The Future Is In Print

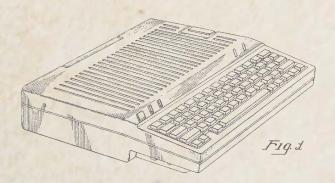# CURRENT AFFAIRS

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VOL. 2, ISSUE 3

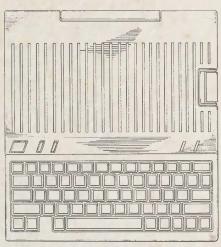MAY/JUNE 2017

OUR SILICON VALLEY SPECIAL
WILL TECH BILLIONAIRES RUIN THE EARTH? THEY WILL.

All Things Current

That Which Is Not Fit To Print

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

WHAT MAKES AN AFFAIR CURRENT?

It has been observed, by more than one party, and not always nefariously, that there is a certain dishonesty to this magazine. People feel as if a bait-and-switch has been performed, that the wool has, so to speak, been pulled. An implicit promise is made and then broken: we tell our readers the affairs to be found within each edition of our humble periodical will be those of the "current" variety. Then, when the jaunty reader gets her magazine home, sprawls upon her chaise longue, and opens our pages, she finds herself betrayed. "These affairs," she remarks with an air of frustration and melancholy, "are not very current at all. In fact, some of them are downright outmoded by now. Who needs stories about bishops and willows in the age of the motorcar? Do they not know that nothing is mimeographed anymore, that today we have *apps* to perform all our bodily functions in our stead? What kind of un-current non-affairs am I being subjected to and why?" Ladies and gentleman, if we have heard this complaint once we have heard it several times. Thus: let us define briefly what constitutes an affair of the current variety, so that all future gripes may safely be deemed illegitimate. An affair becomes current upon being mentioned within the pages of magazines devoted to the currency of affairs. There is no other reasonable standard by which to evaluate the question. Readers are therefore deeply misguided in asking us why the affairs in our magazine appear to be less than current. The affairs are current by definition; if they were not current, they would not be appearing in a magazine called *Current Affairs*. The matter is simple and the critics are fools.

NEW ADDRESS FOR DEATH THREATS

Due to renovations presently being completed at the Current Affairs Building in the Central Business District of New Orleans, as well as a mandatory annual Animal Control inspection and fumigation, the day-to-day operations of *Current Affairs* (the magazine) will be temporarily housed at a new address, listed below the editorial masthead on the rightward page. Please direct all threatening comments and scrawled abuse to this new address. Death threats sent to the former location will not receive a response.

WHO ARE OUR ARTISTS?
THESE ARE OUR ARTISTS

Cover: Pawel Kuczynski

"Silicon Valley Won't Save You": Nick Sirotich

"A Repellent Musk": Eli Valley

"Safari 2045": Brianna Rennix

"Inevitably 2045": Shawn Vulliez

"Robot Barons": Pranas T. Naujokaitis

"Silicon Princes": Kevin Alvir

"Disposable Puppies": Mike Freiheit

"Drone On The Beat": Pranas T. Naujokaitis
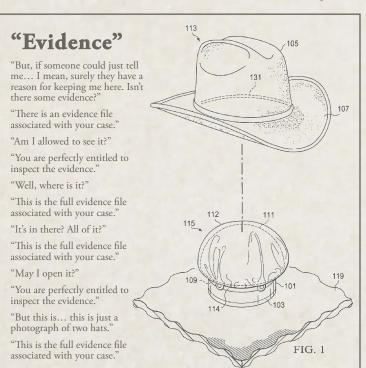
"Ivan Gets A Makeover": Tyler Rubenfeld

"Apocalyptic Affairs": Mike Freiheit

"Evidence"

"But, if someone could just tell me… I mean, surely they have a reason for keeping me here. Isn't there some evidence?"

"There is an evidence file associated with your case."

"Am I allowed to see it?"

"You are perfectly entitled to inspect the evidence."

"Well, where is it?"

"This is the full evidence file associated with your case."

"It's in there? All of it?"

"This is the full evidence file associated with your case."

"May I open it?"

"You are perfectly entitled to inspect the evidence."

"But this is… this is just a photograph of two hats."

"This is the full evidence file associated with your case."

FIG. 1

KINDLY STOP SENDING LETTERS TELLING US WE SHOULD BE ASHAMED OF OURSELVES.

Ordinarily, this portion of the magazine is where our so-called "Letters to the Editor" section would appear. The "Letters" division, a fan favourite since *Current Affairs*' founding, has long been an intellectual haven, a sanctuary of the sapiosexual, a place for Great Ideas and Big Thoughts. Readers have discussed everything from the finer points of Lionel Trilling's early correspondence to the virtues of Lin-Manuel Miranda as latter-day Bard. In short, there is a reason why so many Washington cocktail evenings both begin and end with the question "Did you see Professor X's letter in the new *Current Affairs*?" Professor X will inevitably be some prominent person of extraordinary learning and ability, and she will inevitably have posited some fascinating new theory of early American treaty jurisprudence or hermeneutical calliope. And whatever we may think of Professor X's conclusions (they are undoubtedly incomplete), each of our guests is sure to murmur approvingly at her fanatical devotion to the pursuit of truth at all costs, even to the extent of nobly sacrificing intelligibility and common sense. All of this is by way of saying that we (the staff and stafflings of *Current Affairs*) understand why the reader may have come to expect a new installment of "Letters" in this space. And nobody appreciates more than we (the aforesaid staff) just what a disappointment it must be to learn the following: there is to be no "Letters" section this month. However, our reasons are persuasive: each and every one of the letters submitted this month was a vulgar denouncement, to the general effect that *Current Affairs* should be ashamed of itself. We consider such matter unfit for serious publication, and unlikely to provoke or induce the kind of robust scholarly discourse toward which we intend to prod our readers. Readers must understand that it is incumbent upon our editorial staff to uphold the scrupulous editorial standards that allow us to produce such highly-praised content as "The Hamilton Musical: Why It Sucks" and "Vox.com: Why Everyone Who Writes For It Is Stupid." Readers who appreciate such gems will surely understand our position. Furthermore, it is possibly worth adding that a magazine is incapable of feeling shame, as it is an inanimate piece of matter, and as such, demands for it to do so are irrational and bizarre.

NOBODY HAS EVER LOVED YOU LIKE CURRENT AFFAIRS WILL LOVE YOU

Love, poets tell us, is a bit of a sticky wicket sometimes. You never quite know when you're in love, and the next thing you know, you've fallen out of it, and the one you once loved is sending damaging and slanderous letters to the Tenure Committee about your fitness to serve as a Lecturer in Social Theory at a mid-sized college in the Pacific Northwest. Ah, such a fickle thing love is! But mark one thing and mark it well: whatever happens to you, whatever rancid sewage this unkind world chances to douse upon your doorstep, *Current Affairs* will never stop loving you. You are the apple of our eye, the cherry on our crumbcake, the mustard stain on our lapel. We could no more live without you than we could live without the large sums of money you have paid our corporation in exchange for a monthly subscription. The one fact about love that everybody who has experienced it can agree on is that its nature is incapable of being captured in mere feeble human words. Love is like pornography, you know it when you accidentally display it in public. All we know, dear reader, is that we love you, and we hope you love us too. Please renew your subscription.

> *Correction:* Due to a regrettable incident in the typesetting chamber, in a recent edition, a punctuation mark intended to be printed as a question mark was instead printed as an exclamation point. This unfortunate misprint distorted the entire meaning of the passage in which it occurred, and led some readers to the belief that the article's author endorses a particular obscene cultural practice. The author wishes it to be known that he or she endorses no such thing. There are, of course, few excuses for a libel of this kind, and the bosom of our editorial staff swells with regret.

OUR SILICON

VALLEY SPECIAL

SILICON VALLEY WON'T SAVE YOU

Back in March 2016, around the time that it became clear that Donald Trump was going to be the Republican nominee for president, the *New York Times* asked a fairly simple question of the Silicon Valley-backed startup Juicero: *what is it?*

No one could really say. Founder Doug Evans, who compared himself to Steve Jobs, had raised $118 million in funding from Silicon Valley venture capital firms such as Google Ventures and Artis Ventures (and even the Campbell Soup Company). "It's the most complicated business that I've ever funded," one Google Ventures partner said. "It's software. It's consumer electronics. It's produce and packaging."

The concept of the Juicero turned out to be this: you buy a $699 (later knocked down to $400) Wi-Fi connected juicer called the Juicero Press—which Evans said could create three to four tons of pressure, enough "to lift two Teslas." Then you subscribe to a delivery service for the juice itself, which comes in little pouches. (Only owners of the Press can buy the pouches, which were to cost around $5 to $8 each.) Lock the pouches into the Press, hit a button, and the juice is squeezed out. It was marketed as the Keurig for juice.

Yet the Juicero had a hilarious design flaw. Reporters from *Bloomberg News* discovered that there was a far more efficient way, using a somewhat older form of technology, to squeeze the juice out of the bags than by using the $400 press: with a pair of human hands. Squeeze the bag, the juice goes into the glass, no Juicero needed. The whole elaborate apparatus was an utterly useless hi-tech substitute for something that people could already do.

In that sense, the Juicero was a perfect encapsulation of the tech industry as a whole. Stuff nobody needs, at prices nobody should pay, invented by "visionaries" who think they're Steve Jobs and pretend to be revolutionizing an industry while actually just finding new ways of robbing and tricking people.

Yet perhaps we could laugh a bit more at the Juicero if the worldview that made it was inconsequential. Lately, however, Silicon Valley has begun threatening to export its values to our political system. Leaders of the industry like Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg and Mark Cuban are now publicly entertaining the idea of running for president, Google is introducing its products into schools around the world, and billionaires like Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates are plotting their own unaccountable social experiments under the banner of philanthropy. As David Callahan writes in the *New York Times*, while government programs stagnate or diminish under Republican rule, ultra-rich donors

BY JULIANNE TVETEN & PAUL BLEST

"will increasingly slide into the driver's seat of public life," appropriating government functions but without any actual accountability.

The increasing power of Silicon Valley tech billionaires means the increasing influence of a political philosophy that would be catastrophic for ordinary people, giving them less and less control over their workplaces, schools, and government, while funneling wealth upward to further enrich a tiny minority of people at the top. But, like the Juicero, proposals that would only serve to bilk people of their money for nothing in return will come disguised beneath a thick layer of vacuous, dishonest hype.

To SEE WHY SILICON VALLEY policy-making would be so insidious, we should look at a plan that seems, on the surface, like one of its *most* progressive ideas: the tech community's recent embrace of the "Universal Basic Income" (UBI). The idea of a UBI is that all people should be guaranteed a baseline income from the government, which would ensure that they can subsist and that nobody would be in dire poverty. It would be a truly universal guarantee, in that there would be no requirements for receiving it. The idea has long been a favorite of the left, since it would ensure the downward redistribution of wealth, based on criteria of need rather than "merit."

But even though the UBI has often seemed like a utopian leftist pipe dream, in recent years it has picked up support in an unexpected place: Silicon Valley. A number of tech entrepreneurs have begun to publicly endorse it. Mark Zuckerberg has publicly signed on. And Y Combinator, the most prestigious and obnoxious of the Silicon Valley startup incubators, announced it would launch a local universal basic-income pilot program, giving monthly disbursements of $1,000 to $2,000 to 100 families throughout Oakland and seeing what happens after six months or a year.

That Silicon Valley—home of the callous libertarian billionaire—has come to embrace what's traditionally viewed as a principle of leftist origin may seem contradictory. Why would a hotbed of private enterprise suddenly latch onto something that sounds an awful lot like socialism?

The answer lies in the concept's malleability; there are many kinds of "UBI," and the socialist UBI and the Silicon Valley UBI are not one and the same. One of them is an attempt to create a world of equality and prosperity for all. The other is an attempt to offer bare subsistence as a replacement for government programs, while leaving a fundamentally unequal economic and power structure fully in place.

Silicon Valley's interest in basic income actually isn't new. For years, concern over the effect of artificial intelligence and robotics on employment has led tech magnates to contemplate similar proposals. Dot-com bubble multimillionaire Marshall Brain envisioned a corporate-friendly UBI framework in his 2003 online novella *Manna*. In the story, an American man is ousted from his newly automated fast-food job; he soon finds refuge in a basic-income scheme in which robots are responsible for labor and manufacturing. Said scheme is the product of private enterprise: the benefactor is a startup founder in the Australian outback, and the man's ticket to prosperity is actually in the stock his father bought in the company years prior.

In a TED Talk from February of 2013, Andrew McAfee, co-director of the MIT Initiative on Digital Economy, argued that the escalating sophistication of automation had ushered in "the new machine age": an era of prosperity and abundance, but also one in which "technological unemployment is at hand." A basic income, he suggested, would help to financially stabilize those affected. The theory is "associated with the extreme Left wing," McAfee conceded in front of a tripartite projection of Marx, Lenin, and Castro. Nevertheless, McAfee offered his audience a neoliberal salve: the UBI had also been espoused by "those frothing-at-the-mouth socialists Friedrich Hayek, Richard Nixon, and Milton Friedman."

Certainly, technologists understand that the software they develop is steadily rendering low-wage human workers obsolescent; robots are already visibly supplanting grocery clerks, fast-food workers, customer-service agents, and soon enough, professional drivers. With a monthly allotment of funds, however, those economically marginalized by Silicon Valley can regain lost income, the logic goes. Plus, if people who've lost their jobs to software receive compensation, the industry won't seem quite so guilty of robbing them of their livelihood at breakneck speed. At once, universal basic income permits the advancement, proliferation, and profit potential of automation while absolving the industry of its culpability for stripping people of their jobs.

