain roundly rejected ACOG’s perpetual compromise-seeking, saying that “trading a kick in the head for one in the stomach is no bargain. You’re still under attack.”

May 9 and 10 marked the largest days of demonstrations for the group. Starting with a press conference at the Marriott Marquis hotel, they requested a meeting with Juan Antonio Samaranch, the president of the IOC. In response to media questions, the group said to “look for the pink triangles.” Next, a set of activists got into nine cars with pink triangles painted on their roofs and began a

“slow-down” of I-75 South, a major artery of Atlanta traffic which goes through Cobb County. Ignoring the shouts of police on their bullhorns, they drove at the legal speed limit of 40 mph in more or less all lanes of traffic—and no faster, snarling the entire highway and creating a visual spectacle for the news helicopters that soon gathered above. The demonstrations concluded with a picket outside the Capitol City Club, where ACOG was hosting a dinner for Samaranch. A top ACOG official joked about the activists’ low numbers, dubbing them the “Capital City Nine,” only to be shown up the next day when a candlelight vigil held by Olympics Out of Cobb attracted an estimated 600 people. Chanting and singing, the group walked from Woodruff Park to Underground Atlanta.

Following the group’s name appearing on multiple banners in the Atlanta Pride Parade, where Hussain and Weaver served as official Grand Marshals in 1994, the Olympics Out of Cobb activists then attended the Stonewall 25 Pride Parade in New York City and called for a national protest at the Olympic Games in Atlanta. As they continued to get more and more national media coverage, the group got its biggest endorsement yet. When he accepted the Robert J. Kane award, which honors former Olympians, Greg Louganis—a champion diver who’d won gold in both the 1984 and 1988 games and who’d recently come out as a gay man—dedicated his award to all gay athletes and specifically backed the Olympics Out of Cobb fight, saying that “It’s not an issue of politics but fairness.” Louganis later called Weaver and told him that members of ACOG had been in the audience for his speech and that it had “scared the pants off them.” And finally, after an intense May, June, and July, ACOG announced on July 29 that it would comply with the activists’ demands and move all Olympic events out of Cobb County. They’d won.

NOW, NEARLY 30 YEARS LATER, READING THIS BOOK AND talking to my mother has broadened my own recollections of growing up within an activist family. My mom, Kelly, said “they just didn’t know what to do with us” when reminiscing over her time in the fight as a member of groups like Queen Nation, ACT UP, and the Lesbian Avengers. AAs a kid, I went with my parents to all kinds of protests, marches, and demonstrations for everything from MLK Day to the antiwar movement to the fight against the Georgia. Constitutional Amendment banning same-sex marriage in the early 2000s. My parents worked diligently in 2003 to oppose that homophobic law, but much to their dismay, it passed anyway in 2004. This was when they backed away from street activism, as that defeat stung in a new way. I was 6 or 7 at the time, but I remember seeing our local polling place—which was also my elementary school—become the target of anti-LGBTQ pickets with signs that said “God Hates Fags” during the election where this amendment passed. After that fight, my parents adapted to professional roles as they funded movements more than marched in them. But this childhood of activism planted seeds in me to fight for a better future for all.

The story of *Olympics Out of Cobb: Spiked!* may have taken place three decades ago, but the lessons, anecdotes, and humanity found in its pages are more relevant than ever. As a new generation of activists stand up and fight, whether it’s against “Cop City” in Atlanta or in defense of trans rights across the country, looking to the past and learning from our history is always necessary. So, if you thought you knew the whole story of this country’s social justice movements—think again. Ask a few more questions, read a few more books, and maybe talk to a few more people. Because there are more chapters yet to be written as the torch is passed to a new generation. ✿

CURRENT AFFAIRS

EDITORIAL STAFF



CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Briahna Joy Gray

NEWS BRIEFING

Stephen Prager

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Jessica Elliott
Nathan J. Robinson
Paul Waters-Smith

SECRETARY & TREASURER

Rosemary Matthews

ADMINISTRATIVE MANAGER

Sonya Eugene

PUBLISHER

S. Chapin Domino

EDITOR IN CHIEF

Nathan J. Robinson

MANAGING EDITOR

Lily Sánchez

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Alex Skopic

SUBSCRIBER RELATIONS

Pasha Jovanovic

EDITOR AT LARGE

Yasmin Nair

CHIEF FILM CRITIC

Ciara Moloney

HOUSE ECONOMIST

Rob Larson


SOCIAL MEDIA

John Ross

LEAD DESIGNER

Cali Traina Blume

The Tradwife Lifestyle



*The way it's
meant to be!*

**experiences may vary.*

A Public Service
Announcement from

 **PragerU**



WHO WILL STOP AMISH ANIMAL ABUSE?

BY ALEX SKOPIC

IT'S AUGUST 2, 2016—A HOT SUMMER DAY IN LANCASTER COUNTY, Pennsylvania, home to the Amish religious community. A woman named Tawn Crowther is driving along a narrow rural road when suddenly, she sees something horrifying up ahead. A horse, harnessed to a large wooden cart, has stopped in its tracks, seemingly overcome by the heat and the heavy load it has to pull. But rather than help the distressed animal, its driver—a man dressed in the classic wide-brimmed hat and plain white shirt of the Amish—has started brutally beating it.

As Crowther described the incident:

[The] horse was unable to pull a wagon full of watermelon and 2 grown men [...] At that point he continued to kick, hit and pull on the poor seemingly dying animal. I pulled over and called the police. They came to evaluate the situation, only to tell me that they are unsure of the outcome. Because Amish are governed under a different law. Are you kidding? Isn't abuse standard across the board? So if I decide to beat and kill animals I need to change my religion to be above the law?

In the end, the horse was euthanized, despite the local fire department having used around 1,000 gallons of water to try to cool down the overheated animal. In a subsequent statement, the Ephrata Police Department denied saying that the Amish are subject to a “different law,” and claimed that the officer on the scene had said only that “how the law applied to the immediate situation was not immediately clear.” But it's not really plausible that it would be “unclear” what laws applied. All 50 states have their own laws against cruelty to animals, and in each, the concept is “standard across the board,” just as Crowther said. You couldn't ask for a more clear-cut case than someone beating an overworked horse to death.

In any case, the Ephrata police eventually charged Marvin M. Sensenig, the man beating the horse, with two counts of animal cruelty. He pleaded guilty and paid \$754 in fines, a remarkably light penalty compared to the violence he'd just inflicted on the animal. The case attracted widespread attention, appearing in national papers like the

Washington Post and *Miami Herald* and even international ones like the *Daily Mail*. It was unusual for two reasons: because it was so blatant, taking place in broad daylight on a public road, and because the perpetrator was a member of a unique and insular religious sect. Sensenig is an extreme example, for sure. But his case is far from unique. In fact, abuse and cruelty to animals are disturbingly common features of Amish life. It's a problem that badly needs to be addressed. But nobody seems to have the political will to face it head-on.

IN THE FIRST PLACE, IT SHOULD BE MADE CLEAR THAT ANY ANALYSIS of the Amish and their culture is made more difficult by the relative lack of information coming out of Lancaster County and other Amish enclaves in the United States and Canada. We are talking about an Anabaptist community of roughly 400,000 people that rejects most modern technology: they still rely on horse-drawn carriages for transport and farming alike and live by choice in a state of separation from the modern world. In most cases, the Amish will not pose for film or photography, as they believe it to be a violation of the biblical commandment against “graven images,” and they generally aren't putting much of anything on the internet (although some communities have allowed themselves to be photographed by people they trust). For sociologists and political writers alike, that makes things tricky. In the resources we do have, however, the abuse of animals—and of horses in particular—is a recurring theme.

For instance, a 2018 article in the *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies*, published by the University of Akron, contains the following testimony from an “accomplished equestrian” with knowledge of the community:

The Amish also are their own blacksmiths, or farriers, trimming and shoeing their own horses [because] it is cheaper for them. They don't measure to make sure all four feet are even and they have little to no training other than what is passed down from father to son. The variation, therefore, is enormous. Some Amish love flashy horses and treat them well. I don't mean to denigrate everyone. Like all communities,

individual members differ. Overall, however, my experience and what I've heard from family (who know or knew horses) and from other horse-y types is that the Amish do mistreat and abuse their animals, horses included, if not also particularly their buggy horses.

This fits with the accounts of people who work at animal shelters and rescue projects and have documented many cases of individual horses who've suffered terrible mistreatment at Amish hands. There's Ezekiel (or "Zeke"), who rescuers with the Baby Girl Horse Rescue and Veteran Therapy Ranch of Fellesmere, Florida, discovered in 2021 with a "strip of wire intentionally wrapped around his front left foot that was slowly growing into the bone." There's Katie, who, according to workers at the Equus Rescue of Illinois, was so traumatized by past whippings that she shied away at the sound of a snapping carrot. There's Barnaby, a wild horse from Oregon who was "rounded up, adopted, and worked nearly to death" by Amish farmers, then "discarded in a killpen for the last bit of money that could be wrung out of his suffering" once he could no longer work. (Notably, the staff at the Sky Dog Ranch and Sanctuary write that this is something that "happens often with Amish work horses.") One of the most horrific examples comes from the Little Brook Farm sanctuary in Old Chatham, New York:

John Henry was an Amish plow horse, overworked and underfed. Brothers shared him, so when one finished their fields, he was given to the next one...and then the next one...and the next - for over 15 years. Water was kept in a common trough in the aisle and horses were led to it at some point during the day. John Henry drinks a LOT of water so preventing access to it was not only inhumane but contributed to his poor body condition. His tail is docked so there's no protection from biting flies. (In a harness, they're unable to even reach their head around to remove a horse fly.)

Speaking from personal experience, I grew up in Northeastern Pennsylvania and heard stories like this on a fairly regular basis from a woman who ran a small animal rescue with her husband: horses with prominent whip scars, visible ribs, and so on, all saved at auction from Amish farms and given a quiet place to live out their remaining days.

Some of these abuse cases, like Ezekiel's, could be considered aberrations—the work of a "few bad apples," as the phrase goes. But others, like Barnaby's, speak to a more systemic kind of animal exploitation: the practice of using a horse for hard labor for as long as possible, then selling it off for slaughter when it physically can't work anymore. While a horse could simply be retired from its duties and "put out to pasture," the Amish approach is more harsh, as another horse rescuer puts it:

What we know is that a lot of times [the] Amish—not all the time, but sometimes, a lot of times, oftentimes—really just view their horses as tractors. Right? So they're meant for a specific job, they would use that horse for years and years and years for that job, and when they can no longer perform anymore, there's no purpose for them, or reason for them to keep them any more.

By now, you've probably noticed the references to "the killpen" and "slaughter"—that is, the killing of horses for meat. *Hang on*, you may ask, *hasn't slaughtering horses been banned for a while?* It's a fair question, as it certainly *seems* like the kind of practice that should have ended decades ago. But unfortunately the answer is "yes and no." The last commercial horse slaughterhouse in the United States, run by the Belgian company Cavel International, did indeed close in 2007 as a result of U.S. government policy. But this wasn't an outright ban on horse slaughter itself. Legislation like the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act (2011) or the Save America's Forgotten Equines (SAFE) Act

(2023), both of which would have created a federal ban, has yet to pass both houses of Congress. Instead, what we have is a de facto ban by a roundabout way. Since 2007, language in an appropriations bill dictates that the U.S. Department of Agriculture is prohibited from spending any federal money on *inspecting* horse slaughterhouses. No USDA inspections, no slaughter. But what that doesn't do is prevent people from shipping horses to either Mexico or Canada, where slaughtering them is still perfectly legal. So when elderly Amish horses go to livestock auctions like the ones in New Holland, Pennsylvania, or Sugar Creek, Ohio, they have one of two likely fates: they'll either be bought by a rescuer or sanctuary worker, or by someone trying to snap them up cheaply, ship them across the border, and turn them into horsemeat.

IN FACT, A 2023 STUDY BY THREE NONPROFIT GROUPS—ANIMAL Wellness Action, the Center for a Humane Economy, and Animals' Angels—found that the Amish are one of the key groups keeping the horse-slaughter industry alive in North America. It's declined as a whole, from a high point of "nearly 350,000" horses killed annually in the 1990s to just 20,000 today, as both "supply and demand have cratered." But on the "supply" side, there are still four key "horse sources" remaining. One is the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, which has a program incentivizing people to adopt wild horses and burros but also "adopts horses to individuals known to sell animals directly to slaughter." Two other key sources are the "harness racing industry in the eastern United States" and a small group of Native American tribes. But the fourth is "the Amish and Mennonite [communities], who are a major source of slaughter horses in the Midwest and East." So not only are the Amish incidentally cruel to their horses on a day-to-day basis, whipping them too much or shoeing them improperly, but they're helping to maintain an entire industry built on killing them.

That's the big picture, but it's worth pausing for a second to consider—repulsive as it is—what the process of auctioning and slaughtering horses actually looks like. Unsurprisingly, it is neither clean nor painless. In 2010, nature writer Lisa Couturier attended the New Holland horse auction and was appalled by what she found:

Standardbred mare, leaves the ring early. On her way out, Mennonite boys whip her repeatedly in the face. Russek will tell me later that some of the Amish and Mennonites can be "truly heartless" in the way they treat their horses, an observation that is, in all but the same words, repeated by a horse rescue worker who reported her experience at an Indiana auction on the Grateful Acres website: "The kill pen is full of Belgian draft horses, the powerful, living machinery of Amish farms. . . . [T]he Belgians in this pen are grievously and horrifyingly injured. They have been worked until they literally cannot stand any longer. . . . No matter that the animal has slaved . . . for any number of years, no matter that his swollen, oozing knee is collapsing at every forced step. Just as a broken plow would be sold to the junk man for the metal, these broken animals are sold to the kill-man for meat.

In its descriptions of the "discarded buggy and work horses from the surrounding Amish and Mennonite communities that are being sold every week" at the New Holland auction, the nonprofit report also observes that "Many of these horses are emaciated or limping. Others show signs of Strangles, a highly contagious respiratory infection," and "Draft horses are often brought in with horrific overgrown, cracked or curled up hooves." The photos are worse, and we'll do you a favor by not reproducing them here.

UNFORTUNATELY, IT'S NOT JUST HORSES. THE AMISH community has also become notorious for its role in operating puppy mills—highly unethical farming operations where

dogs are made to reproduce as much as possible. It's literally the mass production of puppies for sale. This fact came unexpectedly into the national news in 2023, when investigators looking into former Representative George Santos found that he'd written several bad checks to Amish dog breeders in 2017, helpfully writing "PUPPIES" in the subject line. Like most stories involving Santos, that's fairly amusing, but the puppy mills themselves are not. According to the *Main Line Times and Suburban* newspaper of Eastern Pennsylvania, they originated in the 1970s, when commercial pet sellers "began to come from the Midwest to Pennsylvania" and "taught Amish and Mennonite farmers and others that a cash crop to supplement their incomes could be pets raised in their barns." In the same article, American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) investigator Bob Baker observes that "The ironic thing is the Amish and Mennonites raise their (other) animals in better conditions" and "they treat dogs worse than livestock."

If anything, that's an understatement. In March 2009, reporters with ABC News interviewed Bill Smith, the founder of the Main Line Animal Rescue of Chester County, Pennsylvania, about his experiences with Amish puppy mills. The picture he painted was a grim one, in which dogs lived their whole lives in close confinement and were subject to outright torture:

When they come out of the rabbit hutches they walk like crabs because they don't know what it's like to walk on a proper surface. [...] The farmers, the Amish and the Mennonites, they pull the heads back and then they hammer sharp instruments down their throats to scar their vocal cords so they can't bark. [...] So that way they can have 500-600 dogs in a barn and no one knows. As we said, it's an industry of secrecy.

