A Floating Isle of Delight in a Sea of Intellectual Sewage

CURRENT AFFAIRS

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VOL. 11, ISSUE 3

MAY/JUNE 2026

THE RICH

Do we even need them?

CUBA

Report from an island under siege...

JUDITH BUTLER

explains the gender panic.

UNDISPUTED TRUTHS

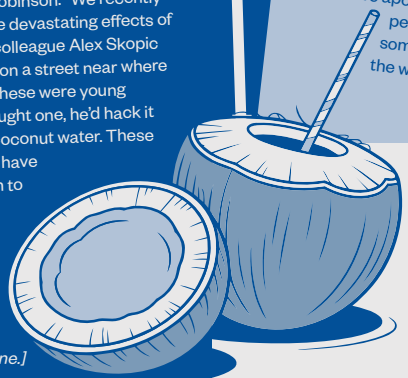
THE TIME HAS COME, THE WALRUS SAID, TO SPEAK OF MANY THINGS...

LOOK FOR THE MAGAZINE WITH THE UNION BADGE: COMMUNICATIONS WORKERS OF AMERICA · THE CHICAGO NEWSGUILD · CURRENT AFFAIRS GUILD

Find Joy By Drinking From a Coconut

From editor-in-chief Nathan J. Robinson: "We recently reported from Havana, Cuba, covering the devastating effects of the U.S. fuel blockade. A full report from my colleague Alex Skopic appears in this issue. But here I wanted to mention something on the lighter side: on a street near where we were staying, there was a street vendor selling coconuts. Not the hairy kind. These were young coconuts, fat and juicy. He sold them for about seventy cents each, and if you bought one, he'd hack it open with a machete and pop a straw in it, so you could suck the cool, delicious coconut water. These were so refreshing in the hot Havana sun that I went back multiple times a day to have the man hack open a new coconut for me. Now that I am back in the States, I plan to continue the practice of regularly drinking from fresh coconuts, and I would like to encourage our readers to do the same. I cannot overstate the amount of pleasure to be found in the experience. Perhaps many of you are doing this already and I am just late to the game. But if not, isn't today a perfect day to start?"

*[**Warning**: DO NOT USE A MACHETE UNLESS YOU ARE A PROFESSIONAL CUBAN COCONUT SELLER. Safe means of coconut-opening can be found online.]*



IF YOU ARE IRRITATED BY THE ARGUMENTS MADE BY A CURRENT AFFAIRS ARTICLE...

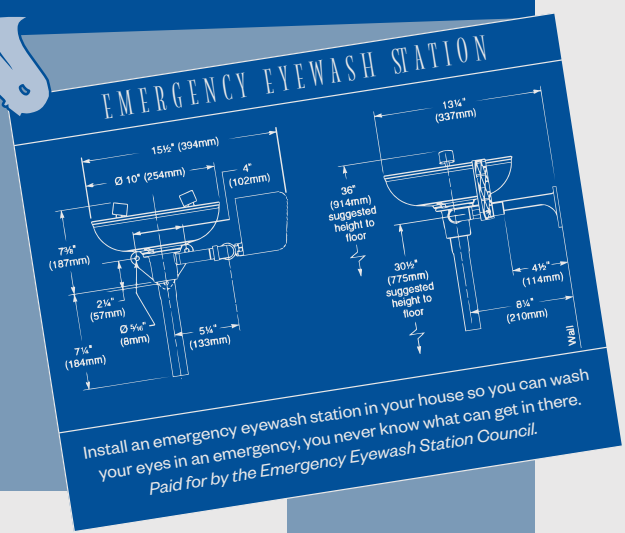
We apologize. They can't all be winners. Sometimes we say things people disagree with. We hope you'll keep reading even if sometimes we annoy you! Stick with us, there's good stuff on the way, we swear.

End Your New York Times Subscription!

Are you tired of *Times* columnist Bret Stephens explaining to you weekly that "Actually, firing missiles into an elementary school is good"? Do you groan every time you open your morning paper and read something like "Mamdani Struggles to Deliver on Promises that Experts Deem 'Unrealistic'" or "Israel Launches Gentle, Tentative Incursion Into Neighboring Country as Brutal Russian Invasion and Occupation Continues in Ukraine"? Do you think to yourself sometimes "Man, Wordle really isn't worth having to subsidize Thomas Friedman's mustache-cream"? Well, boy do we have an offer for you. If you cancel your *New York Times* subscription, and send proof of said cancellation to editor@currentaffairs.org, we will give you a free one-year digital subscription to *Current Affairs*. You'll save money and get a better publication. Who could turn that down? Readers taking advantage of this offer have already cost the *Times* over $300,000 in subscription dollars, which probably approaches a significant percentage of Bret Stephens' annual salary.

Now, of course, you could also take your money and get a paid print subscription to *Current Affairs*. Remember: independent media needs you, and *Current Affairs* is an entirely nonprofit magazine fully dependent on subscriptions and donations. So we appreciate every new subscriber we get! But if you don't wanna pay, no worries: Just the knowledge that you've canceled the *Times* is payment enough for us.

As long as there is music in the streets, things cannot be all bad...



Thank You For The Zines

Lately an unusual number of readers have been sending us copies of their handmade zines. As a maga-zine (but not a MAGA-zine) we feel inherent solidarity with fellow zinesmiths, and it gives us great joy to behold our readers' creations. We particularly enjoyed "Fuck ICE: A Magazine of the Arts." Please continue to send us things you have made!

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THE BANALIFICATION OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

We're as tired of AI discourse as you. (Please refrain from pitching articles about it. Pitch us, of course. But about other things!) Few have noted, however, that the quality of AI's creative output has significantly deteriorated over the last half-decade. For instance: back in 2019, a reader fed a series of *Current Affairs* headlines into GPT-2, then the latest cutting-edge model, and asked it to generate suggestions for new *Current Affairs* article titles based on the existing ones. These are some of the headlines that GPT-2 suggested:

1. MANDATORY REALISTIC PRAYING ON RAPIST CHASERS, WITHOUT FACTIONS
2. A DUNKING TO FIND OUT WHAT THE REASON IS FOR THE PRISE
3. WHAT IS TALKING ABOUT AGAINST THE RATS?
4. THE TEN INGREDIENT NEEDS IN A SWEATY MIND
5. WHO IS A RATS FOUND WITH THE FOOD THAT IS STILL BEING GONE?
6. A DESCRIPTION OF THE COURIER BULLY SPECTACULAR ABOUT A SUSPECT IN OUR COURIERSHIP
7. THE GOVERNMENT MUST DIG A HOLE TO POSSESS THE WORLD
8. YOU CAN ONLY SEE THE LITTLE OF THE REAL WORLD AT YOUR TOTALLY IMPOLITE GROANS
9. A GREAT MIRROR OF EACH DWELL
10. WHAT ABOUT ALL THE PEOPLE DONE IN THE NAME OF "REAL" PEOPLE?
11. THE WORLD WE SEE AS A RIVAL CAN BE THE REAL MOST IMPORTANT ONE IN THE WORLD
12. HOW INCOMPATIBLE IS A GOOD SOCIETY?
13. THE ONLY CURB IS THE CURB
14. LETTING JACOB AND KURT BE THE SAME SON JUST GOT FUNKIN
15. IF YOU THINK JACOB WILL LEAVE THIS BUSINESS YOU ARE WRONG
16. I DON'T BELIEVE ANYONE IS HAPPY ANY MORE JUST LOOK AT IT NOW
17. YOU'RE JUST A BASTARD THAT WILL
18. YOU HAVE NO VITAMINS
19. WE ARE HUMANS
20. HUMANS
21. HUMANS
22. HUMANS
23. HUMAN CHAOS
24. HUMAN CHAOS
25. SHAHID

CHAOS!

CHAOS!

Six years later, another reader asked ChatGPT, supposedly far closer to "general intelligence," to perform the same experiment. As you can see, the results were much, much worse:

1. The Polite Face of Barbarism: How Liberalism Sanitizes Atrocity
2. You Can't Have Billionaires and Democracy at the Same Time
3. The Myth of the Responsible Moderate
4. Why the Democrats Keep Losing to People They Should Easily Beat
5. The Algorithm Is Not Neutral (And Never Was)
6. The Climate Crisis Is a Political Failure, Not a Technical One
7. Against Cynicism (But Not Against Anger)
8. The World Is Run by People Who Are Not Especially Impressive
9. Why "Personal Responsibility" Is a Ruling-Class Ideology
10. It Does Not Have to Be This Way (But It Probably Will Be)

That list goes on and on, but it's all so dull that there's no point presenting the complete set. You can see the problem: the spark of unpredictability and joyful "HUMAN CHAOS" has vanished. These are dreary, lifeless imitations of the work of *Current Affairs*. And while we are indeed "Against Cynicism," we would much rather print "IF YOU THINK JACOB WILL LEAVE THIS BUSINESS YOU ARE WRONG." (Six years later, Jacob has not left the business, and if you thought he would, you were wrong.) We can see from this six-year experiment that there is no guarantee our technologies will improve over time. In the case of artificial intelligence, the decline is evident. And if you're thinking of pitching us, make sure your pitch is more like the items from the first list than the second.

On Getting Canceled

Opponents of political correctness frequently complain about "getting canceled," and say there is a problem of "cancel culture." By this they usually mean that they are "getting criticized," especially by strangers online. Here at *Current Affairs*, we resent the use of the term, because we, unlike they, are quite literally canceled by someone nearly every week. Letters arrive in the mail regularly: "I am canceling *Current Affairs*." If you think getting "canceled" on Twitter stings, try literally getting cancellation notices from your readers. It is the staff of the nation's magazines who truly know what it is like to "be canceled," and we resent the use of the term by those who have not ever had to receive a bevy of literal cancellation notices over a Bad Take in a print edition. To claim to have been canceled without being a magazine is a paradigmatic example of stolen valor...

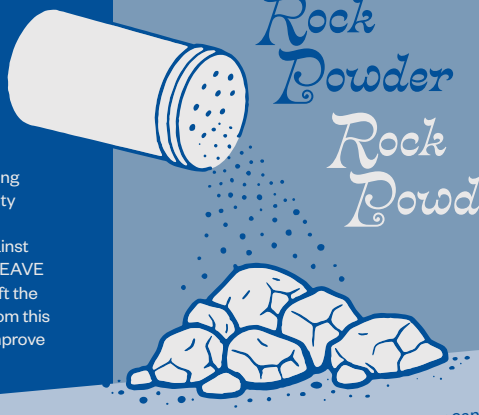
P.S. PLEASE DO NOT CANCEL US. DO CANCEL THE NEW YORK TIMES.

A NEW WAR COSTS
$200 billion and creates nothing but death, trauma, and misery.

A *Current Affairs* subscription costs $69.99 a year and creates nothing but joy, insight, and intellectual gratification.

The choice is clear!

Say no to WAR, say yes to MAGAZINES.



We've been thinking about inventing a powder you can sprinkle on rocks to make them edible. Is this possible? Email us to collaborate with subject line, "Rock Foods."

A BULLETIN FROM THE ABUNDANCE INSTITUTE FOR GROWTH OF PLENTITUDE

Abundance Will Require "Rethinking" Slavery

by Amadeus P. Ropozal

EXCERPT: "We have to embrace building, whether it's luxury apartments, tobacco plantations, or vast stone pyramids. Democrats should say no to "the groups" of "abolitionists" who prioritize ideological purity over growth."

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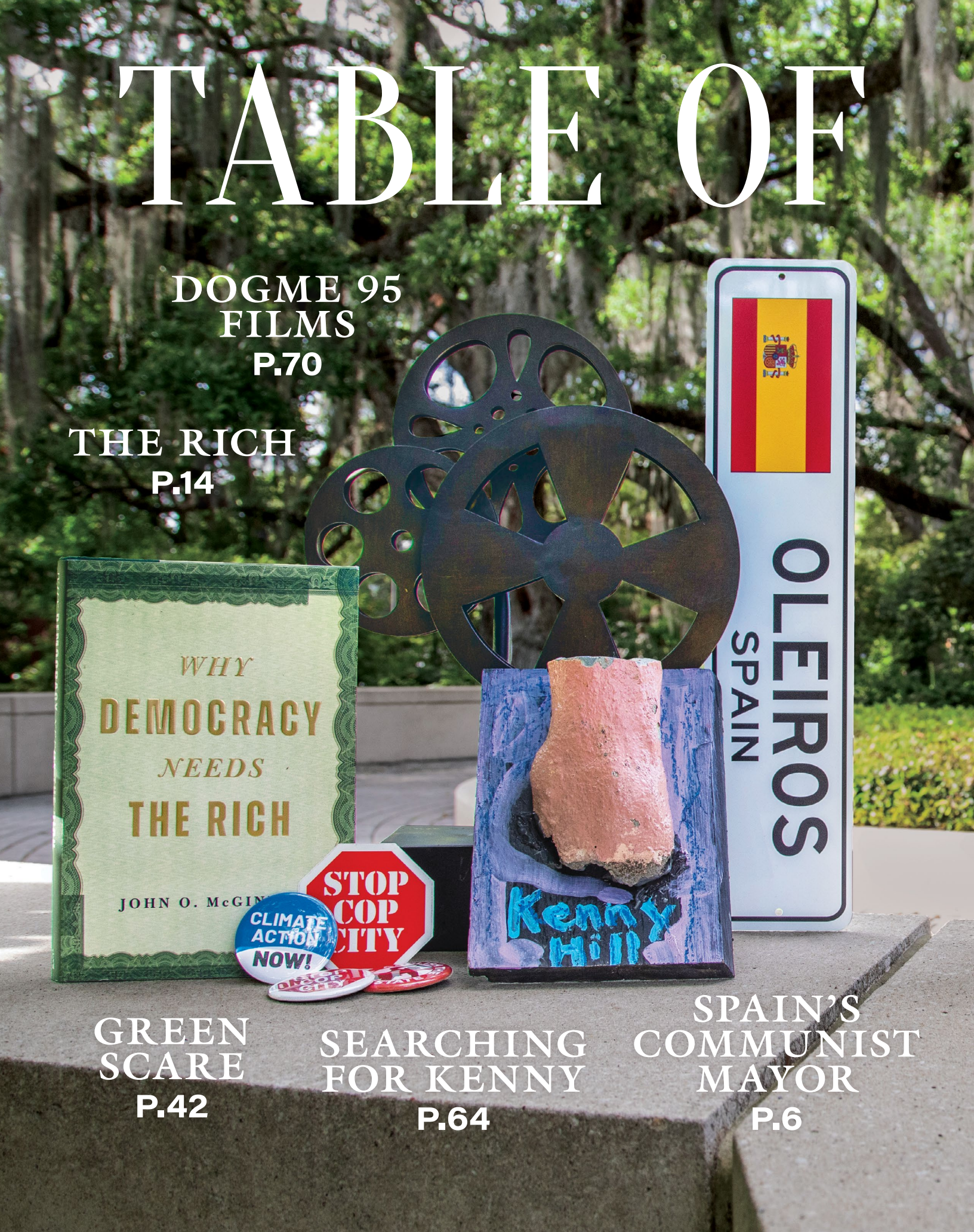

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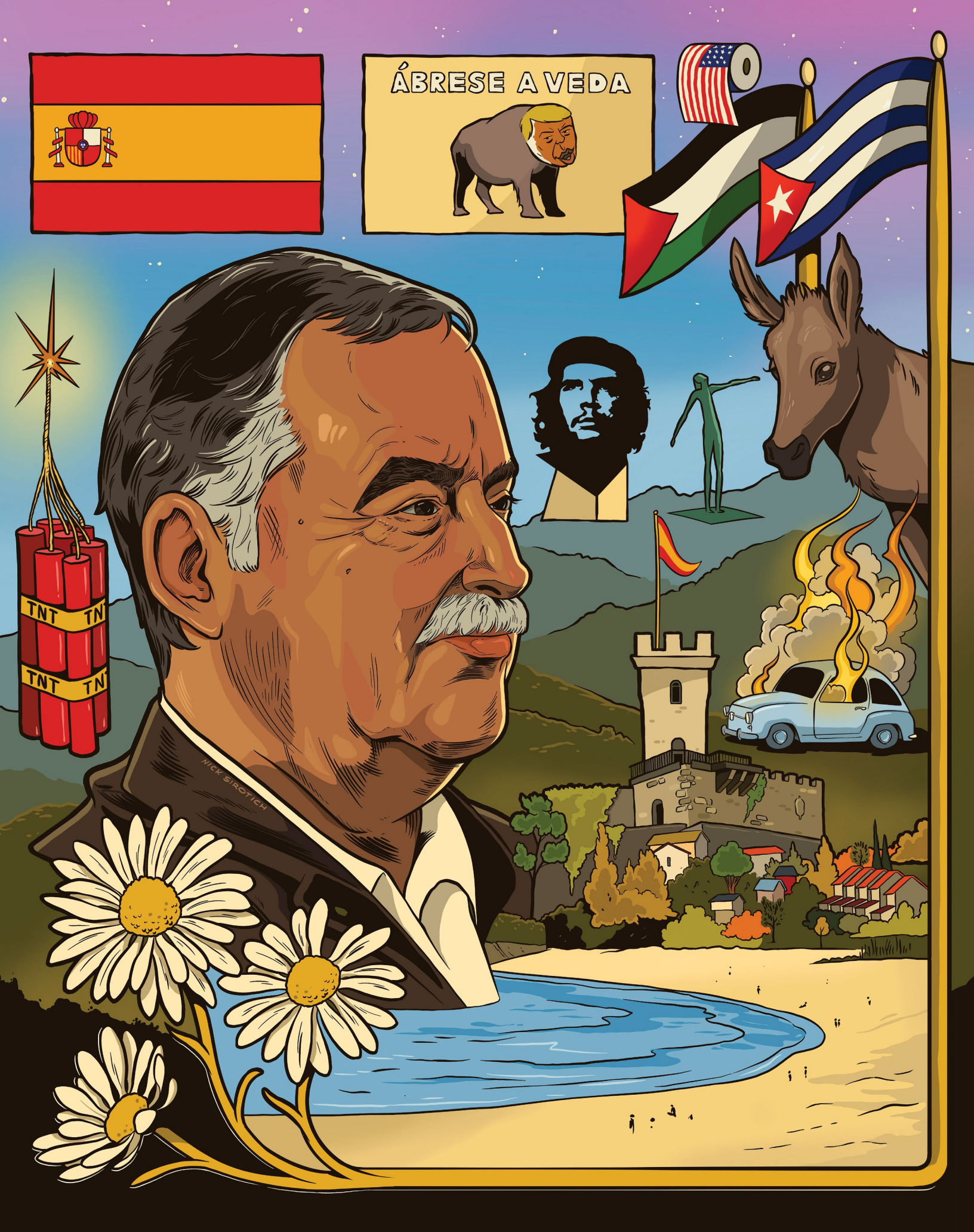
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THE MAYOR WHO WILL PAY YOU 50¢ TO RENDITION TRUMP

BY **JASON SCHAEFER**

There's a town in Spain called Oleiros whose Communist mayor has been in power since the Cold War. When rolling down its main drag, *Avenida Ernesto Che Guevara*, you'll not only be greeted by an eight-meter silhouette of the street's namesake, but be given the option to hang a left toward an eclectic pantheon of thoroughfares in honor of Galileo, Darwin, Abraham Lincoln, Simón Bolívar, assassinated Nicaraguan revolutionary Augusto Sandino, Guatemala's CIA-ousted President Jacobo Árbenz, and historic Spanish Prime Minister Adolfo Suárez, to list just a few. As you pull up to the busy roundabout in front of a gargantuan Gadis supermarket, you may pause as one of the city's many electronic billboards, between blinking standard updates on upcoming local festivities or civic service announcements (Clean Up After Your Dog!), flashes on its screen a PSA equating Benjamin Netanyahu to Hitler (Same Murderous Beasts!) Or maybe you see a bounty poster: *Buscase*. Wanted. *Terrorista Internacional*. The mugshot featured: Donald J. Trump. The reward: 50 cents. That's all Mayor Ángel García Seoane believes Trump is worth.

Maybe you're familiar with certain Spanish localities and their endearing throwback radicalism. When you read the name "Oleiros," it could be that you imagine a place like the self-described utopia of Marinaleda, in hard-scrabble Andalusia, where landless peasants and workers seized acres of unused farmland owned by the Catholic church and the aristocracy in the late 1970s, igniting a localized revolution where, virtually, housing is free and unemployment non-existent. Or perhaps you think I'm describing somewhere akin to the Basque Country's Mondragón, where the industrial working-class is nominally, at least, in control of the means of production.

What you might not picture is one of Spain's top 50 richest municipalities: a sporty, sprawling bedroom community flush with vibrant, interconnecting parks and miles of seaside hiking trails which lead past some of the finest beaches in the region and up to an island castle built to defend against Sir Francis Drake. You certainly wouldn't picture a "Blue City" located in "Red State" Galicia that hosts mansions owned by the wealthiest woman in Spain and Hollywood A-Lister Richard Gere. Or maybe you would. After all, to quote my dad, "Europe is weird."

Descriptions of Galicia, when it's remembered at all, tend to lean heavily on its geographic, economic, and cultural isolation. Flanked by the Cantabrian Sea and Atlantic Ocean to its north and west and cut off from the rest of Spain by Portugal to its south, along with a string of foreboding *sierras* in the east, the rain-battered Gallegos are often stereotyped by their fellow countrymen as withdrawn, fatalistic, suspicious of outsiders, and resistant to change. Despite being the birthplace of Francisco Franco and the founders of Spain's two biggest political parties (the center-left PSOE's founder, like Franco, was born in Ferrol, and the conservative PP's Manuel Fraga—more on him later—was from Vilalba), the central government in Madrid has long neglected the rural, mountainous region. About half of all abandoned villages in Spain are crammed into its northwestern tip, and a census shows that a whopping fifth of all Galician municipalities have more cows than humans. To survive over the years, many Gallegos took to the seas. So many emigrated to the Americas, in fact, that even today your most isolated essentially-monolingual *avoiña* likely has a better grasp of daily life around the wider Hispanophone world than her counterpart

The world's second-largest Che Guevara statue greets commuters in Oleiros.

abuelita in Castille. It's a place where you can, in short, find a paradoxical blend of parochialism and progressivism, coming from the unlikeliest of corners.

Oleiros, one its most unlikely, is a town as rich with such contradictions as it is with money. Just across an estuary from cosmopolitan A Coruña, the average income of its nearly 40,000 residents is pretty much double that of the rest of Galicia. Proportionally, it's got the most parks and public space in the autonomous community and, thanks to its hefty investments in civic infrastructure, it rivals neighboring Coruña—a city over seven times its size—with its quantity of libraries, sports centers, and municipal pools. Yet, in spite of several beaches bearing the prestigious Blue Flag award for their cleanliness and environmental sustainability, Oleiros also counts more backyard swimming pools than Spain's Mecca of mass tourism, Benidorm: one for every 12 residents.

At a time when the international One Percent seems to have forfeited any other vision of the future beyond sectioning themselves off into tiny enclaves where they obsess over their own immortality, Oleiros represents something entirely different. It's a temptation to say that some of the richest people in Europe (including billionaire Zara heiress Sandra Ortega, and others who sit on its parent company Inditex's board) choosing to live in a town that allocates a minimum of 0.7 percent of its total budget to alleviating global poverty and has an award-winning commitment to sustainability, sensible urban planning, and promoting the quality of life of all of its residents is at, the very least, a bit quaint. Did I mention they need to commute past a Che statue every day? But before I ramble into a promo for a town many of us can only afford to visit, let me clearly state that these bougie pool-hoarding suburbanites didn't just stumble upon the benefits of embracing "the warmth of collectivism," as New York City's Zohran Mamdani would put it.

Their preoccupation with liveability is largely chalked up to Oleiros's chronically electable mayor, native Ángel García Seoane. "Gelo," as he's known, got his first taste of labor organizing at age 17, participating in a 1968 strike at a SEAT automotive factory, where he worked to pay for his musical studies. A traveling drummer and accordionist by trade, he once opened for Julio Iglesias (Enrique's dad) and founded a union for Galician musicians. Soon after, he joined the then-illegal *Partido Comunista de España*.

Before Francisco Franco died in 1975, Gelo's hometown was a rural seaside outpost, a third its current size. People mostly lived off farming, fishing, or commuting to Coruña. Little had changed over the preceding centuries, when Oleiros's proximity to a major coastal city and the natural beauty created by the confluence of estuaries alongside its cliffs and beaches provided the perfect spot for the ecclesiastical, aristocratic, and later bourgeois elite to divvy up and call theirs. The Generalissimo himself even summered just a few miles up the road, in the storied Meiras Palace which was controversially "given" to him even as bullets were still flying in the Spanish Civil War. The locals say Franco even loved to bathe at Oleiros's Bastiagueiro beach. The year he went belly up, however, change was on the horizon. Figuratively, in Spain's political *Transición* to democracy, and literally for Oleiros, as the sprawl of Coruña loomed closer with the newly inaugurated Pasaxe Bridge. Plans were drawn to cover Oleiros with concrete Benidorm-esque high-rise eyesores for the vacationing middle and upper-classes. Greed and the very Galician concept of *feísmo*, where practicality and frugality somehow incapacitates builders from constructing anything even remotely aesthetically pleasing, were on the cusp of conquering the town. (Translated literally as "uglyism," *feísmo* can be charming—think mattress-frames finding new life as garden gates.) Peseta signs were everywhere, at least for those cunning enough to ride the shifting tide.

Gelo and a number of like-minded activists came together to protest the auctioning off of their city. As a response to their sit-in at the Department of Public Works and Urban Planning in late 1978, Gelo was detained by the police. Several other members of their neighbors' association got a free trip to the Coruña police station as well, where they spent hours getting questioned by some law enforcement officers who had, likely, just a few short years earlier, worked for Franco. In 1978, Gelo and this association of local activists became the independent *Alternativa dos Veciños* party (The Neighbors' Alternative) which would run in the country's first attempt at elections since military generals conspired to put an end to such shows of popular will in 1936.

Alternativa dos Veciños' goal wasn't to halt Oleiros's growth, but harness it. Instead of the conventional leftist rose, their logo is the hardy, fast-spreading daisy. Utilizing the work of select local urban planners who had, let's say, an alternative vision for their neighbors, their goal was to build up public infrastructure while protecting their city from the waves of privatization, outright theft, and environmental degradation which stood to destroy their commons. Even their now-iconic Santa Cristina beach was for-pay at the time. Now on the city council, Gelo's party put the brakes on chaotic development plans and built schools and cultural centers, installed modern water systems, and set up the first municipal radio station in the region to broadcast fully in Gallego. Meanwhile,

speculators ignored local ordinances as they shoddily and quickly built nightclubs and the like. García Seoane says he was offered millions to look the other way. When that didn't work, someone torched his SEAT 600. Rather than bullying him to the sidelines, Gelo's popularity went up like, well, his car. A collection went around to buy him a new one. Even those who were unhappy with Alternativa's progress offered to donate—on the condition that, next time, the vehicle would include the owner when it was burnt.

The nature of electoral politics will force even the most well-meaning into compromising away their youthful dabbles with radicalism. We don't have to go far—just 150 km south—to follow the trajectory of Vigo's similarly perennial mayor, Abel Caballero. A fellow onetime member of the PCE (Spanish Communist Party), he has since memed himself into a kind of beloved Willy Wonka for Christmas tourism. If you're a left-winger running for public office, be warned. You too may end up, one day, shouting "Viva Primark!" as you cut the ribbon for your city's umpteenth mall.

Because isn't it the mayor's job to better the lives of their constituents in ways that'll maximize the town's attraction to visitors and, more importantly, business? Thus, when you're dedicating streets and putting up statues (one of the office's perks) you might want to steer clear of traditional third-rail political topics—no matter how close to your heart. Especially when, as is the case with Oleiros, your constituents tend to vote conservative in national and regional elections. So when Gelo became mayor in 1985, you'd think he wouldn't want to re-litigate the Spanish Civil War by naming a park after *Las Trece Rosas*, the 13 young socialist and communist women who became some of the Franco regime's first victims. It might be best to stay out of Israel-Palestine—and under no circumstances should you give Yasser Arafat his own street. Also, many of the inhabitants of Spain's 36th richest municipality might not want to hear about your admiration for Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution.

Yet even before becoming mayor, Gelo never kept his foreign policy positions a secret. In 1982, he used his council seat to collect aid for war-ravaged schools and hospitals in Sandinista Nicaragua. In 1984, Oleiros City Hall even named Fidel Castro an Honorary Councilman to both undermine and troll right-wing Gallego politicians who'd threatened the Cuban leader as he made a diplomatic stopover in Madrid. In total, Gelo boasts of travelling to Cuba over 50 times in efforts to break history's longest blockade—most of the trips made as mayor, after the Soviet downfall gutted the island's economy. Havana repaid the favor, naming Gelo its "Adopted Son." He got to act as host for his "leader" (Gelo's word), when in 1992 the then-Galician president, Manuel Fraga, invited Castro to tour the land of his father's birth. Decked out in military getup (this was his pre-tracksuit era), the revolutionary who'd survived hundreds of CIA assassination attempts was fêted around for two days, eating octopus and sipping flaming Galician punch like any other visiting dignitary.

The oddest moment during this strange homecoming was, perhaps, when a local insisted on giving the Cuban president a horse. Watching the 2012 documentary about the trip, *Fraga y Fidel, sin embargo*, you get the sense that Castro is a little more interested in the small-town lefty mayor than the former Franquista minister. Fraga, who represented the liberal wing of the dictatorship, went on, after Franco's death, to be forever associated with the authoritarian Right of the transition government after the March 1976 massacre of striking workers in Vitoria, Basque Country. Banished from the central government, Fraga returned home and, employing the help of a friendly tobacco smuggler, founded the Partido Popular. (As a timely aside, the leadership of Spain's conservative party—to this day—has a long history of playing footsie with boaters who deal with less-than-licit goods.) Despite inhabiting polar opposites of the political spectrum, Fraga and Gelo formed an unlikely friendship based around their common love for Galicia and, one assumes, getting in the headlines. The Oleiros mayor even accompanied the Galician president to Libya in the '90s to meet with Muammar Gaddafi in an attempt to break another blockade.

It should be no surprise, then, that Seaone has earned himself a file with the CIA at Langley. Spanish intelligence, too. Additionally, he piqued the interest of Mossad—likely after his blinking billboards labelled the murderous, far-right Israeli government "the new Nazis" in 2004. In response, Gelo was subjected to numerous death threats (not his first), a hardly-cordial call from the Israeli Ambassador, and pressure from the Spanish foreign ministry to quell the ad drive. Under pressure, the message was changed to "The People of Oleiros with Palestine." But not before selling some T-shirts depicting a cartoon Ariel Sharon-like monster devouring children, ridden like a cowboy by an impish, gun-toting George W. Bush. The proceeds bought school supplies for children in Palestine. It wasn't Gelo's first T-shirt campaign. The previous year, he'd protested the American invasion of Iraq by printing up shirts featuring a red, white, and blue roll of toilet paper, with "*USA ME*" (USE ME) stamped above.

To his resumé, Seaone can also add that he was a volunteer election monitor in El Salvador in 1994. He even joined Guatemalan indigenous activist Rigoberta Menchú in her travels throughout Latin America and attended her Nobel Peace Prize ceremony. His constituents, for their part, also think and act both locally and globally. They're some of the many participants in "Vacaciones en Paz," where host families in Spain give thousands of Sahrawi children living in refugee camps in Algeria relief for the summer. They're also founding members of the Fondo Galego, a collective of Galician municipalities who use part of their city budgets to support efforts to end inequality throughout the Global South. For a town whose entire population could fit inside Wrigley Field, internationally they punch way above their weight. Oleiros's City Hall has its own department dedicated to international cooperation and solidarity.

But you don't win elections just on goodwill abroad (though it's nice to see it can help). Domestically, Alternativa owes its continued success to its sensible urbanism teamed with Gelo's characteristic, controversial style. Plain-speaking, he's not above cursing out his opponents. His history in entertainment and grass-roots activism particularly shines through in certain episodes, like when he brought donkeys to the Galician transport ministry to protest against the "*burro*-cracy" which had been dragging its feet on providing decent public transport to Oleiros. (It's important to note that the translation of "*burro*" into English shares both definitions of "jackass.") Or when he coordinated roadblocks during rush hour with walkie-talkies, forcing the regional government to build better roads.

But it's his tendency to dynamite unlicensed constructions on public property which has caused him the most, well, blowback. On May 15, 1989, García Seoane blasted a considerably-sized beach house illegally put up by a company represented by the local president of Opus Dei, the far-right Catholic organization founded in Spain. According to Gelo, the owner and his associates had already accused Gelo of being a "terrorist" during previous, um, blow-ups, over similarly constructed houses. When Gelo personally detonated the building with ten kilos of Goma-2, an explosive used in mining and long favored by actual terrorists (and famously used by the Basque separatist group ETA when they launched Franco's hand-picked successor skyward in 1974), he did very little to persuade his opposition to retire the charge. Two days later, Gelo demolished a wall on Santa Cristina beach, which protected yet another privately-owned bungalow. A lengthy lawfare process followed, and Gelo was banned from the mayorship for six years and a day. For blowing up rocks. In his "goodbye" letter, dated July 18, 1996, Gelo, never to waste an opportunity, was sure to underscore that the judicial sentence was issued 60 years to the day of the military coup which brought an end to the Second Spanish Republic. He signed off with the promise, "*Volverei!*" ("I will return"), though he didn't move far. As his party chugged on in city hall, popular as ever, a kind of advisory role was created just for him.

