

Every Word In It Is True Except These Ones

CURRENT AFFAIRS

\$12.95

VOL. 10, ISSUE 2

MAY/JUNE 2025

TOLKIEN

*Why fascist nerds
love him.*

CORNEL WEST

Tells us how things are.

ART

Can it save us?



WHAT'S ON THE MENU?

POST MARDI GRAS MALAISE

If you are suffering, as we are, from the debilitating disorder known as Post-Mardi Gras Malaise, know that you are not alone. You need not suffer in silence. The best known cure for the disorder is to start work on next year's Mardi Gras costume. It's never too early!

TO THE Reader

...WHO SENT US MANATEE STAMPS...

The editors would like to thank Joe S. of Milwaukee, WI for sending us a packet of manatee stamps he found at his local post office. Joe correctly surmised that our editors would be delighted by manatee stamps and so resolved that we should have some. In fact, Joe is not the only reader to have sent us manatee-themed objects lately. We also received a pack of "Manatea" tea infusers which have proved extraordinarily useful since endless cups of tea are required to sustain editorial operations. Thank you! Keep sending manatee things!

PIPING HOT TAKES (W/ SIDE OF BREAD)	\$0
DEEP-ROASTED POLEMIC	\$0
CRITIQUES ON TOAST	\$0
DISCURSIVE SPAGHETTI	\$0
IDEOLOGICAL STEW	\$0
NUGGETS OF FACT	\$0
ROASTED BILLIONAIRE KABOBS	\$0
VERY STRONG COFFEE	\$0



HAVE YOU TRIED
— screaming —
INTO THE VOID TODAY?

[illegible]

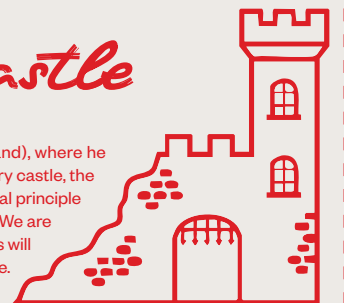
**AGAINST
COMMON
SENSE**

You've heard it said before: "Show some damned common sense!" Or "Well, it's just plain old common sense, that's what it is." But did you know that "common sense" is an *insidious propaganda term* used to place dubious, controversial ideas beyond the realm of dispute? It's true! Politicians use the phrase "common sense" to describe an idea when they want you to assume it's transparently obvious. It might as well mean "don't ask questions." When you hear this term, beware of being bullshitted and swindled!

Now, subscribing to *Current Affairs*, on the other hand? Well, that IS just plain old common sense.

Moving To An Abandoned Castle

The editor in chief recently returned from a visit to his country of origin (the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland), where he occupied his free time taking strolls through the English woods. Upon one such jaunt, he happened upon an abandoned 14th century castle, the kind of thing you find littered about in the British countryside. The castle appeared unloved and unclaimed, and under the English legal principle “whoever stands on the castle and yells ‘I am the king of the castle’ owns the castle,” the castle was duly claimed for *Current Affairs*. We are therefore excited to announce that we will immediately be moving all editorial operations to the property, and most day-to-day tasks will be conducted by the ghosts of long-dead feudal lords. We do not expect this to result in any diminution to the quality of the magazine.



AS (NOT) SEEN ON



No, we are not the television program *A Current Affair* that went off the air in 1996. We had not thought it was necessary to clarify this point, but the extent of public confusion is apparently so great that we must make a formal statement.

Smuggling THIS MAGAZINE THROUGH CUSTOMS

If you are stopped by immigration authorities who detain you in a small room and say, "Ello ello ello, what's all this, then? Smuggling subversive literature across the border, are we?", remember that you have NOTHING to hide. This is a perfectly innocent magazine that contains ABSOLUTELY NO INSTRUCTIONS ON HOW TO MANUFACTURE HEAVY EXPLOSIVES nor any listicles on TEN CREATIVE TERRORIST ATTACKS TO TRY THIS AUTUMN. (You're thinking of *Cosmopolitan*.) Here you will find only gentle poems paying tribute to manatees and other sealife, as well as a few golf tips and restaurant reviews. (We hated the Bijou Cafe in Twistedon.) If Border Patrol has any further questions, tell them they can take it up with our editor in chief, who will gladly once again explain just how little of our magazine's content is dedicated to praising the activities of U.S.-designated terrorist organizations.

WE OWE YOU

If Country A buys more goods from Country B than Country B buys from Country A, then Country A has a "trade deficit" with Country B. According to the esteemed economic advisers of the current president, this means that Country B is ripping off Country A, essentially stealing from it, and Country A should impose enormous taxes on goods coming in from Country B in order to make up the difference. But hang on, if this reasoning is sound, it not only means that much of the rest of the world has been ripping off America, it also means that you (the reader of *Current Affairs*) are being ripped off by this magazine. After all, you have a persistent trade deficit with us: you give us money and in exchange we give you magazines, but what do we ever buy from you? Nothing! We have therefore decided to make the situation much fairer by imposing a 25 percent tariff on magazines, meaning that you should pay 25 percent more for them than you currently do. That way, we will no longer be stealing from you. We are delighted to have found a policy that resolves the unfairness in such a rational and sensible way.

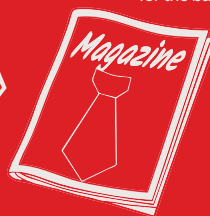
Baked Good of the Month



TO BE TAKEN WITH CLOTTED CREAM AND JAM.

DRESS YOUR MAGAZINE IN A FANCY NECKTIE

Put it on the front when you need to "gussy up" an issue for the ball.



CURRENT AFFAIRS (ISSN 2471-2647) is published bi-monthly for \$59.99/year by CURRENT AFFAIRS INC., 300 LAFAYETTE STREET, 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.

HAIL THE LYNX

This magazine has long distinguished itself from competitors through its broadly pro-lynx editorial stance, to the point where our detractors have persistently referred to our ideological orientation as "Lynxist." The term is a slur, but it is true that we have long praised this noble beast, and it has been awarded Animal Of The Month in these pages. Well, our admiration for the lynx was only further augmented upon reading the recent news that an Egyptian lynx is accused of biting multiple soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces. The noble lynx is clearly doing its part to end the occupation of Palestine, and we can all take lessons from its example.

TAKE PRECAUTIONS

PLEASE MIND THE GAP

Take care when transferring between pages and avoid the gutter, which is electrified. Always stay within the margins. Reading content outside the margins may result in death or serious injury.

PAPERCUT RISK

The edges of this magazine are razor sharp and may cause your insides to become your outsides. Why do you think they call the outer rim of a page the "bleed"?

DAINGEROUS IDEAS WITHIN

The ideas in this magazine, if taken seriously, could create widespread social chaos and even topple governments. We disclaim all responsibility for any mayhem and madness that come about as a result of reading this magazine.

Owl Compensation

This magazine recently reported on a sinister government plot to kill over 400,000 owls in the name of saving a slightly different kind of owl. We objected to the plan, on the grounds that all owls matter and are lovely. But we are doing more than merely register displeasure. We are using every tool at our disposal to stop

this abomination. So here's the plan: We are inspired by the Republican policy that "for every regulation introduced, two must be gotten rid of," which is their way of ensuring that over time, the number of regulations is driven to zero. Our plan is this: for every owl killed, two more owls will be printed in the magazine. Like a hydra, every death produces new life. The number of owls cannot decrease, it can only increase. Owls will multiply and multiply until eventually they consume the universe. The plan cannot fail. We shall thwart the state! The first two owls are printed here:

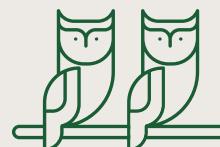


TABLE OF

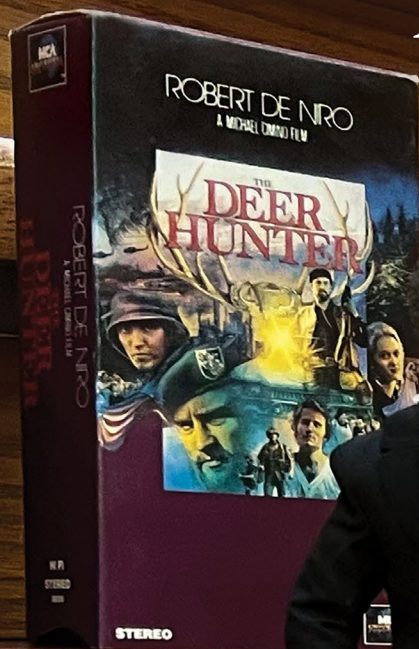
MICHAEL
CIMINO
P.22

ART WON'T
SAVE US
P.36

CORNEL
WEST
P.62

ANOTHER
WORLD
P.50

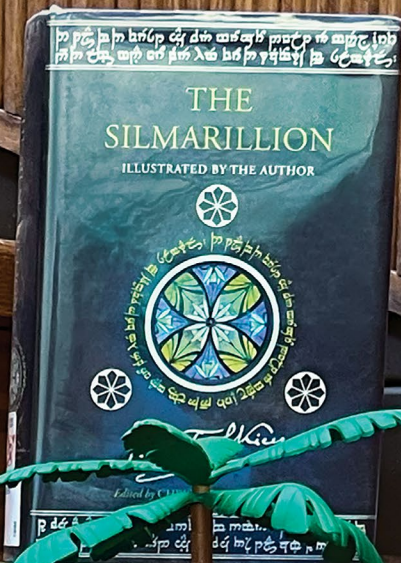
ABITA
MYSTERY
HOUSE
P.42



CONTENTS

TOLKIEN
P.14

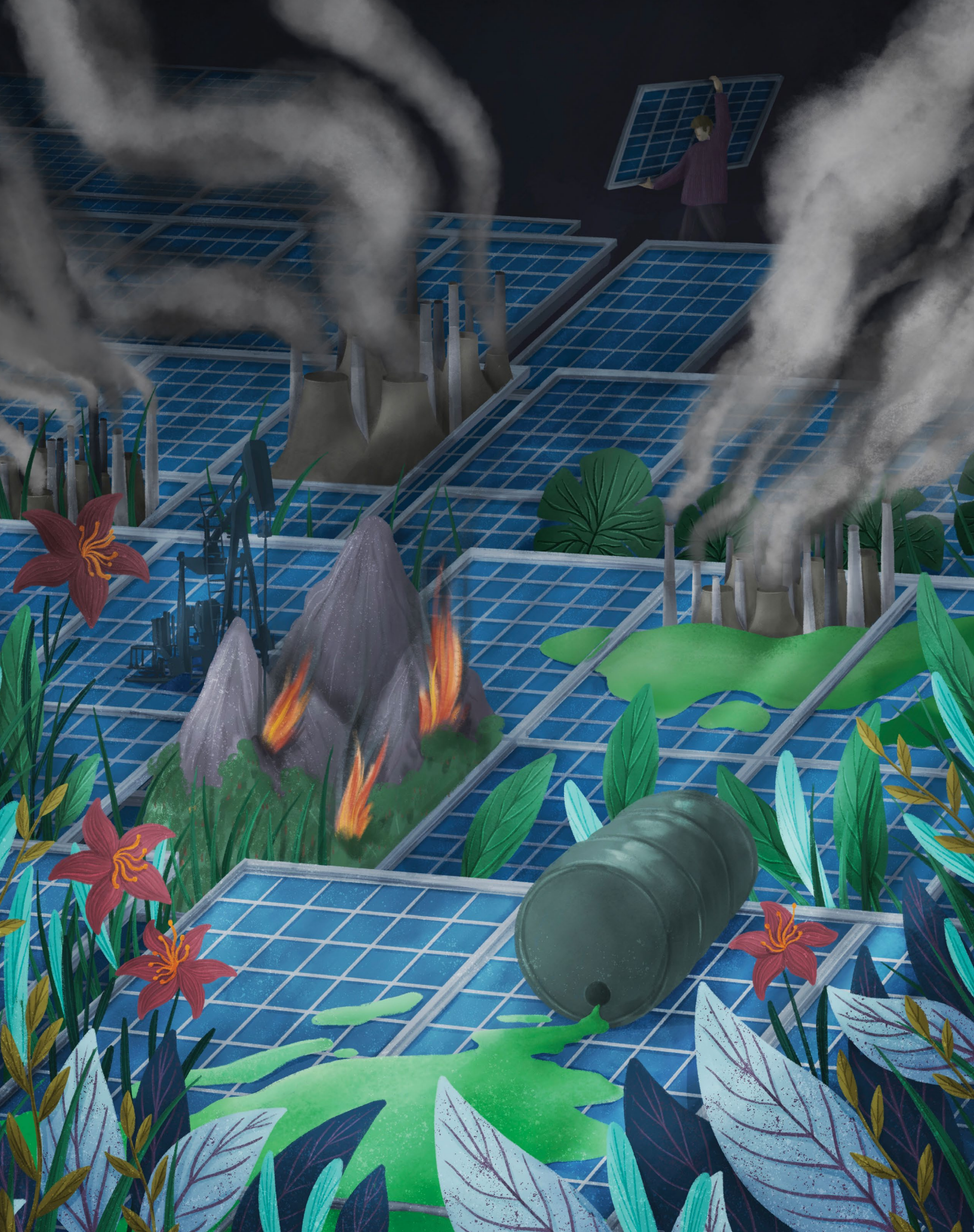
CLEAN
ENERGY
P.6



DE NIRO IN
BARBUDA
P.56

THE
POLICE
P.28





DIRTY LIES ABOUT CLEAN ENERGY

BY SAMUEL MILLER MCDONALD

IN 1917, ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL, THE INVENTOR MOST famous for developing the first practical model of the telephone, gave a graduation speech that became a meandering *National Geographic* article. In it, he expressed concern that humans would use coal and oil until these fuels became scarce. “We can take coal out of a mine,” he laments, “but we can never put it back. [...] What shall we do when we have no more coal or oil?” Once they’re gone, he suggests, people may be able to capture tidal and wave power or possibly use ethanol, “a beautiful, clean, and efficient fuel” synthesized from waste biomass like sawdust, or even use the “sun’s rays directly as a source of power.” He mused, “What wide expanses of roof are available in all our large cities for the utilization of the sun’s rays!”

Bell was concerned not only with the exhaustibility of these fuels that have come to be called “fossil fuels” but also the risk that burning them could create a greenhouse effect—a term that had probably been coined by John Henry Poynting ten years prior—that would turn the Earth into a “hot-house.” Half a century earlier, in 1856, Eunice Newton Foote became the first scientist to demonstrate experimentally that carbon dioxide traps heat. Hypothesizing that if there was enough of the gas in the atmosphere, it could heat up the planet, Foote was the first scientist to link carbon dioxide with global climate change.

Now, after a 169-year experiment of continual carbon emissions, we know that burning fossil fuels in such great amounts has indeed created a greenhouse effect, substantially warming the planet. Last year was the hottest year on record, with the global average temperature hitting 1.55 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, and it will almost certainly be beaten by this year, which will likely be beaten by next year. This warming has occurred far faster than any natural mechanism and thus can

only be attributed to the burning of fossil fuels (and downstream events like forest fires and permafrost melting). Echoing Bell’s fear of this effect creating a “hot-house,” scientists today fear the high likelihood of what some call a “hothouse earth” scenario in which this human-caused warming sets off other sources of warming—like decaying permafrost, which releases large amounts of methane, another greenhouse gas that’s significantly more heat-trapping than carbon dioxide—leading to extreme temperatures that make large stretches of the planet inhospitable for complex forms of life like human beings. With fossil fuel production and greenhouse gas emissions hitting record highs every year with no reduction in sight (along with the global temperature), the likelihood of avoiding such a scenario dwindles every day, growing further and further out of reach.

Many have responded to this crisis with an instinct similar to Bell’s: let’s use various non-fossil alternative energy sources—like his suggestions of tidal, wave, biofuel, and solar power—instead of coal, oil, and gas. While this is generally a reasonable instinct, there are some major hurdles preventing a neat transition from fossil fuels to alternative forms of energy, and there are some related problems that alternative energy simply cannot solve. Bell assumed, after all, that we would only transition once the fossil fuels ran out. But this is something that will happen only long *after* catastrophic warming is locked in, meaning that we cannot afford to wait that long to begin our transition. Unfortunately, instead of confronting these difficult truths, many mainstream commentators and analysts have been content to get themselves hyped up on speculative “new” sources of alternative energy, devoting religious-like fervor to the idea that miracle tech will deliver us from perpetual hellfire.

A RECENT CNN ARTICLE, FOR INSTANCE, OPENS WITH the following claim: “Large reserves of white hydrogen may exist within mountain ranges, [...] raising hopes this clean-burning gas can be extracted and supercharge efforts to tackle the climate crisis.”

There are really three claims bundled cleverly together in this one sentence, and each one is more loaded than the last. The sentence eases us in with an innocuous, neutral fact: white hydrogen may exist within mountain ranges. Fine. But then it claims a “clean-burning gas” may be extracted from these mountain ranges. What makes this gas “clean”? If we mean no particulates (harmful microscopic chemicals) or carbon dioxide come out of, say, a car’s tailpipe when burning this gas, then sure, it’s at least cleaner than a petroleum-based energy source such as standard gasoline. But to accept that it is “clean,” we would have to ignore all the other ways in which the cars that it may power are dirty, like tire pollution (tire wear causes 2,000 times more particle pollution than exhaust) or the demand for petroleum-dependent asphalt created by cars or all the manufacturing waste that goes into making, moving, and maintaining cars. For whom is mountain hydrogen extraction “clean”? For the beings, human and otherwise, who live on and around the mountain that is blasted and made uninhabitable in order to extract the hydrogen, it is not very clean.

The biggest assumption comes at the end: that this extraction will “supercharge efforts to tackle the climate crisis.” At first, this too might seem like an innocuous observation. After all, isn’t hydrogen gas, which does not emit carbon when burned, a replacement for fuels that *do* emit carbon dioxide, making its use a contribution to tackling the climate crisis? This seems reasonable until we consider that new sources of non-fossil alternative energy, like this one, have tended *not* to replace fossil energy but to supplement existing fossil fuel sources. Even when an individual instance of renewable energy generation can be shown to displace fossil energy—like, say, wind displacing coal in Scotland—*on the whole*, fossil energy increases have kept pace with new renewables. There have been some promising changes with regard to electricity generation in some places, such as Europe, but few provable cases of alternative energy supplanting available fossil energy. Fossil fuel use and carbon emissions are still hitting records alongside growth in alternative energy. China, for example, is building out alternative energy projects faster than any other country. It is also deploying coal energy in greater quantities than any other country. Scotland has achieved an impressive reliance on wind energy and a fracking ban. But the U.K. simultaneously promises to continue relying on North Sea oil “for decades to come,” according to the U.K.’s Energy Secretary, Ed Miliband, even as they aim to build offshore wind there. The U.K. is not alone. New fossil fuel spending is happening worldwide to an extent that even exceeds past investment records, indicating that industry and energy companies will continue to rely heavily on fossil fuels into the future, regardless of what other energy sources may come along.

If alternative energy isn’t displacing fossil fuels, can it be said to be reducing carbon emissions and thus tackling the climate crisis? Obviously not: if it’s not reducing emissions, then it’s not tackling the climate crisis. In fact, it may be doing the opposite and contributing to the climate crisis primarily through two mechanisms: 1) by increasing overall energy supply and thereby

FOSSIL FUEL USE AND CARBON EMISSIONS ARE STILL HITTING RECORDS ALONGSIDE GROWTH IN ALTERNATIVE ENERGY.

locking in higher energy demand, and 2) by creating new outlets for fossil energy consumption, namely the infrastructure necessary for alternative energy’s extraction, production, maintenance, and distribution.

Demand is malleable. Reducing the energy supply can restrain unnecessary consumption and force economies and individuals to prioritize consumption. When fuel prices rise as a result of supply constraints, for example, demand for bloated personal vehicle sizes decreases. As we might expect, when fossil fuels are cheaper, we see cars get bigger, which results in more materials being harvested to build these bigger cars, in turn requiring more asphalt for larger parking lots and wider roads and more resources to repair roads more frequently (a two-ton SUV is sixteen times more damaging to roads than a one-ton car), and more. “Car bloat,” as it’s sometimes called, has led to an increase in the material footprint of cars and has counteracted any potential climate benefits of the increasing fuel efficiency of internal combustion engines (such as the reduction of vehicular carbon emissions). As the size of personal vehicles has increased, so has the demand for more fuel. That is, supply induces demand: demand rises to meet supply. Similarly, highway expansion doesn’t reduce congestion; car use simply increases to fill the wider roads. And building more housing typically doesn’t reduce cost; it can instead increase demand. Aside from induced demand,

this also demonstrates the famous Jevons paradox: increased efficiency results in increased consumption. Under these conditions, increasing the supply simply increases demand and rate of consumption, thus locking in the imperative to maintain or expand energy sources in order to sustain that extra consumption. If we see a constantly inflated demand, what incentive would powerful fossil fuel lobbies have to decommission lucrative plants and forego huge, steady annual profits? If there is an ever-rising floor of energy consumption, someone will be there to buy new petroleum. Sometimes that extra consumption is not only superfluous but actively harmful in other ways.

MICROSOFT, FOR EXAMPLE, IS AIMING TO REOPEN the Three Mile Island nuclear plant (parts of which were closed due to a partial meltdown in 1979) and is investing in an experimental reactor in Seattle, all to power its energy-hungry AI data centers. In Ireland, AI data centers have already stalled renewable energy transitions as their energy demands have outpaced new renewables. With the expansion of AI, data centers could account for more than one-fifth of global energy demand within the next five years. It's unclear whether these sorts of projects would be so prioritized without the "clean" energy justification—in fact, nuclear is even less "clean" than hydrogen—but it hasn't stopped President Trump from recently ordering an expansion of coal production to power AI data centers. Either way, those AI data centers not only don't need to exist for any social utility but should not be allowed to exist at all due to the harms they cause. Unlike heating, electricity, or transportation, generative AI—which appropriates existing words and images and reassembles them into uncanny forms—does not provide any positive benefit to humans or other life. On top of energy gluttony, the social harms of generative AI are many: it constitutes or enables widespread intellectual property theft, dramatically increases misinformation, harms student learning outcomes, inundates media with low-quality alternatives, eliminates creative jobs, and much more. The widespread and expanding deployment of AI in surveillance and military applications, like autonomous drone warfare, is even more chilling. Some defenders like to say of the technology that, as with the curses in Pandora's box, AI technology is "out of the bag," and so all we can do is let it develop as it will. But this is as ridiculous as saying that nuclear weapons technology is out of the bag, so we just have to let it proliferate to any and all. Sorry, everyone, polio is out of the bag, good luck! In certain contexts like healthcare, various forms of AI may provide benefits. But deciding which energy consumption is beneficial cannot be left to corrupt markets or malignant officials. The only ethical way to govern AI and other high-consumption tech would be through public, democratic control so that it could be harnessed for social good. Under this model, any potential benefits of the technology would be weighed against the massive environmental cost of AI—which seems to be an afterthought in the private, for-profit model that currently governs the industry.

Another recent article titled "Geothermal Power Is a Climate Moon Shot Beneath Our Feet," this one at the *New Yorker*, explores another potential source of "clean energy." Many places around the world use geothermal energy when heat from the earth's crust bubbles to the surface. Microsoft, Meta, and Google are already using geothermal to power some of their AI data centers. But some geologists are trying to figure out ways of

drilling deeper to access even more of the planet's internal heat. The author, Brent Crane, expresses delight at the prospect of geothermal being able to "supply clean energy for eons." But, like all drilling, this deep earth drilling carries many risks. Some are known, like the possibility of poisoning groundwater and triggering earthquakes. Crane mentions a 2017 earthquake in South Korea that displaced around 2,000 people and injured over a hundred. It was caused by a geothermal project. "In a world of geothermal anywhere," Crane points out, "we may feel quakes everywhere, too." Luckily, we are told, one geologist who happens to have a significant financial interest in geothermal's success isn't worried: "Earthquakes come up *all* the time when we're talking to the public," but he "hopes that any seismic events generated by working enhanced geothermal systems will also be imperceptible." Well, as long as he hopes so.

INCREASED EARTHQUAKES, POLLUTED WATER, AND potential resultant volcanic activity are some of the known risks of existing drilling methods. But accessing these "eons" of clean energy would require drilling far, far deeper than any humans ever have, which carries many more unknown risks, any of which may prove far more catastrophic than the known risks, and some may even be more calamitous than climate change itself, the problem it is meant to solve. After all, history's worst-known extinction event, the Permian-Triassic, occurred when there was likely a massive burst of greenhouse gas emissions, primarily carbon dioxide, and acid rain caused by volcanic activity. It killed nearly all the world's trees and 90 percent of species. If the acquisition of this energy doesn't trigger doomsday volcanoes and consequently wipe out most complex life, could it potentially be a "climate moon shot"? Probably not. The technology needed to access these deep reserves of heat, as Crane reminds readers, does not exist and may not ever. Despite fossil fuel companies and former fracking employees eagerly pointing their veteran-drilling expertise toward this tech, it is highly unlikely to come into commercial viability in the time needed to avert hothouse climate feedback loops, some of which, as far as we know, may have already begun or may begin in the near future. Even if we could access these eons worth of energy, there is, again, no way currently to ensure that all this new geothermal heat would displace fossil energy and carbon emissions rather than simply powering a lot of new AI data centers or other superfluous and harmful forms of consumption yet to be invented. What's lacking here is a mechanism of governance capable of replacing fossil energy with an alternative kind (a point to which I will return).

Another harmful form of consumption worth mentioning is cryptocurrency. Abkhazia, Georgia was once primarily powered by hydropower. It is now facing long and frequent electricity blackouts and increasing dependence on fossil energy imported from Russia. The main reason for these worsening blackouts and the use of Russian fuel is that a nearby illegal crypto mine is directing hydropower away from residents. As CNN reports, "The region typically faces seasonal power shortages as water levels drop in the winter, but they have become more disruptive because of crypto mining, which is sucking up electricity 24 hours a day," resulting in a "humanitarian catastrophe." This manufactured catastrophe should not be happening at all, and certainly not so that we can power crypto mining. Here we have non-fossil energy, an imperfect one that is harmful in its own ways, that should at the very least be providing for residents' needs but instead is being ille-

gally directed toward social harms. After all, crypto is a fraud that primarily benefits criminals who use it to pay for illicit pornography, drugs, and services, and it did not exist before 2009. What other new monstrosity might be invented in the next 16 years with the glut of energy that new sources of “clean” energy might provide? Whatever it may be, we have every reason to believe that all these new sources of “clean energy” will go fully toward powering AI and crypto or some other new, superfluous, and harmful source of consumption, rather than to making energy widely available to all or reducing fossil energy use for more necessary consumption.

THERE IS NO FOSSIL-FREE ENERGY SOURCE.

The act of building new alternative energy will also probably not decrease carbon emissions and, at this point, is just as likely to *increase* carbon emissions. The reason for this, besides the fact that it locks in increased energy demand, is that, currently, *all* energy production is heavily dependent on fossil energy. *There is no fossil-free energy source.* Solar and wind rely on extensive fossil energy for their manufacture, distribution, and construction, and nuclear and hydrogen rely on extensive fossil energy for their extraction, construction, and deployment. And so if those new alternative energy projects are only *adding* energy on top of existing and new fossil energy projects while increasing energy demand, instead of displacing existing and new fossil energy projects, then they are *increasing* net carbon emissions, especially if those projects may not have been as likely to occur with only fossil energy.

DOES THIS MEAN THERE SHOULD BE NO NEW development of alternative energy or that burning fossil fuels is preferable to, say, wind and solar? Absolutely not. It is, of course, much better—less energy- and resource-intensive—for the wind to turn a turbine and generate electricity than coal or gas. But it does mean that any new alternative energy projects, including mountain hydrogen, should be evaluated aggressively based on their direct and downstream harms. After all, not all “clean energy” is equivalent. Tidal power, for instance, may actually have a modestly positive impact on some marine life because it makes large areas off-limits to trawling, the practice of using huge nets to scoop up and destroy marine life indiscriminately, whereas drilling and mining for fuels and minerals almost always harms wildlife and people, even if these forms of energy are “non-carbon.”