At the time, ABC estimated there were about 300 licensed dog breeders in Lancaster County alone, with another 600 unlicensed ones "in barns and sheds." Notably, this was a few months after Governor Ed Rendell had signed Pennsylvania's Act 119, better known simply as the "Dog Law," in October 2008. Rendell said he wanted to end Pennsylvania's reputation as "the puppy mill of the east," and Act 119 made some important provisions toward that goal, including mandates for trained veterinarians to examine each dog at a kennel and a ban on forcing dogs to live on painful wire flooring. But by 2012, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* found there was "little evidence" the law was actually being enforced. It also had a critical weakness, as its regulations only applied to kennels and breeders that sold 60 dogs or more per year. In 2015, *PennLive* journalist Colin Deppen wrote that the "trade long dominated by the Amish" was "not gone, just underground," with many "small-time operators that regularly abuse and kill animals" popping up across Lancaster County. In 2018, former *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter Amy Worden wrote for *Humane PA* that:

[P]uppy mills did not disappear from the Pennsylvania landscape. While the numbers of commercial kennels plummeted from 300 to about 30 following the passage of the bill, that number has crept back up to almost 90. Many kennels dropped below the 60 dog-sale-or-transfer threshold to skirt the new law.

Elsewhere, we can find accounts of equally abhorrent practices. In Laurelville, Ohio, an Amish dog breeder named Jonas Beachy faced 23 separate animal cruelty charges in 2013 after the local police got wind of his backyard operation, where 52 dogs were living under "horrendous conditions" such as "severely matted" fur and "some injured animals [...] living in feces a foot deep." But Beachy got a lawyer, who loudly condemned the charges as a "crusade against Amish breeders" by the Ohio SPCA (implying religious bias against his client), and was even-



Barnaby, a horse rescued from an Amish farm

tually able to get the charges dropped on a record-keeping technicality. More recently, the Paws Angels Dog Rescue of Antioch, Tennessee, has been working to save as many dogs as possible from Amish puppy mills across Ohio, Kentucky, and Mississippi, and its workers describe horribly cramped conditions in which the animals "live in rabbit hutches in the backyard" or in "warehouse barns" rather than suitable homes. And at the nonprofit East Coast Corgi Rescue, the workers write that "most of our highly aggressive corgis, [or] those that are paralyzed from Degenerative Myelopathy, [or] those with the blood borne disorder Von Willebrands" come from Amish mills. Beyond the disturbing details of the cruelty itself, it's important to remember that this is all taking place at a time when the United States has an overabundance of shelter dogs, many of whom can't find homes and are eventually euthanized (359,000 last year to be exact)—so the existence of for-profit puppy mills that churn out *more* dogs is doubly inexcusable. And yet, the Amish breeders show no sign of changing any time soon.

ON THE FACE OF IT, IT SEEMS BIZARRE AND HYPOCRITICAL THAT a religious order so concerned with piety and humility could at the same time be responsible for inflicting so much suffering. How, we might ask, is it possible that the Amish have a spiritual objection to seemingly mundane acts like having their pictures taken or wearing anything but the plainest of clothing, but see nothing wrong with the torment and slaughter of animals under their care? What moral sense does that make? Well, in the first place we should remember that no religion is a monolith, and there most likely are those in the Amish community who object strongly to institutions like horse auctions for slaughter and cramped, unsanitary puppy mills. Leaving aside the possibility of divergent voices, though, Amish animal abuse makes a certain kind of sense—at least when viewed in the context of the Amish worldview as a whole and that of conservative Christianity more generally.

The critical point, as Princeton researcher Nicole Welk-Joerger wrote in a 2021 study of "Amish Agrarianism," is that "Amish views of the environment are [...] ultimately anchored in the understanding that God made nature for human use." In other words, where modern conceptions of animal rights start with the understanding that animals



Footage of an Amish dog auction captured by the Human Society of the United States

are similar to humans in many ways—capable of fear and pain, possessing unique personalities that should be valued—and that both humans and animals are part of the same natural world, the Amish do not share these core assumptions. Rather, they literally believe what Welk-Joerg-er said: that God created humans distinct *from* the rest of nature and placed animals in the world to be humanity's tools and resources. There are several passages from the Christian Bible that could be used to justify such a view, but the most obvious is Genesis 1:28, in which God orders humanity to "have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." (That might be the most troublesome single verse in the book, as it also contains the command to "be fruitful and multiply," which has been the basis for a lot of anti-contraception politics over the years.) In any case, if you believe that animals are fundamentally *something* rather than someone, then the very concepts of "animal abuse" or the violation of "animal rights" wouldn't apply to you in the same way as to everyone else. Instead, an action like sending an elderly horse to the slaughterhouse might seem morally equivalent to selling off an old, dented plow for scrap metal. At the end of the day, both are your belongings, things to be disposed of in any way you see fit.

Politically, this creates a familiar tension: a religious group has a concept of rights and morality regarding animals that leaves a wide opening for abuse, and members of the group wish to continue animal-harming practices that many view as abhorrent. If the practices are allowed to continue, arguably religious liberty has been protected, but at the expense of animals' suffering and death. If authorities force the practices to be halted, the reverse is arguably true. For a less familiar example, we can look to Nepal, where animal advocates are currently trying to stop the Gadhimai slaughter ceremony. Described by its critics as "an appalling bloodbath," this is a ritual sacrifice held every five years in honor of the Hindu goddess Gadhimai, who is believed to reward her devotees with "wishes or good fortune" for killing an animal in her name. This year, "At least 4,200 buffaloes and thousands of goats and pigeons" were reportedly killed in a single event in Bariyarpur. Undoubtedly, this is a custom of genuine spiritual significance to many Nepalese people, one that's been going on for more than 200 years. And yet, it's also a colossal outpouring of animal pain and bloodshed. How to weigh those conflicting factors? Well, the Nepalese government has come down on the side of an animal's right to live being more important than a human's right to preserve a ritual. They've listened to animal rights advocates and are working to slowly phase out the Gadhimai sacrifices, which are already smaller than they used to be. The activists complain they aren't doing it quickly enough, but the basic principle that the state should intervene to stop animal cruelty even when it has a religious basis has been established.

That principle is what the United States needs, too. Last year, Nathan J. Robinson wrote persuasively that "There Should Not Be 'Religious Exemptions' To Laws," as democracy and the rule of law them-

selves are made meaningless if people can opt out of particular laws depending on what they personally believe. Now, the Amish have not been given a religious exemption from animal-cruelty laws, as evidenced by the fact that people like Marvin Sensenig do occasionally face charges. But they *do* enjoy exemptions or carveouts from a surprising number of other U.S. laws. They aren't required to send their children to public high schools, for instance, and instead use their own "one-room schoolhouses" that teach only up to the eighth grade. In New York state, for example, their horse-drawn buggies don't have to be licensed or insured before they're driven on public roads, and there are no seatbelt requirements, either—a fact which has led to all kinds of terrible accidents. In matters of criminal wrongdoing, the Amish community is "largely left to police itself." Cases are typically solved through internal religious processes like appealing to the judgement of a minister, rather than involving the secular courts, and there is "no set of punishments attached to a given transgression." (The exceptions come when a non-Amish witness calls in the secular authorities, as Tawn Crowther did.) In one light, this kind of autonomous self-governance could be seen as inspiring; certainly it shows the falsehood of the idea that a society needs platoons of armed cops to survive. But when it comes to animals, it seems obvious that having their treatment overseen by people who essentially don't believe they have any rights is going to lead to bad outcomes.

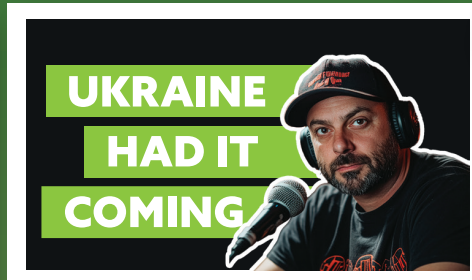
That state of affairs can't be allowed to go on. People in the United States need to do what their counterparts in Nepal have already done, and say *enough*. There must be no more puppy mills and no more horse slaughter, regardless of what anyone believes or disbelieves about it. The process of rooting out these abuses will be hard, but there's a clear roadmap, and it begins with the activists. Right now, a search of the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) website reveals almost nothing about Amish or Mennonite animal abuse. For the single largest animal-rights organization in the world, that's a shocking oversight. Groups like PETA have a responsibility to be on top of issues like this one and to put pressure on their elected officials to actually get something done. In turn, the government has a dual responsibility: to strengthen its laws against animal cruelty and to actually enforce them within Amish and other enclaves the same as it would outside. The United States needs an outright ban on transporting horses for slaughter so that that repulsive industry can finally pass into the history books where it belongs. State governments like Pennsylvania's need to seal the loopholes in their dog abuse laws so that breeders can't get away with using tiny wire cages so long as their puppy mill sells less than 60 dogs a year. There needs to be a wave of unannounced inspections across Lancaster County and places like it, and any animal facility found to be perpetrating abuse and cruelty needs to be swiftly shut down.

It's not that we in the non-Amish world, with our Christmas roasts and our patent leather shoes, are so much better. The same bedrock assumption that the Amish and other religious communities hold—that animals exist mainly for human use—drives plenty of exploitation and abuse in the secular world, too. It all has to be stopped. The question is, who has the political will to do it? In the case of the Amish, if any politician made a serious attempt to enforce animal welfare laws, there'd likely be a backlash from conservatives, who would paint it as an assault on religious faith; this already happens whenever someone tries to regulate Amish farmers' hideously dangerous practice of selling raw milk. With other, more corporate horrors like factory farming, there are powerful meat industry lobbies who do their best to block any reform. Left to their own devices, politicians are unlikely to challenge an abusive status quo. So it's up to the rest of us to force their hand—to build a political movement that demands an end to the needless suffering of animals, in whatever form it takes, and that demands the same standards of animal welfare be enforced everywhere, with no exceptions for anyone. If there's going to be real change, many more people need to become activists for animal rights. They have to be well-organized and dedicated enough to be a constant thorn in the side of elected officials until they have no choice but to take action. Only then can the horror of animal abuse, Amish and otherwise, be ended for good. ✦

HEY! DO YOU WANT LARGE PILES OF MONEY FAST?

If you're reading this, you're one of very few lucky people to learn about revolutionary technique that will have you earning hundreds of thousands of dollars a week. It's a method called **RIGHT-WING PODCASTING**, and thousands of talentless men have already become **MILLIONAIRES** by doing it.

NO charisma? **NO PROBLEM**. You **CAN** do this. Just read from the prepared scripts that will be handed to you weekly in an envelope by a mysterious Eastern European gentleman.



Are you willing to say **ABSOLUTELY ANYTHING** for money?

Are you unconcerned with the **HUMAN CONSEQUENCES** of your actions?

Would you like to spend all day finding new ways to blame the deep state, migrants, and cultural Marxists for economic and social ills?

If **YES**, right-wing podcasting may be for you! **SMASH THE SUBSCRIBE BUTTON** and get a free microphone, beanie, a small bag of cocaine, and your first batch of scripts!





AFRO FUTURISM AND THE FIGHT FOR LIBERATION

BY ETIENNE C. TOUSSAINT

I NEEDED TO MAKE SENSE OF THE CHAOS. IT WAS EARLY 2020, and the coronavirus pandemic had only just begun to unsettle our lives. The rising death toll in my childhood community, the mounting uncertainty about my own family's safety as the virus spread—each moment felt like another weight being stacked upon my shoulders. Confined indoors under strict government orders, we waited for further instructions, our lives suspended, our eyes glued to social media for the latest updates. Like many others, we welcomed certain changes to our daily routine.

Before the pandemic, my mornings were a blur of hurried steps—getting dressed for work, coaxing the kids out of bed, and rushing to the train station. Now, our family lingered over slow breakfasts together. The sweet aroma of homemade waffles filled the living room while our children's laughter echoed down the hall and Elmo's cheerful voice on *Sesame Street* joined into the melee. These simple, tender moments became the fragile backdrop of our new reality indoors. Still, as my wife and I juggled work laptops at the dining table, our toddlers distracted by the soft glow of handheld tablets, we exchanged hushed words and

worried glances. How long could we endure this isolation? How long before the world returned to the way it was before?

One evening, as I sat alone in my home office, the eerie stillness of the surrounding neighborhood pressing in like a held breath, my gaze wandered to a familiar book on my shelf: *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia E. Butler. I had discovered Butler's work years earlier, but now her words seemed to call out to me with renewed urgency. *Parable* paints a haunting vision of a future ravaged by climate change, infectious diseases, and social unrest—a world that felt uncomfortably similar to the one unfolding before me on the news each day.

Butler's work is part of the Black radical tradition and the Afrofuturist canon, which is a cultural, intellectual, and artistic movement that blends science fiction, history, and African diasporic culture to imagine alternative futures for Black people. More than a genre, Afrofuturism explores themes such as technology, space exploration, and reimagined histories, often blending speculative fiction with social and political critique. At its core, these works grapple with race, identity, and power, envisioning futures where Black communities not only survive but thrive and lead.

During the first year of the pandemic, Afrofuturism became a lens through which I could examine the virus's disproportionate health and economic impacts on Black communities and think about collective healing, resilience, and solidarity in response to these challenges. Over the last few years, Butler's words have transformed my perspective, reshaping not only how I understand our present struggles but also how I approach my work as a legal scholar, my role as a father of three Black boys, and my vision for our collective future as Americans.

ALTHOUGH AUTHOR MARK DERY INTRODUCED READERS to the term "Afrofuturism" in the 1993 book *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, the intellectual and creative tradition of imagining Black futures through speculative narratives spans centuries. Central to Afrofuturism is its critique of capitalism and racism and its creation of imaginative futures where Black people control their own destinies and exist free from oppression. While mainstream science fiction often reproduces narratives of white domination, Afrofuturism centers Black experiences and perspectives and envisions more inclusive societies.

One of the earliest works of Afrofuturism is Martin R. Delany's 1859 novel *Blake; or, the Huts of America*, which imagines a global slave revolt culminating in the creation of a Black utopia founded on principles of Black autonomy and self-rule. It was a radical departure from the era's dominant narratives of Black subjugation. This early work laid the groundwork for what would become a rich tradition of speculative fiction centered on Black experiences and alternative futures.

A generation later, W.E.B. Du Bois expanded this visionary approach with his 1920 short story, *The Comet*, which imagines the fallout of a comet strike that releases toxic gases, decimating New York City and leaving only two survivors: Jim Davis, a Black man, and Julia, a wealthy white woman.

In this desolate world, the rigid boundaries of race and class momentarily dissolve, allowing Jim and Julia to forge a fragile, unprecedented connection. However, when Julia's family arrives to rescue her, deeply ingrained social hierarchies swiftly and brutally reassert themselves. In both Delany and Du Bois, Black characters are not merely peripheral to the story; they are capable of reshaping their surroundings entirely.

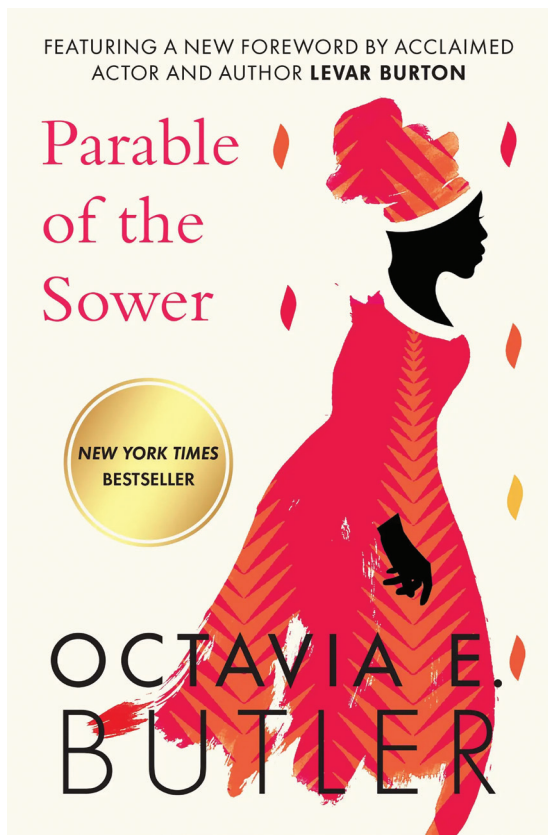
The mid-20th century saw the emergence of groundbreaking Afrofuturist voices in music and philosophy that would profoundly reshape the cultural landscape. Sun Ra, the pioneering jazz composer and philosopher, developed a complex mythology in the 1950s and '60s that blended ancient Egyptian imagery with space-age themes, creating a radical, cosmic narrative that reimagined the Black experience in America. Through albums like "Pathways to Unknown Worlds" and "Space Is The Place," Sun Ra conceptualized space as a site of liberation and transformation, offering a powerful metaphor for those suffocating under systemic racism. His vision suggested that Black people could reclaim their narrative and forge a new identity by looking beyond the confines of the present world.