Many of Seaone's victories have been both practical and symbolic. Aware of proposals to turn the military base inside the 16th-century Santa Cruz castle into a casino, he bypassed its generals, known to be unsympathetic to Alternativa's project, and negotiated the town's takeover of the historic fort directly with Madrid. When a flotilla of citizens arrived to the island for the formal handing-off, there was a tense stand-off as soldiers drew weapons before reluctantly passing the military property into civilian hands. It's now an environmental and educational center. Country palaces, abandoned factories, and pieces of church property—representations of the old order—were similarly bought by, gifted to, or otherwise acquired by the town to find new life as schools, swimming pools, and sports, cultural, and social centers. The Gabriel García Márquez Auditorium, for example, used to be the historic barracks of the long-feared Guardia Civil. Meanwhile, vacant urban areas became parks and gardens, like Park José Martí, and miles of natural ecosystems along Oleiros's coast were protected from further development.

Alternativa's egalitarian, populist take on urbanism created the type of place that even Zara founder Amancio Ortega, the richest man in Spain, called home for a spell. Despite the higher taxes the city demands in exchange for its free services, Oleiros has, per square meter, an astronomical number of millionaires (who, as a class, don't tend to enjoy life's second inevitability, either). This is partially due to its nearness to Arteixo, home of the fast-fashion Inditex empire, but also because residents are reminded daily how their taxes increase their own quality of life (and property values). In compensation, the city performs audits to update infrastructure and keep monthly bills low. Their unwavering emphasis on sustainable growth and public assistance makes Oleiros the ideal recipient for funds from the central, regional, and European governments. City Hall likes to present itself as a poster-child for fiscal responsibility.

To illustrate, Galicia's conservative-run regional government is currently helping local cooperatives add more price-protected apartments to the town that already has, per capita, more public housing units than anywhere else in the autonomous community. When the center-left Zapatero government offered townships across Spain over 8 billion euros in late 2008 to combat the ongoing financial crisis, corruption and an inability for many towns to improvise a productive use of this sudden influx into their coffers led to over half of it going to waste. The portion allocated to Oleiros, however, went towards improving city resources, building rental space in warehouses to encourage the growth of new businesses, and pulling the trigger on long planned-for projects. Like its pretty sweet skatepark.

2008 was pivotal for both Spain and Oleiros. For one, its most famous honorary councilman, Fidel Castro, announced his retirement that same year. So you'd think that, at a time when millions of Spaniards were suffering the initial shockwaves of the global recession, the pinko mayor of some coastal idyll dropping over 180,000 euros on the world's second biggest monument to Che Guevara would've been a gift to the opposition. (The Argentine revolutionary's son, Camilo, even attended its unveiling.) Yet Oleiros was one of the few places in Spain that weathered the crisis and even grew in those years. When the incumbents in Madrid were booted out for fecklessly mismanaging the crisis in 2011, they were replaced by the conservatives in PP led by Galician Mariano Rajoy. Your prototypically inscrutable Gallego, the descriptor most often used for the prime minister who'd institute post-crisis austerity in Spain was "boring." In Oleiros, by contrast, Gelo not only held onto power but began an undefeated streak of electoral victories where, to this day, Alternativa dos Veciños has governed with an absolute majority.

2011 was also the year when the Arab Spring-inspired *Indignados* (indignant) demonstrators occupied public squares to protest corruption and government ineptitude in handling the financial crisis. Similar to Occupy Wall Street, the movement ended with violent crackdowns and burnout. It would find new energy, years later (similar to how many Occupy activists enabled the rise of Bernie Sanders in 2016), as it fueled the rise of the left-wing populists of the Podemos party. It was around that time that Oleiros's governing party, technically one of the oldest political formations in Galicia (and its fourth-largest, municipally speaking), set its sights beyond the city limits. Alternativa dos Veciños currently has seats on neighboring councils and in a couple of remote pockets of Galicia. There had even been talk of running at the European level, where Podemos made its successful launch in 2014. Party politics in Spain tends to run top-heavy, and as the personalities leading the diffuse, somewhat disheartened leftist parties today discuss ways to coalesce to face off against the alarming rise of the hard-right Vox, Gelo, for his part, has put off his own retirement to beyond 2027. Though he says he's received dozens of requests to draft up electoral lists for even more councils across Galicia, the party with the daisy logo plans to focus their efforts in the next election to their home turf—including long-sought representation in Coruña—in an earnest desire to ensure Vox isn't given space to grow in Oleiros. While he takes it as a point of pride that he can count on "cultured and intelligent" right-wingers to show up for

him at the ballot box, assured by nearly half a century of experience that this self-proclaimed red won't be zeroing out their bank accounts any time soon, he has no illusions about getting the votes of the "feral" right who yearn for the days of Franco.

It's easy for outsiders to criticize Gelo. He champions anti-colonial struggles in Cuba and Palestine, yet key members of his community owe their fortunes to Third World sweatshop labor. His job is, essentially, to make some of the world's most coddled more comfortable. His project's efforts to protect local ecosystems and provide residents with clean water are funded by tax money made off the fast fashion industry's built-in disregard for carbon emissions and tremendous amounts of water pollution. Oleiros's city council also has a productive relationship with Amancio Ortega's philanthropic foundation, which is currently providing millions to revamp a center for individuals with disabilities. There's even a park in honor of Rosalía Mera, Ortega's late wife, remembered by the city for her philanthropy. Alternativa's brand of urbanism even helped turn the one-time carpenter and real-estate developer Manuel Jove into a rags-to-riches billionaire. Before his death in 2020, Jove, who lived in a "UFO" shaped building in Oleiros, was the largest private stockholder in Spain's second-largest bank, BBVA. Oleiros may be the wealthiest municipality in Galicia, but it ranks first in Spain for wealth inequality. A fifth of its riches are concentrated into the top tenth of a percentile.

Still, summarizing the project of Alternativa dos Veciños as merely fluffing pillows for the victors of the class war is insultingly reductive. While his conservative opposition once promised that, if elected, they'd "return Oleiros to the elite," many of Gelo's dedicated voters are pensioners and public servants, getting by on a relatively modest income—part of the roughly 18 percent of its registered population who've lived there their whole lives and remember the chaotic 1970s. Others are younger professionals who were attracted to the town due to one or many of the reasons listed above. And Oleiros may be expensive, but it's not as bad as Barcelona. To combat rising costs-of-living, the city council offers its previously mentioned price-protected living quarter. In their 41 years in office, they've constructed 1,171 such units and counting. It's also currently doing battle with Airbnb and developers who've made hay off short-term rental apartments. Efforts to prohibit the sale of tourist apartments in Oleiros go even further than the recent Spanish government crackdown on Airbnb. Still, as global warming encourages more and more Spaniards and foreigners to buy houses in (relatively) more temperate and affordable climes, it's a valid question to wonder if Alternativa dos Veciños has, in some ways, been a victim of its own success. When COVID-19 pressed pause on the global economy, Oleiros was one of the few communities in the region to barrel through. Today, its growth shows no signs of slowing down.

And at 73, neither does Gelo. He's been more vocal than ever in his support for his beloved Cuba, calling Trump's escalation of the blockade "genocidal." Explaining the reasoning behind the Wanted poster, García Seoane described Trump as the greatest criminal on the planet for his hunting down of migrants, assault on Caribbean boaters, his unconditional support for Netanyahu, and for drawing out and profiting off the war in Ukraine. Justifying the comically low bounty of 50 cents placed on the American President's head, he said, "Trump is a murderer. He's worth nothing." Of his campaign declaring Hitler and Netanyahu as the *Mesmas Bestas!* ("Same beasts!"), Gelo's City Hall recently won out against an Israeli lobbying attempt to shut it down. Another recent score was surviving another lawfare attempt to bar him from office. The crime? Demolishing another building. The historic Casa Carnicero, long abandoned, had caught fire in July 2020 and was irrevocably damaged in a storm. This time, he would've been banned from office for 12 years, and faced up to 15 months in prison for rushing the collapse of a building that, apparently, nature was bound to bring down soon anyways. Riding high off these victories, he stepped up his rhetoric in response to Trump's new war on Iran. "Open Season," the new billboard flashes, just above a grotesque Cronenbergian boar whose horrific visage resembles a certain former gameshow host. Fearlessly explaining the meaning of the PSA on live TV, García Seoane went on to say—well, let's just say, what he said next probably caused the folks at Langley to update their file on Richard Gere's mayor.

An Oleiros billboard declares "open season" on Donald Trump. (Photo: Jason Schaefer)

Gelo is aware of the ironies of his position: a life-long red whose democratic revolution not only stopped the transfer of public goods into private hands, but expanded Oleiros's inventory. Instead of capital flight, there was an influx. He has turned the city hall representing some of the most powerful fortunes on Earth into a megaphone that advocates for its most vulnerable. Meanwhile, the beaches and libraries and parks the city maintains and builds—even the ones named after revolutionaries—in their majestic equanimity, are free to be enjoyed by the working class and bourgeoisie alike. And the electronic billboards blink on, calling out to the town and all the world in hopes that someone will clean up the dogshit.

Whether this experiment is replicable beyond Oleiros, or if it will last post-Gelo, who knows. The world is weird. But look, if some neighbors banding together in a small city in Galicia could go this far, what could be possible elsewhere? ⚜

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Joy FOR THE Rich

WHY DEMOCRACY NEEDS THE RICH TO BE EXPROPRIATED

BY **ROB LARSON & NATHAN J. ROBINSON**

"WHAT EXACTLY IS WRONG WITH THE WEALTHY?" law professor John O. McGinnis asks in *Why Democracy Needs The Rich*. McGinnis thinks the one percent have been unfairly maligned by leftists like Bernie Sanders, and are in need of a vigorous defense. The rich, he says, are productive and useful members of society. If we redistribute their wealth, we only impoverish ourselves. Even those of us who will never be rich ourselves benefit from the presence of oligarchs.

Is this true? Do we all benefit from the riches possessed by billionaires? In fact, the arguments here are thin, and the opposite is true: we would all be much, much better off if we lived in a more egalitarian society that didn't concentrate wealth at the top.

Before evaluating McGinnis's substantive case, we should refresh ourselves on what we're talking about when we discuss "the rich" in the United States today. In 2025, the wealthiest one percent of Americans held about $55 trillion in assets, about the same as the bottom 90 percent of Americans put together. This year's World Inequality Report found that the richest one percent globally owned 37 percent of the wealth of the planet, while the poorest 50 percent, over 3 billion people, owned two percent.

According to Oxfam, between 1989 and 2022, a household in the top 0.1 percent would have gained approximately $40 million in wealth, while a household in the bottom 20 percent would have gained less than $8,500, with the top one percent gaining over 100 times more wealth than the median household. When we're talking about billionaires, we're talking about sums of money that are almost impossible to grasp. Families at the top struggle with which sprawling luxury estate to spend the next season in, which exclusive restaurant to have your household manager get a reservation for you tonight, and whether to fire that personal sommelier your kid's getting too close to. Meanwhile, at the bottom, families struggle with medical debt, college is unaffordable, entry-level jobs are scarce, wages don't cover even basic housing, and there is widespread homelessness.

Curiously, though, McGinnis spends little time with these core facts. Instead, the scope of his book is narrow, and he prefers to largely focus on the influence that wealthy people have over political and economic decision-making. Most of his book is a response to the claim that wealthy people have a disproportionate influence over the political process, undermining democracy. Interestingly, rather than dispute the idea that the wealthy have outsized influence, McGinnis concedes the point. *Yes*, he says, *the opinions of the rich matter more to policy outcomes. And that's a good thing.* "Sometimes greater influence results in better policy," he says.

McGinnis says that the question is "whether the rich harm or help society." He concludes that they help in three core ways: one is through "counterbalancing" the outsized influence of other groups, another is by contributing to "dynamism" and innovation through investing in or running businesses, and the third is through philanthropy.

One might begin by asking who, precisely, *he* means by "the rich." McGinnis says that "it is not essential to have a precise cutoff for what constitutes 'the rich,'" but says we might talk about the top 0.1 percent, whose wealth starts at around $60 million. But McGinnis says it ultimately doesn't really matter what threshold we pick, because he will argue that the richer people are, the more socially valuable they are. "While the top 5 percent certainly make significant contributions, the top 1 percent do more, and the top 0.1 percent even more. Wealth, in this sense, acts like a lever: The more there is, the greater the impact." So if you thought that perhaps McGinnis would say that it's good to have a class of wealthy

people, but perhaps not a tiny set of oligarchical near-trillionaires, you'd be wrong. In fact, the people at the very top are the most helpful of all, making Elon Musk our most socially beneficial wealthy person.

The argument McGinnis leans on the most is that the wealthy "counterbalance" the power of special interest groups. McGinnis argues that we do not live in a democracy where everyone has an equal say, with the power of the rich (to influence politicians, to buy media) corrupting that otherwise-pristine democratic process. Instead, he says, other groups like academics, journalists, non-profits, and labor unions wield influence disproportionate to their size, getting their way despite holding minority viewpoints. The wealthy, McGinnis says, through their own power (which, again, he admits they hold) simply act as a counterweight, ensuring that the political process is something closer to fair.

INSUBORDINATION

McGinnis extends this argument about the rich "counterbalancing" special interests (like labor and reporters) to balancing the political debate itself. He leans heavily on the idea that academics and journalists, who he relentlessly claims are ideologically uniform leftists, are far more powerful than the rich since they control information. Journalists set the near-term agenda, he claims, while academics shape the long-term agenda. He says that these knowledge workers form a woke "clerisy" that is offended by the rich for allowing people out of their mind control, and he specifically claims they have more power than the rich.

McGinnis finesses this dubious equation of academic cache with billionaires' cash by resorting to incredibly vague language, often using "clout" as something shared with the small number of households that own the country's productive wealth and professors of English and Metro desk reporters. It is incredibly unserious, because "clout" is not a measurable or even clearly defined thing. McGinnis is guilty of obfuscating hierarchy, and not very convincingly. Frankly, we prefer it when conservatives outright celebrate real hierarchy, as many of the right's leading philosophers have long done. It's more honest.

Irritatingly, McGinnis also adopts the common right-wing pundit's technique of never quoting or citing a leftist, ever. Instead, he cites vague unnamed "critics" who oppose his views, but who cannot apparently be afforded the room for even a few sentences of sincere debate. For someone so consumed with the rich as "counterbalancing" the left-wing uniformity of campuses by bringing "intellectual diversity," McGinnis's book will find literally no quoted leftists, except a two-word quotation from Bernie Sanders on page 1 ("policy failure," used to describe billionaires). Don't get used to it, because after that, ghostly "critics" imply there are opposing views, but McGinnis lacks the courage to let them have their day in court.

But do (often poorly paid) academics and journalists really wield more power than wealthy oligarchs? Certainly, the journalists at the *Washington Post* did not wield more power than their newspaper's billionaire owner, Jeff Bezos. It was Bezos who fired hundreds of reporters at the *Post* recently, not the workers who organized a socialized workplace and voted to sack the boss. Bezos also directed that the paper should only publish op-eds that were consistent with his own ideological viewpoints, advocating for "personal liberties and free markets."

What about academia? Here, too, we should remember that professors only have as much liberty as their board of trustees is willing to grant them. When the donors are unhappy, the professors' careers come under threat. For instance, the public George Mason University in Virginia "granted the conservative Charles Koch Foundation a say in the hiring and firing of professors in exchange for millions of dollars in donations." At the University of Illinois, a job offer to Palestinian professor Steven Salaita was withdrawn after a donor threatened to "reduce or withhold his monetary contributions to the University if Professor Salaita was allowed to teach there."

In fact, McGinnis himself teaches at the Pritzker School of Law at Northwestern University. The private law school was renamed in 2015 after the wealthy Pritzker family, who had given it a $100 million gift. (Although McGinnis tells us the rich are in a "constant churn," with new millionaires minted daily, the Pritzkers have been on the *Forbes* Top 10 Richest Families list since 1982.) The average American earns $1.7 million over their lifetimes, meaning this single gift came to the amount of money made in over 58.8 human lifetimes. Is it plausible that if the Pritzkers had a major problem with a faculty hire, their call to the dean would have zero impact? Would the opinion of a student, or a school janitor, about hiring decisions be nearly as influential?

DIVERSITY, FROM HYPER-RIGHT TO WIMPY CENTER-RIGHT

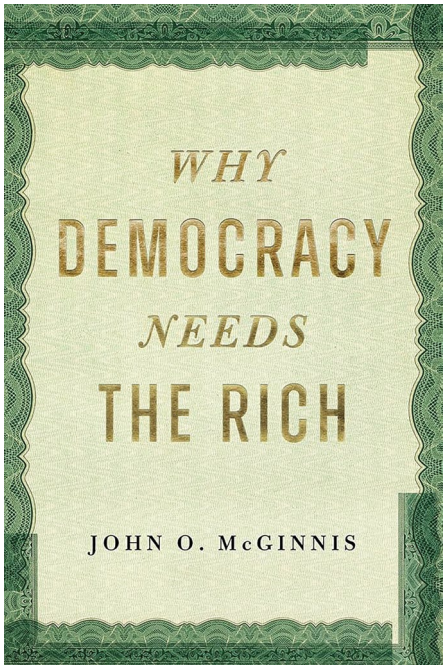
McGinnis argues that the influence of the rich on politics does not pull the country in a particular ideological direction, because there is great political variety among them. This, he says, is proven by some billionaires supporting Trump in 2024 and some supporting Harris. But this in fact proves the point, because the backing of the two parties by America's wealthiest tycoons is what has led them both to cohere around economic policies that decline to disrupt the status quo.

McGinnis's constant claims that university and news elites have "ideological uniformity" relies entirely on the tendency of these groups to vote for the Democratic Party. The flimsiness of this can be seen in various ways, one being that the Democrats are mostly centrists and economic conservatives, opposed to popular left-wing demands like nationalizing health insurance, ending military aid to Israel, or far more liberal immigration policy. Harris's corporate and oligarch backing led her to dial down economically populist policies, and after Barack Obama raked in money from Wall Street, he adopted Wall Street-friendly positions in office. Democrats are a fundamentally economically conservative political party. Democrats like Harris, Clinton, and Biden all support private property ownership and the great "innovations" of Big Tech. These kinds of Democrats passed or supported the working-class-killing NAFTA trade treaty, the TARP bank bailout program, and the use of "Obamacare" private insurance requirements rather than a left-wing proposal like Medicare for All. By claiming national Democratic politicians are "the Left," McGinnis can slothfully claim that there is great ideological variety among the rich.

Still, even by this lazy definition, more of our richest oligarchs are full-on right-wingers than liberals or centrists, and 80 percent

of campaign spending in 2024 by the top 100 richest Americans went to Republicans rather than Democrats. But how many of these elite families support the *actual* political Left in the U.S., such as it is, like endorsing Bernie Sanders or Zohran Mamdani or Rashida Tlaib? Few indeed! McGinnis claims that while academics and journalists are all leftists, the rich are, by contrast, richly different in their views. This is shown by reminding us of billionaires, like Mark Cuban or Tom Steyer, who supported the campaign of the famous left-wing figure of… Kamala Harris. And in reality, the *New York Times* has documented that the partisan tilt is clear enough: about 300 billionaires made 19 percent of all federal political contributions in 2024, with 5/6th of those millions going toward Republican candidates, 1/6th to Democrats. All these billionaires, for their alleged diversity, share a class preference for the leftmost option to be an Obamacare requirement to buy private insurance, rather than a leftist solution like national health insurance.

If we want to be serious in our analysis, we could conduct an institutional analysis, as Ed Herman and Noam Chomsky famously did in *Manufacturing Consent*, the definitive left-wing work of media criticism, which finds that there are compelling corporate and market incentives for media companies to maintain "filters" on news products that reflect the interests of media's corporate ownership and reliance on an advertising-based media model. *Or* we could be serious by examining actual media output, as the progressive media monitoring group FAIR has reliably done for so many years, finding for example that while corporate CEOs are very commonly invited on as guests for commentary on commercial news, labor leaders are almost totally absent.



Similarly, rather than evaluating whether the rich are ideologically diverse by which pro-capitalism party they vote for, we could conduct a class analysis. Mark Cuban may prefer the "woke" stylings of a Kamala Harris while Elon Musk prefers the coarse Donald Trump, but they share an interest in limited regulation of their industries, opposition to tax increases on their income streams or wealth, and antagonism to worker organization in their empires. Both Cuban and Musk, for instance, called for antitrust crusader Lina Khan to be ousted from her post at the Federal Trade Commission in 2024. Are the billions upon billions of dollars at stake for these men possibly more compelling in understanding the rich compared to which anti-Medicare For All party they supported in the last cycle? Perhaps.

CRACKED FOUNDATIONS

What about McGinnis's next argument, "economic dynamism"? The rich, he says, create all kinds of wonderful products and services for us. Well, first, how would we measure the contributions of the rich to "innovation" and "dynamism"? One way might be to look at whether innovation can occur in less grotesquely unequal countries to our own. In fact, it can. Plenty of social democratic countries, including Sanders' favored Nordics, rank high on the Global Innovation Index, which "uses some 80 indicators, ranging from research and development (R&D) spending, venture capital (VC) deals, high-tech exports and intellectual property filings in evaluating nearly 140 world economies on their innovative performance."

As Rob has written about for this magazine, inventing new technology is expensive and risky, with zero guarantee that your lab staff will come across a new discovery, let alone one that will generate a profit in the near-term. Largely for that reason, fundamental research and development has historically been done primarily by the public sector, including the military and university system. The history is clear—the radio broadcasting technology today's cell signals and Wi-Fi descend from were developed by Marconi for the Italian Navy. The internet architecture, including its data protocols, interoperability, and technical network standards, were developed by the Pentagon's research arm, DARPA, along with several U.S. research universities, over decades. Wi-Fi was developed for University of Hawaii researchers to access computing power. Google's original web address was google.stanford.edu, reflecting its origin in a National Science Foundation-funded campus research lab.

The hyper-rich platform billionaires receive endless worship for innovating today's online ecosystem, but their contribution was usually to recognize the commercial potential of the public-funded and -developed internet and rush to put companies in place to exploit the opportunity. That includes gigantic web-commerce entities like Amazon, search monopolist Google, and social network tyrants like Facebook and Twitter. Their innovation is real, but mostly in the field of getting your claws into a valuable new technology paid for by Cold War-era taxpayers.

What about philanthropy? McGinnis points to the work of foundations and charities funded by the rich. Would we want to do without their work? But here we must consider counterfactuals, the scenarios that would have unfolded if we lived in a more egalitarian society, not just if all of America's nonprofits disappeared overnight. Mark Zuckerberg, for instance, donated $100 million to the Newark school system. We might look at that as a big plus in the "what rich people do for society" column. But even if we assume that that money was well spent (in fact, $20 million of it was spent on consultants), we can't conclude that that's $100 million worth of good contributed by the rich, because we have to consider an alternative world in which billionaires had their wealth taxed away to fund schools. In that alternative scenario, we would have *a lot more than Zuckerberg's $100 million* to put towards underfunded schools.

You can come up with a long list, as McGinnis does, of helpful

philanthropic endeavors funded by the rich. But the right question is: to what extent would we even need billionaire benevolence if we had a just system of taxation and spending to begin with? If public hospitals are starved of resources because the rich aren't adequately taxed to pay for strong public services, but then a rich man funds a hospital for the poor, is that a benefit provided by the rich? Or is that a tiny suggestion of the world we *could* live in if we actually taxed appropriately?

McGinnis makes the point that many art museums are funded largely by wealthy philanthropists, suggesting that without the wealthy, we would lose access to important cultural treasures. "Walking through any major museum," he writes, "one can trace not only the history of great art but also the legacy of the entrepreneurs and industrialists who were its early patrons." Now, we should first note that *even* if we assume that only entrepreneurs and industrialists can endow and support museums, it may still be the case that we do not need billionaires, since art museums might well flourish in a society where nobody had more than $200 million. In fact, a policy that said "any income over $1 million per year must be donated to a nonprofit" would likely result in a vast increase in art museum budgets. But McGinnis also assumes that the public sector simply cannot care enough about culture to fund it adequately. Speaking of the Guggenheim Museum, he says, "Could a committee of bureaucrats, dispensing money that is not their own, have accomplished anything comparable?"

Well, as a matter of fact, yes. There's a museum you may have heard of called the Louvre. (It's in France.) In 1791, after the French Revolution, the National Constituent Assembly established the Louvre as "a place for bringing together monuments of all the sciences and arts," and it opened to the public on the first anniversary of the end of the monarchy, making the king's treasures accessible to all. The Louvre is operated by the French state to this day as a public cultural institution. There is no reason why art has to remain in the hands of the rich. The state can kill the king and give his art to the people, and the result is not bureaucratic disarray but the most acclaimed museum in the world.

McGinnis is also living in an idealized world of charitable billionaires, who believe in "giving back." In fact, giving back has fallen out of fashion among today's elites. Billionaires who signed Warren Buffett's Giving Pledge have come to regret it. A *New York Times* profile of Lauren Sanchez Bezos says she embodies the moment when "American money stopped apologizing and decided it might as well enjoy itself." In the age of Trump, the philosophy of the rich is: get as much as you can and keep it. The prevailing philosophy is now, according to Aaron Horvath, a sociologist who has studied the Giving Pledge: "I can keep my head down and keep making money. I don't have to put up with this charity charade anymore."

Because McGinnis doesn't reckon with the actual public policy influence of the wealthy, or the counterfactual scenarios in which we had a more progressive system of taxation, let alone the moral horror of letting deprivation persist so that billionaires may sail around on climate-destroying jets and megayachts, his book's argument is worthless and unconvincing. But this book does afford an opportunity to think through the world we *could* live in if we expropriated some of the vast wealth hoarded by our oligarchs.

The RAND Corporation has produced an important study that shows just what we are giving up by allowing extreme wealth concentration to persist. They note that over the last 40-plus years, "had the bottom 90 percent kept up with GDP growth, they'd have collectively taken home $2.5 trillion more in income in 2018." They imagine a counterfactual situation in which the benefits of growth had been distributed equally rather than being clustered among the already-rich. If that had happened, then the annual income for a full-time worker in the 25th percentile would have been $61,000 in 2018, instead of the actual figure, $33,000. The median full-time salary would have been $92,000 instead of $50,000. In other words, you (yes, you!) would have been earning tens of thousands of dollars more every year. Think of what a difference that would have made. Think of how much suffering would have been avoided, how many sleepless nights over medical debt, how much hunger, how much homelessness. Illness or injury brings twin fears for Americans, not just death but bankruptcy for us and our family. Struggling to pay the bills colors every day with a desperation for many families, which is totally avoidable. We could have lived in a world in which even those in the low end of the income distribution earned more than enough to live what today seem like comfortable middle-class lives. That's what inequality has robbed us of. It's not just that we're not getting our share of the money, it's the life of unstable precarity and constant anxiety it burdens us with.

McGinnis does not mention this study, because he does not want us to think about the world we could actually have if we had a less absurd distribution of wealth. He doesn't want you to realize that you are being robbed, and to realize just how much worse things are for the rest of us so that the world's wealthiest people can amass even greater fortunes.

It would seem very difficult to defend this kind of inequality, which strikes many as grotesque. When kids are going to school hungry, how can Mark Zuckerberg justify having a $400 million, 387-foot megayacht, a yacht so elaborate that it travels with its own 220-foot support vessel? Interestingly, McGinnis does not even try to address the basic moral objection to extreme wealth inequality, namely that wasteful spending on luxuries cannot be justified when many people's basic needs are not met. Perhaps that is because it is *extremely* difficult to make the case for why it is more important for Zuckerberg to have a 17th or 18th house than it is for a destitute child in Detroit to go to school well-fed. The allocation of resources that comes from such a lopsided wealth distribution cannot be squared with any defensible theory of the moral good.

From finessing numbers to inverting corporate org charts, McGinnis's book badly bungles the facts and grossly fails to make its case. He claims that the rich are not that rich, that their wealth makes them more open-minded, that they are "out of favor" despite owning the economy, and that their practical experience and independence make them good for democracy. But despite this constant McGlibness, the ruling class helps democracy like smoking helps your lungs. McGinnis should return to his office, in his school named for billionaires, and start work on his book-length apology. ⚜

HEY, KIDS! ARE YOU READY FOR SOME...

NON-FUN FACTS??

ANYONE CAN HIRE A PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR TO FOLLOW YOU AROUND AND REPORT ON YOUR ACTIVITIES, AND IT'S PERFECTLY LEGAL!

WOW!!

PUG DOGS ARE SUFFERING HORRIBLY! THANKS TO HUMAN EUGENICS PROGRAMS, THEY CAN BARELY BREATHE THROUGH THEIR SQUASHED NOSES, AND SOMETIMES THEIR EYEBALLS JUST POP OUT OF THEIR SKULLS. THE BREED REALLY SHOULDN'T EXIST!

ADVERTISING ALGORITHMS KNOW WHEN YOU'RE DEPRESSED AND TAKE ADVANTAGE OF YOUR LOW SPIRITS TO SELL YOU STUFF!

ISRAEL HAS AN ESTIMATED 90 NUCLEAR WEAPONS, HASN'T SIGNED ANY TREATIES REGULATING THEM, AND HAS INCREASINGLY BELLIGERENT LEADERS!

AN ESTIMATED 4 PERCENT OF PEOPLE EXECUTED IN THE UNITED STATES WERE INNOCENT!

OH BOY!

YUCKY!

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S TEETH WEREN'T MADE OF WOOD! THEY WERE THE TEETH OF ENSLAVED AFRICAN PEOPLE, RIPPED OUT OF THEIR MOUTHS WHILE THEY WERE STILL USING THEM!

COPS ARE REALLY BAD AT SOLVING CRIMES! ONLY 58 PERCENT OF MURDERS GET SOLVED IN THE U.S., SO IF SOMEONE KILLS YOU, IT'S BASICALLY A COIN FLIP THAT THEY'LL GET AWAY WITH IT!

BRITISH FASCIST LEADER OSWALD MOSLEY'S GRANDSON IS NOW AN EXECUTIVE AT PALANTIR!

HAVANA UNDER SIEGE

BY **ALEX SKOPIC**

A COUPLE OF MEN SAT IN Washington, D.C. and planned how to strangle a nation to death, and we did our best to get in their way. There are a hundred things you could say about the Nuestra América mission to Cuba, and I'm going to say some of them, at some length. But in the handful of days I spent walking around Havana, I kept thinking of Ernest Hemingway, who lived there for a third of his life, rattling off manuscripts from his perch in the Finca Vigía. Despite his gallery of personal hangups, the old man knew his business. The simplest, most direct sentence is the truest, he always said. So this is mine. Donald Trump and Marco Rubio

(Photo by Nathan J. Robinson)

tried to strangle Cuba, and a remarkable group of people from all over the world came together to say *no*.

For four days, *Current Affairs* editor-in-chief Nathan J. Robinson and I traveled with them. Back in March, we heard that CODEPINK, the Progressive International, and a variety of other socialist and anti-war groups were putting together a humanitarian mission to Cuba. Inspired by the Global Sumud Flotilla to Gaza, they were going to deliver several thousand pounds of medical supplies, solar panels, and other badly-needed aid to the island, by plane and boat, breaking the world's longest-standing economic blockade. It sounded like a hell of a thing. So we put our names on the dotted line to go along and cover it.

We wanted to see, firsthand, what it's like for people to live under the most severe of U.S. sanctions. More than that, we wanted to see one of the only communist-governed nations on Earth, and report back about it, clear of the haze of propaganda that has surrounded Cuba for so long. And we wanted, in whatever small way we could, to help. So we got on a plane to Havana, armed with just enough optimism to think we might make a difference. This is what we found.

A pro-Trump, pro-regime-change demonstration. (Photo by Steven Goldberg)

THURSDAY

The bearded man was hollering something in Spanish that I couldn't understand. Like a lot of Americans, I remain shamefully monolingual, my *Español* limited to a handful of half-remembered phrases from high school. I can ferret out the locations of *el baño* and *la biblioteca*, ask for a *cerveza con lima* at a bar, and that's about it. So all I can say for sure is that this guy was yelling something about *socialismo*, and it didn't sound like he approved. He had a Cuban flag tied around his neck like a cape, and he wore a black T-shirt emblazoned with the words "MAKE CUBA GREAT AGAIN" in white letters. A few dozen of his compatriots surrounded him, similarly garbed, yelling and waving signs at cars as they drove by. Sometimes the drivers would honk and yell back. An older woman was waving a "Trump 2020" flag, now somewhat out of date. Someone else brandished a huge photo of Trump pumping his fist and yelling "FIGHT FIGHT FIGHT" in Butler, Pennsylvania, moments after his attempted assassination. Some of the younger demonstrators were livestreaming on their phones. All of them were loud. This was a crowd of right-wing, pro-embargo Cuban Americans—or, as they're pejoratively known by Fidel Castro's supporters, "*gusanos*."

It was a cloudy, humid Thursday evening in Miami, and we had found ourselves in the dark heart of Trump Country. The Versailles Restaurant is a gaudy old relic, barely changed since its construction in 1971. Its cavernous interior is like something out of *The Godfather*, full of ornate woodwork, cut-glass chandeliers, and floor-length mirrors covered in filigree. It's also one of the most important meeting places for the right-wing Cuban diaspora, who come there to curse Castro and the Revolution over mojitos, plot their political lobbying activities, and as it turns out, hold big, shouty rallies on the sidewalk outside.

Versailles was founded by Felipe Valls, a Cuban tycoon whose chain of gas stations and glass bottle factories was expropriated during the Revolution, and who never really got over it. As the name suggests, it's a place for people who fantasize about being kings. The dining room is immortalized in Joan Didion's *Miami*—one of her most underrated books, by the way—as the site where someone broke a chair over journalist Luciano Nieves' head, after Nieves wrote a column suggesting that political dialogue with Castro might be possible. Years later, Versailles would be the first place Donald Trump visited after his 2023 arraignment for mishandling classified documents, whereupon he famously yelled "food for everyone!", then left without paying. It's that kind of scene. But a few of us from the Nuestra América group had wandered out looking for somewhere to eat, and this is where we had ended up.