And this brings us back to the mechanism of governance that’s needed here. In order for these alternative energy projects to put a dent in carbon emissions, they *must be coupled* with state-mandated restrictions on fossil fuel development and deployment. The only proven way to decrease carbon emissions is to prevent the extraction and deployment of fossil energy in the first place. Remember, the climate crisis is primarily caused by greenhouse gases, the dangers of which scientists have understood for almost 170 years. There is no proven technology capable of pulling carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere or safely and sufficiently blocking solar radiation (to counter the warmth of greenhouse gases). Nor is there any source of non-carbon energy that will be so good it makes fossil fuels obsolete. The more demand created by both fossil and alternative energy, the harder it will be to decrease fossil energy. Status quo emissions trajectories put us on degrees of warming that could make the planet simply too hot for human and other complex life to live. There is quite literally no outcome worse than one in which the planet is rendered uninhabitable. That’s why stopping fossil energy use as quickly and completely as possible, which is the only known way to prevent this outcome, is imperative.

This sounds like a terrible deadlock, one that hasn’t improved in the past 100 years since Alexander Graham Bell was talking about moving past coal and oil for tidal power and solar. But there is good news: a world that constrains energy consumption, particularly that of rich people and industry, will be a far better world for all.

The original CNN article on white hydrogen reveals its ideological bias by taking for granted the need to maintain “humanity’s insatiable energy appetite,” as does, less explicitly, the *New Yorker* geothermal article. This presumption—that humanity’s insatiable energy appetite should be maintained—is a “growthist” ideology. It is an ideology in the sense that it contains presumed (often incorrect) beliefs about how the world works and moral beliefs about how the world should work. It is “growthist” in the sense that everything is pared down to one imperative above all others: to “grow,” or rather, to achieve compounding increases in profit, territory, energy, or other assets. This ideology is dominant throughout the world, with major political parties, governments, corporations, universities, and other institutions all aligned on this all-powerful idea that fetishizes the production of infinitely increasing profit through unlimited consumption and extraction of natural resources alongside the exploitation of labor. (Though some will complain about using “growthist” instead of “capitalist” here, the reality is that historically, economies that we might think of as “anticapitalist,” like the mid-century USSR and late-century China, have also put “growth” above most or all other concerns.) But not only is such an outcome—ever-increasing energy expenditure—a physical impossibility, there is no good reason for seeking to maintain ever-increasing levels of energy production and consumption, and certainly no reason sufficient to justify destroying the living world. The only solution to the interlocked climate, ecological, and fossil energy crises is for humanity to reject the idea of perpetually rising energy demand. In other words, we must become satiable with respect to the consumption of goods and services and, as a result, energy use. Doing so is not only necessary, but it will also make us all a lot happier and healthier.

At one scale, we as individuals must be willing to set a limit on what and how much we consume, finding satisfaction in natural joys rather than chasing the short, disposable highs of voracious

consumption. This means, for example, avoiding things like single-use plastics; not buying heaps of short-lived clothing; not depending on energy gluttonous devices like a new phone every year or a massive vehicle; not taking lots of flights for weekend trips; and so on. Good parents know that giving kids everything they want all the time is a sure way to “spoil” them, to turn them into avaricious, selfish, unhappy little monsters. Why do we forget that the same principle applies to adults? While a level of responsible consumption is required of us, people understandably may find this self-abnegation difficult to justify when the very rich consume so much without any such scruples, spoiling themselves and the rest of the living world with them. An Oxfam study found that, through investments and personal activities, a billionaire emits more carbon dioxide in an hour and a half than the average person will in a lifetime. It’s not just billionaires, either. As Jag Bhalla has shown in this publication, the global 1 percent (and even the top 10 percent) are also emitting way more than their “fair share” of carbon dioxide. Meanwhile, ordinary people are facing reduced living standards due to government-imposed austerity and wealth-hoarding by the rich. In the U.K., according to a new analysis, public spending cuts are likely to reduce living standards for all British families by 2030, “with those on the lowest incomes declining twice as fast as middle and high earners.” National wealth that went into public services like the National Health Service, utilities, and welfare benefits is increasingly being diverted to private companies and wealthy individuals. So why should I limit myself to owning one or two cars in a lifetime when someone as demonic as Andrew Tate is allowed to hoard dozens at once? Why should I deny myself things I want and can afford when I am already pouring so many resources into a bunch of parasitic companies and landowners just so I can live, while they are rolling around in profligacy?

THE OTHER SIDE OF THIS PROBLEM IS THAT THE FORCES of production have decided, in their insatiable quest for ever-increasing profits, to undertake a decades-long campaign of reducing the quality of their products in exchange for quantity of items sold. Even if we would like to limit ourselves to a single good car for a lifetime, for instance—or avoid single-use plastic or use a phone for ten years or wear high-quality clothes—the companies that dominate markets have made this difficult. They build obsolescence into their products, they cut corners in production, and they charge ever higher prices for increasingly worse goods.

Probably the best solution to both the problem of overconsumption by the rich and overproduction of low-quality products by industry—and the political and market influence of the fossil fuel industry—is to build a government with the willingness to rein them in by force of arms. A powerful state is currently the only force capable of setting a limit on what businesses and the rich are able to produce and consume. The outcome of building such an entity could be utopian: ban AI, and suddenly we won’t be inundated with low-quality information and images and can maintain high-quality creative professions. Aggressively persecute crypto operations, and you cut the financial balls off criminals and prevent a lot of pollution and energy waste. Force automakers to only build cars that are attractive, don’t emit carbon dioxide at the point of use, and are built to last decades, and suddenly there will be fewer and better cars (which would have cascading quality of life benefits for all, like fewer deadly roads, less asthma- and

dementia-causing pollution, more beautiful cities, and on and on). Mandate all tech companies build products for quality instead of obsolescence, and force them to take responsibility for safe waste disposal. Tax the rich out of existence, and suddenly there are no more psychopathic oligarchs trying to kill us, no more brutally unfair distribution of resources, no more mafia boss-style politicians rigging the system. As a bonus, we could use that revenue to build comfortable transportation and walkable cities, to maintain research funding, and to rewild habitat. The happiest people in the world live in societies with more equal distribution of wealth and a close association with the natural world—even though they are sometimes among the “poorest” in terms of income—not in societies where rich people get to act like giant toddlers and industries get to pump out heaps of ugly garbage.

Yet in this moment, when states, politicians, and regulatory bureaucracies are almost totally subservient to industry and the rich, when virtually all trends are going in the opposite direction they need to be, and when public good regulations are being rapidly eroded, the idea that a government might suddenly pull a one-eighty and start reining in the rich and industry looks like utopian fiction. Achieving that would require a large and active labor movement, more vigilante leftist agitators, courageous journalists, rebellious bureaucrats, sympathetic police and armed forces, and much else. It would require a world where the rich and corporate management teams truly understood that if they didn’t get taxed out of existence, they would be ushered out of existence by other means (like, for example, the assassination of healthcare CEO Brian Thompson, although the political element to the story is being suppressed by a corporate media that is trying to ensure that public expression of rage against the healthcare industry is kept quiet).

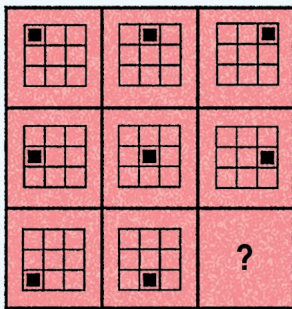
Even if we don’t currently live in such a world, it’s easy to understand why it’s better than the path we’re on now. We know where we’re headed. Some corporations will flatten the world’s mountains, or drill so deep into the earth’s crust they set off doomsday volcanoes, or fill every crevice with radioactive waste, or cover every square mile of land in solar panels so that tech companies get a few more years of developing ever more sophisticated ways of surveilling people. All known life in the universe will be destroyed so that a few billionaires can become trillionaires for a generation. This growthist fetish is anti-living. It is an ideology that tells us to be happy with a temporary energy-fueled simulacrum of life rather than life itself. Anyone who has spent any time on a mountain would never trade such beautiful ranges for a whole ocean of white hydrogen or the ill-gotten spoils that its extraction would accrue for some investment portfolio.

Growthism is not just anti-living, it’s anti-life. The Alps are among the areas being explored for possible future drilling. These are some of the last habitats in Europe for numerous species like brown bears, lynx, ibex, wolves, and golden eagles, not to mention many less charismatic ones who also deserve to live. If the mountains are drilled, they may be extirpated. Other ranges, like the Pyrenees and Himalayas, home to lynx and snow leopards, respectively, and much else, may also contain significant white hydrogen pools. If drilled, they would suffer the same death-making as the Alps. If we maintain the current level of energy consumption and continue drilling the land and seas for energy at the current pace, a great deadening will be the fate of everyone and everything. Nothing is worth that. ✚

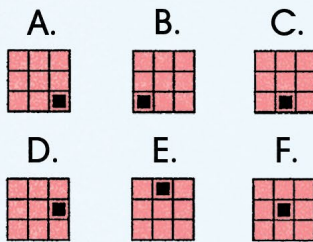
Current Affairs IQ TEST

Are you tired of people calling you names like lamebrain, numbskull, and ignoramus? Prove the haters wrong by taking the highly esteemed...

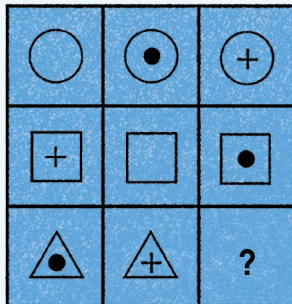
Exercise 1



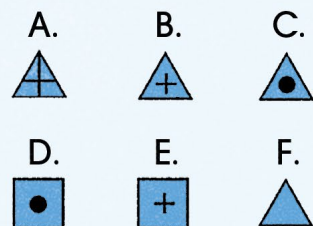
Circle one



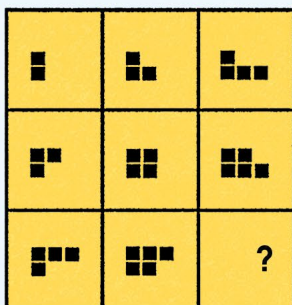
Exercise 2



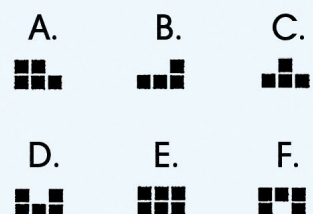
Circle one



Exercise 3



Circle one

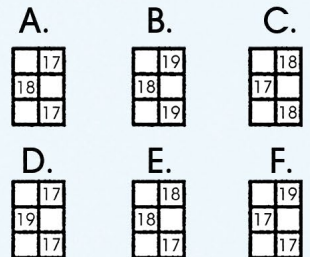


Exercise 4

Yeah, this one has math! Not so clever now, are you, motherfucker?

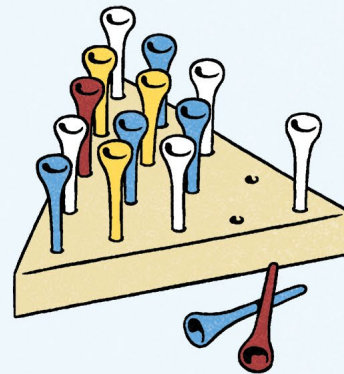
20	22	19	21
17	19	16	?
19	21	?	20
16	18	15	?

Circle one



Exercise 5

Have you ever been able to solve that dumb little triangle thing with the pegs at Cracker Barrel? Be honest! We'll know if you're lying!



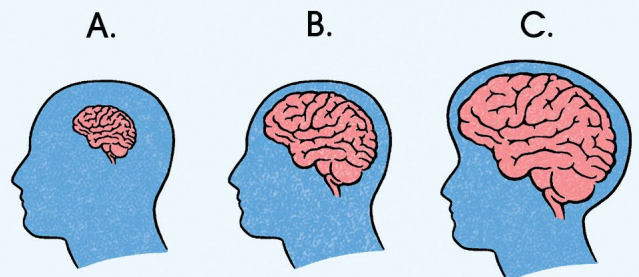
Circle one

A. Yes B. No

Exercise 6

How big is your brain?

Circle one



Exercise 7

How many times during this test have you banged your head against a wall and yelled "Stupid! Stupid!"?

Circle one

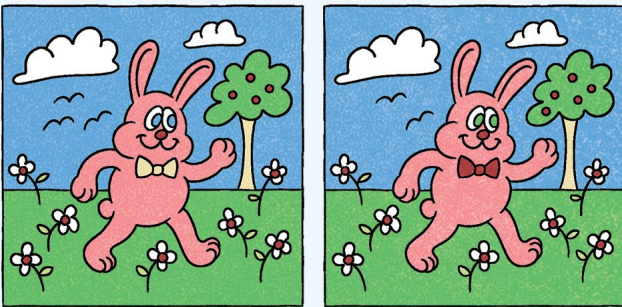
- A. 0 B. 10 C. 100

D. _____

(Please write in your answer)

Exercise 8

Please circle the 6 differences between the two pictures.



Exercise 9

The center fielder fires the ball from center field in an attempt to stop the runner from first trying to get to third on a base hit. The throw goes wild and the ball ends up out of bounds. At the time of the throw the lead runner was between second and third and the batting runner was between home and first base. Where should each runner be placed? (Bet you weren't expecting this one, nerd.)

- A. First and Second B. Second and Home C. First and Home D. Second and Third

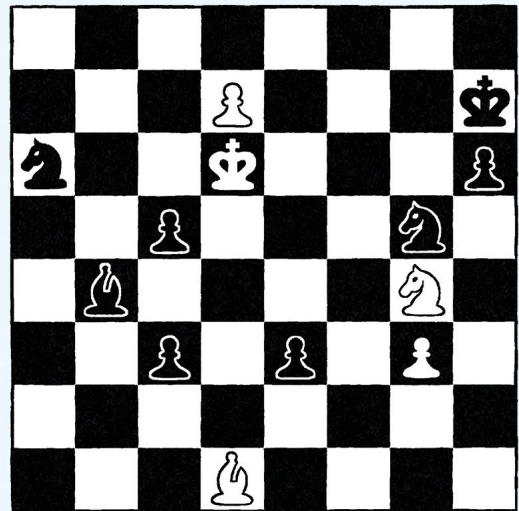
Exercise 10

How much money do you pledge to donate during our next fundraiser?

\$ _____

Exercise 11

White to play. Checkmate in 14 moves.

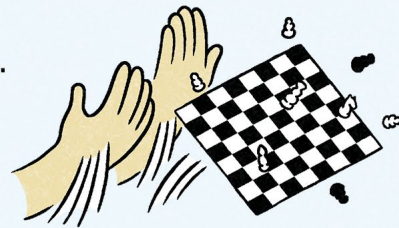


Circle one

A.

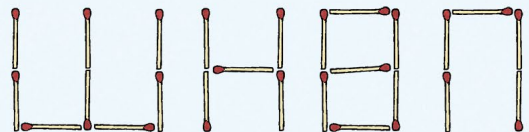
Answer: _____

B.



Exercise 12

Move exactly one matchstick to reveal a hidden word.



Answer: _____

To see your results please send this page along with a self addressed and stamped envelope to:

Current Affairs
300 Lafayette St. #210
New Orleans, LA 70130

Please allow 6-800 weeks for shipping and processing.



THE ABUSES OF TOLKIEN

BY ALEX SKOPIC

IN THE ANNALS OF ENGLISH LITERATURE, CERTAIN LINES OF criticism have left a lasting sting. One of the most memorable of these came from the screenwriter and cartoonist John Rogers, who had this to say about the relative merits of J.R.R. Tolkien and Ayn Rand:

There are two novels that can change a bookish fourteen-year old's life: The Lord of the Rings and Atlas Shrugged. One is a childish fantasy that often engenders a lifelong obsession with its unbelievable heroes, leading to an emotionally stunted, socially crippled adulthood, unable to deal with the real world. The other, of course, involves orcs.

Rogers didn't know it when he wrote that in 2009, but he was foreshadowing the obsessions of today's political far right. From the White House to Silicon Valley, we're now dealing with a generation of reactionaries like JD Vance and Peter Thiel who meld the worst of both literary worlds: Tolkien's and Rand's. Like Ayn Rand's sociopathic heroes, they believe rich capitalists ought to

run the world, and they have bottomless contempt for concepts like equality and democracy. But they've also latched onto Tolkien's fantasy realm of Middle-Earth as a cultural touchstone—one they believe is symbolic of their own worldview. They love to name their slush funds and surveillance companies, like Thiel's Palantir, after magical artifacts from Tolkien's books. But, as often happens with the political right, they've fundamentally misunderstood the works of art they claim to love. Despite the notable flaws in his own politics, it's unlikely that J.R.R. Tolkien would have had any fondness or respect for oligarchs, war profiteers, or their allies. In fact, Tolkien's whole mythology warns against exactly the kind of power-hungry politics they pursue.

FOR AN IDEA OF THE KIND OF FETID IDEOLOGICAL STEW we're dealing with here, just consider the story of Vice President JD Vance's venture capital fund. Back in 2019, Vance wasn't yet a national politician; he was just the bestselling author of *Hillbilly Elegy* and a constant fixture in the liberal media, where his alleged insights into the

“white working class” were in high demand. But Vance had big ambitions, and he was starting to build connections with people richer, more powerful, and more evil than himself. So he started a venture capital firm, and he named it “Narya Capital.”

For most people, “Narya” probably sounds like an arbitrary corporate pseudo-word. For Vance’s liberal detractors, like MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow, it has raised suspicions that he just took the word “Aryan” and moved the N. Really, though, the name comes from Tolkien. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Narya is the Ring of Fire, one of three magic rings created by the elven craftsman Celebrimbor; it’s not the all-powerful One Ring, but it’s still a potent magical weapon.¹ Now, ostensibly the purpose of Vance’s fund was to invest in “often-overlooked places” like the ones he’d described in *Hillbilly Elegy*, taking venture capital beyond the usual California and New York markets and empowering people who wanted to launch a startup in, say, North Carolina. But the name “Narya” betrays that Vance thought of the fund as his very own Ring of Power, which would allow him to wield influence in the world, and that’s how he really used it.

In the first place, a sizable chunk of Narya’s \$93 million starting capital came from Peter Thiel, the infamous right-wing billionaire who would soon be the top donor to Vance’s 2022 Senate run as well. Other funds came from Marc Andreessen, another billionaire who runs in the same circles as Thiel and whose view of the average American is reportedly “I’m glad there’s OxyContin and video games to keep those people quiet.” Still more cash came from Vivek Ramaswamy, who went to Yale Law School with Vance. In turn, Narya didn’t exactly donate to striving Appalachians who just needed a chance to succeed. Instead, *Business Insider* reports that the fund has given large sums of money to “a gene therapy company founded by Vivek Ramaswamy’s brother” (now *there’s* a coincidence), to a “Catholic meditation and prayer app” called Hallow, and to Rumble, the right-wing YouTube alternative that’s known for hosting Andrew Tate, Russell Brand, and miscellaneous other sex pests and racists. The one major project that *did* have a plausible connection to rural America—a startup called AppHarvest that aimed to create lots of high-tech autonomous greenhouses—went bankrupt after only a few years. So it appears that Narya Capital’s primary focus wasn’t altruism, the way it was initially touted in the press. Instead, Vance used the fund to build up tech-based conservative projects and to make connections for himself within the burgeoning techno-right. And it worked, to the extent that the same network of billionaires would help propel him all the way to the White House just five years later.

Right-wing Catholicism, in particular, goes a long way toward explaining Vance’s affinity for Tolkien. By his own account, Vance converted to Catholicism in 2019, the same year he founded Narya Capital. Today, he’s what’s known as a “traditionalist” or “postliberal” Catholic—in other words, a stridently conservative one who opposes progressive reforms and outreach to marginalized groups like LGBTQ Catholics, to the extent that the late Pope Francis had to lecture Vance about showing compassion to immigrants. In practice, Vance’s brand of Catholic conservatism means he wants to ban pornography along with abortion, and he

blames the American epidemic of mass shootings on “the culture of fatherlessness” rather than the widespread availability of guns. It’s a restrictive and authoritarian blend of religion and politics, the polar opposite of “liberation theology,” and it contains little room for nuance or tolerance. As Vance himself puts it, “I believe the devil is real and that he works terrible things in our society.”

Historically, that’s the kind of worldview that’s led to crusades and witch trials—and it has a parallel in Tolkien’s world, which is embroiled in a war against absolute evil in the form of the Dark Lord Sauron, a literary Satan figure. Tolkien was a devout Catholic, too, and Vance says that “a lot of my conservative worldview was influenced by Tolkien growing up.” For his part, Catholic scholar Luke Burgis believes that Vance took “an apocalyptic frame of mind” from his reading of *The Lord of the Rings*, and perhaps imagines himself waging a “final and all-encompassing battle between good and evil” in the way Tolkien’s heroes do. If so, that’s a deeply worrying mindset for a political leader to have. We can see it reflected in Vance’s recent statements, like when he responded “excellent” to a text informing him that a U.S. airstrike had destroyed an entire apartment building in an attempt to kill one Yemeni missile engineer. If you believe in human rights and international law, that’s horrifying. But if you live in a moral universe of Dark Lords and noble warriors who fight them, it’s perfectly acceptable.

BY HIMSELF, THOUGH, JD VANCE IS ONLY OF LIMITED interest. The real *éminence grise* has always been Peter Thiel, who effectively created Vance as we know him today. It was Thiel who gave Vance his first job in high finance in 2016, at his \$850 million Mithril Capital fund. The position seems to have been a sinecure; according to colleagues who spoke anonymously to the *Wall Street Journal* in 2024, Vance was seldom in the office and spent a lot of time traveling to promote *Hillbilly Elegy* instead of doing investment work. But his time at Mithril allowed Vance to cultivate an image of himself as a successful businessman, which would later serve him well on the campaign trail. Like Narya, Mithril is a Tolkien-inspired name; in *The Lord of the Rings*, “mithril” is a precious metal that dwarves mine in the mountains of Moria. The company also seems to have provided the model for how Narya would work, with Vance just copying Thiel’s business on a smaller scale. As we’ve seen, it was Thiel who funded a portion of Narya too; it was Thiel who bankrolled Vance’s Senate campaign; it was even Thiel who first introduced Vance to Donald Trump in 2021, setting the stage for him to later become vice president. To a disturbing extent, Vance is Thiel’s proxy and his gateway to political power—and Thiel’s politics are the kind that shouldn’t be allowed any influence, anywhere.

There is some debate about whether Peter Thiel is a fascist.² In the past, he’s claimed to merely be a libertarian. But that doesn’t necessarily prove anything; economists Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek were both libertarians, and they both supported fascist dictators at various points (Mussolini for von Mises, Pinochet for Hayek.) Thiel’s biographer, Max Chafkin, writes that the billionaire’s worldview “combines an obsession

1 Altogether, there are 20 different magic rings in Tolkien’s lore, but you don’t have to think about all of them today. I promise.

2 A bit of life advice: if people are litigating the precise details of whether you’re a fascist or not, you’ve probably done something badly wrong.

with technological progress with nationalist politics—a politics that at times has seemingly flirted with white supremacy.” On his blog *Unpopular Front*, writer John Ganz argues that, well, that sounds a lot like fascism. And really, it’s less a “flirtation” with white supremacy than a full-fledged love affair.

Notably, Thiel grew up in apartheid South Africa and Namibia (formerly called South West Africa). There, he attended a German-language school in a town called Swakopmund which, according to the *Guardian*, was “notorious for its continued glorification of Nazism, including celebrating Hitler’s birthday” well into the 1970s. On the record, Thiel claims he disliked the “regimentation” of the schools there and turned to libertarianism as a result. But people who have known him personally tell a different story. In a 2016 blog post, author Julie Lythcott-Haims—one of Thiel’s former classmates from Stanford—recalls hearing rumors that Thiel had defended apartheid during their freshman year and confronting him about it:

He said, with no facial affect, that apartheid was a sound economic system working efficiently, and moral issues were irrelevant. He made no effort to even acknowledge the pain the concept of apartheid could possibly raise for me, a Black woman. Needless to say, the chill up my spine didn’t go away that day; if anything my fear was now greater knowing I was living with someone who seemed indifferent to human suffering or felt that oppressing whole swaths of humans was a rational, justifiable element of a system of governance.

More recently, Thiel has said that “I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible” because “welfare beneficiaries and the extension of the franchise to women” have “rendered the notion of ‘capitalist democracy’ into an oxymoron.” In his view, the wrong *kinds* of people are voting, you see. Thiel has also praised the ideas of Nazi political theorist Carl Schmitt, saying that he sees “parallels in the U.S. in the 2020s to Germany in the 1920s, where liberalism is exhausted. One suspects [that] democracy, whatever that means, is exhausted.” Absurdly enough, he’s even used a Tolkien analogy to express sympathy for Nazism, comparing society in Weimar Germany to “the dwarves in Moria where they [delve] too deep and finally awaken the nameless terror.” The implication is that if Weimar Germans hadn’t gone too far with their decadent liberalism, there wouldn’t have been a Nazi takeover, just as the demonic Balrog in *The Lord of the Rings* wouldn’t have woken up and devoured a bunch of dwarves if they hadn’t disturbed its rest with their too-ambitious mining project. That’s an unsubtle form of victim-blaming—especially since some critics have compared Tolkien’s short, bearded, and gold-loving dwarves to 20th century antisemitic caricatures—and it’s only a hair’s breadth away from saying that Hitler had a point.

In terms of his business ventures, Mithril Capital isn’t the only Tolkien-branded company in Thiel’s portfolio. In keeping with the “obsession with technological progress” Chafkin noted, he’s up to his elbows in surveillance and weapons technology, and his whole project seems to revolve around amassing as much money and power as humanly possible. His flagship company is Palantir Technologies, and it’s named after a type of enchanted crystal ball that the wizard Saruman uses to spy on people across Middle-Earth. Like its fictional namesake, Palantir specializes

in surveillance, along with data analysis and tracking. At the time of writing, they’ve just won a \$30 million contract with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to build an AI model that tracks immigrants for deportation. They also have a “strategic partnership to supply technology to Israel” for use in Gaza, including “AI-based predictive policing systems” that allow the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to arrest Palestinians *before* they’ve actually committed any offense, based purely on the AI’s prediction that they may. Oh, and the leader of the company’s London office is Louis Mosley, the grandson of Oswald Mosley, who founded and ran the British Union of Fascists back in the 1930s. That’s certainly a choice.



The Barracuda-250, an autonomous air vehicle (AAV) built by Anduril

THE WHOLE THING IS JUST CARTOONISHLY SINISTER, and that’s before you even get into Anduril Industries. It’s a weapons company, and it’s named after the sword Anduril in Tolkien’s books—a special weapon wielded by kings, including Isildur and his descendant Aragorn (played with panache by Viggo Mortensen in the film adaptations.) Among other nasty products, the company makes Barracuda cruise missiles, quadcopter drones with “lethal precision firepower” onboard, and a “torpedo-inspired underwater attack drone” called Copperhead. Like with Palantir, many of its products incorporate AI in some way; a key goal appears to be creating autonomous “swarms” of drones that can fly in sync with each other and overwhelm air defenses, leading to more efficient killing. Technically, Thiel didn’t found this company; that was Palmer Luckey, who, like Vance, is another of his acolytes. But the *New York Times* points out that Luckey received “seed funding from the Founders Fund,” another venture capital firm co-founded by Thiel, and the fund still supplies Anduril with periodic infusions of cash in the billions, so it’s very much a part

of his extended business empire. It's also attracted the attention of the anti-war group Veterans for Peace, whose members have been protesting the construction of a \$900 million drone factory in JD Vance's Ohio.