In the 1970s, Parliament-Funkadelic's music and imagery (e.g., "Afronauts capable of funkating galaxies") further propelled this cosmic vision, transforming space travel into a metaphor for Black resilience. Parliament-Funkadelic's vivid blending of funk music with Afrofuturist iconography—flying saucers, extraterrestrial personas, and futuristic worlds—presented an alternative vision of Black identity and collective experience, emphasizing freedom, unity, and empowerment through music and imagination.

The foundational elements heard in Sun Ra and Parliament-Funkadelic persist in contemporary art. Janelle Monáe's concept albums, "The ArchAndroid" and "Dirty Computer," explore identity, sexuality, and resistance through futuristic narratives featuring android protagonists. Artists like Flying Lotus, Solange, Erykah Badu, Grace Jones, and OutKast have similarly embraced Afrofuturist aesthetics, weaving intricate tapestries of space, technology, and African heritage into their work.

In the realm of visual arts, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Laylah Ali have incorporated Afrofuturist elements to reimagine Blackness and explore new possibilities for Black identity. Film and visual media have also increasingly embraced Afrofuturist narratives, notably Ryan Coogler's 2018 Marvel film *Black Panther*. By depicting the fictional Wakanda as a technologically advanced African nation untouched by colonialism, the film delivered a revolutionary counter-narrative to Hollywood's typically reductive portrayals of Black history. *Black Panther* presented a bold vision of Black excellence and self-determination, celebrating African heritage with depth and imagination. Other works like Boots Riley's 2018 *Sorry to Bother You* and the 2023 animated series *My Dad the Bounty Hunter* use speculative fiction to challenge features of capitalism such as racial hierarchy and social inequality. These narratives do more than critique—they envision alternative realities.

Octavia Butler, who is among the most celebrated Afrofuturist



Butler's "Parable of the Sower" book cover

writers of the late 20th century, elevated the genre from the margins to the heart of popular cultural discourse. Her work combines masterful storytelling with incisive critiques of contemporary politics and society. In her 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower*, Butler imagines a dystopian California community facing environmental collapse, economic inequality, and social breakdown. Within this harsh reality, protagonist Lauren Olamina creates a religious philosophy called Earthseed that emphasizes human adaptability to changing circumstances and eventual escape from Earth to the stars. Butler's narrative is more than speculative fiction. By envisioning space colonization as a liberatory path, she offers a transformative counter-narrative to societies entrenched in systemic racism and severe economic inequality. Her work suggests that survival is not merely about enduring but about reimagining possibilities of human existence.

Other key works of Afrofuturism have had a profound impact on both the genre of speculative fiction and broader cultural conversations about race, technology, and human potential. Writers like Samuel R. Delany, N.K. Jemisin, and Tananarive Due have further developed Afrofuturism's themes, exploring everything from environmental collapse to cosmic politics. These works, along with many others in music and film, have propelled Afrofuturism from a niche intellectual movement into the mainstream.

PARABLE OF THE SOWER IS SET IN CALIFORNIA IN THE 2020s. Interestingly, the book opens in this very year, 2024. In Butler's world, America is ravaged by climate change, hurricanes, and other storms that loom on the horizon. The weather is so extreme that it has rained only once in the last six years. The economy is one of widespread unemployment. The cost of living is extremely high. Most of the jobs that are available either don't pay anything close to a living wage or involve debt servitude or corporate slavery, where people live in gated company towns and accept a pittance for some sense of security. Most people live a kill-or-be-killed existence on the streets. Others, including Lauren Olamina, a 15-year-old from a college-educated Black family, inhabit walled-off compounds where their family homes are protected by a thin veneer of stability and comfort.

Outside the Olamina's Robledo neighborhood, homelessness, illiteracy, and social despair are widespread. There is rampant drug use, pyromania, cannibalism, murder, rape, and sexual slavery, much of which is committed by people who are desperate to obtain, steal, or protect the basic goods they need to survive. Although the government is still intact, its public functions have largely disintegrated. Vaccinations, public school, and clean water are no longer readily available to the public—everything has been left to the private market, rendering basic human needs into luxury commodities. (For instance, the Olamina children were lucky enough to have obtained their childhood vaccines, and on the outside, Lauren is the rare person who can read and write.) In this society of scarcity, survival demands constant vigilance, cooperation, and the strategic sharing of increasingly scarce resources.

Robledo is a multiracial community whose fragile existence is eventually shattered when arson, set by mobs from the outside looking to steal resources, engulfs the neighborhood. Lauren, the sole surviving member of her immediate family, is forced to flee into a perilous and lawless world. Because surviving alone is simply too risky, Lauren must figure out how to build a community of people who can trust each other—no easy task in a society where anyone outside one's immediate survival group is viewed as a potential thief or murderer. The society Butler imagines—a world in which people must kill or be killed—is not one from a distant or alien planet but an eerily familiar one. It resembles an extreme yet terrifyingly plausible version of our own reality, which is plagued by climate-related disasters, economic inequality, homelessness, and social despair. Lauren's observation that children wandering the streets "have nothing to look forward to" vividly illustrates America's mountain of despair, a landscape where hope has crumbled for an expanding unhoused population.

In this way, *Parable* offers a chilling mirror to the inequities we confront today. While an estimated half a million people sleep on the streets on any given night in the U.S., Butler shows us what it would look like in a world where nearly everyone endures the precarity of street life, where daily survival demands extraordinary resilience. The unsettling parallels between *Parable's* California and our own world invite readers to question whether the conditions of our own society should be deemed

acceptable. Are we not already living in a world full of the horrors that Lauren endures?

At the height of the pandemic in 2020, my family's isolated existence often reminded me of *Parable*. Like many other middle-class families, we retreated into a protective bubble, cutting ourselves off from the outside world to avoid coronavirus infection. We clung to any semblance of normalcy—potty training, coloring books, movie nights, and bedtime routines—amid economic uncertainty and the breakdown of regular social routines. Our experiences bore some similarity to the walled-off existence of Lauren Olamina and her family: the constant vigilance against an invisible threat, the paranoia and defensiveness of our socially distanced world. Just as the Olamina family's gated community relied on mutual trust and shared resources to survive, in that year, my family became acutely aware of the fragility of our networks and the importance of self-sufficiency. The scarcity of essential goods—everything from toilet paper to medical supplies—echoed the shortages in Butler's dystopia.

In both contexts, these shortages were exacerbated by corporate price-gouging and other practices aimed at preserving profit instead of meeting people's needs. Outside our home, the societal fractures exposed by the pandemic—racial and economic inequities, public mistrust of government health measures, and the disproportionate suffering of working-class Black communities, alongside other marginalized groups—felt like a real-life precursor to the societal collapse Butler envisions. Though we were not facing roving bands of armed thieves or the corporate feudalism depicted in *Parable*, the pandemic underscored how quickly social stability can unravel and how deeply interconnected we all are. Like Lauren, we were forced to grapple with uncertainty and reimagine what community and resilience could look like in a world forever changed.

Another way in which the California of *Parable* resembles our own society is the presence of rampant worker exploitation. In Butler's world, labor laws have been rolled back by a morally bankrupt president, and corporate greed has been left unrestrained. Workers are reduced to disposable commodities—"more throw-aways than slaves" and "easy to replace." This dystopian reality is reminiscent of the plight of essential workers during the pandemic who were, for a time, hailed as "heroes." Grocery clerks, bus drivers, nurses, meatpackers, and delivery drivers were among those

forced to work under dangerous conditions at great personal risk. While their work was undoubtedly essential, their lives were treated as expendable. Many were denied a living wage, hazard pay, paid sick time, personal protective equipment, and adequate workplace safety standards to protect them from COVID-19. For countless working-class Americans, especially service and frontline workers, the pandemic was another reminder that the rich would continue to grow richer while they struggled to afford rent, healthcare, and basic necessities. The pandemic laid bare the stark inequities of modern society, making it undeniable that, for so many, the American Dream has devolved into an unrelenting nightmare. As one Safeway worker in Maryland told the *Washington Post* in August 2020, "At the beginning they valorized what was deemed a dead-end job, but four months later they don't even treat us like humans anymore."

The pandemic has revealed not only the depth of material inequalities but also the fragility of the promises that underpin the so-called American Dream. For many Black Americans, the notion that hard work alone could provide a ticket out of poverty had long since withered. The struggle to realize our full rights as Americans has always been a defining feature of Black life, as American democracy itself was built on the exclusion of Black people from its promises of liberty and justice. The Black radical tradition—encompassing resistance to slavery, as well as the struggles of the civil rights movement and beyond—stands as a testament to this ongoing fight. The violent society depicted in *Parable* serves as a chilling reminder that for Black Americans, the American Dream has often been overshadowed by night terrors—haunting memories of slavery, lynching, police brutality, attack dogs, fire hoses, and knees pressed firmly upon necks. These traumas persist in the body and mind, ever-present reminders of lived oppression. In this way, Butler's work functions not only as a dystopian warning but also as a reflection on the historical and enduring struggles for Black liberation.

The society in *Parable*, much like our own, is structured around racial and class hierarchies, with corporations mediating these inequalities in their relentless pursuit of natural resource and labor extraction to maximize profits. When the Olamina family gets word that the "upper middle class, white, literate community" of Olivar, a coastal town, will now



be “taken over, bought out, privatized” and governed by a corporation that will also employ its residents and fund the desalination of its water supply, Lauren’s father remarks,

Robledo’s too big, too poor, too black, and too Hispanic to be of interest to anyone—and it has no coastline. What it does have is street poor, body dumps, and a memory of once being well-off—of shade trees, big houses, hills, and canyons. Most of those things are still here, but no company will want us.

The family worries that “if Olivar succeeds,” “this country is going to be parceled out as a source of cheap labor and cheap land. When people like those in Olivar beg to sell themselves, our surviving cities are bound to wind up the economic colonies of whoever can afford to buy them.” These words are striking given the threats of real-world right wing efforts to privatize everything from public schools to Medicare. Are we, like the society in Butler’s dystopia, on a path to becoming a nation run as a massive corporation, with citizens reduced to little more than corporate slaves?

Butler also frequently critiques the police in *Parable*, portraying them as ineffectual and corrupt. In the novel, the police charge fees for their services, show up *after* a crime has been committed, take a long time to arrive, and are largely absent during emergencies. They don’t solve crimes, and their presence is often more harmful than helpful because they lie and steal from the “street poor” and “knock them around” to assert their dominance. Butler’s critique feels especially relevant to the Black Lives Matter uprisings of 2020, when “defund the police” became a rallying cry, and *Parable* became so popular that it made the *New York Times* Best Seller list a full 27 years after its initial publication. Yet, despite the promise of the 2020 uprisings, police violence has only worsened. Each year since 2020, the cops have killed more people than the previous, with over 1,200 killings so far this year.

In the wake of this year’s presidential election, some pundits have argued that the slogan “defund the police” cost Kamala Harris the election. Not only is this claim false—Harris ran a pro-law and order campaign, and the Biden administration generously funded the police—but it’s also a reminder of how limited our country’s political imagination can be when it comes to policing. While “defund the police” remains unthinkable among many of the most vocal in the political center and right, the kind of imagination required to engage the proposition seriously—as expressed by police and prison abolitionists in 2020—is precisely that exemplified by Butler’s protagonist, Lauren Olamina.

Parable invites us to reconsider fundamental concepts like safety and survival through Lauren’s philosophy Earthseed, summed up as “God is Change.” This tenet challenges traditional religious notions of a fixed or static deity, suggesting instead that divinity resides in the force of change itself. In a society where free markets and individual economic success are often equated with progress—framing change as an inevitable outcome of impersonal economic forces—Lauren’s belief in the malleability of change urges us to rethink its very nature. Change, according to Earthseed, is not inevitable or abstract or controlled by external market forces; it is something we must actively shape and direct ourselves.

This perspective is particularly relevant to the conversation around reimagining public safety. What if, similar to Lauren, we redefined our conception of public safety? Redirecting public resources to address the root causes of issues like mental illness, homelessness, and systemic inequality would be far more effective than perpetuating a system where police interventions fail so many.

A central question I take from *Parable* is this: will we resign ourselves to climbing the socioeconomic ladder as “debt slaves,” or, like Lauren, forge a new path in pursuit of true freedom?

AS A LAW PROFESSOR, I ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO BRAINSTORM how Afrofuturist concepts like communitarianism and mutual aid might inform more equitable community development policies. Drawing inspiration from the Earthseed philosophy, I push students to consider legal frameworks that prioritize community resilience and social solidarity. My hope is that such discussions will lead to deeper insights into how the law can better serve marginalized communities, much like Lauren’s quest to build a more loving and just world in the face of societal collapse.

Critics may argue that Afrofuturism’s speculative nature makes it impractical for addressing pressing social issues. But this couldn’t be further from the truth. With President Donald Trump’s reelection, we find ourselves hurtling toward a chaos reminiscent of the early pandemic years—or perhaps something even worse. Trump has threatened mass deportations that, beyond their cruelty, would destabilize the economy and upend entire industries reliant upon immigrant labor. Even more, Trump’s GOP appears more intent on destroying government institutions and gutting essential programs and services like Medicare, Social Security, and public education than on improving the material conditions of everyday Americans. Confronting these challenges will require organized resistance and, as *Parable* illustrates, resistance begins with mutual aid and the fight for survival.

As I navigate the challenges of raising children in a world marked by school shootings, war, and environmental catastrophe, I strive to teach them not merely to endure but to hope for a better future. I introduce them to books that feature Black boys as central characters, showing them that they can be the heroes of their own stories rather than passive observers of the world’s struggles. I encourage them to imagine what the world might become if we collectively resist the forces that harm us—corporate greed, police brutality, and political corruption among them.

In the words of Octavia Butler, “There is no end to what a living world will demand of you.” “The only lasting truth is Change.” Afrofuturism embraces change not as something to fear but as an opportunity to build a more just and equitable future. It reminds us that the future is not fixed and that within that uncertainty lies our greatest potential for transformation. The challenges we face are immense, but so too is our capacity for imagination and collective action. Like Lauren Olamina and her fellow travelers, we must walk boldly toward a new future, trusting that each step will bring us closer to a more just and hopeful tomorrow. 🌸

AFROFUTURISM



WILL EXPAND YOUR MIND



HOPE IN HELL

BY LAUREN FADIMAN

IT IS CLEAR WHY 2024's *THE MANIFESTATION* WAS ONE OF THE worst films of the year from the moment you meet its protagonist: a down-on-his-luck cryptocurrency daytrader who finds himself on an unprecedented stint in the black after he starts to trust in his baser instincts when it comes to short-selling. Ringing in his ears is the guidance of the professional self-help guru who led the workshop where he first met his now-wife Roni. The rhetoric that returns to Stephen in his darkest hours is generically familiar:

You cause everything. There is no accident. There are no coincidences... If you don't like what your life is reaping, ask yourself this question:... When did I sow this into my life? The moment you ask that question, you move from victim to victor.