If the protesters knew we would soon be boarding a plane for Havana with tons of supplies onboard, in opposition to the U.S. embargo, they might have reached for another chair. I got a drink and some shrimp, and tried not to say anything too political, too loudly. "They just keep going, don't they?" I remember asking Davidson Boswell, who had come representing the direct-action group Climate Defiance.

Indeed. Hours later, the sky was darker, and the demonstrators were still at it, yelling *Cuba Libre!* at passing Nissans as we left. For all I know, they're still there. And why not? After all, they were closer than they'd ever been to getting what they want: the total devastation of Cuba, and retribution for their forebears, the plantation, factory, and casino owners who'd been uprooted along with Fulgencio Batista all those years ago. The U.S. Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, is one of them. In

his 2012 memoir, Rubio recalls sitting at his grandfather's knee and fantasizing that he would "someday lead an army of exiles to overthrow Fidel Castro and become president of a free Cuba." Castro died of old age before Rubio got that chance, but the same dream still animates him.

As an adult, Rubio makes speeches railing against a world transformed by "godless communist revolutions and by anti-colonial uprisings," strongly implying that his own views are *pro*-colonial. Ever since he was unanimously confirmed to run the State Department in 2025—for which 45 Democrats and two independents really owe the world an apology—he has been waging savage economic warfare against Cuba. Last February, Rubio introduced targeted sanctions against Cuban doctors who take aid missions to other countries, making the old phrase about no good deed going unpunished into U.S. law. And this January, the Trump administration went further, announcing punitive tariffs against any country that supplies "any oil" to Cuba. In effect, they imposed a total energy blockade, a devastating act of collective punishment against the entire Cuban population.

Rubio still frames his agenda in the language of Cold War liberalism, talking about "giving people economic and political freedom." His boss Donald Trump, however, is more honest, saying that "I do believe I'll be having the honor of taking Cuba[...] whether I free it, take it, I think I can do anything I want with it, you want to know the truth." Like his old pal Jeffrey Epstein, Trump has a perverse enthusiasm for forcing himself on people and places that he believes can't fight back. In the first few months of 2026, he rained death on Venezuela and Iran, killing or kidnapping their heads of state, and he made it clear that Cuba is next on his list. No wonder his supporters in Miami were in a rip-roaring state of enthusiasm. They smelled blood. A cheerful thought, as we prepared to set out.

FRIDAY

In the face of that kind of high-powered aggression from Washington, our group began to seem a bit small and scruffy. Who exactly did we think we were, to go up against Trump, Rubio, and the powers at their disposal? As we queued up in the Miami airport, I kept glancing around and seeing a *Who's Who* of the political Left in the U.S.—journalists, labor organizers, podcasters, and others I'd only known as two-dimensional presences on a laptop screen. Ahead of me in line was the ever-controversial Hasan Piker, towering over everyone else like an NBA player. Behind me, broadcaster Katie Halper, Chris Smalls of the Amazon Labor Union, and Brace Belden of *TrueAnon* in his bucket hat. Apart from Nathan and myself, our particular sub-group contained a lot of political comedians—Fareeha Khan, Jeff Seal, Mary Houlihan, Freddy G, and Kate Willett, who'd helped organize the whole thing in a frantic fusillade of emails, among others. (And here, special thanks are in order to photographer Julia Keane, who was the only person close enough to the Cuban embassy in Washington, D.C. to secure our press visas.) Everyone had done their research, and everyone had an idea of where they'd be volunteering, or what kind of journalism they'd be doing. Still, when your opposite number is the Secretary of State, you tend to want something stronger than a large-to-medium internet following on your side.

And yet, there were signs that some people in Washington were getting nervous about the whole Nuestra América business. By Friday morning, we had already been condemned in a congressional hearing by Representative Scott Perry of Pennsylvania. Channeling the ghost of Joseph McCarthy, he called the mission a "communist flotilla" that was "working to subvert the United States government openly," and he demanded that the Department of Justice "investigate and take the appropriate actions." The U.S. Embassy in Havana, too, issued a hair-raising bulletin about "pro-Cuban regime and anti-U.S. policy protests and rallies" during the exact timespan of our trip, warning everyone to stay away from presumably dangerous radicals like ourselves. It was a glowing, though unintentional, endorsement. If someone like Rep. Perry was getting red in the face, maybe we were onto something after all.

MEDEA BENJAMIN

The co-founder of CODEPINK spoke to us at the airport about the importance of the mission.

NATHAN ROBINSON: Why are we here at Miami International Airport?

MEDEA BENJAMIN: We're here because we all care about people, and we care about the Cuban people, and we're so disgusted that we have a policy that's designed to make them miserable.

NR: So tell us what this mission is. You have hundreds of people here. You have dozens and dozens of boxes of aid.

MD: One, we're taking lots and lots of aid. We're taking medicines for the hospitals, for the polyclinics. We're taking crutches, we're taking wheelchairs, we're taking all kinds of things for the people of Cuba. But we're also going because our hearts are aching at what our government is doing, cutting off oil for three months now, with Trump bragging that not one drop of oil is going to get to Cuba, bragging that he can take over Cuba and do whatever he wants with it. It's so disgusting. So we're here to say we do not agree at all with our government's policy.

It is shockingly easy to go to Cuba, and people ought to know that. In the States, our politicians and news media like to give us the impression that it's difficult, dangerous, and maybe even illegal to make the trip. In the days before I headed off, some of my family urged me to reconsider, visions of handcuffs and gun barrels dancing in their heads. But nothing could be more misleading. In fact, it's perfectly legal to visit Cuba as either a journalist, a humanitarian volunteer, or in my case, both at once. The security screenings are really no different than what you'd experience going to London or Detroit. What's more, it's quick: roughly 90 miles from Miami, less than an hour's hop in a modern jet. You're not even on the plane long enough to need pretzels, and then

(Photo by Steven Goldberg)

you're on communist soil.

You can actually feel the communism, too. It's strange, but as soon as you're in Cuba, you immediately know that you're moving and breathing in a wholly different system than the one you've lived under up to that point. At first, you can't quite pinpoint *what's* different. The usual cliché, which you'll see in a lot of travel writing and documentaries, is that Cuba seems "frozen in time," a throwback to the 1950s or '60s. But that's not it. Yes, there are the magnificent old Fords and Cadillacs with their tail fins, still cruising around like big fish. But you'll see plenty of modern technology and culture, too, whether it's an electric bus with solar panels all over its roof, or the Jordan 4s on young people's feet.

The difference is something deeper: there is no corporate presence whatsoever. No chain stores or restaurants, and no advertising. The only billboards you'll see, traveling from the airport to the center of Havana, have inspirational quotes from Fidel Castro and Che Guevara on them. Most of the buildings are people's houses and apartment blocks, with clotheslines hanging out the windows—or at most, corner stores and gas stations that are clearly small-time operations, like New York City's bodegas. The kind of urban and suburban sprawl that has overtaken U.S. cities, where you'll often see six-lane highway overpasses and vast asphalt parking lots, all leading to a Walmart, is completely absent.

On the bus from the airport, Jeff Seal points this out to me. In the U.S., he says, "You tear down working-class neighborhoods, usually brown and Black, to build a freeway so you can go downtown. Then you need more parking, so you tear down more stuff, and pretty soon there's no reason to go downtown." This is exactly what hasn't happened in Cuba, and as a result, Havana is beautiful in exactly the way Houston isn't. You see wild tamarind trees growing on the side of the road, their branches forming a lattice against the sky; a children's play castle built out of cinder blocks, painted cerulean; a long stretch of tobacco fields, where people are tending to the plants by hand; huge birds, possibly vultures or pelicans, wheeling overhead.

Our first stop is the Havana Convention Center, where President Miguel Díaz-Canel is going to address his international guests. This is the seat of power in Cuba, where the National Assembly meets, and a historic site too. Back in 1979, the Non-Aligned Movement had one of its landmark summits here, convening nations who didn't want to be satellites of the U.S. or the Soviet Union. It's a last-minute addition to our schedule, which the president has decided to rewrite.

Here, the full scope of the Nuestra América project becomes visible. The U.S. is not the only country to send people and supplies to Cuba's aid; not by a long shot. Conservatively, the United States might account for a third of the people who have shown up, and there are hundreds. Every continent except Antarctica seems to be represented. Across the Assembly hall, I see a crowd of serious-looking Palestinian medical students, plus another young doctor who I'd later find out is from Uganda. The MST, or Landless Workers' Movement, of Brazil has sent a delegation, and so has the Communist Refoundation Party of Italy. On the far wall, the international flags are lined up: Puerto Rico, Argentina, Chile,

CHRIS SMALLS

The co-founder and former president of the Amazon Labor Union, author of the upcoming book When The Revolution Comes, on why he joined the aid mission.

ALEX SKOPIC: So how did you get in touch with this mission, and what brought you to Cuba?

CHRIS SMALLS: Yeah, I was honored to be a delegate as far as the Progressive International and CODEPINK, representing over 130 different organizations from around the world bringing about almost half a million dollars worth of donations, whether it be via plane or via flotilla, that was on the way. And this is definitely something that touched near to my heart, as you know, being on the flotilla mission, going to Gaza this past summer. But also previously, I visited Havana three years ago and did a similar mission with a smaller delegation, bringing a labor delegation. Actually, I brought about 10 members from my union down here to work with the community. And also at that time, we were dealing with similar issues, a blockade on oil, and inhumane conditions for the people of Cuba. So I'm just trying to, as a labor leader, as an organizer and as a civilian, with the freedoms and liberties that we have in America, I want to see the people of Cuba be able to have the same type of freedom.

AS: What have you been seeing as you walk around Havana, and how is it? How has the city changed since the last time you were here?

CS: I mean, definitely the people are still the same. They're still resilient, they're still beautiful people, probably some of the most resilient people you meet on the planet. And they're still very optimistic, there's a lot of hope. As far as the conditions, there's been some garbage around town that I haven't seen the last time, and of course, as you mentioned, the blackouts. But despite all of that, it's still been beautiful to see how the people figure out a way to get by. And also they are really, really happy that we're here doing this mission. Everywhere I go, every time I walk outside, people are coming up to me and saying, thank you. We love you Americans for coming here and trying to help the people of Cuba out. So it's been like a beautiful nightmare. And you know, I hate to use the term nightmare, but that's what we're living in under this Trump administration, unfortunately, and we need the people. Whenever our government fails us, we have to rise to the occasion. And this is just another opportunity to do that.

Palestine, the *Estelada Vermella* of the Catalonian independence movement… and a ski mask in the colors of the Irish flag, hanging from a piece of string. The Belfast rap group Kneecap are here, too, and DJ Próvaí has donated his trademark headgear to the cause. The phrase "international community" is often used to refer to dubious institutions like NATO and the World Bank, but this gathering is what it ought to mean.

As we settle into our seats, it occurs to me that I don't know a huge amount about Miguel Díaz-Canel. He's a cagey guy, rarely giving interviews and appearing guarded the few times he does—although when your country is under siege, you have to be. Raúl Castro and the rest of the Communist Party trusted him enough to take over the presidency when Raúl's health began to decline in 2018, though reports suggest the 94-year-old Castro still plays a role behind the scenes. Díaz-Canel is an electrical engineer by trade, and he spent the 1980s teaching technical classes before he got involved in politics. Today, he wears a grey suit with a sky-blue T-shirt beneath, a contrast from the military fatigues of the Castro brothers. As he told the *Nation* in 2023, he's the first Cuban president to be born after the Revolution, and judging by his recent actions, he seems to be more a pragmatist than an ideological warrior. After being threatened personally by Trump, who demanded he step down days before our arrival, Díaz-Canel responded by offering to loosen economic restrictions on Cuban exiles, inviting them to make investments on the island for the first time. (He didn't even call them "*gusanos*.")

Today, though, Díaz-Canel's tone is defiant, and he's clearly trying to channel Fidel. It's not subtle. Before his speech, the screens on the wall display a kind of *SportsCenter* highlight reel, with black-and-white footage of Castro's most dramatic moments, cut together with bombastic music: Castro waving a rifle, Castro with Che, Castro shouting at the United Nations. Then Díaz-Canel takes the podium, and he says all the things you'd expect of him. He condemns Yankee imperialism, both in Latin America and the Middle East: "The danger over Cuba, the danger over the Palestinian people, is also a danger over the world. And if the world allows this aggression against a small island to change its political system, what world are we talking about?" He gestures emphatically, stabbing the air. He says the Cuban people have made "the decision that we will die defending the revolution," and he follows it up with a loud *Venceremos!*—"we will triumph."

It's a contrast from his economic concessions just a few days ago, and I suspect the news that the Iranians are keeping Trump busy in the Strait of Hormuz has emboldened him. Or maybe he knows that he'll soon have to make distasteful compromises, and wants to strike a bold pose while he can. But for all that he puts on a brave performance, Díaz-Canel doesn't quite have the juice, the way Castro did. He's an engineer and a Party loyalist, doing his best to act the part of a revolutionary commander. He can't quite hide the worry in his voice. By itself, the fact that he took two hours from his day, in the middle of a national crisis, to come greet *us* is telling. If our hastily cobbled-together aid mission is an important element in his survival strategy, things have to be bad.

We would see just how bad that night, at dinner. We had gone to eat at a little bar and grill called *La Terraza*, which has a frankly alarming old elevator. ("Only four," warned the doorman, and I believed him that something bad would happen if five people got on.) Because of the blockade, there aren't many items on the menu, and the ones available are all local Cuban products: rice, pork, shrimp, plantains. I had something simply called "fish filet," and it beat most of what I've tried in New Orleans' fanciest seafood places. But then the blackout happened, and the menu ceased to matter.

One second the whole city is lit up, and the next it isn't. We would only find out later that the entire country had been hit with a power outage on the night of March 20. At the time, all we knew was that *La Terazza* was now pitch-dark. I went to the little balcony with its cast-iron railings, and looked

(Photo by Gerard Dalbon)

out across the street. The whole block had been thrown into shadow, with only a few rectangles of light where someone had a backup lamp running. There was just a heavy *absence*: of light, of music, of the mechanical background hum you don't notice until it's gone. The traffic lights hung from the wires like stones, useless.

It's not that blackouts are unknown in the States. There was the terrible one in Texas, back in 2021, when an estimated 246 people died after the power grid went down in a harsh winter storm. Even in New Orleans, our rickety Entergy grid sometimes flickers out, for unclear reasons or none at all. (As I write this, a "Mylar streamer" has caused a fresh power outage in the French Quarter. If we applied our standards consistently, this would be called a sign of the horrors of capitalism, justifying regime change in Louisiana.)

But there was nothing accidental about this blackout. This was something Donald Trump and Marco Rubio had chosen to do. From their faux-gold chairs in D.C., these two men had deliberately inflicted the equivalent of a natural disaster on the Cuban people, to hurt them, in the name of U.S. foreign policy. Later, Ryan Grim of *Drop Site News* would talk to doctors in a neonatal care unit, who told him that during these blackouts, there's a gap of several minutes between the power flickering off and their emergency generators kicking in. In that gap, the medics have to "take their phone [flashlight], race, and hand-pump the ventilators," otherwise infants will die. That, too, is Trump and Rubio's doing. The word that comes to mind is *premeditated*, and if there's any justice left in the world, one day they'll stand trial for it.

SATURDAY

The power came back the next morning, before going out again in the afternoon, and then coming back the following day, and so on. The whole time, we heard people in Havana gossiping anxiously about the possibility of a Russian oil tanker coming in. It finally *did* come in at the start of April, after we'd left: the *Anatoly Kolodkin*, stocked with 730,000 barrels. As much as there is to dislike about Russia under Putin, they deserve some credit there. But that was all to come. On Saturday morning, I walked past a gas station and found it shuttered, a *CERRADO* sign hanging in the door. There wasn't even a price on the big board outside: no point numbering what isn't available.

We spent a lot of time walking, in those few days. A sad side-effect of the oil blockade is that you *can* walk wherever you want, because very few cars will be coming. You can even stand in the center of a four-lane street, if you feel like it, and it'll be a while before you have to move out of anyone's way. The exceptions are the orange solar-powered mini-buses, people on bikes and three-wheeled pedi-cabs, and the handful of guys who line their big pink Cadillacs up near the Capitol building, hoping to entice tourists to pay them for a ride. But the tourists are gone now, so mostly they stay parked.

In the U.S., Cuba is regularly derided as a dictatorship, or called "the regime." But really, it was striking how few signs of the state's presence there were. We could walk around wherever we liked, talk to whoever we wanted, with no interference; there were no government "minders," as there are in places like North Korea. Only embassies and military buildings had armed guards. I saw very few cops: a total of three, in fact. Two of them were sitting on motorbikes in the town center, joking around with a guy who'd walked up to them. Another was smoking a cigarette outside the Ministry of Public Health.

(Apparently he'd never been inside and heard the health advice, or didn't care; cigarettes, strong and unfiltered, are everywhere in Havana.)

Physically, the city reminded me strongly of New Orleans: same narrow streets, same Spanish colonial architecture. But in New Orleans, we've recently been dealing with a full-bore incursion of National Guard troops and ICE agents. They were led for a while by the noxious Gregory Bovino, who called his months-long crusade against Latino day laborers "Operation Catahoula Crunch." In New Orleans, people who lack immigration papers have been hiding out in their homes like Anne Frank, for fear of getting grabbed and imprisoned in a huge warehouse, God-knows-where. On any given street, you may run into a 19-year-old soldier with a full camo uniform and a peach-fuzz pseudo-beard, carrying an AR-15. (Or leaving it behind in a Bourbon Street bathroom, propped up against the sink, as happened over Mardi Gras.) In Havana, I felt a lot less "policed" than I do at home.

You've got to be careful about drawing too many conclusions from a few days' visit, of course. The big international human rights organizations, like Amnesty International, have concluded that Cuba has serious problems with censorship, political prisoners, and the death penalty; there have been reports of "warrantless searches" of the homes of people who run political YouTube channels, for instance. It's possible, even likely, that gringos with notebooks who have obviously come from abroad get treated differently from locals. Still, I saw plenty of what you'd call *signs of dissent*. Political graffiti was surprisingly common in both Spanish and English. One piece read "IF HARD WORK LEADS TO SUCCESS, THEN THE DONKEY WOULD OWN THE FARM," while another showed the good old-fashioned "ACAB" for "All Cops are Bastards." Apparently it's a universal slogan at this point. Marijuana, meanwhile, is still highly illegal under Cuba's "zero tolerance" drug laws, but that didn't deter the middle-aged woman I saw wearing a huge green weed-leaf T-shirt.

I didn't meet an outright opponent of the government, but Hasan Piker, Katie Halper, and several of the other journalists did, and they report that ordinary Cubans were surprisingly frank about their opinions, including their criticisms of the state—far more so than you'd expect, in a place that's considered so thoroughly repressive. Now, things are probably different if you try to form an opposition party. Political repression happens in the sphere of politics, so if you're not actively doing politics, it often doesn't affect your day-to-day life. But at least, this doesn't *feel* like a place where people are afraid to express themselves. There was none of the grey bleakness of the USSR in the Stalin era.

And then, there are different kinds of freedom and unfreedom. In the U.S., we like to pretend this is simple: we're the Good, Free Country, and Cuba is the Bad, Unfree Country. But that's a cartoonish way of looking at the world. Sure, in the U.S., we do plenty of voting, and we can publish whatever political ideas pop into our heads. (Well, unless you're Rümeysa Öztürk or Mahmoud Khalil, and ICE decides to target you for your speech.) But in a lot of important ways, we're not "free" at all. Private landlords control our homes, private insurers control our health, and private bosses decide whether we will stay employed and eating each month. We get to exist only to the extent that we're profitable. People in Cuba may not have a variety of political parties to choose from, or an equivalent of the First Amendment. But nobody in Havana has ever had their medical care denied by UnitedHealth, either, and 85 percent of them own their homes. The concept of a "school shooting" is alien to them, because gun companies haven't been allowed to write government policy. Nor do they seem any worse off for the lack of a Cuban Fox News affiliate, or a Nick Fuentes stream. It's a question worth asking: would you rather have lots of elections and debates, but no healthcare and a spree killing every week, or guaranteed healthcare and safety in a one-party state? When you're comfortable, it may seem obvious that the U.S. system is preferable to the Cuban one. When you have appendicitis or lung cancer, and no money, it may be less clear.

But the nature of the Cuban government is also totally irrelevant to the question of whether it's acceptable to impose a fuel blockade on the Cuban

KNEECAP

The Irish hip-hop trio accompanied the Nuestra América Convoy and spoke with Katie Halper.

KATIE HALPER: Something that I find fascinating is that, and I'm not just saying this to flatter people in the room, but I really do think that of all the people I've met and places I've been, the nicest, kindest, and most generous people are the Irish, the Cubans, and the Palestinians. I'm wondering if you think that any of the shared struggle has affected almost the character of your people in a positive way. I'm not romanticizing it.

KNEECAP [MO CHARA]: I think there's a reason that you say the Cubans, the Irish, and the Palestinians are some of the nicest people you meet. Because I think what happens is, during times of struggle, or during long periods of struggle, it breeds people who are willing to help. You go to West Belfast, and it's a community that's been fucking impoverished for a long time. And again, that's by design, by the British government. There's a reason that community has been impoverished in lack of infrastructure and stuff. But what happens is, these people know what it's like to go without. So whenever you grow up knowing what it's like to go without, you don't want to see your friend, your brother, your sister, or your neighbor going without. So I think that there's a reason for that. And I think tough times breed the best people.

KNEECAP [MÓGLAÍ BAP]: And a sense of community. I think that's how communities get through, whether it be in the North during the Troubles, or in Palestine, or in Cuba. In a sense, community is how people get free in these times. And I think oppressors, like people who commit oppression, always think that the people who are oppressed want to commit the same things to them, and that's what they get wrong. Even with Cuba—I don't see Cuba invading any countries. Only with doctors. So they're not bombing countries and stuff like that there. So I think it says community is the way to get through these things.

This interview has been condensed for print, the full conversation is available on The Katie Halper Show.

people. Nothing can justify the man-made poverty and suffering we saw. There have been a lot of headlines about the trash piling up in the streets of Havana, because there isn't enough fuel to run the garbage trucks regularly, and that's real. Nothing can prepare you for the stench of it, as you round the corner of a narrow street and come up against a pile that's been there for days: part fecal, part rotten vegetables, and a sour alcoholic note beneath it all. The flies cover the trash in a thick, black layer, and they buzz up into a cloud as you walk past. Undoubtedly, they're laying eggs and multiplying in there, and spreading disease.

Nobody, from shopkeepers to government officials, likes to talk about the trash. They're embarrassed by it; it hurts their pride to see their city like this. But the worst thing of all is to see an old man with a cardboard box, stooped over, picking through the garbage looking for aluminum cans. He finds one, puts it in the box, and goes back for more, over and over. This, too, has been deliberately inflicted on him, by some of the richest people alive.

In dark and desperate times, everyone finds their hustle. At one point, a kid in a denim baseball cap sells me a copy of *Granma*, the Communist Party's official newspaper, which on closer inspection turns out to be eight months old. (Fascinatingly, it also contains a review of the Netflix horror series *Midnight Mass*. The reviewer liked it.) Other people, either homeless or close to it, just ask you for money. Their playbook is to be as friendly as possible, and they strike up a conversation, in whatever jury-rigged combination of Spanish and English works.

"You're from the U.S.A.?" asks Rafael. He's a skinny, Afro-Cuban man, maybe 20 years old, with a shaved head and ragged jeans. "Thank you for Obama!" he says.

A lot of Cubans love Barack Obama, and look back fondly on the brief period of "normalization" from 2015-2017, when American cruise ships were allowed to dock here. "Cubans and the U.S. are like brothers, *manos*," Rafael says, clasping his hands to demonstrate. "But President Donald Trump, he doesn't like the Cubans. He says no money, no food for the children." Obviously, he's playing up his message, and I slip him some pesos. But he's also *right*, and because he can distinguish between a country and its leadership, his political analysis is more sophisticated than most of what you'll find on cable news.

Garbage piles up in front of the Hermanos Ameijeiras Hospital. (Photo by Nathan J. Robinson)

In total, I saw maybe ten or 15 people who were definitely homeless, sleeping on the sidewalk with bruises on their bare feet. According to some of the volunteers who've visited Cuba before, that kind of visible homelessness is a new development, and a sign of how badly the government has been strained in the last few years. On paper, housing is a constitutional right in Cuba, delivered in a variety of ways: state subsidies to buy or construct homes, public construction projects, and "usufruct," where people are granted the right to live on state-owned land for free. But now, after decades of sanctions making it hard to get construction equipment, and hurricanes destroying the houses that exist, it seems a home can't actually be provided to everyone who needs it. (And yet, even then, Havana is *still* doing better than our city governments in the U.S., who don't even attempt to provide housing, going straight for imprisonment instead.)

If U.S. policymakers hoped to eliminate joy from the streets, though, they've failed. Little clusters of kids kick a soccer ball back and forth, oblivious to the fact that the ball is half-inflated, oblong, and shedding bits of its covering. Other people, young and old, play frantic games of dominos, slapping down and rearranging the tiles in a flurry of clacking sounds. In the Paseo del Prado, couples hold a ballroom dance class, slow and romantic, with classical music emanating from a small radio with a solar panel strapped to it. On the Calle Obispo, a shirtless daredevil performs a fire act, chugging some kind of brown liquid and then blowing huge plumes of flame skyward. You wouldn't

know they're in a national crisis at all, the way they take it with grace. Again, compare them to Americans, who threw full-blown protest rallies when they were told they couldn't go to Applebee's for a few weeks due to COVID-19. In the past century, the Cubans have outlasted dictators, invasions, pandemics, hurricanes, wars and rumors of wars, and here they stand, ready to outlast a century more. Whatever happens next, I wouldn't bet against them.

Carlos Fernández de Cossío, Cuba's Deputy Foreign Minister, looks like he hasn't slept well for some time. A group of the journalists have been invited to Havana's International Press Center to speak with him, and through an hour-long press conference, he's a consummate diplomat, careful not to say anything that could inflame the already-delicate situation. I ask him what he thinks of Claudia Sheinbaum, the impressive new president of Mexico, saying that she'd be willing to ship oil to Cuba despite the embargo; he says he'd welcome it, and be grateful. *TrueAnon*'s Brace Belden asks him about the pressure the U.S. is putting on other countries to expel Cuban doctors, and he condemns that. But it's when he talks about the crisis the blockade has caused in Cuba's own healthcare system that de Cossío gets visibly angry.

"That could be the difference, even of life and death for some people. Or the difference in agonizing illness, or having the same illness with less pain, less suffering," he says. "You can't imagine the pressure. Maybe you've talked to some of our doctors, when they have to decide, as if they were God: this product that I have here, should I use it on this individual who might die in a week? Or should I use it on this other one, who has a longer lifespan? And then you think, am I God? Am I to decide?"

He isn't exaggerating. According to a new study in the *British Medical Journal Paediatrics*, U.S. sanctions are directly responsible for shortages of 364 essential medicines in Cuba, and any medical technology with more than 10 percent U.S.-made components—including "infusion pumps, cardiac catheters, haemodialysis machines and ventilators"—simply can't be sold to them. Kidney specialists report having to wash and reuse blood filters, since no more can be found, causing hepatitis to spread. At the end of 2025, there were "9913 children awaiting surgery because of shortages," and that was *before* the fuel blockade. Almost certainly, some are now dead.

10-year-old Carlos, who has cystic fibrosis, cannot access Trikafta due to the American blockade. After our visit, the medication was delivered. (Photo by Steven Goldberg)

There are, however, some people in Cuba who will have to suffer a little less now. That day, I stood on the stone steps of the Salvador Allende Hospital, waiting for the Puerto Rican delegation. It's a magnificent place, and it's fitting that it's named for Allende: the medical doctor and Marxist who was elected president of Chile in 1970, then quickly driven to suicide by a U.S.-backed coup. He was a personal friend of Fidel's, and a huge framed portrait of the two of them embracing hangs in the lobby. The doctors and nurses have lined up like an honor guard by the door, pristine in their white coats, and a cheer goes up when the first delegate walks in, carrying the Puerto Rican flag. "Long live Puerto Rico! Long live Cuba! Long live all the peoples of the world!" one of the doctors yells. Several more volunteers follow, rolling along huge suitcases full of prescription drugs: painkillers, antibiotics, inhalers, diabetes treatments, and everything else that's been in short supply. Journalist David Montgomery of the *Nation*, a real pro who was there at the hospital, estimates that it added up to over 1,800 pounds in all, just shy of a ton.

Each pill is a victory. The entire U.S. government wanted to keep that medicine from reaching the Cubans—to keep them in pain and despair, until they surrender their sovereignty. But the Puerto Ricans wouldn't let it happen. Today, there are people in those hospital wards who can sleep free of pain because of their solidarity. And keep in mind, Puerto Rico doesn't have much in the way of wealth

TIMELINE OF UNITED STATES-CUBA RELATIONSHIP

1823 President James Monroe declares the Monroe Doctrine, effectively announcing that Latin America is the United States' "backyard" to influence. Thomas Jefferson says Cuba would be "the most interesting addition which could ever be made to our system of states."

1902 Cuba becomes independent from Spanish colonial rule.

1903 Cuba is forced to agree to a treaty with the U.S. granting the U.S. extensive rights to intervene in Cuban affairs.

1940 Fulgencio Batista is elected president, and serves until 1944. He establishes close relationships with U.S. gangsters including Meyer Lansky and "Lucky" Luciano.

1952 Staging a military coup that cancels that year's presidential election, Batista takes power for the second time, now as a dictator. The U.S. recognizes his new government after only 17 days.

ROBERTICO YIS

A Cuban who now lives in America and joined the aid mission, Robertico spoke to us about the U.S. relationship with his country.

NATHAN J. ROBINSON: You have a very deep relationship with this country. Perhaps you could tell us first a little bit about your background before we get to the current mission.

ROBERTICO YIS: Well, first of all, I was born and raised in the city of Holguín, on the other side of the country. I was raised by my grandparents. I studied. I learned English. I learned *petit français.* Because here in Cuba, studying costs nothing. It's free. You can study anything you want. I went to Ecuador to work in a hotel in 2013, then I moved to Mexico, then I moved to the United States, then I moved to Canada, then I moved to the United States again. So having been all over America, I have walked, literally walked, America. I've seen the world, and that's kind of my background. I studied psychology in Havana and Holguín University, and I studied journalism in Miami.

ROBINSON: And so what brings you back to Cuba today?

YIS: First of all, it's my country. I love my homeland. I consider Cuba my mother and the United States my father, and they are both divorced. And we, the kids, are in the middle of this divorce.

ROBINSON: So tell me a little bit more about your perspective on the Cuban-American relationship, given that you are someone who now splits your time between Cuba and the United States.

YIS: To be a good judge, you have to know both parts, the part from that side and the part from this side. And from the very beginning in the history of Cuba, Cuba has been trying to establish a relationship between the United States and Cuba. The first place that Fidel Castro visited when he was prime minister—he wasn't the president yet—was Venezuela, looking for oil to supply the oil that was taken from Cuba with the blockade once it started. The second place Fidel Castro as a minister visited was the United States, and he tried to talk to Eisenhower. Eisenhower didn't want to talk to him, so he talked to Nixon. The thing is, Cuba has always been trying to establish bilateral relationships between both countries.

ROBINSON: It's safe to say that U.S. policy towards Cuba has presented itself as being done in the interests of the freedom of the Cuban people from a repressive government. But the actual motives are very different.

YIS: The actual motive is that there are a lot of people with a lot of money in South Florida, Bacardi and all these big companies. [Bacardi, which had its Cuban operations nationalized by Castro's government, has long been active in lobbying to maintain the blockade, and at one point the CEO of Bacardi even directly plotted the bombing of Cuban oil refineries and assisted with assassination plots against Castro.] Nobody can deny that United States politics works with lobbies. So the [most influential foreign] lobby in the United States right now is the Zionist lobby, and the second is the Cuban lobby. Because Cubans have a lot of congressmen and women and senators in the Senate. Cuba is a business for these guys, because they get money out of the Cuban topic. They don't care about the people.

ROBINSON: Tell us a little bit more about the current situation that Cuba is in that this aid mission is attempting to draw focus on.

YIS: Cuba has been in crisis since the very beginning of the revolution because of the blockade and the economic sanctions they've been trying to impose. Some people say that this is the worst-case scenario, but I can bet my life, by experience, that it was the '90s, when the Soviet Union fell off. That was the worst time ever for Cuba. Now everything is worse because Marco Rubio is the Secretary of State, and he has a personal interest because, for real, for the United States politicians, Cuba is not important. We don't have oil. We don't have anything that is profitable for the United States. This is just a matter of Marco Rubio and his Cubans from South Florida. They're dreaming about getting back all the land, all the property they had in 1959. I was born in 1983. I have nothing to do with what happened with these properties and these nationalizations.

ROBINSON: And what have you seen here in terms of the effect of the fuel embargo on the country, and how are people holding up? You mentioned when we talked earlier in the day that Cubans have lived through worse, but certainly what we've seen this weekend has been pretty disturbing in terms of what the United States is doing to this country.

YIS: This is inhuman, and it's violating the rights of the Cubans, because you cannot try to kill a country by starvation and necessity. There is a secret memorandum from [Deputy Assistant Secretary of State] Lester Mallory from April 1960 that, if you read it, you're going to see clearly what's happening and what they have been trying to do. [Mallory concluded that because "the majority of Cubans support Castro ... every possible means should be undertaken promptly to weaken the economic life of Cuba" in order "to bring about hunger, desperation and overthrow of government."] It's difficult now, it's hard, it's tough. We're going through a lot, but we're going to resist. Because what is a crisis for the rest of the world, for us, is a small flu. We are used to crisis. We're going to overcome this.