Thiel has a hand in several other, less prominent Tolkien-themed companies, too, and the journalist Paris Marx has compiled a thorough list. There's Valar Ventures, yet another startup fund named after the gods of Tolkien's universe, plus two more venture capital funds called "Rivendell" (an elven city) and "Lembas" (a type of magic bread). The latter firm, Marx reports, has funded "a series of seemingly defunct food and blockchain startups." (I know *I've* been waiting patiently for my food to be on the blockchain.) There's Athelas, which aims to get more AI into the healthcare industry and is named after a fictional medicinal plant; Thiel associate Garry Tan is one of its "key investors." And of course there's Thiel's Founders Fund, which he reportedly calls "the precious" behind closed doors, the same way Gollum refers to the One Ring. Thiel's fixation on Tolkien has even spilled into his creepiest extracurricular project: his attempts to extend his own lifespan, which have led him to look into blood transfusions from younger people. In a 2023 interview with the *Atlantic*, he compared this pursuit to the existence of immortality in Tolkien's universe, asking: "Why can't we be elves?" For someone with his oversized ego and ambitions, the limitations of the human species are just unacceptable; he wants to transcend them and become a supernatural being, even if "vampire" would be a more apt comparison than "elf."

SUPERFICIALLY, IT'S UNDERSTANDABLE WHY THE American far-right might believe they've found a kindred spirit in Tolkien. After all, *The Lord of the Rings* is essentially a monarchist fantasy about a noble king returning to solve all the world's problems. Concepts of hereditary power and virtue are downright fetishized. Aragorn, who's secretly the heir to Gondor's throne, can heal people's battle wounds by touching them and command an army of ghosts simply because he has royal blood in his veins. Democracy as a concept just doesn't enter into the equation. There's also plenty of old-timey racism to be found in the books. The world of Middle-Earth features strictly-defined races of creatures, and there are inherently "good" and "bad" races; elves and dwarves are good (although they can have flaws, like pride and greed), while orcs and goblins are always evil and fit only to be killed. Humans are the only morally mixed race—but there, it's notable that the good humans tend to get descriptions like "Yellow is their hair, and bright are their spears. Their leader is very tall," while the bad ones are described with language like "swart, slant-eyed" or even "black men like half-trolls." It's ugly stuff, and it's led the Marxist novelist China Miéville to describe Tolkien as "the wen on the arse of fantasy literature," lambasting his "small-minded and reactionary love for hierarchical status-quos." That's harsh, but not entirely baseless.

However, it's more complicated than that. Although there's plenty in Tolkien that *is* reactionary and racist, there's plenty that isn't, too. Notably, the Fellowship of the Ring is a multi-racial coalition of heroes, and Tolkien's extended universe contains a pivotal interracial romance between the human warrior Beren and the elf princess Lúthien. In the real world, too, Tolkien was more hostile to racism than his descriptions of "dark" villains

might suggest. Like Peter Thiel, he spent part of his childhood in South Africa—but when he later reflected on its system of government in a valedictory speech at Oxford University, he had this to say:

There are of course other lands under the Southern Cross. I was born in one; though I do not claim to be the most learned of those who have come hither from the far end of the Dark Continent. But I have the hatred of apartheid in my bones; and most of all I detest the segregation or separation of Language and Literature. I do not care which of them you think White.

The use of the term "Dark Continent" raises a wince today, but this is clearly an anti-apartheid statement, which is more than Thiel could muster decades later. Elsewhere, Tolkien wrote in a letter to his son Christopher that "I know nothing about British or American imperialism in the Far East that does not fill me with regret and disgust," and he was horrified by the development of the nuclear bomb and modern weaponry in general:

The utter folly of these lunatic physicists to consent to do such work for war-purposes: calmly plotting the destruction of the world! Such explosives in men's hands, while their moral and intellectual status is declining, is about as useful as giving out firearms to all inmates of a gaol and then saying that you hope "this will ensure peace."

This last passage, from another letter to Christopher, is especially striking because Tolkien is condemning the exact arms industry that people like Thiel and Vance now champion. With old J.R.R. in his grave since 1973, there's no way to be certain, but it seems likely he would have been deeply disturbed to see the words "Anduril" or "Palantir" inscribed on a cruise missile or an AI targeting system.

In other letters, Tolkien wrote that "My political opinions lean more and more to Anarchy (philosophically understood, meaning the abolition of control not whiskered men with bombs)—or to 'unconstitutional' Monarchy." This is obviously contradictory and eccentric, and literature scholars have spent decades debating exactly what he meant by it. But we get a clue a few sentences later, when Tolkien writes that "The most improper job of any man, even saints (who at any rate were at least unwilling to take it on), is bossing other men. Not one in a million is fit for it, and least of all those who seek the opportunity." I take that to mean that Tolkien liked the idea of "unconstitutional monarchy" in theory, if a purely benevolent king like his fictional Aragorn could be found, but he didn't trust any actually existing leader to fill the role, and so opted for anarchy and the "abolition of control" as a lesser evil. (Other readers will, doubtless, disagree.) At any rate, the bit about "those who seek the opportunity" to wield power being the least fit of all is another clear rebuke to people like Thiel and Vance, whose entire lives seem devoted to becoming more wealthy and powerful. In fact, we could call that the moral core of Tolkien's entire mythos.

It's especially ironic, when you know the ins and outs of Middle-Earth, that Peter Thiel chose to name his surveillance company "Palantir." In *The Lord of the Rings*, a Palantir is not a good thing to have. Actually, almost everyone who lays a hand on one is cursed and driven to their destruction by the experience.

First there's the wizard Saruman, who was once a wise ally of the elves and his fellow wizard Gandalf but eventually becomes corrupted and raises his own army of orcs, becoming a kind of mini-Sauron. (Saruman? Sauron-man? Get it?) The turning point in his moral downfall is when he arrogantly decides to start using a Palantir, only to find that A) he quite likes having the power to spy on anyone he wants, and desires *more* power, and B) he's now in direct contact with the mind of Sauron, who has a Palantir of his own and persuades him to make an alliance with Mordor.



Christopher Lee as Saruman in "The Fellowship of the Ring"

THEN THERE'S DENETHOR, THE HUMAN RULER OF THE kingdom of Gondor. Like Saruman, he gets his hands on a Palantir and decides to start dabbling in mass surveillance. But his fate is a little different: he's so terrified by visions of Mordor and its armies that he becomes a pathetic, cowardly figure, refusing to join in the fight against Sauron, before eventually going completely insane and burning himself to death on a pyre. Finally, there's the hobbit Pippin, who gets hold of Saruman's Palantir after his death and is *almost* driven insane by it before Gandalf rescues him. In all three cases, the Palantir is a straightforwardly evil artifact—and yet, Peter Thiel apparently read all this and thought it would be cool to own one. Comedy writer Alex Blechman's joke about the scientists who successfully create "the Torment Nexus from classic sci-fi novel *Don't Create The Torment Nexus*" applies.

This type of tragedy, in which someone's desire for power or wealth leads directly to their downfall, is one of the strongest recurring themes in Tolkien. It happens at the climax of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, when Boromir (Denethor's son and a member of the titular group) decides that he can steal the One Ring and use its magic to restore Gondor to its former glory. Instead, he ends up becoming paranoid, turning against his friends, running off into the woods, and getting killed by a lurking orc. Or there's the heroic dwarf Thorin Oakenshield in *The Hobbit*, who leads a successful dragon-slaying raid on the mountain of Erebor, but becomes obsessed with the gold he finds there: "Long hours in the past days Thorin had spent in the treasury, and the lust of it was heavy on him," Tolkien writes. So great is his pride and

greed that he refuses to release any of the treasure to the people of the surrounding countries, who the dragon Smaug had been raiding and pillaging for years:

"You put your worst cause last and in the chief place," Thorin answered. "To the treasure of my people no man has a claim, because Smaug who stole it from us also robbed him of life or home. The treasure was not his that his evil deeds should be amended with a share of it."

Inevitably, this leads to war, and Thorin dies. His last words are to the hobbit Bilbo Baggins, and as befits a book originally written for children, they just directly spell out the Moral of the Story: "if more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world." This couldn't be clearer. And yet, once again, Thiel and Co. have missed the memo. They're going around hoarding wealth in their slush funds and Roth IRAs and sitting on them like dragons. Maybe their next company will be called "Smaug Capital."



Richard Armitage as Thorin in "The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies"

CLEARLY, THIEL AND VANCE DON'T UNDERSTAND THE first thing about Tolkien. They've taken an author who—although capable of racism and a little too fond of kings—was inherently suspicious of wealth, power, and those who seek them, and they've turned his words and symbols into celebrations of those very things. "Palantir Technologies" is a bad joke, except it's real. But this shouldn't be surprising, because these kinds of right-wing tech and finance people have a notoriously hard time understanding art or really anything that isn't a profit-maximizing algorithm. After all, understanding art and literature requires a certain amount of empathy, and they don't really believe in that. In a similar case, the U.K.'s right-wing *Sun* tabloid was appalled to find, in 2018, that "snowflake" students sympathize with the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and believe he's "misunderstood"—which is, in fact, the point of the book. Today, a similar fate has befallen Tolkien, whose works are being distorted and abused by some of the worst people alive. It's a pity, because he has a lot of good advice to offer them, if they'd only put aside their ego and avarice long enough to listen. ✚

Elon's DOGE CIRCUS

OH BOY!
IT'S TIME TO
MAKE AMERICA
GREAT AGAIN!

AN EVAN
ALLGOOD
& J. LONGO
COLLABO

ART BY:
J. LONGO

LEAVES EVERY CHILD BEHIND

I WILL SIRE MORE!

DEPT. OF EDUCATION

FIRE FIRE FIRE FIRE FIRE FIRE

MILLIONS
IN AID
WASTED

AID AID

FIRES NUCLEAR
SAFETY EXPERTS

OOPSIES!

SOCIAL SECURITY

47

47

BETA TESTS SOCIAL SECURITY
AND V.A. CUTS ON SENIORS

CANCELS CONTRACTS THAT
INCLUDE "D.E.I. KEYWORDS"

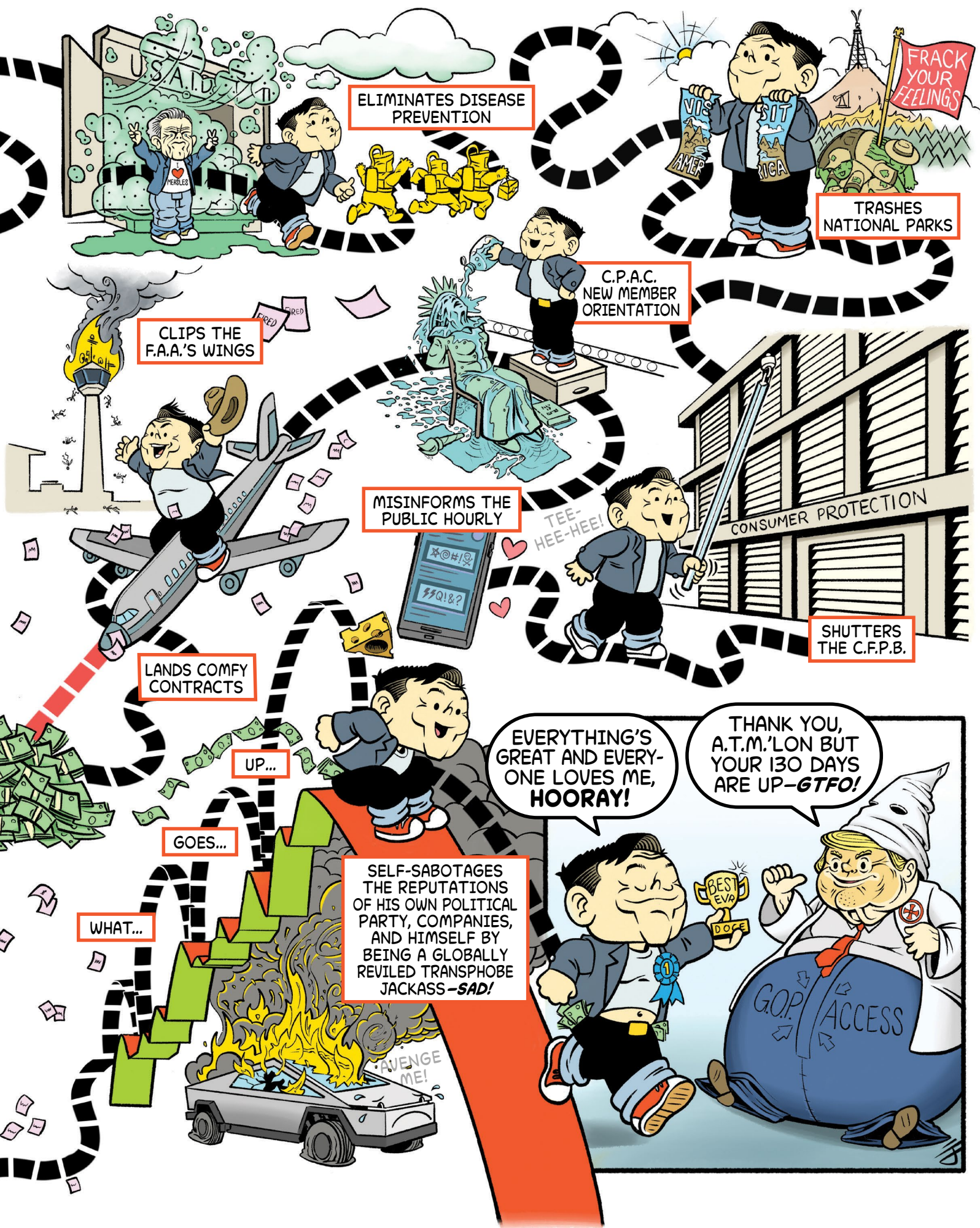
COMEDY
IS NOW
LEGAL!

OPENLY
COURTS
NAZI
SUPPORT

ALLOWS
BIG BALLS
TO RANSACK
THE I.R.S.

I.R.S.

CUTS OFF
CANCER
RESEARCH



SEEING CIMINO

BY CIARA MOLONEY



NOBODY REALLY KNOWS ANYTHING ABOUT Michael Cimino. All we have are contradictions and fleeting glimpses. As a director, Cimino is an integral part of the story of “New Hollywood” in the 1970s. But as the former director of TV commercials for Maxwell House, Cimino has always stood apart from film school “movie brats” like Steven Spielberg, Martin Scorsese, and Francis Ford Coppola. Cimino’s second movie, *The Deer Hunter*, won the Oscar for Best Picture in 1979. Cimino’s follow-up, *Heaven’s Gate*, is the most infamous critical and commercial flop in cinema history. There are accounts from half a dozen people who believed they were Cimino’s only real friend, each unknowingly siloed into a separate part of Cimino’s life. Cimino’s own account is inherently suspect, as Cimino was a known and inveterate liar. The Long Islander grew up middle-class but claimed to be basically a Vanderbilt and deliberately mispronounced their own name, going from Cimino with a soft c (*Sim-ee-no*) to *Chi-meen-o* right after leaving home. Cimino was “always knocking five or six years off, even when he was barely thirty,” George Parker, an adman who knew an early-career Cimino, said. “He also claimed he was just shy of six foot, when it was obvious he wore massively built-up shoes and was probably about five foot four.”

Charles Elton’s biography *Cimino: The Deer Hunter, Heaven’s Gate, and the Price of a Vision* is both the definitive version of Cimino’s life and a version that recognizes—is thematically about—its own incompleteness and contradictions. It has a ghostly quality. Even when Elton can parse out the truth, something always remains unknowable. The motivations for Cimino’s lies, for one. Parts of the intensely private two-time Oscar winner’s life remain a black box. Late in the process of writing the book, Elton encounters Valerie Driscoll, a woman who runs a wig shop. Cimino was a client who became a close friend. Driscoll claims that Cimino was a trans woman named Nikki—although she doesn’t put it exactly that way. “I don’t know at what point he decided he was done with being a guy,” she tells Elton. “I just don’t know. Michael became Nikki.” She remembers “Nikki driving away one night in the Mercedes sports car and waving through the window” and thinking “she was the most beautiful woman I ever saw.” This apparently confirms a rumor Cimino denied when alive. Struggling to come to terms with their gender identity seems like a potential organizing principle for the lies, clarifying that Cimino had a need to build a Michael Cimino-with-a-hard-c from the ground up, a macho persona to wear as armor. But really, it’s just another fleeting glimpse, creating more uncertainties than it resolves. We don’t know Cimino’s gender, just like we don’t know their date of birth.

In the gaps, a myth was created: Cimino as the folk devil of American cinema. After the success of *The Deer Hunter*—a Vietnam War movie that’s either a white supremacist fantasy or one of the greatest films ever made, depending on who you ask—they went mad with power on *Heaven’s Gate*. That movie went so massively over budget that it sunk United Artists—the studio that Charlie Chaplin, D.W. Griffith, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks founded in 1919—and killed New Hollywood stone dead. After a decade and change of often young directors being given creative control of their films, the corporate suits decided there wasn’t a business case for artistic freedom. In a later interview, Martin Scorsese described it as a “coup d’état” by the executives in the filmmaking business.

Usually, when an artist fights a corporate overlord, the story makes the artist the hero. But Cimino became a cautionary tale. (In the 1990s, the troubled production of the Kevin Costner film *Waterworld* earned the moniker “Kevin’s Gate” in sardonic tribute.) Even as the world has started to come around on Cimino, that narrative has lingered. The re-evaluation of Cimino has gotten far enough that Greta Gerwig could cite *Heaven’s Gate* as a key influence on her adaptation of *Little Women*, but it still “made everyone a bit nervous” that she kept referencing it.

But when the encrusted layers of decades of misinformation and antagonism are scraped away, we’re still left with the work. Looked at up close, one at a time, Cimino’s films are mesmerizingly beautiful and frequently astonishing. There was nobody quite like Cimino. Money men ended the career of one of the great American artists, and they got away with it, too.

Thunderbolt and Lightfoot, Cimino’s 1974 feature directorial debut, came after Cimino broke into Hollywood as a screenwriter with *Silent Running* and the *Dirty Harry* sequel *Magnum Force*. Compared to the three- and four-hour epics that would make Cimino famous, it’s a lean and efficient genre exercise: a comic crime caper on the road, clocking in at under two hours. That would make it easy to dismiss as a tentative, unambitious start, its creator gearing up for masterpieces to come—or worse, a cynical effort to break into directing by reverse-engineering a hit, a rote star vehicle for Clint Eastwood. (As Elton tells it, Cimino was deferential to Eastwood to a degree never to be replicated.) But when you sit down and watch *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*, it’s something else entirely. I admittedly love 1970s Clint Eastwood star vehicles, but *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* isn’t just an especially well-made or interesting example of the form. It’s transcendent.

Eastwood plays a bank robber, nicknamed the Thunderbolt in the press, opposite Jeff Bridges as Lightfoot, a freewheeling drifter and small-time

thief. Thunderbolt—dressed in preacher’s garb after hiding out as a clergyman—is fleeing an assassin when Lightfoot, flooring it in a stolen car, runs the assassin over. Thunderbolt grabs onto Lightfoot’s car by the open window and climbs in. It is one of the great meet-cutes of cinema history. They go on the run together, hopping from stolen car to stolen car. Members of Thunderbolt’s old gang chase after them, mistakenly believing they were double-crossed and that Thunderbolt stole their share of their last heist. The four men eventually come to an uneasy peace, agreeing to redo the same bank job again—with Lightfoot making up for the man he hit with his car. But, in signature Cimino style, the film has a leisurely pace and is full of apparently aimless lingering—on the wheat fields of Montana, on Eastwood’s rugged face—that adds up to something more. It has less fat on it than Cimino’s later epics, but it maintains a cultivated disinterest in the story that you might bill as the “premise.” Most heist movies are built around the major set pieces of the heist itself. More *Midnight Cowboy* than *Ocean’s Eleven*, *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* is about something much more commonplace and much more extraordinary: two people and the special connection between them.



Jeff Bridges and Clint Eastwood in “*Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*”

As Lightfoot, Bridges is sprightly, shaggy-haired, and sun-shine-bright. His boyish good looks and smart mouth make the perfect foil for the still, steady but magnetic toughness of Eastwood. The chemistry between them is undeniable. *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*’s “homoeroticism is so manifest as to barely be subtext,” Christina Newland argues for Criterion. And “although Jeff Bridges’s dreamy, irresponsible Lightfoot is forever chasing skirts, it’s pretty evident that he has a lovesick, puppyish infatuation” with Thunderbolt. “Bridges plucks at Eastwood’s shirt flirtatiously, nuzzles close to him, craves a physical affection that Eastwood brushes off throughout”—but though it’s true that Eastwood’s Thunderbolt is not as physically affectionate, it’s clear that he adores Lightfoot right back. There’s never a crack in his tough guy façade, but his love is so strong that it emanates out of him, no cracks necessary. One of the first things he says to Lightfoot is that his eyes are blue: it’s not a compliment in the strictest sense—just an observation—but in Eastwood’s gruff manner, it feels like one. If his warmth and protectiveness could seem big brotherly, the changes he makes to the heist plan to accommodate swapping in Lightfoot for their tech guy do not. Last time around, the tech guy monitored the frequencies of the alarm system. This time, in what Phipps nails as “a scheme seemingly borrowed from the Bugs Bunny playbook,” Thunderbolt gets Lightfoot to dress in drag to distract a security guard. The getaway plan involves Lightfoot staying in drag to pose as Thun-

derbolt’s date—he’s held in his big strong arms while they watch the show at a drive-in movie theatre. They’re posing as a couple on a date, but this is a case where, to paraphrase Kurt Vonnegut, you are what you pretend to be. Nobody really knows anything about Michael Cimino, but *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* feels like one from the heart.

Impressed by *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* and Cimino’s commercials, EMI Films producer Michael Deeley approached Cimino about *The Man Who Came to Play*, a script written by Louis A. Garfinkle and Quinn K. Redeker that EMI had bought the rights to. It was about playing Russian roulette in Las Vegas, with Elton calling it a “larky buddy movie” in the vein of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Cimino said yes—and turned it into *The Deer Hunter*. It was, to say the least, not a larky buddy movie about playing Russian roulette in Vegas.

THE *DEER HUNTER* IS TYPICALLY DESCRIBED AS A FILM ABOUT the Vietnam War. True enough, but that’s a little like saying *Kramer vs. Kramer* is a film about working in advertising. Macho, stoic Mike (Robert De Niro), sweet, delicate Nick (Christopher Walken), and their friend Steven (John Savage) are steelworkers in a working-class, primarily Russian Orthodox town in Pennsylvania. The film opens on the day of Steven’s wedding, shortly before the three men are due to ship out to Vietnam. In the script, the wedding scene is ten pages—about ten or 15 minutes of screentime. In the final film, this opening swells to the length of a feature presentation. It’s not that a lot of new material is added; it just stretches. “68 minutes might sound like a ludicrously excessive amount of screen time for a prologue,” Sean Burns writes at *Crooked Marquee*. “[Y]et we need to dwell on the day to day details. We need to be able to feel the fabric of these lives before it’s so cruelly ripped away.”

The Deer Hunter is typically described as an epic. Also true enough, but it misses how small and intimate the film feels. An epic film can span decades, centuries even, or plot the rise and fall of whole civilizations. Not *The Deer Hunter*. The plot is made so subservient to the film’s other elements that you forget to expect one to develop. Instead, you have to submit to the wedding sequence’s slow, hypnotic rhythm, train yourself to see all that happens when nothing much is happening. The Robert Altman-esque sound design has a naturalistic array of overlapping conversations, music, and incidental sounds, making everything seem so much more real without ever devolving into an unintelligible din. We’re just hanging out with the fellas. Mike, Nick, and Steven, as well as their friends Stan (John Cazale, in his final role), Axel (Chuck Aspegren, a non-professional actor who was foreman of a steel mill that Cimino and De Niro visited during pre-production), and Nick’s girlfriend Linda (Meryl Streep): we see these friends drinking, dancing, giddy, and aimless and so much younger than they will ever be again.

The Vietnam scenes are, by contrast, less than 40 minutes of the film’s 184. As the gang arrive back at the bar, happy and drunk and singing, spraying beers on each other, one of them starts playing Chopin on the piano. Their rambunctiousness, their exuberance, their youth drains out of them. The camera is still trained on their faces when we hear the helicopters. Smash cut to Vietnam.

The scenes in Pennsylvania are slow and deliberate, full of long, wide shots of crowds. The scenes in Vietnam are loud and fast and full of close-ups. Once you’re accommodated to the pace

of the first hour or so, the Vietnam scenes feel hallucinatory. It is here that we get to the film's most famous sequence: Mike, Nick, and Steven are captured and put in a POW camp, where the guards force them to play Russian roulette for their entertainment. Many have pointed out the illogic of this, but for me, a strictly rationalist interpretation of this part of the film misses the point. It operates in the key of a fevered nightmare, distilling war to its essence—violence inflicted arbitrarily, disfiguring both body and mind. In a more elegant manner than *Apocalypse Now Redux* manages with its added scenes, *The Deer Hunter* connects this violence back to colonization by having a French man run a Russian roulette ring with Vietnamese competitors in Saigon.

The Deer Hunter was controversial on release and remains so to this day. To its naysayers, the film's portrayal of the Vietnam War is a disgusting act of historical revisionism akin to genocide denial. In reality, the U.S., having committed untold war crimes, was the aggressor in Vietnam, and in *The Deer Hunter*, American soldiers are the victims. In the *Chicago Reader*, Jonathan Rosenbaum called it a "disgusting account of what the evil Vietnamese did to poor, innocent Americans." The controversy was buoyed by revelation of Cimino's own lies: the director claimed to have joined up after the Tet offensive and served in a Green Beret unit, but the actual extent of their military service was enlisting in the army reserve while at Yale before the war even began. It is an easy jump in logic to go from Cimino being a liar to *The Deer Hunter* being a lie—if you don't take the time to wonder what it could even mean to call a fictional work of art a "lie."

The Deer Hunter is not a good source of education on the Vietnam War. But it's not like it sets out to be one and fails. It's easy to place the film within a grand official narrative of the Vietnam War as some kind of noble mistake, but looked at up close, *The Deer Hunter* is full of beautiful things outside of any grand narrative. For one, I've never seen Russian-American culture represented with such vibrancy.

The main characters' identities as Russian Americans have been curiously overlooked by most commentators. But Vietnam was in many ways a proxy war between Cold War superpowers, and *The Deer Hunter* plants its roots in a form of national and cultural identity that defies that dichotomy. Because the character Mike and the director Michael share a name, critics, including Pauline Kael, saw the De Niro character as Cimino's idealized self-insert. (Knowing that Cimino used the female name Nikki, Christopher Walken's Nick—with his fragile soul and fine-boned, angelic look—prompts a similar idea.) But Cimino was Italian American: the Russian Orthodox milieu is not a reflection of self. It's a way to look at how American identity is formed in immigrant communities. While the characters earnestly believe in America—as a nation, as an ideal—the film gives the audience the time and space to see further. The whole film is nothing but time, and space, and seeing. We look and look and look until we are saturated with the sensory experience of a few small lives. Nobody really knows anything about Michael Cimino, but *The Deer Hunter* is not the product of meat-headed American chauvinism that its haters wish it was.

The Deer Hunter was controversial, but it was also a critical and commercial success. Cimino won Best Director and Best Picture at the Academy Awards. The next day, they flew to Montana to begin filming *Heaven's Gate*.