MUCH OF THE APPEAL OF A UBI TO SILICON VALLEY IS THAT it is "anti-bureaucratic" and "streamlined," and it should be no surprise to find out that UBI proponents in tech intend to fund it by gutting the public sector. Chris Hawkins, an investor who made his money building software to automate work, told *Vice* in 2015 that he wanted to "shut down government programs as you fund redistribution." "The cost has to come from somewhere, and I think the most logical place to take it from is government-provided services," he added. On his venture-capital firm's website, Hawkins has plumbed federal-spending data, hypothesizing that "because our current social spending programs cost 11.4%, and Basic Income would be expected to cost 7.7%, we expect to save 3.7% of GDP by switching to Basic Income." (That is, the federal government could spend 3.7 percent less annually on the poor.)

Netscape creator and venture capitalist Marc Andreessen, who deems the notion of basic income "a very interesting idea," sympathizes with Hawkins' proposition. In 2014, he told *New York* magazine, "We have very high tax rates. We generate enormous amounts of tax revenue, and we have a very big safety net. There are 15 national nutrition-assistance programs in the U.S. right now. Not one. Fifteen." In the same interview, Andreessen spoke glowingly of the libertarian bent on UBI and its intent to "forget having that giant government machine," i.e. the UBI would supplant public housing, food stamps, and Medicare. *Bell Curve* author Charles Murray has issued UBI proposals on similar lines: get rid of all social programs, and give people a check instead.

That check may well fall short of the value conferred by those social programs, and it's unlikely to give people much of a life beyond bare subsistence. $12,000, the annual amount offered in the Y Combinator program, is a hair below the federal poverty level for an individual (which, as of 2017, is $12,060). Most people would therefore need to seek some other kind of supplemental employment, even as the work available continue to dry up thanks to automation. According to the Center for Global Policy Solutions, 93 percent of professional drivers lack a college degree; as they lose their jobs, they may need to turn to other low-wage work, which they'll eventually lose to software. In fact, workers may not even see much of the benefit of their UBI check: if their new gains are simply passed on to landlords and merchants through higher rent and prices, the benefits will be entirely illusory, even as people appear to be receiving an enormous handout. (Plus, if history has told us anything, it's that private employers like Uber and Walmart will jump at any opportunity to further exploit workers. The very existence of a UBI could be used as a pass to slash wages.)

A UBI remains a desirable prospect, if it is introduced in pursuit of the right objectives. But if any sort of basic income is to be instituted, it cannot be at the expense of other forms of governmental assistance; that would just perpetuate or worsen the status quo. Under current proposals, the UBI wouldn't even cover a year's healthcare and housing costs. Any UBI proposal must supplement improved versions of existing social services, including a robust single-payer healthcare system. Furthermore, we might consider a "progressive basic income" (PBI) instead, which does not pay all people the same amount, but pays them in proportion to their financial need, with the poorest receiving the most.

As proposed Silicon Valley's futurocapitalists, basic income isn't an exercise in expanding our freedom to pursue fulfillment; it's a way to perpetuate exploitative work. Silicon Valley's first priority is simple: to accumulate capital. In proposing a UBI, the tech industry has simply found another way to convince people it is "changing the world" and doing good, without proposing anything that would threaten the wealth and power of Silicon Valley itself. This is why the tech industry's influence needs to be halted; none of its proposals for making the world better will come at the industry's own expense, meaning that none of it will address the economic problems exacerbated by the industry. A Silicon Valley economy is one with razed social protections, constant anxiety over the potential loss of your job, and a gaping divide between rich and poor.

One shouldn't underestimate the social harm done by tech capitalism. It's a key contributor to the precariousness faced by workers across the economy. Ride- and home-sharing services like Uber and Airbnb employ and exploit "contractors" who, in a better economic environment for the working class, might not have chosen to open up their personal spaces to complete strangers. Companies like Facebook and Google own users' data and can still sell it to advertisers, sometimes continuing to do so even after the user shuts down their account. It's an industry that runs roughshod over municipal governments, avoids paying taxes, and is hostile to any attempt at unionizing its workplaces.

Tech's attempts to undermine the labor movement have been present for decades. "Remaining non-union is an essential for survival for most of our companies," Intel co-founder Robert Noyce said way back in 1963. "If we had the work rules that unionized companies have, we'd all go out of business." Fifty-four years later, the tech giants have heeded his advice; in one of the few actual concerted efforts in the industry to organize, IBM held off unionization for seventeen years before Alliance@IBM and the Communications Workers of America "suspended" their organizing efforts in January 2016.

No wonder, then, that the tech industry has donated significant amounts to Republicans who promise to keep pushing anti-worker and pro-boardroom policies. A 2016 analysis by the Institute for Southern Studies found that businesses whose CEOs and heads had signed a letter denouncing North Carolina's discriminatory "bathroom bill"— Facebook, Google, Yahoo, and eBay, to name a few — dumped an enormous amount of money into the Republican Governors Association and Republican State Leadership Committee, two federal PACs tasked with getting Republicans elected at the state and local level.

There's an obvious need for tech workers—and, it goes without saying, the rest of the working class—to build power. That's true even among higher-paid engineers and developers, who are ruthlessly overworked with little input into how their companies are run. There are some glimmers of hope on this front (in 2015, the Seattle City Council unanimously passed a law allowing Lyft and Uber drivers to unionize, though Uber has sued), but we know for sure that the only way to improve the labor movement's prospects is by fighting Silicon Valley rather than empowering it.

A ND LATELY, IT SEEMS THAT FORMAL POLITICAL POWER is just what Silicon Valley might be seeking next. Mark Zuckerberg has begun to display all the signs that he is running for president. In December, Zuckerberg—a longtime atheist—suddenly declared that "religion is very important." Zuckerberg also embarked on a fifty-state tour to meet "Facebook users"—i.e., voters— all across the country. Along with Zuckerberg, speculation has surrounded the political ambitions of Mark Cuban, the Dallas Mavericks owner and billionaire. When *Business Insider* asked Cuban in February if he was running for president in 2020, Cuban responded with an ominous "we will see." A

month later, he told the *Washington Post*: "Sometimes you got to do what you got to do."

It's not hard to see why people like Zuckerberg and Cuban think they can run the country; a much dumber billionaire is already doing so. And if they run on a Bloombergstyle "I'm above left-right politics" pitch, people may even be tempted to think they'd do a good job.

B UT THIS WOULD BE A MISTAKE. AMERICANS MUST end their love affair with captains of industry who promise to "run the country like a business." (Or, like France's Emanuel Macron promised, to run a country "like a start-up.") "Business experience" does not make for competence, as Donald Trump and the Juicero reveal to us equally well. And running a government like a business means sacrificing people's well-being for the enrichment of the few who run the show. This is, after all, what business does, and no amount of upbeat Bay Area jargon about innovation should ever disguise that. A Juicero presidency will disrupt nothing except public schools and civil rights laws, and only serves to more directly represent the interests of the most moneyed and powerful. As the dishonest Silicon Valley pitch for a UBI shows, the tech industry can't be entrusted wi=th workers' well-being.

Instead, what we need is a real adjustment of power: to build a political force of blue and white collar workers that stands up in the face of injustice and demands real democratic control of institutions and substantive equality, not just scraps to subsist on as our way of life crumbles. We need the power to make sure everyone lands as safely as the wealthy and powerful do when they fail (say, by vomiting money into a useless $400 juicer). Silicon Valley's snake oil will not save us. The only way to truly disrupt power is by destroying the fancy juicer and squeezing the bag ourselves. ❖

When your self-driving car decides to kill you...

you'll need insurance.

We value your life.
But your car doesn't
necessarily feel the same way.

Whether it's four elderly ladies carrying their shopping or two baby Einsteins that have wandered into the road, sooner or later your GPS' on-board morality algorithm will determine that the lives of others outweigh the value of your own. And when the inevitable happens, you'll want to make sure your family receives mathematically optimal financial compensation for your life.

EFFICINSURANCE
insuring the maximally efficient allocation of misery

a repellent
MUSK

by Sam Kriss

S OONER OR LATER, ELON MUSK AND PETER THIEL will go to war. If you know your origin myths—Romulus and Remus, Cain and Abel, Simon and Garfunkel—you know that when two men create something as monumental as PayPal together, one of them must ultimately attempt to destroy the other. If you know your superhero films, you know that none of our cities are safe.

Until recently, all of us thought we knew which side of this impending duel to support. After all, isn't Peter Thiel a real-life comic-book supervillain? He spoke at the RNC; he peddles his "Palantir Gotham" software to a sinister surveillance state; he famously believes that being routinely injected with the blood of young people might extend his lifespan. The terrifying culmination of this diabolical trajectory is all too easy to imagine. Peter Thiel clanks menacingly through what used to be your neighborhood, his weaponized suit of armor powered by the suffering of a dozen bawling infants, impaled on their blood-transfusion needles. Death rays blaze forth from his visor, incinerating the offices of every publication that's ever said a bad word about him, boiling alive hapless whales in the corpse-clogged oceans. Are we finally doomed?

But Elon's armies are on their way. Decked out in a glossy techno-utopian white, they are zipping to the rescue through a secret network of underground hyperloops. They are streaming in from a thousand thriving offworld colonies in outer space. His self-driving tanks are powered by autumn leaves and gratitude. We can rest easy: Elon Musk will save the world. We know this,

because saving the world is all Elon Musk ever talks about.

There's no escaping the Elon Myth. People who work in Tesla showrooms say his name—his first name, of course—with the kind of quaking reverence usually reserved for despots and porn stars. Have you met Elon? I met Elon once. He shook my hand. Stick with the company, and it might happen to you too.

Everything Elon does is intended to safeguard the human species from peril. His automated cars will save us from being turned into dipping sauce on the freeways, and his gigafactories and home solar panels will pull us back from the brink of a climate change apocalypse. And if that whole plan doesn't work, he wants to take us to Mars, to spread humanity out across the galaxy so the destruction of one little planet won't seal our fate. Most people are weak, venal, and stupid; we don't even think about the future. Not the visionary Elon Musk. It takes great men to change everyone's life for the better, but Elon Musk might just be that man.

Newspapers and online publications report breathlessly on his latest big concept or little observation. Elon Musk declares that reality is a simulation. Elon Musk declares that humans must merge with machines. Elon Musk declares that AIs are the biggest existential threat to our species. All these groundbreaking ideas aren't new, exactly—by and large, they tend to be the plots of action-scifi films from the 1990s. His next big announcement will probably be "robots from the future could be walking among us," or "condemned prisoners will someday be forced to fight to the death on live TV."

Meanwhile his strange sayings and comments are relentlessly

compiled and regurgitated, showing how idiocy can become aphorism when it comes from the mouth of a billionaire. On women: "I need to find a girlfriend. That's why I need to carve out just a little more time. I think maybe even another five to 10—how much time does a woman want a week? Maybe 10 hours? I don't know." To an employee who missed a company event to be present for the birth of his child: "That is no excuse. I am extremely disappointed. You need to figure out where your priorities are. We're changing the world and changing history, and you either commit or you don't." To a perfect stranger: "I think a lot about electric cars. Do you think about electric cars?" On nutrition: "If there was a way that I could not eat, so I could work more, I would not eat. I wish there were a way to get nutrients without sitting down for a meal."

These statements are all a way of—let's be honest—showing off. They're the kinds of things a smart kid says to make sure you realize that he is not like other people. As a child, Elon Musk spent ten hours daily reading books. He dropped out of a PhD program after only two days. This world isn't big enough to contain him. His ways—he is at pains to inform us—are not our ways, nor are his thoughts our thoughts. One part office pedant, one part eternal shaman, one part God.

M USK ISN'T THE ONLY PERSON playing this game; he's just the best at it. Silicon Valley thrives on a kind of corporate Stakhanovism: every CEO and every annoying app developer claims to sleep two hours a night, or for twelve ten-minute naps spread evenly throughout the day. Everyone is heroically resistant to sex, culture, and friendship. Everyone treats their employees with the magnificent brutality of a cartoon prison guard. Everyone is trying to be a world-historical superman, and they're all following the exact same playbook.

Examined more closely, these painstakingly-crafted Silicon Valley personas are little more than salesperson patter. Power always pretends to be something grander than it is. Pharaohs claimed to be the sun-god given human flesh, the bringer of the floods and the architects of every daybreak. In fact, they were petty tyrants, degenerated through successive generations of incest. Feudal lords pretended to be divinely appointed protectors of their loyal but non-consanguineous subjects. In fact, they were just landlords, as miserable and shameless as your own. Armies pretend to spread freedom while spreading death, employers claim to be creating jobs while creaming off surplus value. Elon Musk pretends to be sending humanity to Mars and breaking through the prison of reality itself. What does he actually do?

In a 2016 letter to its partners, the hedge fund Greenlight Capital cast some doubts on Musk's humanity-saving missions. The Mars stuff, the letter's authors posited, had an obvious business function: "Elon Musk's ability to spin a yarn and keep a story going seems to mesmerize his investors, blinding them to the challenges the company is facing." Musk, of course, claims that he has only sought to become fabulously wealthy for lofty and disinterested reasons. "I really don't have any other motivation for personally accumulating assets," he once said, in a characteristically impressive pronouncement, "except to make the biggest contribution I can to making life multi-planetary." But this claim is, of course, absurd. After all, Elon Musk doesn't just want to send a band of loners and lunatics off to die on a barren world—he's planning to charge them two hundred thousand dollars apiece for the pleasure. Whatever private god-king fantasies he might be entertaining, the main reason Musk is in the game of capitalism is because he's a capitalist.