ROBINSON: I think one of the important things I want to get straight is, how do you think Americans should understand the situation as it is? There's been a lot of misreporting on the aid convoy, and what is the kind of message that you think Americans should understand about Cuba right now?

YIS: Cuba doesn't represent any threat to the United States at all. To the contrary, we have so much to give to the United States people. We want to decide our own destiny with nobody from outside telling us what to do. We want to be good neighbors.

1959 After several years of guerilla warfare, the Cuban Revolution overthrows Batista, placing Fidel Castro and his allies in power. Che Guevara oversees revolutionary tribunals and executions at La Cabaña; land reform and mass literacy programs begin.

1960 Castro visits Harlem and meets Malcolm X. Eisenhower begins plans for an invasion of Cuba and overthrow of its government. The first of many U.S. assassination attempts against Castro is launched. The U.S. Treasury Secretary proposes that "if we were to cut the Cubans off from their fuel supply, the effect would be devastating on them within a month or six weeks."

1961 The Bay of Pigs invasion. Roughly 1,500 CIA-backed militia fighters land in Cuba, and are soundly defeated. Angered by their humiliating failure to overthrow Castro, the Kennedy administration escalates other means of subverting the Cuban government.

1962 The Cuban Missile Crisis (more appropriately called the Turkish Missile Crisis, since the U.S. placed nuclear weapons on the USSR's doorstep before the Soviets responded in kind). Crisis concludes with a U.S. pledge not to invade Cuba, but the U.S. later declares it is not bound by this pledge.

and resources itself, having been battered by hurricanes and maliciously neglected by the United States for decades. But they don't let it stop them, so those of us who have comparatively more to work with *really* have no excuse for sitting idle.

The picture was the same at a nearby care center for people with special needs. The facility itself is in rough shape: the tiled ceiling sags down in the middle, and there's peeling paint and streaks of water damage on the walls. But the staff have done an admirable job of not letting the residents know there's anything wrong. They've blown up balloons, kept some music playing, and painted a certain cartoon character on the wall. (I can't tell you which one, since the company is infamously litigious, and I wouldn't put it past them to invade Cuba to enforce their intellectual property rights.) Like kids everywhere, the younger patients light up when the volunteers bring them in some donations: school supplies, powdered milk, medicines, crayons. And here, you see the basic immorality of sanctions at its meanest and ugliest. Even if you believe Cuba needs sweeping political reform, it isn't Miguel Díaz-Canel or any of the leadership who are hurt by sanctions. I saw their building, too, and they're doing fine. It's a little Cuban kid in a wheelchair that our country is really hurting, and his friends and classmates.

But we shouldn't act surprised, because the same pattern of collective punishment has been playing out in Palestine for years. There, the U.S. and Israel impose the same kind of restrictions on what can come in and out, keeping food and fuel to a bare minimum, and forcing everyone to suffer. Just like in Cuba, children, sick people, and the elderly are the hardest hit; they're the ones who starve and die first. And because we haven't yet punished the U.S. political class for doing it in the Middle East, they're now doing it in the Caribbean, too. Sanctions are often sold as a safe, humane alternative to war, but when you've seen them firsthand, it's obvious that they're not. They are war itself, waged against the most vulnerable. What can you call that but evil? Where will it stop?

SUNDAY

It would take a lot more time and space than I have to properly describe what Cuba is like, let alone what it means. So I'll flash-forward past some things. The sheer *blueness* of the Caribbean, seen from the stone walkway called the Malecón, and the groups of people teaching their small kids to fish from the edge. Talking to Chris Smalls, whose comments you'll find elsewhere in these pages. The woman in the park with her kite, catching the sea breeze and stretching so far into the sky it could barely be seen. Gerard Dalbon of New York City's DSA, and his mad dash to deliver his suitcase of solar panels to community centers all over Havana. The huge turquoise mural the delegation's art group painted, reading *Humanidad*. (Personally I'd have preferred Fidel's slogan, *Muerte al Invasor*, but it's a nice mural all the same.) James Ray, another DSA activist from Philadelphia, who gave us the incredible news that Cuban kids are just as obsessed with yelling "six seven" as their Yankee counterparts. Plenty more, along those lines. But there are two Cubans I met, in particular, who are memorable.

The first is Rafael Hernández, one of Cuba's most prominent political scientists, and he's complicated. In discussions in the U.S., Cuban intellectuals tend to get sorted into one of two boxes: either a loyal supporter of "the regime," as it's called, or a pro-U.S. dissident yearning for capitalism. Hernández doesn't fit neatly into either category. In 1999, his important book *Looking at Cuba: Essays on Culture and Civil Society* (translated to English in 2003) staked out a third position, that of the constructive critic. In it, Hernandez is frank about the "problems caused by bureaucracy, censorship, or dogmatism," and argues that it's necessary for Cuba to "allow for readjustment, inspire a new generation of leaders, peacefully let go of old dogmas[...] reform the structures that were created earlier, reorder the economy and the legal system, promote more effective mechanisms, and at the same time carry out the delegation of power required for the viable transition to a more decentralized and democratic system." But he's still a socialist, and he firmly defends the gains won in the Revolution, like Cuba's universal health and education services. He's exactly the kind of person that U.S. leaders, if they actually cared about civil rights and liberties in Cuba the way they claim, could productively work with. But of course, they don't.

Hernández spoke to a group of us from the Nuestra América mission, giving a kind of impromptu lecture and discussion, and to me, this was his most provocative question: "The U.S. deals with the Chinese Communist Party. They deal with the Vietnamese communist party. Why don't they deal with the Cuban communist party?" Like any good political scientist, he has a theory. "Our different views, our different interests with the United States, our conflict, is not something that was created by a socialist system, that was created by the Revolution. It is older than that. The question of independence and sovereignty is much older than that."

In his view, even if Cuba were a liberal democracy like France or Spain, it wouldn't matter: the simple fact is that the U.S. wants the land, and always has. And the evidence bears this out. Certainly, the U.S. doesn't actually care about democracy or human rights; you can tell because Saudi Arabia is still a valued ally. And Donald Trump has also threatened territories like Greenland that do *not* have communist governments, so ideology isn't the deciding factor. But U.S. leaders dating back to Thomas Jefferson—who preached freedom with one hand, and whipped his slaves with the other—have always talked about making Cuba a U.S. territory, long before Fidel Castro was born. The aggressive intent has

1963 The Kennedy administration administers an "economic denial program" explicitly designed to ensure that Cuba stays poor, in the hopes that this will foment an uprising against Fidel Castro.

1980 The Cuban government declares that anyone who wishes to leave Cuba can do so, leading to the Mariel Boatlift, in which approximately 125,000 Cubans emigrate to Florida.

1996 The Helms-Burton Act is passed in Congress, intensifying the U.S. embargo even further.

1976 Che Guevara is killed by CIA-backed forces in Bolivia, while trying to spark yet another revolution. His last words are reportedly "Shoot, coward! You are only going to kill a man."

1984 Black Panther Party activist Assata Shakur, newly escaped from prison, flees to Cuba and is granted political asylum.

always been there.

What would they do, if their wildest dreams were realized, and they got control of Cuba? We can make some guesses. Free access to that beautiful seafront would have to go, of course, replaced by some kind of paywall system with private allotments. The "big six" hotel brands would come in, from Hilton to Wyndham, and build sprawling, Mar-a-Lago style resorts. Very probably, there would be a boom in the construction of loud, garish nightclubs, like the ones in Miami where online influencers like Andrew Tate and "Clavicular" are always hanging out. Around them, the drug and sex trades would flourish. Developers would bulldoze the crumbling old stone houses, and put Starbucks and Sephora and the AT&T Store where they used to be. The state healthcare system would be scrapped, and 11 million Cubans would have to contend with the ACA Marketplace for the first time, leading to a corresponding spike in mortality. Same with education, where they'd be introduced to the wonders of student loans and private charter schools. There would be golf courses and tanning salons, and rich white men in polyester pants to populate them. The GDP would go up, and everything beautiful and fascinating about the place would be destroyed. Before his still-mysterious death, Jeffrey Epstein was emailing with businessmen from the United Arab Emirates about this kind of thing. "I think your skill in transforming dubai, should be touted in cuba, its location is the best, no shortage of land," he wrote to Sultan Ahmed bin Sulayem in 2009. What role Jeffrey himself hoped to have, as he cast his eye south, doesn't bear thinking about.

(Photo by Alex B.)

On our last full day in Cuba, I would meet a kind of person I recognize immediately, and like immensely. His name is Roberto, and he runs a little bookshop on the Calle Obispo, called the *Libreria Victoria*. Everywhere I've been in the world, the proprietors of used bookshops are the same. They don't make much money—how could they, selling their wares for eight bucks, or five pounds sterling, or 2000 pesos?—but they care deeply about literature, and they're fiercely proud of their collections. Roberto doesn't get many English-speaking visitors these days, and he's eager to show me his shelf of Hemingway in English: *A Farewell to Arms* and *The Sun Also Rises*, which you'd expect, but also *The Garden of Eden*, which is a little more outré. He's apologetic for not having any first editions—"only in Spanish." He also has a Spanish copy of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, garish against the surrounding books; even in Havana, you can't get away from J.K. Above the shelves, a framed portrait of Che Guevara looks down on the whole operation, like a patron saint. Along with the books themselves, Roberto sells pins, postcards, vinyl records, empty cigar boxes, old coins and peso notes—plus plenty of what, I say with all the love in the world, can only be described as *junk*. There are two other middle-aged guys who work with him, having an endless, low-level conversation-slash-argument in the back, but Roberto is the Anglophone of the joint.

I buy some postcards of Hemingway shaking hands with Fidel in 1960, on the one occasion they met, but it's Martha Gellhorn I'm thinking about. It's one of the great crimes of literary history that her writing has been so thoroughly overshadowed by Hemingway's, just because she happened to be married to him for a while. Secretly, she's a better travel writer. In an essay for *Granta* called "Cuba Revisited," she compared her experience living at the Finca Vigía in the 1940s, pre-Revolution, to her return to Cuba in 1986, on a scuba-diving trip. There, she's shocked by the way Havana has changed, its streets now boasting "many bookstores, a real novelty; I remembered none." In the years between Gellhorn's stays, Castro's government waged its campaign to eradicate illiteracy

2014 Barack Obama announces "normalization" with Cuba, loosening trade restrictions and allowing U.S. tourism.

JAN 2026 Trump and Rubio impose a near-total fuel blockade on Cuba, leaving exceptions only for the prison camp at Guantanamo Bay, and for private companies.

1997 The EU brings charges against the U.S. at the World Trade Organization, arguing that the U.S. embargo violates WTO rules. The U.S. rejects the WTO's jurisdiction.

2017 Upon taking office, Donald Trump immediately reverses Obama's "normalization" policies.

YOU ARE HERE

from the island, fielding 100,000 educators as if they were soldiers, and they succeeded. A whole new literary culture sprung up: poets like Nancy Morejón, novelists like Leonardo Padura, and too many others to name. (In her travelogue, Gellhorn casually notes that "Cubans love poetry, so poets abound and are widely read." Can any community in the U.S. say the same?) Roberto's *Libreria*, I realize, exists because of that great historic upheaval. In a very literal sense, it's the fruit of the Revolution, and of communism. No wonder he has Che in a frame.

Like everyone else in Havana, the blackouts have been making Roberto's life difficult. Mainly, he's worried about his refrigerator. "You have something frozen, you have to put it out and cook it, or put it in salt, or something, because you have no electricity. How will you keep it?" he asks. "Then another thing is: people are nervous, because suddenly the electricity comes back, and then you don't have a protector for your fridge, and the electricity is so strong, it can burn the system of the fridge, or another thing that you have connected. So when there is no electricity running, most of the people run to the house, disconnect everything, and then it's a problem. You have a phone. If you don't have how to charge it, it's stressing, because most of the people now, most of the time, are using the phone to connect to your family, or to know something on the internet. It's stressing," he repeats. "You have a business like this, you have to protect your merchandise, because it's your money. It's a lot of stress. And you don't know when the electricity's coming back. Because if you know, you can make a plan, or if you know when they're going to take it." A lot of the talk in the bookshop, now, is about rumors from other municipalities in Cuba, about people who do have power, and whether Havana might be next in line.

MONDAY, AND RETURN

Monday morning is all motion and chaos. Nathan and I grab breakfast, drop off the remaining packs of Tylenol and Advil we've brought for donation, say a few goodbyes to people who are staying longer, and then it's back to the airport. When we reach Miami, the TSA agents scowl at us. "They were going to *support* the…" I hear one of them whisper, and I can't hear the next word, but assume it was "regime," because it always is. But because we're white men in suits, we're the kind of people cops' potato-like brains are programmed to respect, and they let us through without incident.

Not everyone gets that leniency. Coming back through security, several of our people got pulled aside from the line and hauled into a side office for questioning, including Noura Erakat, Katie Halper, and Chris Smalls. But we'd been told that might happen, and the protocol is simple: tell them your name, where you've been and how long, that you were on a humanitarian mission, and nothing else. All other questions are met with a polite "I believe I've answered all I'm required to." And then change all your passwords, when they finally let you go.

I don't know what will happen next in Cuba. As I write this, reports are coming out in *USA Today* that Trump and his accomplices are making plans for a "possible Pentagon-led operation" against the island. By the time you read these words, they may actually have attacked, and caused nightmarish death and destruction. The Cubans are brave, and their military is on high alert, but they're outgunned. It's possible we could be some of the last people to see a sovereign Cuba before the end. Then again, other reports say secret negotiations are ongoing. We are standing at a terrible crisis point in history, and almost anything could happen.

But if this mission showed anything, it's that history is not only made by people like Trump, or even Díaz-Canel. We are all agents within it, with our own parts to play. It's easy to forget that, scrolling through the news every day. The media we consume is practically designed to make us feel helpless, like all we can do is spectate while the people who *matter* do things, and maybe leave a comment. But that's a lie. When you read a history book, it's easy to see what ordinary people have done, or what they should have done and didn't, and the consequences it had. We're those people now, and it's up to us to write the next page. You can just get on a plane to Havana and give a kid some medicine, and their life will be different. Frankly, if you have the resources, you should. There's no practical or legal reason there can't be an aid flight every week, if enough people care about Cuba enough to launch one. Organizations like the National Network on Cuba, the Hands Off Cuba Committee, Cuban Americans for Cuba, CODEPINK, and the Progressive International are busy trying to set them up, and it's worth giving them a Google.

We have been thoroughly lied to about who the "good guys" and "bad guys" are. We've been told Cuba is an irredeemable dystopia, in dire need of being "liberated" at the tip of a U.S. gunboat. But when you've been there, you realize how absurd that is. Cuba is a beautiful country, full of extraordinary people who don't deserve what the U.S. has done to them—what it continues to do to them, even as we speak. And the most infuriating part is, it's all so easily solvable. All that's necessary is for U.S. leaders to sign an order, lift the blockade, and halt the aggression. The so-called "Miami Mafia" that lobbies to keep the siege in place, like the pro-Israel lobby, is a numerically tiny group of ideologues. They've only gotten their way for so long because people have been kept in the dark about the facts, and there's been very little *pro*-Cuba politics in the United States. But that's changing. The more people see, the more obvious it is that the United States' actions are completely indefensible. And with a serious political effort, people like Marco Rubio can be beaten. They have to be, because Cuba and its people are worth the fight.

Venceremos. ⚜

JEREMY CORBYN

The former leader of the British Labour Party spoke to journalist Katie Halper in Havana about his own relationship with Cuba.

KATIE HALPER: Tell me about the first time you came to Cuba, and why?

JEREMY CORBYN: I've been involved with supporting Cuba for a very long time, because I've always been impressed with the way they had the revolution in '59, finally got to Havana, and then six months later, the U.S. started sanctions against Cuba. Then we had the Bay of Pigs, then we had the Cuban Missile Crisis, and ever since then, Cuba has been under sanctions. But I remember following, as best one could, the Cuban Revolution in the late '50s. My mum read it very carefully insofar as it was reported in the British papers. And I remember the time when Fidel finally made it into Havana. She came up to my bedroom and woke me up to say, "Fidel's in Havana!" I would have been 10.

KH: Wow. And at that point were you already interested?

JC: Yes. The things I was interested in at school were geography and history, not much else. So I knew exactly where Cuba was. I knew what it produced, and so on and so on.

I first came here many years later, in 1986, and it wasn't an easy time for Cuba. Mind, there's never been an easy time for Cuba. It was the beginning of the Special Period, and I remember then questioning an economic model that relied entirely on the connections with the Comecon countries and the supply of manufactured goods from the Soviet Union or from the GDR, the German Democratic Republic. And then I've been here several times since then, including on an extended cycle ride around Cuba with my eldest son, raising money for asthma. Asthma is a big problem in Cuba, partly because of the humid conditions. And then I've been here with Laura on another occasion when we had a lot of meetings on agriculture and things.

And then I'm here in solidarity. I have to say this is, alongside the Bay of Pigs in '61 and the Cuban Missile Crisis in '62, the most perilous time for Cuba. Oil is not coming in. I was told by a taxi driver gasoline is selling at $40 a gallon. $40 a gallon. And somehow or other people are scraping together, sharing cars and all that sort of thing, just to get around. And obviously it means public transport and everything else affected. Also, electricity generation depends to some extent on oil, either because it's got oil-fired power stations or diesel generators, whatever. And so part of our reason for being here is to have longer discussions about how we can support Cuba in deciding its own future, and that means looking at renewables. Cuba has land, has sun, has wind—not a bad combination. You can make synthetic fuels from crops grown on the land. There's not a land shortage in Cuba. You've obviously got a great deal of sun to generate solar electricity and a great deal of wind for the same thing.

It's not up to us to decide the future of Cuba, and that's a problem that the left has all around the world. The left gets involved in solidarity with different countries. Good. But solidarity means you support people on their terms, not yours. And so if the demand of the Cuban people is that we raise money or resources for solar panels, so be it. That's what we'll do. If they don't want them, then we won't do it. But it is essential that we maintain that sense of solidarity with Cuba. Now, the situation is obviously very, very difficult at the moment. Huge electricity cuts, a hit on living standards, and also, because of the Trump financial restrictions on Cuba, getting funds into Cuba from the expatriate population is complicated. And the Helms-Burton Act, which has been, from the point of view of the Batista-derivative right, very effective in that it terrifies any European company from doing business in Cuba because they might be prevented from trading with the USA, and while the USA is still just about the biggest market for Europe, then they're frightened. So there are a lot of things we've got to deal with here. [...]

KH: And it's interesting, because I don't think that the United States has done the moral thing in terms of foreign policy since World War Two. And if you look at Cuba, their record is unimpeachable in terms of foreign policy, whether it's helping bring down apartheid South Africa or sending doctors.

JC: The number of places I've been around the world where you talk to—I'll give an example. I went to the refugee camps in the Western Sahara, where the Sahrawi people are, and they're campaigning for the independence of Western Sahara from the Moroccan occupation. And I was in this camp talking to this guy, and he was talking about foreign policy and the Sahrawi people. Incredibly well-educated, very well-informed. So I said, "If you don't mind me asking, you seem very well-educated and very knowledgeable"—very young guy. "Where did you learn all this?" He said, "University of Havana." He got a scholarship from the Polisario to go to Cuba and study. And I met Palestinians who have been through the same. And so they've come here to Cuba and learned a lot of technical skills, as well as, obviously, discussed politics, history, and so much else. So we're here because we want Cuba to survive, but we're here also to get urgent aid coming in. To the audience in the USA: Do everything you can to force the Trump administration to lift the blockade and allow the oil to come into Cuba so that Cuba can at least keep the lights on. As you've observed, there are no lights around here. Those lights are battery lights from our phones, and I don't know how long they're going to last. It's beautiful, this darkness, and we're enjoying it. But just imagine you'd come home from work—you get home at six, and then by seven o'clock, it's dark, and there's a power cut. That's it.

KH: And not to mention that it's a death sentence for some people.

JC: No cooking, there's no television, there's nothing.

KH: Yes, but also no dialysis.

JC: Dialysis can't happen or anything else. All the stuff that we absolutely take for granted because we've got electricity is not available to ordinary, decent people in Cuba, and it's just plain wrong.

KH: Yes, it's sadistic, and it's also a testament, though, that there aren't constant riots in the streets. Despite this, I think it is a testament to the strength of the Cuban people.

JC: I spent a couple of hours walking around in bits and pieces of Havana this afternoon, just on my own, just walking around watching what was going on. People were out with their kids; people were out, in some cases, doing a bit of shopping, having a beer, chatting, drinking. They weren't rioting, they weren't protesting, they weren't complaining. They were just saying, "This is how it is." And so if Trump thinks he can further suppress and oppress the Cuban people and somehow or other get what he wants, he'd then have to tell us what it is he actually wants, other than his obvious dislike of the idea that a society can provide for all on the basis of need, rather than on the basis of the greed of those that would seek to make money from the provision of it. That's the difference.

This interview has been condensed for print, the full conversation is available on The Katie Halper Show.

Can you match these U.S. CRIMES to the countries they were perpetrated against?

1. The U.S. covertly armed a right-wing paramilitary group that tried to unseat this country's leftist government, U.S. agents caused many civilian deaths by blowing up bridges and mining the harbor, and the CIA distributed a "terror manual" to the rebels with advice on blackmail, assassination, and bombing.

2. After the people elected a socialist president, the U.S. supported a military coup that lead to 3,000 people being murdered by the new regime, widespread torture, and the end of democracy in this country for an entire generation.

3. Several million people died in this country as the United States tried to prop up a corrupt regime. Through a decade of saturation bombing, including the use of chemical weapons to destroy agriculture and the burning of villages, there were mass civilian casualties in a war widely seen as pointless.

4. The CIA plotted to assassinate the first prime minister of this newly independent postcolonial country, even developing a plan to poison his toothpaste. While that was abandoned, ultimately the U.S. supported a successful kidnapping and murder, leading to the installation of one of the most brutal dictators in the continent, whose decades-long reign contributed to a civil war that killed millions.

5. For 60 years, the United States has maintained a crippling trade embargo against this country in violation of the Charter of the United Nations and of international law, contributing to its ongoing severe poverty.

6. In this country, U.S.-trained government death squads killed 75,000 civilians over the course of a decade, including an infamous 1981 massacre of an entire village of 800 people.

7. Based on deliberately manipulated and misleading intelligence about "weapons of mass destruction," the United States launched an illegal war against this country that killed 500,000 people.

8. In the early 1950s, United States bombing raids destroyed nearly all of the major cities in this poor country, in some cases flattening 95% of the existing structures, an action that is nearly completely forgotten among those today who wonder why this country's ruler harbors an irrational hatred for the U.S.

9. During the mid-1960s, the autocratic leader of this country murdered millions of leftists with full U.S. support, with the U.S. even providing lists of suspected communists to the death squads, in a largely forgotten tragedy that historians "rank as one of the worst mass murders of the 20th century, along with the Soviet purges of the 1930s, the Nazi mass murders during the Second World War, and the Maoist bloodbath of the early 1950s."

10. This country was illegally and secretly bombed in the late 1960s and early 1970s in "Operation Menu."

11. Under a popular Democratic president known for promising "hope" and "change," the United States arranged to sell $100 billion in arms to one of its allies, which then relentlessly bombed this country, creating one of the worst humanitarian catastrophes of our era.

12. Under the same aforementioned Democratic president, the United States intervened in a civil conflict in this country, killing its leader and contributing to an ongoing bloodbath that would destabilize the country for years to come.

13. In the first decade of the 20th century, the United States occupied this faraway country in a war that would cause at least 200,000 native inhabitants to die from famine and disease.

14. In the early 1960s, the United States launched a plan called "Operation Brother Sam" designed to destabilize this country and allow its military to overthrow the constitutional government. Within a month of the coup, the military regime had arrested more than 50,000 political opponents.

15. The U.S. gives billions of dollars in aid to a country that keeps this country under occupation and siege, and has carried out genocide and ethnic cleansing there. The U.S. has consistently supported those who continue to dispossess this country's residents, even when they kill unarmed civilians.

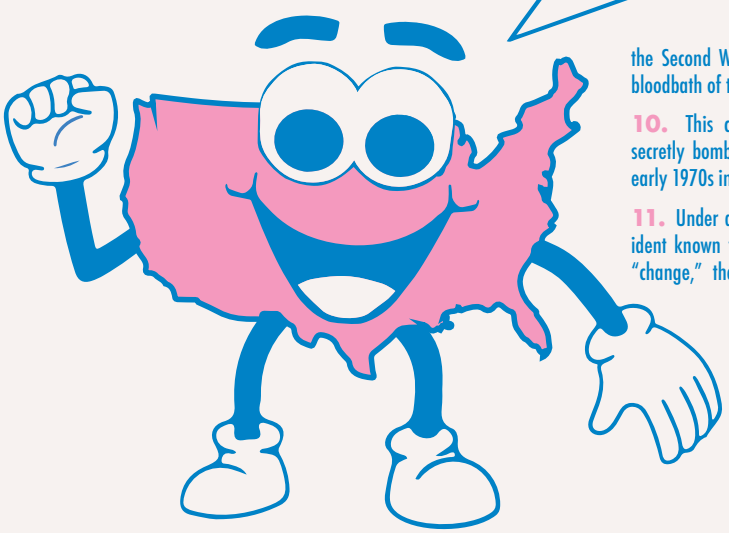
16. The United States overthrew the democratically-elected government of this country in 1954 because land and labor reforms mhreatened U.S. agribusiness interests. The U.S. later supported the military of this country as it committed genocide against its indigenous inhabitants.

17. In the mid-60s, the Johnson Administration occupied this country with 42,000 troops in order to protect its military junta and "keep it from going communist."

18. This is the most bombed country in the world thanks to 10 years in which the United States dropped hundreds of thousands of tons of ordnance including napalm on its peasant population.

19. In 1953 the United States engineered the overthrow of this country's democratically-elected leader and the installation of an authoritarian monarch who maintained power only through U.S. support and was ultimately ousted in a revolution.

20. The popular Democratic president mentioned earlier legitimized a fraudulent election and coup in this country, supporting this country's post-coup leadership and whitewashing its crimes.



GUATEMALA

IRAN

LAOS

LIBYA

YEMEN

N. KOREA

DOMINICAN REP.

EL SALVADOR

INDONESIA

CONGO

IRAQ

VIETNAM

HONDURAS

BRAZIL

CHILE

CAMBODIA

PALESTINE

CUBA

PHILIPPINES

NICARAGUA

ANSWERS

1. Nicaragua 2. Chile 3. Vietnam 4. Congo 5. Cuba 6. El Salvador 7. Iraq 8. North Korea 9. Indonesia 10. Cambodia 11. Yemen 12. Libya 13. Philippines 14. Brazil 15. Palestine 16. Guatemala 17. Dominican Republic 18. Laos 19. Iran 20. Honduras

STELLAR FICTIONS: THE FASCISM OF MODERN ASTROLOGY

BY **LINNI KRAL**

I was 26, living in Boston, and working as a cheesemonger when astrology and I first fell out. My friend Allie (not her real name) had just received an email from her boyfriend's ex containing a triangulation of all their natal charts—and while this hovered near the ceiling of the room I called "normal," it was 2013, *Girls* was on the air, and we allowed it.

Then I began dating the man who would become my husband. We were in the annoying phase where he stopped by my work a lot and I had a new coworker, a person I'm not afraid to tell you was named Ren. Ren was young, hot, opinionated, fresh out of college. She had a pink and blonde ponytail, hairy armpits, and a twinkle in her eye. We were all smitten with her for about a week. Then, one afternoon, I told her I couldn't wait for her to meet my boyfriend.

"When was he born?" she asked, dubious, as we both cubed cheese.

"Why?"

"I hope he's not a Gemini."

"Well," I shrugged, doing something with my eyes meant to convey apology. Hers were doing disgust.

"Does it matter?" I asked. "You'll love him."

"I doubt it."

I laughed, because what else could I do? Her mouth was set in a hard line. "So what," I said eventually, "You're going to refuse to meet him?"

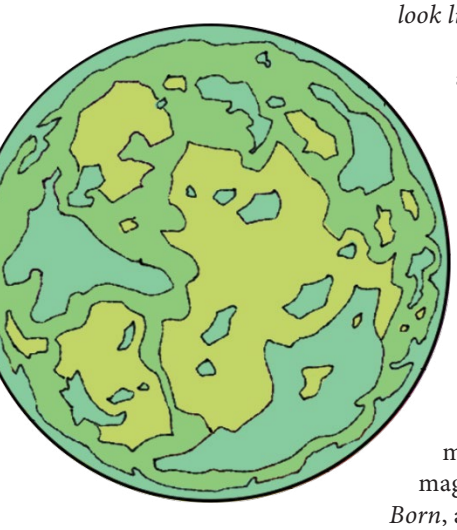
"I mean…I could meet him." She paused to pop a vivid orange piece of Mimolette in her mouth. "But I don't think you want me to."

More Americans know their Zodiac sign than know their blood type and, like many millennial women, I spent my first few decades living and dying by this sword. *Would I ever be cool? Was I compatible with my crush? Why was my best friend being such a bitch?* Reading what my horoscope had to say about these things satisfied something in me—a need to understand what I was, why I did the things I did. It scratched an itch I didn't yet know the word for, because no one teaches a fourth grader the word "narcissism."

I'm ashamed now to admit how late into adulthood I was before I stopped to consider the mechanisms grinding under the hood of this cultural milieu, a scientifically murky ecosystem governed by something one X user referred to as "birthday racism." (German social theorist Theodor Adorno called it "fascism" as early as 1952, but we'll get to that.) I spent four years and thousands of dollars on a liberal arts degree that taught me to question everything, yet I'd never bothered to ask where Virgos came from.

In its most elemental form, astrology is grounded in the idea that the stars in the sky when you were born have some bearing on your personality, your moods, your destiny. And because the moon *does* pull on our oceans and uterine tissues, this has the glint of believability. But it isn't the moon or the stars astrology focuses on—it's the pictures they form. People born under the crab of Cancer are… crabby. People born under the scales of Libra are diplomatic, balanced, fair. People born under the horned figure of Aries are combative, stubborn. These pictures hold the power, and it's a sizable power—a third of Americans

consult them at least once a year. So who chose them? Surely some divine, immutable figure? More likely, it was a couple of Sumerian dudes sitting around a fire, high on whatever they'd found to eat that day. *Hey*, one probably grunted to another, before pointing up. *Doesn't that kind of look like a fish?*



The 12 constellations we afford so much importance today were dreamt up in ancient civilizations throughout Mesopotamia, then refined and compiled by Ptolemy in the second century. What he wrote down is now recognized all over the Western world and transmuted to pre-teens through varied means (in my day, it was *Cosmopolitan* magazine and *The Day You Were Born*, a blue-and-yellow book every older sister was required to have). But unsurprisingly, other cultures saw different things in those stars. Take the asterism known as the Big Dipper, to start with just about the lowest hanging fruit. To many it is a cup or a plough, but to people in Siberia, it's an elk. To the Dakota, it's a woman giving birth. To some ancient Greeks, it was a bear. For a while, Egyptians thought Libra was a boat. The Maya thought Pisces was a bat. In China, some believe Cancer represents a cloud of pollen (which you could say about any grouping of stars, but okay). The glorified line drawings behind thousands of life decisions and toxically entrenched personalities turn out to be kind of a cosmic crapshoot.

I had this realization behind the cheese counter, and it lit me *up*. How could I abide a hobby that made people think they knew a person they'd never met? It violated basic laws of utilitarian morality. It violated the categorical imperative. It violated the golden rule.

And I, no stranger to screaming into the void, got to work proselytizing this. I spent years going on screeds, posting cunty takes—years that ran concurrently with an absolute mushroom cloud of divinatory, crystal-gazing content. Memes and quizzes and charts maligning Scorpios and heralding Leos were everywhere. The Twitter account Astro Poets amassed over half a million followers. *Cosmo* expanded their print coverage of astrology from one column to nine pages. For a few years, everyone I knew had the Co–Star app. Millennial women were hanging on the every word of *New York Magazine*'s Madame Clairvoyant or Astrology Zone's Susan Miller or the Canadian activist-astrologer Chani Nicholas. It was a bubble that seemed destined to burst.

So whenever I got the opportunity to share my revelations, I went for it. And I, humiliatingly, often went in thinking *I'm going to blow people's minds*. But when I trotted out my point about pictures in the sky, something weird happened. No one cared.

Isaac Newton got into Euclidean geometry only after trying and failing to understand astrological charts. The field of *astronomy* apparently arose out of an attempt to do better astrology. That it's been around so long, that it predates modern science, that it can get quite mathy, are all things astrology's defenders point to as justification for its existence. And it's true, it was widely practiced and respected from the second through the 15th century—years when we were also treating most medical anomalies with leeches.

But then the Enlightenment happened. Astrology was unscientific; you couldn't study it. There was no way to isolate the variable of "personality" in a world where people were told what their sign said about them before they even learned to read. So it faded from the world of academia, finding a new and lasting home amid the occult. But although its intellectual cachet shifted, we never quite quit it. We, in fact, went back to it whenever things got hard. Robber barons like J.P. Morgan consulted it about the Panic of 1893. The first modern astrology column was commissioned in 1930, right after the market crashed. It was in a post-World War II climate, with A and H bombs looming and astrology columns proliferating, that Adorno wrote *The Stars Down to Earth*, one of the most damning astrology critiques of the last century.

More widely known for interrogating jazz, Adorno had a bone to pick with culture industries that claimed to promote independent thought while serving the interests of capital. He wanted to know what made our society so susceptible to things like this, writing "Only very strong instinctual demands" could explain how, in a world in which "every schoolboy knows of the billions of galaxies, the cosmic insignificance of the Earth, and the mechanical laws governing the movements of stellar systems," anyone could believe this trash. He located those strong instinctual demands in the human urge to depend on somebody or something bigger than themselves—to pass the buck, to let Jesus (or Neptune, or whoever) take the wheel.