The inciting moment in the film, then, is that Stephen begins to think differently about his life and the role he plays in it. "I'm a new man," he tells his disconcerted wife when she gets home from her unpaid law internship that afternoon. "I tried out a new system, babe, and it worked... I'm the system. It's like I access this core part of my mind that just works on a quantum level."

"Oh my God," she says.

The film only gets bleaker from there as the voices in Stephen's head start appearing to him in the corporeal form of a *younger* version of his wife, this one in an ill-fitting red wig, who coquettishly encourages him to cash out his 401k, steal from his real-world spouse, and siphon money from a line of credit to continue trading crypto until the markets close each day. Wiggled Roni might be a construct of Stephen's imagination, but she has very real acumen with financial markets; together, they somehow pull Stephen out of debt and allow him to buy all the luxuries available to crypto barons for his increasingly wiggled-out real-world wife. But Stephen's manifestation soon proves nefarious: the mixture of sensuality and success that wiggled Roni brings to his life spells destruction. The film ends with Stephen broke, single, and in jail. *That's what you get for trying to get rich quick*, the film seems to proffer. Manifesting appears as a cheat code to capitalism—one that works but demands consequences down the line.

For all its modern accoutrements—crypto! unpaid internships! PMC self-help workshops!—this film is ultimately about avarice, whose 3rd-century status as a "deadly" sin is taken oh-so-literally. But is greed the right framework for understanding the attraction of the belief that our minds

have the power to change our material circumstances?

This is not, after all, a marginal belief. Nearly one-third of Americans believe in the power of manifestation and twice that accept the related premise that "we create our own reality." In that sense, we live in the world that Rhonda Byrne's 2006 book *The Secret* wrought—*The Secret's* garden, if you will. Its promise that thought alone has the power to transform one's life circumstances revived a century-and-a-half-old pseudoscientific belief in the so-called "law of attraction." But the world was primed for its promises: the Human Potential Movement (HPM) of the 1970s had left behind a popular sense that "the individual will is all powerful and totally determines one's fate," an idea of spiritual bootstrapping that cultural critic Christopher Lasch argues only intensifies the "isolation of the self" in its deification thereof. In time, many of the contributions of the counterculture would be taken for granted by mainstream culture, perhaps this among them, squeezed in somewhere between meditation and alternative medicine. By the time *The Secret* was released as a documentary and book—the latter of which sold 35 million copies—HPM and the wider New Age movement had long since retreated from the streets of San Francisco, but New Age religiosity remained quietly pervasive in American culture.

The Secret landed on shelves just two years before the Great Recession, which in New Age lingo we might describe as an economic "vibe shift." But economic peril had already been the horizon for Byrne's youngest readers for decades. Gen Xers (born in 1980 and onwards) would be less likely than any previous generation to out-earn their parents, with only half outdoing Mom and Dad by age 30. With that in mind, perhaps popular enthusiasm for "positive thinking" has less to do with desire than it does deprivation. Today, three in four Americans describe feeling financially insecure—and one in three suspect they will remain that way for their whole lives. Given that reality, the "greed" framework begins to seem unduly harsh: obviously money is necessary to survive (and even, if such a thing is possible under capitalism, thrive) in the U.S.—but at the same time, class mobility is at its most immovable place in the past 150 years. Maybe economic stagnation has made it such that manifesting magic seems as likely a route to means as American Dream-ing ever was. The problem is that this enchantment of capitalism conceals its true rapacious nature, its utter unresponsiveness to the existential needs of working people.

NEW THOUGHT FOR THE NEW AGE

In 1922, a young British-Barbadian actor and dancer by the name of Neville Goddard migrated to New York for work and found God instead. First he sought Him in the occult, in metaphysics, and in the Christian gnostic tradition of Rosicrucianism, with its amalgam of alchemy, astrology, and other esoteric knowledge. Then he sought God in the passed-down Afro-Hebraic teachings of an Ethiopian rabbi who may or may not have existed; then in the Kabbalah, Scripture, and number symbology, taught to him by that same rabbi over the course of five years of study. But ultimately, he found God in himself: in the human imagination. He went on to write ten books, give hundreds of talks and lectures, and shoot two mid-'50s seasons of television expounding on this central idea: "Change your conception of yourself and you will automatically change the world in which you live."

Some of the posts on the subreddit dedicated to Goddard are so reminiscent of the plot of *The Manifestation* that one might be tempted to accuse the screenwriters of lurking online. "I was one of those extremely unsuccessful people," begins one such post:

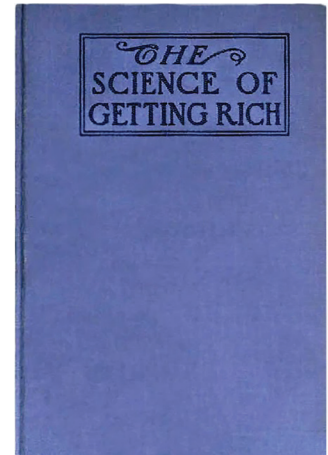
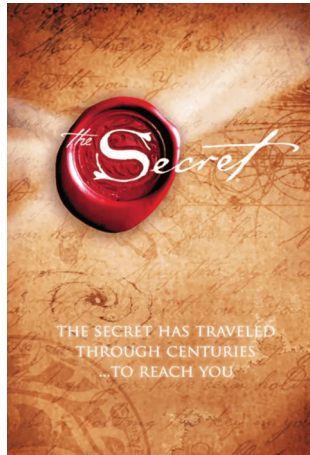
I had never succeeded in anything and I had just dropped out of college for a second time at the age of 21. I knew I had a huge problem at hand and it all started with my mind and how it was conditioned when I was young... I hated my life and felt trapped in my own mind as well as in my parent's house. I didn't know who to ask for help, I had no money, no support, and no solutions... Every morning I bathed my mind in these unwanted ideas unconsciously and my life out-pictured these ideas back to me with mathematical precision. I recognized this was the root of all my problems. My mind created my attitude and that created my life. Everything from my financial brokenness, depression, and my physical chronic pains were coded in my mind and I woke up in it every day, completely immersed and bathed in it which blinded me to any other possibility.

It is a neat, NEET little tale, and luckily for us, does not end in a school shooting. In fact, it has a happy ending: "I manifested \$250,000 by practicing wealth affirmations in 90 days," the author goes on to tell us, attributing their success to a combination of guidance by Goddard and Paramahansa Yogananda, an Indian American Hindu monk who mainstreamed meditation in the U.S. They describe the intensity of the "mental battle" between the attitude of a winner and the attitude of a loser, the thrill of waking up to the thought that "success is inevitable," the certainty of the knowledge that "something was right around the corner." And it was: the COVID-19 pandemic, which allowed them to start an extremely lucrative Etsy business selling hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of face masks.

Their story is framed as a testament to the power of the law of attraction—though whether in order to attract COVID-related wealth they also had to manifest the literal pandemic is unclear. All that matters with manifestation is the end result, never the means; even if COVID is necessarily what made this money-making scheme possible, our poster *still* locates their path to success in the mind alone.

The law of attraction is like Newtonian mechanics for the New Age: the idea that negative thoughts—because they, like all people and things, are made of "pure energy"—have the power to bring negative experiences into one's life, while positive thoughts have the opposite potential effect. It first appeared in an 1852 text by the Spiritualist clairvoyant Andrew Jackson Davis, the "Poughkeepsie Seer"—later the "John the Baptist of Spiritism"—but would be the subject of wide purchase and permutation in the heady occultist air of late-19th century America, which had everyone from Mary Todd Lincoln on down intoxicated on its ethers.

One such thinker who further developed the notion of the law of attraction was folk healer, mentalist, and mesmerist Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, who theorized that all afflictions of the body are "the effect of a false direction given to the mind" for which "the Truth is the cure." One of his



acolytes, Mary Baker Eddy—who claimed Quimby healed her of a spinal disease in 1862—would go on to found the Church of Christ, Scientist, based on the belief that material reality is illusory and that one need only pray in order to be healed of disease. Her former associate Emma Curtis Hopkins would helm a separate strain of the same belief system, hers under the moniker Christian Science, from which emerged many others of the leading ladies of the New Thought religious movement—like Melinda Cramer of Divine Science and Helen Van Anderson of the Church of Higher Life—whose distinct traditions were united in the belief that the divinity of the human mind meant it could, with "right thinking," triumph over physical constraints and material obstacles. In time, these thinkers would form a bridge between the spiritual and secular realms, much as they had drawn connections between the mind and body; whether consciously or not, the secular would be indelibly transformed by the belief system of the Spiritualists. The New Age of the 20th century was in many ways a Christian Science redux; only God got left behind.

As the long 19th century became the long 20th century, the never-monolithic New Thought movement expanded to include many variations of the law of attraction: positive thinking, creative visualization, personal power, and so forth. Books like Norman Vincent Peale's 1952 *The Power of Positive Thinking* and Byrne's *The Secret*, though published decades apart, would follow similar trajectories: while excoriated by reviewers, both were received with rave enthusiasm by readers—and both remain in print today as prime members of the pseudoscientific canon. Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* uses a series of anecdotal case histories to propose that positive thought has the power to transform practical affairs when honed and channeled through daily affirmations and visualizations. The book's main affirmation is "I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me," but its top three rules are nondenominational and ready for you to apply to your own crypto-related ambitions:

1. *Formulate and stamp indelibly on your mind a mental picture of yourself as succeeding. Hold this picture tenaciously. Never permit it to fade. Your mind will seek to develop this picture. Never think of yourself as failing; never doubt the reality of the mental image. That is most dangerous, for the mind always tries to complete what it pictures. So always picture "success" no matter how badly things seem to be going at the moment.*

2. *Whenever a negative thought concerning your personal powers comes to mind, deliberately voice a positive thought to cancel it out.*

3. *Do not build up obstacles in your imagination. Depreciate every so-called obstacle. Minimize them. Difficulties must be studied and efficiently dealt with to be eliminated, but they must be seen for only what they are. They must not be inflated by fear thoughts.*

Famous fans of Peale include plenty of people who should have visualized more and done less in their lives, Richard Nixon chief among them. Michael Jordan also attributes his success to the power of positive thinking—that, as opposed to the power of being 6' 6" and practicing basketball for seven hours per day.

But perhaps the most avid fans of the practice today are to be found

online, swearing they healed chronic pain using the law of attraction; made Crohn's, irritable bowel syndrome, and other conditions more manageable; or even defied the odds and cured cancer. Sometimes the order is tall: "I have akathisia, protracted benzo withdrawal, SSRI withdrawal syndrome, gut dysbiosis, nutritional deficiencies, possible mold and Lyme," says a poster to Reddit. "Is it possible to use the LOA/manifestation etc to heal from [these] issues?"

"Absolutely," reads one response, "you would [just] have to understand on the molecular level what your ailments are and focus on the appropriate cellular mechanisms working as they should."

Health, the primary fixation of Quimby, Eddy, and Hopkins, clearly never ceased to be part of the equation—but wealth had certainly vaulted up the priority list by the time Byrne published *The Secret* in the early aughts. In her foreword, she explains, "[I] have received thousands of accounts of *The Secret* being used to bring about large sums of money and unexpected checks in the mail," apparently as much as ten million dollars, though Byrne herself is worth as much as \$100 million off her books and films. "People have used *The Secret* to manifest their perfect homes, life partners, cars, jobs, and promotions, with many accounts of businesses being transformed within days of applying *The Secret*," she asserts.

THE POLITICS OF POSITIVE THINKING

In 1911, a Christian socialist by the name of Wallace D. Wattles quietly passed away of tuberculosis, lamented by socialist leader Eugene Debs as a "comrade beloved... [and] a very brother in flesh and blood and spirit." Wattles had had a hard life, described by his daughter Florence in a letter to the editor of the now-defunct magazine *Nautilus*. "His life was cursed by poverty and the fear of poverty," she wrote:

His death is one of the tragedies of our modern civilization. We were compelled to live in a God-forsaken factory district and the thing which took his life very probably found its way into his system there... Our own neglect in permitting such conditions to exist has cost us the life of the gentlest among us. It is the price we pay for our inhumanity to men.

Wattles's death was only surprising in that it abruptly ended several years of enormous productivity on behalf of the Socialist Party of the jailed Debs. Between 1908 and his death, Wattles had made two unsuccessful runs as a Socialist candidate for office in Indiana, served as an Indiana organizer, and regularly travelled around the Midwest as a Party lecturer. "His passionate devotion to the cause of the working class left him little time to think of himself," explained Florence. "The master passion of his life was the establishment of just relations among men."

Given that, it is not without some sad irony that Wattles is best-known today for his role in inspiring Byrne's *The Secret*, with its emphasis on using the "power of positive thinking" for personal financial gain. In the last year of his life, 1910, Wattles published the book that Byrne would cite as her primary reference a hundred years later: *The Science of Getting Rich*, in which he explains how to overcome mental barriers (like the competition mindset) in the accrual of wealth. The theory he outlines, he had already begun to explore in other works, including his 1909 *Making the Man Who Can*:

When you desire a thing, and your mind and the Mind of things are one, that thing will desire you, and will move toward you. If you desire dollars, and your mind is one with the Mind that pervades dollars... dollars will be permeated with the desire to come to you, and they will move toward you, impelled by the Eternal Power which makes for more abundant life.

The abundant life, according to Wattles, included the whole of Maslow's yet-untheorized hierarchy of needs and more: "good food, comfortable clothing, warm shelter... [and] freedom from excessive toil," "books and time to study them... opportunity for travel and observation... intellectual companionship... [and] recreations," as well as "[means for] the bestowal of benefits on those he loves... [for] love finds its most natural and spon-

aneous expression in giving." But it was not simply that Wattles believed that "it is not possible to live a really complete or successful life unless one is rich," but that industrial capitalism had *made* this so. And in order to intervene into and overthrow capitalism, Wattles believed, man first had to believe that intervention and overthrow were possible. For, he wrote, "the wage slaves really own the world; they created it all, and they could take possession of it tomorrow if they would. They can begin at any time, to use the factories to make things for themselves, instead of turning out wealth for their masters." In the socialist future to come, he writes elsewhere, "all that a man may need for the soul-growth of himself and his, he shall own and use as he will."

But in the century between Wattles's writing and *The Secret*, any semblance of politics—like the vision of utopian socialism so dearly held by Wattles that his daughter believed his efforts to "move the world forward faster than the force of evolution wanted it to go" were what ultimately killed him—was stripped from the "law of attraction" he helped theorize. The ethos he puts forward, "What I want for myself, I want for all," would be displaced by Byrne's "I am receiving now. I am receiving all the good in my life, now, I am receiving [fill in your desire] now." And it is Byrne's ethos that thrums through culture today: manifestation practices that stop far short of envisioning the utopian socialism Wattles spent his life working toward, the law of attraction stripped of any concurrent or future revolutionary *action*. Instead of imagining a way out of capitalism, self-help gurus peddling the power of positive thinking for money have practically come to symbolize the system itself.

Of course, the idea that one might magically accumulate wealth is an ancient one. Between the 100s BCE and the 400s CE in Greco-Roman Egypt, for example, hundreds of spells and rituals were preserved on papyrus and compiled, upon their rediscovery in the 19th century, into what is known as the Greek Magical Papyri. One of the included texts is "a charm for acquiring business and for calling in customers to a workshop or house or wherever you put it," promising its practitioner that "by having it"—it being a waxen figurine of Hermes with a tiny money bag hidden in the wall of your house—"you will become rich, you will be successful."

More than a millennium later, not much has changed. Absent Hermes, it is perhaps his born-in-the-wrong-decade supplicants who have turned to widespread TikTok trends like "lucky girl syndrome" in their quest for riches and success. The videos rack up tens and even hundreds of thousands of views with eye-catching claims like "HOW I MANIFESTED 100% OF MY EXES BACK" and "HOW WE CHANGED OUR LIFE WITH LUCKY GIRL SYNDROME." "Start living like you're the luckiest girl in the world and everything works out for you," advises one poster to Reddit, "and I promise you, it will." The things that apparently happen as a result of this mindset range from finding wanted clothing on sale to securing new employment. "Whatever I want presents its self [sic] to me," another Reddit poster describes reminding herself daily. "Its [sic] like I ordered from Amazon and I'm just waiting for the package. Already claimed and paid for, now waiting on arrival."