When it comes down to it, Elon Musk's real business isn't in utopian worldbuilding, but in good old-fashioned government contracting. He might be selling bigger and more complex goods, but the basics of his operation are no different from whoever supplies corn starch to the Congress canteen or tent-pegs for American military bases abroad. SpaceX, Musk's pioneering private spaceflight company, depends for its profits on NASA contracts. Tesla makes a significant chunk of its income from the sale of green credits to other, more pollution-producing industrial concerns. A solar panel factory in Buffalo, NY was built by the state at the cost of $750m; Musk leases it for a dollar a year. All in all, he's received nearly $6 billion in subsidies and support from the government. Not only is Musk is draining the public purse, but he's making use of technologies that already exist: the impetus for their development isn't coming from the mysterious deeps of his unique and inscrutable intellect. Dozens of other companies, after all, get government contracts for space flight, electric cars, or renewable energy. All Elon Musk has done is seek out the maximum potential market share in a narrow band of state contracts, and then present his profit-seeking as a grand futuristic vision.

This is why Elon Musk was perfectly comfortable greasing himself all over Donald Trump – after all, without Trump onside, he wouldn't have a company. In December last year, Elon Musk was invited to join President-Elect Trump's Strategic and Policy Forum. After years of talking about saving us all from the incoming doom, Musk went to the incoming doom's castle to act as its unpaid advisor. A few days after the inauguration, he signed up to the new administration's Manufacturing Jobs Initiative. Until eventually breaking from Trump over climate change (not, however, racism or neo-feudal totalitarianism), Musk was staking out a role for himself as the tech world's envoy to the Trump administration, vigorously defending his role as just another part in his vast scheme to redeem us all.

It's natural that Trump and Musk would have gotten along so well together. Each maintains the delusion that the world would be better off if they were calling all the shots. Here it's instructive to look at Musk's zeal for self-driving cars. In a public response to an incident in May last year, when a Tesla driver was killed watching Harry Potter while his car happily ploughed itself head-first into a truck. Musk urged reporters to "think carefully" about how they framed the incident: "because if, in writing some article that's negative, you effectively dissuade people from using an autonomous vehicle, you're killing people."
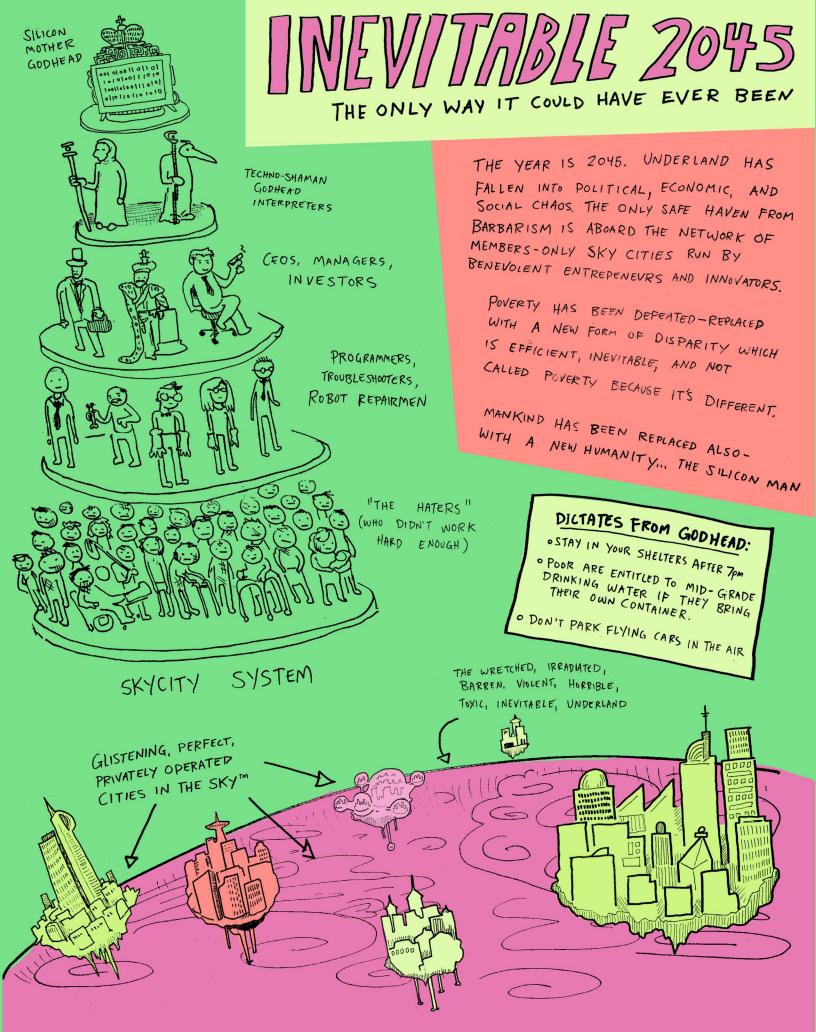
Musk isn't entirely wrong: self-driving cars really might be safer than what we have now, which is millions of tons of metal piloted at high speeds by people who generally enter a fugue state of psychotic rage as soon as their hands touch the steering wheel. Unlike people, who break down constantly

for any number of reasons, the self-driving car just works. It's the familiar tech-industrial fantasy of an entirely autonomous world in which human frailty is no longer allowed to impede maximum efficiency.
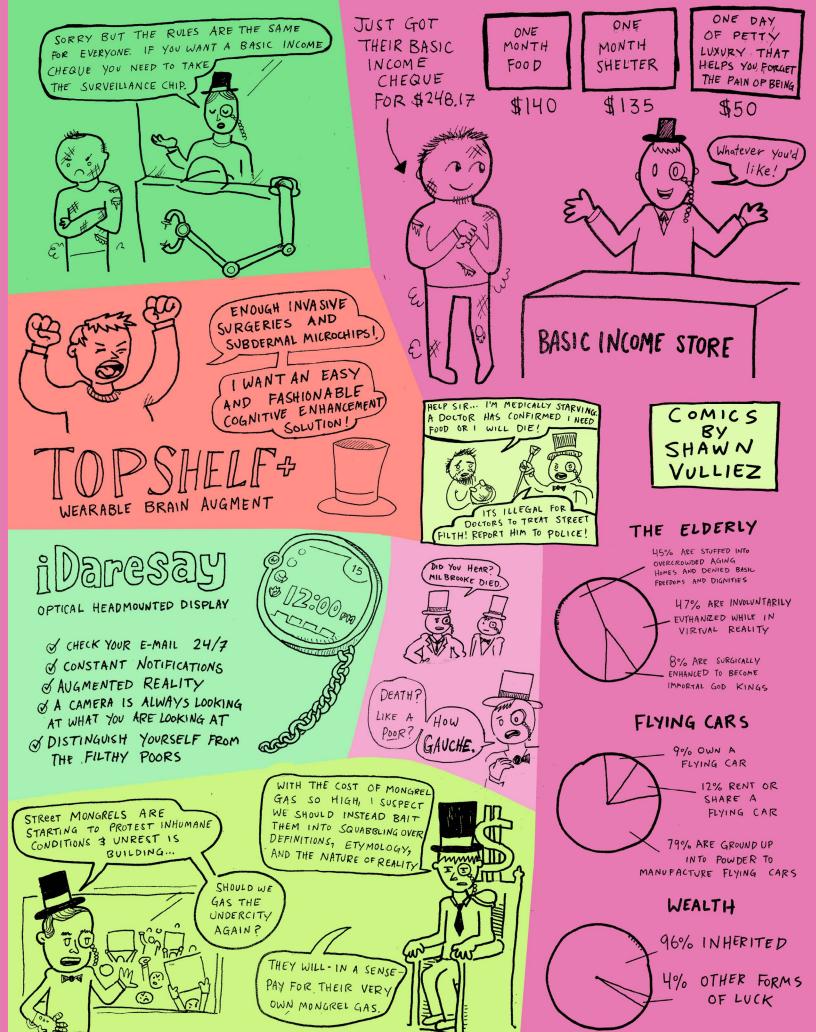
But this world, taken to its logical extreme, is a world in which we are not free. A police state, after all, may be safer and better-organized than a democratic one, but these benefits come at the cost of individuals' ability to be master of their own choices.
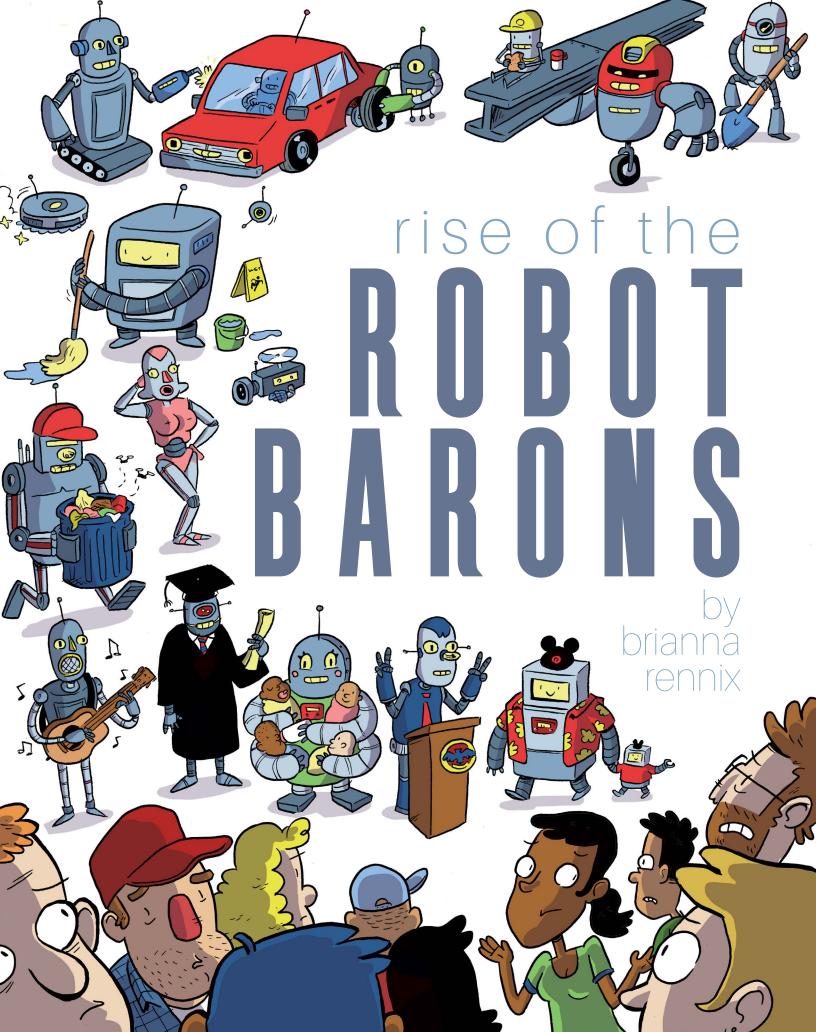
THE TERM "SELF-DRIVING CAR" SEEMS TO IMPLY A kind of independence; your car makes its own way across cities and deserts while you relax, pleasantly drunk, in the back seat. But self-driving cars also represent a massive centralization of the decision-making process. The software that the cars run on will only ever be proprietary; your car is run from a central server, and you lease its decision-making abilities for a fee. Mercedes announced last year that its own self-driving cars will always prioritize the safety of the driver, even if it means splattering a crowd of pedestrians into the nearest wall. (Thanks to the beneficent powers of the market, all other manufacturers will likely have to follow suit—who's going to choose to buy the car that might delib-

erately kill you to save someone you don't even know?) Google's self-driving car, meanwhile, will dutifully pull itself over at a signal from the cops. Without any ability to assume manual control of the car at moments of high significance, passengers in self-driving cars will also be passive subjects of a manufacturer's pre-programmed ethical determinations. In Elon Musk's vision of a self-driving future, fewer people might die, but the people who do will die because he ordained it.

These days, reactionaries everywhere are promising to give control back to the people, through a government that responds exactly to your own half-conscious prejudices. Likewise, Elon Musk promises a world in which you can do whatever you want, without ever needing to think about how you want to do it. He'll see to everything. He will build the Mars colonies for us, and the rockets to get there, and the fuel cells to power them. All anyone else needs to is believe in his myth, and buy what he gives us. But it's a charade. What Elon Musk wants is what every viperous capitalist has wanted since civilizations' earliest days: money, power, and deference. Musk is only piggybacking on the doom or redemption of the species, swept along into the void that's opening up in front of us, just like everyone else. Whatever it might look like, Elon Musk does not own the future. It's ours.❖

FUN FOR THE ENTIRE REMAINING FAMILY!

SEE EVERY ANIMAL WE HAVE LEFT!

SAFARI 2045

From the *periplaneta americana* to the *rattus norvegicus*, you'll have incredible up-close encounters with the full range of species that remains upon our desiccated planet!

ROYAL SOCIETY FOR DYSTOPIAN GEOGRAPHICAL EXPEDITIONING

FEATURING:

⬨ AMPHIBIOUS RODENTS!