LOOSELY BASED ON THE JOHNSON COUNTY WAR OF 1889 TO 1893, *Heaven's Gate* takes one of the classic narratives of the Western—wealthy cattle barons versus small homesteaders—and paints it on the biggest canvas imaginable. As *New Yorker* film critic Richard Brody puts it, "Cimino made a film that's both conventional and boldly original—a Western that entirely fits the norms and expectations of the genre while taking a radical approach to image-making and storytelling." Running close to four hours, the central plot concerns the wealthy ranchers of Wyoming drawing up a list of 125 recent settlers and hiring mercenaries to kill them. Those on the death list are supposedly "thieves and anarchists," but their real crime is being poor, and for the most part, being recent immigrants from Europe. I think a lot of modern audiences, raised since the Western's precipitous decline in popularity, have a preconceived idea of the genre as inherently right-wing, sexist, and racist, but as Edward Buscombe writes in his brilliant book on John Ford's *Stagecoach*, "it is at least as plausible to see Westerns as fundamentally anti-establishment, against the rich and powerful and in favor of the poor and weak. Besides the triumphalism of conquest and empire-building, there is another tradition in the Western... [that] teems with corrupt sheriffs, arrogant and tyrannical landowners, grasping and cheating bankers, sadistic and blinkered martinets." *Heaven's Gate*, emphatically part of this tradition, uses the Western as a framework to depict quite literal class warfare.

It's a devastating film to watch at any time, but it's particularly harrowing to watch during Donald Trump's second term. The criminalization of immigrants in the pursuit of ever greater self-enrichment of the few acquires a new urgency when state agencies are kidnapping immigrants and deporting them to concentration camps. Two of the film's most indelible scenes capture the breadth of the immigrant experience, both taking place in the titular "Heaven's Gate," which is, of all things, a roller-skating rink. In one scene, the community plays music and dances and skates at a proto-roller disco that is easily mocked as anachronistic but is actually one of the most historically accurate things in the movie. (Roller skating was really big in the 1880s!) When the young fiddle player (David Mansfield) descends from the stage to skate around (while playing uninterrupted), it is majestic. It feels like what cinema was made to capture. I can't imagine how much you would need to harden your heart not to crack a smile. The whole sequence is an ecstatic celebration of immigrant cultures that is unmistakably American—an assertion that "immigrant cultures" and "American" not only aren't mutually exclusive but are different words for the same thing. Later, in this same hall, the community will hear the death list read aloud. They will beg Kris Kristofferson to stop reading, to continue reading—to escape this knowledge like that will protect them, to seize this knowledge like that will protect them. Either way, it ends in intense, heart-wrenching slaughter.

Kristofferson plays Jim Averill, a Harvard graduate who arrives in Johnson County, Wyoming, to serve as marshal. "Every new citizen who takes up land here, the big fellas black ball 'em," an Irish immigrant tells him when he arrives. "Citizen steals to keep his family from starving, and they thread them off or kill 'em." Averill's sympathy is all with the homesteaders, not

least because his lover, sex worker Ellie (Isabelle Huppert), is on the death list. Men that he went to university with are on the other side—not getting their own hands dirty, but dictating from behind closed doors. Averill tries to enlist the help of the army, but the big ranchers have the backing of no less than the U.S. president. If *The Deer Hunter* is a small story that swells with its rapt attention to details, *Heaven's Gate* manages to tell a story about dozens or hundreds of people with that same keen and lingering eye. “I wanted you to feel what it was like to walk down a street in that period: to follow those noisy wagons, to cross all that activity, what you felt, what you heard,” Cimino told *Cahiers du Cinéma*. “People made so much dust. [W]hen hundreds of wagons go around, they raise dust. And very often, we took the time to record the background sound. In the store, for example, we recorded numerous conversations, with the intention of inserting them into the soundtrack later.” Even more so than *The Deer Hunter*, it's a film that creates a wall of sound, both atmospheric and intelligible: “This isn't general background noise; you hear people, in a corner, argue over the price of a knife...” Cimino places actors with significant roles in the background of shots where you would typically only use extras, creating the sense of the whole town being lived in and interconnected. Characters come to the fore and fade away but do not disappear. The American West is sometimes imagined as a vast, empty place, but in *Heaven's Gate*, it is full and overflowing. As Brody notes, “There is something almost pointillistic [or] proto-digital about the enormous amount of specific and distinctive visual information in Cimino's over-packed compositions.” Every frame is, as they say, a painting.

It's a masterpiece. And it's hard to oversell how harshly it was received. Roger Ebert called it one of the ugliest films he'd ever seen, as well as “the most scandalous [of] cinematic waste.” Before it was screened, it had already become infamous for going so far over time and over budget. Cimino was asked on NBC if it was “obscene” to spend \$35 million on a movie when that much money could make such a difference to poor American families. (That's about \$132 million adjusted for inflation, or less than half of what Disney's soulless live-action remake of *Snow White* cost.) Everyone seemed to delight in seeing Cimino fall. “The reviews [...] belong less to the history of cinema than to the sociology of the mob,” Brody writes. “Egged on by reports of the movie's inflated budget and protracted shooting schedule that resulted in part from Cimino's extremely meticulous approach to design and direction, critics closed their eyes, minds, and hearts and instead reviewed the gossip.” Its failure was blamed for bankrupting United Artists. But UA didn't actually go bankrupt; rather, it was sold to a conglomerate for a hefty sum. Still, the reviews saw the film through the lens of its inflated budget. Its failure to make the money back was proof the negative reviews were right. For decades it could be called the worst film ever made, a claim that went virtually uncontested. Nobody really knows anything about Michael Cimino, but *Heaven's Gate* is the work of a true artist.

Cimino would never make another film of that cost and scale again, although—unlike Elaine May after *Ishtar*—they did make other movies. The best of these is 1985's *The Year of the Dragon*, which by rights would have been the film that rescued their career. If you hated *Heaven's Gate*, then *Year of the Dragon* should

seem like redemption. It's a taut crime thriller that feels like the missing link between Jean-Pierre Melville and John Woo. It has the beauty of Cimino's best work—the backlighting in the final shootout is gorgeous—but without their supposed indulgence. But it, too, was a failure, solidifying Cimino's downward trajectory. Mickey Rourke plays a New York police captain and Vietnam veteran who takes on the Triad, the Chinese mafia. Unable to shoot the film in Chinatown, Cimino built an extremely detailed set instead. Cimino and production designer Wolf Kroeger “took plaster casts of the actual pavements so their set would have the right chipped curbs,” Elton writes, quoting Cimino, “People think cities are all horizontals and verticals. Lampposts and signs are often at an angle. Most studio builds are pool table flat. New York is a rocky little island.”

Elton describes Rourke as “too young for the role” and having “a curious time-warp quality” in his film noirish trilby hat. But Rourke being unstuck in time is part of what the film's about. In one of cinema's most fascinating riffs on the archetypal unrelenting cop who goes too far and thumbs his nose at the system, the police captain's war on the Triad is a misguided attempt, born of a toxic mix of unresolved trauma and anti-Asian racism, to relitigate Vietnam, to *win* this time. Asian-American organizations protested the film prior to its release, pointing to its use of racial slurs and the potential harm it could do to Chinatown's economy. As with gay activists protesting *Cruising* a few years earlier, I think this is an understandable wariness that veers into unwarranted hostility.

Whether it slips into racism or not, *Year of the Dragon* clearly sets out to be an anti-racist film—didactically so, if anything. Rourke's character is paired with a rookie Chinese-American cop played by Dennis Dun, and he makes clear the systemic nature of anti-Asian racism in American society. Sometimes it feels like Cimino was trying to include every fact they found out when researching Chinese people's experience in the U.S. In *Year of the Dragon*, Cimino goes to great lengths to remind the audience that the West is littered with the bones of anonymous Chinese men who built the railroads, and they were still excluded from citizenship until 1943. “I know the story, Captain. Most people don't. Because no one remembers in this country,” the rookie cop says. “No one remembers anything.”

Cimino's final directorial efforts—*The Desperate Hours* and *The Sunchaser*—have their moments, but they're largely anonymous work-for-hire stuff. We know Cimino never stopped writing screenplays. We know Cimino never stopped trying to get an adaptation of *The Fountainhead* off the ground. We know that Cimino largely disappeared from public life. We know that Cimino became virtually unrecognizable after extensive plastic surgery. We know that Cimino lived to see people start to recognize *Heaven's Gate* as one of the greatest films of all time. We know that it was too little, too late: Cimino had been a much easier figure of blame than the corporate consolidation that did more to change Hollywood filmmaking than one little Western ever could. We know that, despite it all, Cimino gifted us a handful of the most extraordinary works of art in the history of the movie business.

But then again, nobody really knows anything about Michael Cimino. ✚

THIS WEEK ON THE **MEIDAS**TOUCHNETWORK



TRUMP Goes NUTS and Does MOST INSANE THING EVER

8 million views • 52 seconds ago



Is This The END For TRUMP????? PROBABLY YES!

20 million views • 2 minutes ago



Trump BURNS ALIVE After EPIC FAIL at the UNITED NATIONS

1 million views • 4 minutes ago



You'll Never GUESS What STUPID THING He SAID...

7 million views • 8 minutes ago



His WORST INTERVIEW YET Goes HORRIBLY WRONG With FAUX PAS!

4 million views • 24 minutes ago



TRADE POLICY SPEECH Goes AWRY After He LOSES TRAIN OF THOUGHT

13 million views • 1 hour ago



The GRIFT IS UP After Trump Memecoin Loses 5 Percent In 1 HOUR

3 million views • 5 hours ago



DONALD TRUMP Is So OVER After Saying LUDICROUS Thing!!!

40 million views • 6 hours ago



Even FOX Thinks Trump Is WRONG About This THING...

1 million views • 9 hours ago



Could TRUMP Possibly Be More FOOLISH? We THINK NOT!

4 million views • 13 hours ago



His CROWD SIZES Are TINY Like His GENITALS Probably Are!!!!!!

60 million views • 18 hours ago



Trump LOSES KEYS to the WHITE HOUSE Like a COMPLETE DUMBASS!

2 million views • 1 day ago

YOUR SOURCE FOR INTELLIGENT CONTENT



IT'S STILL DEFUND AND ABOLISH

BY LILY SÁNCHEZ

Washington, DC, USA - June 12, 2020: Protesters march down Pennsylvania Avenue in support of funding for communities instead of police

TRUE CRIME IS A VERY POPULAR GENRE THESE DAYS. There are true crime podcasts, documentaries, TV shows, and films. You can combine your interest in crime and cooking with books like “The Serial Killer Cookbook” and “Recipes for Murder.” You can listen to “crime junkie radio” on satellite and BBC radio true crime. You can also follow true crime influencers on TikTok. Americans are awash in this content. A 2024 YouGov poll found that over half of Americans say they consume it. The most popular true crime subject? Murder.

The most scandalous true crime story out there, however, is something you won’t find on streaming queues or bestseller lists. There’s a serial killer on the loose in the United States that has been allowed to kill with impunity... for *centuries*. This killer has taken the lives of over a thousand people each year in recent years. So far this year, 361 Americans have been killed at their hands. Who are some of the killer’s latest victims? Victor Perez, a 17-year-old boy with autism and cerebral palsy, shot nine times in Pocatello, Idaho. James Andrew Evans, a 57-year-old man who was shot in James City County, Virginia. Cole L.M. Turner, a 15-year-old boy who was shot multiple times in Bloomington, Illinois. And Robin Rae Budelli, a 41-year-old woman shot on a highway in Tucson, Arizona.

Last year, the victim count was 1,367. The year before that, 1,358. And before that, 1,269. In 2021, it was 1,189. As you can see, the killer is becoming more prolific with each passing year.

This problem seems to be specific to the United States. Year after year, some of the most marginalized people are disproportionately targeted and killed (and survivors injured or traumatized) by this killer: Black men, Asian American and Pacific Islanders, Native American people, disabled people, poor people, homeless people, people who use drugs, people with mental illness, LGBTQ people, and sex workers. The situation has gotten so bad that groups that typically work in the areas of genocide or human rights—such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the United Nations—and otherwise conservative medical groups like the American Medical Association (which doesn’t want you to have single-payer healthcare) are in agreement that these killings are a serious problem. Other professional societies and journals have declared the killings a public health issue. We only have tallies of the murders because nonprofit groups, newspapers, and other independent groups do the work of recording what the government has failed to accurately count.

How is this killer getting away with such bloodshed? Well, they happen to come from money. They have plenty of tools and weapons to carry out their violence. They get a special legal waiver from responsibility when they kill. They have a robust public relations team to get the media and politicians on their side and other advocates fighting on their behalf. The killer is also a star on the nightly local news, where they are shown acting in the name of public safety. This explains why the killer shows up at traffic stops and is

even sometimes invited to sporting events, community demonstrations, and celebrations. The killer has also been invited into public schools to discipline children, especially those that are Black and Latino. (In the 1980s and 1990s, the killer taught a widely popular anti-drug abuse curriculum to school children, one aim of which was to help school children become more comfortable with them as an authority figure.) Easily recognized in neighborhoods across the country, they go around, perversely, with some version of “to serve and protect” or “courtesy, professionalism, respect” or “America’s finest” written on their vehicles.

Who is this serial killer? The police, of course.

POLICING AS CLASS WARFARE

Police are the entry point into our criminal punishment bureaucracy, which includes courts, prosecutors and judges, prisons and jails, and the vast network of companies and industries that profit off this system (sometimes also referred to as the prison industrial complex). While police are responsible for one-third of homicides when the victim and perpetrator are strangers, killing people is just one of the many ways they harm society. On a good day, if you’re being targeted by the cops and you’re not getting killed, it might be a blessing. Chances are, though, you’re still going to end up cursed. But police do not arrest, imprison, and kill people equally. So-called “white collar” criminals, who are often wealthy and well-connected and largely commit financial crimes, receive lenient treatment and are unlikely to be physically harmed by police in the way someone accused of, say, shoplifting may be. Instead, as civil rights attorney Alec Karakatsanis explains in his new book *Copaganda*, routine policing inflicts “daily violence” onto mostly poor people. He writes,

[S]tandard lawful policing [...] subjects poor people to mass surveillance and harassment, takes billions of dollars in personal property through civil forfeiture, traps people in abusive jails, coerces plea deals, imposes harsh sentences with no connection to empirical evidence, separates individuals from friends and family, leaves pets to starve alone, and marks tens of millions with a criminal record that closes off opportunities for employment, health care, and housing.

With the punishment system focusing mostly on poor people, it’s easy to see that policing is essentially a legalized form of class warfare. As Karakatsanis explains, police should be thought of as agents of inequality preservation.

POLICE DON'T CARE ABOUT YOUR SAFETY

While the police focus mostly on the crimes of the poor, there are important things that they *don’t* care about: things like wage theft (when an employer fails to follow the law in paying you); tax evasion; corporate violations of environmental policies; for-profit healthcare that kills thousands every year because they can’t afford to purchase care; public school inequities; soaring rents; and so on. In other words, the cops don’t care about the real threats to your life and well-being: systemic issues that affect most people. Or if they do care about an issue, they’re on the wrong side of it (e.g., when they carry out court-ordered evictions or conduct violent “sweeps” against the homeless).

Take the case of George Floyd, whose murder (a rare example of a cop being charged with a crime and convicted) sparked the 2020 global uprisings against police brutality and one of the largest protest movements in U.S. history. Originally from North Carolina, Floyd was a poor African American man living in Minneapolis. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, he ran afoul of the authorities, mostly for “nonviolent drug offenses.” He became a felon after an \$18 drug deal sent him to jail for six months. Unable to find “legitimate work,” he also struggled to deal with court debt from his time in jail. Then he pleaded guilty (as part of a plea deal) to armed robbery in 2007, which sent him back to prison for five years. By the time the pandemic struck, he had developed an opioid problem and was unemployed. On May 25, 2020, he visited a convenience store in Minneapolis. He appeared to be “high” and allegedly paid for a pack of cigarettes with a counterfeit bill. The store clerk, Christopher Martin, testified in court that he “immediately” knew the \$20 bill was fake but carried out the transaction anyway. But then Martin decided to tell his manager, who advised him to have Floyd return to the store to settle the issue. Martin thought Floyd didn’t know the bill was fake and thought he’d be “doing him a favor” if they just let the issue go, but the manager told Martin to bring Floyd back inside to settle the issue. Floyd, who was sitting in an SUV outside the store, refused twice, at which point the police were called by another staff member. They arrived, and one officer killed Floyd by asphyxiation in a matter of minutes while the others did not intervene to stop him. The event was recorded for the world to see by a 17-year-old girl named Darnella Frazier, who described seeing the murder as a “traumatic, life-changing experience.”

Think about it this way: for the alleged act of using counterfeit money, George Floyd was subject to a cop’s unilateral assumption of the role of judge, jury, and executioner. Is this reasonable? First, we should ask if Floyd’s payment had actually been a fake. During the trial of Derek Chauvin, the officer who killed Floyd, the issue didn’t come up much, so we may never know for sure. If we assume Floyd’s guilt for the sake of argument, we can then ask: did the murder of Floyd in any way repay the convenience store owner for any harm he experienced from the counterfeit payment? Could there possibly be another way to rectify the harm done to the business owner? These are questions the police simply aren’t interested in asking. The police’s actions that day also precluded any non-lethal resolution.

Even the non-lethal methods that police have available at their disposal are very limited. As Nathan J. Robinson has noted, police primarily use “force or the threat of force” to deal with people. Otherwise, they write tickets and/or make arrests. As law professor Rosa Brooks, who spent time embedded in police units to write her book, *Tangled Up in Blue*, said on a *Current Affairs* podcast, “[I]f your only tool is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Police don’t have a whole lot of options at their disposal. [...] [I]f things are bad, you know, they can arrest people and stick them in a cage.” What would arresting Floyd and sticking him in a cage have looked like? Even this non-lethal option provided by the criminal punishment system looks pretty absurd. *USA Today* reported in 2020 that “In Minnesota, the highest penalty for knowingly using counterfeit money less than \$1,000 is up to 1 year in prison and a fine up to \$3,000.” The focus here is all on punishment and none on repairing the harm done to the store owner or in addressing the root causes that may have led Floyd to have used counterfeit money (again, assuming he knew it was counterfeit).

For his part, the store owner, Mahmoud “Mike” Abumayyaleh, did not approve of the killing. While he was not at the store that

day, he recalled that Floyd had in general been a “pleasant” customer who had frequented the store for about a year and speculated that Floyd “may not have even known that the bill was counterfeit.” When NPR’s Adrian Florido interviewed Abumayyaleh just days after the murder, he said that the store typically tried to avoid calling the police for these kinds of issues unless there was “violence” involved; people in the neighborhood confirmed this. “[A]lmost everyone I spoke with in this largely black community said Abumayyaleh and his staff are known for not calling police,” Florido wrote. Abumayyaleh also had strong words to say about the murder, telling NBC news: “The murder and execution was something done by the police and the abuse of power. The police brutality needs to stop. [...] We [are] all outraged.” Both Abumayyaleh and Martin expressed regret that the police were called that day.

So, for a relatively minor act of (alleged) dishonesty against a business, George Floyd was killed by the state. The state could have done other things. It could have provided him a good-paying job, an education, drug treatment, or affordable housing—the things that would have given him stability so that he wouldn’t need to try to pay for some cigarettes with a counterfeit bill. In a very literal sense, the things that would have prevented George Floyd’s murder by the police are the things that everyone wants and needs: good-paying jobs, education, healthcare and drug treatment, and good housing. But that’s not how our society works. As abolitionist and Black Lives Matter Canada co-founder Sandy Hudson puts it in her book *Defund*, “by the time law enforcement is involved, the conditions that are required for us to be safe or secure have already been broken. [...] [L]aw enforcement is not engaged in creating conditions that proactively support a safe society.”

The following idea has been drilled into our heads by the news media and the police themselves: that “police” are here to prevent or solve “crime” in the name of “public safety.” Often, the crimes focused on are those the FBI considers “violent crime,” such as “murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault.” Now, it’s true that these things happen every day to people and cause a lot of harm to individuals and society overall. But what do those things have to do with the police? Not much, it turns out. “[T]he vast majority of sexual assaults, child molestation, and violent incidents are never reported to police at all,” as Karakatsanis writes. And just how good are the police at addressing violent crimes that are reported to them? Not very good at all, it turns out. In the first place, they only spend about 4 percent of their work time on “violent” crime—the things we tend to hear about on the nightly news and in media headlines. And the other key there is *responding*. Mostly, the police arrive after something bad happens, put up some yellow tape, and stand around. So by definition, the police are not actively getting ahead of crime. Secondly, they’re not that good at solving homicides, over half of which go unsolved, a record percentage that hadn’t budged much between 2020 and 2023, according to NPR. How about robbery? Per the FBI, less than one-third of those cases are solved. Aggravated assault? A little over one-half. What’s more, research shows that adding more police does not result in a statistically significant effect on crime. This is all pretty significant: the police aren’t very good at solving crime, nor do they reduce crime. In our minds, we need to completely decouple “police” from “crime reduction.”

We also need to decouple “police” from “safety.” Safety is not merely a negative, or the fact of not being murdered or raped or robbed or assaulted or having something bad happen to you. Safety is a much broader concept that requires the presence of good

things in one’s life as well as the absence of bad ones. As Mariame Kaba and Andrea J. Ritchie explain,

Safety isn’t a commodity that can be manufactured and sold to us by the carceral state or private corporations. Nor is safety a static state of being. Safety is dependent on social relations and operates relative to conditions: We are more or less safe depending on our relationship to others and our access to the resources we need to survive. [...] If you ask anyone on any given day if they feel more or less safe, their answer will depend on a multitude of things. Did they just get paid and so feel less anxious about rent? Did they go outside or did they stay home all day? Did they log on to the internet and find themselves bombarded by [pro-police propaganda] and stories of violent crime, missing white women, and mass shootings? Do they have people to lean on if some calamity befalls them or will they be left alone to navigate and make sense of it?

The concept of safety thus amounts to much more than we’re told. Once we decouple “police” from “crime reduction” and “safety,” we can look at what we know works. As Karakatsanis explains, “the key to reducing interpersonal harm is addressing the underlying causes of interpersonal harm and violence by investing in things like education, housing, health care, human connection, and reducing inequality.” It’s social goods and services and connections that keep people safe.

But the police don’t have anything to do with provision of the goods and services and social networks we all need to be happy, healthy, and safe. So when we think again about George Floyd or the nearly two million people behind bars right now in the U.S. or the thousands that are killed (or others injured or tortured or sexually assaulted or raped) by police every year, it’s hard to see how the police are doing anything good. When they’re not injuring or killing people, they’re ushering them into a “death-making” punishment bureaucracy, and we know that prisons themselves are not rehabilitative. They can be criminogenic, meaning that some people who go to prison are actually *more* likely to commit future crimes, not less.

So what the police are doing, actually, just starts to look like pure evil.

‘DEFUND’ NEVER HAPPENED

The 2020 uprisings were a continuation of the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement, which originated as a hashtag by founder and activist Alicia Garza, who posted on social media in 2013 about the acquittal of the neighborhood vigilante who shot and killed an African American teenager, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, in 2012 in Florida. The killing of yet another Black teenager, 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, also sparked relatively large and sustained BLM uprisings there, and this helped propel the movement nationwide. The next year, in Baltimore, the killing of 25-year-old Freddie Gray sparked uprisings as well. In 2020, the uprisings went global (protests happened in dozens of countries) and brought cross-racial public support to the Black Lives Matter movement. Something else happened: the slogan “defund the police,” which is part of a larger vision of police and prison abolition, made its way into mainstream discussion.

“Defunding” the police means to divert money away from police budgets and instead toward programs that meet human

needs, including “mental health care, non-police emergency response units, housing, education, and other social services.” This approach works twofold: it addresses the needs of people who tend to be targeted by the police for punishment, and it addresses the root causes of crime. Research has shown that Medicaid expansion, early childhood learning programs, and jobs programs for at-risk youth help reduce crime. In this way, “defund,” if it were properly talked about in the mainstream media, would be referred to as an evidence-based public safety program. It’s also intuitive. Ordinary people can sense that tackling social problems is beneficial for public safety in a way that shooting someone who is experiencing a mental health crisis or throwing them into a jail cell because they couldn’t pay a ticket or court fee simply isn’t. In a Loyola Marymount University Police and Community Relations survey of Los Angeles residents, majorities of respondents said in 2020, 2022, and 2023 that they supported or somewhat supported redirecting money from the LAPD budget and into social services. “Defund” can poll well when the question is framed properly.

But you wouldn’t know any of that from the way “defund” is used in public discourse by politicians and political commentators: mostly as a slur or “scary” thing being proposed by Radical Marxists Who Have Let Criminals Take Over Our Cities. Contrary to what Donald Trump, Andrew Cuomo, Fox News, ex-*New York Times* political commentator Bari Weiss, or centrist Democrats would have you believe, “defund” never became a political priority in the aftermath of the Floyd uprisings. As Karakatsanis puts it in his recent book, “There is not political support in either party to significantly change U.S. policing, hold police accountable, or reduce their power.” Although thousands of local officials began demanding cuts to police budgets and more accountability after 2020 and some departments did face budget cuts, he writes that “only a tiny number of police agencies saw small reductions, those rare reductions did not affect operations, and overall spending on police *increased* in 2021.” This is because the punishment bureaucracy tends to expand in times of social crisis.

Police spending also displaced or exceeded other critical public health and social spending at a time of great need. Independent journalist Ella Fassler reported in *Truthout* in 2021—one of the deadliest years of the COVID-19 pandemic—that the country’s ten largest cities “will spend more on police than public health this year.” In Los Angeles, City Controller Kenneth Mejia, who was elected in 2022 on a platform to audit the LAPD and the city’s efforts at addressing homelessness, put up large billboards showing how LA’s massive police budget dwarfed other important social spending.



Photo courtesy of Kenneth Mejia

In 2022, states and local governments started receiving public health money from court settlements with Johnson & Johnson and other drug companies whose actions contributed to the opioid crisis—more than \$26 billion, altogether. Rationally, one would think that money should have gone first and foremost to help people dealing with drug use and addiction. Instead, it found its way into the hands of the cops for things like “new cruisers, overtime pay for narcotics investigators, phone-hacking equipment, body scanners to detect drugs on inmates and restraint devices.” Once again, police were enriched, not defunded.

As for the politicians themselves, Democrats chose not to meet the moment in 2020. They made empty symbolic gestures—draping themselves in African kente cloths and “taking a knee” at the Capitol for racial justice—but took little real action. Their proposed legislation, The George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, which wouldn’t have substantively changed U.S. policing, never became law as it only passed in one chamber. The act also would not have saved George Floyd’s life, as activist and abolitionist Derecka Purnell (and many others) pointed out in March of 2021. For instance, the law would have banned chokeholds, but Floyd was not killed in a chokehold. Purnell elaborated on why that particular provision was terribly inadequate:

Banning chokeholds is important, as we should reduce the number of tactics that the police can employ to be dangerous. However, the problem with policing is precisely that – they can kill people using a diverse number of tactics. Shooting, kneeling, punching, suffocating, Tasing. Congress banned one practice, and not even the one responsible for the homicide.

Meanwhile, President Joe Biden and Vice President (and former prosecutor) Kamala Harris did not embrace “defund” throughout their term in office or run on it as a campaign issue in 2024. Late in 2020, audio of Biden surfaced in which he told a group of civil rights leaders to back off demands for police reform until after a runoff Senate election in Georgia. In 2022, Biden famously said the nation needed to “fund the police” and then proceeded to do so generously. Harris never met a progressive policy she didn’t initially support in the name of political expediency and then drop later on, also for political expediency; “defund the police” was one of them.

Since 2020, then, police have not only *not* been defunded, but budgets have generally continued to increase. New York City, for example, which has the country’s largest police budget, spends a little over \$11 billion on police. Mayor Bill de Blasio publicly announced \$1 billion in cuts to the NYPD in 2020, but local reporters and activists found the math to be “fuzzy,” and the cuts were actually on the order of a few hundred million. (Not nothing, but hardly \$1 billion.) The *New York Times* reported last year that the city council was struggling to find \$53 million to fund arts and cultural groups; meanwhile, the police budget included “\$39.8 million for the purchase of two light twin-engine helicopters.”