The phenomenon has also earwormed its way into the music industry. One TikTok creator converted the phenomenon into a terrible song that is no doubt ruining someone's savasana in a hot yoga studio near you right this very second. "I don't chase, I attract / Universe has got my back," she brashly declares. "I decided, it's a fact / Everything I want, I have / La-la-lucky me / Must be my energy." This is reminiscent of another song, "Lucky Girl" by Carlin: "I'm a lucky girl / And all good things come to me / Flow to me, move through me / Everything works out for me." There is unfortunately no room in either rhyme scheme for the revolution—but one Reddit poster describes singing along to Carlin's affirmations whenever she feels nervous or anxious, to great effect. "Ever since then, things go outrageously well for me regardless how little or big the situation is," she says.

How do you—a self-declared lucky girl—know your manifestations are working? "I started practicing Lucky Girl Syndrome/Affirmations and the next day I literally got invited to a rich guys [sic] home in Dubai [with] all expenses paid," exclaims another post to TikTok. It is one of TikTok's

favorite topics: Instagram models who get flown to Dubai in not-quite-sex-work schemes to party with the scions of the Gulf's wealthiest families. Her commenters are accordingly skeptical of the innocence of the offer. "That invitation may be a lot of things," reads one such response, "[but] lucky aint [sic] one of them." The "lucky girl" trend might profess harnessing your inner power to bring about desired goals in the external world; at its core, however, would seem to be a pervasive sense of social and economic powerlessness—so much so that, joke or not, escorting in the Gulf appears, conceivably, as a beacon of hope.

POOR LITTLE RICH GIRLS

It is perhaps unsurprising that, for every piece of positive thinking content online, there is an equal and opposite pastiche or put-down. On TikTok, self-declared "lucky girls" are the target of decidedly unlucky ire. "The universe is rigged in my favor. [But] [i]t's not because I'm rich or white or able-bodied or pretty in a non-threatening way," snipes one parody video, whose "lucky girl" is a legacy graduate from Harvard with an über-wealthy father. The joke implies that positive thinking only goes as far as privilege allows—that the possibility of luck in life is a matter of luck in birth. And there is something to that. So much of life comes down to chance with a heavy serving of circumstance—so much so that the lottery might be the last bastion of truly equitable unlikely odds. But luck is not the only problem with positive thinking.

Others critics have pointed out that there is something patently offensive to the very thought that our thoughts control our material circumstances. This line of critique is applicable as far back as Ernest Holmes's 1926 *Science of Mind*, which includes (in earnest) the following passage:

If I say, "I am poor," and keep on saying, "I am poor," [my] subconscious mind at once says, "Yes, you are poor," and keeps me poor, as long as I say it. This is all there is to poverty.

This is the "ugly flipside" of the law of attraction, write two investigators for the *Skeptical Inquirer*. "[I]f you have an accident or disease, it's your fault" for attracting calamity into your life. Mitch Horowitz, author of *Occult America*, notes the same: *What of slaves and sickly children?*

Accidents happen and children get sick regardless of whether one manifests the catastrophes or not; they are facts of life—but their associated costs are not. It is a social construct that with them should come medical bills that have inspired at least one high-profile assassination of an insurance CEO. Such costs conspire to keep people locked in debt: the average American carries \$104k in debt across credit cards and personal and auto loans, and the 14 million Americans with medical debt have an extra \$1k-plus on top of that. Millennials are saddled with a whopping \$125k on average, while Gen Z approaches an average of \$30k long before they can even dream of a subprime mortgage to call their own. Gen X might be the first downwardly mobile generation in American history, and their younger siblings and children are not far behind them in the downward spiral. The reasons for this are at once extraordinarily complicated and extremely obvious: stagnant wages, skyrocketing home and childcare costs, increased precarity in employment, and the erosion of both the social safety net and the parental safety net, plus the Great Recession, COVID-19, and a veritable hit-parade of geopolitical crises in between. Facing odds like these, and with little external help to rely on, what is one to do but try to focus on the bright side? It's worth just about as much as the COVID relief payments—which is to say, not much at all.

In a passage I cite often, the cultural theorist Fredric Jameson attributes conspiracy thinking to popular inability to comprehend the logic and workings of contemporary capitalism, a system whose reach and complexity can scarcely be visualized—especially with the added complications of globalization, technologization, and financialization. In a "desperate" attempt to make sense of such a world, says Jameson, those disenfranchised by it revert

to a mode of storytelling that offers no meaningful critique of the system. QAnon, for example, attributes all suffering in the world to the machinations of an evil child sex- and adrenochrome-trafficking ring. Positive thinking is perhaps the closest thing such a world has to praxis, i.e., the conversion of theory into action. It is one of the few means at anyone's disposal that costs absolutely nothing—although self-help gurus have ably monetized the practice where they can. Unlike going to college and accruing debt along the way, searching for a second job in a tight employment market, or reallocating nonexistent assets into equity-building enterprises, manifesting requires no startup investment except for faith, trust, and pixie dust.

That is not to vindicate manifestation culture outright: stripped of politics, absent even Wattles's encouragement to "wish for others what you wish for yourself," it is a dead end as far as meaningfully reallocating wealth goes. In fact, in the language of manifestation manifestos, a woeful lack of understanding of capitalism becomes apparent. There is Amanda Frances's 2020 *Rich as F*ck*, written by a guru who describes a gut feeling that she was "made for opulent environments," asserting that there is an "energy and frequency" to money that responds "to your vibration, and your thoughts, feelings, and patterns" toward it. (In this framework, debt, too, is a "vibration.") Then there is Denise Duffield-Thomas's 2013 *Get Rich, Lucky Bitch!* telling readers, "Want to be a millionaire? Do it," while Jen Sincero's 2017 *You Are a Badass at Making Money* chides, "[P]eople who complain and blame—blameplain?—[the economy] stay stuck." In these books, economic responsibility rests with individuals alone: every American must manifest their own destiny—with, I dare say, all the implications that accompany that phrase.

These writers simplify and smooth the complexities of capitalism, but also deify it. If *Citizens United* made corporations people, then these books do their best to make capital a god—and a vengeful one at that, imbued with energy, omnipresent and omnipotent, giveth-ing and taketh-ing away according to its own whims. It demands worship like the following, posted to Reddit in the form of a recommended daily affirmation:

Money loves you. Money appreciates you. Money loves being in your world. Money loves being in your bank account. Money loves being in your wallet and in your purse. Money enjoys circulating in and around your life. Money supports you. Money looks out for you. Money has your back. Money is your friend. Money is your confidant. Money elevates you. Money cares about you. Money is good to you. Money absolutely loves you.

For Wattles, manifestation was about the opposite entirely. It was about acquiring riches through creation instead of competition—so, in spite of the capitalist system—and eventually toppling the god that is capitalism itself. "If the workers of America chose to do so," he asserts in *The Science of Getting Rich*, "they could... establish great department stores and co-operative industries; they could elect men of their own class to office, and pass laws favoring the development of such cooperative industries; and in a few years they could take peaceable possession of the industrial field."

But since his time, the clarion call of personal empowerment has displaced worker power as the "isolation of the self" that accompanies New Age spirituality has rendered inaudible any call to mass action. The manifesting of means has displaced the *seizing* of means as an instinctive response to financial suffering. That is not to say that leftists ought to devote energy to dismantling these beliefs; but rather, to see in them the degradation of popular understanding of capitalism. In that sense, the law of attraction poses a challenge to the left: How do we teach people to understand a system as complex and slippery as global capitalism without assigning *Capital, Volumes I-IV* or the complete Karl Kautsky? And perhaps more importantly: How do we de-deify capitalism, strip it of its place in both New Age spirituality and the secular rhetoric it has inspired, and remind people that it is a system like any other—one that can be overthrown and dismantled?

Only then will people be able to read *The Science of Getting Rich* and see past the title to Wattles's embedded reminder: that all the world belongs to the workers, owes its very form to them, and is theirs for the taking, if only they could just *envision* it. ♣

YOU ARE THE READER THAT WE HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR



*Subscribe and get
six issues per year of
the most beautiful
and entertaining
magazine on Earth!
We know you'll
love the magazine
just as much as the
magazine loves you.*



currentaffairs.org

POET'S

THESE POEMS WERE CO-PUBLISHED
AND SUPPORTED BY THE JOURNALISM
NON-PROFIT THE ECONOMIC HARDSHIP
REPORTING PROJECT (EHRP)



ALLEY

BY BRENDAN JOYCE

HOW MUCH CAN A BANANA COST?

A price, such as rent or a wage, that remains fixed, recurring and agreed on for a long period of time eventually becomes a ghost. The agreed upon amount no longer exists in any real way even as your boss still pays the number. The number is no longer the same. Each time you pay your landlord the number, the number invisibly changes, becomes less the number you stated when you started paying. Just stating your wage, after a year or two, becomes a kind of nostalgia, a lie you tell yourself about the distance between yourself and the past. Worse, the number becomes a lie the market tells you about the distance between yourself and the past. Worse, the real marker between yourself and the past; the dead; have no mention in this equation, just the infinitesimal and invisibly mounting lied about number. The best part; eventually you can not understand any number in the world, because your frame of reference for the cost of an hour or a day or fifteen hundred square feet is twenty years ago, two thousand miles away, and one day you find yourself asking about the cost of a one bedroom, embarrassing yourself, guessing what was once a month but is now an hour.

BY W.D. EHRHART

SMART FISH DON'T BITE

For John Prados

Only the stupid ones who get caught, gutted, beheaded, filleted, and eaten fried or poached or boiled or broiled, pickled in brine, fed to porpoises raw at Sea World, canned for family pets. The smart ones just keep swimming. You'll never meet an intelligent fish because they don't take the bait, though they never seem to go hungry. My friend Gary Metras loves to fish; ties his own flies, pulls on his waders and heads for his local river several times a week, rain or shine, year-round. Strictly catch-&-release. Lucky fish, but not very bright. He tells me he often catches the same fish multiple times. One of these days, the guy with the rod won't be so kind. This is why we hear about the liars, hypocrites and crooks like Spiro Agnew, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Swaggart, Bernie Madoff, Sam Bankman-Fried, and all those other stupid fish who can't resist the bait. Ever wonder what the smart fish are up to, the ones you never hear about?

BY W.D. EHRLHART

THIRTEEN REASONS TO DOUBT THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

I. The cotton gin
II. Manifest Destiny
III. Jim Crow
IV. John D. Rockefeller:
"God gave me my money!"
V. Woodrow Wilson:
Self-determination for all peoples and all nations
so long as they're white northern European Protestants;
the rest of you can go piss up a rope.
VI. Comrade Stalin
VII. Der Fuhrer
VIII. The Holocaust
IX. The Holy Land
X. The Atom Bomb
XI. Henry Kissinger
XII. Fox News
XIII. Thy will be done:
Seriously?
This is all part of some Master Plan?
You're joking, right?

BY BRENDAN JOYCE

BRIEFCASE FEELINGS

Listen; this is how the world ends:
When I buy a shoe I don't need made by
a child I don't know who also did not
need the shoe. Getting the shoe to me
costs the child's country's annual carbon
emissions. When it's a day late I write a bad
review.

We're twenty years from agricultural collapse
asking each other how the world will end,
we've done it a million times already.

All a wage means is I've imbricated
strangers in my immiseration in order
to afford immiserating them.

This is exchange. As you are on fire, I sell you
water at the price of setting me on fire.

And the state laughs on the 1 and 3.
First and fifteenth. Future smelted dignitaries
attempt to negotiate the temperature
at which they'll melt.

When negotiating with fire make sure you're
the one holding it. We are coming home again.
Leave a light on.

BY ALISSA QUART

BLUR COLLAR

Ten police & army & American flags
surround one house.
"Don't tread on me" framed
by antelope skulls. Grinning
martens race through the crops.
The house's owner: an alpha-hole
I don't feel like understanding.

Blue collar, blur collar.

Iron Cross tattoo, freedom
as subtraction, politician puppetry.
papier mache armies of the night,
bloody neo-Avedons. A new
meaning to doing the nasty.
Exercise fanatics and the exercise
of fanaticism. One flag
reads Trump 202:
A printing era.
Shooter bigots the new cereal
box models, the Iron
Cross man pets your dog.

Enemies are collages.

Alissa Quart is the Executive Director
of the Economic Hardship Reporting
Project and the author of seven acclaimed
books, most recently *Bootstrapped*. Her
poetry books include *Thoughts and
Prayers*.

W.D. Ehrhart is a poet, a Vietnam War
veteran, and a lifelong antiwar activist.
His nonfiction writing can be found in the
LA Progressive, and his books of poetry
include *Thank You For Your Service*.

Brendan Joyce is a poet and essayist from
Cleveland, Ohio. His poetry has been
featured in *Lithub*, *Protean*, *Poetry Daily*
and the Poetry Society. He is the author
of three books of poetry: *Character Limit*
(2019), *Love & Solidarity* (2020) and
Personal Problem (2023).



the world for wager

BY BENJAMIN CHARLES GERMAIN LEE

In the midst of the compounding stress that I experienced on Election Day, I periodically checked in with friends by phone and text to get their thoughts on what we might be in for. Of my friends monitoring probabilities of election outcomes as the polls began to close, some had predictably turned to the *New York Times*'s dreaded election needle and *FiveThirtyEight*'s projections. But other friends had turned to a site that few had heard of during the 2020 election. Its sleek infographics and wide array of colors suggested the visual styling of data journalism outlets and polling aggregation sites. And yet, the website was anything but that: it was instead a cryptocurrency-powered betting site by the name of Polymarket.

Billed as the “world’s largest prediction market,” Polymarket allows users to place bets on all sorts of predictions: not just who will be elected president but also when SpaceX starships will launch, whether Bitcoin will pass \$100,000 by the end of 2024, and which actor will play James Bond next. The site infamously took bets in 2023 on whether the doomed Titan submersible would be found, and by what date. In just the month of October 2024 alone, Polymarket handled \$2.5 billion in bet volume. Think of a bet on a mainstream event, from sports to pop culture to politics to science, and you can probably find a way to bet on it on Polymarket or similar sites like Manifold, Insight Prediction, and Metaculus.

The thing about betting markets, especially one like Polymarket with such a high volume, is that the odds set using predictive models tend to be quite accurate. This intuitively makes sense: otherwise, Polymarket itself would be fleeced over and over again by more sophisticated bettors and forced to pay out en masse. (Think of all the brilliant minds out there who could be solving fundamental problems in biomedical research or mathematical physics. Many more than you might expect are actually working as oddsmakers for betting sites in

order to make sure these betting lines are accurate, or are trying to beat the markets on the other side.) And so, as I watched Polymarket’s probabilities for Trump’s election climb higher and higher after the sun set on the West Coast, a certain form of dread sunk in, despite the fact that the *New York Times* election needle was still calm. The source of this dread was not just the crystallizing reality that Trump was going to win, but the realization that I had come to find this out by consulting a cryptocurrency-based betting market, and one that had received billions of dollars of bets on the election’s outcome to boot. It was a sobering moment, to say the least.

Though this was already obvious before the election, I’ll state the even-more-so painfully obvious here: we live in a society consumed by gambling. Everything has been turned into a market to bet on, where the allure of profits and thrill are always just around the corner. If betting’s ubiquity demands a thorough treatment, so too do its purveyors—those who champion it not just as another activity but an all-consuming lifestyle that brings with it an insidious form of politics.