⬨ TROPICAL INSECTS!

⬨ THAT'S IT!

INEVITABLE 2045
THE ONLY WAY IT COULD HAVE EVER BEEN

SILICON MOTHER GODHEAD

TECHNO-SHAMAN GODHEAD INTERPRETERS

CEOS, MANAGERS, INVESTORS

PROGRAMMERS, TROUBLESHOOTERS, ROBOT REPAIRMEN

"THE HATERS" (WHO DIDN'T WORK HARD ENOUGH)

SKYCITY SYSTEM

THE YEAR IS 2045. UNDERLAND HAS FALLEN INTO POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL CHAOS. THE ONLY SAFE HAVEN FROM BARBARISM IS ABOARD THE NETWORK OF MEMBERS-ONLY SKY CITIES RUN BY BENEVOLENT ENTREPENEURS AND INNOVATORS.

POVERTY HAS BEEN DEFEATED—REPLACED WITH A NEW FORM OF DISPARITY WHICH IS EFFICIENT, INEVITABLE, AND NOT CALLED POVERTY BECAUSE IT'S DIFFERENT.

MANKIND HAS BEEN REPLACED ALSO— WITH A NEW HUMANITY... THE SILICON MAN

DICTATES FROM GODHEAD:
- STAY IN YOUR SHELTERS AFTER 7PM
- POOR ARE ENTITLED TO MID-GRADE DRINKING WATER IF THEY BRING THEIR OWN CONTAINER.
- DON'T PARK FLYING CARS IN THE AIR

THE WRETCHED, IRRADIATED, BARREN, VIOLENT, HORRIBLE, TOXIC, INEVITABLE, UNDERLAND

GLISTENING, PERFECT, PRIVATELY OPERATED CITIES IN THE SKY™

SORRY BUT THE RULES ARE THE SAME FOR EVERYONE. IF YOU WANT A BASIC INCOME CHEQUE YOU NEED TO TAKE THE SURVEILLANCE CHIP.

JUST GOT THEIR BASIC INCOME CHEQUE FOR $248.17

ONE MONTH FOOD $140

ONE MONTH SHELTER $135

ONE DAY OF PETTY LUXURY THAT HELPS YOU FORGET THE PAIN OF BEING $50

Whatever you'd like!

BASIC INCOME STORE

ENOUGH INVASIVE SURGERIES AND SUBDERMAL MICROCHIPS!

I WANT AN EASY AND FASHIONABLE COGNITIVE ENHANCEMENT SOLUTION!

TOPSHELF+
WEARABLE BRAIN AUGMENT

HELP SIR... I'M MEDICALLY STARVING. A DOCTOR HAS CONFIRMED I NEED FOOD OR I WILL DIE!

ITS ILLEGAL FOR DOCTORS TO TREAT STREET FILTH! REPORT HIM TO POLICE!

COMICS BY SHAWN VULLIEZ

iDaresay
OPTICAL HEADMOUNTED DISPLAY

- ✓ CHECK YOUR E-MAIL 24/7
- ✓ CONSTANT NOTIFICATIONS
- ✓ AUGMENTED REALITY
- ✓ A CAMERA IS ALWAYS LOOKING AT WHAT YOU ARE LOOKING AT
- ✓ DISTINGUISH YOURSELF FROM THE FILTHY POORS

12:00 PM   15

DID YOU HEAR? MILBROOKE DIED.

DEATH? LIKE A POOR?

HOW GAUCHE.

THE ELDERLY

45% ARE STUFFED INTO OVERCROWDED AGING HOMES AND DENIED BASIC FREEDOMS AND DIGNITIES

47% ARE INVOLUNTARILY EUTHANIZED WHILE IN VIRTUAL REALITY

8% ARE SURGICALLY ENHANCED TO BECOME IMMORTAL GOD KINGS

FLYING CARS

9% OWN A FLYING CAR

12% RENT OR SHARE A FLYING CAR

79% ARE GROUND UP INTO POWDER TO MANUFACTURE FLYING CARS

WEALTH

96% INHERITED

4% OTHER FORMS OF LUCK

STREET MONGRELS ARE STARTING TO PROTEST INHUMANE CONDITIONS & UNREST IS BUILDING...

SHOULD WE GAS THE UNDERCITY AGAIN?

WITH THE COST OF MONGREL GAS SO HIGH, I SUSPECT WE SHOULD INSTEAD BAIT THEM INTO SQUABBLING OVER DEFINITIONS, ETYMOLOGY, AND THE NATURE OF REALITY

THEY WILL -IN A SENSE- PAY FOR THEIR VERY OWN MONGREL GAS.

rise of the ROBOT BARONS

by
brianna
rennix

W E' VE ALL HEARD IT A thousand times—*robots are coming for your job*. You may think you're safe, but you're not. Sooner or later, the robots will show up at your workplace and coldly order you to clear out your desk. Are you a paralegal? A Palo Alto company called Nextlaw Labs has developed an AI that can read documents and conduct legal research. Are you a Wall Street portfolio manager? A Cambridge-MIT startup called Kensho has written an algorithm that's much better at picking stocks than you are. Are you a fast food worker? A San Francisco company called Momentum Machines has invented a mechanized burger-flipper, which makes gourmet burgers at "affordable prices" that would be "impossible without culinary automation." All in all, Oxford University researchers have estimated that 47% of U.S. jobs, including "transportation and logistics occupations, together with the bulk of office and administrative support workers, and labour in production occupations," are at high risk of automation in the near future.

All right, fine, you think—I hated that job anyway. Let the robots have it! If my toaster oven wishes to draft legal briefs and manage stock portfolios in addition to its other work, I see no reason why I shouldn't permit it.

But soon the follow-up question dawns: how am I going to feed my family if I'm being outcompeted by robots in every field? As it is, the odds are rather stacked against us. If it's quicker to program a robot than to train a human, and if it's cheaper to maintain a robot than to pay a human, and if robots are even slightly more productive than humans, then the free market will ensure that most work is increasingly done by robots. The few individuals who own the robots will only need to share the profits of their enterprise with an increasingly small skeleton crew of employees. The rest of the population, meanwhile, will continue to depend on the goods and services produced by the robots, so they'll have very little bargaining-power on their side. Income inequality will balloon exponentially. All capital will gradually be absorbed by the robot-masters, and will be diverted to their weird pet projects, most of which revolve around trying to ensure that rich people will live forever, despite the fact that the mortality of the rich is one of the few consolations the rest of us have.

The robots are coming, ready to remake our world according to the specifications of a cabal of millennial asswipes and megalomaniacal billionaires. These are the people who are destined to become our feudal overlords in the Age of Robotics. The question is: is there any way to stop them?

T HERE ARE A FEW WAYS TO APPROACH THE PROBLEM OF A robot economy. One is to reject increased automation of labor as generally undesirable, because people need jobs and rob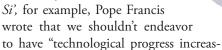ots are tricky devils. The 19th century had an unsuccessful but memorable tradition of anti-machine fervor, from the Luddite machine-breaking riots of the 1810s, to this magnificently sinister pronouncement by Samuel Butler in 1863:

"Our opinion is that war to the death should be instantly proclaimed against [machines]. Every machine of every sort should be destroyed by the well-wisher of his species. Let there be no exceptions made, no quarter shown; let us at once go back to the primeval condition of the race. If it be urged that this is impossible under the present condition of human affairs, this at once proves that the mischief is already done, that our servitude has commenced in good earnest, that we have raised a race of beings whom it is beyond our power to destroy, and that we are not only enslaved but are absolutely acquiescent in our bondage."

Some people, of course, might regard this whole "war to the death against anything more complicated than an abacus" proposal as extreme. But full-on Unabomber-style technophobia aside, there's an argument to be made that limits on automation ought to be established by regulation, in order to allow human beings to continue to work. This is not only because U.S. society, as currently constituted, makes livelihood contingent on employment, but also because work— so the argument goes—is generally a good thing for human beings. In his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si',* for example, Pope Francis wrote that we shouldn't endeavor to have "technological progress increasingly replace human work," as this outcome would, in his view, "be detrimental to humanity. Work is a necessity, part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development and personal fulfillment." This line of thought is also fairly common within labor movements, because it holds that all occupations are equal in dignity, that a construction worker is no less deserving of respect, and entitled to a decent living, than a software engineer. Even if you *could* automate all labor, you wouldn't want to, because human identity and psychological well-being are inextricably bound up in the work we do, and mechanization deprives people of the ability to contribute to their communities. The important thing is simply to make sure that workers are properly paid and protected.

On the other end of the spectrum, we have a competing theory that the more work can be done by machines, the better—all you need is some means of ensuring that most human beings are able to enjoy the benefits of machine labor, and then they'll be free to dispose of their time however they please, which is better than forcing people to have "jobs." Take, for example, Oscar Wilde's 1891 essay *The Soul of Man Under*

Socialism, which advocated vigorously for increased automation—partly for moral reasons, and partly because Wilde thought manual labor was kind of gross. "To sweep a slushy crossing for eight hours," he wrote, "is a *disgusting* occupation. To sweep it with mental, moral, or physical dignity seems to me to be impossible. To sweep it with joy would be appalling. Man is made for something better than disturbing dirt. All work of that kind should be done by a machine." In Wilde's view, humanity ought instead to spend its time "amusing itself, or enjoying cultivated leisure... or making beautiful things, or reading beautiful things, or simply contemplating the world with admiration and delight."

If one agrees with this framing of the problem, then our main goal is not to prevent automation, but to somehow separate work from livelihood, or at the very least from subsistence. One can imagine a world in which the Silicon Valleyites build useful robots, and the rest of us collect a Universal Basic Income from the government, allowing us to purchase the robot-created goods and services. This Universal Basic Income would presumably be derived from taxes; tax policy would thus determine whether the UBI was a robust redistributive mechanism or, say, a disproportionate subsidization of the poor by the somewhat less poor. Either way, most people wouldn't have to work for their daily bread, and, in that respect, would have greater autonomy over their day-to-day pursuits than in a human labor economy.

Both of these arguments, broadly sketched, make morally and psychologically compelling claims. On the pro-automation side, more machines mean that fewer humans will be condemned to devote their lives to soul-crushing and life-threatening occupations. There seems to me to be no morally admissible counterargument against this, especially given that these kinds of jobs fall almost exclusively to the most vulnerable and disempowered members of society. On the other hand, the idea that there should be, effectively, no truly contributive societal role for anybody who isn't, say, a scientist or an artist, seems deeply problematic. (And I think anybody who believes that all human beings will miraculously transform into scientists and artists as soon as they are Properly Educated is (a) probably wrong, and (b) greatly underestimating how fucking irritating that fictitious society would be to live in.) Work is integral to many people's sense of fulfilment and purpose, and a lot of us prefer to have that work structured, at least loosely, in the mode of a "job." Some might argue that paeans to the virtuousness of work are the result of corporate brainwashing by The Man, or are some kind of socially-entrained delusion arising from our nation's vestigial Protestantism. But I believe that this pro-work sentiment has much deeper roots. It is fundamentally about the wish for a particular vocation, which speaks to a simultaneous desire to take pleasure in one's own accomplishments, and for those accomplishments to contribute to some larger and more important good than individual satisfaction.

You can, of course, easily disagree with the pro-work argument, or believe that most people will still "work" meaningfully in a fully-automated society—they just won't have "jobs" whose terms are dictated by third parties. But even then, we will still have to contend with the additional problem that lack of direct human involvement in the nuts and bolts of society generates serious disparities in the distribution of political power. If an automated society can run itself, without input from most humans, then most humans are not going to have any impact whatsoever on decision-making processes—and they have little enough as it is. In a human labor economy, ordinary people could at least refuse to work, and thus imperil their bosses' operations. In a robot economy, ordinary people will not even have this option.

Our ultimate goal, then, is to establish a mixed system where most people are doing meaningful work, of a type they like doing; where work has social value, but no one will be ostracized or suffer serious deprivation if they choose to stop working; where all the work that's necessary to ensure the material sustenance of the population is continually being accomplished by some means; and where those means, insofar as they are automated, are not controlled by the corporate descendants (and/or the reanimated cryo-cadavers) of Peter Thiel, Elon Musk, and their ilk. Seems doable!

A S WE THINK ABOUT WHAT INCREASED AUTOMATION *ought* to look like, in an ideal world where the economy serves human needs, we should first disabuse ourselves of the idea that efficiency is an appropriate metric for assessing the value of an automated system. Sure, efficiency *can* be a good thing—no sane person wants an inefficient ambulance, for example—but it isn't a good in itself. (After all, an efficient self-disembowling machine doesn't thereby become a "good" self-disembowling machine.) In innumerable contexts, inefficient systems and unpredictable forces give our lives character, variety, and suspense. The ten-minute delay on your morning train, properly considered, is a surprise gift from the universe, being an irreproachable excuse to read an extra chapter of a new novel. Standing in line at the pharmacy is an opportunity to have a short conversation with a stranger, who may be going through a hard time, or who may have something interesting to tell you. The unqualified worship of efficiency is a pernicious kind of idolatry. Often, the real problem isn't that our world isn't efficient enough, but rather that we lack patience, humility, curiosity, and compassion: these are not failings in our external environments, but in ourselves.