Recall that New York City was home to Mayors Rudolph Giuliani and Michael Bloomberg, who championed “broken windows” and “stop and frisk” policing methods, which disproportionately target Black and Latino residents. (The latter was ruled unconstitutional in 2013). In 2021, the city elected a former cop, Eric Adams, to the mayor’s office. Adams has been

on an austerity spree since then, threatening to cut everything from childcare to public libraries and then having to walk back the cuts due to public backlash. Same thing with police—he threatened budget cuts in late 2023 but then walked them back in 2024. Now, he’s brought back the “broken windows” approach to policing in order to address “quality of life” concerns. Broken windows policing, the idea that “disorder” leads to violent crime, has been debunked for decades—but that won’t stop a mayor like Adams from using it, probably in a cynical ploy to get reelected later this year. Come election time, the media and politicians’ favorite bogeyman—“crime”—will reappear, and we’ll be reminded yet again of all the people who are supposedly out to get us: the homeless, those who use drugs, migrants, pro-Palestinian protesters, and on and on. The script never changes.

Another disturbing development in the last few years is the rise of “Cop Cities.” There are over 80 of these multi-million-dollar police training facilities in the works. Activists in Atlanta, Dallas, and the Bay Area have built protest movements against the facilities. The police, of course, have been tasked with suppressing these movements, and some Georgia protesters have been charged with domestic terrorism or racketeering. In 2023, Georgia state troopers killed a peaceful protester named Manuel “Tortuguita” Terán, shooting him over 57 times while he held his hands up in the air. The officers faced no charges.

Modern cop cities are reminiscent of armories built in the late 19th century so that law enforcement would be better prepared to crush labor strikes that popped up. Around that time, in the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, which involved 100,000 workers across the country, the National Guard and state militias killed at least a hundred people. Police are still suppressing the labor movement. At a recent Starbucks sit-in to pressure the company to sign a contract with the union representing thousands of its employees across the country, Chicago police arrested 11 workers and supporters. Just months before that, in Brooklyn, police arrested striking Starbucks baristas.

We find ourselves five years out from the Floyd uprisings, and it’s safe to say that the police have won. Or, at least, they *are* winning. Pro-police propaganda—“copaganda”—is everywhere: the media, endless episodes of fictionalized shows like *Law and Order*, and movies. Not only does this propaganda falsely portray the police as agents of “public safety,” it obscures the abolitionist position and frames the police as the solution to their own violence. Defund, when it’s not being used as a slur by right-wing zealots or centrist Democrats, is otherwise dead. (In the mainstream discourse, at least. There are community organizers and prison abolitionists working hard to build a future without policing as we know it.) In state and national politics, 2024 was a year of wins for the “tough on crime” approach at the state level.

Defund has barely had a few of years in the discourse. Police have had *centuries* to establish and fortify their grip on society. The fight may not be fair. But it certainly isn’t over.

‘AMERICA ON FIRE’

In June 2020, an African American man, 27-year-old Rayshard Brooks, was killed by Atlanta police in the parking lot of a Wendy’s restaurant. He was shot in the back. Atlanta explod-

ed, as people smashed windows, put up graffiti, and blocked highways. As NPR reported, “Brooks’ killing set off a new round of demonstrations against police brutality. Police Chief Erika Shields resigned less than 24 hours after Brooks died. Protesters set fire to the Wendy’s restaurant, which was later demolished.” I remember watching the coverage on cable news websites. My intuition was that protesting and burning property seemed appropriate given what the police had done. Same for what happened earlier that year in Minneapolis, when protesters burned a police precinct to the ground. But nobody on cable news seemed to have anything useful to say about how to understand this latest episode of police violence and the community response to it.

One way to understand it is through the history of the African American freedom struggle. Modern police, which originated from slave patrols, have always worked to maintain the class and racial order, from enforcement of the post-Emancipation Black Codes, which “criminalize[d] Black life,” to Jim Crow to the Wars on Crime, Drugs, and Terror. Police also helped create the violence that erupted in major American cities in the years after civil rights legislation was passed (the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965). Because political and civil rights are not the same as economic empowerment—as Martin Luther King Jr. pointed out, it’s one thing to be able to sit at a lunch counter but another to be able to afford to buy anything at that counter—many Black communities remained marginalized, impoverished, and subject to racist policing. Black youth were at the forefront of rebellions that occurred in that period, from 1964–1972, as documented by Elizabeth Hinton in the 2021 book, *America on Fire: The Untold History of Police Violence and Black Rebellion Since the 1960s*.

Around this time, President Johnson turned his War on Poverty into a War on Crime. In 1965, the president would, for the first time, establish “a direct role for the federal government in local police operations, court systems, and state prisons.” Federal money was used to purchase “bulletproof vests, helicopters, tanks, rifles, gas masks and other military-grade hardware for police departments.” Around this time, too, the 1967 Kerner Commission found that racial inequality—and the social conditions resulting from it—had fomented African American uprisings in the ’60s. As Hinton wrote, in 1967, there had been 75 rebellions in cities throughout the country; the Kerner Commission had cited around 23 of them in its investigation. Did the government heed the findings of the Kerner Commission and strive to provide more resources (jobs, education, and so forth) to African American communities? No. Instead, as Hinton writes, the War on Poverty wound down and the War on Crime “became the foremost policy approach to the social and demographic challenges of the late twentieth century.” When the United States failed at the task of making racial equality a reality, the police were there to manage the fallout—and they have been doing this ever since, often through deadly violence. A 2019 study by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research found that police killings—meaning those inflicted by “asphyxiation, beating, a chemical agent, a medical emergency, a Taser, or a gunshot”—were the sixth leading cause of death for young Black men in America.

DESPITE WHAT CONSERVATIVE PUNDITS AND PUBLICATIONS might tell you, the 2020 uprisings were largely peaceful. One assessment by academics found that “96.3 percent of events involved no property damage or police injuries, and in 97.7 percent of events, no injuries were reported among participants, bystanders or police.” But, as Hinton writes, “police violence precipitates community violence.” As long as the police remain a violence-creating institution, the level of overall violence in our society is never going to improve, and class and racial inequality will persist.

Communities of color (joined by multi-racial coalitions in 2020) have been pushing back against police decade after decade and yet the police’s methods have only grown more militarized and authoritarian year after year. Despite reforms like the introduction of body cameras and an assortment of “non-lethal” weapons and crowd control tools (rubber bullets, water cannons, sound cannons, chemical weapons, stun guns or Tasers, and the Bola wrap restraint device), police are killing more people year after year. It’s time to understand that “policing’s problems are embedded in the institution,” as Hudson writes. The police are the problem, and they can’t be reformed—if they could, over a century of reforms would have made them better by now. They must be abolished.

A FUTURE WITHOUT POLICE

The vision of abolition is to create a world in which everyone has the material goods and the social connections they need to truly be safe. It’s not a world in which there are no harms or violence. It’s a world in which all harms are taken seriously—from the ways we harm each other interpersonally (most sexual violence, for instance, happens among people who know each other) to the large-scale systemic harms inflicted upon large numbers of people by powerful corporations and the wealthy.

Derecka Purnell has written one of the best explanations for abolition that I have come across: her 2020 essay, “How I Became a Police Abolitionist.” As she explained, when she was growing up, she and her community members in St. Louis, Missouri, called the police for anything and everything. She was skeptical of abolition at first. “I feared letting go” of the police, she writes. “I thought we needed them.” But then she realized that the police don’t actually meet people’s needs or make them safe:

“Police abolition” initially repulsed me. The idea seemed white and utopic. I’d seen too much sexual violence and buried too many friends to consider getting rid of police in St. Louis, let alone the nation. But in reality, the police were a placebo. Calling them felt like something, as the legal scholar Michelle Alexander explains, and something feels like everything when your other option is nothing. Police couldn’t do what we really needed. They could not heal relationships or provide jobs. We were afraid every time we called. When the cops arrived, I was silenced, threatened with detention, or removed from my home. Fifteen years later, my old neighborhood still lacks quality

food, employment, schools, health care, and air—all of which increases the risk of violence and the reliance on police.

The task is as follows: first, to “reduce the size and scope of police and thus limit their opportunities to come into contact with civilians.” This means no more budget increases, no more additional officers, no more “non-lethal” devices or tools. Redirect money and resources into programs that actually meet people’s needs. Secondly, we must organize for the affirmative vision of abolition to “creat[e] lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment.”

Some of these ideas are already being put into place, such as non-police mental health crisis response teams and community-based projects to help meet people’s needs. The socialist candidate for New York City mayor, Zohran Mamdani, has proposed a Department of Community Safety, which focuses on increasing mental healthcare, reducing homelessness, utilizing “gun violence interrupters” trained to de-escalate conflicts, and more. While I wouldn’t characterize Mamdani’s plan as full-blown abolitionist—he says that “police have a critical role to play” in public safety—his ideas are certainly preferable to what other mayoral candidates will likely do, which is hire more police officers and, in the case of Eric Adams at least, continue broken windows and stop and frisk style policing. Other efforts include creating more green space, which can have a positive effect on community safety and well-being, and thinking through how to make roads safer and how to enact non-punitive methods of traffic enforcement. As Hudson points out, abolitionists do not have to have *all* the solutions right now. We can create the kind of society we want once we agree that the violent methods of policing are not working and must be abandoned.

“Defund” has been unfairly maligned as a slogan over the last few years. In the Loyola Marymount University survey that I mentioned earlier, “Defund the police” and “dismantle the police” did not poll very well, suggesting that there is a public perception problem for the abolitionist movement and a need to reinforce what the movement stands for beyond simply the negative policy prescription of “defund.”

I became an abolitionist in the year 2020 because of the Floyd uprisings and because people started talking about defunding the police and abolition. My advice would be to pick up a book by any of the authors that I’ve mentioned and join progressive and abolitionist organizations in your community. Contact your Congressional representative about the People’s Response Act, which would create a non-police safety department to fund non-punitive safety measures and is supported by Reps. Ayanna Pressley and Rashida Tlaib, among others.

Anyone who wants a better world—one that’s safer and more just, and one in which people in uniforms can’t just kill you any given day of the year or round you up and put you into a cell—should realize that the cops are standing between us and the future we want for everyone. Generously funded law enforcement agencies everywhere are also good foot soldiers for authoritarians—as we’re seeing right now with the Trump administration.

You should consider the police your enemy. That’s why it’s still “defund and abolish.” ✚



MEOW
MEOW-5
MEOW-7
MEOW-10



C#ex@cf
e92fx6x

AT THE CAT CAFE







DON'T EXPECT TO SAVE YOU

BY RS BENEDICT

AS THE RIGHT WING WINS ONE POLITICAL victory after another, artists rush to present themselves as the vanguard of the resistance. It was one of the defining trends of the first Donald Trump administration. Musician Amanda Palmer said at a 2016 press conference in Queensland, Australia that “If the political climate keeps getting uglier, the art will have to answer. We will have to fight.” In 2017, *Slate* suggested we “resist Islamophobia” by reading a “gay Muslim furry romance” novel. That same year, Pompeu Fabra University philosophy professor Santiago Zabala claimed that aesthetic forces could “disrupt not only capitalism’s indefinite reproduction but also realism’s metaphysical impositions” in his book *Why Only Art Can Save Us: Aesthetics and the Absence of Emergency*. During the temporary lull of the Joe Biden administration, the *Washington Post* figured out how to heal our divided nation: watching *WandaVision* and other superhero media, which could apparently “teach us how to come together again.”

Politicians got in on the action. After Stacey Abrams lost the Georgia gubernatorial election to Republican Brian Kemp in 2018, she pivoted to a new, imaginary political career as the president of United Earth on *Star Trek: Discovery*, a show which also name-dropped Elon Musk as one of humankind’s greatest inventors. In the real world, Abrams ran against Kemp a second time in 2022. She lost again, by a much larger margin. Art, it turned out, was no substitute for actual politics.

Now that Trump has returned, our nation’s content creators are scrambling to resist him even harder, with even more powerful stories—because stories are weapons, as *io9* blog editor Annalee Newitz argues in her 2024 book *Stories Are Weapons*. Early this year, children’s author Phil Bildner heroically took to Bluesky to tell us to buy books, because “buying books is resistance.” On January 6, 2025, the fourth anniversary of the Capitol riot, sci-fi/fantasy publishing powerhouse Tor invited us to bask in some “fight the empire energy” by purchasing between one and five recommended young adult adventure novels. One week later, *New York Times* bestselling editor John Joseph Adams leaped into action, launching an Indiegogo campaign for a fiction anthology titled *Protest 2025: Stories Against Tyranny*, designed to “protest, resist, and survive Donald Trump’s 2nd term.” The project closed after raising \$1,306 of its \$50,000 goal.

This is nothing new. The art world has fought against the forces of oppression for ages. Between Berlin’s thriving cabaret scene and subversive Expressionist films like *Metropolis* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Weimar-era Germany was a hotbed of bold, fresh art. Pacifist art blossomed during and after the first World War. Kurt Vonnegut said of the 1960s, “Every respectable artist in this country was against the [Vietnam] war. It was like a laser beam. We were all aimed in the same direction. The power of this weapon turns out to be that of a custard pie dropped from a stepladder six feet high.”

Art did not save them. It will not save us. So why do we keep thinking it will?

ARTISTS AND POWER / Authoritarians always attack artists. The Nazis denounced so-called “degenerate art” for its innovative style as well as its daring content. Pinochet’s goons tortured and executed folk singer Víctor Jara; the musician wrote his last song lyrics with broken wrists. Ronald Reagan bolstered his career by ratting on leftist filmmakers to the House Un-American Activities Committee. A major project of today’s technocratic right is to build AI content generators to render artists obsolete.

If every terrible regime treats artists like a threat, artists naturally start to believe it. If the government is afraid of you, it stands to reason that you must be powerfully dangerous. But that’s assuming authoritarians are driven by reason. They often aren’t. Since the fall of the Roman Empire, most authoritarians have tended to ban gay sex. But having gay sex will not defeat fascism. Reactionaries in the English-speaking world fear certain kinds of food: spice will overexcite the nervous system, soybeans will turn you into a woman, or seed oils will make you gay. But consuming tofu burritos will not defeat fascism.

In truth, artists, like exotic foods, have a more complicated relationship with power. Yes, art often flourishes among society’s undesirables: queers, failsons, the mentally ill, cultural and ethnic minorities. And, yes, artists often do belong to subversive political movements.

But those same artists also often belong to the privileged classes that have much to lose in a revolution. It takes resources to make art. Paint isn’t cheap. Musical instruments and recording equipment don’t grow on trees. Movies cost a lot of money. Even writing—arguably the cheapest art form—requires free time, education, and a room of one’s own to work in. It’s easier to access these resources if you have some proximity to power or wealth. And if you have these things, you might not want society to change all that much, since it’s working pretty well for you.

And then you’ve got to get your art in front of people. Publishers, record companies, gallery owners, and so on can reject your work because it doesn’t meet their taste, or they think it will be hard to sell. You must appeal to them before you can reach your intended audience. And these gatekeepers might not like anything too radical. Director Ali Abbasi struggled to find a distributor for *The Apprentice*, a well-reviewed biopic that depicts the life of Donald Trump in a negative light. Francis

Lawrence’s 2007 adaptation of *I Am Legend* had to change its original subversive ending, in which a lone militaristic American he-man fighting a war against a dehumanized enemy realizes *he’s* the real monster, to something a little friendlier to George W. Bush’s War on Terror: the hero blows everything up and sends a helpless woman and child to the safety of a military fortress. Julie Taymor’s 2002 Frida Kahlo biopic *Frida* made it to screens containing very little about its subject’s staunch communism; instead, producer Harvey Weinstein thought the film should focus more on sex.

Self-publishing online does not guarantee widespread dissemination, either. There’s a lot of content out there, and algorithms designed by technocratic neofascists probably will not favor yours.

In the old days, artists found patrons among the aristocracy. Now, if we want to quit our day jobs to make art full time, we

either seek corporate sponsorship or we suffer at the merciless hand of the free market. A progressive artist must choose between starving or making a deal with the Devil. Will you tone down the politics in your work to make it more marketable? Will you promote yourself on Twitter or Facebook or Instagram or some other social media platform owned by reactionary billionaires? Will you submit your sculpture



Stacey Abrams as President of United Earth in “Star Trek: Discovery”

ture to a gallery funded by the Sackler family, whose pharmaceutical company produced the OxyContin that led to the opioid epidemic? Will you send your poetry to a magazine bankrolled by an heir to the Eli Lilly fortune? Will you attend a writing convention sponsored by Amazon or Raytheon, as science fiction’s Hugo Awards were in 2021? Will you shill for BetterHelp on your YouTube channel? Meanwhile, happy to swap their doomed art careers for more lucrative jobs as propaganda mouthpieces, right-wing ideologues like failed screenwriter Ben Shapiro and failed comedian Steven Crowder frolic in a golden shower of cash supplied by shadowy billionaires. (Until their benefactors pull the plug, anyway.) They don’t need to compromise their values; they never had any.

Even if, somehow, you overcome the material barriers of the entertainment industry and get your uncompromisingly subversive work of art in front of a wide audience, there’s no guarantee that it will have the impact you intended. 2012 Republican vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan loved Rage Against the Machine. The Wachowski sisters’ *The Matrix* struck a chord with

internet-addicted misogynists, who refer to their descent into woman-hating loneliness as “taking the red pill.” Jim Crow-era white Americans loved watching Black entertainers perform in racially segregated concert halls. Trump and his supporters cheerfully sing and dance to the Village People’s gay cruising anthem “YMCA” at rallies. *Squid Game* did not spark an anti-capitalist uprising, but it did lead to some McDonald’s tie-ins and a series of degrading MrBeast game shows.

“Capital has the ability to subsume all *critiques* into itself. Even those who would critique capital end up *reinforcing* it instead,” says a Thatcher-esque character in indie studio ZA/UM’s 2019 unapologetically leftist role-playing game *Disco Elysium*. In other words, if you create a stunning anti-capitalist work of art that resonates with people, capitalism will find a way to package and sell it until it becomes kitsch, like Che Guevara’s face on a T-shirt. *Disco Elysium* fell victim to that same curse; the game’s runaway success attracted a couple of shady Estonian businessmen who took over ZA/UM and laid off the lead developers, dooming any chances of a sequel. (The studio is currently working on a mobile version of the game designed to “captivate TikTok users with quick hits of compelling story, art, and audio.”)

MAGICAL THINKING / When an ancient Mesopotamian king was threatened by ill omens, his advisors would pick a substitute to serve as a human shield. This surrogate king, usually a man of low social standing, had no real political power, but during his brief reign he got to wear fine clothes and feast on good food and enjoy the company of a pretty girl chosen to serve as his surrogate queen. The surrogate king absorbed all the curses and demonic spirits while the real king quietly ruled the country behind the scenes. This was a temporary arrangement. At the end of no more than one hundred days, the surrogate king and his queen were sacrificed, taking the bad magic with them to the afterlife.

This is the role of the artist in our current political era: the surrogate king. Serve as a focal point for the public’s hope for social and political change: for women’s liberation, for non-toxic masculinity, for queer rights, for BIPOC excellence. And when you err, whether it’s a rediscovered problematic tweet from ten years ago or a long-running pattern of heinous sexual violence, suffer the public’s fury. You are king for a day, and when the sun sets you must enter the wicker man to be set alight.

The idea that art will save us is the kind of magical thinking that flourishes when people feel helpless. As Lauren Fadiman discussed in last November’s *Current Affairs*, books like *The Secret* that claim we can “manifest” our desires (without working for them) gained popularity in the wake of the 2008 economic crash. When climbing your way up the social ladder looks increasingly impossible, vibes become as good as personal initiative—or actual political action.

Even the most ardent liberal knows, in their heart of hearts, not to expect much from their politicians. Youthful cries for positive change—a working healthcare system, or the protection of LGBTQ rights, or meaningful reform of the justice system, or withdrawing support for the genocide in Gaza—are met with ridicule. And, while the Democratic and Labour Parties fought valiantly to smother progressive leaders like Bernie Sanders and

Jeremy Corbyn, respectively, they put up anemic responses to the likes of Donald Trump and Boris Johnson. Those of us who want a better world have nowhere to direct our energy.

So we throw it at art and artists. Watch a TV show and argue whether it’s feminist enough while *Roe v. Wade* gets overturned. Watch *Emilia Pérez*, a movie about a Mexican trans woman; give it a bunch of awards while politicians work to ban gender-affirming healthcare. Don’t ask what our elected officials are doing to fix any of it. They’re busy fundraising—and redirecting blame.

Consider the 2024 presidential election. As the Democratic Party floundered, liberals looked away from the campaign’s many faults to condemn pop musician Chappell Roan for criticizing Kamala Harris’s position on Gaza.

Consider the DNC turning to Taylor Swift to defeat Trump. Whatever your opinion of Swift and her fanbase, the fact remains that she is not a politician and should not be expected to save the country from itself.

Consider Democratic Party loyalists blaming Susan Sarandon for Hillary Clinton’s loss in 2016.

Consider Woodstock ’99. The makers of HBO Max’s abysmal documentary about the disaster interviewed dozens of musicians, journalists, and concert goers, all in an effort to piece together how a music festival turned into a riot with fires, rapes, and multiple fatalities. The talking heads did not blame the festival’s organizers, who planned the event without adequate security or sanitation facilities or drinking water. Instead, they unanimously pointed the finger at one man: Limp Bizkit singer Fred Durst, who somehow caused everything to go wrong by rapping “Nookie” and doing a bit of crowd surfing on a piece of plywood.

At a critical moment in the proceedings that presaged our current era, Rome, NY, Mayor Joseph Griffo asked the Red Hot Chili Peppers to quell the chaos and was genuinely shocked when they did not. It occurred to no one that perhaps a democratically elected political leader bears more responsibility for public safety within his jurisdiction than does Flea, whose professional obligations are limited to 1) playing slap bass and 2) wearing a tube sock on his penis.

Artists are not blameless in this. Many entertainers happily don the mantle of surrogate king. Convince your fans that buying your novel or concert ticket or movie or merchandise is political activism, and you might sell a few more units, as well as gain an ideological shield against any style critique of your work. Who wouldn’t want to be king for a day?

WHAT GOOD IS ART? / This is not to say that art is worthless. Art has value for its own sake. It will not topple fascism, but that’s not art’s job. Nor should it be. It’s *our* job.

If art has any role to play in the struggle, it is to channel people toward collective action, not to act as a substitute for it. The protest art of the 1960s existed alongside fierce, organized political action: demonstrations and boycotts and campus revolts and the occasional riot. The labor movement of the early 20th century had folk songs, yes, but it also had Wobblies throwing bricks at strikebreakers. When you start to see art as the soundtrack to your revolt, not as the revolt itself, you might notice that the real king fits in a wicker man just as well as the surrogate. ✚

The Care and Feeding of Baby Billionaires

So, you've given birth to a baby billionaire. You should be very proud! But these precious creatures demand extra special care, so follow our guide to make sure you don't accidentally raise them to be empathetic and altruistic.



Focus On Your Child's Self-Esteem

Young children are especially impressionable, so be sure to remind your baby billionaire that they're better than other babies—and all other people too!

Praise your child for every accomplishment, no matter how much someone else accomplished it for them.



Prioritize Communication

Two to three texts a week should be sufficient.

Be Willing To Adjust Your Parenting Style To Fit Their Needs

Is your baby billionaire a socially stunted attention-seeker, a rapacious capitalist, an illiterate fascist, or some combination of the three? You need to be flexible in accommodating your little tyke's budding sociopathic tendencies, whatever they are.

Touch-Free Childhood

Touching a child can create dangerous emotional bonds that will make it more difficult for them to lay off workers. You need them to develop a thick skin in order to be appropriately cold, calculating, cunning, and cutthroat.

Do Not Set Limits

Limits are for poor kids! Your little bundle of love money should never be discouraged from pursuing their dreams money-making opportunities, no matter how asinine or socially destructive!

Understand Your Own Limitations As A Parent

That's what your servants are for.



Spend Over 180-Hour Weeks With Your Kids

Teach your budding little CEO the magic of time manipulation by telling them you're spending over 30 hours every day with them. That way, they'll know just how to pretend they work 90 hours a week as CEO of five companies.

Explain To Your Kids Why Being A Good Person Is Fucking Stupid

Teach your kids why values like generosity, kindness, and respect are absolutely goddamn useless in this day and age, and instill in your child the awareness that they should be able to steamroll these morons without breaking a sweat.

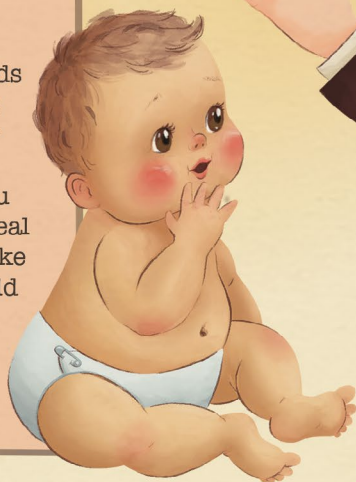
Rub Money On Them

Rubbing a crisp hundred-dollar bill on your baby's smooth bald head ensures they've got money on the brain.



Get At Least One Meal Delivered By A Gig Worker Every Day

A family that understands and embodies its class position will make for more egotistical, unfeeling children. You don't have to eat the meal together or anything like that, but your kid should know how far above others they stand.



Make sure your baby is carefully spoonfed

(1) ayahuasca and (2) sparkling formula with flakes of gold. If you must use baby food, make it Gerber Platinum, each 8oz jar of which costs the GDP of a small island nation.



Don't give them their first company until their first birthday!

No matter how tempting it is or how much your child asks, it is important to teach them self-discipline by not appointing them to a formal executive position until at least midway through teething.



I NEVER DRIVE FASTER THAN
MY GUARDIAN ANGEL CAN FLY

THE WORST DAY FISHING IS BETTER
THAN THE BEST DAY WORKING.



FOR USE AS A
MOTOR FUEL ONLY
LEAD
(TETRAETHYL)



WE CHANGED OUR
NAME FROM THE
MCM MUSEUM



THE ABITA MYSTERY HOUSE IS THE WEIRD AMERICA I LOVE

"THIS MYSTERY HOUSE IS THE BEGINNING OF YOUR BEST DREAMS..."
—SIGN OUTSIDE THE ABITA MYSTERY HOUSE

BY NATHAN J. ROBINSON

IT'S INDESCRIBABLE, BUT HERE GOES. THE ABITA MYSTERY House is a roadside attraction in Abita Springs, Louisiana. The front is an old filling station. Behind it there's a barn and a shotgun house. The whole complex is a museum, kind of. (It used to be called the "UCM Museum," meaning "you see 'em.") Inside is a ton of, well, *stuff*, ranging from old advertising signs to arcade games to the many absurdist art projects of founder and curator John Preble. A lot of it is busted, rusty, falling to bits. Some of it's whimsical, some of it's weird, some of it seems like junk that ought to have been thrown away long ago. In places, it conjures up the feeling that you're in a thrift shop deep in the bayou in 1956 and a hurricane has torn through the place and then extraterrestrials visited and subsequently left behind their used appliances. Admission to the House is free, but to leave it costs \$5. (When I reminded Preble that it was, strictly speaking, unlawful to adopt kidnapping as a business model, he graciously waived my exit fee.) *Condé Nast Traveler* says of the House: "the furthest stretches of [Preble's] imagination are all on display here, from wall-sized mosaics to miniature city scenes, to sculptures of half-human hybrid creatures to an Airstream trailer

that has collided with a flying saucer," and "considering the fine line it walks between hoarded junk and fine art, the place is well organized, though that's a relative term."