If you’ve watched any professional sports over the past few years, you’ll surely have noticed the encroachment of sports betting into even fair-weather spectatorship. Sports commentators and websites now regularly report on the lines on sporting events (i.e., whether a certain team will score X more points than its opponent). Interruptions for analytics and visualizations are often thinly-veiled opportunities to provide updates on bets and offer more statistics that sports fans might bet on. Advertisements for sports betting websites like DraftKings and FanDuel are everywhere, both virtually and in person. Just consider the fact that DraftKings has invested in billboards and signs in sports venues across the country: a “HEY, BETTOR BETTOR!” sign greets Cubbies fans arriving at the closest metro stop for games; a “BET LOCAL” ad sits out front of Fenway Park. The sign-up deals for these sites offer hundreds of dollars in free play when creating an account and placing a first bet. “Looking for action? You

came to the right place,” the DraftKings website tells us. The saturation of gambling ads and sports coverage through the lens of betting has been, to say the least, extremely detrimental to the viewing experience—unless, of course, you are betting.

How popular is sports betting? Pew Research reported in 2022 that just under 1 in every 5 adults in America had placed a sports bet in the last year, approximately three-quarters of whom placed a bet in an official way (rather than an office pool or among friends, for example). According to the American Gaming Association’s Commercial Gaming Revenue Tracker, Americans bet \$119.8 billion on sports in 2023. Betting is so entrenched that professional athletes routinely receive hate messages from bettors who lost money due to their play, even if their team won the game. It seems to me that sports spectatorship is increasingly taking a backseat to gambling, where sports are merely a tool for generating things to bet on: how many points will be scored, who will score first, or whether the coin flip will be heads or tails.

The *reductio ad absurdum* of this inversion of priorities has led to sporting events that seem to have been contrived primarily with betting in mind. The recent Netflix boxing match pitting Mike Tyson against Jake Paul was “the most bet-on fight in combat sports history, by far, including any and all UFC fights” on the platform BetMGM, according to MGM Bets. In featuring a past-his-prime 58-year-old fighting an online influencer, the event offered a third-rate version of the sport that few boxing fans actually wanted to watch. Instead, each punch thrown by Tyson and Paul was an opportunity for a different wager. With the statistical breakdown after each round reporting how many punches each boxer had thrown and how many punches had landed, ungodly amounts of money were won and lost. Just look at what ESPN decided to quote in its coverage of the betting: “[It] was unbelievable for business,” John Murray, executive director of the Westgate SuperBook in Las Vegas, told ESPN. “Casino was packed. Bets flying in all day. I was stunned.”

Like many Americans, I’ve spent an enormous amount of my life watching sports (my love of the Baltimore Orioles is an affliction that haunts me every year). And like many Americans, I grew up watching *SportsCenter* before school, *Around the Horn* and *Pardon the Interruption* in the evening. Over the past few years, I’ve lost the ability to watch ESPN coverage for any sustained period of time. The infiltration of sports betting is extremely depressing, and, worse, the media empire has largely succumbed to a style of frat bro-driven sports pseudojournalism popularized by Barstool Sports.

Created by Dave Portnoy as a free weekly Boston-area publication in 2003, Barstool Sports has grown into a digital media company valued at \$606 million in 2023. The company has an enormous online presence, with 41 million followers on TikTok and 17 million followers on Instagram. It has also launched a slew of incredibly successful podcasts like “Call Her Daddy” (distributed by Barstool Sports until 2021) and “Bussin’ with the Boys.” The latter is hosted by NFL players Will Compton and Taylor Lewan, who were recipients of a high-profile shout-out by UFC founder Dana White during his cameo at Donald Trump’s presidential acceptance speech in November. (White himself is a massive gambler, stating earlier this year, “I gamble almost

every night...My goal before I die is to bet a \$1M hand.”) Notably, Barstool Sports helped to raise the profile of ex-NFL punter and still-bro Pat McAfee, whose talk show gained notoriety under the Barstool brand (McAfee famously gave quarterback Aaron Rodgers’s anti-vax views a platform). McAfee left Barstool Sports and soon joined ESPN, where he dominates airtime in lieu of actual sports journalists (prominent NBA journalist Zach Lowe was fired by the network a few months ago). “The bros like their Bud Light and DraftKings, not their newspapers, and they love them some Pat McAfee. You can understand why,” wrote *Indianapolis Star* sports columnist Gregg Doyel last year. Dave Portnoy himself is an alleged sex pest, and Barstool Sports has come under fire time and time again for detestable rape jokes. Unsurprisingly, Portnoy, who goes by the moniker “Stool Presidente,” endorsed Trump for president in the weeks leading up to the election.

HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO BETTING? Barstool Sports is quite simply obsessed with this vice. Dave Portnoy himself talks incessantly about the bets he places (as one example, he bet \$600,000 on the University of Connecticut Huskies to win the 2024 NCAA Men’s Basketball Tournament, leading to this deranged sentence from betmassachusetts.com: “Dave Portnoy was bullish on Dan Hurley and the Huskies ahead of March Madness on MA betting apps, and their second straight title yielded him a \$2,760,000 payout”). Until 2023, Barstool ran its own sports betting site, Barstool Sportsbook; rather confusingly, this site was split off from Barstool Sports when it was under the ownership of the PENN group and has now become ESPN’s betting site, ESPN BET. “Breaking News: I’m proud to announce that Barstool has signed a multi year monster deal with @draftkings,” read Portnoy’s Instagram post announcing a deal with DraftKings in the aftermath, which received over 100,000 likes. “We’re back to our roots. DK is once again the exclusive sports betting partner of Barstool Sports. The more things change the more they stay the same.”

Gambling is such an essential part of Portnoy’s brand that a 6,000-word *New York Magazine* feature on Portnoy from 2021 bore the title and subheading, “The Dave Portnoy Playbook: Staring down the sports-gambling gold rush—and sexual-misconduct allegations—Barstool’s founder bets on the culture war.” In the immediate aftermath of Portnoy’s sexual assault allegations, first published by *Business Insider*, Portnoy is portrayed as more or less consumed by betting, with the *New York Magazine* article ending as follows:

He also got back to the gambling. Ten days after the Business Insider story, Portnoy spent a Sunday afternoon hanging out at the Barstool Sportsbook house in Hoboken, where he and other Barstool personalities regularly livestream themselves sitting in recliners for hours on end while they gamble on sports. Barstool would only hit its projection of \$200 million in revenue this year if Portnoy kept up his appearances, and the central concern on the stream today wasn’t the controversy swirling around him but a \$500,000 bet Portnoy had placed on the Green Bay Packers. There wasn’t much sense from Portnoy that he was going to dramatically change his approach to work or life anytime soon.

As for the Packers, they started off slow, leaving Portnoy's bet in doubt well into the fourth quarter. But Green Bay eventually took control and won in a blowout. Portnoy walked away with half a million dollars.

In my mind, it is a depressing vision of a Sunday afternoon, and one that I suspect is all too common among American football fans (the size of the bets notwithstanding).

The rise of online fantasy football in the early aughts reflected a sort of garden-variety interest in betting (in the form of the office pool or \$50 buy-in), and its defining lowbrow aesthetic was Hooters, reflecting a form of sexism that pervaded much of NFL spectatorship. Barstool Sports represents a massive amplification of this, where the bets are more than doubled down, and the sexism has been dialed up by the same factor. Barstool Sports has been uniquely successful in advancing a brand of aggression, and it is beyond coincidence that it sees betting as one of its core lifestyle features, along with an explicitly retrograde politics.

politics. “The GameStop pump, like Trumpism, QAnon, or GamerGate, is also a meme first and a political movement second,” wrote Ryan Broderick in *The Nation*.

Notably, stock trading writ large has seen a turn toward reckless speculation among the general public. Widespread interest in trading has been fueled by platforms like Robinhood, whose mobile app interface makes the experience of trading feel remarkably similar to a video game. Simply put: as with sports betting apps, it is remarkably easy to sink lots of money, by design.

Of course, WallStreetBets, the GameStop short squeeze, and a rise in day trading were just some of the manifestations of a broader form of speculation that dominated the early years of the pandemic. This speculation seems to be returning in full force with Trump's reelection through perhaps the most insufferable means imaginable: cryptocurrency. I won't spend much time on crypto here, given that



Sportsbooks in Las Vegas

AN UNHEALTHY OBSESSION WITH FINANCIAL speculation has, of course, suffused societies for centuries. One only needs to point to the Dutch tulip mania of the 1630s. But the past few years have brought their own forms of financial speculation that have been rebranded as betting. Just consider the rise of the subreddit r/WallStreetBets. Self-described with the tagline: “Like 4chan found a Bloomberg terminal,” r/WallStreetBets now has 17 million members and is littered with financial memes and message board-adjacent vernacular. It was responsible for the infamous GameStop stock manipulation of January 2021, in which redditors were encouraged to buy GameStop stock and hold it in order to execute a short squeeze (i.e., make the stock's price rise rapidly). Endorsers of the short squeeze included *Current Affairs* foe and soon-to-be Department of Government Efficiency co-leader Elon Musk. Convicted felon and pharmaceutical price manipulator Martin Shkreli posted regularly on the site. It is clear the site blurs with troublesome

Current Affairs Editor-in-Chief Nathan J. Robinson has already written extensively about it in pieces such as, “Why Cryptocurrency is a Giant Fraud.” But what remains important is that cryptocurrency was and still is both remarkably speculative and virtually indistinguishable from betting. As Annie Lowrey wrote in “The Three Pillars of the Bro-Economy,” “Day-trading, sports betting, and crypto are three floors in one bustling, high-stakes casino.”

This kind of high-risk speculation has pervaded hobbies as well. As I wrote in the pages of *Current Affairs* in 2021, even sports cards have exploded in value on the basis of enormous speculation, with card sales regularly eclipsing millions of dollars and hobby “enthusiasts” spending tens of thousands of dollars to open sealed packs of cards. Having spent a significant amount of time on sports card Instagram and online forums as a collector myself, I've observed that the median card hobbyist now seems to subscribe to more or less the same interests as the Barstool Sports fan and crypto enthusiast: Trump memes and sports betting schemes.

Just as Barstool Sports ushered in an era of unfettered sports betting as a certain kind of lifestyle trait, cryptocurrency and r/WallStreetBets gave way to the rise of the toxic “crypto bro,” whose primary affinities include not only crypto but generalized speculative betting, tacky generative AI art, Trump, memes, and sometimes, AI-generated Trump memes. What has come with these affinities is a kind of irony-poisoned politics, one largely of impatience and low impulse control: what matters is that there is something to speculate on, and one’s masculinity is related to the size of the bet.

IF POLYMARKET’S BETTING MARKET FOR THE ELECTION recalled the *New York Times*’s election needle, or *FiveThirtyEight*’s simulations, it was not without coincidence. *FiveThirtyEight*’s creator and election predictor extraordinaire Nate Silver was hired this summer to work for Polymarket itself. Silver has an extensive background in gambling, having supported himself financially for many years by playing poker. A *Sports Illustrated* profile of Silver noted that “he made \$400,000 over three years, and in his spare time began work on his baseball forecasting model” called PECOTA. It was on the basis of this that his career took off. “In 2003 Silver sold PECOTA to Baseball Prospectus for an equity stake, and every year afterward, until he left in ’09,” reported the profile. In other words, Silver made his name in baseball analytics, or sabermetrics—another form of predictive gambling that, as I’ve written about for *Jacobin*, reflects a certain encroachment of marketized and financialized logic into sports. It was from this vantage point of baseball that Silver turned to politics. Silver himself told the world this in a 2008 op-ed in the *New York Post*: “I created a Web site called FiveThirtyEight.com (named after the number of votes in the Electoral College) to try and apply the same scientific spirit that we’ve used in baseball to the political world.” Silver would later candidly tell us, “even my decision to start FiveThirtyEight... was an unexpected consequence of a law passed by Congress that ended my three-year tenure as a professional poker player.”

Silver’s popular books have been obsessed with betting in one way or another—for example, his profile in *The Signal and the Noise: Why So Many Predictions Fail—But Some Don’t* of NBA bettor and former Dallas Mavericks Director of Quantitative Research Bob Voulgaris. His most recent book, *On the Edge: The Art of Risking Everything*—which I’ve seen on display at bookstores across Seattle—goes all in on betting. Just consider the table of contents:

- Part 1: Gambling.
- Chapter 1. Optimization
- Chapter 2. Perception
- Chapter 3. Consumption
- Chapter 4. Competition

Two chapters of the book are about poker; Chapter 4 (“Competition”) is about sports betting. “This is also the most hands-on chapter,” says Silver. “I learned the ropes of the industry the hard way, in an experiment where I bet almost \$2 million on the NBA in the 2022-23 season.” (It’s hard not to see this as a rationalized form of a gambling addiction.) Much of the second half of the book is about

Sam Bankman-Fried, the one-time crypto billionaire and now-felon. *On the Edge* is so infused with betting that one heading of the Introduction reads: “So, Uh ... What If I’m Just Not That into Gambling?” As the *New York Times* review of the book summarizes: “In ‘On the Edge,’ the election forecaster argues that the gambler’s mind-set has come to define modern life.”*

Silver’s hiring by Polymarket is the logical conclusion to a 20-year obsession with statistical analysis and hunting for edge. Even as *FiveThirtyEight* became a proper journalistic outlet with staff writers, it is clear that Silver’s appetite for betting was being whetted. Of course, Silver’s professionalization of gambling reflects a broader shift among those with an education and background in quantitative methods and STEM. As I mentioned earlier, a surprising number of statistical minds are competing against each other in betting markets to gain edge. Of course, this mirrors a broader professionalization of quantitative trading on Wall Street—a sort of exodus from basic STEM research and applied engineering jobs to quant jobs supporting increasingly sophisticated trading strategies, whether low-latency approaches or machine learning and game-theoretic approaches to beat market competition. Indeed, the worlds of quantitative trading and sports gambling are essentially blurred: the trading firm Susquehanna just opened a sports betting desk, and, anecdotally, many traders take stints playing professional poker or the like in between trading jobs. Trading firms sponsor poker events with prize pools as a way to recruit college students for internships, and some even teach their employees poker as part of their training.

The self-evident point here is that financial markets themselves are uncannily similar to betting markets. They are glorified by writers like Silver and Michael Lewis, whose narratives serve to recruit STEM graduates into the world of financialized gambling just as Barstool Sports pulls college-aged men into sports betting. It comes as no surprise that Silver has relapsed into sports betting just as Lewis slipped into a blind infatuation with crypto in his most recent No. 1 bestseller, *Going Infinite: The Rise and Fall of a New Tycoon*. It is betting, all the way down. On the one hand, this world is perhaps more measured than Barstool Sports and crypto, in terms of its lifestyle traits. On the other hand, we find that this, too, is enmeshed with politics in a way that ultimately puts profits over people: just as crypto rallied after Trump’s reelection, so too did the financial markets, laying bare an uncomfortable yet important connection between politics and finance.

IT IS INSTRUCTIVE TO CONSIDER JUST HOW FAST BETTING and new modes of speculation more generally have exploded in the United States. As the *New York Times* reminds us, “Six years ago, sports betting was illegal under federal law.” Limited to Nevada, Delaware, Oregon, and Montana in 2018, sports betting is now legal in 38 states and Washington, D.C. Cryptocurrency exploded in value only a few years ago; regulation has been limited, and what is in place will almost certainly be reversed under the second Trump administration (explaining in part why Bitcoin rose significantly in the weeks after the election).

Polymarket is even younger. Though United States residents are forbidden from trading on Polymarket and the Department of Justice is investigating Polymarket for allowing U.S. users to place bets (the CEO's phone was seized in a recent raid), I doubt Polymarket will wither over the next four years. If we are to do what a sophisticated bettor does—plot the data points and look at the line of best fit—what we extrapolate is that betting is growing at an alarming rate.

While often championed as a form of market and individual freedom, deregulation as a general phenomenon naturally comes at our own expense. We are remarkably bad at making decisions about how we might feel about something in the future. Betting is a prime example of this: it is very difficult for a person placing a first bet with a DraftKings sign-up code to understand how all-consuming and damaging a gambling addiction might be. Gambling, then, is a prime example of a structural problem that's made worse by deregulation in its various forms, from advertising to making betting on a smartphone easier. Unfortunately, those who are pushing us to gamble the most—DraftKings, Barstool Sports, r/WallStreetBets, crypto influencers, Nate Silver, Polymarket—share one thing in common: they all profit when we bet, and thus, when we lose, again and again.