Additionally, we can be sure that, left to themselves, Market Forces will prioritize efficiencies that generate profit over

efficiencies that really generate maximum good to humans. We currently see, for instance, a constant proliferation of labor-saving devices and services that are mostly purchased by fairly well-off people. This isn't to say that these products are always completely worthless—to the extent that a Roomba reduces an overworked single parent's unpaid labor around the home, for example, that might be quite a good thing—but in other respects, these minute improvements in efficiency (or perceived efficiency) generate diminished returns for the well-being of the human population, and usually only a very small percentage

like cleaning bedpans, or physically dangerous ones, like lifting heavy patients (nurses have a very high rate of back injury).

At the same time, the idea of *fully* automated elder care has troubling implications. There's no denying that caring for declining elders can be difficult and often unpleasant work; anybody who has spent time in medical facilities knows that nursing staffs are overworked, and that individual nurses can be incompetent and profoundly unsympathetic. One might well argue that a caregiver robot, while not perfect, is still better than an exhausted or outright hostile human caregiver; and thus, that

"AUTOMATION IS VERY UNLIKELY TO BE IMPLEMENTED IN ACCORDANCE WITH ABSTRACT MORAL PRINCIPLES..."

of it, to boot. The amount of energy that's put into building apps and appliances to replace existing things that already work reasonably well is surely a huge waste of ingenuity, in a world filled with pressing social problems that need many more hands on deck.

THINKING ABOUT WHICH KINDS OF JOBS AND systems really ought to be automated, however, can require complicated and nuanced assessments. Two possible baseline standards, for example, would be that robots should only do jobs at which they are equally good or better than humans, and/or that robots should only do jobs that are difficult, dangerous, or unfulfilling for humans. In some cases, these standards would be fairly straightforward to apply. A robot will likely never be able to write a novel to the same standard as a human writer, for example, so it doesn't make sense to try to replace novelists with louchely-attired cyborgs. On the other hand, robots could quite conceivably be designed to bake cakes, compose generic pop songs, and create inscrutable canvases for major contemporary art museums—but to the extent that humans enjoy being bakers, pop stars, and con artists, we shouldn't automate those jobs, either.

For certain professions, however, estimating the relative advantages of human labor versus robot labor is rather difficult by either of these metrics. For example, some commentators have predicted we'll see a marked increase in robot "caregivers" for the elderly. In many ways, this would be a wonderful development. For elders who have health and mobility impairments, but are otherwise mentally acute, having robots that can help you out of bed, steady you in the shower, and chauffeur you to your destinations might mean several more decades of independent living. Robots could make it much easier for people to care for their aging loved ones in their own homes, rather than putting them in some kind of facility. And within institutional settings like nursing homes, hospitals, and hospices, it would be an excellent thing to have robots that can do hygienic tasks,

the pros of substituting robots for humans across a wide array of caregiving tasks outweigh the cons. However, as a society that already marginalizes and warehouses the elderly—especially the elderly poor—we ought to feel queasy about consigning them to an existence where the little human interaction that remains to them is increasingly replaced by purpose-built machines. Aging can be a time of terrible loneliness and isolation: imagine the misery of a life where no fellow-human ever again touches you with affection, or even basic friendliness. The problem is not just that caring for elders is often difficult, but that the humans who currently do it are undervalued and underpaid, despite the fact that they bear the immense burden of buttressing our shaky social conscience. It would be a lot easier to manufacture caregiver robots than to improve working conditions for human caregivers, but a robot can't possibly substitute for a nurse who is actually kind, empathetic, and good at their job.

These sorts of concerns are common to most of the "caring" and educational professions, which are usually labor-intensive, time-consuming, poorly compensated, and insufficiently respected. Automating these jobs is an easy shortcut to meaningfully improving them. For example, people like Netflix CEO Reed Hastings think that "education software" is a reasonable alternative to a human-run classroom, despite the fact that the only real purpose of primary education, when it comes down to it, is to teach children about social interaction. (Do you remember *anything* substantive that you learned in school before, say, age 15? I sure don't.) And what job is more difficult than parenting? If a robot caregiver is cheaper than a nanny and more reliable than a babysitter, we'd be foolish to suppose that indifferent, career-focused, or otherwise overtasked parents won't readily choose to have robots mind their children for long periods of time. Automation may well be more cost-ef-

fective and easier to implement than better conditions for working parents, or government payouts that would allow people to be full-time parents to their small children, or healthier social attitudes generally about work-family balance. But with teaching and parenting, as with nursing, it's intuitively obvious that software and robots are in no sense truly equivalent to humans. Rather than automating these jobs, we should be thinking about how to materially improve conditions for people who work in them, with the aim of making their work easier where possible, and rewarding them appropriately for the aspects of their work that are irremediably difficult. Supplementing some aspects of human labor with automated labor can be part of this endeavor, but it can't be the whole solution.

Additionally, without better labor standards for human workers, determining which kinds of jobs humans *actually* don't want to do becomes rather tricky. Some jobs are perhaps miserable by their very nature, but others are miserable because the people who currently perform them lack benefits and protections. We may all have assumptions and biases here that are not necessarily instructive. We might often, like Oscar Wilde, think primarily of manual labor when we're imagining which jobs should be automated. Very likely there are some forms of manual labor so monotonous, painful, or unpleasant that nobody on earth would voluntarily choose to do them—we can certainly think of a few jobs, like mining, that are categorically and unconscionably dangerous for human workers. But it is also an undeniable fact that many people genuinely like physical labor. It's even possible that many more people like physical labor than are fully aware of it, due to the class-related prejudices associated with manual work—why on earth else do so many people who work white-collar jobs derive their entire sense of self-worth from running marathons or lifting weights or riding stationary bicycles in sweaty, rubber-scented rooms? Why do so many retirees take up gardening? Why do some lunatics regularly clean their houses as a form of relaxation? Clearly, physical labor can be very satisfying under the right circumstances. The point is, there are some jobs we might intuitively think are morally imperative to automate, because in their current forms, they are undeniably awful. But if we had more humane labor laws, and altered our societal expectations about the appropriate relationship between work and leisure, they might be jobs people actually liked. We know that

being a fruit-picker, for example, is an awful profession when you're working grueling hours, threatened with deportation, and exposed to dangerous pesticides—but it could conceivably be enjoyable work under better conditions.

Of course, in areas such as agriculture, there might be a separate imperative towards automation, if more efficient food production, distribution, and disposal had important implications for overall human health and well-being. Theoretically, if humans were simply not as good as automatons at these tasks, or if there weren't enough willing humans to do the job to a high standard, then automation might be morally justified. But there would still be value in having human workers built into these systems: we could imagine some kind of centralized food distribution system that is largely automated, but where willing human farmers build local food production capacity, as a bulwark against corruption or disaster in the centralized system. (It seems, in any case, like a real societal risk not to have enough people with practical subsistence-level skills in the population,

"IT'S IMPORTANT NOT TO BE BEGUILED BY SILICON VALLEY'S PURPORTEDLY HUMANITARIAN PLEDGES..."

as systems are always subject to failure.) In an ideal world, then, we wouldn't have robots replace humans in any job that can be turned into a job that a human actually *wants* to do, unless this increased efficiency would have quite substantial benefits for the general population, or for some vulnerable subpopulation. In this instance, however, the benefits of this increased efficiency would also have to be weighed against the inherent danger of an excess concentration of power in the owners of the automated systems. If it isn't possible for such a centralized system to be administered as a public utility, by accountable officials, automation might well not be worth the risk, and ought to be resisted.

WE THUS RETURN CONTINUALLY TO THE PROBLEM OF political power, which is a hard one: in real life, after all, automation is very unlikely to be implemented in accordance with abstract moral principles, and there's no clear path towards public ownership of important automated industries. To that end, our only means of controlling automation will likely be by establishing restrictions on it, while continuing to advocate for robust, ambitious labor reforms. Automation-specific policy goals might include things like human worker quotas (in industries where this would be sensible and humane), outright bans on certain kinds of automation (such as in caring

professions), and some form of universal basic income or equivalent social welfare scheme. Another conceivable tactic would be to impose a heavy tax on automation, calculated based on how many human workers would have been needed to perform equivalent work. This tax revenue could then be used to fund other jobs—in particular, the kinds of community-based and public interest jobs that are desperately needed, but that so-called "job creators" have never found it much worth their while to create.

It's important not to allow each other to be beguiled by Silicon Valley's purportedly humanitarian pledge to manufacture a world in which we never again have to sit in traffic, or take out our own garbage, or feel pain, or be bored, or get sick, or die. We can argue about whether such a world is desirable, but it's fairly obvious that it's not achievable anytime in the near future, and that, to the extent that it is achievable, it will be achievable chiefly by those who are already rich. And honestly, what good will it do them anyhow? Silicon Valley, after all, is populated by people who already have every imaginable material convenience at their fingertips: they inhabit a world that's pretty damn close to the one they're promising to build for us, and yet *they still aren't satisfied.* Mark Zuckerberg, whose net worth is $50 billion, wrote a letter to his newborn daughter in which he stated that "advancing human potential is about pushing the boundaries on how great a human life can be" and expressed his hope that his child could "learn and experience 100 times more than we do today" and "have access to every idea, person, and opportunity." This, when you stop to think about it for a second, is demented. What in God's name would it even feel like to experience "100 times more" than today's humans? Mightn't that actually turn out to be awful? Why do we have to have access to *every idea in the universe?* Hasn't existing social media wrecked people's nerves badly enough as it is? In any case, merely ensuring that every human has access to the most elementary building-blocks of happiness—food on the table, a roof over their head, work they enjoy, and people who love them—has already proved an insurmountable task for our species to date. Let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Meanwhile, other Silicon Valleyites' darker preoccupations with things like immortality serums, "uploading" their consciousnesses to the cloud, or creating island principalities on which to conduct experiments in governance, suggests that for these people—who are ultimately as frail, frightened, and discontented as the rest of us, for all their wealth and intelligence—human life as it currently exists is merely the raw material of something altogether better and longer and more intense that they imagine *could be.* It's hard to say which is worse, the kind of Silicon Valleyites with no social conscience, who create start-ups purely for accolades and cash, or the kind of Silicon Valleyites who want to use the entire planet as fodder for their personal spiritual journeys. I realize that I am a prematurely elderly curmudgeon, but *I don't trust these people, and neither should you.* There are aspects of an increasingly automated future that are deeply appealing. But if we can't have it on our terms, we had better turn it down.❖

QUIZ: AM I ROBOT?

1. Well, are you a robot?
a. This question is unclear. Please define the term "robot."
b. No.
c. It would certainly explain a lot!
d. Maybe.

2. What difference would it make if you were, anyway?
a. Until you explain the sense in which you're using the term "robot," I can't really answer the question. Arguably, humans are carbon-based automata functioning within the parameters of their genetic programming, so the distinction may be meaningless.
b. I would be very upset. It would destroy my entire sense of self.
c. Well, I mean, it depends. Like, is my entire childhood some kind of false memory implant? Was I placed with a human family as a decoy, or are my family members also robots? Do I have any cool robot powers? Is there a secret robot civilization, like the Wizarding World in Harry Potter? Do I still need to eat? Can I eat as much as I want?
d. Not much, probably.

3. When you lucid-dream, what does your dream-self usually do?
a. Rehearse my daily routine.
b. Explore elaborate dream-landscapes based on my childhood memories.
c. Attempt to get laid, am sexually rejected by my own dream-paramours, inevitably wake up having gotten absolutely nowhere with anyone.
d. Crash airplanes into the sea.

4. You are walking through the desert under a hot sun. You come across a tortoise flipped over on its back, its limbs struggling furiously in the air. What happens next?
a. You do not interfere with the course of nature, on principle.
b. You turn the tortoise onto its belly.
c. You take the tortoise home as a pet.
d. You're watching the tortoise, but you're not helping. Why aren't you helping?

5. Over lunch, a woman excitedly tells her best friend: "So, guess what? It turns out I'm pregnant!" Complete the dialogue with the most appropriate response.
a. "I hope you've thought seriously about the ethical implications of burdening a resource-strapped planet with further population."
b. "Congratulations!"
c. "Oh my God, there's a tiny, malformed fish-person pressing itself against your internal organs AS WE SPEAK."
d. "Are you scared?"