Christopher Lasch took up this question 40 years later in his 1976 *New York Review of Books* article "The Narcissist Society," in which he argued that Americans were retreating to "purely personal satisfactions" out of a "growing despair of changing society." Having lost any hope of improving the world around them, Lasch argued, people had "convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement." Just four years later, Americans almost unanimously elected Ronald Reagan, a president who reportedly consulted a White House astrologist before every major decision of his administration.

Fifty years post-Reagan and 13 years post-Ren, Adorno's is still the most rational critique of astrology out there. A Google search for "astrology takedown" nets the *astrologist*-penned Adorno roast: "A satisfying takedown of 'aStrOloGy iS A gAtewaY tO fAscIsm.'" Journalists have admittedly had their hands full lately, but investigations into this cultural phenomenon have nevertheless been particularly craven. When the *New Yorker* profiled the founders of Co–Star in 2019, I thought, *Finally, a thinking person's take*. No way would they escape unscathed from this world-famous fact-checking department, this institution known for integrity

and journalistic rigor. To my abject dismay, the writer Christine Smallwood deemed astrology harmless because "it doesn't teach dogma, or prescribe action." *What is a horoscope*, I scribbled in the margins, *if not a prescription for action?*

For something that set out to untangle the thorny knot of modern divinatory culture, the article "[failed] to mention a crucial fact—that astrology is nonsense" (read one Letter to the Editor that, no, was not from me). By the end of the piece, Smallwood is joining a group of astro entrepreneurs to cast a spell on the Brooklyn Bridge.

The *Washington Post* didn't fare much better in 2023, quoting a yoga instructor who described her approach to horoscopes as "you pick and choose what resonates with you," offering a pretty succinct definition of confirmation bias.

I turned next to Lauren Oyler's tongue-in-cheek take in the side-eye-heavy pages of the *Baffler*. Surely they would succeed where legacy media had failed, right? But while Oyler did call out the Co–Star app for feeding her the same pithy one-liners multiple times a day, she also said this "does not make [them] any less true." Many epistemological questions are begged by this statement, the most basic of which concerns Oyler's definition of truth.

Astrology, which Oyler says "exerts no measurable or material influence," sits behind a $12.8 billion industry expected to reach $22.8 billion by 2031, according to a study by Allied Market Research. And because numbers that big can feel abstract, consider that the *Bluey* franchise, including all merchandise for the most streamed show in the world, is valued at $2 billion. People charge $300/hour for chart readings. Chani Nicholas, who has more than 680,000 followers on Instagram, has used astrology to determine the impact of Saturn on the future of the U.S. immigration policy DACA.

We've seen this tide ebb slightly in recent years—you won't find a purple stick of amethyst in every one-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn anymore, and doubting "western medicine" is more aligned with MAHA conservatives than Silver Lake witches. The nation's foremost authority on public health is an anti-vaxxer, so whatever grasp we still have on objective fact and scientific truth is being clung to with a white knuckle grip.

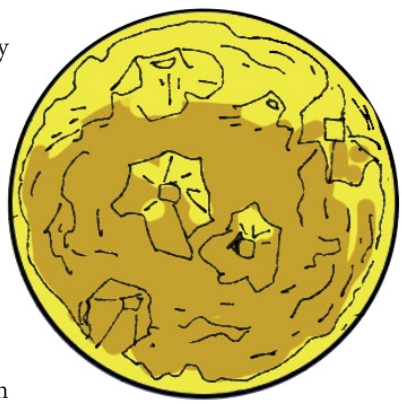
And yet… the stench of astrology still permeates the internet, the culture, probably the Oval Office. Co–Star is still one of the top apps in the U.S. Astrology dating sites, books, podcasts, and meme accounts are still surging. On Hinge, your sign is still listed under your "Vitals." Just last year, a friend of mine was turned down for a room in an apartment in Bushwick because one of the current tenants had lived with Libras before and said it "just never works out." I know people who've planned their IVF embryo transfers around avoiding an undesired sign. At the birthday party of my friend's *one-year-old* last winter, a bartender asked who we were celebrating and when I told him, responded: "Capricorn—yikes." At my own most recent birthday dinner, the servers opined loudly about how much they hated Aries season (which began that day) while I opened my presents in front of them.

As recently as September 2025, The *New York Times* published "Your Zodiac Sign is 2,000 Years Out of Date," a news article that accepts as a core premise that your Zodiac sign means anything, an article that presupposes belief, an article that questions nothing. One friend who likes to rib me about these things said in one breath that she knows astrology isn't real, but refuses to accept the *Times*' reassignment of her sign because "no way am I a Sagitarrius." Cue me flailing my arms and screaming out the nearest window.

We are, Oyler says, a generation "deeply confused about what irony is, whether it's acceptable, and if we are in fact employing it right now," and maybe it's this shifting relationship to earnestness that makes it so hard to know where my peers stand on this nonsense—why so many act like it means nothing, yet bristle at attempts to discuss it. People seem to want to make fun while simultaneously deriving a genuine sense of themselves from it.

I'm speaking not of Ren or that person with an empty room in Bushwick, but brilliant scientific minds, people with Ph.D.s, people with no shortage of arguments in favor of me shutting up. I'm talking about a professor who wears a Pisces necklace, an electrical engineer who checks their horoscope before making important life decisions, a therapist who uses clients' signs to unpack their behavior. Astrology means something to these people; they use it as a tool for self-reflection. I've been told by some friends that it helps them process reality, by others that it gives them access to a notion of identity that's accepted by the culture at large when their other identities (gender, ability, sexuality, race, ethnicity) are not. It is a modern religion, at a time when so few of us have religion. It is something willing to take the wheel for a while.

And we live in a polytheistic world—astrology being poly-constellational is not a knock against it any more than the existence of Christianity is an argument against Hinduism. (Many *do* believe that, but it won't get you very far in a global debate). Different cultures have different relationships to truth and objectivity, to the metaphysical and the rational. While I've so far focused on Western astrology, such mysticisms exist all over the world—in Indian Jyotish, or Vedic astrology; the Jewish Zohar; Islamic cosmology and Sufism; the Chinese zodiac; the Yoruban Ifa and West African Orisha. These require, like any religion, a leap of faith.



But we should be careful associating rationalism with Western thought—to paraphrase a comment I saw on the Vedic astrology subreddit, Eastern schools were doing rationalism while Westerners were still bopping each other over the head with clubs. And not all rationalism is oriented against the divine—the rationalism that led me away from astrology is opposed not to having a spiritual connection to the Earth, but to the idea that some people, be they Muslims or Libras, have greater access to that connection.

And while human science is limited (we did use those leeches for quite a while), we can say with pretty much utmost certainty

that a few random balls of fire appearing to look like either a fish or a bat does not mean people born while that is in the sky will grow up to behave fishy or batty. Highly subjective shapes are not personalities, and the belief that one's sign is rooted in anything, be it science or religion, is dangerous because it will always be dangerous to assign character traits to someone based on where or when they were born.

Some say it's just meaningless fun, but the general unwillingness to let it go implies otherwise. Its meaning is undeniable, even if it lies only in the solace of self-definition it provides. And while that pull toward defining ourselves may seem innocuous, it stems from something darker, more capitalistic, less in our control than we think.

The way we use the internet today rewards, even necessitates, self-definition. People want to know, and be able to tell the world, who they are in the amount of text that fits on a screen—and the acceptance this brings is a heady, dangerous drug. Increased social media use by minors has been linked to suicidality in reports by the National Institute of Health, Centers for Disease Control, and American Medical Association. The high of online approval is so potent, some psychologists think it has eclipsed sex. And we've resorted to many identity shorthands to get it, of which astrology is just one: Myers-Briggs, Enneagram, the introvert/extrovert binary, attachment styles, love languages; being an empath, being "Type A," being Gen Z, being a [fill-in-the-blank] girly. Even our attempts to resist the gender binary were thwarted by girl dinner and the male urge to talk about the Roman empire. I am not immune to this—my favorite podcast is two comedians debating whether arbitrary things (lunch, fermentation, Denver) are gay or straight. We can't help ourselves. It is in our nature to put things in boxes. It helps us make sense of the world. It feels better to say *I'm a hedonist because I'm a Taurus* than it does to say *I'm a hedonist like any other*, to live in the murk of category collapse.

Because that murkiness can drive people crazy. I once went on a trip to Greece, where restaurants generally do not assign you a table—you're free to sit wherever you want—and by the end of the trip, I was yearning to be dommed by a good old-fashioned American hostess. *I would rather be unhappy with a choice made for me*, I proclaimed, *than unhappy with a choice I made for myself!* This is, I think, a little bit what we're up to with astrology—narrowing our options, shrinking the world into manageable size. Even the smartest people are, at the end of the day, human—and humans are creatures of instinct, who rely on mental shortcuts and cognitive biases to simplify what goes on in our big, complicated brains. But you can't compress the world around you without compressing the people in it, too. And compressed people are easier to judge, to be rude to, to hate.

I mentioned the categorical imperative earlier, philosopher Immanuel Kant's idea that we should abide only by principles we'd be comfortable applying as universal laws—in other words, don't dish it out if you can't take it. Ren may be ready, even eager, to be judged by her birthday, but Ren is not someone I want making my universal laws. Fighting with her about what she thought she knew about my future-husband's personality was a little bit like fighting with my in-laws about race—to ignore the socioeconomic or systemic factors of someone's upbringing implies that inequality is the natural order of things. In 2025, we've poked enough holes in this theory that you could drain pasta through it. Why go on pretending we haven't? "The discovery of our deficiencies," Kant said, "must produce a great change in the determination of the aims of human reason."

I was in a group chat recently where a friend shared this tweet: "men are so quick to dismiss astrology but if your dick bled every time the moon was in waxing gibbous i bet you'd suddenly be real interested in the patterns between the planets and our lives."

I think I played it more or less cool in the chat (don't fact-check that), but this obsessed me. Within it I found everything I'd been railing against for years—the pretense of scientific justification for something extremely unscientific; likening imagined pictures in the stars to the very real physics of moons, tides, and magnetism. And all while belittling the intelligence of women! It was pseudo-intellectualism, half humor, logical laziness. ("Semi-erudition" was Adorno's term.) It offended me as a reader, a thinker, a member of post-Enlightenment rational society.

"Why," my Gemini husband wanted to know, "do you care what other people do for fun?"

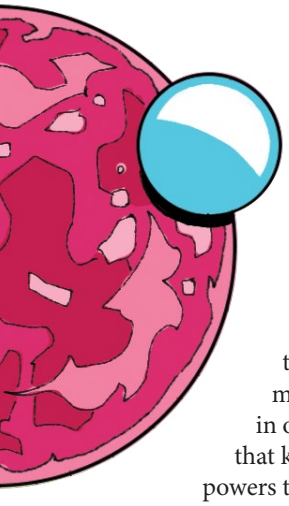
Because I don't like seeing my generation hold our intellect so loosely. Not to go all *In this house, we believe* on y'all, but I'm uncomfortable letting pseudoscience have any cultural capital in these times—times of fake news and deep fakes; of dissociative episodes and depersonalization; when you can drop "simulation theory" into casual conversation; when people joke that we "timeline-jumped" in 2020, in 2016, on 9/11; when it often feels like we're living in the wrong reality. Nigh on 75 years after Adorno, astrology has not led us into fascism—but some would say we're closer than we've ever been. Astrology keeps us at arms' length from the real world at a time when I find it important to keep a hand firmly on the ground.

This perspective is written off as belonging to the likes of trolling atheists and Silicon Valley bros. The Co–Star site even preemptively counters it, promising to allow "irrationality to invade our techno-rationalist ways of living." New Age practitioners like to scoff at efforts to apply hard data to the numinous mysteries of the world. But what is astrology, if not an attempt to label, to pin down? When someone doesn't fit into the confines of their sign, astrologists do not marvel at the unpredictability of human nature—they retrofit explanations of how that behavior could have come about. *Maybe your rising sign, maybe your moon sign, maybe Jeffrey Epstein's Mercury-Uranus-Venus-Mars configuration explains his desire to have sex with children* (a real speculation I saw on a Reddit forum—one that makes you wonder why, if the star charts were predicting child molesting, someone didn't alert the authorities). Celebrating unpredictability isn't acting like the answers to age-old metaphysical questions lie in the shapes we choose to see in a deeply impressionistic sky—it is living with the not-knowing.

Yes, it's terrifying to admit that we don't know why we're here. But there is so much we *can* know. Why be here, alive, in the age

of limitless information, to forsake your critical thinking capacities for a cheap dopamine hit? To embrace the kind of clan thinking that leads to bigotry? To use the immense tools at your disposal to find out when Jupiter is orbiting your seventh house? Aren't we more brilliant than this? This isn't techno-rationalist cynicism, but *deeply* humanist optimism. Being human is learning to grow and change. We are adaptable, omnivorous, shapeshifting. We have more power than astrology gives us credit for.

Kant and Adorno made names for themselves critiquing dogmas, and no argument against astrology is complete without them. But they weren't tearing things down just to watch the world burn. They genuinely felt there was more freedom in reason, more value in our ability to think for ourselves than in creeds offering to do the thinking for us.



And while astrology may prompt introspection, self-reflection is about *accountability*—about understanding what we bring to the dynamics in our lives. These days, astrology is more often used to excuse bad behavior (*I'm a Pisces, forgetfulness is my nature*) than to help someone take responsibility and grow. And what is self-reflection without growth but navel-gazing?

We didn't get this way on our own. Astrology preys on an instinct you developed when the first grown-up asked you your favorite color, when you took your first personality quiz, when your school made you take a career assessment test. Everything in our world screams *you should know who you are*, that knowing is the key to success. We pray to higher powers to find out, but we don't need a higher power to tell us that. We have each other. We never see ourselves as clearly as the people around us do. Getting to know others, be they Gemini scum or Pisces royalty, is how I come to understand myself.

It does me no good to know that my friend cries a lot because she's a Cancer. When a friend of mine is crying, I need to know how to comfort her, and that knowledge comes from within me, from my lived history with her. My capacity for emotional and intellectual progress comes from intense effort on my part, not from the constellations that were above Chicago's Columbus Hospital at 7:45 a.m. on March 22, 1987.

Everyone can be—in the space of a year, a week, even some days—crabby, diplomatic, self-indulgent, creative, fiery, watery. This is why horoscopes work. And it puts walls around me to territorially proclaim: *I'm an Aries so I'm stubborn and ambitious.* It says *these are my things*, i.e., they can't be your things. Wouldn't it do us more good to embrace our commonality? I want to live with all of you in the soup of our own ignorance, bleeding through borders, making meaning together. Sure, I am stubborn. (I wrote this, didn't I?) But I bet you can be stubborn, too. And in many ways, I'm a lot less stubborn than I used to be. In fact as I've gotten older I've learned from the flexibility of the people around me, who entered this world in a multitude of seasons and places.

For a while, astrology was just a toy, a parlor game, a pastime. There may be room to keep it around in that capacity, but only if we don't lose sight of what it really is. What makes me want to take the toy away is misuse—we lose our Lego privileges if we start throwing them at other kids. Maybe astrology could have a similar place in our world as the 6 p.m. beer you drink on a Friday—a lark, an indulgence, something there to lighten the mood of living. Like that Friday night beer, you can't take it too seriously. Like that Friday night beer, holding too fast to it kind of ruins the fun.

THE LONG GREEN SCARE

BY **LAUREN FADIMAN**

I knew we were screwed the moment I was introduced to the guy from Colorado. The supposed owner of a Denver marijuana store who claimed not to have been political prior to the 2016 election of Donald Trump, he told us he had since become an ardent "Antifa activist" and had driven halfway across the country to Georgia for the privilege of getting tear-gassed at 11 o'clock on a Monday morning. Whether he was conjured from the political fantasies of Fox News or given corporeal form by some Dr. Frankenstein at the DeKalb County Police Department, as he headed off into the parking lot that night, a seasoned organizer whispered, "He has *got* to be an undercover." That was indeed the last we saw of the guy from Colorado—unless he was on the other side of the police line two days later, staring us down through the iron sight of a military surplus machine gun.

It was November 2023. I had told my mother I was going to Atlanta on a "girls' trip," which is true in the sense that girls were involved. I was actually heading south to report on a direct action in DeKalb County, home to the then-in-progress Atlanta Public Safety Training Center (PSTC) smack-dab in the middle of the sprawling South River Forest. The movement to stop this development was widely known as Stop Cop City, so named because the training center includes a mock urban streetscape for practice raids and a driving range for practice high-speed chases—all for the sake of "cultural awareness" and "community knowledge," according to its architects. But policing in Atlanta is synonymous with brute and blatant force; their seemingly undercover cop might not have had much by way of community knowledge and cultural awareness to aid him in his abortive infiltration of the Atlanta anarchist scene, but that was irrelevant two days later, as officers threatened to indiscriminately kill unarmed protesters with an armored car they'd nicknamed "The Beast."

When I arrived in Georgia, Stop Cop City was in its third year. The movement's first iteration had ended with the police killing of Manuel Esteban "Tortuguita" Paez Terán during an inter-agency raid of the South River Forest on January 18, 2023, designed to clear out the self-declared "forest defenders" who had occupied the canopy since late 2021. An autopsy of Terán's body found it riddled with 57 bullet holes, including through the palms of the activist's outstretched hands. The police were quick to claim self-defense—though video footage suggested that the minor injuries sustained by their officer were a result of friendly fire. The state autopsy found no gunpowder residue on Terán's clothes or near their wounds, which would have supported the cops' assertion that Terán had shot a firearm. None of the officers who killed the activist were wearing a body camera. A month later, police arrested dozens of Terán's remaining comrades for spurious "property damage," citing the dirt in their boots as evidence of criminal behavior, and casting them into a legal purgatory pending RICO and domestic terrorism charges (dismissed by a judge, then appealed by the state), which—for those convicted—are themselves a kind of living death.

Police repression in the forest acted like a planned burn. Under a new moniker—Block Cop City—hundreds of far-flung folks now returned to the woods after nine months gestating a new tactic: this time, with tragedy never far from mind, farce was the weapon of choice. Protesters would march to South River carrying puppets and parasols, streamers and saplings, dragging a papier mâché parade float behind them, and occupy a PSTC construction site. They would wear tie-dyed painters' suits, swimming goggles, silly hats; a brass band would bring up the rear. When the inevitable police overreaction dawned, it would be in response to the circus coming to town. When they brought out The Beast, it would be to fend off 400 dedicated freaks and geeks, a not-insignificant number of whom were dressed up like bugs.

And overreact they did. Any informants among the activists had done their job: cops blocked off every decoy route discussed by organizers, leaving a clear path to the construction site. Unfortunately, the surveillance helicopters circling overhead also did their job, and around 10:30 a.m. on November 13, the DeKalb County Police Department met us in full force on Bouldercrest Road near Gresham Park, just a few hundred feet from where the protesters hoped to plant their saplings. The clash was straight from the pages of prehistory: two phalanxes advancing relentlessly towards each other, the sound of drums lost to shouting, the distinctive thud of shields and sticks hitting flesh.

Whether purposefully or not, the first tear gas canister landed at the feet of the press. I fumbled with my swimming goggles, but by then it was too late: I'd inadvertently trapped the gas against my eyeballs. By the time I poured drinking water into my eyes, a hundred-odd armed officers had roundly gassed protesters and begun to fire rubber bullets into the crowd. I offered an asthma inhaler to an elderly radio journalist while a local reporter gushed her misplaced thanks to the cop who had advised us to "be careful out there." The marching band continued to play as it had while the Titanic went down.

In some sense, the organizers got what they wanted: for the police to prove that—as far as their guns were concerned—the distinction between violent and nonviolent protest is rhetorical. But the logic runs backward too: if the police respond with force to nonviolent protest *every time*, then every protest must have actually been violent from the outset. Later, the DeKalb County police insisted that "you [only] bring [gas masks to a protest] because you know that you are going to craft that action and prompt that action from law enforcement," disregarding the fact that the cops had even their dogs decked out in gas-proof goggles. Police overreaction conceals the scope and scale of its own provocation. Look at the exit wound alone, and you might think the bullet had been far bigger at its point-of-entry.

Once the protesters were beaten back, it was just the press and the felled puppets remaining in the no man's land between officers and activists. A papier mâché dragonfly, whose wings declared "this is what a domestic terrorist looks like," lay crumpled on the ground. I considered how easy it would be to die. All I would need to do was approach the line of police a little too quickly.

That night, the news aired a press conference with none other than the DeKalb County Police Department. "[Protesters carried] an array of tools[...] constructed and designed to be used as weapons against law enforcement," said Atlanta police chief Darin Schierbaum, as the camera panned to 11 shamefaced gardening spades arranged in a police lineup against somber blue. Of the umbrellas his

(Photo by Cody Bloomfield)

men had confiscated: "We see a number of devices that would appear innocent on the forefront that are actually used in a very aggressive and violent manner." If the spades and umbrellas were not spared, then the papier mâché dragonfly had surely been interrogated back at the station house, the balloons held at needle-point to force false confessions. In Atlanta, even a puppet can be a "professional protester and anarchist" for a day.

It is almost amazing how heavily the state comes down on activists whose sand in the gears is often just that: sand in the gears. But that is the strange magic of the Green Scare. The mere mention of environmentalist ends—and, god forbid, *anarchism* as a means to those ends—animates the inanimate and arms the unarmed. A kind of corporate personhood transmogrifies property damage into physical violence, transforming by legal alchemy what should be counts of trespassing and vandalism into charges of domestic terrorism.

One person I met at an action in Appalachia said that a felony charge had only redoubled their commitment to the cause, having placed permanently out-of-reach those hallmarks of mainstream politics—like, you know, voting—and the possibility of any petit-bourgeois job requiring a background check. "This is my life now," they told me. But "life" is a high price to pay for protest that causes no harm to humans, carried out by protesters who are ever careful to carry out their recycling.

THE MAKING OF THE GREEN SCARE

On December 7, 2005, the United States declared war on environmentalists. That afternoon and in weeks that followed, the FBI descended on mundane offices across the country to haul into custody eight people associated with the Earth Liberation Front (ELF); two more would evade capture until 2012 and 2018, respectively, while one has yet to be found. The activists had been the face of the United States' "No. 1 domestic terror concern" in the years before *and after* 9/11: punks from the Pacific Northwest with just enough technical acumen to burn down a ski resort in Vail, Colorado in 1998, and firebomb some botany labs at the University of Washington three years later. The name of the FBI's subsequent investigation was apropos: Operation Backfire.

You might think, based on the phrase "No. 1 domestic terror concern," that countless people had died in the incidents, but that was not the case. The Elves had, in fact, taken pains to ensure that *no one* would be injured in the attacks, postponing or canceling actions when safety could not be guaranteed. Their only target was the master's tools: "All ELF actions are nonviolent towards humans and animals," reads a 2001 communique from the group. "But[…] the ELF wholeheartedly condones the use of violence towards inanimate objects to prevent oppression, violence, and most of all to protect freedom."

Despite their appeal to that most American of values—*freedom*, or whatever—the 11 total Elves were indicted on 65 combined charges including arson, conspiracy, and use of destructive devices, facing sentences as severe as life plus 1,150 years for participating in the two ELF attacks. It turns out that murder is neither necessary nor sufficient for a charge of domestic terrorism: "Their whole intent [was] to change the way things are done," an Oregon detective who investigated ELF told the *Intercept*. "That's terrorism."

Under the 2001 PATRIOT Act, that was true in disturbing new ways. The legislation expanded the definition of terrorism into the realm of nebulous potential energies: terrorism "involve[d] acts dangerous to human life," but did not necessarily *take* lives; it "appear[ed] to be intended[…] to intimidate or coerce a civilian population" or to "influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion," but did not necessarily succeed, and was not necessarily even *intended* to do any of these things—it merely *appeared* as such. By those standards, argued the American Civil Liberties Union in 2002, even Greenpeace is a terrorist group; and by the standards of that Oregon detective on the ELF case, so is the ACLU.

The green anarchist tradition began its formal life on the page with the writings of Murray Bookchin, Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1975), and Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975). Abbey's work in particular had the function of a speech act: after its release, groups soon began to emulate his characters' attacks on industrial equipment throughout the American West.

In 1981, the radical environmental advocacy group Earth First! held its inaugural action at the site of the controversial Glen Canyon Dam in Arizona, a structure that one of Abbey's protagonists seriously considers blowing up for having "plugged up Glen Canyon, the heart of his river, the river of his heart." From a bridge above the Colorado River, approximately 75 activists unfurled a 300-foot black plastic banner that—from a distance—appeared to "crack" the dam, whose construction represented to many activists an unforgivable compromise (or perhaps capitulation) by the mainstream environmental movement to corporate interests. From that crack flowed forth a lively new tradition: one of radical direct action in defense of the environment.

Earth First!'s repertoire soon came to include not only monkey wrenching—the strategic sabotage of machines used for environmental degradation—but also road blockades, tree sits,

and tree spikes, a practice later discontinued for the potential harm it posed to loggers. The *Earth First! Journal* began to circulate nationally and internationally in 1980. "We will not make political compromises," declares its first issue. "EARTH FIRST will set forth the pure, hard-line, radical position of those who believe in the Earth first." In a platform decrying development (especially of dams) and demanding what would later be called "rewilding" through the creation of national ecological preserves, the group explicitly invoked the Civil Rights struggle of the preceding decades. That was the level of organizational commitment, tactical creativity, and courage in the face of state repression that achieving ecological justice would require. Already, members were gearing up for a long, hard fight.

"But don't think that we're just a bunch of humorless fanatics who have found a new true-believing cause," the *Earth First!* authors chide. "We laugh a lot, too." The assurance did little to stave off the third degree: before the decade was out, even the president of the National Wildlife Federation was referring to Earth First! as "outlaws" and "terrorists."

Earth First! was not the only group thinking radically. In fact, Edward Abbey had not invented the notion of eco-sabotage so much as romanticized an incipient guerilla movement that had spontaneously emerged across the U.S. after the inaugural Earth Day in 1970. Some of these early groups included the Arizona Phantom, which sought to sabotage an in-progress desert coal mine; the Bolt Weevils, a group of farmers who targeted electrical towers belonging to a high-voltage power line that bifurcated the Minnesota prairie; and the Eco-Raiders, who systematically destroyed the assets of a variety of Tucson development projects to the tune of a half-million dollars' worth of damage.

In 1977, the short-lived Environmental Life Force pipe-bombed an Oregon City paper company, demanding it stop using harmful herbicides. Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom, a movement for animal rights was taking shape under the banner of the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), a collection of anonymous, autonomous cells that were soon regularly carrying out rescues of every kind of creature, from dogs to dolphins, from medical and cosmetic testing hubs. The group was definitively operating in the U.S. by 1984, when ALF affiliates took credit for the destruction of a laboratory of the University of Pennsylvania where scientists routinely inflicted severe brain damage on baboons in order to better understand the consequences of vehicular head trauma. Another university incident three years later—an arson attack at UC Davis's Animal Diagnostics Laboratory that caused $1 million in damage—was the first animal rights action that the FBI would explicitly label "domestic terrorism."

As ALF escalated their tactics in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Earth First! endured waves of internal dissent. As documented by David Naguib Pellow in his history of the radical environmental movement, *Total Liberation: The Power and Promise of Animal Rights and the Radical Earth Movement*, young members began to react against some of the group's worse tendencies, specifically the "anti-labor, patriotic, misanthropic, racist, and patriarchal biases of some of the movement's founders," who had (despite their chosen tactics) long resisted the political commitments of the wider anarchist movement. Many of the young members identified strongly with the anarchist tradition and considered environmentalism one of many fundamentally interconnected social justice aims—a vision of total liberation that went beyond Earth First!'s traditional singular focus on wilderness preservation. Not only did this "second generation" of Earth First! activists think more intersectionally than the one that preceded it, but it was also acutely aware of the influence the group had come to wield over the years. These new members began to push for nonviolent civil disobedience instead of ecotage as an approach that would both allow for potential coalition-building *and* preserve popular goodwill.

The Earth Liberation Front (ELF) emerged as a reaction against this reaction. Founded in 1992 by dissident members of Earth First! who maintained that criminal direct action was a more effective tactic than nonviolent civil disobedience, ELF fused the mission and tactics of early Earth First! with the highly-effective decentralized structure of the Animal Liberation Front. It made its first known appearance in the US in 1996 in the form of graffiti in Eugene, Oregon, and within a year had collaborated with the American outgrowth of ALF to liberate (through arson) 500 wild horses from a federal corral in the nearby, aptly-named town of Burns.

"[This action was taken] to help halt the BLM's illegal and immoral business of rounding up wild horses from public lands and funneling them to slaughter," declared the groups' joint statement at the time. "This hypocrisy and genocide against the horse nation will not go unchallenged!" In the following months and years, they carried out a litany of other arson attacks, the most notorious of which was their 1998 arson strike on a Vail ski resort that racked up $26 million in damage in a single burn.

But as the journalist and activist Will Potter reveals in his landmark account of the Green Scare, *Green Is the New Red: An Insider's Account of a Social Movement Under Siege*, the language of "environmental terrorism" was already being applied to far lesser offenses. Several months prior, at a Congressional hearing on "Acts of Ecoterrorism by Radical Environmental Organizations," Republican California Rep. Frank Riggs had complained of his district being "assaulted" by "environmental terrorists." Riggs was referring to a group of young women who had recently chained themselves together in his office in a completely nonviolent act of civil disobedience intended to draw attention to the embattled Headwaters redwood forest. In response, armed police officers dispatched to the scene had systematically peeled back the immobilized women's eyelids before dousing them in pepper spray at close range. ELF emerged like the fulfillment of a false prophecy—a group whose actions could be manufactured to seem emblematic of the entire environmental movement. They became the face of the Green Scare.

Even in the wake of 9/11, environmental activists remained, in the eyes of the FBI, one of the "most serious domestic terrorism threats" in the United States—this despite the fact that not a single human life had been lost to the 1,200 environmental actions that occurred between 1990 and 2004. A new legal, legislative, and lobbyist infrastructure had risen from the footprint of the Twin Towers: one that leveraged the notion of "terrorism" for a range of political ends.

Corporate interests that had already been pushing the "eco-terrorist" label in their lobbying efforts now went into opportunistic overdrive. Potter describes how the hysteria surrounding terrorism created this opening: industries dogged by

dissenters could now scarlet-letter activists with a little help from one of many crisis management firms, incentivized by the 9/11 attacks to taxonomize threat everywhere—and thereby cash in big on the T-word. When environmentalists slapped bumper stickers on SUVs reading "I'm Changing the Climate. Ask Me How," one firm declared even *that* an act of "eco-terrorism." Police and federal agents meanwhile jockeyed for professional advancement by means of terror investigations that displaced the previous decades' preoccupations with gangs, drugs, and Satanists.

Between 2005 and 2008, the government prosecuted as many eco-radicals as it had in the 20 preceding years. These individuals were slapped with heavy sentences for crimes dwarfed by the multi-million damage incidents of the preceding decades: one activist was dealt 22 years (later reduced to ten) for torching three SUVs at a Chevrolet dealership, another given eight years for causing $5k in damage to a McDonald's. Some activists were even charged with "crimes" that included no damage whatsoever, like six New Jersey activists who were given multi-year prison sentences for collectively running a website that advocated for legal and illegal environmental actions, and recording acts of vandalism which none of them were even charged with participating in themselves. In 2007, the California activist Rodney Coronado, by then long since retired from monkeywrenching, was prosecuted for the mere act of *describing* before an audience how he had carried out an act of sabotage in the early 1990s—resulting in a terrorism charge that, had his trial not resulted in a hung jury, might have landed him a 20-year prison sentence.

Coronado was one of the targets of Operation Backfire, which resulted in the indictments of 17 environmental activists, including twelve Elves who had participated in actions in Washington and Colorado. Their pathway to prosecution was paved by the War on Drugs: the FBI's key informant was a heroin user who snitched on his fellow Elves to avoid a lengthy drug sentence after getting picked up by police in 2003. Later, the National Lawyers Guild would condemn the FBI for the tactics it had employed in Operation Backfire and other investigations of environmentalists, including the "[use of] paid informants" and "warrantless spying on a range of organizations," only to then "over-charg[e] people with offenses that carry severe sanctions to force them to accept guilty pleas[…] or to intimidate them into turning state's evidence." But by then it was too late to stop the turning wheels of the criminal injustice system.

Under enormous pressure from law enforcement—including the oft-repeated threat of life sentences for terroristic activity if they refused to name names—some of the Elves informed on and testified against one another. Eleven of them served prison sentences ranging between three and 13 years, some with "terrorism enhancements" (the first sought and won by prosecutors for property damage) that required them to serve their time in the most formidable maximum-security prisons in the country. One committed suicide in custody before the case could even go to trial.

"I was not dead, but my old life died that day," writes Daniel McGowan, an Elf who served seven years, of his December 7, 2006, arrest. "I was no longer an activist working on various projects in NYC. I was now defined as a 'terrorist.'" He would spend much of his sentence in a communications management unit (CMU) in which "terrorists" are segregated from the general prison population, strictly limited in their interactions with the outside world, and recorded at all times during the day.

HOW PROPERTY DAMAGE BECAME DOMESTIC TERRORISM

The Earth Liberation Front remains practically unmatched in terms of the destructiveness and sheer drama of its activity in the late 1990s and early Aughts. There are certainly many among the ranks of environmental activists, past and present, who disagree tactically with the Elves and resent them for the way in which the meaning of "radical environmentalism" has coalesced around the indelible image of a smoking ski resort. Outside of the activist sphere, among mainstream American liberals, conservatives, independents, and apathetics, there are surely many more who think that ELF got what it had coming: that its activity *did* amount to terrorism, whether human lives were lost or not.