THERE ARE, OF COURSE, ENDLESS WAYS TO pathologize the proliferation of betting, beyond the regulatory considerations. Marx spoke of alienation under capitalism that decouples one from one's humanity. Sites like *Psychology Today* lament the rise in "lonely single men" who have presumably too much time on their hands. News outlets regularly cover how goods and services are rapidly becoming unaffordable, which limits options for other activities and forms of leisure. I am less interested in apportioning fractional significance to each of these root causes and am more concerned with what betting as a behavior is bound up with—particular forms of masculinity and cynicism—and how they relate to the present political moment.

In an expansive *n+1* piece titled "The Last Last Summer," the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Joshua Cohen recounts his time as a teenager working as a coin cashier at Resorts, a casino in Atlantic City. The essay is from another time, written around the 2016 election. In it, Cohen reflects on Donald Trump's role in the decline of the gambling haven. Cohen reports some telling statistics:

In the 1980s and '90s, the casinos with which Trump was associated comprised between a third and a quarter of AC's gaming industry.... And then there's the Trump Taj Mahal, which Trump built with the help of Resorts International in 1990 on financial footings so shaky and negligent that by the end of the decade he'd racked up more than \$3.4 billion in debt, including business (mostly high-interest junk-bond) and personal debt which he handled by conflating them.

Cohen makes the case that Trump isn't just a man hopelessly entrenched in a world of gambling but a politician whose very success is predicated upon the emotionality of placing a bet:

It's this ambient scare that Trump's put into the populace, and the way that his ruthlessly calculated vulture-swoops through the news cycle

serve to moderate, or exacerbate, this emotionalism, regulating it like a professional thrill, that remind me more than anything of gaming: of what it feels like to put my money on the line. It's as if Trump—this vanity candidate, famous beyond law—is offering all of us a wager: that he can inflame his rhetoric and press his luck without ever pressing it too far—without alienating all women and black and Hispanic voters, and without getting too many Mexicans, or too many Muslims, or even just some white Democrats, beaten up or killed.

At this point, enough ink has been spilled on Donald Trump the man and the criminal. What matters to me is the idea that beneath it all, Trump and MAGA are intimately connected with gambling—not just in an explicitly financial sense but in this deeper way that Cohen aptly picked up on almost a decade ago and which is amplified and rendered even more explicit with each new encroachment of betting into our daily lives. There's probably not much sense in Monday morning quarterbacking the election at this point, but I find the Barstool Sports-ification of younger men, the erosion of their impulses via the thrills of cryptocurrency and r/WallStreetBets, and the growing seduction of Polymarket-like betting to reflect a deep-seated relationship between financial aggressiveness and, as hackneyed as it sounds, a profoundly toxic form of masculinity—one that Wall Street is both famous for and laid the precedent for. Fifty-six percent of men aged 18-29 voted for Trump in this election, up from 41 percent in 2020. This is, as *USA Today* proclaimed as part of a recent headline, reflective of the fact that "Gen Z Bros Love MAGA." I imagine too many of them followed the election by monitoring Polymarket, not for the political implications of the real-time probability updates but rather for the bet itself—their votes cast as a perverted sort of skin in the game that gave way to surges of dopamine as the market resolved to Trump.

In his *n+1* piece, Cohen goes on to conclude the section on Trump and gambling with the observation that:

Ironically enough, most of the more reliable sites that'll trade US election action for cash are registered in the UK, the Bahamas, or elsewhere abroad, because America doesn't quite approve of betting on politics – not because betting on politics is cynical, but because it's considered a variety of sports betting, which is illegal in all but four of the states. America: a country in which even a noble law has to be justified through the drudgery of precedent and stupid technicality.

Here we are, eight years later, in which this law on sports betting has long since been overturned by the Supreme Court, and betting on anything, even as an American citizen, seems more and more of a possibility within the next four years. Of course, this was always possible in financial markets through various market positions—but now, the bets might be made explicit. Perhaps the addendum to Cohen's proclamation should read:

**America: a country in which even
our noble laws cannot be shored up,
and the house always wins.**

Innovative New GMO Fruits & Vegetables We Can't Wait to Try!

By Aidan Yetman-Michaelson

With bioengineering moving at a breakneck pace, it's no wonder there are so many exciting new developments in the agricultural space. Farm scientists have carefully selected each of these gifts from mother nature, mutated them horribly using unfathomable technology, and delivered them straight to your grocer for your culinary enjoyment. We can't wait to taste what dazzling delights this season has in store for us!

2. Conjoined Oranges

What's better than one orange? Two oranges! What's better than two oranges? One! Of these guys, that is!

3. Bite-Sized Pumpkins

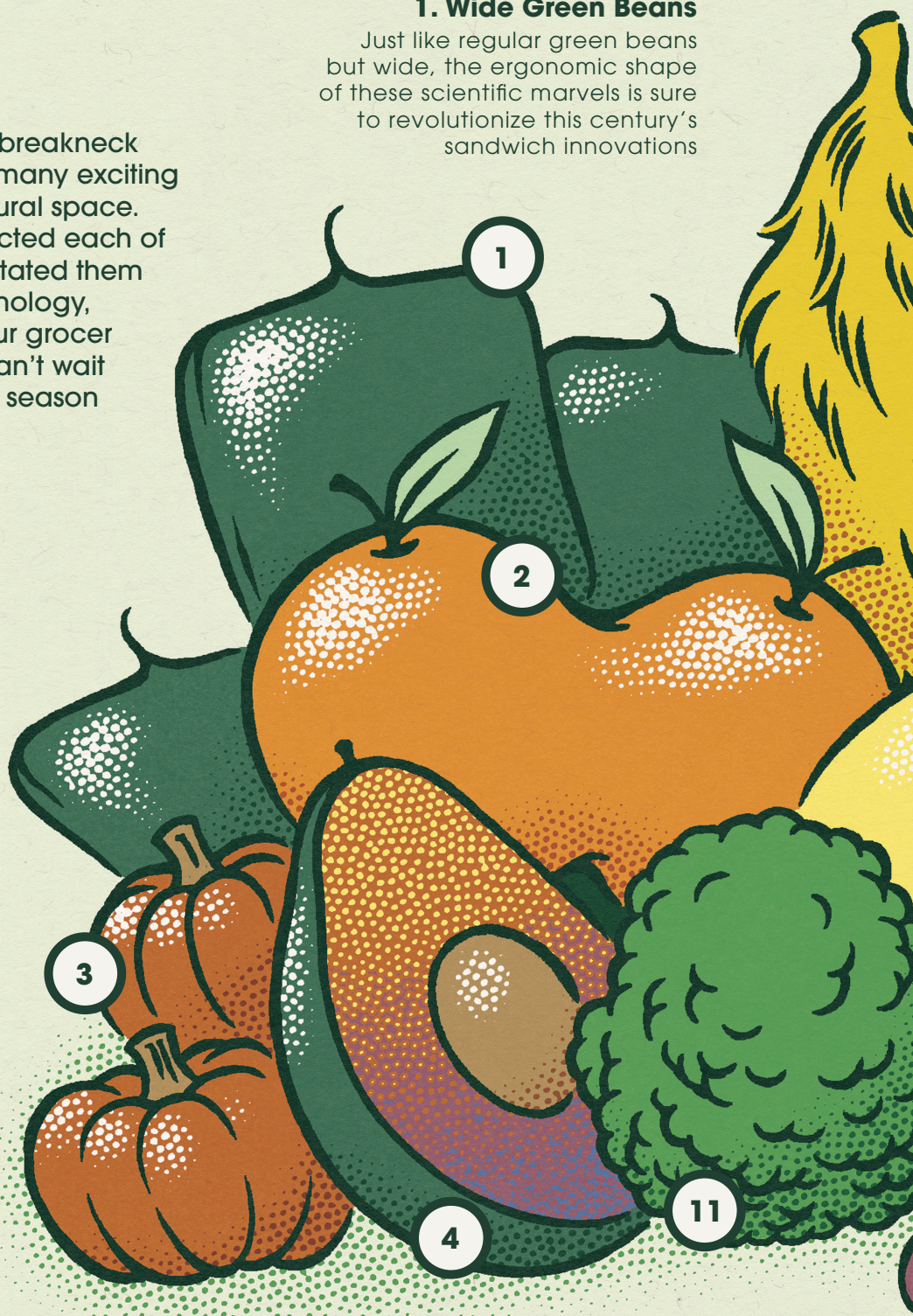
Finally a pumpkin for the snacker on the go! Just pop one of these little cuties into your mouth and chew. No more cutting off a slice of pumpkin for a midnight treat at home. Just be careful not to swallow the stem!

4. Rainbow Avocado

This colorful variation on the classic veggie is a great way to show you're a brave ally. As a bonus, the grayish brown color of the guacamole these bad boys make is a great way to dissuade any moochers from asking for a scoop of your precious dip.

1. Wide Green Beans

Just like regular green beans but wide, the ergonomic shape of these scientific marvels is sure to revolutionize this century's sandwich innovations



5. Furry Banana

These bananas' furry peels double as an ethical and vegan alternative to mink pelts. Plus they're sustainable and biodegrade in just four to six weeks!

6. Light-Up Asparagus

This bioluminescent delight has the same satisfying snap as regular asparagus but also functions equally well as a night light, reading lamp, or rave glow stick. Sure to be a real party pleaser!

7. Lime-Flavored Lemon

Looks just like a lemon — but what's this?? The flavor of...lime? Madness! Sorcery!

8. Invisible Pear

Bet you thought the illustrator got tired of drawing more fruits. Sike! There's a pear here, dummy!

9. Individual Grapes

These grapes eschew the bunches, instead growing individually directly on the vine!

Sure this means orders of magnitude more work for the farm workers harvesting them, but it should also be a huge help in shaving valuable seconds off your grape eating time trials.

10. World's Largest Blueberry

At 2.5" in diameter, this blueberry is guaranteed to be the largest you've ever seen! What, were you expecting something bigger? C'mon, we're not wizards here!

11. Diet Broccoli

All the great taste of broccoli that you know and love with none of those pesky calories! Perfect for the vegetable lover looking to watch their waistline.



A man with a beard, wearing a dark suit and a white shirt, stands smiling between two yellow taxis. The taxis are yellow with black lettering, including 'VAC' and '1133'. The background shows a city street with buildings.

COULD A SOCIALIST MAYOR BE JUST WHAT NYC NEEDS?

ZOHRAN MAMDANI REPRESENTS THE 36TH DISTRICT IN THE NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY. A MEMBER OF THE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS OF AMERICA, HE IS CURRENTLY RUNNING FOR MAYOR OF NEW YORK CITY, HOPING TO UNSEAT THE CONTROVERSIAL ERIC ADAMS, WHO IS FACING FEDERAL CORRUPTION CHARGES. MAMDANI IS RUNNING ON A PLATFORM OF LOWERING THE COST OF LIVING FOR NEW YORKERS. HE JOINED CURRENT AFFAIRS EDITOR-IN-CHIEF NATHAN J. ROBINSON TO DISCUSS HIS CITY AND HIS CAMPAIGN.

NATHAN J. ROBINSON

I'm not from New York. I've spent about a week in New York in my entire life. It's an overwhelming, complex, and fascinating place. You know the city. You're from there. You get it in a way that I don't. You're running to succeed your current mayor, Eric Adams. So first, explain to me your current mayor. He seems very strange.

ZOHRAN MAMDANI

I probably wouldn't put the word "succeed" with Mayor Adams in the same sentence given his record over the last few years. He is someone who ran on a promise to fight for the working class of New York City. But in office, he has used almost every opportunity to exacerbate the cost of living crisis that is pushing those very working-class New Yorkers out of the city that they call home.

ROBINSON

And how's he doing that?

MAMDANI

Well, the mayor of New York City has a number of powers. One of them is that you set the rent for rent stabilized tenants across New York City. We have about 8.3 million people who call this city home. About two and a half million of them live in rent stabilized units. The mayor sets their rent through something called the Rent Guidelines Board. Under the previous mayor, we saw a number of rent freezes that occurred a few times. Tenants understood that their rent this year would be the same as next year because of just how immense the economic pressures were outside the home, and yet, under this mayor that we have right now, Mayor Eric Adams, he has raised the rent nine percent in the time since he's been in office. And those are rates we have not seen since we had a Republican running City Hall.

This is just one example. But what I would say is that almost every time that Adams has been given an opportunity to intervene to help working-class New Yorkers, he has instead poured gasoline on the fire that's consuming them. And I think about when ConEd, which has a monopoly over many New Yorkers' utility bills, had put in an application to the state to raise electricity and gas prices by close to \$70 a month, the mayor signed off in support of both of those requests. Former Mayor Bill de Blasio created universal pre-K and 3-K, and Adams took his opportunity as the mayor of New York City to decimate the 3-K program and create an altogether new cost on many New York families of close to \$20-25,000 a year to find replacement child care.

ROBINSON

New York City seems to have not gotten, in many cases, the mayors that it deserves. You've had some bad governance over the years. A few months ago, I interviewed Jeremiah Moss, the author of *Vanishing New York*, who talked about the process by which New York City, a place in which all kinds of people could once flourish, became such an unaffordable place, a place that caters to billionaires in their little pencil towers while everyone else struggles.

What happened? You've had a series of these mayors. You've had Michael Bloomberg, who obviously was awful. Rudy Giuliani seems like he was pretty awful, too, even though he was "America's mayor." Eric Adams seems both awful and also like he has a screw loose. Why has your city been so poorly served by its governance?

MAMDANI

I think part of the reason is that there is also a lot of money to be made in New York City, and a lot of those businesses that benefit from what is an untenable status quo for working people have continued to support candidates that they know will create even greater profit for them, and we see that with Eric Adams. When he was running, it wasn't just that he won the mayor's race, it was that so many national and local figures, both in the media and political classes, designated him as the savior of the Democratic Party.

ROBINSON

That looks funny in retrospect.

MAMDANI

Yes. But in many ways, he does symbolize the party—in the sense of its bankruptcy. This was somebody who was supported by big business by virtue of the fact that he was so open to influence. That wasn't some quirk that they were willing to accept; it was one of the very reasons that they wanted to support him in the first place. And he has made an incredible amount of money for a lot of the people who supported him. We all know about the corruption charges, the fact that he's the first mayor in modern history to be facing federal charges. But what I'm really talking about is that this is a mayor who has gone to bat for real estate and for so many other special interests in the time that he's supposed to be running a city for the benefit of the 8.3 million people who call it home.

ROBINSON

Didn't he say he was going to make New York City the crypto capital of America, too?

MAMDANI

He said a lot of things. It's quite hard to keep up with everything he has said about New York City, whether that it's the "Islamabad of America" or the crypto capital of the world.

ROBINSON

You are out talking to New Yorkers, and you hear what they are concerned about. You hear what they love about the city, and you hear what doesn't work about the city. And you, as a candidate, have to be responsive to their needs, aspirations, and demands. The most obvious thing is that it's a very unaffordable city and seems to be getting worse. Could you elaborate on what you think the most pressing concerns for New Yorkers are at the moment?

MAMDANI

I think, ultimately, it does come back to that question of whether they can afford to live the life that they have built in this city. I spent much of last Sunday on Fordham Road in the Bronx and on Hillside Avenue in Queens, two areas in New York City that saw the most staggering shifts towards Trump and even larger drop-offs in voting overall in the presidential election. And I asked New Yorkers who lived in those neighborhoods why they voted for Trump when, previously, many of them had been voting Democrat. And what I had heard from them is this same issue, that they felt they had more money in their pocket four years ago—that they couldn't afford groceries, that they couldn't afford their rent.