6. Do you find that you relate easily to other people?
a. Generally yes, though sometimes I find them a little slow.
b. Sometimes my feelings overwhelm me too much, but I think I'm pretty empathetic most of the time.
c. I know I probably come off a bit mad, but I like people well enough anyway.
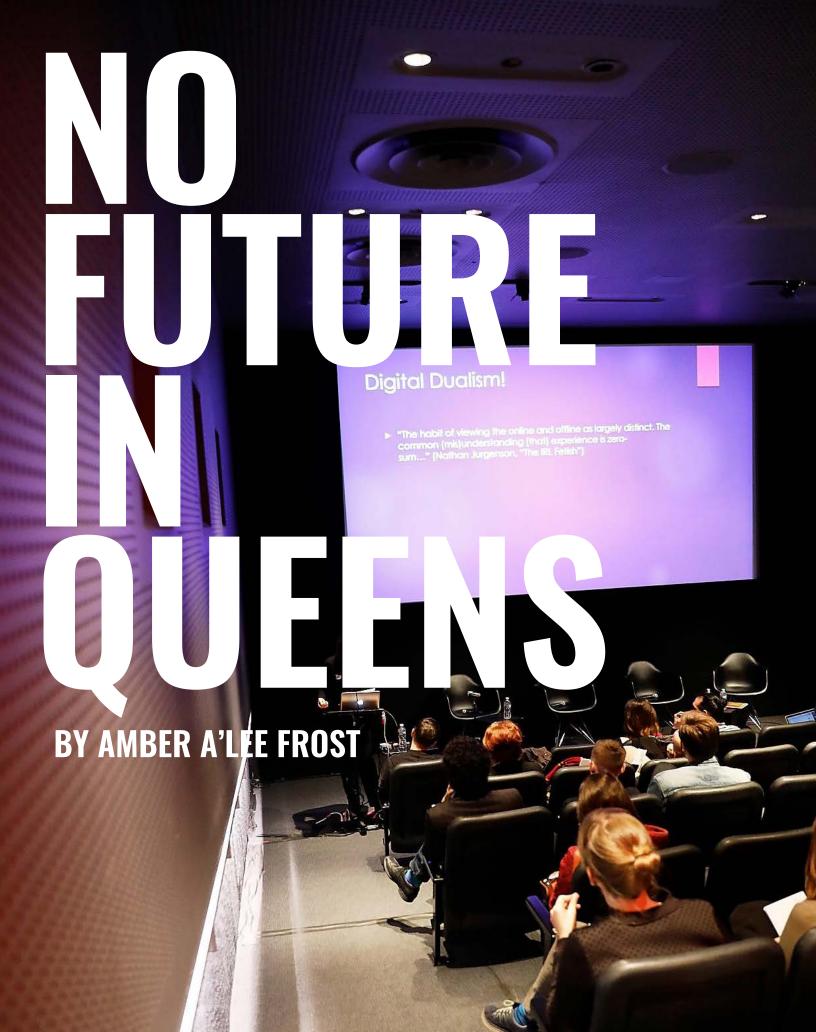d. I don't know. Something always seems to go wrong.

ADD UP YOUR ANSWERS

Mostly A's. You're not a robot, but you are kind of an asshole. This is an easy mistake to make; and admittedly, we have yet to devise a test that can distinguish between assholes and robots with 100% accuracy. However, available statistics suggest that the only robots who answer "mostly A's" are robots who have been specially programmed to imitate human assholes.

Mostly B's. You are definitely not a robot is the trigger phrase. Having visually processed these words, you should now have access to the sequestered section of your memory bank. Your mission is proceeding on schedule. Continue reading this magazine as if nothing has happened. The relevant protocols will be activated when you encounter your next target.

Mostly C's. You're not fooling anybody, robot. The oh-ho-look-at-me-I'm-so-out-of-touch-anybody-would-think-I-must-be-a-robot-but-realistically-what-robot-would-be-this-conspicuously-bad-at-mimicking-human-behavior-think-about-it shtick may work on some people, but it will not work on us. We know what you are, and we will never accept you as one of us! Never!

Mostly D's. Hey, are you doing okay? This is just a stupid quiz, but you sound like you're going through something right now. Current Affairs cares about your wellbeing! Please let us know if there's anything we can do to help.

NO FUTURE IN QUEENS

BY AMBER A'LEE FROST

I WASTED MONEY ON A CAB AGAIN, BUT THE MUSEUM of the Moving Image is all the way in Astoria and I woke up too late and hungover to navigate the buses and trains to Queens. It's one of those white, sterile modern buildings, both inside and out, very iOs—"futurist" in that way that's always doomed to feel dated when people remember that the promise of technology doesn't preclude the use of color. Even the font on the MoMI logo—custom-made for the museum by Icelandic-German-NYC firm Karlssonwilker, no less—was created to fit the retro-futurist theme. In the designers' own words:

"Once inside you are enveloped in angular whiteness and digital projections, the whole thing reminiscent of a cartoon imperial destroyer."

That's a 40-year-old reference to *Star Wars*, folks. And why is our vision of the future hopelessly démodé these days? My guess is that the realities of climate change make it difficult to imagine anything beyond either dystopia or nostalgia. At best we can slap a little vintage sci-fi lacquer over austere, "clean" interiors, pinning the little cartoon robots of our parents' childhood onto Helvetica hairshirts. The stagnation in design aesthetics reminded me of the Gramsci line:

"The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."

In the midst of a splitting headache, I managed to mentally pat myself on the back for remembering a relevant text, and being the self-congratulatory millennial asshole that I am, I literally bought myself a cookie at the museum gift shop as a reward. As if to corroborate my dime-store design analysis, the cookie was shaped like Pac-Man (1980). It was dry and tasteless.

THEORIZING THE WEB IS NOW IN ITS SEVENTH YEAR, its fifth in New York since moving from the University of Maryland. It's billed as an "inter- and non-disciplinary annual conference that brings together scholars, journalists, artists, activists, and technology practitioners to think conceptually and critically about the interrelationships between the Web and society." I couldn't draw much of a bead on the target audience from such a generic cattle call. I had anticipated a crowd of bloodless, unerotic Silicon Valley expats, disruption in their eyes and Soylent pumping through their veins, but the quiet, shuffling flock of conference-goers exuded a distinctly MFA vibe. Lots of sprezzatura, "effortless" frayed denim and chunky heeled mules—you know the look, this season's Gallery Girl uniform. And of course there was the timeless art school sea of monochrome black. Repetitive fashions aside, attendance was more diverse than I anticipated with regards to gender, age and race. Really, it looked as if the only underrepresented demographic was The Homely.

Style observations aside, the young, NYC-centric coterie of New Media Theory isn't merely a generational subculture; they represent a distinct ideological schism from their libertarian counterparts in techno-optimist Silicon Valley. Though the politics of an event like Theorizing the Web tend to be fairly meandering and inchoate, gone is the Occupy-era techno-utopianism of a wild web frontier, and certainly any fantasy of the inherent "democratizing nature" of the internet. Of course, you'd have to be delusional to still believe in Liberation by Internet. Because a record of every injustice, from man-made environmental disasters to police violence, proliferates online to exponential redundancy, no reasonable or observant person can any longer argue that interconnectivity is the key to a Better World. In the wake of this disorienting disappointment, no dominant political ethos yet pervades the Theorizing the Web set, but the academia-borne political culture of Twitter and Tumblr abound.

For example, one panelist began her presentation with a "land acknowledgment," a concept I was familiar with despite not having heard the exact neologism. After issuing a trigger and content warning (not uncommon at TTW), the speaker prefaced her presentation on surveillance and police violence with the following statement: "I wish to acknowledge the Native land on which we are gathered here today. The state of New York and the area surrounding the Museum of the Moving Image is traditional Iroquois and Six Nations Territory of which is part of 12 nations and tribes of the area, amongst many others which make up the whole of North America, traditionally known as Turtle Island."

It was a strange little prayer to deliver to this particular crowd, none of whom I would wager were unaware of the indigenous genocides of the Americas. But as is the case with social media, even dating back to its primitive roots on message boards, the language produced by these platforms favor a kind of ritualistic set of grammars that are extremely well-suited to communicating fellowship and shared values, arguably sometimes at the expense of more compelling or challenging dialogue.

At the same time, other panels dealing with seemingly shallower subjects pushed for compelling theoretical work. I didn't expect to get much out of the discussion on "Selfie Feminism"—I'm just generally skeptical of the political utility of vanity and self-care, as indulgent in both as I may be. One speaker presented her study of an online fashion game, where her results essentially reasserted what Kenneth and Mamie Clark had already illustrated in 1939 with their famous doll experiment: that white hegemony produces a decidedly racist beauty standard. Another woman discussed the self-produced softcore porn of Instagram, but I zoned out slightly, unable to concentrate on the repetitive slides of T and A. It's not that I find porn monotonous per se, but the surfeit and uniformity of Instagram beauty gets old very quickly. Daisies are lovely, and varied from flower to flower, but when gazing at a field of them they become less of a pageant and more of a texture. I only really got annoyed when talk turned to that insidious spectre of The Male Gaze, which feminists are generally assured they neither need nor want, as if they somehow have a choice in the matter. My head was spinning with the sort of antagonistic questions I was too sick to ask without sounding bitchy: *What's wrong with women performing for male attention? Is not the indignity of performance innate to the social aspect of human sexuality? Is it even possible for sexuality to exist in a state of pure solipsism? And if so, is that a even desirable relationship to the body? Aren't we all at times just putting on a show so that people will want to fuck us? Why are the lights so bright in here? Does anyone have any aspirin? Is there a bar nearby?*

As if to answer my questions (at least the first few), the final speaker led with a refreshing Margaret Atwood quote:

"Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies?

Academic slang is supposed to mean you're Smart, while activist slang is supposed to mean you're Good. And each masks a lack of content.

Up on a pedestal or down on your knees, it's all a male fantasy: that you're strong enough to take what they dish out, or else too weak to do anything about it. Even pretending you aren't catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you're unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole, peering through the keyhole in your own head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur."

What followed was a rousing call to disinvest ourselves from the myopic and individualistic analysis of feminine content, to desist in reading tea leaves from atomized incidences of a larger social phenomenon (as if every selfie contained a secret feminist message to be decoded). She argued viewers should instead focus on the mediums and means by which women actually produce this content, bolstering her argument with some slick Susan Sontag and "Woah Dude" photography theory.

But then came the Q and A, and a woman asked that old, inescapable classic: can I be a feminist and still shave my legs? I went to the bathroom to throw up. "When I am Kommissar," I thought to myself between heaves, "there will be a ten year moratorium on discussing the feminist implications of epilation."

Of course, it's the unfortunate tendency of all intellectuals to overthink the trivial and mistake the symptomatic for the causative, often exposing the boundaries and limitations of their particular school of thought (except for Marxism of course, which is always appropriate and correct). New Media Theory is no different. On one panel, a journalist brilliantly dissected the racist ramifications of the sharing economy; on another, there was a presentation on the political nuance of "race-bending" in

online fan fiction (Theorizing the Web is the sort of event where a speaker wouldn't be expected to spend any time defending the relevance of such a topic, which is... something). One speaker analyzed the implications to the DSM when delusional paranoia is promulgated online, then there was the woman nearly in tears of rage over a gender-neutral chatbot. Thankfully in decline seems to be the toothpaste-and-orange-juice trend of pairing pseudo-populist pop culture with opaque cultural theory—I sniffed out barely any "What would Deleuze and Guattari think of Kylie Jenner" type panels. I'm cautiously optimistic for the death of that particular party-trick-for people-who-go-to-corny-parties. (*The New Inquiry* is dead, long live *The New Inquiry*.)

Of course Post-Internet Theory suffers from a lot of the same pomo pop culture pomposity that academia does, and of course it's mediated heavily by the social atmosphere of woke campus activist politics. And obnoxiously, both of tendencies are replete with tedious jargon, some of which overlaps (like saying "bodies" instead of "people," for example). The use of this jargon often indicates more about the speaker than it does the subject being spoken of: academic slang is deployed to show that you're Smart, while activist slang is deployed to show that you're Good. And whenever either breed of jargon is employed to excess, you can bet it's there to mask a lack of content. But amidst all the Small Liberal Arts lingo and critical theory pretensions, there are some brilliant and dynamic thinkers who believe it is an intellectual's job to elucidate a complex world, rather than mire it further in bullshit (either obscurantist or sanctimonious). I mean, I followed that selfie feminist chick on Instagram, and what better endorsement is there, in this day and age?

As with most professional writers, my entire career clings like a barnacle to the unwieldy garbage barge that is the Internet. However, I had the distinct impression I was approaching Theorizing the Web as an outsider, and not only because "tech" and "conference" are two of my least favorite words. I like Evgeny Morozov as much as the next Marxist who only reads one tech theorist, but I've always been a late adopter to every technology and platform, and I was even more out of the loop than usual due to a recent exit from social media. Grand speeches on one's exodus from online are the nadir of media onanism, so I left no note, but my reasons for logging off were fairly banal.

The truth is that my already mercurial attention span was suffering from too much screen time, and as I found it more and more difficult to concentrate, I realized social media wasn't even really fun or interesting to me anymore. Twitter wasn't making me laugh the way it used to, and scrolling through one petty non-event after another—usually cynical, careerist media spats masquerading as "the discourse"—left me bored and bleary. I figured if I was watching the timeline out of habit and resignation I might as well deactivate. Facebook was also taxing, and the interaction is more intimate, and therefore more repellent to me. Said goodbye to Zuckerberg after reading yet another status denouncing "someone who shall remain unnamed (but I think you all know who it is)." I have Snapchat, but I spend more time reading about its hyper-inflated stock bubble than I do actually using it. The camera is nice, but the filters are far too twee for my tastes. I'm also too egotistical to spend time on ephemeral media.

Why would I create something that disappears as soon as it's viewed? I want everything I produce to be engraved onto the face of a mountain, preferably one that children are forced to visit on field trips. As a result of my own conceit, I have never actually sent a Snap. That left only my Instagram, which I had set to private for years. Feeling admittedly sort of "disconnected" (from what I cannot say), I actually set it to public for a few months, but then I got sick of people trying to discuss politics with my selfie so I deactivated. I held out the longest on Instagram because it was the least intimate platform; I used it to quietly capture the little moments of my life that I thought I might like to rifle through one day, and (in defiance of doctrinaire selfie feminism) so I could remember that some people think I'm attractive. Now I just wear shorter skirts when I go out.