The Mystery House is indeed mysterious, insofar as you do not know what you're going to find around the next corner. There are a lot of homemade contraptions, a lot of signs next to levers and buttons and knobs that say "PRESS HERE" or "DO NOT PRESS" (I pressed) and then make little thingamajigs go spinning and jerking and dancing. The House's website touts the chance to see a machine send a marble clacking through a structure "made of thousands of popsicle sticks, hot glue sticks, pinball machine parts, and plumbing supplies" and displayed "inside of an old movie house ticket booth from a nearby town." Preble collects old arcade games (there's *Space Invaders* and a Beatles-themed pinball machine from circa 1964), and if you bring a stack of quarters you can play some of them. (Others will just steal your quarters.) There is an unfathomably large number of little plastic action figures, tacky commemorative plates, old novelty postcards, paint-by-numbers paintings, tourist guides, diner signs, baseball cards, bottle caps, and other assorted tchotchkes. There is a chande-



lier made out of plastic flamingos and gator heads, sprayed gold. There is a little revolving platform with plaster dinosaurs on it. There is a Tesla coil. In the gift shop you can buy art prints of Fats Domino or a “mystery bag” of bits and pieces for \$5. My bag contained some buttons, a Chinese finger trap, one of those fortune-telling plastic fish, a rubber cyclops, a turtle necklace, and a whistle.

Death is omnipresent among the exhibits. There are dancing skeletons behind glass. In another room is a skeleton in a box with a sign that says “Jackie the Jump-Roping Skeleton.” Press the button, Jackie jumps rope. Elsewhere in a glass case is a horrible clown. Put a quarter in the machine and the clown will dance. There are little handmade dioramas of swamps and trailer parks and Mardi Gras and a jazz funeral. One scene depicts Union and Confederate soldiers fighting in heaven with a little plaque that reads “God Bless Our Forefathers, Who Fought In The Civil War So That We Can Play Goofy Golf In Peace.” There is a giant model of a medieval village that spans an entire room, with no explanation for its presence. There is a crash-landed UFO you can crawl into. A sign next to a hole says, “What You Will Have For Lunch.” Pull the crank, put your eye to the hole, and a wheel spins and comes to rest on a disgusting food. (I got “Spider Pie.” Others got “Fried Snot” and “Roaches on Toast.”) There’s another similar fortune-telling machine that predicts what the worst day of your life will be. Mine will be when I sit on an anthill. Not the worst thing that could happen, I suppose. (Someone else got “Wet yourself on a Ferris wheel.”)

There is hoax taxidermy. Not the infamous “jackalope,” but the more obscure “dogigator” (specifically “Darrel the Dogigator, MIRACLE OF SCIENCE”), a cryptid that looks an awful lot like an alligator head grafted onto a dog sculpture. In fact, many of the exhibits seem like they might have been welded together by an adult version of Sid, the doll-dismembering kid from *Toy Story*. I did see a turtle that had baby doll arms glued onto it and a “miniature allisapien,” some kind of hybrid alligator/human thing in a jar.

I fear I may not be selling it well. “This all sounds disturbing,” you may be thinking. Creepy, even. Look, it’s not for everyone. I’m sure Preble alienates some visitors with his tall tales and off-color jokes. He reminds me of the ferociously entertaining, larger-than-life patri-

arch in Tim Burton’s *Big Fish*, who exasperated his son by telling monstrous whoppers about meeting werewolves and giants. Preble told me that he was raised by Bigfoot, who saved him from being raised by wolves after he was abandoned as a baby on a remote mountaintop. (I think I’m remembering the story correctly.) He said he once met Princess Diana, who he says was hideous but very kind. He then insisted, despite my protestations, that I am Hugh Grant’s nephew, and the Abita Mystery House Facebook page now has a picture of me on it boasting that Hugh Grant’s nephew visited the House.

But I like John Preble, and he took a shine to me, in part because the *Current Affairs* sensibility (eclectic, artistic, a bit absurdist, proudly Louisianan) is not so far from the Mystery House’s own. Not only did he release me from the museum for free, but he gave me a CD by an obscure piano player of his acquaintance called Bobby Lounge, who plays and sings like Jerry Lee Lewis, if Jerry Lewis sang picaresque nonsense stories about Abita Springs.

The Abita Mystery House touts itself as one of a kind, but that is not quite true. It shares a certain kinship with other places around the country. In Los Angeles, there is the Museum of Jurassic Technology, a cabinet of curiosities that adopts a much more formal and technical approach to absurdist hoaxing. In Michigan there is Hamtramck Disneyland, a towering assemblage of colorful sculptures, kinetic elements, and found objects that features carousel horses and windmills and spans two garages in a back alley. The St. Louis City Museum is an enormous playground made of architectural salvage in an old shoe warehouse. In Florida, there’s the Coral Castle, a complex of megaliths built by Edward Leedskalnin, supposedly using mysterious “magnetic currents.” Tinkertown in New Mexico, perhaps the closest direct ancestor to the Abita Mystery House, is an exhibition of animatronic Western-themed dioramas built over a 40-year period by Ross Ward and housed in a rambling museum of Americana.



These spaces were all built by devoted eccentrics who, unconcerned with wealth, poured countless hours into achieving an artistic vision.

They are like nothing in their surroundings. And while they are not “political” in any obvious sense, they constitute an act of creative defiance against today’s creeping monoculture. They are proudly nonconformist and the exact antithesis of what *Vanishing*



Louisiana
ANGOLA
PRISON RODEO

Willkommen

JUL FLORIDA 86
QTY 611
PALM



REVIEWS

OF THE

ABITA MYSTERY HOUSE



"IT'S DEFINITELY
A 'MYSTERY' LOL.
I WOULDN'T SUGGEST IT -
ESPECIALLY AT \$5
PER PERSON"



"WAS DEFINITELY
NOTHING I'VE SEEN
BEFORE, THAT'S FOR SURE."



"THERE'S A ROOM
LINED WITH HOT SAUCE
BOTTLES, ROBOTS MADE
OF COMPUTER BOARDS,
A 'HOME MADE HARLEY
DAVIDSON' MADE OF
BICYCLE AND MACHINE
PARTS... AND SO MUCH
MORE."



"YOU WOULD HAVE TO
SEE IT FOR YOURSELF TO
REALLY UNDERSTAND
WHAT I AM TRYING TO
DESCRIBE. IT ALMOST
LOOKS LIKE THE FAMOUS
ARTIST 'SALVADOR DALI'
HAD SOME SAY-SO AS
TO WHERE MOST OF THE
STUFF WENT."

New York author Jeremiah Moss calls "the new people." By this he means not transplants to the city per se, but a new kind of mindset arising from the neoliberal era of gentrification and inequality. Moss writes about how the culture of New York City has changed over the years, as its rough edges have been sheared off, its messiness tidied up, and its eccentricity and individuality tamed in favor of a sleek, corporatized minimalism. The city, having once comprised many shades of the rainbow, has been drained of color in favor of white and gray. In an interview with *Current Affairs*, he elaborated:

I mean a new kind of person, a neoliberalized self. This sense of walking around and thinking they're not quite human, they don't feel quite human. They're not engaging with other humans, and they all look exactly the same. Their ability to root out any sort of difference that would mark them as individuals is profound, to the point where they have the same skin, the same kind of buttery tan white person skin. It's the same tone. The clothing has no variation on a theme, even. It's got to be exactly the same. I call them hypernormative, with this very intense need to conform to one another and to have this belonging. I'm fascinated by them...

In his book, Moss writes of his neighbor, an influencer who is one of these types:

Behind my crummy kitchen with its broken stove and leaky sink, I look for books painting some sign of a creative and uncontrolled life, conflict and imperfection, but there is nothing. She has one green plant, a housewarming gift from the landlord. Everything else is white. The couch is white. The pillows are white. The curtains are white. The bedsheets and blankets are white. The desk is white. The dining set is white. The rug is white. The new mirror, the one that replaced the old white mirror, has a blonde wood frame that looks almost white. The influencer loves the blonde wood because she says "everything's white, so I needed, like, some texture."



Moss tells me that the use of the color white is an attempt to fill one's life with "purity and cleanliness" and "indicates I've never been touched by anything. Nothing can get to me," which he describes as "a hermetically sealed way of going through

the world." This is certainly not the Abita Mystery House way of going through the world. Some of the crap in there is mildewy. There is rust, moss, fungus, crud. There is *color*: bright, hand-painted signs everywhere. Imperfection. Disarray. But not total disorder, for everything is lovingly arranged.

Skeletons are not among the white objects in the perfect white apartment. There's no place for death there. By contrast, death is everywhere in the mystery house. Swamp ghosts, skulls, stuffed critters. The folklore that the Mystery House is steeped in is virtually death-obsessed. If you pick up an anthology of old American folk lyrics, as I did recently, you may be surprised to see just how many of them are about death: men robbing stores and then getting hanged, jealous lovers shooting their beaus, train accidents, wars, etc. Of course, life expectancy was lower in those days, so maybe *mortality* was more on their minds. But we all die now just as they all died then, and in many ways, a culture that incorporates death into its art and song is probably healthier than one that doesn't. (See Jennifer Dines's 2023 *Current Affairs* piece on death for more on this.)

In a time when every space threatens to become a Panera Bread or a CVS, we need the Abita Mystery House spirit. I have a suspicion that Donald Trump would not understand the Abita Mystery House. I cannot imagine Jeff Bezos or Jamie Dimon going there. Their worlds are too clean, too purified of history and mess and death and the surreal. The do-it-yourself utopianism of Abita or Hamtramck Disneyland is the very inverse of an Amazon warehouse or Trump Tower.

In *The Old Weird America*, rock critic Greil Marcus coined the titular term to describe the culture that Bob Dylan and The Band's Basement Tapes were steeped in, a "playground of God, Satan, tricksters, Puritans, confidence men, Illuminati, braggarts, preachers, anonymous poets of all stripes." This weird mental place, he said, was not just "quaint" but rather represented a "break in the fabric of modernity," an imaginary America full of myth and mystery. If you want an antidote to bleakness and boredom, and if you want to appreciate your country again, you might think of taking a visit to this country of the mind, embracing the Great American Weird, with its dogigators, singing cowboys, giant roadside dinosaurs, and legendary swamp spirits. We keep that America alive down here in Louisiana, and they house one of the most precious collections of it out in Abita Springs. 🧛‍🦋

Believe It or Not!

INCREDIBLE BUT TRUE FACTS ABOUT OUR FASCINATING WORLD!

**OUR APOLOGIES TO MR RIPLEY*

A JUDGE USED TO HAVE TO SIGN A WARRANT BEFORE THE GOVERNMENT COULD JUST THROW YOU INTO A VAN AND PUT YOU ON A PLANE OUT OF THE COUNTRY.



GOOGLE USED TO SHOW THE THING YOU SEARCHED FOR, NOT INCOHERENT AI GIBBERISH!

Who is Mr. Ripley?

ai summary

Robert Ripley was the soul-survivor of the USSCS Nostromo, after their ship encountered a Xenomorph during a distress call.

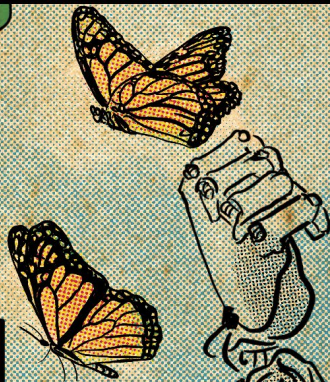
Later he would accompany Dickie Greenleaf to the idyllic landscape of sun-drenched Italy in the late 1950s

WEALTHY PEOPLE HAD TO PAY TAXES ON A PORTION OF THEIR INCOME TO FUND IMPORTANT PUBLIC SERVICES!

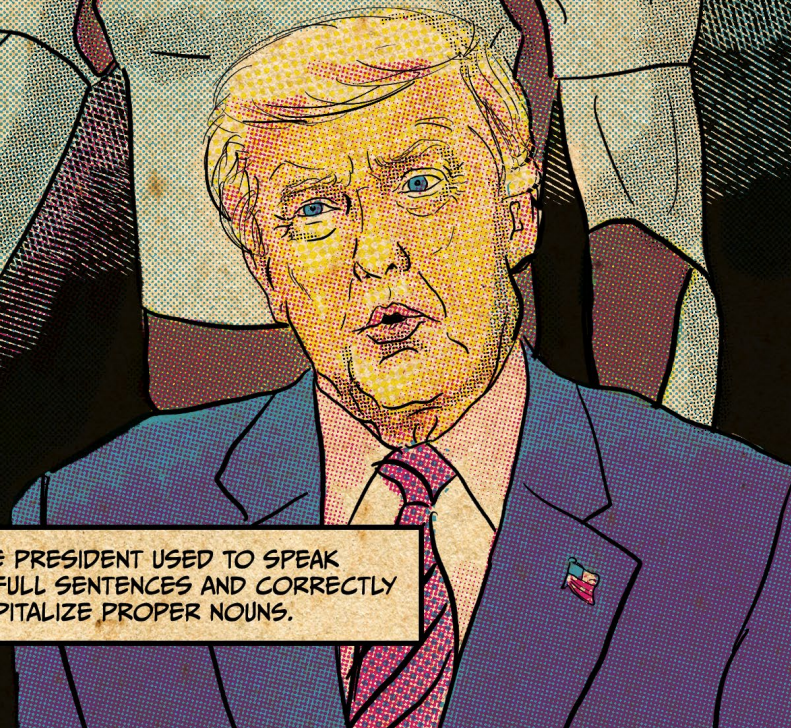


HUMAN BEINGS WERE NOT ENSLAVED BY ARTIFICIALLY INTELLIGENT ROBOT OVERLORDS.

CORAL REEFS WERE A THING! AND THERE WERE BUTTERFLIES!



THE PRESIDENT USED TO SPEAK IN FULL SENTENCES AND CORRECTLY CAPITALIZE PROPER NOUNS.



OH YAY
BRUNCH



WHY CAN'T WE DO IT?



WAITING ON
INSTRUCTION
FROM OBAMA

SUPREME
COURT SAYS
NO!



Wynston Sinema



STILL LEARNING
PROTEST DANCE



John Fetterman



CALL ICE ON YOUR
NEIGHBOR'S LANDSCAPER



FOR ISRAEL BOMBS



OH NO
FASCISM





CANDIDATE AGE

MEET THE PRESS

DEMOCRATIC EXCUSE
PINBALL

DEMENTIA OR DEMOCRAT

Who's to Blame?

BLACK

IMMIGRANT

TRANS

Nick Sinatra

Doing Something

the

Parliamentarian

HOW ARE WE GOING TO PAY FOR IT?

MONEY



CEASEFIRE?



a world of possibilities

BY NATASHA HAKIMI ZAPATA

Housing &
Development
Board residential
public housing
in Singapore

IN WHAT WOULD BE THE FINAL YEAR OF THE FIRST Donald Trump administration, the COVID-19 pandemic put many age-old cracks in American society into high relief. Our ailing, grossly unequal healthcare system was woefully ill-prepared for a public health crisis that illustrated that a society is only as healthy as its most vulnerable members. Working families, struggling to patch together child care even before the pandemic shut down schools and daycares, became more aware than ever before just how little they could rely on governmental support to raise America's youngest citizens. Obstacles to accessing public services reached new highs as offices across the country shut down to stem the coronavirus's deadly spread. Behind the doors shut by lockdowns, the opioid crisis spiraled even further out of control.

I spent that turbulent period in the United Kingdom, where I joined other British residents at windows to clap and cheer nightly for the country's National Health Service (NHS). Everything felt hopeless as the virus spread worldwide and the death toll rose daily. Yet a display of collective gratitude for the world's first universal healthcare system served as a reminder that, together, people can overcome great darkness. But the contrast between my experience with the NHS amid a global health catastrophe and that of my loved ones at home in the U.S., many of whom were initially unsure if they could afford lifesaving care if they were to contract the virus, also added new urgency to a

question I'd been mulling for many years: why have the hard-earned lessons from other country's struggles to obtain universal healthcare and other progressive programs not been learned in my home country—or, worse, ignored?

Throughout most of my career as a journalist, I have lived in several countries in Europe and Latin America. I've been reporting for progressive U.S. media on issues that seem intractable at home: multiple public health crises coupled with soaring healthcare costs, a shocking rise in homelessness and housing unaffordability, and the life-threatening impacts of climate change and biodiversity loss, to name just a few. I have also seen firsthand



how several countries have successfully addressed many of these same problems through effective policies and social programs aimed at bolstering the collective good. With numerous crises undeniably spiralling before our eyes in recent years, it seemed as though Americans might be more open than ever to hearing these success stories and internalizing their many lessons. It was time to share them with my fellow Americans.

This realization became the starting point for a journey that would take me around the world to every continent but Antarctica in search of the policy triumphs that ultimately would make it into my recently published first book, *Another World Is Possible*. Centering the lived experiences of my loved ones in the U.S. and my own, I took a “cradle to grave” approach to analyzing public policy over the next several years. I began with the U.K.’s National Health Service before heading to Scandinavia to talk to Norwegians about their family-friendly policies and to visit Finland’s world-leading public schools. I took a boat across the Baltic Sea to get a crash course on Estonia’s publicly owned digital infrastructure, at the heart of which is the idea that access to the Internet is a human right. I also returned to Portugal, where I had previously lived for half a decade and where all personal drug use has been decriminalized, to shadow its harm reduction programs and to spend time in its acclaimed “Dissuasion Commissions” (where people who’ve received citations for drug use are engaged in conversations about illicit drugs and informed about treatment options and other services should they need them). But I refused to limit my observations to Europe, as is the tendency of many who explore social democracy. Eventually, I made my way to Singapore’s impressive and affordable public housing high-rises, to Uruguay’s record-breaking wind and solar farms, to some of the Costa Rican community-run national parks that put its biodiversity law in action, and even to Aotearoa New Zealand’s retirement communities to learn about universal, non-contributory, flat-rate pensions.

Everywhere I went, I recorded in detail how each of these policies work and how everyday citizens experience them day in and day out, in the hope that they can serve as inspiration for American campaigns and policies in the near future. Inevitably, I also drew comparisons to the U.S. to highlight the sheer amount of work that must be done at home on all these fronts. Throughout this global journey, I learned many things about designing effective and long-lasting social policies and programs. Here are some key lessons from my journey.

WE NEED A SOCIETY BUILT FOR THE MANY, NOT THE FEW

IN THE FACE OF CREEPING AUTHORITARIANISM FOLLOWING decades of bipartisan failure to address skyrocketing inequality, many Americans are urgently asking ourselves what kind of society we truly want to live in. Ultimately, that is the question at the root of all the policies I examined, from Singapore to New Zealand and Estonia to Costa Rica. Do we want to live in a society like Singapore, where housing is a right? How about Norway, where working families can count on guaranteed government support to raise their children? Or Finland, where everyone can count on receiving the best possible education in their neighborhood school? Or New Zealand, where

people can age without fear of destitution? Or Estonia, where public services and direct democracy initiatives have been made universally accessible online? Or Portugal, where addiction is treated as a public health issue rather than a criminal one? Or Uruguay and Costa Rica, where clean energy and biodiversity protections safeguard the planet that humans and so many other species depend on? Or the United Kingdom, where healthcare is a universal right?

America is not working for the majority of us. We struggle to pay healthcare and child care costs, we can’t afford to buy our own homes, we are caught off guard by rising energy costs, we are getting sick from the lack of clean air and water, we’ve lost loved ones to opioids and other drugs, we’ve watched many of our public schools fail our children, we cannot access public services (thanks in part to what *Jacobin*’s Meagan Day calls “austerity by paperwork”), we cannot survive on inadequate Social Security payments, and we’re anxious about the climate crisis that threatens to engulf our planet. Instead, America is working for a tiny superrich minority that amassed its wealth on the back of our collective labor—and our collective impoverishment.

WE NEED PUBLIC OWNERSHIP, NOT PRIVATE PROFIT

ESSENTIAL SERVICES SHOULD BE PUBLICLY OWNED AND operated. Public schools can be improved, but as long as private schools provide an off-ramp for the wealthiest citizens, the education system cannot actually be made equitable. Weaning our grids off fossil fuels is an existential matter, and it should be done in a way that prioritizes the public’s needs rather than private companies’ profits. Digital government services are necessary, but they can’t be delegated to private companies that profiteer and that collect and misuse private data as they fail to keep it safe.

The clearest example of the need to keep essential services publicly owned—or, at the very least, publicly funded and universally accessible—is healthcare. Our very lives depend on it. Under the current system, there are countless incentives for private profit that can put a person’s life at risk or bankrupt them while they are in the process of trying to heal. It should come as no surprise that as the United States spends more and more on healthcare—in 2023, health expenditure reached a historic high of almost 19 percent of GDP—private health industry profits have soared. It is simply unconscionable for companies to profit from Americans’ sickness. Imagine how we could improve the health of *all* Americans if our money were used to fund actual care rather than line corporate pockets.

If we can take ownership of our essential services, we can remake them to work for all of us.

WE CAN HAVE IT ALL

AS I OBSERVED THROUGHOUT MY TRAVELS, MANY KEY policies intersect with one another. Portugal’s drug decriminalization is a legal shift, but it is aided by the country’s universal healthcare system, which offers addiction treatment and other care free at the point of delivery like the United Kingdom’s NHS. Robust

old-age pensions are essential, but if housing becomes unaffordable, as it increasingly has in New Zealand, more and more of pensioners' checks will go toward housing and leave little for other needs. This intersection of housing with other needs is something Singapore realized early in its designs for public housing. In other words, while any progress made on any front is welcome, we need to—dare I say it—do it all.

Contrary to what we're often told about progressive policies, we *can* have them all. Not only can we afford to, the truth is that we simply can't afford *not* to. American lives are being lost because our healthcare system locks people out based on price. Record numbers of Americans are experiencing homelessness while countless others are unable to afford to buy homes to meet their needs because our government hasn't guaranteed housing as a right. American moms are dying at higher rates than those in other wealthy nations because both our healthcare system and nonexistent parental leave policies are harming them. Too many American children, particularly children of color and poor children, aren't getting high-quality care and education from their earliest days because our daycares are unaffordable and our schools inequitably resourced. Americans aren't getting access to the government programs and services they're entitled to partly because our digital infrastructure is lacking. Americans from all walks of life are overdosing on fentanyl or being incarcerated for drug use because we are refusing to see addiction as a public health issue rather than a criminal offense. Americans are being displaced and dying as the climate crisis wreaks havoc on the environment we depend on to survive. Plants and animals are disappearing before our very eyes due to feeble biodiversity protections.

In many cases, such as in healthcare and education, we're already outspending other countries, and it's just a matter of re-designing the systems that are already in place. When it comes to family-friendly policies and greening our energy grids, these have been shown to pay for themselves with projected economic gains. But whether we're talking about investing in bettering Americans' daily lives, protecting our natural environment, or reenvisioning broken systems, these progressive policies pay off.

WE NEED LEADERS

POLITICAL WILL AND STRONG LEADERSHIP FROM A broad range of class, racial, educational, and professional backgrounds are critical to designing the sorts of policies that can make a profound material change in people's lives. Everywhere I went, I came across leaders who fought for radical change in the face of staunch opposition. João Goulão, a Portuguese medical doctor, understood early on that drug addiction was a public health concern, and biochemist and parliamentarian Alexandre Quintanilha led the way toward a radical approach to the dual epidemics of drug overdose and HIV/AIDs facing the country. Ramón Méndez, a physicist, was appointed to engineer a greener future for Uruguay, while electrical engineer Gonzalo Casaravilla made sure it remained in public hands as head of the country's electric utility. Environmentalists Patricia Madrigal Cordero and Vivienne Solís Rivera, together with elected representative Luis Martínez

Ramírez, valiantly protected Costa Rica's vital biodiversity for future generations and helped reverse some of the damage that had already been done to the environment.

What struck me most in meeting so many of these leaders was that they were, for the most part, ordinary people from all walks of life who simply wanted to serve their fellow citizens doing what they did best. In the end, this is what made them extraordinary. In America, we, too, will need extraordinary leaders to write and pass progressive legislation even in the face of extreme polarization. I noticed something else remarkable on this journey. Many of the ideas I explored have begun to spread throughout the United States, too, and have influential sponsors. At the local level, with homelessness increasing 12 percent in 2023 after pandemic protections were lifted, state leaders Stanley Chang and Alex Lee have continued agitating to pass Singapore-style public housing bills. At the federal level, congressional Democrats recently tried to pass paid parental leave—which is popular across the political spectrum—and got closer than ever before. The former director of the National Parks Service, Charles Sams III, the first Native American in the post, understood that biodiversity protections needed to be based on communities' needs and knowledge, especially that of Indigenous people. A 2023 Gallup poll found that 57 percent of Americans think the federal government should ensure healthcare coverage, and the Medicare for All Act, which would establish universal, single-payer healthcare, has continued to grow in popularity thanks to champions like Senator Bernie Sanders. All over America, there are also more and more candidates winning local and national elections based on progressive campaign promises like a just clean energy transition and subsidized child care.

WE REALLY NEED ONE ANOTHER

WE NEED MORE THAN POLITICAL LEADERS. IN EVERY country I visited, activists, union members and leaders, researchers, civil society groups, and many more encouraged their representatives to write and rewrite policies to serve as many people as possible—holding them accountable every day. Many are still fighting to expand the scope of these policies, or else to protect them from attempts—most often from the political right—to defang or destroy them. NHS founder Aneurin Bevan's spirit lives on in Dr. Tony O'Sullivan and fellow activists as they strive to protect the United Kingdom's National Health Service and reverse the harm inflicted through years of funding cuts and stealth privatization efforts. Environmental advocates like Silvia Rodríguez Cervantes have continued to demand that Costa Rica's government stay true to the Biodiversity Law amid pressure from wealthier countries and companies, including during negotiations for the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). In every country, there are people like O'Sullivan and Rodríguez Cervantes, and alongside all of them are the countless everyday citizens who form part of their movements, provide them with solidarity and support, and inspire them to keep working. Given how much more sway lobbyists hold over our elected representatives than their average constituents do, I am more

convinced than ever before that change will have to stem from the people through America’s growing grassroots movements, unions, civil rights groups, and other forms of collective organization. A better future will depend on all these groups. Although union numbers have still not reached the highs of the past century, in recent years there’s been a notable uptick in union membership among workers under 45. There have also been a number of high-profile strikes and union victories across large sectors like the film, entertainment, fast-food, and other service industries; automobile companies; and academic settings from elementary schools to universities. With nearly 70 percent of Americans expressing approval of labor unions, public support approached a 60-year high, according to a recent Gallup poll. And in places where formal union organizing is absent, workers have been taking matters into their own hands and organizing their workplaces, as labor studies professor Eric Blanc recently explained on the *Current Affairs* podcast. And when it comes to electoral wins, we should take heart in a surprising example that emerged from the 2024 general election: Missouri, Alaska, and Nebraska, three states that voted overwhelmingly for Trump and other Republicans, also passed paid sick leave ballot initiatives. It is through these kinds of collective expressions of power that we can begin to build an America that works for us all.

WE CAN MAKE THE BEST OUT OF THE WORST OF TIMES

IT MAY FEEL IMPOSSIBLE TO INTERNALIZE THE PRACTICAL optimism that can be found in these stories as our country plunges deeper and deeper into chaos. Although the crisis we face has been decades in the making, it seems to be worsening with the onslaught of mounting civil rights abuses, public spending cuts to make way for even more tax cuts for the rich, attempts to gut the institutions at the heart of our government, and news every day of the ways the Trump

administration and its coterie of oligarchs are dialing back progress made on everything from LGBTQ+ rights to environmental protections. But I have seen what so many other countries have managed to do during their darkest moments to redefine their societies in just a matter of years. Because of this, I know that barbarism will not prevail in America or beyond in the long run.

Profound societal change often begins in moments of deep crisis. In Britain, the National Health Service was born from the bloodstained devastation of World War II. Portugal’s radical drug reforms arose from the desperation created by dual epidemics unlike any the country had seen. Estonia, Finland, Singapore, and Norway all designed their own policies in the midst of financial crises that required them to reimagine the very foundations of their economies. Faced with environmental devastation, Uruguay and Costa Rica found ways to tackle the climate and biodiversity crises head on. All these historically difficult periods had one thing in common: they forced their citizens not just to hope for better but to work toward better, and people in these countries took it upon themselves to do so.