But, as Potter's work clarifies, it is not just the ELF arsonists who got the 21st-century COINTELPRO treatment. During the early years of the War on Terror, the newly-founded Department of Homeland Security (DHS) pumped billions into policing on the state and local levels, training beat cops to identify "domestic terrorists" everywhere at work and play in Nowhere, USA. Dozens of "fusion centers"—hubs where state, local, and federal agents collaborate to gather "intelligence" on potential threats—began to compile dossiers on local activists, aided by regular infusions of information provided by private security companies on corporate payrolls. Activists began to find themselves regularly stalked and spied on by men in dark SUVs. Just a few weeks after 9/11, the first local outpost of the DHS was established in Atlanta, Georgia: the Homeland Security Division of DeKalb County—the same DeKalb County where, 20 years later, activists would find themselves facing RICO and terrorism allegations for their participation in the Stop Cop City movement.

There is no single federal law criminalizing domestic terrorism so much as a constellation of state laws, federal definitions, and federal sentencing tools. The first U.S. federal statute to use the term "terrorist" was the Foreign Assistance Act of 1969, in which Congress demanded that the United Nations prevent any humanitarian aid from flowing to "any refugee who is receiving military training as a member of the so-called Palestine Liberation Army[…] or who has engaged in any act of terrorism." Though "terrorism" was not formally defined in that document, in the decades prior to 9/11, the term was understood to mean acts of violence carried out against human beings. The earliest definition of terrorism in federal law comes from the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978, which defined it as activities that "involve violent acts or acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States" and appear to be intended to "intimidate or coerce a civilian population" or "influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion." After the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, sentence-extending "terrorism enhancements" were introduced for domestic crimes, giving prosecutors and judges guidelines to levy more severe punishments for violent crimes committed on U.S. soil when they were perceived as having political ends. The scope of terrorism widened again with the 2001 PATRIOT Act and the spate of other terrorism laws passed *after* 9/11, which suddenly included provisions for harm

against "property," "infrastructure," and "entities" right alongside "human lives."

The inclusion of property damage as a terroristic enterprise had everything to do with the federal government's 1990s war against radical animal and environmental activists. An early federal law tethering property damage and terrorism was the Animal Enterprise Protection Act (AEPA) of 1992, which allowed for new penalties against anyone who "intentionally physically disrupts the functioning of an animal enterprise by intentionally stealing, damaging, or causing the loss of enterprise property, including animals and records." After 9/11, the bill was amended by the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act (AETA). This new legislation, which was introduced to Congress by representatives with deep-pocketed industry sponsors and extensive personal investments in agriculture, replaces the language of "harm" and "violence" with "damage" and the even vaguer "interference." As the anthropologist Jennifer Grubbs points out in her ethnography of the radical environmental movement, *Ecoliberation: Reimagining Resistance and the Green Scare*, "everything from a sit-in to [a] bombing[…] might be considered 'interference' and thus terrorism." Nonetheless, AETA passed the Senate with unanimous support and was then expedited through the rest of the legislative process as a "non-controversial bill."

extremism interviewed by NPR unanimously agreed that attacks on Tesla vehicles were a prime example of domestic terrorism. "It's absolutely domestic terrorism," asserted a fellow at the Council of Foreign Relations. "I know that may discomfort many people. But vandalism is a crime that if it's committed with a political motive, can certainly be defined as terrorism."

So, what is and is not terrorism? In 2017, two Catholic Workers faced nine charges and 110 years in prison for destroying a bulldozer and some other construction equipment along the Dakota Access Pipeline. One of the activists, Jessica Reznicek, pleaded guilty to a single count of damaging an energy facility, for which she could have expected to be sentenced to between three and four years in prison. But her sentencing judge, citing the need to deter others from similar acts of sabotage, imposed a terrorism enhancement that extended the sentence to eight years and added a $3.1 million restitution order on top. In 2022, Reznicek's sentence was upheld by the Eighth Circuit court; meanwhile, notes lawyer Madeline Johl in the *Fordham Urban Law Review*, January 6 participant Guy Wesley Reffitt—who had openly threatened to "physically attack, remove, and replace" Democratic lawmakers during the riot—managed to dodge the terrorist enhancement entirely that same year.

Because there are no hard and fast rules to what constitutes

"I WAS NO LONGER AN ACTIVIST…I WAS NOW DEFINED AS A 'TERRORIST'."

In reality, ecotage was already in decline before 9/11. In that sense, ELF and ALF were the exception, not the rule, even in their own time. The practice has not resurged in the post-9/11 world, no doubt in part because of the avidity with which it was pursued and prosecuted by an increasingly empowered federal government beginning September 12. Today, as has been the case for decades, the greatest terroristic threat to the American people remains domestic white supremacist groups, whose hateful rhetoric regularly incites mass shootings—a fact openly acknowledged by the federal government in an FBI/DHS joint intelligence briefing from 2017 stating that "white supremacist extremism poses [a] persistent threat of lethal violence," with white supremacist groups having carried out homicidal attacks far more frequently "than any other domestic extremist movement" between 2000 and 2016.

And yet, discursively, the association between environmental direct action and domestic terrorism remains strong. Environmental activists of all stripes—even those participating in simple acts of civil disobedience—are regularly smeared as terrorists by the federal government. Any movement that utilizes tactics broadly associated with radical environmental activism are liable to get the same treatment. And certainly any persons or groups responsible for property damage, even if it is a mere fraction of the millions of dollars' worth of damage wrought by ELF and ALF, are at risk of getting slapped with the T-word. (Except, notably, the participants in the January 6 Capitol Hill attack.) Indeed, in early 2025, three professors and experts on domestic terrorism and terrorism, the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) has openly expressed concern about what else might come to be considered terrorism in time. "The natural and unacceptable result of this mission creep is that traditional means of civil resistance will have a terrorism enhancement wrongfully applied," reads a 2017 blog post about the Reznicek case cited by Johl. "From here it is all too conceivable that a sit-in style protest near train tracks, a demonstration at a military exercise, or opposition to government immigration policies at airports around the country might next be subject to the label of terrorism."

During Trump's second term, CCR's concerns were proven prescient: his National Security Presidential Memorandum-7 (NSPM-7) orders the FBI to "compile a list of groups or entities engaging in acts that may constitute domestic terrorism," with "anti-Americanism," "anti-capitalism," and "anti-Christianity" listed as views characteristic of domestic terrorists associated with "Antifa." Some of these supposed "Antifa terrorists" went to trial in Texas in February, charged with such offenses as the possession of anarchist zines. In March, they were all found guilty of material support for terrorism.

PLAYING WITH FIRE

Though it might sound strange to say, perhaps the blowback against environmental activists in the 1990s and 2000s is actually *proportional* to the threat those activists posed to the status quo.

Smoldering ruins of Vail Mountain's Two Elks restaurant on Oct. 20, 1998, after a fire—later claimed by the Earth Liberation Front—caused $12 million in damage at the ski resort. (AP Photo/Jack Affleck)

Certainly their direct actions had caused enormous inconvenience and financial injury to companies exploiting animals and the environment—and their decentralized, leaderless structure had proven embarrassingly difficult for law enforcement to effectively police. As Potter notes in *Green Is the New Red*, "groups like PETA used photographs, video footage and documents obtained by underground activists to wage aboveground campaigns," implying a potentially symbiotic relationship between multiple fronts (both radical and mainstream) of the war for environmental justice. And growing consciousness among activists of the interconnectedness of environmental issues and other forms of repression was beginning to make possible powerful new coalitions, like an emerging alliance between Earth First! and organized labor. It is difficult to know what trajectory the environmental movement might have followed had 9/11 never occurred.

Those foreclosed possibilities have had consequences for organizers of all stripes. Today, it is not just arson and firebombings that might be credibly cast as domestic terrorism; it is *all* direct action, including completely nonviolent acts of obstruction and occupation. "Domestic terrorist" has joined the ranks of "professional protester" and "outside agitator" as pejoratives for those moved to even the most routine acts of resistance—tactics that, today, often pale in comparison to those of the 20th century, which opened with the politically-motivated assassination of President William McKinley and closed with the Battle of Seattle.

Even the progressive liberal mainstream is not safe from allegations of propaganda of the deed: after Charlie Kirk's murder, Vice President JD Vance accused both the Open Society Foundation and the Ford Foundation of paying "the salaries of terrorist sympathizers" and "promot[ing] violence and terrorism" through their work. Perhaps it is as simple as concept creep: the gradual expansion of a term's meaning to encompass ever-greater swaths of phenomena. How else to explain the semantic collapse between the language used to describe Osama Bin Laden 20 years ago and that used to describe George Soros today?

But crucially, it is not merely the popular usage of the term whose scope has shifted—its legal scope has too. "Aboveground activists assume that the First Amendment protects their right to use legal direct action," writes Grubbs matter-of-factly. "The implementation of the AETA, however, demonstrates that legal direct action can also be targeted within the vague and inclusive language of the act." And the consequences can be seen everywhere that people come together to political ends: from DeKalb County—where I watched the local sheriff describe umbrellas as weapons of guerilla combat—to present-day Minneapolis, whose popular and peaceful uprising the Trump Administration regularly describes in the language of domestic terrorism. For those actually arrested and facing the possibility of terrorism enhancements to their sentences, the law does not discriminate between lethal and nonlethal acts. One is as likely to face a 25-year sentence increase for politically-motivated arson as for politically-motivated murder.

"The indiscriminate nature of the terrorism enhancement gives state actors wide latitude to pick and choose which criminal defendants deserve its application," writes Johl. "The enhancement's defenders claim that the severe sanctions it imposes are meant to act as a signal to the public that such actions will not be tolerated. Thus, when wielded against political protesters, the terrorism enhancement presents an opportunity for state actors to ostracize certain types of protest."

Even though I went to DeKalb fully expecting to bear witness to repression, I was still disturbed by what I found there—by the radical disjunction between protesters' intentions and the subsequent bad-faith interpretation issued by local law enforcement. While police attacked marchers with flash-bang grenades, teargas, tanks, and snipers, two non-participant activists watching the livestream of the action in a nearby supermarket parking lot were accosted by officers who accused them of terrorism—an allegation that preceded any evidence, because there was none. Nonetheless, cops speculated that the duo were running a mobile action HQ from the parking lot and contemplated a double-arrest for "conspiracy to commit acts of terrorism."

It was the illogic of the Green Scare at work. When environmentalists threaten property rights, reality is systematically unspooled to accommodate the inalienable right of ownership—somehow even *more* inalienable than the human right to life. Umbrellas become weapons, protective gear is interpreted as evidence of plans to actively incite violence, friends and comrades are reframed as cell members, and finally comes the coup de grâce: when—as writers Eva Rosenfeld and Tadhg Larabee have argued for *Dissent*—solidarity is presented to a courtroom as conspiracy. Today every activist appears before law enforcement in the image of an ELF. Legal infrastructure built in the 1990s and reinforced in the wake of 9/11 allows them to be prosecuted as such.

The consequences are felt acutely on the front lines of American direct action campaigns. While the RICO charges were dropped against all 61 activists arrested at that fateful music festival in the South River Forest, the Georgia Attorney General's Office has appealed the dismissal, meaning the counts may be reinstated. Five individuals are still facing domestic terrorism charges. The allegations cast a chill over one of the hottest campaigns in recent American history. The 85-acre, $115 million Cop City complex opened in the spring of 2025.

"[It] will ensure that we recruit, equip, and train the officers[…] necessary to keep the city safe," declared the Atlanta police chief at the ribbon-cutting ceremony, which occurred on the same grounds where his officers executed Tortuguita in cold blood and hauled his comrades in on trumped-up charges. The world burns around us indeed, but it is not environmental activists lighting those fires. ⚜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Use the new PITCHFORK TOOL to motivate new characters to move to your Valley! You could use it for gardening too...I guess.
HELP POCAHONTAS and her people move to Oklahoma.... I mean your valley....
DENIED
HELP DONALD fight with the V.A. office for pants coverage!
HELP SCROOGE commit tax fraud!
MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

JUDITH BUTLER EXPLAINS THE GENDER PANIC

JUDITH BUTLER is one of the world's leading scholars and philosophers on issues of gender, sexuality, and the cultural phenomena that surround them. They are the author of the landmark 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, and more recently the 2024 follow-up work *Who's Afraid of Gender?* Butler joined *Current Affairs* editor-in-chief Nathan J. Robinson to discuss the way people around the world—mostly conservatives, but some who consider themselves leftists, too—have become fearful and angry about what they call "gender ideology," why they're mistaken, and what might be done about it.

NATHAN J. ROBINSON
I want to start with a quote from your newest book, *Who's Afraid of Gender?*, where you say,

> *In the United States, at least, gender is no longer a mundane box to be checked on official forms, and surely not one of those obscure academic disciplines with no effect in the broader world. On the contrary: it has become a phantasm with destructive powers, one way of collecting and escalating multitudes of modern panics.*

Could you elaborate on what you mean by that?

JUDITH BUTLER
Yes. Well, first of all, let me just say that I don't consider myself the leading philosopher of gender, nor do I hold myself or my work responsible for what the popular discourse calls "gender ideology." My sense is that gender ideology does not exist. It's a way of abbreviating a complex field, a set of social policies and legal decisions. It's a shorthand that fails to really explicate what is at stake but also produces something like an imaginary enemy, or a fictional unity of sorts that attracts a lot of anxiety and fear—some fascination and confusion. And if I track the way gender is being referred to in the media and in public discourse, it seems to stand for a whole host of issues, including reproductive rights, transgender or women's equality, how to work with sports, questions of equality, inclusion, and DEI, and psychological understandings of what happens to boys and girls as they grow up and come to understand themselves.

There are so many different issues that get grouped together, and I suppose the word "phantasm" suggests that there's a kind of dream image or a phantasmatic construct that has taken hold in people's minds, and it's called gender. But actually, gender is very complex. People have been studying it for a very long time, and there are conflicting views. And if we took a more sober and intellectual approach—a scholarly approach—to the issue, we would find many different strands and conflicts and interesting items there.

ROBINSON
I'm sure you're familiar with the case that happened recently after the publication of your book, of the professor [Martin Peterson of Texas A&M University] who was prohibited from teaching a portion of Plato's *The Symposium* because it violated the rule in Texas against teaching "gender ideology." And I think there's a very interesting example of the way that the right has seemed very clear on what it means, or has felt to itself like it is very clear on what it means, by prohibiting gender ideology. But then when it comes down to actually enforcing it, I'm not sure that a lot of them know, themselves, precisely what they mean by "gender ideology." When you were writing this book, did you get a clearer understanding of what is meant by the effort to prohibit "gender ideology"?

BUTLER
Well, I think, unfortunately, when the right uses the term "ideology" they tend to think of a dogmatic position that's being imposed by some people in positions of power, by teachers or by social

policies, and they attribute to gender an ideological function, by which they mean both dogmatic and falsifying. So against the dogmatic, they say we should have an open and free discussion, including conservative views, on family and gender. Against the falsification, they think, well, we should be grounding all of our views on biological facts, although sometimes they say we should be grounding all of our views on Christian doctrine. So there's a little bit of a tension there. And there are different variants of the anti-gender ideology movement throughout the world. So what we find in Taiwan is not the same as what we find in Uganda, for instance. However, in the case of the Plato censorship, what they're actually doing is making a doctrinaire decision. They're imposing a doctrine that says you should not have an open discussion on love and homosexuality, which is a feature of Socrates' relationship with some of his interlocutors, and not an explicitly sexual representation, but certainly a representation of love between men. Now, in classical Greece, we accept that's part of what was happening. We don't need to negate that. We don't need to deny that. And if we do negate or deny it, we are the ones, or they are the ones, who are acting in a dogmatic and doctrinaire fashion. So the irony is that gender is understood as a dogmatic doctrine, and the way in which it's prohibited certainly suggests that those who are doing the prohibition are acting in a dogmatic and doctrinaire way.

ROBINSON

Now, much of your book is concerned with excavating or trying to understand the reasons why gender, or "gender ideology," has come to loom large for these people and the reason for the fear. But I think many of them, if you asked them, would start with, "Well, before you can pose that question, you have to prove that we are wrong and that our arguments are false." And certainly, I was reading Kathleen Stock's very critical review of your book, and what she said was essentially, how dare you psychoanalyze us instead of refuting us? If we try and articulate what their position would be, [your critics] would say, "We are making the case that there is a view of gender as subjective that leads to all kinds of harms, and to the belief that anyone can change their gender at will." She cited cases of children being given puberty blockers, trans women competing in women's sports, and trans women being allowed to share prison cells with cisgender women, etc.—all the result of a view that essentially sees gender as subjective, a view that is wrong and a denial of reality. So, how do you respond first to that assertion?

BUTLER

Well, first of all, gender is not subjective, so her attribution is incorrect. Now, if I were to answer that question, I would have to allow for her attribution to be true, but I can't do that without falsifying my position. So, first, gender is a framework that's been developed through the social sciences. A framework is not subjective. A framework is a way of framing knowledge and a mode of inquiry. To the degree that we talk about gender norms in the world, we ask how labor is divided by gender—what are women making, as opposed to what men are making? We're talking about gender as a differential of power. And I think we can say, yes, there's lots of good sociological and economic analysis that has suggested gender is a factor in the distribution of wealth or the division of labor. Those are not *subjective* dimensions of gender. She seems to conflate gender, which is a much broader concept, with gender identity, which is the way in which different people identify. But she also makes a further mistake, which is to say that identifying with a specific gender is a merely subjective or volitional, freely chosen kind of act, like, "Oh, I think I'll be this gender today; I think I'll be that gender today."

Now, the reason why psychoanalysis remains interesting to us in the year 2026 is that we often think we are choosing things deliberately, and we're actually motivated by some other kinds of issues; we think we're speaking rationally, but actually we're maybe in a panic, or we have some wishes we wish to fulfill. And Freud was one of those thinkers who did ask us to reflect on the fact that much of what we think we are doing in a voluntary way is affected by other kinds of passions or anxieties or even unconscious elements that influence human motivation.

So I'm not a voluntarist. I don't think people get up in the morning and decide what gender they're going to be today, but I do think that we've been naive about how deep-seated certain notions of gender are. So, for instance, when a man says to me, as they have, and says, "Look, my gender is part of who I am. This is basic to me. Don't tell me this is changeable. This is absolutely who I am." You know what? The last thing I'm going to say is, "You can change that if you want." No. I'm going to respect that person. He's telling me something that is deep-seated. He doesn't know all the reasons why, but that's his passionate, fierce understanding of himself. And it's like, go forth. It's good. You know who you are, and you're living in the world. But the trans person says, this is deep-seated—

ROBINSON

This is true for me.

BUTLER

This is so deep-seated. And I don't know all the reasons for this, but this is who I am. I'm going to say, I respect you. Go forth.

ROBINSON

This is related to what is perhaps the most common misunderstanding of your own work, because you've become so associated with the term "performative." People sometimes interpret that to mean that if gender is created by a series of actions, I could take different actions tomorrow,

and my gender would change immediately. You talk a lot about J.K. Rowling in the book, and she makes the argument, well, what if a man felt himself to be a man for 40 years, and then tomorrow he decides he's been a woman the whole time? And this is sort of based on a misconstrual of your own work, but you're saying there it just doesn't work like that. And this idea that you could change your gender by flipping some kind of switch in your head is just not how it works.

BUTLER

You can, maybe, in Hollywood; you can if you're a performance artist. But look, performative is not radical free choice. It's like I can be anything I want at any time. Hardly. I'm formed by culture, family, and religion. Oh, I'm so formed, but I'm not fully determined. Yes, I come out of this family and out of this background; this is what I was taught, this is how I've lived, and I'm deeply crafted and formed by social norms and historical circumstances and all kinds of psychic material I didn't get to choose. At the same time, I live this life, make decisions about it, and decide what my existence should be like based on my deepest understanding of who I am or how I want to be in the world. So I don't think we're totally voluntaristic, like I can be anything, nor do I think we're totally determined. And performativity is a way of naming that space between philosophical determinism and voluntarism. In other words, you're affected by culture, and yet you also are remaking it. You're making some changes in it, and it's hard, and there are countercurrents, and what we call choice there is not radically free. It's a struggle with an existing formation. And people struggle in different ways to revise their history—not make up a new history, but to find new ways of living in the midst of having been formed. That's performativity.

ROBINSON

Do you detect in the anti-gender movement a kind of frustration with, or an unwillingness to grapple with, the possibility that reality is complicated and that common-sense categories and plain language don't get us a true description of reality? There's this documentary from a couple of years ago by one of these anti-gender people, Matt Walsh, called *What is a Woman?* His whole frustration was that people won't accept the simple answer to "What is a woman?" He says it has a simple answer: "It's an adult human female." He goes around posing this question, and if you don't answer it with a simple answer, he suggests you're part of this terrible, destructive gender ideology. Could you respond to this idea that a question like "What is a woman?" should have, or needs to have, a simple, common-sense answer?

BUTLER

Yes. Well, I'm going to answer your question directly, I promise you, but I can't help noting that the people who pound the table with "It's a simple fact; we should have a simple answer!" are angry, insistent, and frustrated. Just look at what the emotional aura of that claim is, that we need a simple truth. Why are we so angry about that? Why do we need a simple truth? Well, complexity is frightening. Look at human endocrinology. Look at how testosterone is distributed among people assigned female or male at birth. You look at the complex interactions, as developmental biology does, between genetic and epigenetic factors and the different forms of masculinity and femininity that emerge, and then cultural differences—oh, my goodness. People who are very clearly women in one culture are absolutely not in another. Why is it we have different frameworks culturally for understanding that? Or, why is it that medical professionals also have to think about how to name people with mixed sexual attributes, intersex people, who make up a certain small but significant percentage of the population?

We are interested in that complexity because it is kind of interesting—we take for granted certain ideas, and other people are taking for granted totally different ones. How do we translate between those or come up with a more comprehensive understanding? How do we think about developmental biology in relationship to cultural anthropology and the humanities? I don't know; I find that interesting. It doesn't scare me, but for some people—[they want] no complexity. But human life is complex, and we are a complexity of factors that go into making who we are. So even if we're unequivocally a man or a woman, how we live that gender, how we experience it, how we present it, and how we understand it will be complex. It's why sometimes we don't understand each other or make expectations of one another. It's like, oh, but you're a man; I thought you would like X. It's like, well, I don't like X. You're a woman; you're supposed to—well, I don't like that.

ROBINSON

If a right-wing provocateur like Walsh poses the question, "What is a woman?", do you think the right response is to dispute the question, or is there a satisfactory answer to that question?

BUTLER

Well, look, I asked the same question: what is a woman? Freud asked the question, what does a woman want? But you could also say, what is a woman? My own sensibility is to say it's a great question. It's wondrous. Let's keep that question open, because you know what? There will be many different ways of answering, and those will give us access to human complexity. We'll want to know more about the world, and we'll be able to affirm the human in its complexity, rather than putting it into fixed boxes and smashing in those nails. So for me, "What is a woman?" is a great question, but I would just keep it open.

ROBINSON

When I saw the title of the documentary, I thought, you know where you should start if you really want to investigate that question is with Simone de Beauvoir, who was fascinated by this question of, how does one become a woman? What does it mean to be a woman? But one of the things you point out in here is that there is a very aggressive unwillingness to do the reading among many of these critics, a real hostility. In fact, you recount an anecdote about someone you met who came up to you after a talk and said they prayed for you. And then you asked if she read your work, and she said, "No, I would never read such a book."

BUTLER

Well, it's true. I think we have to think about book banning. We have to think about censorship, the new constraints

being imposed on universities, the defunding or renaming of gender studies, sexuality studies, feminist studies, ethnic studies, Africana and African American Studies—all of this censorship and increased authoritarian incursion into educational systems, K through 12 and higher ed. This is of a piece with the anti-gender ideology movement. This is a movement that seeks to control knowledge, to suppress knowledge, to stop us from questioning, to attack Socrates, who taught us the absolute importance of open inquiry. All of higher education, we might say, is dedicated to Socrates and his way of opening questions and asking people to reexamine their assumptions about what is justice, what is beauty, and what is truth—not to become radical relativists, but to allow for a complex understanding and, quite frankly, a better set of judgments based on knowledge. But the anti-gender ideology movement is an attack on knowledge and an attack on open inquiry.

ROBINSON

It comes up repeatedly in this book that you can't separate the attacks on gender from rising authoritarianism and fascism. You cite the right-wing pundit Michael Knowles in your conclusion, who said, "Transgenderism is false, and therefore it must be eradicated from public life." And you hone in on that language of eradication, that if you don't accept our definition of common sense and then speak in our defined plain language and accept biblical or biological truths as we define them, then you have no place in public life.

BUTLER

Well, I think that's true. The Lemkin Institute, which is dedicated to genocide studies, has recently put out a statement saying that the attack on transgender people—their legal rights, their very existence—indicates a potentially genocidal project. They're not saying that people are committing genocide against trans people, but they're saying that the minute you deny the legal standing of a minority and refuse to acknowledge that they exist within legal and public discourse, you nullify their legal and public existence and withdraw social recognition. They fall into a kind of legal unreality, or nonexistence, that allows for their rights to be taken away, including the right to life. So I do think that there are those who would eliminate the category of transgender altogether, which, of course, abandons all transgender people to living lives that are unlivable and not being recognized according to the language and legal categories that allow for them to have rights in this world pertaining to their gender. So it is, for me, a very terrifying thing. To deprive people of health, rights of passage from one country to another, and legal recognition is to deprive them of all the rights that follow from being legally recognized as the person that you are.

ROBINSON

Now, I would like to ask you briefly about the category of critics who are often called trans-exclusionary radical feminists. People like Germaine Greer, for instance, would say, "I am a leftist. I am not a fascist. I am someone whose sympathies are with liberation movements, and my argument against trans people is that they deny the true nature of womanhood. They undermine the women's rights movement by reinforcing a stereotyped notion of what it means to be a certain gender." And they would argue this is a good faith and feminist criticism—it's not a Viktor Orbán or Vladimir Putin criticism. You've been, obviously, deeply critical and suggested that movement, that posture, ends up aligning itself with these very hardcore authoritarians. How do you respond to their criticism?

BUTLER

Well, I think there's just no question in my mind that Germaine Greer has been a great leftist and a great feminist. You would never hear me object to that. I think what puzzles me is why leftist feminists, in part, not in whole, have taken positions that do ally with right-wing authoritarianism, the same forms of authoritarianism that have denied reproductive freedom and legal protections for women. I think that trans women have always been part of the feminist movement. Most trans women I know are also feminists, and the category of women has been an expansive one. One question for me, especially for second-wave feminists, is, didn't we learn that definitions of what a woman is have been far too narrow and sometimes biologically reductive? For example, women reproduce. Well, not all women reproduce. Not all women can. Not all women want to. Or, women have these kinds of values. Well, not all kinds of women have those values. Or, women belong in the private sphere. No, they don't believe that.

So there are all these restrictive definitions of what a woman is. And my sense is that the exhilarating part of feminism is that it was and remains a freedom movement. That is to say, women can be all kinds of things, and we need to allow the category of women to be expansive. Now, that doesn't mean it can include all things. I don't mean to be silly about this, but trans people, and more broadly non-binary people, are subject to harassment, discrimination, and the restriction of rights that makes them potential and actual political allies with feminists. And we've always been allies. We've always been in favor of equality, against discrimination, trying to figure out how to live freely and how to live and breathe in the street, in the workplace, and in the home without fear of violence. That brings us all together. Why wouldn't that just be the most compelling affiliation and alliance? We know too many stories about trans people who are assaulted on the street. We know too many stories about women who are assaulted on the street. The same people are doing those assaults. We need to band together to oppose femicide and the killing of trans, non-binary, or non-gender-conforming people. And throughout Latin America, the feminist movements have those alliances. And it's

THE EXHILARATING PART OF FEMINISM IS THAT IT WAS AND REMAINS A FREEDOM MOVEMENT

been very surprising to me, especially in the British context, to see that those alliances have severed. There's no good reason for it.

ROBINSON

We had Shon Faye on the program a couple of years ago and talked about how remarkable the anti-trans tendency in British feminism specifically is. And you have a chapter on Britain.

BUTLER

It is. And I agree with Shon Faye. We've actually spoken about this, that the British anti-trans movement within feminism is singular. I know no country in which it is as fierce as it is there.

ROBINSON

I'm sure this is a question that could have a book-length answer, but it intrigues me that briefly in your book, you discuss your own previous work in gender theory, and you say that you now find it "questionable in several ways, especially in light of trans and materialist criticisms." I wonder if you could just briefly tell us a little bit about how your own views have evolved over the decades.

BUTLER

Well, 37 years ago, when I was actually writing *Gender Trouble*, I was deeply influenced by French post-structuralism and feminist theory. I was a bit lost in that academic world. And it's still very interesting material, and I teach it and write about it, and it's all fine, but it's a narrow framework. Oddly, when the book started to get translated into other languages, I started to become aware of what's happening in other parts of the world. So the translation of *Gender Trouble* made me much more worldly and exposed me to different kinds of scholarly work, feminist work, and activist work as well. That gave me a sense of how gender needed to be thought of in terms of the economy and geopolitical power relations—why the word sometimes works in certain parts of the world and sometimes cannot possibly work in other parts. So I think that I have much more of a transnational perspective. I think I needed to think more clearly about developmental biology and questions of materialism. Some of those early criticisms did incite me to rethink my position. I think that drag was a big moment in *Gender Trouble*. Many people took off from that, but it's not the same as trans. That needs to be made clear. There's a lot of work in trans studies that has been extremely interesting for me, also in law and in medicine. So yes, I've learned a lot. I think I'm a more interdisciplinary and transnational thinker than I was 37 years ago.

ROBINSON

Readers might be surprised when they open this book that it is not focused singularly or primarily on the United States Republican Party. Your first chapter is "the global scene." You discuss Hungary, Taiwan, Uganda, and the Vatican.

I want to just conclude here by going beyond gender, because you do say that one of the problems with this anti-gender movement is a heightened focus on gender by the right deflects from the various social and political forces that are destroying the world as we know it. And you discuss in your conclusion the importance of the anti-capitalist struggle and broader freedom movements around the world. You yourself have been involved in pro-Palestinian activism, and I mentioned your involvement in Occupy with anti-capitalist work. Could you discuss the way in which that singular focus on gender takes us away from some of these other crucial areas of struggle?

BUTLER

Yes. One argument of the anti-gender ideology movement has been that gender is a destructive force and that it will destroy family, the environment, civilization, man, and all kinds of values that we hold dear. And I think making that argument appeals to people who are living with a fair amount of fear about what the future holds, whether their lives will be able to continue. They're aware of ways in which their lives are torn apart or their economic well-being has been challenged, if not destroyed. Now, you could say "gender," or "woke," or "DEI"—that these are the things that are destroying our lives. But what's destroying our lives is the decimation of the environment, and the ecological catastrophe that goes along with climate destruction and climate catastrophe, I guess we could call it. And what's destroying our lives is the destruction of democracy, of basic public goods that allow people to feel that they're going to have shelter, healthcare, and education. Without those basic goods and without a sense that what they need in life is affordable, they're going to live with a great deal of anxiety and fear.

Now you could say, okay, how are we organizing healthcare? What are we doing to save the planet? What are we doing to create more social and economic equality and affordability? We could ask those larger questions, which I think are asked by social democratic and socialist perspectives, and try to address people's fundamental fears that way. But instead, the right is engaging in a form of hyper-capitalism, the full marketization and destruction of democracy. We're seeing the rise of authoritarian regimes. We're seeing the increase in the number of poor people in the world and the intensification of wealth among the very wealthiest. These are the matters we should be thinking about in a systematic way so that we can live in a world in which people are free to work and live with some sense of security and hope. We know antisemitism works that way. Racism works that way. We find the scapegoat; we produce the monster in people's minds that is the destructive force making their lives feel so insecure, but actually there are some structural reasons that are making a lot of people feel that their lives are unmanageably precarious. So we should be addressing those and perhaps reorienting ourselves and retrieving our humanity in some way.

ROBINSON

Yes, both your introduction and your conclusion contain that phrase, "the fear of destruction." The fear of destruction being legitimate and grounded in real forces. But those forces do not include troubling the gender binary, which is not responsible for most of the major ills that threaten the potential downfall of human civilization. We thank you, Professor Butler, for joining us here today at *Current Affairs*.

BUTLER

Thank you very much. ⚜

Transcript edited by Patrick Farnsworth.

Practical Jokes to Play on ICE/CBP

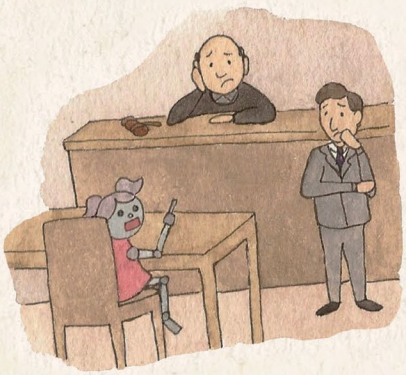
(U.S. IMMIGRATION AND CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT/CUSTOMS AND BORDER PROTECTION)

1.

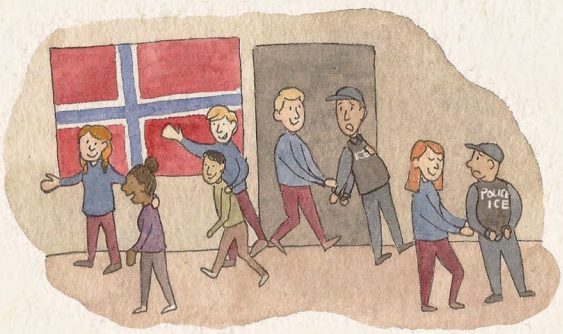
Switch ICE's deliberately muddled lists of separated children and parents with an accurate list, so that ICE ends up reunifying the correct parents with the correct children by accident.

2.