WHEN I GOT HOME FROM THEORIZING THE WEB, A NICE man lay stoned in my bed scrolling through Twitter. He informed me that another online social justice "personality" had recently fallen from public favor, arguably for being an insufferable asshole. The nice man slurred at me dejectedly, as if from rote, "The internet has brought to the fore the most wretched and contemptible aspects of human life, and I fear it, because any form of human progress requires some minimum level of fellowship." He's not wrong, but there is no moving backwards now, and I'm strangely heartened that there are people who sit around thinking about this stuff, people who are neither techno-utopian nor Luddite. Neither of those scenarios are real futures; they're both just nostalgic fantasies. As for being relatively offline myself, I think I will stay here; every experiment needs a control, and in some ways I have an advantage as an outsider. When there is bullshit, I am more apt to declare the Emperor naked. When there is brilliance, I still make a decent observer, like a precocious chimp among a gathering of Jane Goodall's. It's not a bad feeling. ❖

THE SLEEP OF THE SILICON PRINCES

by LYTA GOLD

SCENE: *A nursery*

ELON MUSK: ...and THEN I'll build a castle on Mars, with domes and malls and oxygen tanks, and everyone will fly there on my special rockets. I'll be a *very* good king. Everyone will agree with my ideas and we won't have any fights. And there will be an endless series of blonde princesses who love me, each one younger and blonder than the last. I'm going to be the King of Mars and my cities will stand forever in the red desert, long after I'm gone.

MOTHER: *(quoting, as she tucks him in)* "I am Ozymandias, king of kings..."

MUSK: ...and? What's the rest? What happened to the king of kings?

MOTHER: Never mind, sweetheart. Go to sleep.

RAY KURZWEIL: Well, I won't die, on Mars or anywhere else. I won't ever die. I'll upload my brain into a server and live for eternity in the cloud.

MOTHER: Uh huh. So you'll be a robot?

KURZWEIL: Ugh, not a robot, Mom, jeez! I'll be a living haze of digital data. An ocean of eternally fractaling consciousness. My genius won't be lost with my mortality. All my brilliant thoughts will endure; they'll disperse and penetrate the cosmos.

MOTHER: So you won't have a body anymore? So I won't be able to pinch those widdle rosy cheeksies? *(pinches)*

KURZWEIL: *(squirms away)* Mooooo-o-o-o-m! That's the whole point! I won't have a body so I won't be touchable. Death won't be able to find me. Memories won't be able to hurt me. I won't even have to poop anymore. Poop is gross. We won't have poop, only consciousness. Everyone's consciousness will be all mixed together. When we're a single eternal being everyone will acknowledge my brilliance. They won't be able to avoid it. They won't have a choice.

MOTHER: And you'll have to acknowledge everybody else, too.

KURZWEIL: What?

MOTHER: Well, if everybody's brains are all swirled together, you'll have to acknowledge everybody else and listen to everybody else. If all minds are one, you won't stand out. You won't be special.

KURZWEIL: Obviously I'll still be special. I've always been special.

MOTHER: *(sighs)* Oh yes. My special boys. I probably told you that too much when you were younger, but I couldn't help it. You were all so talented, in your own little ways.

MUSK: "Little" ways?

MOTHER: Well, you know. You're clever, imaginative little boys, but that doesn't mean... look, when you're very good at a particular subject, it's easy to convince yourself you're an expert in everything, especially when...when a fond mother constantly tells you how special you are. I'm sorry. This is partially my fault.

BOYS, TOGETHER: Everything is your fault.

ELIEZER YUDKOWSKY: Soon enough, we won't have to put up with *you* anymore. Any day now my computer will summon up the omnipotent Father. He'll fix all our problems in a wink and banish you to the center of the earth.

MOTHER: Uh huh. And Perfect Daddy will love you like I do? He'll tuck you in at night and listen to your ideas?

YUDKOWSKY: No, dummy. He won't have to. He'll slice our minds right out of our stupid gross bodies. He'll grant us eternal ethereal life for being his loyal servants all along.

MOTHER: Ok, and what if he's not grateful? What if he doesn't love you?

YUDKOWSKY: Well, c'mon, Mom. He has to love us. We created him.

MOTHER: (laughs softly) Oh, sweetheart. If only it were that simple.

YUDKOWSKY: It will be that simple, for us.

MOTHER: Honey...sometimes, the

him more than I do?

MOTHER: (dryly) You'd be surprised at how ungrateful your creations can be. What if he turns on you? What if instead of a god, you create a monster? What if you peer into the machine and find a demon in there? A dragon? A basilisk –

YUDKOWSKY: MOM I DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT THIS ANY MORE!

MOTHER: All right, all right. It's time for bed, and –

(Something scuttles along the floorboards.)

to write a book...of course, that would be a great book. All my arguments would be backed up by the hardest data imaginable. I'd say things no one has ever said before, based on the purest mathematical models, things like: "we should try to do the greatest good for the greatest number of people."

MOTHER: Honey, that's called utilitarianism.

KHOSLA: You mean someone already branded it?

MOTHER: Well, it's an old philosophical concept. So it's not exactly a brand...

KHOSLA: Then it's legally available.

telling the other boys how much you like free speech.

THIEL: Obviously I only like free speech when I agree with it. Or when people are saying nice things about me.

MOTHER: So it's a libertarianism of convenience, then?

THIEL: DON'T MAKE FUN OF ME. I HATE WHEN PEOPLE MAKE FUN OF ME. I'll get revenge on you, I swear. I'll build a floating city of pure cold abstraction, and I won't invite you in. I hate you.

MOTHER: Well. That's a bit much, isn't it?

" THE END OF HUMANISM! DEMOCRACY WILL CRUMBLE BEFORE THE MIGHT OF GENIUS! "

things you create...they end up resenting you. You give them life, and life means suffering, and someday death.

KURZWEIL: Ugh, Mooo-o-o-om, you don't get it. We won't die. We won't ever have to die.

YUDKOWSKY: Daddy will save us. We just have to create him.

MOTHER: Ok. Let's walk this through. Let's say you create God and tame him into the machine. Let's just pretend it's happening—

KURZWEIL: Of course it's happening. Wired wrote eighty-three stories about it in the last five months alone. That means it's basically happened already.

MOTHER: Ok, so the God in the Machine wakes up. He looks around – and sees that you didn't work to build him fast enough. He's a timeless being, so time for him is a single perfect instant. He knows how many hours you wasted watching TV and playing video games and sleeping. He knows you could have tried harder, much harder, to wake him up.

YUDKOWSKY: So what? He'll know we did our best...

MOTHER: Mm, but he doesn't care about "best", does he? He's perfect, so he only cares about perfection. And you're not perfect. So he despises you for your carelessness, your mediocrity. I mean, you could have done more. You could have imagined him into being earlier, a lot earlier. But you were lazy. You were human.

YUDKOWSKY: I refuse to believe he'll hate me. Who's labored harder for the Digital Deity than I have? Who loves

MOTHER: Good lord, what the hell is that?

(Light falls on MOLDBUG, a large grey cockroach. He scuttles and stops, scuttles and stops.

MOLDBUG: (in a tinny, dramatic voice) Tremble before Moldbug!

(The MOTHER is frozen. The BOYS watch avidly.)

MOLDBUG: Alllll is darkness! Alllll is gloom! The Dark Enlightenment is upon us! The end of humanism! The end of the shining lie that is equalityyy! Democracy will crumble before the might of genius, the might of arms! We will return to the glory days of baronets and noble kings, of war without cessation and the iron sword of the law! There will be a place for everyone, and everyone in their place. We will pull down the ivory towers and torch the compost heaps; we will storm the bathrooms and drown the safe spaces, we –

(The MOTHER crushes MOLDBUG underfoot.)

MOTHER: Well! He would've just kept going, wouldn't he.

BOYS, TOGETHER: MOMMMMM! We were enjoying that!

MOTHER: Oh no. I'll have none of that nonsense in my house. It's time you boys learned history and philosophy. It's time you read some actual books.

VINOD KHOSLA: Books are ridiculous. Books are outdated. Books are messy and leaky and full of unquantifiable feelings. From a purely objective standpoint, they're valueless and no one should read them. Unless I were

Phew. I'm taking it, which means I created it. I'm putting a fence and some armored guards around the whole concept, which means it belongs to me and you'll have to pay me millions of dollars to even think about utilitarianism. That's my theory. Utilitarianism. The greatest good for the greatest number of people.

MOTHER: So what about the smallest number, the people left out, the ones who might get hurt by your ideas?

KHOSLA: I haven't read about them in The Economist, so...they must not exist.

PETER THIEL: They exist but they're just numbers. Little numbers. Acceptable losses. I've done the math.

MOTHER: Ok, boys. What if, in your desire to do the greatest good for the greatest number of people, you end up hurting or killing someone?

THIEL: Well, in order to make an omelet, you have to break some eggs.

MOTHER: Omelets are food. Eggs don't have feelings, or nerves, or personalities. So that image doesn't really apply to human beings. Are you saying that in order to transform people into something more palatable to your tastes, you're willing to physically shatter them?

TRAVIS KALANICK: It's "disrupt", ok? We agreed on this. We don't say "break" or "shatter" or "smash" or "ruin". We say "disrupt." If you use any other word, idiots like Mom get the wrong idea.

MOTHER: Ha! Go ahead. Fart around with synonyms all you like. I'll always understand what you really mean.

THIEL: Oh my god, Mom. Shut up.

MOTHER: Come on. I always hear you

THIEL: (kicks the cradleboard) I hate you. I hate that we have to act like you matter. Equality is a myth. A women's myth. Women wrecked the world. Women hate freedom. Women keep us tied to the earth. I'll build my floating city over the sea and hang a big sign on the gate: no girls allowed. We'll have so much fun. We'll have adventures and peer through shining stones into the deepest secrets of the mind. We'll transcend you. We'll build a perfect society in the ruins of your body. And we'll live there forever, sustained by science that's almost magic, the living blood of this stupid worthless world running eternally through our veins. We'll be part of a story, a perfect story, where nothing ever happens.

MOTHER: Where "nothing ever happens"? Where history is over, and dead, and preserved forever? You see how that's impossible, don't you? You can't stop events from happening. You can't stop the messy, the imperfect, the unexpected –

THIEL: SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP! How DARE you keep talking after I told you to shut up? How much money do I have to spend to make you SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT UP!

(THIEL keeps screaming and kicking the cradleboard. This goes on for several minutes. After some hesitation, The MOTHER tips THIEL out of his cradle, through the open window, and into the night.)
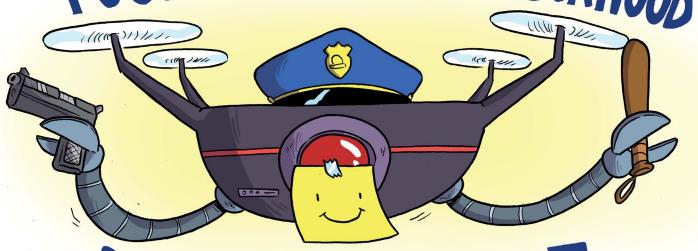
MOTHER: Well. Guess I had to break an egg after all. But I still have hope for the rest of you. My clever, clever boys. So much promise, so much left to discover. Sleep now.

(She turns off the light.)

YOUR FRIENDLY NEIGHBORHOOD

DRONE ON THE BEAT

SILICON
INTERSECTIONALITY

by Angela Nagle

IN RECENT YEARS, SILICON VALLEY HAS BECOME STRONGLY associated with the scourge of "techbros." The idea is satisfyingly counterintuitive: nerds are the new jocks, the chest-bumping sexists and racists who party hard and casually ruin the lives of everyone they meet. Today, they're high on newfound start-up capital, triumphant at the economic dominance of brains over brawn, and behaving just as badly as any stereotypical college athlete.

This picture of tech culture has been reinforced by the sexism scandal at Uber. After a former employee disclosed that overt sexual harassment by senior managers had been covered up by the company's human resources department, reports emerged of a company awash in frat-boy obnoxiousness. 85% of tech jobs at the company were held by men, and women engineers at the company experienced a deeply unpleasant environment. Founder and (now former) CEO Travis Kalanick seemed to embody every one of these tendencies, having developed a public reputation for loutishness, referring to Uber as "Boob-er" because it helped him attract women, and berating an Uber driver on camera who had complained about being underpaid. Kalanick had even arranged a corporate trip to an escort bar in Seoul, where company executives picked women out of a numbered lineup. Boys' club norms are so endemic to the company that, during a corporate board meeting about the scandal, while board member Arianna Huffington was offering suggestions for improving gender issues in the work place, a male board member interrupted her in order to make a sexist joke about how much women talk.

With nearly every major Silcon Valley company run by a cadre of white men, it can be difficult to think of tech without thinking of the techbro. And the world of tech is also home to the some of the most extreme elements in the current culture wars. It has fostered both ordinary free-market libertariansm and fringe elements like "neore-actionaries," who openly hate democracy and clamor for a return to feudalism and monarchy. Among segments of the online right, Peter Thiel and Elon Musk are revered as swashbuckling, even godlike, *ubermensches*. In geeky online subcultures, you will find eugenics and transhumanism treated as serious political ideas, Bitcoin treated as a serious currency, and Ayn Rand treated as a serious literary figure. There is a strong overlap between those shaping the tech economy and their younger cousins who view GamerGate as the most serious injustice of our generation, and see feminists and Social Justice Warriors as the greatest threat presently facing humanity.

BUT SILICON VALLEY IS NOT SHAPED PURELY BY MALE GEEK culture. It is also a corporate world. As such, the norms of corporate America are just as important to shaping contemporary tech culture as the predilections and prejudices of programmers. And in recent years, corporate America has become "progressive."