Rather than raise our hands in surrender as we face this avalanche of problems—problems that seem to multiply by the minute under the second Trump administration—we must look to these examples and take heart. The lesson is crystal clear: some of the most effective and longest-lasting solutions are forged in the darkest of times as we look up from the pits of despair and envision a way out. More importantly, it’s at times like these that we learn how not to fall back in. ✚

Natasha Hakimi Zapata is an award-winning journalist, translator, and university lecturer based in Europe.

Copyright © 2025 by Natasha Hakimi Zapata. This excerpt originally appeared in *Another World is Possible: Lessons for America from Around the Globe* by Natasha Hakimi Zapata. Published by The New Press. Reprinted here with permission.

CURRENT AFFAIRS

EDITORIAL STAFF

PUBLISHER
S. Chapin Domino

EDITOR IN CHIEF
Nathan J. Robinson

MANAGING EDITOR
Lily Sánchez

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
Alex Skopic

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR
Briahna Joy Gray

NEWS BRIEFING
Stephen Prager

BOARD OF DIRECTORS
Jessica Elliott
Nathan J. Robinson
Paul Waters-Smith

SECRETARY & TREASURER
Rosemary Matthews

DEVELOPMENT MANAGER
Sonya Eugene

ART DIRECTOR
Cali Traina Blume

DIGITAL EDITOR
John Ross

EDITOR AT LARGE
Yasmin Nair

CHIEF FILM CRITIC
Ciara Moloney

HOUSE ECONOMIST
Rob Larson

WITH YOU FOR LIFE



currentaffairs.org





DISASTER CAPITALISM COMES TO BARBUDA

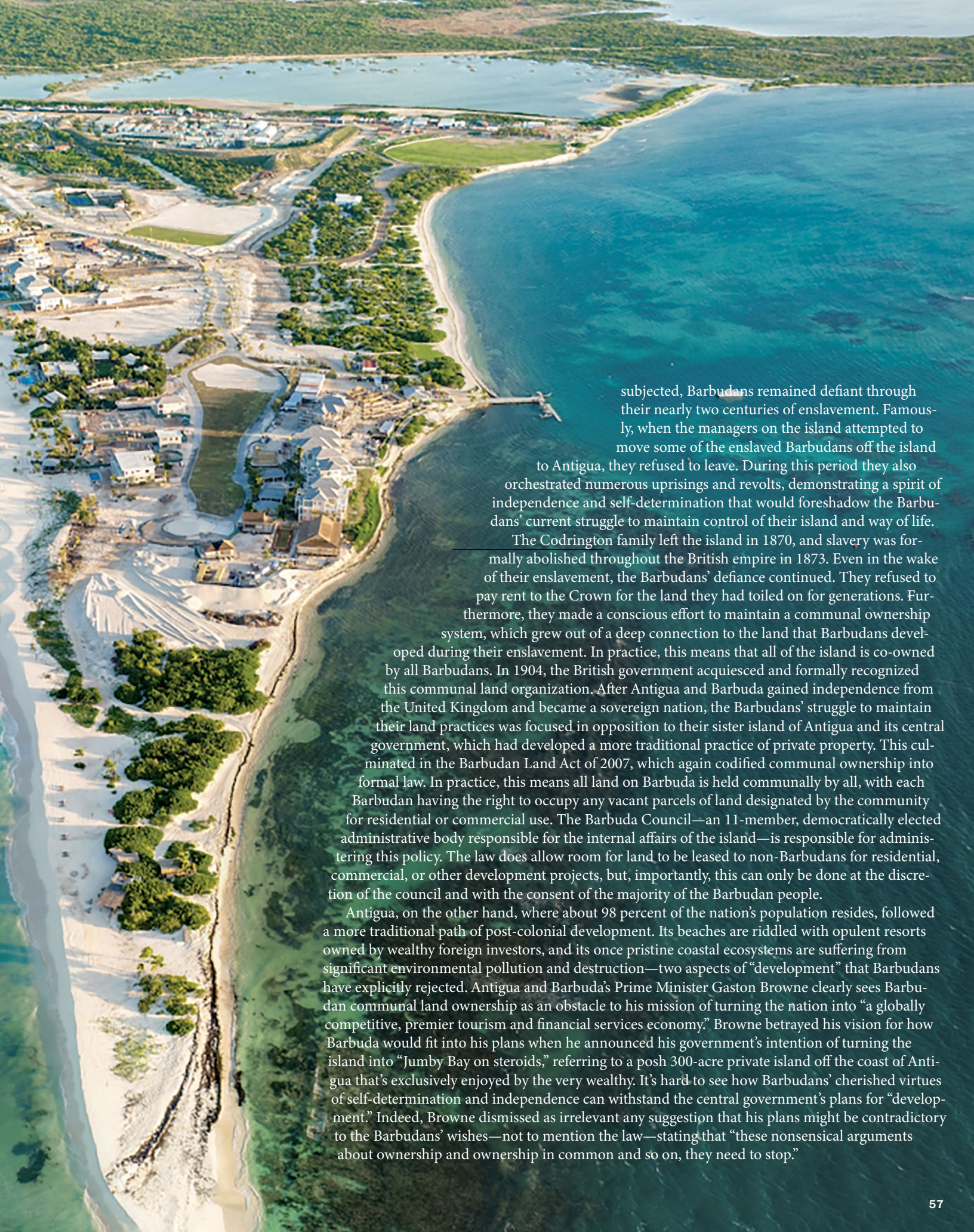
BY WILLIAM BRUNO

THE ACTOR ROBERT DE NIRO WAS RECENTLY INTERVIEWED in the *New York Times* Travel section, where he boasted about his latest business venture—an ultra-exclusive luxury resort complete with a swanky, Nobu-branded sushi restaurant. The interview took place on location at the very site where De Niro’s pet project is currently being constructed: the remote Caribbean island of Barbuda (not to be confused with either Bermuda or Barbados). It’s not hard to see why De Niro and other wealthy investors have the island in their crosshairs: it has a population of fewer than 2,000 people spread out over about 60 square miles of beautiful limestone terrain circumscribed by a ring of pristine beaches. The *Times* reporter gushed over the delicious irony of taking a helicopter for an afternoon meeting with a world-famous movie star at a world-famous restaurant on a “semi-deserted” beach. But Barbuda’s natural features and sparse population are not really what set it apart from other Caribbean islands. And that beach is not “semi-deserted” at all. In fact, it is the epicenter of a political struggle between the island’s local population on the one hand and a cadre of billionaire developers and political elites on the other.

Barbudans, who are mostly descendants of enslaved people brought to the island by British aristocrats, have shared the island in communal ownership since the mid 19th century, when

slavery there was ended. While other islands in the region have developed a more traditionally capitalist orientation in terms of private land ownership, Barbuda has maintained its unique model of communitarianism for generations. Unfortunately for Barbudans, however, developers from around the world, including at least one movie star, have been chomping at the bit to see the island’s remarkable experiment in communal ownership transformed into a playground for the mega-rich. Hurricane Irma, which caused widespread destruction and forced evacuations on the island in 2017, provided the perfect opportunity for those pushing for this transformation. The ongoing “development” of Barbuda in the wake of Irma is a brazen example of disaster capitalism, which, as Naomi Klein famously put it, “uses the desperation and fear created by catastrophe to engage in radical social and economic engineering.”

Along with the more populated island of Antigua, Barbuda makes up part of the two-island nation of Antigua and Barbuda. It was first colonized by the British Crown in 1678, and in 1685 the island was leased to the Codrington family, who used Barbuda as a support station for sugar plantations on the more fertile island of Antigua. The Codringtons brought enslaved people from Africa to Barbuda to work, and those people’s descendants now make up most of the present-day Barbudan population. Despite the brutally oppressive conditions to which they were



subjected, Barbudans remained defiant through their nearly two centuries of enslavement. Famously, when the managers on the island attempted to move some of the enslaved Barbudans off the island to Antigua, they refused to leave. During this period they also orchestrated numerous uprisings and revolts, demonstrating a spirit of independence and self-determination that would foreshadow the Barbudans' current struggle to maintain control of their island and way of life.

The Codrington family left the island in 1870, and slavery was formally abolished throughout the British empire in 1873. Even in the wake of their enslavement, the Barbudans' defiance continued. They refused to pay rent to the Crown for the land they had toiled on for generations. Furthermore, they made a conscious effort to maintain a communal ownership system, which grew out of a deep connection to the land that Barbudans developed during their enslavement. In practice, this means that all of the island is co-owned by all Barbudans. In 1904, the British government acquiesced and formally recognized this communal land organization. After Antigua and Barbuda gained independence from the United Kingdom and became a sovereign nation, the Barbudans' struggle to maintain their land practices was focused in opposition to their sister island of Antigua and its central government, which had developed a more traditional practice of private property. This culminated in the Barbudan Land Act of 2007, which again codified communal ownership into formal law. In practice, this means all land on Barbuda is held communally by all, with each Barbudan having the right to occupy any vacant parcels of land designated by the community for residential or commercial use. The Barbuda Council—an 11-member, democratically elected administrative body responsible for the internal affairs of the island—is responsible for administering this policy. The law does allow room for land to be leased to non-Barbudans for residential, commercial, or other development projects, but, importantly, this can only be done at the discretion of the council and with the consent of the majority of the Barbudan people.

Antigua, on the other hand, where about 98 percent of the nation's population resides, followed a more traditional path of post-colonial development. Its beaches are riddled with opulent resorts owned by wealthy foreign investors, and its once pristine coastal ecosystems are suffering from significant environmental pollution and destruction—two aspects of “development” that Barbudans have explicitly rejected. Antigua and Barbuda's Prime Minister Gaston Browne clearly sees Barbudan communal land ownership as an obstacle to his mission of turning the nation into “a globally competitive, premier tourism and financial services economy.” Browne betrayed his vision for how Barbuda would fit into his plans when he announced his government's intention of turning the island into “Jumby Bay on steroids,” referring to a posh 300-acre private island off the coast of Antigua that's exclusively enjoyed by the very wealthy. It's hard to see how Barbudans' cherished virtues of self-determination and independence can withstand the central government's plans for “development.” Indeed, Browne dismissed as irrelevant any suggestion that his plans might be contradictory to the Barbudans' wishes—not to mention the law—stating that “these nonsensical arguments about ownership and ownership in common and so on, they need to stop.”



Interview with Robert De Niro

Despite Gaston Browne's belittling of the Barbudans' centuries-old communal land practices as a "glorified welfare system," the 2007 Land Act dictates that he would need the approval of Barbudans to proceed with his agenda. The people of Barbuda have clearly stated their stance, and they are not interested in the prime minister's plans. Their reasons surely vary. For some, it might be a desire to protect the island's fragile ecosystem from the destruction that large-scale tourism and development often brings. For others, it could be an aversion to seeing large swaths of their ancestral homeland turned into places accessible only by the ultra-wealthy, who commute to and fro on private jets. At the very least, as Council Member Trevor Walker stated, development projects at this scale "should be done by negotiation with the laws on the books." Whatever the Barbudans' reasons are for deciding against this brand of wealthy foreign investment, that decision, by any measure—moral, legal, or otherwise—should be theirs to make.

ROBERT DE NIRO APPARENTLY DISAGREES. AS A founder of the development group Paradise Found LLC, he has been working with partners to build an exclusive hotel on the island since at least 2014. Due to local opposition, the project could never have passed the hurdles set up by the 2007 Land Act. Fortunately for De Niro, however, he had a staunch ally in Gaston Browne's government. In 2015, Browne pushed through a piece of legislation called the Paradise Found Act, which circumvented the council's authority and granted the developers the rights to build their hotel. Interestingly, the hotel is now being branded as a Nobu Inn, as opposed to its initial name, Paradise Found. One wonders if, in a flash of self-awareness, the actor and his partners recognized that a hotel bearing the same name as a piece of legislation responsible for dismantling a cherished communal land practice was a bit too 'on the nose'? In an effort to legitimize his Paradise Found legislation, Browne's government helped pass a separate referendum on the island, which apparently narrowly approved the development. However, there are significant questions about the legitimacy of the referendum, not the least of which is the fact that non-Barbudans were allowed to vote.

In the wake of the Paradise Found Act's passage, one opposition senator told the media that "a very bad precedent has been set." His concerns would prove prescient. In the decade since, several major development firms including the Abercorn Trust, Escape to (Barbuda) Inc., and others have started projects. There is also the Peace, Love & Happiness LLC and the Discovery Land Company, each partially owned by wealthy American businessmen who are jointly building a resort called the Barbuda Ocean Club as an "heirloom community where you can extend your legacy for generations." The legacy in question will presumably be of the non-Barbudan persuasion.

If the Paradise Found project started to erode the cultural and legal frameworks that protected the Barbudan people's sovereignty, it was a 2017 Category 5 hurricane and its aftermath that has pushed it to the brink. On September 6, 2017, Hurricane Irma touched down on Barbuda, bringing dangerously high winds and large-scale flooding. The central government of Antigua and Barbuda issued mandatory evacuation orders so that the island was mostly empty when the storm hit. What little infrastructure existed on the island—mostly modest homes and a few public buildings—sustained significant damage. These facts are indisputable. What is in dispute, however, is the motivation behind the government's evacuation order and the veracity of their claims that the island was "95% destroyed" and "unhabitable" after the hurricane. Many Barbudans feel that the government's post-disaster relief efforts were simply a pretense to keep them off the island while encouraging foreign developers to move in. As one Barbudan resident put it to me when I visited the island in the summer of 2024, "Irma was destructive, but the destruction of Barbuda was not [from] Irma." Prime Minister Browne himself more or less dropped all pretenses that the Barbudans' traditional way of life should be respected after Irma when he said "you cannot run a country on sentimentality. We're saddened by the extent of the damage, but there are opportunities to be exploited."

Browne would not miss this opportunity for exploitation. In the immediate aftermath of the storm, and while Barbudans were kept from returning to the island, the central government began working on legislation that would further gut the communal ownership provisions and ultimately repeal the 2007 Barbuda Land Act. It passed in December of 2017. The government now argued that moving away from communal land tenure toward private ownership and foreign investment was an essential part of "recovery." In other words, according to the Browne government, the motivation for this transition was purely humanitarian, with only the Barbudans' best interests in mind. For their part, the Barbudans were apparently expected to believe that it was pure coincidence that this "necessary step" in post-hurricane recovery was in lockstep with the pre-Irma "development" agenda of Browne and the billionaire developers. Robert De Niro played his part as well as ever, delivering one trademark performance after another on cable news and at the United Nations pleading with the world to stand with the "vulnerable" people of Barbuda and pledging to personally assist in the recovery efforts. During these public appearances, he made no mention of the hotel he and his partners already had in development. Again, a happy coincidence that advocating for the Browne government's version of "recovery" through private development would help facilitate his own "special" investment on the island.

If, as Browne and De Niro claimed, the focus of this post-Irma development was to improve the lives of the Barbudans, one might expect that the first priorities would be repairing homes, hospitals, and schools. Not so. Instead, the first major construction to begin on the island, during the forced evacuation order and just days after the storm, was a new airport—one that was specifically designed to accommodate private jets and aimed at “attracting the luxury traveler and private jet owners from around the world.” Meanwhile, most Barbudans were still picking up the pieces of their shattered lives. Seven years after the storm, as I walked around the island, I was shocked to see many Barbudans still living in houses never fully repaired, with tarpaulin roofs bearing the worn logos of the NGOs that placed them in Irma’s aftermath. The crumbling roads used by most Barbudans, wrecked by the storm, have only been made worse by the massive construction trucks brought in by developers heading to and from their luxury hotel and residential projects.

ANOTHER MAJOR CONCERN BARBUDANS HAD WITH the initial post-Irma development was that the government had not done the proper environmental impact assessments to ensure that projects like the new airport would not damage the island’s unique and fragile ecosystems. There is also an Abercorn Trust Inc. development, started in 2020, which includes a 15,000-square-foot residential complex with swimming pools, tennis courts, and a helicopter pad sprawling over 114 acres. These are being built dangerously close to a protected wetland, which is a vital frigate bird sanctuary and a turtle nesting site. Another construction project being challenged by Barbuda land activists on ecological grounds is the aforementioned Barbuda Ocean Club, which is slated to consist of around 400 luxury residences, an 18-hole golf course, a beach club, and a natural gas storage facility on more than 600 acres, also on protected wetlands. Even the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has taken notice. They filed a report in 2022 expressing alarm that Barbuda’s wetlands were “at risk, with serious human rights implications, due to the construction of the Barbuda Ocean Club resort.” Furthermore, they mention concerns about “the quality and quantity of Barbuda’s groundwater, which could be further affected by the project, sand mining, and waste pollution.” For Barbudans, who have a deep historical and cultural connection to the island, the impending environmental damage must be agonizing.

The term disaster capitalism, coined by Naomi Klein in her influential 2007 book *The Shock Doctrine*, describes how those in power exploit a disaster to “consolidate and amplify their own power and resources, usually at the expense of the most disaster-affected people.” It is not a new concept; the phenomenon is probably as old as capitalism itself. In fact, there are many examples in which the specific goal of those in power has been to develop a profitable tourism industry. For example, in the aftermath of a 1998 hurricane in Honduras, developers conspired with the government to rob indigenous people of their land to develop Honduras as an ecotourism destination. In India after the 2004 tsunami, buffer zones were set up and deemed unsafe to inhabit, clearing the way for developers to start construction. It is hard to imagine a better application of the term than what is hap-

pening in Barbuda. The central government clearly embellished the humanitarian needs that supposedly compelled them to maintain a forced evacuation order for weeks while they started the construction of the airport. They, along with their celebrity investors, used the publicity the storm generated—as well as the sympathy for “the most vulnerable” (to use De Niro’s words)—to raise millions in investments from governments, aid agencies, and private citizens.

But the Barbudan Council was not included in the allocation and management of these funds, and they are rightfully suspicious about how the central government has used them. For example, the European Union provided a \$5.5 million grant meant to build 150 homes. As of 2024, only 91 small, barren concrete structures—which residents call “hurricane homes” and say barely qualify as livable—have been built. Even some donors have expressed concern about how the government has used the charitable funds. Steve Morgan, whose philanthropic group gave a \$1 million donation for relief efforts after the storm, stated he “would love to do more” but asked, “how can we trust when we give money to a government opened bank account and it doesn’t get used?” The truth is that the current government is not incentivized to repair the infrastructure that is most important for Barbudans’ daily life. That would only entrench the “nonsensical arguments about ownership” and wouldn’t be very lucrative. This is not to say that no infrastructure is being built. But it is not homes, schools, or hospitals. It is primarily mansions, hotels, and airports designed for private jets. This is why the irony of a glamorous Nobu sushi restaurant that caters to the world’s richest jetsetters being located on this little island, which so delighted the *New York Times* travel journalist, is likely not lost on the Barbudans.

As for the argument that the central government has made regarding communal land ownership being incompatible with effective disaster response and preparedness, this couldn’t be further from the truth. The Barbudans’ communal control of resources and strong social bonds are potent sources of resilience.

**BARBUDANS HAVE
THEIR OWN “HERITAGE
OF SOCIAL SOLIDARITY”
THAT HAS ENORMOUS
POTENTIAL TO RESPOND
TO CRISES.**

Despite the destruction caused by Hurricane Irma, their ability to provide each other with shelter and adequate food once they returned to the island was a testament to the effectiveness of this form of social relations. Beyond the inherent value in the Barbudan form of participatory governance, there are also practical advantages. In the uncertainty of a crisis, the adaptability and direct accountability that this structure offers can prove invaluable. One wonders how things may have been different if the millions of dollars in aid had been controlled by the Barbudan council, with its members drawn directly from the community.

Anarchist and radical democratic thinkers have long recognized these advantages. In fact, these scholars have coined the term radical resilience, which describes the “capacity of inhabitants to be active, aware, and engaged in realizing and developing their own resilience in the face of shared vulnerabilities during and after disasters.” Even more mainstream scientific literature emphasizes the efficacy of community engagement in times of crisis. An instructive example of these concepts can be found in Sudan, which is currently in the thrall of a bloody civil war that has resulted in limited access for traditional aid groups. Filling this void are community-based mutual aid groups that have spontaneously grown from preexisting grassroots organizations. They have set up “emergency rooms” which are providing vital services such as sheltering displaced people, supporting hospitals, and securing food and water supplies. These mutual aid groups did not appear in a vacuum but instead were made possible thanks to a “rich heritage of social solidarity in Sudan.” Barbudans have their own “heritage of social solidarity” that has enormous potential to respond to crises. Unfortunately, in the case of Irma, this potential was stymied by the central government and its ulterior motives.

AS CLIMATE CHANGE IS MAKING NATURAL DISASTERS, particularly hurricanes, more common, we are likely to see more and more disaster capitalism at work. And we need not look to remote islands to find examples. Consider the recent fires that ravaged Los Angeles. While much of the press coverage has focused on the wealthier areas like the Pacific Palisades, there are many working-class neighborhoods in places like Altadena that were decimated by the fires. Some residents of these communities are rightly concerned that reconstruction might accelerate gentrification and price them out of their neighborhoods. And disaster capitalism does not only rear its head in the aftermath of natural disasters, but war and genocide as well. President Trump’s flip-pant comments about a plan to ethnically cleanse the Gaza Strip so that developers could turn it into a “Riviera” is another prime, and particularly grotesque, example.

The Barbudans have maintained their resistance at every turn. They have partnered with legal organizations like the Global Legal Action Network (GLAN) to file lawsuits aimed at halting the land grab. Save Barbuda and other grassroots organizations are working to organize local and foreign advocates, and ordinary Barbudans are taking to the streets to protect their sovereignty. Those of us in the U.S. could do our part by putting pressure on some of the highly visible developers who have worked to cultivate otherwise respectable public images. For example, John Paul DeJoria, the American philanthropist



A map of the proposed Paradise Found Development

and co-owner of the development group Peace, Love & Happiness (PLH), fancies himself an environmentalist, even boasting about his environmental restoration of Barbuda. A coordinated boycott of his famed hair product company, Paul Mitchell, or his Patrón tequila brand, might draw enough attention to make him reconsider PLH’s controversial residential development projects. PLH’s work on the island is clearly in conflict with DeJoria’s purported goals of restoring the island’s “critical ecosystem” by “utilizing a hands-on approach involving the locals.” As for Robert De Niro—we could bring the Barbudans’ message across the Caribbean and confront the movie star by disrupting the glitz and glamor of his next red carpet appearance.

Barbudans’ struggle has implications that reach far beyond this small Caribbean island. Their communal land ownership and direct democracy stand as a centuries-old model for how communities all over the world could build their own form of “radical resilience” and control their own destinies. Unfortunately, this example is now at the risk of being wrecked on the shoals of disaster capitalism, all so that a cadre of wealthy elites can take private jets to eat sushi on a “semi-deserted” beach. This should, of course, bother anyone concerned with justice and human rights. But when I think about why this fight really matters, I’m reminded of a conversation I had with a Barbudan a few months ago. I posed to him some of the government’s claims about the development bringing greater economic opportunity for Barbudans. He looked at me and responded something to the effect of, “What opportunity? The opportunity for our children to become their servants. That is not the economic path we chose.” ✚



DOCTOR FABULOSO

WHAT'S IN YOUR FUTURE?

FORTUNE TELLER EXTRAORDINAIRE,
KNOWS WHAT'S COMING!

Nobody knows more than the mysterious Fabuloso, who uses magic and Marxian analysis to correctly prophesize what shall be! For just 25 cents you, too, can know the future - if you can handle it!

JOB IN AN
AMAZON
WAREHOUSE

CLIMATE
CATASTROPHE

KILLER
ROBOTS


KILLER
ROBOTS

CLIMATE
CATASTROPHE

CLIMATE
CATASTROPHE

YOU WILL BE
DEPORTED

WRESTLING WITH THE *CATASTROPHE* OF OUR TIMES



DR. CORNEL WEST, a philosopher, activist, and public intellectual, is a professor of philosophy and Christian practice at Union Theological Seminary. He also ran for president in 2024 as an independent candidate with academic and activist Dr. Melina Abdullah as his vice presidential running mate. He has written numerous books, including the 1993 bestseller *Race Matters*. In this interview, Dr. West discusses the nihilism gripping our ruling class, the failures of the Democratic Party, and why resistance requires moral courage, historical memory, and a radical commitment to love.

NATHAN J. ROBINSON

Dr. West, I wanted to talk to you in particular because you are a person I turn to for solace and encouragement in dark and bleak times. And that is what I think we are very much in. You are one of the few people in American public life who talks honestly and unashamedly about love. Recently, Vice President JD Vance said, essentially, that we don't really need to care that much about immigrants. He said that there's a Christian concept of the *ordo amoris*, the hierarchy of the people you're supposed to love. And he said that our first obligation is to love our family, then our fellow citizens, and then we can care about the rest of the world later. Essentially, we don't have to love the rest of the world. As I heard that, I thought of you. You have been such an advocate for and a spokesperson for the deepest concept of Christian love, of brotherhood, of humanity. What's your reaction when you hear that kind of Christian justification for, essentially, cruelty?

CORNEL WEST

It's the worst kind of rationalization of indifference. As the great Rabbi Joshua Heschel used to say, indifference is the very essence of what sin is—a cold heart and a callousness toward the suffering of others, especially the most vulnerable: the orphans, the widows, the motherless, the fatherless, the oppressed, the subjugated, the demeaned, the degraded. There was a philosophical doctrine called “self-referential altruism” that was put forward about 45 years ago, and the philosophers went at it tooth and nail because, of course, given the kind of narcissism that's not just in Vance but in all of us, we have to kill it every day. The great Goethe says you've got to wake up and kill the worst inside of you in order to win what he called freedom and existence, and he's right about that.

Of course, Christians talk about learning how to die every day. When [Catholic Worker activist and anarchist] Dorothy Day wrote her eulogy for Martin Luther King Jr., she said that he learned how to die every day. What does that mean? That means dealing with the hatred and the envy and the greed and the resentment inside of each and every one of us in order to emerge with courage. And one of the distinctive features of the decline of the American empire—and it's a sad thing because we're watching it in real time: the decay, the decline, the dissolution—is spiritual and moral cowardliness, the civic cowardliness. And so we can talk about a huge military and about how the economy is doing, but if your political system is not predicated on a civic virtue and courage to reach out and be concerned about others, then the political system is a house of cards. James Madison

understood that you can't proceed without civic virtue. We know that John Adams said the same thing. These are not the most revolutionary thinkers around, but they got some insights, brother.

ROBINSON

When you talk about waking up every day and killing the worst that's inside you, it strikes me that Donald Trump is someone who essentially flips that doctrine on its head. He wakes up every day and celebrates the worst that is inside him and says, no, you should embrace it. You should lean into it. You should act upon all of your worst impulses, and you should do so unashamedly. You should never apologize. In fact, Vance reacted very negatively when someone suggested that a racist employee at the Department of Government Efficiency should be rehired. And they said, shouldn't he apologize first? And Vance suggested that even apologizing for a racist statement was a form of what he called “emotional blackmail.” The White House recently posted for Valentine's Day a message, “Roses are red, violets are blue, come here illegally, and we'll deport you,” and they posted a video of someone being shackled for a deportation flight. If there's a doctrine of taking these worst impulses and destroying them, you could really go in the exact opposite direction, and now that is what those who are in power in this country [seem to be doing].

WEST

I think you're absolutely right, brother. Thucydides was a favorite writer of Nietzsche, and both of them put a premium on the centrality of war and strength and the relative feebleness of trying to create interruptions in the history of the species dominated by war, dominated by oppression, dominated by exploitation. And it's a very important juxtaposition to see somebody like Trump. You'd have to get partly into his own formation and so on. He had a very precious mother from Scotland, Mary Anne, who made it here penniless. And she used to tell him, I just hope you don't grow up to be somebody that I'm ashamed of. I just hope you grow up to be somebody I can be proud of, not based on the money you have but based on who you are. Now, she's coming out of a working-class situation, in a highly impoverished situation in Scotland. As an immigrant, she comes to the United States and meets Fred, Trump's father. But Trump has this element in his past that he continually pushes aside because Roy Cohn and a whole host of others, including his father, had socialized him into a “might makes right” view of the world. The Ten Commandments mean nothing. The eleventh commandment, “Thou shalt not get caught,” is the only important one. Life is a matter of

survival of the slickest and the richest and the smartest.