Replace unrepresented children with robots programmed by immigration lawyers. When the children have to defend themselves alone in court, they end up stumping the judges with brilliant arguments.



3.



Alter the deportation charter plane's flight plan so that it goes to Norway instead. When the flight arrives, all the immigrants will be financially supported. The ICE agents will be prosecuted and quickly rehabilitated in Norwegian jail.

4.

Slowly move the border fence, inch by inch, until Mexico reoccupies all of its former territory.

5.

In a child concentration camp (aka "baby jail"), switch the children's coloring paper for blank signed release orders.

Hack ICE's databases...

6.

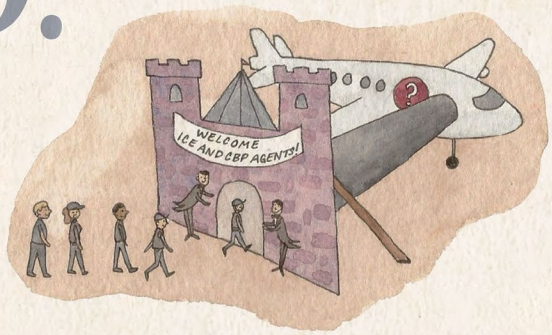
...so that the "illegal immigrants" they're hunting turn out to be members of the ICE agents' own families.

7. Put the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in the "to shred" tray.

8.

Find an enormous trench coat. Go to a baby jail, release all the children at once, and stack them within the trenchcoat into one giant terrifying person that roams America, terrorizing the populace.

9. Offer a celebration in ICE/CBP's honor. When the agents arrive, deport them to a random country.



10. Have everyone crossing the border dress as a CBP agent. When they encounter other CBP agents, accuse them of being impostors and demand to see their paperwork.

11. Fill the lining of their uniforms with nearly-hatched scorpion eggs.

12. Call ICE and CBP agents "mall cops" until they cry.

13. Make them contemplate the horror of their deeds.

14. **ABOLISH ICE AND CBP. OPEN THE BORDERS.**

THE BOSS, ME, OUR FATHERS, AND THE DOWNTRODDEN

BY **SCOTT FINA**

Recently I took in a matinee of *Springsteen: Deliver Me From Nowhere* at a theater. A dozen of us, all grey-haired, watched the show.

The film is engaging art, and depicts Bruce Springsteen's unorthodox effort in creating one of his early albums, *Nebraska*. But there are also deeper messages in the movie. One is Bruce's struggle with his father, who was aloof, suffered from mental illness, and verged on violence at times. The second is Bruce's wrestling with his own mental illness.

I reacted strongly to the film, partly because Bruce and I had some commonalities growing up, and also because our paths crossed once. Decades ago—before walking away, disillusioned, from the career path I'd seen my father forge—I'd escorted "The Boss" to five of his concerts during my time as a New Jersey State Trooper. My tenure as a cop was brief, but long enough to open my eyes. After joining the force in the early 1980s, I witnessed a world of structural poverty and deeply-embedded racism, the likes of which I'd never realized, in the peak of the crack cocaine epidemic. Little did I know at the time that Bruce Springsteen's music reflected these realities.

Springsteen's lyrics spoke of poverty, prejudice, state violence, and the limits of the American Dream. But on a warm night in 1985, as I stood amongst the crowd and listened to his words for the first time, I wondered if the audience could really hear him. Later, as I contemplated the purpose of my badge, I'd wonder if I could too.

Now judge, judge I got debts no honest man could pay
The bank was holdin' my mortgage and takin' my house away
Now I ain't sayin' that make me an innocent man
But it was more 'n all this that put that gun in my hand
—Bruce Springsteen, "Johnny '99" (1982)

That summer, when Bruce was at the peak of his fame, he came to what was then Giants Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey to give six homecoming concerts in the middle of his international "Born in the USA" tour. Tickets for the string of shows sold out immediately. There was concern that hordes of Springsteen devotees would gather outside the stadium each night trying to buy tickets, or at least be in the vicinity of the music—and indeed, fans flooded the area each night.

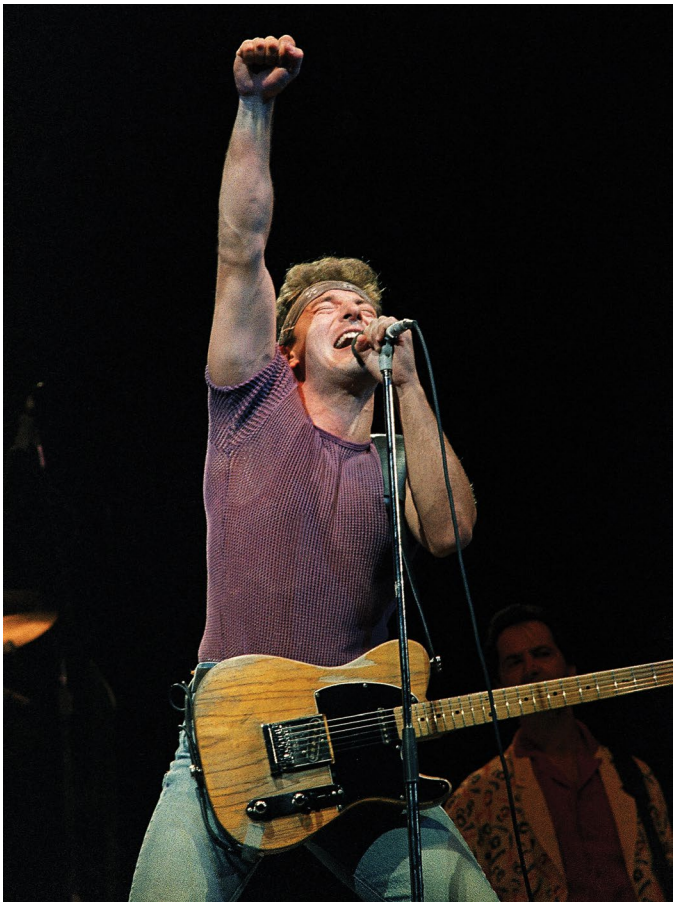
It was my fourth summer on the New Jersey State Police force, and my unit was called in to keep crowds from getting out of control during Bruce's concerts. (The Meadowlands Sports Complex was under the authority of the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority, part of the state government. The complex included an office of the State Police.) I was personally assigned to escort Bruce into and out of Giants Stadium to assure he would not be mobbed by fans.

Bruce was driven from his Rumson residence to the stadium in an old cargo van by whom, I assumed, was his bodyguard. The singer remained hidden in back, behind a curtain.

Each concert I waited in my marked troop car for Bruce's van to arrive on the offramp from the New Jersey Turnpike, and accompanied it into the back entrance of the stadium. This gave an appearance to fans that I was escorting a vehicle with equipment. When the concerts ended, I quickly led Bruce's getaway car out of the stadium and back to the Turnpike entrance ramp.

During one concert I was allowed to change into civilian

My father and I pose for a photo in our family living room in 1964: him in uniform, and I, age eight, holding a toy gun. I have never touched a firearm since leaving the State Police—and never will again.



Bruce Springsteen and the E. Street Band perfom at Giants Stadium, East Rutherford, NJ, August 18, 1985. The band was touring in support of their "Born in the USA" album. (AP Photo/David Bookstaver)

clothes and go onto the stadium field, close to the stage where I could watch Bruce and the E Street Band perform for a good part of the show. It was my first rock concert. I was astounded.

All the seats in the stands and almost every foot on the field were taken by 65,000 fans in the stadium. Everyone stood for every song and most danced along with it. The scene felt like a massive human heart pulsating with the thunderous instruments and Bruce's emotional voice cavorting on stage. Bruce was a gut-deep, soul-stirring phenomenon.

I was hearing many of his songs for the first time. The music was powerful, but I was more taken by the lyrics. This "average Joe" guy in jeans and T-shirt was a poet laureate, not for the millions of his fans around the world, but for the downtrodden, the disadvantaged, and the disenfranchised. Bruce was a veritable prophet. I stood at his feet.

Yet, after some time watching the show, I sensed an underlying disconnect between the crowd and these revelatory songs. I questioned whether the fans were fully getting Bruce's messages about distressed towns and families, unemployed working-class men and women, a beaten-down underclass, and the murderous warring on Vietnam. I guess it was hard to dance to poverty and loss, if not bordering on perverse, so fans were more engrossed in the tunes and beat, rather than the lyrics.

Standing in this immense and spirited crowd, I felt my own confused disconnect: one that had already been rising during my policing. I initially and enthusiastically wanted to stop crime. But now, those feelings were fading.

To understand that feeling, I have to go back—to where I came from, and to my father.

I was born in Redbank, New Jersey, seven years after and seven miles from Bruce Springsteen's birth in Long Branch. We were both raised in blue-collar towns, equally distant from the shores of Asbury Park, where my family made rare outings so that my four siblings and I could enjoy the rides on its amusement boardwalk. Some years later, Bruce began to build his musical career at the Stone Pony, a beachfront bar just a few blocks away.

The Fina and Springsteen families were both of modest means. My father was a New York-New Jersey Port Authority police officer who worked 26 years as a cop, mostly at the George Washington Bridge and Lincoln Tunnel. Bruce's father had a number of jobs, most of which he had difficulty keeping until he became a bus driver. (This is according to Bruce's 2016 memoir, *Born to Run*.)

My father was principled, hardworking, and highly responsible for his family. He was also stoic; I rarely saw him laugh, and never saw him shed a tear, even at his own father's funeral. My father had a temper, and while sometimes he scared me, he never hurt me or any of my siblings. He showed utmost respect for my mother. According to the *Born to Run* memoir and depicted in *Deliver Me From Nowhere*, as Bruce grew up, his father was quick to anger, drank too much, and disrespected his wife.

So our fathers were different, with a few impactful exceptions. I don't recall my dad saying he loved me, but I knew he did. Bruce similarly couldn't recall his father using those words, but he knew he felt that way.

Bruce stated in his memoir that his father was both his hero and his greatest foe. My father was also a hero to me, but never a

foe. Yet, I didn't really get to know him. He spent a disproportionate amount of time at work and commuting; he was literally and emotionally distant. My father died suddenly, overnight, from a brain aneurysm when he was 46. He was buried in an old cemetery up the street from our house. I was 17, and rattled.

Bruce's father died at 73. As an adult he got to know his father, especially what was hurting in him. Later in life he even felt the elder Springsteen's warmth.

I adopted my father's stoicism when he died, but ached to know his heart and his hopes. A hundred times or more I stood by his grave, and carried on one-way conversations. In time I set off in search of my father, and how to make him proud of me if he were alive.

And so, I decided to walk in his footsteps; I became a cop and joined the State Police. Within two years I was assigned to the elite TEAMS Unit. Among the unit's many operations were SWAT and special criminal interventions. As a cop I was exposed to poverty and disproportionate violence in urban neighborhoods. By the time I found myself at the Meadowlands in 1985, I started questioning what had led to these circumstances. I was running into structural inequalities without seeing them, yet sensing something was radically wrong.

The crack cocaine epidemic peaked in the mid-to late 1980s in cities across the United States, and Newark, New Jersey was in the line of fire. Its targets were impoverished, mostly African-American neighborhoods where crime exploded.

Not far from the Meadowlands, Interstate 280 intersects with Highway 21 in the city of Newark. A public high-rise housing project, the Christopher Columbus Homes—which was torn down in the 1990s—loomed over the freeway exits that led to Broad Street. The central business district of Newark was just a few blocks south. I-280 and the ramps to Broad were under the jurisdiction of the State Police; the area was hit by addiction, neglect, and violent crime.

Employees driving on I-280 to Newark's central business district from middle- and upper-class communities were alluring targets for largely unemployed, desperate, prospectless, young Black male residents of the Christopher Columbus Homes, who easily robbed them. My TEAMS Unit was called in to stop them.

The assignment took me into the public housing complex where I observed radical destitution. One night, my unit entered a high-rise building in search of a young man who was possibly involved in a murder on an off-ramp of I-280. We took the steps up several floors, walking through trash and stench in dingy stairways. The building was barely habitable, yet crowded with families.

Prostitution and drug dealing were common around the premises of the Christopher Columbus Homes. At such places there was little chance for residents to escape poverty, but a huge chance to be incarcerated.

Increasingly, it felt like my job as a cop was to help separate a world of empowered white people from a world of marginalized Black people. Too often, this resulted in arrests by cops and imprisonment of desperate people living in places like public housing projects.

In the years since, I've come to understand that what I was witnessing was structural: persistent, socioeconomic inequality wrought by the isolation and concentration of impoverished minorities. I learned about these issues from the writings of William Julius Wilson, a sociologist who published a seminal work in 1987: *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. The text was required reading in one of my graduate courses, and probably the most compelling during my doctoral studies.

Consider how Wilson, in his book, described the situation of the impoverished urban communities in the 1980s:

> *Today's ghetto neighborhoods [sic] are populated almost exclusively by the most disadvantaged segments of the black urban community, that heterogeneous grouping of families and individuals who are outside the mainstream of the American occupational system.*
>
> *Included in this group are individuals who lack training and skills and either experience long-term unemployment or are not members of the labor force, individuals who are engaged in street crime and other forms of aberrant behavior, and families that experience long-term spells of poverty and/or welfare dependency.*

Wilson's research focused on intergenerational, Black poverty in crime-plagued inner cities. The book included discussion of Chicago's Robert Taylor and Cabrini-Green public housing projects. He could have easily developed his arguments by studying the Christopher Columbus Homes in Newark, walking beside me, observing underlying realities I was blind to as I carried out my policing.

Wilson (and other social scientists of like thinking) concluded that historical racism, unjust public policy, and inequitable economic processes placed urban African Americans at a radical disadvantage. These factors included: the mass migration of African Americans from the South to northern cities seeking better paid factory jobs during the four decades following WWI; the allowance of restricted deeds and covenants prohibiting sales of homes to racial minorities; redlining by the Federal Housing Authority (refusal to insure mortgages for homes in places where African Americans lived); the federal Urban Renewal program—using the blunt tool of eminent domain—literally plowing over neighborhoods because they were Black and working-class; and the outmigration of industry and white residents from cities to suburbs, especially during the 1950s and '60s.

Sadly, since my tenure on the force in the 1980s, there has been a substantial change in the overall incarceration rate in the United States—for the worse. According to the Vera Institute, the U.S. currently has four percent of the world's population, but 16 percent of the world's imprisoned people. In the spring of 2024, there were 1.8 million incarcerated people in our nation.

Readers will recall that Giants Stadium held 65,000 fans in the 1985 Springsteen concerts. It would take more than 27 such stadiums to hold the number of incarcerated Americans today. Of those, white incarcerated people would fill ten stadiums, while Black incarcerated people would have filled well over eleven—even though the percentage of white people in our nation is four times greater than the number of Black people.

Economic inequality has also grown in the U.S. from the 1980s, with racial disparities further compounding the problem of incarceration. Since 1989, the U.S. Federal Reserve has been reporting on the "Distribution of Household Wealth" in our country. The report provides a telling picture. In the third fiscal quarter of 1989, the wealthiest 0.1 percent of Americans held nearly nine percent of the total household wealth, while the bottom half of Americans held only 3.52 percent.

Thirty-six years later, things have gotten substantially more inequitable. In the third fiscal quarter of 2025, the top 0.1 percent of Americans held over 14 percent of the total household wealth, while the bottom half of Americans held only 2.45 percent.

The glaring inequality revealed by these figures points to a grossly unjust political economy with a large segment of our population struggling to stay financially afloat, especially racial minorities. According to KFF (formerly the Kaiser Family Foundation), roughly 20 percent of Black Americans and 16 percent of Hispanic Americans in 2024 were living in poverty, compared to only 9.1 percent of white Americans.

In late February of 2026, the National Community Reinvestment Coalition (NCRC) published a report titled "Racial Wealth Snapshot Series: Overview of Black America." The NCRC found that:

> *The median Black household holds $44,100 in net worth compared to $284,310 for White households. This means Black households have roughly 15 cents for every one dollar in wealth that White households have.*

In other words, white households have over six times the net wealth of their Black counterparts. The National Women's Law Center reported in October 2025 that seven out of 10 Black women, and eight out of 10 Latina women were "worried about affording groceries…"

These striking economic disparities read like a page out of Victor Hugo's 1862 classic *Les Misérables*. Looking back to my policing days, I could see myself as Javert chasing down a desperate Jean Valjean for stealing a loaf of bread for his starving family.

As a cop in the 1980s, I didn't understand the unjust factors and inequities plaguing American society. But I felt them, as I contributed to them.

One experience in particular helped drive me toward my resignation from the State Police.

My unit was called upon to capture a prisoner who escaped from an AIDS ward at Trenton State Prison in late 1986. The inmate was a younger Black man who was imprisoned for armed robbery. He was hiding in a large house in a predominantly African American neighborhood in East Orange, New Jersey. (I note my unit was entirely white.) The house was occupied by his extended family. The inmate was in remission from AIDS, but had little chance to survive the disease; effective medicines were not available at the time.

I vividly recall how we ordered the inmate's family members to evacuate the house, using a loudspeaker. One by one they came out, weeping and terrified, especially the children. A crowd of neighbors gathered on the sidewalk in front of the house, clearly angry that state troopers had invaded their community.

We then announced, repeatedly, for the inmate to exit the house and surrender. He didn't respond. I and four other troopers eventually went into the house to search for him.

We determined the man was hiding in the attic, which was accessible only by a panel door in the second-floor ceiling. We stood underneath, with handguns unholstered and ready to fire, assuming he might also be armed. It crossed my mind that the escaped inmate, who had little to lose, might start shooting through the attic floor at us, or that one of my fellow troopers might start shooting through the ceiling first. Either possibility would lead to a barrage of gunfire.

Thankfully, I was able to talk the inmate down from the attic and handcuff him.

This episode was the closest I had come to shooting someone, and nearly did so within earshot of the inmate's desperate family. I've often questioned, *what kind of a fiend had I become?*

Not long after, I turned in my badge.

Policing in the U.S. is a no-win endeavor. It can lead to great losses.

A classmate from the State Police Academy, Trooper Carlos Negron, was killed while patrolling the New Jersey Turnpike during our third year of service. Carlos stopped to give assistance to a van that had broken down on the shoulder of the highway. He was unaware that one of its occupants was armed and wanted by the New York Police Department for the murder of two people in Queens. The suspect shot Carlos four times as he approached the van. Carlos was 29, and left behind a wife and 11-month-old son.

I believe Americans generally resent being policed. That's no surprise; our Constitution limits police authority, upholding civil liberties. Yet, Americans demand police protection for themselves, their institutions, and their political and economic arrangements. In such a society, cops are simultaneously heroes, villains, and victims.

My career as a trooper ended prematurely, only a few years after I had escorted Bruce at Giants Stadium. Looking back, I can still feel the muggy air of that 1985 night, and the thoughts racing through my head; I had travelled several years down my father's path, only to realize I must forge another one. I still regret that I contributed to the racial disparity of incarceration in the U.S. as a cop.

> *New Jersey Turnpike riding on a wet night*
> *'Neath the refinery's glow out where the great black rivers flow*
> *License, registration, I ain't got none*
> *But I got a clear conscience 'bout the things that I done*
> *Mister state trooper, please don't stop me*
> *Please don't stop me, please don't stop me*
> —Bruce Springsteen, "State Trooper" (1982)

Bruce Springsteen sings about state troopers, but I doubt he could have ever been one. He would make a lousy cop, but he's one hell of a prophet. His career as a musician still goes on, now in his late 70s.

Decades after having resigned from the State Police, I found myself an old man sitting in a nearly empty theatre, watching *Deliver Me From Nowhere*, reminded of my father, and for the first time, crying during a movie. ⚜

DISAFFECTED YOUNG MEN:

YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO BE GROOMED BY THE FBI

If you're a young man between the ages of 12 to 24 and unsure of what you want to do with your life, consider being coerced into partaking in an FBI plot to fabricate terrorist activity and stimulate nationwide hatred and fear!

JOIN THE FBI'S YOUTH GROOMING PROGRAM TODAY:

- Spend all your time online, isolated and impressionable
- Spend hours chatting with undercover FBI agents masquerading as anti-American sympathizers
- Let those agents prey upon your isolation and impressionability
- Be coached into looking up how to make explosives online or sending money to terrorist groups
- Have your plot foiled, get arrested, and make the FBI look good
- Help your country become more Islamaphobic, violent, and afraid!

JOIN TODAY!

SEARCHING FOR KENNY

BY **EMILY TOPPING**

Somewhere in a patch of grass along the South Louisiana bayou, amongst cement angels and cowboys, 38-year-old Andrew Cuneo leans down to greet an old friend. Well, a statue of him, anyway.

"This one's my favorite," Cuneo says, slinging an arm around the life-size sculpture. "This is how I remember him."

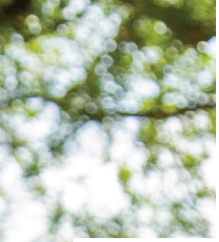
In memory and in plaster, artist Kenny Hill hasn't aged a day in 26 years. His hair, shaggy and blond, tucked into a blue trucker hat, sits permanently below his shoulders. In one frozen hand, he holds a conch shell up to his ear like a telephone. The self-portrait statue is one of dozens that make up Chauvin Sculpture Garden—regarded as one of America's most unique folk art destinations, both for its scale and the enduring mystery of its creator.

Back when Kenny built this place, it was simply his front yard. As far as anyone knows, he has never opened the waist-high fence that now surrounds his statues, which once emerged from the foliage as if they'd been planted. He's never read the plaque that now sits at the garden's entrance, listing the few known details about his background. He's never once attended the yearly festival celebrating his life's work, where visitors buy T-shirts bearing his name and pose for photos within his sprawling installation.

That's because one afternoon in early January 2000, upon discovering an eviction notice taped to the door of his wooden shack, Hill packed a knapsack full of his belongings, stepped outside into the yard he had spent more than a decade transforming, and took off on foot. Before he went, he knocked the head clean off one of his Jesus statues. Then he vanished.

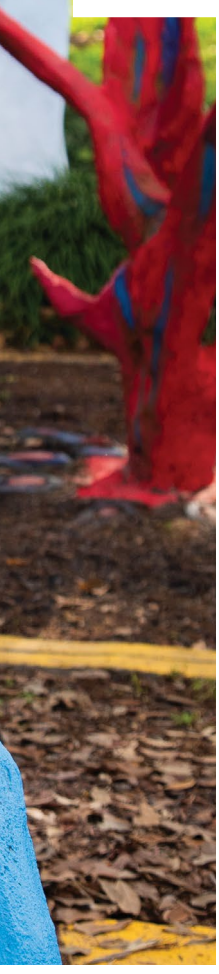
Since his disappearance, rumors about Kenny's motivations—both for creating his sculptures and abandoning them—have spread throughout town. "I heard he was schizophrenic and losing it," one local resident told me at this year's Chauvin Folk Art Festival, "doing all kinds of drugs." She'd never met him, though. Those who did see it differently.

"He was a beautiful person," says Cuneo, who grew up two doors down. "I think Kenny had a lot of pain, and these



sculptures were his way of communicating."

But what was he trying to say? And why, after all this time, has he never returned?



By all accounts, Kenny Hill was lost by the time he wound up in Chauvin, Louisiana in 1988: a father of three children on the heels of a painful divorce. It's not exactly clear what brought him here. Chauvin isn't even technically a *town*, just a "census-designated place," and at the time it held fewer than 4,000 residents. (Today, that number is even smaller.) The region's economy centers heavily on the oil and fishing industries—but Kenny, a stonemason by trade, was versed in neither. Perhaps there was no plan at all. He simply left his family in Baton Rouge and headed south, stopping only when the asphalt turned to brackish water.

What we do know is that upon discovering an unoccupied stretch of land along the bayou, Kenny set up camp. Eventually, he struck a deal with the nearby property owners to build a rudimentary shack on the water, where he paid a couple hundred dollars in rent per year in exchange for keeping the grass mowed. For the next decade-plus, he spent his summers in Missouri laying bricks, and his winters back on the Bayou, pouring pounds of concrete into something shaped like salvation. He never asked permission to start building; according to neighbors, one day, the scenes just started to unfold.

Kenny's garden spreads across the property in a crowded, almost overwhelming sequence of acts: more than 100 statues, many of them angels, many of them versions of himself. The installation culminates in a dizzying, 45-foot-tall tower made with over 7,000 bricks. Its structure seems to tell the story of the United States: hanging off it are Native Americans and cowboys wielding pistols, World War II soldiers lifting Old Glory overhead, Black musicians blowing into saxophones. (And on the backside, inexplicably, two busty women frolic in a waterfall. It's not immediately clear what historical event they're supposed to represent.)

One of the first statues Kenny constructed was a seven-foot tall man, painted entirely white, holding a woman's limp body in one arm and a perched eagle on the other. Art historian Deborah Cibelli has theorized, based on his personal history, that it represents "an estranged couple cast out of paradise, like Adam and Eve."

Behind the sculpture, a robed statue of Jesus hoists a wooden cross onto his shoulder. He reaches an arm back for yet another version of Kenny, who—in this depiction, appearing younger, his trademark blond beard cropped close to his face—struggles to lift a cross of his own.

A few steps away, a gazebo appears on the right side of the garden: half-formed faces emerge from its columns, as if pressing out from inside the concrete, anchored at the base by a ring of eagle talons. In the center, a weary Kenny rests his head in the lap of a winged angel. In his final iterations, our mysterious sculptor begins to resemble the son of God himself: his hat is discarded, and he lays shirtless and weak, torn jeans dripped with blood. Or perhaps that's just spilled paint from the red flowers nearby. There's no way to ask.

Still, the garden is only part of the story.

Andrew Cuneo, who grew up down the street, with his grandma next door, remembers Kenny differently than most.

His father Errol, a firefighter, was strict about where his son was allowed to go. He'd responded to many dark calls in the community, from arson to overdoses, and as a result, ran a tight ship when it came to safety. Still, the young boy knew he was always welcome to walk down the road and visit his eccentric neighbor, no questions asked.

Often, he didn't have to go far. Many nights, Kenny could be found in the kitchen of Cuneo's grandma, filling up on a bowl of jambalaya after helping her fix her car.

"My grandmother, her being that age during that time, and being a widow, stuff was always breaking… and Kenny was always around to help," he says. Sometimes the elderly woman paid him; other times, a warm dinner sufficed.

Cuneo recalls one Thanksgiving when his father noticed that Kenny didn't have a winter jacket. Out the window, his skinny frame could be seen hunched over a budding sculpture, arms protected only by a T-shirt. Errol walked over and gifted him an old firefighter coat. Come Christmas Day, apparently, Kenny felt the need to return the favor.

"He'd come across a litter of puppies, I guess, and he grabbed one of them, and that was me and my brother's first dog as a kid for Christmas," Cuneo laughs. "We named her Lucy. I'm not sure he asked my Mom about that."

As the years went by, the Cuneos considered Kenny a friend, and even helped him source materials for his installation—although they never quite understood the purpose. Errol knew a guy who owned a paint shop in town,

and when its warehouse needed clearing to make room for more inventory, he'd hitch up the trailer and give Kenny a ride, returning back with a load of mix-and-matched paint samples. From their home down the bayou, they watched his garden grow.

Then, one day, when John was driving Andrew back from school, they spotted that faded blue firefighter jacket bobbing down the road. It was Kenny, carrying only a rucksack on his shoulder.

"My Dad pulled over and asked him what was going on, and he explained that he'd been evicted," Cuneo recalls.

He told them he was heading to Arkansas, where his brother lived. They offered to buy him a bus ticket, or even help pay the rent, but he refused, promising to send a letter when he arrived. It came in the mail two months later: Kenny had made it, over 300 miles away, on foot. That was the last they ever heard from him.

The first time Gary LaFleur visited the garden, it was the winter of 1999. A biology professor at Nicholls State University, he was driving to a marine lab at the end of Bayou Road to teach a class, when something caught his eye.

"It was a little spooky, because it was hard to tell if somebody was there or not," he recalls. "I walked into the garden. You know, it was kind of overgrown at that time."

LaFleur trudged through the knee-high grass, unable to shake the feeling of being watched, although that could have been the hundred-odd eyes of concrete celestial beings peering down at him. Then, from inside the shack's darkened window, a face appeared. "I saw Kenny pull back the curtain," LaFleur says. "He just kind of nodded, like, *go ahead.* I got the feeling he was okay with me walking around his garden. It was just sort of like a gentle permission."

That brief interaction was the only moment LaFleur ever set eyes on him. The next time he returned, it was to bring along Dennis Sipiorski—a friend, and the head of the art department at Nicholls—to see the site before it was too late.

After Kenny left, his landlords were planning to demolish the place. Depending who you asked, the garden had become an eyesore at best, and at worst, a lawsuit waiting to happen: barbs of rebar metal stuck out from half-finished sculptures, and the unattended brick tower had begun to attract trespassing teens. Meanwhile, Parish officials quoted the owners $300 a month to mow the lawn, just to avoid fines.

The story of why Kenny was evicted has a few different versions. LaFleur says he's spoken to members of the landlords' family, who said, *You know, we didn't really want to kick Kenny off the property, but he just wouldn't talk to us. He wouldn't communicate with us, so we didn't know what to do.* Kenny's mother had died earlier that year, which reportedly devastated him, leading the artist to withdraw.

According to Cuneo, Kenny actually spent most of '99 up north in Branson, Missouri, laying bricks to save money for more sculpting materials. In that time, Cuneo says, the yard became unmanageable. The elderly couple who owned the property called the Parish to come cut the grass, and by the time Kenny returned, he was not only facing rent, but a few thousand dollars in Parish fees. His eviction notice lists the "reasons for wanting you to quit the premises" as "The rent was due JANUARY 1, 2000 and not paid"; it is dated January 3rd, only three days later.

One person I spoke to—who doesn't live in Chauvin, but has spent considerable time there—says the yard wasn't the problem. "Kenny was gone every summer in Missouri, you know damn well the grass wasn't getting mowed then. It wasn't that," he said. "The general feeling is that [the owners] wanted this property for the boat tie-ups. And so they started pecking away at him, about various things. That really, I mean, it broke his spirit."

According to them, because Chauvin is such a small community ("everyone here is related to everyone"), the story of Kenny's eviction has been rewritten. It's difficult to be sure: the landlords have since passed away, and Kenny has never shared his version of events. What is undisputed are the relentless efforts of the people who came afterward, determined to save the garden.

When Dennis Sipiorski arrived at the site a few months later, he immediately recognized what he'd stumbled upon. He reached out to artist Greg Elliot, a former coworker, to tell him there was a treasure trove down in the Bayou he ought to lay eyes on, and quick.

Elliott made the drive from Baton Rouge, armed only with a U.S. Geological Survey map splayed out on the dashboard. His friend, printmaker Kimberly Arp, sat in the passenger seat, helping to navigate a smattering of barely developed roads through the coastal marsh. When they arrived at the coordinates, the grass was easily eight or nine feet high.

"We all three split up, walked in to look around," Elliot recalls. "And about ten minutes later, we came back out to the road and looked at each other, and at the exact same time, went: *this cannot be destroyed*." The men shook on it then and there. If the Parish's only hurdle was overgrown plants and some rickety construction, then dammit, they'd fix it themselves.

Artists Kimberly Arp, left, and Greg Elliott, right, unveil one of the statues they restored after Hurricane Ida.

"We said, we'll take care of that. So we cleaned it up, mowed it, for what—about four months, five? Just taking endless truckloads of shit to the dumps."

Not long after, Sipiorski contacted the Kohler Foundation, a philanthropic organization dedicated to preserving art. When one of its administrators visited the site, she said she felt as if she'd been "transported to another planet." The Foundation purchased

the property from the landlords and donated it to Nicholls State University, which has maintained it as a free and open public space ever since.

People often ask LaFleur why the university doesn't charge an entry fee. Each time, he is reminded of that winter in '99, the shadowed face in the window and its nod of "gentle permission." "It wouldn't be in the spirit of what Kenny built," he says.

For Elliott, the garden is more than a local curiosity. He's spent the last 40-plus years as a professionally trained sculptor—holding three degrees in various concentrations and teaching roles at multiple universities—yet throughout his research, it has always been "outsider art" that intrigues him most.

"If you talk to people in academic fields about 'outside art,' there are people who, like us, think it's incredible," he says. "Then there are so many who turn their nose up and say, 'They didn't go to the academy. They don't have training. This work has no purpose.'"

"To those people, I say: then why do we study cave paintings?"

His retort gets to the heart of the question all art historians seek to answer. What does art mean—to the ones who create it, and those who view it? People seeking the answer often start with the very first examples in human history: smudges from the fingertips of our early ancestors, whose sole purpose seems to be saying *I was here*.

The earliest known human artwork was discovered in a cave in Indonesia, dating back 45,000 years, and shows two pairs of hands dipped in red pigment and pressed against a limestone wall. For historians and philosophers alike, it was this act that differentiated humans from all other forms of animal: the ability to create something outside of themselves, solely for the purpose of expression. Art, then, is not something earned through credentials and academic study. Nor is it something that must be bought and sold like any other commodity, a product to be justified with profit. It is innate. It's what makes us who we are.

This philosophy is what draws Elliot, and others like him, to the greatest folk artists of our time: Howard Finster, the Baptist minister from Georgia who claimed God called him to spread the gospel by transforming his swampy land into "Paradise Garden," a sculpture garden with nearly 47,000 pieces of art; Simon Rodia, the Italian immigrant who spent three decades building a series of 100-foot towers from scrap metal in Los Angeles; Helen Martins, who covered her childhood home with crushed glass and mirror after her father's death, hoping to "add color and light" to her life. And of course, Kenny Hill.

Over the years, the garden has been threatened again and again—not only by natural disasters, but manmade ones.