In their words, [Trump] was a candidate that spoke to their anxiety, spoke to the necessity for a cheaper life, that it would actually be coming about, and promised to bring peace to the world. And we know that those are insincere claims coming as they are from someone like Donald Trump. But what he did do is diagnose that despair and offer an answer to it, whereas many of those voters simply saw a void when it came to what our party is actually offering them.

And so when I was concluding those

conversations, I asked them: "what would it take for you to come back to the Democratic Party?" And I listed out some of the proposals that launched our campaign: to freeze the rent; to make buses fast and free; to make universal child care a reality for all New Yorkers, whether their child is six weeks or 5 years of age. And they said it's those very kinds of economic issues that would liberate their life as working-class New Yorkers from the anxieties that they're currently being consumed by.

ROBINSON

What I noticed on your website is that you've got a very simple platform. We did a whole thing on Kamala Harris's policies, a roundup of her policies—she went from having no policies to having a billion policies—actually, 54 policies by our count. We analyzed all of them, but it wasn't easy to *remember* any of her policies. I think Hillary Clinton had the same kind of problem where she gave people a whole wonky list of endless little tiny tweaks. It seems like you've gone in the opposite direction, in a Bernie Sanders kind of direction. You've come up with a short, punchy list of things that people will remember. So tell me a little bit more about how you formulated what you see as your core agenda going into this.

MAMDANI

I think we worked backwards to look at the costs that dominate working people's lives. And in New York City, the first cost is housing. A majority of all New Yorkers hand over greater than 50 percent of their paycheck each month to a landlord or a bank, with nearly a quarter close behind, and we're seeing at the same time evictions and homelessness surging. Around five hundred thousand of our school children can't afford enough food to eat. And so to me, it was very clear that you should speak to New Yorkers about the crises they're facing and what powers you have as the mayor [to address them]. That necessitates a rent freeze, at the very least, for the more than two million tenants who live in stabilized housing.

After housing, the second cost is often childcare. We are seeing in New York City an economic crisis because the families that leave New York City, by virtue of the childcare costs of \$20,000-25,000 a year, are taking with them about \$2 billion in

lost annual revenue. If we don't rectify this situation, we will continue to lose money and lose New Yorkers to a city that they believe will allow their dollar to go further.

The final issue is transit. New Yorkers use public transit every single day to get to wherever they want to go. And when I've been in the State Assembly these last four years, I have fought to make buses free, and we won the first-ever free bus pilot in New York City history, making one bus in each borough free. What we saw is that when you do that, you increase ridership by more than 30 percent, decrease assaults on bus drivers by 38.9 percent, and of the new riders—the vast majority are making less than \$28,000 a year—11 percent were previously driving their own car or taking a taxi. So you have an economic benefit, a public safety benefit, and an environmental benefit. So with all of those things and the fact that one-fifth of New Yorkers can't afford the bus fare, it makes obvious sense to me.

ROBINSON

One plank of the Mamdani agenda is capping rent. Obviously, I think there is pretty much a universal consensus that, in the words of another legendary New Yorker, the rent is too damn high. However, every time you talk about rent control or rent freezes, many economists and those who call themselves the YIMBYs respond that caps on rent interfere with the signals of the market. There are those who benefit from it—those whose rent you have frozen—but you disincentivize the construction of new housing and ultimately exacerbate the problem. How do you plan to make sure that by capping rents, you can still solve the supply side of the housing problem?

MAMDANI

You do that by ensuring that it's not the entirety of your platform. We open with this promise to freeze the rent for every rent stabilized tenant, but we still have an entire housing policy platform. When we lay it out, we will speak about a citywide equitable development project that we have, a proposal to ensure that we are building enough supply so that every New Yorker can have a home. We're doing so in a manner that understands it to be a city-wide responsibility, as opposed to doing isolated spot rezoning, which has been



Zohran Mamdani at a volunteer town hall in Brooklyn; Photo credit: Michael Paulson / NYC-DSA

what a lot of the current administration's policy has been through much of the last few years.

I'm speaking to you today just having come back from a rally to end forced broker fees—New York City and Boston are two of the only cities in America that force tenants to pay broker's fees for work that is hired and that should be paid for by the landlord but is so often paid for by tenants. And I say this as a tenant myself. You may not even meet the broker when you are getting an apartment—it may simply be somebody who tells you online where to go and what code to put in to enter into the apartment. That is a service—if any is being performed at all—being done for the benefit of the landlord. City Council is going to pass that legislation today, and I have legislation at the state level to do the same thing. It speaks to the different ways in which you can actually make housing more affordable and not only freeze the rent, but frankly, bring the rent to even lower than what it is right now. That is an ultimate necessity for people to continue to live in New York City.

ROBINSON

You've mentioned the ways in which the

current mayor is in office in part because there are wealthy interests who would prefer that someone with his agenda inhabit that office. Someone may ask you, then, as I am going to ask you now, look at the difficulty that the left has had at attaining power. You are a democratic socialist. What hope do you possibly have of going against these interests? In a city where the political system is rigged to put someone like Eric Adams or even Michael Bloomberg into office, what's your plan? How are you going to succeed in this race?

MAMDANI

I think that there are a number of things that give us a pathway to winning, and one of them is the fact that in New York City, there's a public matching system. So if you are a New York City resident, and you give anywhere between \$10 to \$250 to a candidate running for mayor, the city will match that eight times. And so a \$250 donation then becomes north of \$2,000 in terms of its worth for a campaign. And what that means is that if you raise around a million dollars, you will then

get an additional \$7 million or so from the city, enabling you to run an \$8 million campaign.

ROBINSON

How did that happen? That's awesome.

MAMDANI

The idea of it is to empower small dollar donors. The idea is to take on the barriers of special interests you're talking about. I think it's the kind of thing that would be very difficult to pass today. I'm glad that it does exist. So many congresspeople who have stood up for Palestinian human rights have faced multimillion-dollar onslaughts from [pro-Israel lobby groups such as] AIPAC and DMFI and company, and you have to raise raw dollars to compete with that. But when you're running for a citywide office in New York City, you have a pathway to \$8 million by only raising \$1 million. So I think that is a major way that you can compete.

This is also a moment of political uncertainty as well as political possibility. People feel failed by the answers they have

been told for many decades. And while there is not a majority of socialist or progressive thinking across New York City, I would say there is a majority who feel left behind by this economic system and the policies of this current administration, and that is an ingredient that could give rise to an entirely new coalition of people who feel left behind and are ready to get behind a leftist in order to turn the page.

ROBINSON

It can't hurt that the guy who was supposed to be the great centrist hope for the Democratic Party turns out to be a massively corrupt criminal—accused, not convicted.

on the influx of subscriptions to *Current Affairs* magazine, that there is all of a sudden a hunger for an alternative message.

MAMDANI

Yes. I think that people do see the bankruptcy of leadership at multiple levels of Democratic governance across this country, and I think in classic fashion, the political and consultant class is seeking to blame the left for the failures of the center, as if it were a left campaign that we just saw come to an end over these last few months. In reality, what we saw is a wavering commitment to continuing to have Lina Khan as head of the FTC, a desire to campaign with Liz Cheney and Mark

with that in the New York State Legislature, and is there anything you can do on issues of foreign policy like that from the New York mayor's office, other than to change whose flag you raise at the endless flag-raising ceremonies?

MAMDANI

As a state representative, I introduced first in the nation legislation to bar New York charities from funding Israeli war crimes. I did that because on an annual basis, charities registered across this state send tens of millions of dollars to fund the Israeli settler enterprise, a funding scheme that has now grown to include units of the Israeli military that have been found guilty of aiding and abetting that very genocide, or have been found complicit in it. And that is an example of the kind of legislative action that we have to take because we know that the horror that we feel in watching this genocide unfold is due to the fact that we are not just witnesses to it but are responsible for it. And I think the mayor has incredible power just by virtue of his bully pulpit—I would argue he has the second-largest bully pulpit in America, and he used that bully pulpit when he was first running by saying that he would retire in the [Israeli occupied] Golan Heights.

ROBINSON

What a thing to say.

MAMDANI

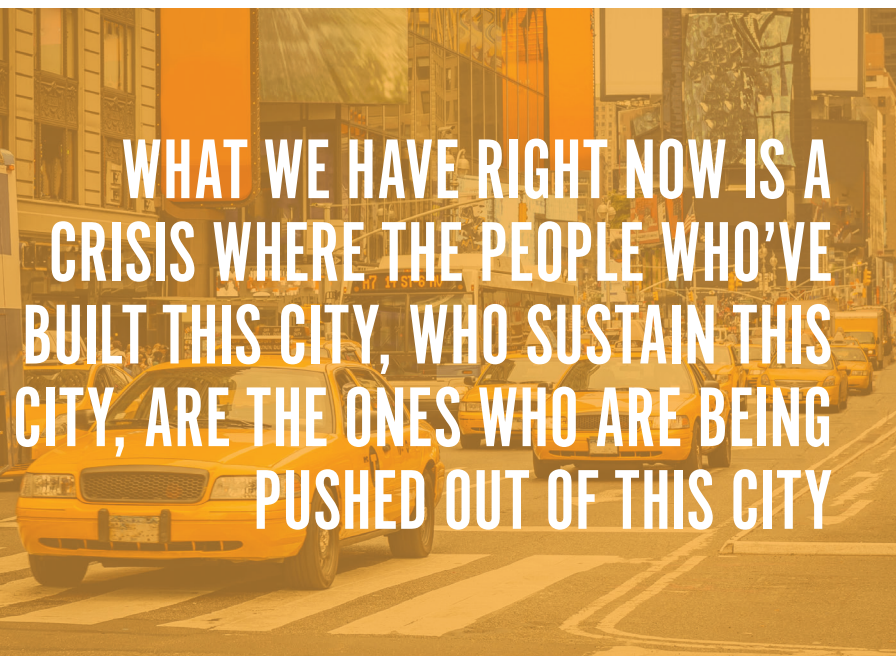
When he went to Israel, he promised greater cooperation with Israeli settlers and has called many of the war criminals of the Israeli government friends of New York City. That kind of support from the leader of this city needs to come to an end.

ROBINSON

I'm going to pose as a potential constituent, someone you meet when you're going door-to-door and is the kind of constituent that makes you go, "Oh boy, here we go."

MAMDANI

I love them.



MAMDANI

Allegedly.

ROBINSON

But just to touch on the links with what has just happened at the national level with the election that we have just gone through, there is a certain way in which the Democratic establishment has been discredited, not just through Eric Adams's alleged personal corruption but through the Democratic Party's complete failure to stop the far right at the national level. And I think that we're certainly finding, based

Cuban, and a departure from some of the most successful parts of Biden's domestic economic agenda, all while maintaining the same line for an absolutely horrific and disastrous foreign policy that has continued to fund a genocide that continues unabated across Palestine.

ROBINSON

Well, speaking of that disastrous foreign policy and that genocide, you have been an activist for Palestinian rights and have been against that genocide. It awkwardly interacts with running for local office, but is there any way you've been able to deal

ROBINSON

So you meet a constituent, and you say, “Tell me a little bit about your most serious concerns.” And I say, well, Mr. Mamdani, I’m really hoping you’re going to do something about all the immigrants that are coming to our city and taking up all the social services. And all the crime in our city. I’m very concerned that all the leftists want to let people out of prison and abolish the police. I don’t want to return to the 1970s—I was here in the 1970s, and you couldn’t walk down the street without getting mugged! And then Mayor Giuliani came in, and he cleaned all that rubbish, etc.

I don’t need to go on. How do you speak to a constituent who tells you that the problem is, as Eric Adams might have told them, crime and immigration?

MAMDANI

I think the first thing you have to do is actually listen to them and not try and dissuade them of what they are feeling but respond to it. Too often, what the Democratic Party is guilty of is hearing a critique or a concern and then trying to wave it away with a bar graph or a set of statistics. And for the two concerns around immigration and around disorder, I would say that we need to develop new policies as opposed to the ones that have been shown to be failures that have been carried out by the Eric Adams administration. I’d give one example. Right now, we have street vendors across New York City, and there is a law that requires the city to give out permits to street vendors, but it is refusing to give out those permits. What it is doing is requiring street vendors to purchase permits off the black market. And so a vendor of a halal cart is spending \$18,000 just to be able to sell. And because of that black market, because they have to get a license from the illegal market, they then have to increase the price of their food from \$8 to \$10. They have to make up that \$18,000 cost, which is completely created by Eric Adams’s ineptitude. And what you can also talk about is bringing order by giving dignity to people who are trying to make a life for themselves in New York City and taking them out of the shadows.

And I think to the question of crime, you can ask them, where do you feel this the most? Often, what you will hear is public transit. I feel this when I’m

going on the trains or the buses, or I feel this even when I’m at home and thinking about those things. And I think it’s important to respond to it by saying two things. The first is one of the reasons I’m fighting for free buses. When we won a free bus pilot, we saw that assaults on bus drivers went down by 38.9 percent, and that almost identically mirrored what happened in Kansas City when it went down by 39 percent when they made buses free. We need to bring safety back to our buses in reality and in perception. This is a clear way that we do so. Every time a bus driver is assaulted, it is horrific for the worker who is simply doing their job and for the passengers who are just trying to get where they’re going.

And, secondly, I would say that most people, when they’re thinking about crime on the subways, are also just thinking about mental health crises and homelessness. It’s not necessarily an act of crime itself. We will be putting out a proposal to create a new Department of Community Safety that would empower a force separate from the police that would be responding to mental health crises, and their responses would be based out of the subway system in many of the commercial units that are now vacant across the subway system, very much inspired by the successes of programs in Philadelphia with Hub of Hope, as well as in the BART system out west. And I think it’s speaking to these concerns and answering them in a way that is honest to yourself, but also honest to this perception that is sometimes grounded in either anecdotes or reality, and saying that what we’re doing right now isn’t working, so here’s what we’re going to pursue.

ROBINSON

Yes, I like what you do there. I believe in defunding the police in many cases, but it’s a purely negative policy—it’s what you’re going to take funding away from, whereas you’re talking about funding real safety and taking safety seriously. We believe that everyone should be safe, but we just don’t believe that is done through militarizing the subway, sending men with guns in to attack someone who jumps the turnstile or what have you. To conclude here, we’ve gone through the core sort of economic issues, but describe to us a little more your vision for what New York City under a competent, effective leftist mayor could become.

MAMDANI

It could become the city that it was always meant to be, which is a place that working people can flourish in, where working people can dream of more than simply getting off the hamster wheel to go to sleep and getting back on it in the morning to go back to work. What we have right now is a crisis where the people who’ve built this city, who sustain this city, are the ones who are being pushed out of this city all while we are concerned about this imaginary flight of the wealthy from New York City. In fact, it’s the working class who are leaving this place that we call home. And what a Mamdani mayoralty would look like is spending each and every day figuring out how we could make this city more affordable and how we could bring a shred of dignity back into the working class’s life on a 24-hour basis.

ROBINSON

Current Affairs is prohibited as a 501(c)(3) from offering endorsements, but we wish you the best of luck in your campaign. If people want to support you, what should they do?

MAMDANI

They should go to zohranfornyc.com, and they should click the link to donate as well as to sign up to volunteer. The only way that we can build a campaign that’s worthy of New Yorkers’ hopes and New Yorkers’ beliefs is if it’s a fully funded campaign. We are doing incredible work to get there, but we need a lot of help to get to the finish line.

ROBINSON

And thanks to New York’s amazing campaign finance laws, your money goes a long way.

MAMDANI

Yes, it does. ✚

Transcript edited by Patrick Farnsworth.

the Illustrators

ELLEN BURCH

NICK SIROTICH

C.M. DUFFY

J. LONGO

LIBBY MCGUIRE

TOM HUMBERSTONE

JESSE RUBENFELD

KASIA KOZAKIEWICZ

BASIL KINCAID

CHELSEA SAUNDERS

EMILY ALTMAN

NICK SIROTICH

AIDAN Y-M



51ST EDITION

COVER ART: WERONIKA ZAREBA