Now, he's not all alone [in this thinking]. In the history of our species, there have been 70 empires. The United States is the 68th empire in the history of [the] species. The United States is unique because it denies it's an empire. And therefore you can't understand the truth. That's what "American idealism" is to me [referring to Noam Chomsky and Nathan J. Robinson's book, *The Myth of American Idealism: How U.S. Foreign Policy Endangers the World*].

How does U.S. foreign policy endanger the world? You deny you're an empire. You deny the power that you exert and the violence that you promote. In the name of what? Innocence. James Baldwin [said] that innocence itself is a crime. And so Trump is a manifestation of the worst of the U.S. empire. But he has had elements inside of him that he had thoroughly ignored, and he ends up choosing to be a gangster.

Now, a gangster is different than a hypocrite. Hypocrisy is the tribute that vice plays to virtue. Hypocrites have standards, they just violate them. Gangsters have no standards. They say anything and do anything and think they can get away with it. No accountability, no responsibility. That's the history of Trump. That's also the history of the U.S. empire in terms of its attempt to shape the world in its own image and interest.

So then here comes those prophetic ones. What does Melville say in *Moby-Dick*? America, you are addicted to self-destruction, and if you don't learn how to muster the courage to think critically and to love and be concerned about the least of these, just like the Pequod, the ship of that powerful epic he wrote at 32 years old, you're going under. And how does it end? Ishmael is on top of what? A coffin. The ship goes under. That self-destruction overwhelms the moral and spiritual forces.

But those of us who are committed to the moral and spiritual forces will hold on. See, I come from a people, brother, who've been on intimate relations with catastrophe, calamity, monstrosity—244 years of the most barbaric slavery of modern times and then another hundred years of neo-slavery, of Jim and Jane Crow, lynching Black folk every two and a half days for 50 years. How do we generate some courage to love, courage to hope, courage to resist, courage to remember, courage to have a reference for something bigger than our egos? Moral and spiritual cultivation. How do you cultivate? By example, not by textbook. No, not by words on paper. There are beautiful words on paper in the U.S. Constitution. It was pro-slavery in practice. We're talking about actual examples—practices. That's the key thing, though, brother.

ROBINSON

One of the things I appreciate about you, and I think that everyone who meets you and interacts with you notices, is that you do put a lot of effort into, on an interpersonal level, spreading joy. In your daily practice, you call people "brothers and sisters." There's a political purpose to that. It's not just a little Cornel West eccentricity. It is something that you do that, on a small level, makes people feel something.

WEST

I think a lot of it has to do with just being the son of Clifton and Irene West, and [having] spent my [childhood at] Shiloh Baptist Church. A certain deep Christian formation and cultivation, there's no doubt about that. Like when I encountered the sick white brothers down in Charlottesville [in 2017], and they came up to me and said, "I can't stand the fact you call everybody brother, I can't stand that." And I said, "Oh, really, brother?" And he said, "Oh, you called me brother, too." I said, "That's right. I think God

loves you just like God loves me, but I'm a free Black man, and I do not ask for your permission as to who I love, how I laugh, or how I struggle or how I resist."

There's a freedom in that love, but it's a matter of trying to stay in contact with the humanity of others. The Klan and neo-Nazis choose to be thoroughgoing gangsters. There's no doubt about that. But I also acknowledge I've got gangster proclivities in me. I have to fight it every day, and they're still my foes. They're still my enemy. But there are ways of staying in contact with the humanity of even your enemy.

ROBINSON

Well, this is what I would love for you to expand upon a little bit. I think that many people who have Trump-supporting relatives struggle with the question of how to love someone who is supportive of something you find repellent and cruel and monstrous. How do you engage with—should you engage with—people you know who are far on the right? Should you sit down with them? To what degree should you collaborate with them? Should you shun them entirely? You think a lot about this. You sit down with people. You had a long conversation with Candace Owens, someone who I think many on the left would find completely repellent. But you sat down, and you had a cordial conversation.

At the same time, you always know your enemy. You always know what you're fighting, and you still talk in the language of having an enemy and knowing that there are forces of evil in the world. You are not someone who says, well, we need to put aside all of our differences. Barack Obama famously said, there's no red America or blue America, there's just the United States of America, and we just need to set aside our differences and all get along. But that's not what you're doing.



Dr. Cornel West speaks at a Refuse Fascism rally in Union Square in New York City on October 19, 2019

WEST

That's right. You're absolutely right about that, brother. You probably know the new book that I've been blessed to put out with my dear brother Robbie George called *Truth Matters: A Dialogue on Fruitful Disagreement in an Age of Division*. It just dropped a couple of weeks ago, and we got a chance to lay this out. He's a conservative Republican brother, I am who I am, and we're able to revel in each other's humanity even as we have these disagreements. But part of it has to do with the fact that you recognize that everyone is going through a process, and everyone can change. They can change from better to worse. They can change from worse to better. And so you never foreclose anybody's possibility of undergoing change. That's one thing. All of us are in process.

On the other hand, we're not naive, not at all. I love how you call brother

Chomsky a sincere idealist. I love that.

[Always being] open to people undergoing change, that's very important. A number of our comrades started off in a very different place. A number of folk who used to be with us got cowardly. They sold out. Went centrist. Some of them went further to the right, not for an intellectual reason but just for money. Well, we know human beings are human beings, but we're all, in the end, brother, made in the image of a loving and mighty God that [gives us] a dignity and a sanctity. Now, if you don't believe in God, you can just say, well, human beings have a dignity and a sanctity that's never reducible just to their politics.

ROBINSON

You must have encountered criticism from people on the left for collaborating with someone like Robert George, who is staunchly anti-abortion, for instance, and

who is a strong conservative Christian. Or, when Ron DeSantis was proposing getting the classics back into education, and you said, well, that part of his agenda is good, many leftists said, Cornel West is praising Ron DeSantis—don't you understand you are naive about the right-wing political project? I've said that you're not naive about it. So how do you respond when people say things like, what are you doing praising something Ron DeSantis is doing? What are you doing collaborating with someone like Robert George, who celebrates the taking away of a woman's right to choose?

WEST

Well, I just tell them that I have deep opposition to my dear brother Robert's position, and we fight it out. But we also overlap on other things. We both have concerns about anti-poverty programs. So, we're concerned about children once

they've arrived. So many folk who talk about abortion don't say a mumbling word about the levels of child poverty. Child poverty is one of the crimes against humanity in America, among a whole host of others such as mass incarceration. We can go on and on and on. But I wouldn't call it a collaboration, though, brother. I would call it more of a Socratic conversation that tries to see where we overlap. Now, your sister Lily Sánchez, who wrote that inspiring piece—

ROBINSON

About your presidential campaign.

Africa, Asia, and what have you. And if, in fact, it looks like the right-wing talking about excellence in Europe, I'm not right-wing if I talk about my love for Anton Chekhov and Herman Melville and William Shakespeare at all. I'm a free man. I'm speaking my mind. I'm being honest. I'm being candid.

ROBINSON

Well, one of the things people may notice when they hear you talk or read your writing is that you do drop references from so many varied sources from music, literature, and philosophy. And it strikes

NIHILISM IS PROBABLY THE MAJOR MOVEMENT ON THE GLOBE, AND IT GOES HAND IN HAND WITH FASCISM.

WEST

Exactly. She laid this out very well. She [essentially] said, look, brother West is a free man, and he chooses various issues that mean much to him. And if somebody says [the classics such as] Shakespeare or Dante or Melville and so forth are to be marginalized, I say, no—that's like marginalizing John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Louis Armstrong, and Sarah Vaughan. We're talking about levels of excellence that must never, ever be degraded. And it comes in a number of different forms. We could talk about it with Rabindranath Tagore in India. We could talk about it in terms of Chinua Achebe in Africa. There are certain forms of excellence that we must always affirm, no matter where it comes from. It can come from Europe,

me, as I was going back through your writing, that so much of your kind of broad intellectual project has been an attempt to fuse various things that people don't always see as being part of one thing. You draw out these rich spiritual, musical, philosophical, and literary traditions to show human beings what we have produced and to encourage us to see it all as part of something that everyone's entitled to enjoy. Everyone's entitled to enjoy the blues, and everyone's entitled to enjoy Shakespeare. Tell us a little bit more about this effort. I do think this is something that's true of your writing that isn't true of most people. Most people are not going to put William James and John Coltrane and Shakespeare in the same paragraph.

WEST

You are very kind, brother. I was just blessed to give the Gifford Lectures in Scotland, which is a magnificent lecture series. And it was on "A Jazz-soaked Philosophy for our Catastrophic Times: From Socrates to Coltrane." And those six lectures try to do exactly what you just talked about, but it has to do with just me trying to be true to myself, because I am who I am and because people have poured so much into me. I got the Shiloh Baptist Church. I got the Black Panther Party. I got Harvard College with John Rawls and Robert Nozick and Judith Shklar, who talked about the centrality of cruelty. I've got Princeton with Richard Rorty.

ROBINSON

And Marxism, of course, was an influence on you.

WEST

The Black Panther Party introduced me to Marxism and the study of Frantz Fanon and others. That's been an integral part. But it's just a matter of trying to get at the truth. See, that's the fundamental thing. Is it true that capitalism is a system with asymmetric relations of power in the workplace, where greedy bosses can get away with no accountability as workers barely make it from week to week? Absolutely right. It's not an "ism" at all. We know about the truth. You don't have to be a Marxist to accept that. And so it is. But anarchism is the same way—there's the anarchist suspicion of the nation-state and its monopoly on instrumentalities of violence, and that nation-state, whoever tends to head it, becomes corrupt. And no doubt, power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Noam Chomsky is right. Peter Kropotkin is right. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon is right. So it's just a matter of the truth, and I'm just being true to my-

self. All these things have shaped who I am. From the street to Marvin Gaye to Curtis Mayfield to Plato [and others]. These are people who mean much to me in terms of who I am, and I would be untrue to myself if I acted as if they don't mean anything to me. And one has to be true to whatever self that we've been able to shape over time, because there's no self that's isolated. Every self has been shaped by other selves. And I'm sure you were viewed in the same way, in terms of who you are and all the voices that have been inside of you that shaped you in such a way that you have been able to find your distinctive voice of *Current Affairs* and be such a force for good.

ROBINSON

I was going back to *Race Matters* from 1993, so over 30 years ago now. The book made you a public name in America. Up until then, you had been doing a lot of academic writing and were widely respected as a philosopher, but this was a public-facing book. You wrote,

In these downbeat times, we need as much hope and courage as we do vision and analysis. We must accept the best of each other, even as we point out the vicious effects of our racial divide and the pernicious consequences of our maldistribution of wealth and power. We simply cannot enter the 21st century at each other's throats, even as we acknowledge the weighty forces of racism, patriarchy, economic inequality, homophobia and ecological abuse [at our necks].

I feel like we did not heed that prophetic warning, and we did, in fact, enter the 21st century rather at each other's throats, at least in the United States of America.

WEST

I think you're right about that, brother. You're absolutely right about that. And in my next text, *Democracy Matters*, I put ni-

hilism at the very center of it: the nihilism of the ruling classes, of the professional elite, of the professional managerial strata, and how that was connected to the nihilism I was talking about in the hoods, in Black communities. Nihilism is probably the major movement on the globe, and it goes hand in hand with fascism. Nihilism is a view that might makes right, that there's no possibility of hope as it relates to poor people, as it relates to human beings relating to each other as human beings. All life is domination, manipulation, transaction, and everything is subject to being not just sold but being used and abused. So it's just as bleak a nightmare as you can get.

We see it in Hungary, and we see it around the world. But it's triumphant now. Martin Luther King Jr. said at the Nobel Peace Prize [ceremony] in 1964, "Right, [temporarily] defeated, is more powerful than evil triumphant." Martin, where did that come from, brother? Is that naive idealism? No. He said, I'm describing a love and a courage and a joy in me that the world can never take away, that the world can never crush.

ROBINSON

You are the editor of a volume of Martin Luther King Jr.'s writings, *The Radical King*. Nobody is more abused in terms of their reputation in the 21st century, perhaps, than Martin Luther King Jr. Nobody is more misrepresented or misunderstood. The right has certainly tried to appropriate King, their own version of King—the King they could use to bash DEI and say, but don't judge people on the color of their skin. That's all they want to know. And one of the things you've tried to do is explain that Martin Luther King Jr., in fact, had a deep, comprehensive, and broad vision of social justice. It was a democratic socialist vision, and it is one that we can turn to in bleak times.

WEST

Martin Luther King Jr. received a call that he had been chosen to receive the Nobel Prize, and he said, no, give it to Norman Thomas because he was a member of the Socialist Intercollegiate Organization at Boston University as a Christian socialist. Norman Thomas meant the world to him. He wrote an essay called "The Bravest Man I Ever Met" about Norman Thomas. So, yes, you're right about the democratic socialist element, but socialism was not the crucial thing for Martin. It was, how do you create a public life in such a way that citizens are able to live lives of decency and dignity and have some mechanisms of accountability for the asymmetric relation of power [between] greedy bosses and workers wrestling with wage stagnation? That was his question.

That question is still crucial these days. The neoliberals couldn't answer it because they allowed for the inequality to flourish. And here come the neofascists, who do what? Tell working people and poor people to scapegoat the most vulnerable rather than confront the most powerful. That any moral substance, any spiritual content of your politics, ought to be pushed aside. It's all about power. It's all about manipulation. It's all about who wins, who has the most money, who has the most access to resources. No, Martin says, I believe that, in fact, looking at the world through a moral and spiritual lens is the only way, even though it seemed weak and feeble because it only creates these moments of interruption, given the dominant tendencies of the species, which has, in fact, been those of organized greed and weaponized hatred and institutionalized indifference to the vulnerable. That's the history of the species. There's no doubt about that. When Hegel said, "history as a slaughter-bench," he's right about that.

ROBINSON

We've talked about neofascism and about Trump as the embodiment of this "might makes right" ideology, this nihilistic idea that there are no values that you need to respect except getting what you can and keeping it—following, as you said, the 11th commandment. However, people might say, that's why people should have voted for Kamala Harris. But, of course, you have been a staunch critic of the Democratic Party as being inadequate, hypocritical, and failing to understand and acknowledge these deep injustices. Of course, you ran a third party presidential campaign, and people said to you many times, but you're going to get the greater evil into power. We need to all rally behind the lesser evil. You rejected that logic, and so you must see that there's a very deep problem with the so-called opposition. Elaborate on that.

WEST

Part of the sadness, my brother, is that once the Democratic Party unjustly and unfairly made it impossible for brother Bernie Sanders to gain access to leadership, it was clear to me that the party was beyond redemption. It meant that the party was so beholden to its benefactors, its donors, the corporate elite, that the progressives in the Democratic Party would be marginal and on the fringe, just like Bernie and the Squad and so forth. We'll never be able to really have leadership over the Democratic Party. I said we've got to look somewhere else. Continually finding ourselves supporting, let's say, a Kamala Harris, means genocide, which is the crime against crime against crimes of humanity. You can't say a word about poverty. It's only the middle class you talk about. You can't say a word about mass incarceration, which still plays such an ugly role in the shaping of poor people, disproportionately Black and brown. You can't say a mumbling word, a substantive

word, about the ecological crisis.

So I've said to myself, if this is all the U.S. empire can present when it's in the middle of crisis, that it denies its neofascism and neoliberalism, then we've got to look another way. We have no other alternative. If you're concerned about truth, justice, and love, we've got to look another way. And what did those in American history do in the 19th century when they had to choose between two slaveholders? They formed another party, and it looked as if they were not just on the fringe but the kind of lunatic fringe, these abolitionists and so forth. Well, not really. They had to tell the truth about the evil in the society.

ROBINSON

You've been a staunch critic for a long time of America's elite institutions, even its liberal institutions. You have famously taught at all the top Ivy League universities. But you've also been critical. In 2021, when you left Harvard, you pointed out that their commitment to their professed values of "veritas" was shaky, to understate it. You've also pointed out hypocrisy on Palestine. You are someone who has seen more of the [inner workings] of these institutions than most people will ever get to see. Most of these institutions—top universities—consider themselves to be the liberal defenders of culture and decency and democracy against an uncultured boor like Donald Trump who is destroying our democracy. You say, well, hang on a minute, Harvard University is not exactly pure itself.

WEST

Absolutely. Part of it, my brother, is that all the institutions in the American empire have become so commodified, and higher education has become commodified and corporatized. So it became very difficult for faculties to wield their power in the name of the life of the mind. It became a

matter of money, money, money, position, position, position, status, status, status. That's how you ended up producing the meritocracy. The students themselves come in looking for a career and profession rather than critical engagement and [and understanding of] what it means to be a force for good as a citizen. And so, once the market takes over, you end up with the life of the mind being tertiary.

When [Harvard President] Larry Summers and I had our big fight back in 2001, it had nothing to do with the life of the mind. He was [saying], West hasn't published that [much]—I published 13 books. Quit lying, brother. Trump's not the only one who lies. Then we had another fight again 18 years later. It had nothing to do with the life of the mind. It had to do with the fact that I was a faculty advisor for the Students for Justice for Palestine and also faculty advisor for the gospel choir at the same time. They were not going to allow this so-called pro-Palestinian presence on the faculty [to have] this kind of visibility. And it was very clear to anybody who could see that.

ROBINSON

I did my PhD at Harvard. And one of the things that was striking to me was the idea that being political necessarily meant that your scholarship was weak, and to speak to a broad audience also meant that your scholarship was weak. I once wrote a paper about landlord-tenant court in Boston, and my advisor said, it seems like you're on the side of the tenants, and that means that this paper is weak because you're clearly biased. And I said, well, no, everything I've said is true. And the criticisms that were launched at you were kind of interesting: the idea that the more you engage with the public and speak on things that really deeply matter in a moral sense, the more you diminish instead of improve your [quality] as a scholar—that it makes you frivolous or trivial or some-

how reduces the quality of your thought.

WEST

Well, but the thing is, though, brother, when you get figures like Samuel Huntington, Daniel Moynihan, or Henry Kissinger, these are public intellectuals.

ROBINSON

Those guys get to do it.

WEST

Yes, exactly. The stature and the culture—people that defer to them are justifying the power of wealth, justifying hierarchies that are illegitimate, and we can go on and on and on. So it really depends on [whose side you are on]. If I came out for the property owners, it would have been very different. Absolutely. But I want to just speak directly to you, brother, because I think you play a very important role in the culture. Do not get discouraged. Be encouraged and of great courage. Your voice matters. Your witness matters. And as a young, serious intellectual, engaging the life of the mind, [you should] find joy in the life of the mind, not just in the instrumental way and using ideas for politics—there's a joy in the life of the mind. Never apologize for that. That's like John Coltrane apologizing because he's playing the saxophone, a European instrument. He loves playing that instrument. But in that love of playing that instrument, he also knows he can inspire and illuminate and instruct people to be more courageous forces for good in solidarity with the poor around the world, in every culture and every continent. And so we're in a very dim and grim time, but we have to have a blues sensibility. And the blues is about wrestling with catastrophe but never allowing catastrophe to have the last word. We have a love and a courage and a joy inside of us that can never be taken away. They can try to take us to jail because we need to engage in some serious resistance. I loved

your piece on resistance, though, brother. [...] The powers that be are trying to break our spirits. And our spirits should never, ever be broken. That's what love is. It could never be crushed, brother. Never.

ROBINSON

You speak to me, and obviously, I need to hear this a lot myself. But our readers, importantly, write in and say, I really do feel that it's not like it was in 2017, when there were vast street protests. There seems to be a lot of Trump fatigue. A lot of people [seem to want to lie down] and

that there's victory. But this is [...] the kind of movement you choose to be in and be a part of, and that is what it is to bear witness. That's what it is to have a calling. That's what it is to have a vocation rooted in a tradition of remembrance and reverence and resistance. And T.S. Eliot says, "Ours is in the trying. The rest is not our business." We're not in control of history. We got a life to live, and if that life leads us to hit the street and go to jail and get killed, that's the life we live. And we're going to put a smile on grandma's face, because she wanted us to do what? Live a

WE HAVE TO BE REVOLUTIONARIES IN THE DEEPEST SENSE.

just let the steamroller roll over them. And it is our job as a left magazine to rally the troops, to exhort them. [What's] great about your work—and one of the reasons that I encourage people to read it—is that you are deeply engaged with history and the history of social struggles. You can look over hundreds of years, and you can look at all these people who struggled in far more dire circumstances than face today—people who faced an even greater risk of death in the age of lynching, in the age of slavery—who were able to persist and resist nonetheless. And so, the study of history can actually bring quite a lot of consolation and encouragement to us at the moment.

WEST

That's very true. But at the same time, Keats talked about [how] there are no guarantees, ever. There are no guarantees that we will win. There are no guarantees

life of integrity, honesty, and decency. She didn't say, go out and win every victory.

We have to be revolutionaries in the deepest sense. And revolution is about what? The sharing of power. Too many people are powerless: the sharing of resources. Too many people are poor: the sharing of respect. Too many people are disrespected: in the end, the sharing of love. Too many people don't have love, brother. And that's a life for each one of us in community, in struggle. And if the whole planet goes up, which it might—ecological catastrophe, nuclear catastrophe, as real as a heart attack—we did all that we could do. And people said, well, brother Nathan, you were true to your calling, my brother. Brother Cornel, you were true to your calling. That's exactly right. ♣

Transcript edited by Patrick Farnsworth.

POET'S

BY W.D. EHRHART

THE USELESSNESS OF WORDS

*for the innocent in Gaza,
the Occupied Territories,
and throughout the world*

How does one respond to such destruction with a poem? Can poetry outweigh a 2,000-pound Mark-84 bomb, save the life of a single wounded child, put an end to the hatred and madness and inhumanity of those who do the butchery? Might just as well be pissing up a rope as thinking poetry can matter where it really counts there among the dead and dying, armless, legless, homeless, starving, families shattered, orphaned children, misery without hope of ever ending.

And here I sit in safety half a world away. My tax dollars buying bombs my government supplies to those who do the killing. How can one be silent in the face of such ignoble cruelty? How can one just turn away as if it wasn't happening, as if I weren't responsible, as if I didn't care.

I suppose I could refuse to pay my taxes, get myself arrested doing civil disobedience in front of Independence Hall, write letters to my representatives in Congress. But we've done all that and more for more than half a century and yet the killing just goes on and on.

One finds it hard, indeed impossible, to dodge concluding that humanity is, taken on the whole, just inhumane, stark raving mad, beyond redemption.

I'd like to think I'm wrong, but this poem is all the evidence that I can offer.

ALLEY

About the POETS

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* and *Wolves in Winter*.

Darius Simpson is a New Afrikan writer, educator, farmer, and skilled living room dancer from Akron, Ohio. Much like the means of production, he believes poetry must be used for the positive social, political, economic development, and collective benefit of those struggling under oppression. Free The People! Free The Land!

BY DARIUS SIMPSON

THEY PASSED ANOTHER BILL AND WE STILL AIN'T BUCK

i'm as corny as i ever been on my off days. cushioned by a reclined view of the enemy's secrets. laid back from my fire alarm antics. i don't advocate violence any more than a backboard advocates a rebound. i'm shocked darker people didn't storm the capitol first. shocked more civilians didn't storm it once we saw it was possible. but i guess that's the benefit of rockin a badge and takin it off to bite the hand. sedition is safe when you unmake for the state in your day job. terrorism is only terrorism when you can point to brown skin or a brown flag. a terrified ruling class is good news for doctor visits. people in high places forget gravity. senate wrote a *yo momma* joke so foul it killed yo momma. instead of condolences they sent a bomb squad to inspect your electronics. congress walked off wit yo last \$15 and looked your dead corpse in the eye. your representative spit in your coffee in front of you then poured it on your childhood pet. the police ran off wit the roof of the school. lieutenant says *we're doing all we can*. didn't specify if that means more roofs will go missing. didn't explain why deputies were selling shingles out of undercover vehicles for the low. it's hard to accept a culprit paid to protect you. but look around. bloody fingerprints on the public acid fountains means someone needs to be slapped. means you're underwater. means you're sinking. fast.

BY DARIUS SIMPSON

APOLITICAL POETS HIDE BEHIND THEIR IDENTITY

after Otto René Castillo

for cover from UV rays. from history. from the reflection off of lake water. from critique. for a grant to buy curtains for the sedimentary rock they live under. apolitical poet wants a Black president so they can excuse away four years of death-dealing. so they can cover their ears when faced with occupational genocide from the oval. apolitical poet wrote the manual on form. attends the craft talk front row. teaches ten classes a week to unsuspecting undergraduates. apolitical poet says not everything is about politics until it's time to keynote. apolitical poet loves Beyonce at the super bowl but can't name a single Black Panther imprisoned. apolitical poet knows all the handshakes but won't teach you unless you apply for the fellowship. unless you get rejected three years in a row. apolitical poet so Black their poetry is white. apolitical poet so smart they say little of relevance to working people. apolitical poet architected a circle to gratify an insatiable ego. called it a workshop. apolitical poet let the last award go to their heart. or what's left of it. or what would be there if the academy hadn't sucked the blood dry. apolitical poet don't breathe. apolitical poet has a machine brain. semi-automatic trigger support for electoral politics. apolitical poet says FREE PALESTINE but believes zionism has a point. apolitical poet puppets revolutionary words when the riots start. apolitical poet says *now is not the time* as soon as the march is over. soon as it's safe to look away.

About the POETS

Celina Su's academic and creative work focuses on everyday struggles for collective governance. Her last book was the poetry collection *Landia*; her current book project centering radical democracy, *Budget Justice: On Building Grassroots Politics and Solidarities*, is forthcoming this fall from Princeton University Press.

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*.

QUART AND SU'S
POEMS WERE
CO-PUBLISHED AND
SUPPORTED BY THE
JOURNALISM
NON-PROFIT THE
ECONOMIC HARDSHIP
REPORTING PROJECT
(EHRP)



BY CELINA SU

LUNAR NEW YEAR

This year signifies transformation,
as if we could molt away
old skins and transform them
into expensive clutches,
into cold-blooded.

Closed off streets are, to
pedestrians, open streets.
Every inclusion another's exclusion.

A student, plaintive: "I'm a Black male
who voted for Trump. Is that the colonizer
mentality in me?"

I can't use three letters: D, E, or I.
Will my research be shut down
or embrace Chinese
netizens' euphemisms—
"youth in Asia" equals euthanasia.
Damn, you crazy, every time
I mean *democracy*.

Fight, flight, freeze, and fawn.
Also gather?
Deer are not evil.
They attack when hurt.

These long winter nights.
Let's write shorter lines.

BY ALISSA QUART

SNAKE YEAR

Democrats have no idea how to
respond. That's a headline,
not a joke. News cycle,
news cyclone. Ouroboros.

Our dogs look out windows, aged
women in the old country.
The most elegant bridges connect
the least glamorous nabes (Verrazzano).
Pocketbook voters; price of eggs.

One friend dubs another
"a trauma unit." FOMO
also an animal sentiment.

Those "who vote on inflation" appear
in news' photos, packed in
steamy delis. The cliché:
you're counted or
you're discounted.

Ophidian American fascist calls
his method "muzzle velocity."
An Iranian film made in secret, against
the regime, a forced indoors
aesthetic, as in my current
mood: I don't want to
leave my apartment.

Price of eggs. Ouroboros.

We are running out of money.
The rich running
for cover. This *really* is
the year of the snake

the Illustrators

KASIA KOZAKIEWICZ



53RD EDITION
COVER ART: JANET HILL