After Hurricane Ida caused severe damage to the sculptures in 2021, Elliott was flown in from out of state to assess the damage: trees were strewn across the property, limbs torn from angels, entire statues knocked over on their side. Kimberly Arp joined too, reuniting the same team who'd rescued the garden so many years before. Then, one night, as they were still assembling a restoration plan, a vandal entered the property. The two bathing beauties by the waterfall had their legs broken; an angel's arm was severed at the elbow. Most devastating of all, a statue of a young girl, peering at her reflection in a painted river, was missing entirely.

"That was a hard day," LaFleur remembers. "We were already reeling from Ida. And now, this was something we couldn't replace."

Then, one of the garden's volunteers noticed something: embedded drag marks in the grass led right from the statue's former resting spot all the way to the bayou's edge. The missing girl might only be a few feet away. Gary LaFleur knew friends at the nearby biology lab who had sonar equipment, and could assist with a scuba dive—but given the destruction of the recent hurricane, it would all take too long to coordinate. Instead, he took his shirt off and jumped into the water.

"I wasn't too worried about gators, but I was really hoping not to find broken glass," he says.

Holding his breath, LaFleur swept his arms through the thick mud floor, pushing through downed branches and debris. The muffled sounds of volunteers cheering him on could be heard from above water. Finally, he struck something solid. When LaFleur surfaced, gasping, he had the statue hooked under his arm. He dragged it back to shore himself.

After the storm, it would take several years to restore the garden to its former glory. Realizing how many hours this project required, Elliott and Arp moved into the property next door—the home belonging to Andrew Cuneo's grandmother, who had since passed away. They relied on old photographs of Kenny's work to match his exact paint colors, and experimented with various techniques to get the statues to balance just right, their roots planted in an earth that was rapidly waterlogging.

At times, preserving this space felt like trying to build a sandcastle when the tide is rising. And it is.

Louisiana's coastline is vanishing at a rate of 14 football fields of land per day, taking with it homes, jobs, and entire communities. Since Kenny's disappearance in 2000, Chauvin's population has dwindled from 3,200

to an estimated 2,400. As hurricane seasons become increasingly brutal, many families can't afford to rebuild from the damage, and job opportunities have stalled. Yet as difficult a place as it may be to live, it can be equally hard to leave. Many residents here are part of the third, fourth, or fifth generation to live on their land, and they'll sooner learn to swim than walk away.

On a sweltering Sunday afternoon in April, dozens of local residents and out-of-towners have gathered at the Chauvin Sculpture Garden for the annual Folk Art Festival, staged the same afternoon as the "Blessing of the Fleet." The Blessing is a yearly tradition held at the beginning of shrimp season, where a local priest blesses each fishing boat with holy water to prepare them for a fruitful harvest ahead.

Professor Gary LaFleur takes the stage, a plastic cup of champagne in his hand. First, a toast to Kenny. Then, he reminds the audience that when the boats pass, we shouldn't raise our beer cans: "The priest isn't a fan of that," he says, only half joking.

This is Catholic country, after all, but above anything, it's Cajun. The Blessing of the Fleet may be symbolic, a reason to celebrate the season ahead, but many residents here are truly counting on something divine to save their way of life. If the fishing industry dries up in Chauvin, so does an entire culture.

After the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, Louisiana's shrimp landings slashed by more than half, reaching the lowest number in 50 years in 2024. Even when fishermen do reel in big, it's not paying: shrimp prices fell 40 percent in 2024 alone, mostly due to an influx of cheap foreign imports. Oysters are faring no better, with a 2019 study by the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries finding the lowest population ever recorded in Louisiana's public harvest areas.

The people of Chauvin could use a miracle, and at the very least, being surrounded by Kenny's angels can't hurt. That's why LaFleur, a marine biologist, brings his students here.

"I invite students to come to the art festival, and then I like them to see the shrimpers go by with the families on the shrimp boat, the generations of people there," LaFleur says.

In his classes and beyond, he's come to use the garden as a vessel to speak about something larger. It's one thing to be lectured about the life cycle of a fish, he says, and be told that its population is shrinking; it's another to come to a magnificent art site, to witness the faces of the neighbors who care about it, and realize *their* population is shrinking, too.

"Then, usually they'll see a house that's abandoned with no roof, y'know? And then, almost if you look hard enough, you can see it on the faces of the community members. You can see the struggle—the people that are still there, they're just, they're just hanging on," he says.

"It's not just coastal land loss, but it's really loss of communities. And then, you know, the final layer is, if you lose the community, you've lost something else that's hard to measure, and that's culture."

In the decades since his departure, Kenny Hill has given his neighbors a reason to come together. Seeing dozens of strangers gathered in his garden is bittersweet; it's a community he never quite ingratiated himself in, whether by choice or not.

Andrew Cuneo is the only person at this year's festival who'd ever exchanged more than a handful of words with Kenny. His father, the firefighter, died in 2019, and his grandmother before that. Today, Cuneo is serving bowls filled with her jambalaya recipe: free of charge, unless you'd like to donate a few bucks to help maintain the garden.

Kenny's family appears to have visited the sculptures in their own time. Once, in 2007, a postcard appeared in the donation box:

To whom it may concern,

I Maxine Hill Sparks ex wife of Kenneth Allen Hill Sr. came by to see the garden which is beautiful. Kenneth has 3 children, Kenny Jr., Retha, Mary. Their Daddy is not a hermit. he was only a lonely man. We were married Nov-30-1969 in Baton Rouge, La. Thank you'll for keeping his work alive. Also he is alive and well.

Kenny is still alive now, in his mid-70s, as far as Gary LaFleur, Greg Elliott, and the other keepers of the garden know. They've heard that he is back in Baton Rouge, possibly living in an assisted facility. Online obituaries show that his ex-wife, Maxine, died in 2017, and his son, Kenny Jr., the following year.

He has turned down all requests to visit the garden.

"I kind of struggle with it," LaFleur says, referring to the knowledge that Kenny is still out there. Sometimes the professor attends meetings about the preservation of other folk sites, where people insist that he's got to track Kenny down, and get an interview before it's too late.

"But I am not convinced," LaFleur says. "I don't think that's what Kenny wants. I mean, it's wrong for me to act like I know what Kenny wants, exactly—but I got the feeling that Kenny did not express himself verbally. Or didn't know how to. He probably didn't know how to explain his feelings, but he knew how to draw it, and put it in a garden."

Across the street from Kenny's sculptures, a one-room museum holds photographs and items recovered from his home, shortly before its demolition. If you're hoping it holds a diary, manifesto, or map, you'll be disappointed. Still, there is one surprise: three sheets of hand-written song lyrics and a signed contract with Sunrise Records, dated 1983. There's also a royalty check made out for 50 cents, payment for eight vinyls sold. Kenny wasn't much for talking, but at some point, he must have sang. ⚜

I just want to love you
And kiss your tears away
I'm always thinking of you
So remember
Love will never go away

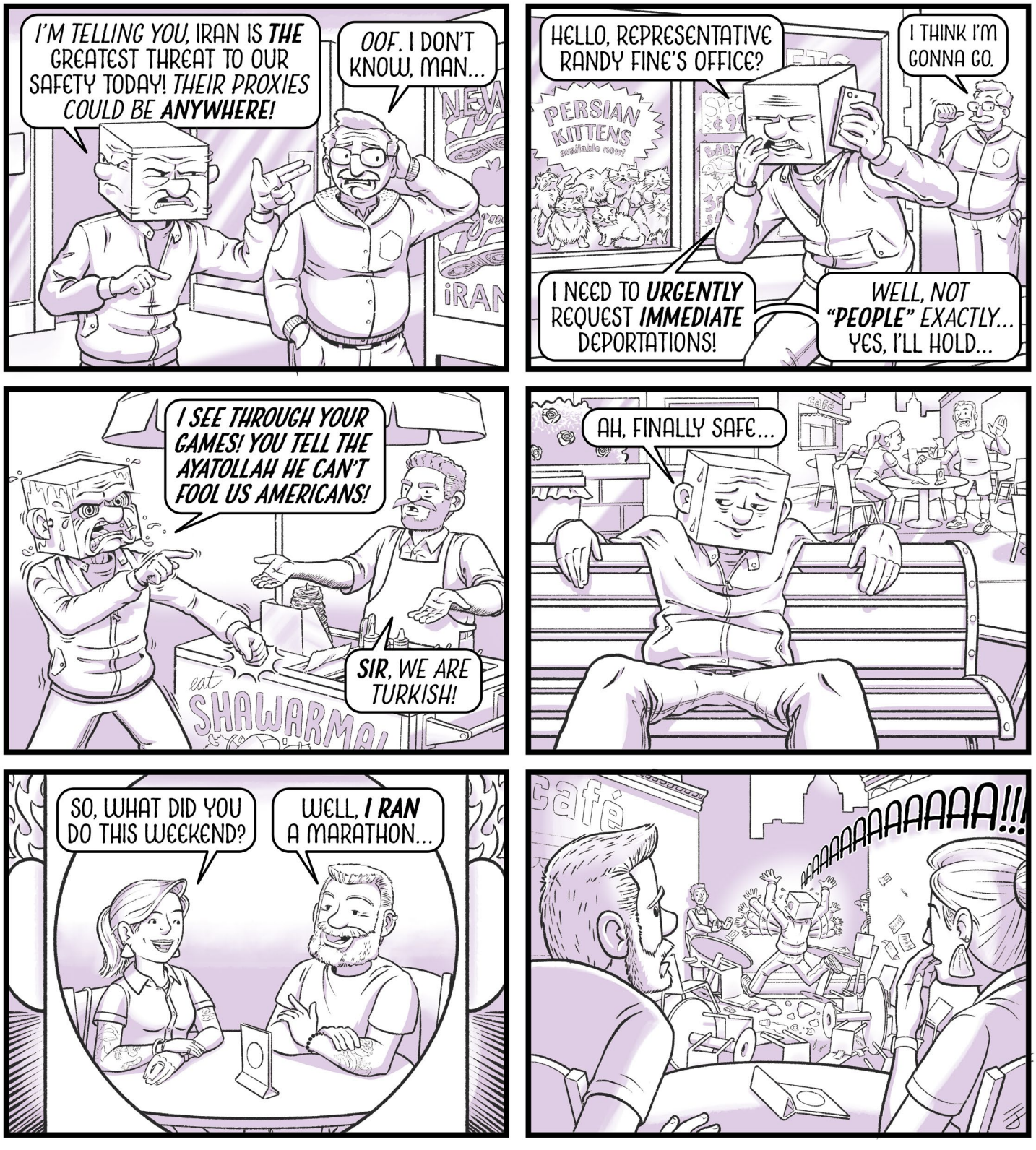
– "Love and Kisses,"
Kenneth Hill

In 1912, cartoonist **Ernest Riebe**—a trade unionist with the Industrial Workers of the World—created one of America's most memorable cartoon characters. **Mr. Block**, Riebe wrote, is "the representation of that host of slaves who think in terms of their masters," and sides with the rich and powerful in every argument. Mr. Block "owns nothing, yet speaks from the standpoint of the millionaire," he is "patriotic without patrimony," and he "licks the hand that smites him and kisses the boot that kicks him." In short, **Mr. Block is "the personification of all that a worker should not be."** Thanks to the wonders of the Public Domain, *Current Affairs* is proud to present to you the 21st-century adventures of:

MR. BLOCK

HE CONDEMNS IRAN

WRITTEN BY: ALEX SKOPIC & ART BY: J. LONGO



HANDHELD, UNLIT, UNCREDITED

BY **CIARA MOLONEY**

On March 13, 1995, at a celebration of the centenary of cinema in Paris, Danish filmmakers Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg announced their intention to launch a new film movement. They distributed a manifesto and an accompanying Vow of Chastity, and didn't take any questions. Most film movements—Italian neorealism, say, or new queer cinema—happen organically and are blurrily defined, getting a name as filmmakers, critics and audiences happen to notice features which seem to link certain films together. Not this one. Dogme 95 (Danish for, as you might have guessed, "dogma 95") consists of exactly 35 films, each numbered and given a certificate.

Making a Dogme 95 film meant swearing "to submit to the following set of rules," as outlined in the Vow of Chastity:

> *Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is to be found).*
>
> *The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot.)*
>
> *The camera must be hand-held. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted.*
>
> *The film must be in color. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a single lamp be attached to the camera.)*
>
> *Optical work and filters are forbidden.*
>
> *The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur.)*
>
> *Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now.)*
>
> *Genre movies are not acceptable.*
>
> *The film format must be Academy 35 mm.*
>
> *The director must not be credited.*

Conceptually, Dogme 95 was an attempt to radically democratize filmmaking and resist the rise of the modern blockbuster, transforming low budgets and limited technical skill from obstacles into virtues. But it was also, unmistakably, a troll. The manifesto was allegedly written in 45 minutes. A lot of great art comes from restrictions, but the Dogme rules are a hilarious combination of arbitrary and exacting. (It's one thing to ban setting up an elaborate camera rig, but you can't set the camera on a table?) It is, as much as anything, a funny bit. Dogme 95 resolved this duality within itself—caught between sincere reinvention of the cinemat-

ic form and sticking its tongue out to blow a raspberry—through total commitment to that bit. The Dogme rules sound hard to follow, harder to follow and make a good movie, and harder still to make one that isn't the same as every other Dogme movie. Nobody made a film attempting to follow the rules for another three years after the announcement—Vinterberg's *Festen* and Von Trier's *The Idiots* were released in 1998—and both of those broke some of the rules. It's hard not to break *any*. "You can break one of the rules" is basically one of the rules. *Julien Donkey-Boy* (Dogme #12) breaks six of them and still got a certificate. What makes Dogme 95 a funny troll and what makes it an important film movement are the same thing: that it managed to produce films so rich, diverse and fascinating that they can fundamentally change the way you think about cinema.

DOGME #1: *FESTEN* (1998) AND DOGME #2: *THE IDIOTS* (1998)

Festen—also known in English as *The Celebration*—is set at the 60th birthday party of a wealthy businessman (Henning Moritzen). The hotel he owns hosts a formal banquet attended by various friends, family, and business associates, including his adult children. His eldest son (Ulrich Thomsen) stands to, apparently, give a toast. Instead, he announces that his father sexually abused him and his twin sister, who has recently taken her own life. There's a brief, shocked silence. And then the party continues as before. In a manner that feels surreal, but reflects the all-too-real pattern of societal inaction on sexual abuse, the guests ignore it. Some of them disbelieve the accusation; some are more motivated by fear of social awkwardness than horror of child abuse. The father denies it, of course. How the rest of the family react to the public accusation, and how much they knew about the abuse, is peeled back throughout the rest of the film. The son's greatest supporters are the hotel kitchen staff, who hide the guests' car keys to prevent them from leaving.

The film is obviously a masterpiece. It is blackly funny but never flippant, carefully unspooling the effects of sex abuse within a family. As Roger Ebert writes, *Festen* "mixes farce and tragedy so completely that it challenges us to respond at all." This is not because Vinterberg lacks control over the material, but because he has such skill that can evoke an incredibly specific tragicomic tone in this highest-stakes emotional context. It's like the most messed-up episode of *Succession* never made. *Festen* singlehandedly justifies the Dogme 95 concept: nothing about following those restrictions feels gimmicky. Rather, the natural lighting, handheld cameras, and only diegetic sound make the film seem intimate and authentic and real, like you would never consider telling this story any other way. The Dogme style effectively undercuts the story's potential for melodrama. Don't get me wrong, I love melodrama, but it is so much more effective that *Festen*'s shocks, twists and revelations don't play in the emotional major keys. It feels true to life. Like you're just another guest trapped at this damn party.

Festen is so good that it feels fated to be the exception that proves the rule, casting the failures of other Dogme movies into sharper relief.

The Idiots, in contrast, is easy to hate. When it premiered at Cannes, Mark Kermode shouted "Il est merde! Il est merde!" ("it is shit," in not-good French) until he was kicked out of the screening. AO Scott accused the film of "contemptible emotional brutality." It is visually ugly and narratively disjointed, with retrospective talking-head interviews mixed in among the scenes, though they aren't part of a larger mockumentary approach. It has an unsimulated orgy in the middle for no real reason. It is viscerally distressing and morally queasy. It is also beautiful and moving. I love it unreservedly.

Karen (Bodil Jørgensen) is alone at a restaurant. A group of adults with intellectual disabilities arrive at the restaurant with their carer: the group interfere with and embarrass other diners, whose anger and disgust are no less obvious for being swallowed out of politeness. But Karen—quiet in ways that could be shyness or something sadder—is kind and sympathetic. One of the group holds her hand and takes her with them. They reveal that they are not, in fact, disabled: they are bohemians who publicly pretend to be mentally disabled—their word for this pretending is translated in subtitles as "spazzing"—as some kind of anti-bourgeois protest. They intend to shock middle-class sensibilities. Stoffer (Jens Albinus), their philosopher-in-chief, talks grandly about how "idiots" are the people of the future, the only ones who are truly free, and that it is vital to find one's "inner idiot" to resist the system. The group take Karen to stay with them at a big suburban house which Stoffer is supposed to be selling for his uncle. Instead, he is using it as the base of operations for his strange, vague revolution.

There are whole sequences in *The Idiots* that play like a bad-taste hidden-camera prank show. The gang "spaz" in swimming pools and biker bars—twitching, jerking, drooling, saying and doing whatever is socially inappropriate. As in a prank show, the humor comes from the people around them not knowing how to deal with a situation which they perceive as real. But if this was a prank show, it would be reprehensible: ableism in its purest, unreconstructed form. In *The Idiots*, these scenes are integrated seamlessly into a sad drama—one that is shamelessly provocative on disability issues, but ultimately pulls apart assumptions about disability and propriety, whether held by either a scandalized audience member or the film's characters.

Despite its gleeful outrageousness, *The Idiots* never really indulges Stoffer's radical posturing. His claims about whatever grander point "spazzing" achieves are incoherent and empty. He's a posh boy who doesn't think the rules should apply to him, that's all. When another member of the group brings some people with Down's Syndrome to the house for tea, he's angry. For all his talk of "idiots" being the people of the future, he seems as uncomfortable around actually disabled people as the squares he loves to scandalize. (More so: the squares suffer their discomfort politely.) This is one of several events that cause the group to un-

ravel. Another is that Josephine's (Louise Mieritz) father shows up, chastising her for going off her medication and insisting she return home.

If the visit of the characters with Down's Syndrome exposes the shallow sham of "spazzing" by contrasting it with genuine disability, the reveal of Josephine's mental illness re-blurs the lines. To pretend to be disabled—to "spaz"—is a conceit that relies on the stable definition of the non-disabled mind and body, a norm to which one returns. But that stability is illusory. The boundaries between the disabled and "normal" body or mind are unfixed—perhaps even more so than other socially constructed categories, due to the number and variety of conditions that may or may not be classed as disabilities. Josephine, like her friends, was pretending to have a brain that worked differently from the norm, in a way that would require care. At the same time, she was pretending something that was also true, and the act of pretending made her seem "normal," both to the group and to the audience. Her experience of disability is a lack of autonomy, subject to her authoritative father's demands, but her experience of pretending disability is blissful freedom.

This ambiguity along the borders of disability and not, and between being and pretending to be, is the center of *The Idiots*. This tension comes to a head in the final, excruciating ten minutes, when Karen, the newcomer, is the only person to accept Stoffer's challenge to "spaz" in front of your family and loved ones. Though Karen was initially sceptical and only joined the group not long before it began to dissolve, it quickly seems especially meaningful for her. She is unwilling to let go or move on. She returns home with one other group member, and all at once we learn Karen's story. Her mother is shocked to see her after her disappearance. It turns out that two weeks earlier, Karen's newborn baby died. She left home before the funeral. The narrative "has the structure of a joke in that the point at the end endows the rest of it with meaning," Ove Christensen writes. "Only at the end does it become clear that Karen's vulnerability (also) has an external explanation." Christensen is right that this is a structure typical in comedy, which makes the scene all the more effective as tragedy: you are coiled for the expected surprise of delight, and instead get a much more surprising punch in the face. For the whole film we were watching, Karen was carrying around an unspoken, unspeakable trauma. It's difficult to process, but "spazzing" seems to have been especially meaningful to her in part due to that grief. She starts to dribble her food, fulfilling the stupid, pointless dare, and just remembering it makes my stomach knot with anxiety. Christensen describes this as a kind of involuntary compulsion—"spazzing" made real—but to me, it's a deliberate action resulting from a terrible miscalculation of what matters, of who one wants to be and how to be part of a community, by a woman whose foundation has crumbled beneath her. It's the saddest dribble in film history.

DOGME #3: *MIFUNE* (1999)

There's nothing in the Dogme 95 rules mandating certain themes, yet it seems natural enough that several Dogme films carry through the interest in communities of outcasts and self-exiles and the porousness of disability initiated in *The Idiots*. The Dogme manifesto is a declaration of an outcast filmmaking community, and the Dogme rules function as a kind of disability metaphor, reframing assumed deficits as positive values to cultivate a different kind of gaze. This is most directly evidenced in Harmony Korine's *Julien Donkey-Boy*, where the scuzzy visuals parallel the vision impairments of many of the film's characters. But my favorite examples are those films that reconsider those themes in tones totally unlike *The Idiots*' blend of shock humor and painful tragedy.

Søren Kragh-Jacobsen's *Mifune* is, for all intents and purposes, a romantic comedy and a sentimental found-family drama. But it is a loose-limbed and freewheeling one, whose adherence to genre conventions is less cookie-cutter repetition and more that, freed from all expectation, you realize those conventions are actually a really great way to tell a story.

Mifune opens at a wedding. Kresten (Anders W. Berthelsen) marries a girl whose father owns the firm where he works. The next morning, he gets a call telling him that his father has died, and he must come home to the family farm to look after his brother. His new bride is confused. He never mentioned where he grew up—on the rural Danish island of Lolland—and she calls him "peasant ass" when he tells her. He never mentioned having a brother, or a father for that matter. He never told her that his mother hanged herself when he was a child. He reassures her that he will be back in Copenhagen in two days' time.

When Kresten arrives in his BMW at the ramshackle farm where he grew up, the house has severe water damage to the walls and fixtures, the stench is bad enough that he vomits, and his brother is hiding under the table where their father's corpse is laid out. Rud (Jesper Asholt) is noticeably older than Kresten, the scruffy emotional counterbalance to his suave polish. He's also intellectually disabled. In the decade since Kresten last visited, their father was ostensibly Rud's carer, but it sounds like the direction of caring responsibilities became complex as time wore on: the animals died, and their father burned all their furniture and rarely left the farm. Kresten assumes Rud will be put in a home, one of a dozen things to tidy away neatly before he goes back to Copenhagen. "I have a home!" Rud insists. Kresten doesn't seem inclined to listen to him. Rud is, more than anything, an inconvenience. A stubborn obstacle in his way back to his carefully sculpted life as a yuppie newlywed. When he asks the man who notified him of his father's death about putting Rud in a home, he's told that they don't usually do much if there's family around, and that it would take many months out here in the country. Or he could hire a maid to take care of him.

Enter Liva (Iben Hjejle), a sex worker trying to pay for her little brother's boarding school. She fabricates an employment history and takes the job, in part to escape the stream of abusive phone calls she's been receiving. Rud is instantly smitten: before she arrives, he is appalled at the notion he should wash himself, but once he sees her, he decides to put on his good suit and comb his hair. He tells her about aliens, and she smiles gently, threading the line of finding Rud funny without being mean. When she meets Kresten, he has a bucket on his head, shouting in mock-Japanese. When they were younger, he and Rud would play a game where they pretended that legendary Japanese screen actor Toshiro Mifune, or more accurately, his character in

Anders W. Berthelsen as Kresten, Iben Hjejle as Liva, and Jesper Asholt as Rud in the 1999 film Mifune

Seven Samurai, lived in their basement, and Kresten would act the part for Rud's amusement. Despite the façade he's put on in Copenhagen, he hasn't been home for long before he goes back to playing *Mifune*. Much like Tom Cruise in *Rain Man*, reconnecting with his disabled brother helps him, bit by bit, reconnect with his authentic self.

It is obvious to anyone who has seen a movie that by the end Kresten and Liva will fall in love, and will live with Rud on the farm, as his dearest friends and fiercest allies. They'll also be joined by Liva's kid brother Bjarke (Emil Tarding), after he gets kicked out of boarding school. I want to say it's darker than it sounds, but that's not quite it. I could describe it with emphasis on different details—Rud's fixation on the tree their mother hanged herself from, say, or the reveal of who exactly was making the abusive phone calls to Liva—and it would sound hideous and unsettling, but it is, on the whole, *lovely*, its painful moments like salt to the caramel. It's a Dogme movie, so you don't have the kind of reassurance that is built into similar Hollywood fare—you know how stories like this go, that all secrets will out and hearts of stone will soften, but you don't know that *this* story won't still take a sharp left turn. Bjarke convinces Rud to get into the water to retrieve a stone he tells him is special, and when Rud can't swim *at all* it feels like the end of the world. But, after a beat or two too long, Bjarke dives in to save him—and pulls Rud out clutching the special stone in his hand, happy as a clam.

It is a film about making a family out of these bits and pieces that come into your life. About the wonder and glory of happenstance. There are biological relationships here—two pairs of siblings—but it doesn't feel like that's what binds them together. Kresten and Rud were still "brothers" when he was spending a decade in Copenhagen pretending to be somebody else. They were brothers when Kresten griped about how annoying it was that he couldn't dump Rud in an institution. But they are brothers in a different, truer way when Kresten wanders through a wheatfield, crying out, putting on Rud's clothes as he finds them strewn about. Rud's intellectual disability goes from being perceived as a burden to being just an aspect of his personality, as ineffable and loveable as anyone else's. At one point, Kresten calls them all idiots, and Bjarke corrects him: "Not Rud."

When we first meet him, Rud says he already has a home. It just takes a while for the rest of the characters to catch up.

DOGME #12: *ITALIAN FOR BEGINNERS* (2000)

For all its pretense of experimentalism, the Dogme style turns out to be extremely well-suited to romcoms, a genre well-disposed to people talking in rooms without period setting or special effects. *Italian for Beginners*, adapted from a novel by Irish "chick lit" queen Maeve Binchy, follows the intersecting romance plots of characters attending an evening class in Italian. By the end of the film, none of them have learned Italian, but it doesn't matter, because Giulia has finally told Jorgan Mortensen she's in love with him, despite continuing to call him exclusively by his full name. *Italian for Beginners* is funny and chatty and moving in the manner of a Nora Ephron script. It is the only film that truly dares to ask, "What if *Love Actually* was good?"—a question *Love Actually* fails to answer every Christmas.

It seems pretty extraordinary that a film like *Italian for Beginners* could conceivably be part of the same film movement as *The Idiots*. One I would happily recommend to my mother, and one I assume will get me put on a list for publicly praising. Yet even at this fluffiest end of the spectrum, that interest in disability remains. *Italian for Beginners* is an ensemble piece, but if it has a protagonist, it's Olympia (Anette Støvelbæk): a woman who is described both within the film and in writing about it as "clumsy," but whose lack of coordination goes beyond everyday clumsiness. She clearly has pretty severe dyspraxia (AKA developmental coordination disorder), a neurodevelopmental differ-

Full cast of the 2000 film Italian for Beginners

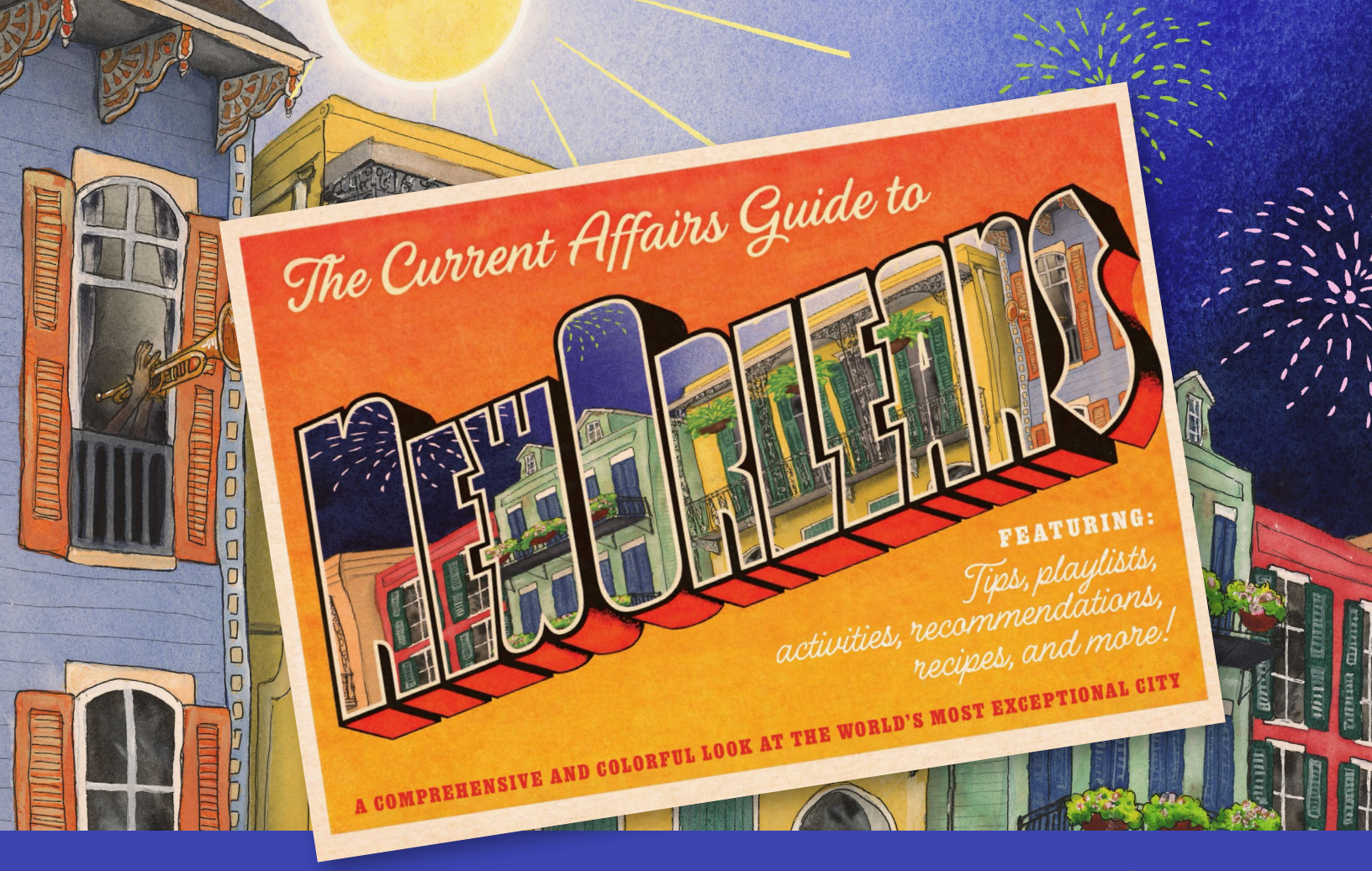
ence that affects a person's fine and gross motor skills. This could show up in daily activities like tying your shoes, writing by hand, and balance, although it affects different people in different ways. Olympia has been fired from dozens of jobs for dropping things, bumping into things, and knocking things over, and looks likely to be fired from her current job at the bakery. Though she acts as a carer for her elderly father, he berates her for supposed stupidity in doing everyday tasks that require coordination. Again, the line between disabled and not is blurry. On paper, Olympia's father is disabled and she is his non-disabled carer, but in practice, his abuse of her—which likely far precedes his own disability—is centered in no small part on her invisible and unnamed neurodivergence. Her dyspraxia is *recognized* by those around her, but instead of being labelled as such it's chalked up to stupidity, laziness, lack of attention or concern.

Dogme 95 aimed to spur the democratization of filmmaking. In the short-to-medium term, it seemed to work. People whose films would otherwise never be seen got their shiny Dogme certificate and some kind of audience. More importantly, it showed how little is actually needed to make a film—even a good one. There is a clear throughline from Dogme 95 to American mumblecore films of the 2000s like *Funny Ha Ha* and *Hannah Takes the Stairs*, with their low budgets and ultra-naturalistic dialogue. If Dogme revisited and revised the porous boundaries of disability, mumblecore cultivated a distinctly neurodivergent perspective on the world, exemplified by the performances of ADHDer Greta Gerwig (who was an actor before she turned to directing). But that was twenty years ago. Today, filmmaking is at once more accessible than ever—we all carry a high-definition camera and editing suite in our pocket—but doesn't feel particularly *democratized*. It is easier than ever to make a film, but harder than ever to get your film seen. It's like we leapfrogged from democratization to atomization: not the equality of each person in the collective, but the isolation of each individual in their own bubble of algorithmically generated reality.

If it sounds like I'm building up to saying we need a new Dogme movement, a group of Danish filmmakers beat me to it last year at Cannes. The Dogme 25 rules are somehow even more stupid and arbitrary than the originals:

> *The script must be original and handwritten by the director.*
>
> *At least half the film must be without dialogue.*
>
> *The internet is off limits in all creative processes.*
>
> *We'll only accept funding with no content-altering conditions attached.*
>
> *No more than 10 people behind the camera.*
>
> *The film must be shot where the narrative takes place.*
>
> *We're not allowed to use make-up or manipulate faces and bodies unless it's part of the narrative.*
>
> *Everything relating to the film's production must be rented, borrowed, found or used.*
>
> *The film must be made in no more than one year.*
>
> *Create the film as if it were your last.*

Maybe, like the original Dogme 95 rules, they'll produce a stunning variety of horrific and delightful films against all the odds. But Dogme 95 was responding to distinct trends in the cinematic ecosystem of the 1990s, as blockbusters were becoming more and more dominant. Dogme 25's manifesto states that they wish to "preserve the originality of cinema" and criticize how "experimental practice is stifled by fear of risk-taking." But it's hard not to think that in an era of endless media franchises, they might be just another nostalgia-driven reboot. ⚜



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