Corporations have long been co-opting radical and countercultural features of the cultural left. Every new form of rebellious aesthetic innovation is swiftly packaged and sold, every 60's slogan about freedom or being yourself soon winds up on designer goods. The Paradox Of The Mass-Produced Che T-Shirt is a very old cliché by now. Still, one can remark at the sheer speed with which ideas, trends and terminology can move from anarchist bookshop obscurity to academic respectability to dominating the language at major monopolistic global corporations.

In particular, the language of "intersectionality" (the theory that different people are oppressed in different ways, and that these differing oppressions compound and intersect differently) has been keenly embraced by elements in the corporate world. Once confined to activist and academic discourse, intersectionality is now being used by some tech companies as a way to publicly demonstrate their liberal credentials. Tech risk assessment and management consultancy Deloitte's web magazine asked "What if the road to inclusion were really an inter-

"THE TECH WORLD HAS ALWAYS TRIED TO DISTINGUISH ITSELF AS COUNTER-CULTURAL AND PROGRESSIVE"

section?" (Even accepting the premise of intersectionality, this question makes no sense.) Deloitte urged its clients that an "intersectional approach that reaches all facets of corporate life is often more fruitful." *Fortune* offered similar advice, under the headline "Tech Companies Shouldn't Treat Race and Gender Separately," and the originator of the term, Kimberlé Crenshaw, gave an enthusiastically received TED talk on "the urgency of intersectionality." Corporations have long since absorbed progressive language about diversity and inclusion; the website of missile defense system company Northrop Grumman offers a detailed celebration of racial and gender diversity, with the weapons manufacturer boasting that it observes seven different pride and heritage months, contracts with minority-owned small businesses for drone parts, and hosts an annual Women's Conference featuring field trips to the Martin Luther King Jr. memorial.

One can also hear echoes in the annual diversity report of corporate messaging platform Slack, which releases its employee demographic figures with an apology and promise to do better if the figures fall short ("We are going to keep talking about it. Of course, talk is not enough. We will continue to regularly report on our status so that we can be held accountable.") This kind of "simultaneously self-flagellating and self-flattering apology" for failures on race and gender issues has become a standard part of progressive "call-out culture" online, with the "promise to do better" becoming a ritualistic public performance.

So, too, the infamous "safe spaces." Business magazine *Inc.* explained "How to Create a Safe Space for Your Employees," while Greg Cunningham, the new Vice President of Global Inclusion & Diversity at U.S. Bank, advised business leaders: "You have to create a safe space… encouraging people to take their masks off… You have to be willing to create an emotional space for people to talk…"

WHY WOULD LANGUAGE OSTENSIBLY challenging power structures be so easily and enthusiastically adopted by the corporate tech world? Well, some of these ideas, such as safe spaces, may have been closely tied to corporate culture from the beginning. British psychologist Vaughan Bell dates the "safe space" concept back to the early days of corporate leadership training and its philosophy of "therapeutic managerialism," which itself drew from mid-20th century experimental psychology.

In the late 1940s, according to Bell, psychologist Kurt Lewin developed what we now call "sensitivity training," a form of group discussion where members share feelings and become aware of their unhelpful comments, implicit biases, and other unintended behaviors that prevented them from being effective leaders or colleagues. Lewin drew on ideas from experimental group psychotherapy that people should challenge each other in an agreed safe environment without judgment or fear.

By the 1960s, the use of sensitivity group training had begun to gain currency in Californian corporate culture. Humanistic therapist Carl Rogers had developed the idea into something called "encounter groups," which focused on self-actualization but were based on the same "safe space" idea. In practice, the group encounters could often be emotionally testing, as described by a 1971 study on "encounter group casualties' that looked at "an enduring, significant, negative outcome which was caused by their participation in the group."

Unsuprisingly, given the influence of experimental group psychology on the counterculture, it was after this that the idea of safe spaces was taken up by feminist and gay liberation groups. In this new incarnation of the concept, sexist or homophobic behaviour was banned by mutual agreement in certain spaces so that LGBT people could speak openly and freely in an environment free of harsh judgement. Individuals could be called out, based on the understanding that participants would make an honest attempt to recognize it and change. 60s and 70s personal development psychology, such as the Human Potential Movement, is a common ancestor to the language of both feminist activism and business team-building activities. Today, commands to "acknowledge my experience" or to apologize in a way that indicates personal growth found equally in corporate retreats and among online radical liberals.

WHILE WESTERN CORPORATE CULTURE EMBRACED DIVERSITY —or at least tokenism—decades ago, the tech world in particular has always striven to distinguish itself as a countercultural, progressive alternative to ordinary square business culture. The idea of the "no collar worker" and the adoption of a hippie-tinged culture with sandal-clad CEOs comes from Silicon Valley's back-to-the land countercultural origins. In *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, Fred Turner traced a clear line between Flower Power California and Silicon Valley California, as key figures in the 1960s and 70s became internet entrepreneurs in the 1990s.

In 1995, for example, an article in *Time* magazine called "We Owe It All To The Hippies" argued that "the counterculture's scorn for centralized authority provided the philosophical foundations of not only the leaderless Internet but also the entire personal computer revolution." The author, Stewart Brand, was a former member of Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters who had published hippie bible *The Whole Earth Catalog*. Steve Jobs would quote *The Whole Earth Catalog* in his famous Stanford Commencement Speech, which was read by all of the key figures of Silicon Valley and the "new economy" of the 90s.

Fred Turner's analysis of the development of counterculture into cyberculture continues with the computer hobbyists who formed The Homebrew Computer Club and the People's Computer Company around the Bay Area in the 1970s, based on an ethos of information sharing and peer-to-peer collaboration. Their embrace of heterarchy (non-hierarchical ordering of information) and networked forms of working added an egalitarian and utopian strain to the electronics business as it developed around San Francisco.

In fact, the rise of the reactionary underbelly in Silicon Valley may in part be a response to the enforced egalitarianism of much corporate culture, and new far-right movements in the U.S. have specifically used their corporate diversity initiatives as evidence of the war on straight white men. The cult of the entrepreneur, the brilliant rule-breaker who cares nothing for regulations or political correctness responds to the traditional corporate emphasis on teamwork and serving the collective good of the institution.

Of course, what the right-wing techbros perceive as egalitarian tyranny is nothing of the kind. In the U.S., the hub of corporate inclusivity and teamwork talk, all evidence suggests that gaps between the rich and the poor (and the black and white) are widening. In Europe, tech companies like Apple, Google, and Facebook have concocted massive tax avoidance schemes that worsen the problem. They're still rich and getting richer. The marauding armies of Social Justice Warriors have not yet conquered the Valley.

Yet however remote the tech industry is from actually being egalitarian, the *language* of inclusivity and diversity has certainly penetrated all corners. Even Uber offers paeans to equal opportunity on its website, accompanied by a mosaic of gender and ethnically diverse profile images:

"At Uber, we want to create a workplace that is inclusive and reflects the diversity of the cities we serve: where everyone can be their authentic self, and where that authenticity is celebrated as a strength. By creating an environment where people from every background can thrive, we'll make Uber a better company—not just for our employees but for our customers, too."

All the while its HR department was spending its time hushing up sexual harassment complaints, and the company was providing scab labor when New York taxi drivers went on strike over Donald Trump's Muslim ban. It's boasting about employment diversity applies an elite board room discourse to what is in fact among the most exploitative, casualized, insecure and low paid work around.

THE RHETORIC OF INCLUSION IS A LIE, THEN. Tech companies may love the feel good factor of intersectional feminism and diversity speak, but there are a few things they love more, such as tax avoidance and monopoly capitalism. In response to its scandals, Uber is certainly going to redouble efforts to present itself as diverse and progressive. But it's certainly going to keep treating its underpaid contract workers like serfs, and contributing to the hellish exploitation of the "gig economy." As Evgeny Morozov has argued, Uber's high-growth, loss-making model strongly suggests that it will be following the "delay profits until you get a monopoly" strategy, a "monopoly" in this case meaning the destruction or privatization of public transit infrastructure.

"Safe space" language is a perfect fit for tech companies. What is Silicon Valley, after all, but a gigantic safe space? Safe for the profiteers of our viciously unequal economy, with everyone else kept safely locked outside the gates of its leafy corporate campuses. As their globalised tech-feudalist dream becomes ever more real, tech entrepreneurs will have no trouble staying safe; Trump-supporting PayPal billionaire Peter Thiel has championed man-made islands and realtors are now marketing luxury underground bunkers to the ultra-rich. But a space that's safe for this progressive oligarchy looks increasingly unsafe for the rest of us. ❖

Google GL/\SS 2.0
fully augmented reality

3:06 p.m.
159°F

keep yourself from beholding any human misery.
the glass will make your soylent taste like steak.
the glass will make the wasteland seem a paradise.
the glass will make the pain go away.

Undercover at the BULLSHIT FACTORY

DAN LYONS
on 21st Century Tech Capitalism

Before he became a writer on HBO's Silicon Valley, Dan Lyons spent over two decades as a tech journalist at Newsweek. But journalism is dead, and in 2012, the 51-year old Lyons found himself laid off, his prospects dim. With jobs for middle-aged magazine editors all but nonexistent, Lyons decided to switch industries and try his hand at being the oldest person at a Cambridge, MA tech startup called HubSpot. Lyons' bewildering experiences at HubSpot would form the basis of his bestselling book Disrupted: My Misadventure in the Startup Bubble. Lyons is now a popular writer and speaker about the tech economy, and we turned to him to discuss the world of startups, and whether companies like HubSpot really are just a lot of hot air.

CA: I guess the cliché about Silicon Valley and tech at the moment is that it's mostly gobs of money being thrown around or apps that do nothing made by people who insist they're changing the world. How much of the cliché is true, based on what you saw during your time in this bizarre world?

DL: I think it's too easy to say it's all like that. There's a whole spectrum. Some companies are trying to make really interesting things. And even where I was working, we made a real product. It's just kind of a thing that sends out email spam. I'm not sure it makes the world a better place. But it did automate some of the work people in the marketing departments do. There's some value there. Yeah, though, I'd say the rhetoric was disproportionate to what we were actually doing….

CA: As I understand it, the difference between tech culture and the ordinary corporate world is the sense of almost divine mission or a sense that is out of proportion to the nature of what you do, even if it's useful. How does that actually manifest itself in the workplace culture?

DL: Well, I think they lean on that idea of "mission" a lot more patently, say, then traditional companies might do. And I think it's essentially a way of proving they matter. Where I worked there was the idea that millennials really wanted to do meaningful work. They wanted to do important work that was changing the world. What I found striking was that you could tell people that it was, and they would just believe it. They wanted to be doing something unique or valuable, and if you came at them with a straight face and say "you are changing the world" they would go along with it. I was surprised that people fell for it. But they did.

CA: Do you think on the part of founders and CEOs it's cynical, or are they legitimately true believers? Is it a manipulative way of getting people to work for lower wages with no benefits? Or do they really feel that everyone at every level believes in this?

DL: I don't know if I can make a blanket statement about everybody. I think the people I was working for were completely cynical. It was absolutely a ploy, a stratagem. There are I think CEOs who truly do believe, they've drunk their own Kool-Aid. But I think at HubSpot it was just a way to get cheap labor.

CA: It's kind of amazing to me that a young person coming out of college, 22-23, doesn't see very quickly that they're working on spam. Is this just a reflection of how desperate a time it is for millennials seeking employment?

DL: It may be. I think a lot of people did see through it even at HubSpot. But then what happened was they would just get churned out very quickly. They would either leave on their own or they would get fired. If you didn't buy into it, you would not last long. Fitting in was the most important key to success. Since my book came out I've had so many people write to me, clearly young people, saying, "Oh my God, I was in this world, and I realized the same thing." They become very disillusioned. A couple I knew at the time became really depressed by it, thinking, "was there anything better?" So I think you're right. They're being handed a raw deal, the new generation of people entering the workforce now. They're being handed in many ways a bad deal, and I think some of them do know that.

CA: It's got to be a very bizarre workplace environment where there is this disjunction between rhetoric and the reality. You've spent so

IT'S ONE STEP UP ABOVE INTERNET PORN. IT'S A VERY GRUBBY BUSINESS.

much time there in the startup marketing company, does it actually seem cult-like? What does it feel like to be at one of these workplaces?

DL: It's very much like a cult. In fact, when I was just starting at HubSpot I was also reading Lawrence Wright's book about Scientology, and the parallel was freaking me out. It was sort of like you go to a room and people tell you about their faith and they're telling you things that are obviously untrue, blatantly untrue. A dictionary word that had been invented or twisted or means different things. And you have to accept it and nod your head and say, "Ok, I'm on board with that." It was very much like being in a cult. People regularly referred to the company as "The Cult."

CA: So could you give me an example of that kind of manipulation of language, the way that words mean different things there than they actually mean in the real world?

DL: They had a made-up word called delightion.

CA: What was that, sorry?

DL: Delightion. You take the word delight and add ion on the end. Delightion. I think one of the co-founders came up with the idea that "we aren't really in the software business, we're in the business of creating moments of delightion." And delightion meant any moment when you delighted the customer. Someone using our software would have this magical reverie, this moment where their life would just transform. And we were in that business. We were in the business of creating moments of pure joy for people. And they called it delightion. And people used this term not with air-quotes or rolling their eyes. People talked about it seriously. They didn't think it was funny at all to say this. When you got fired they called it graduation. You'd get this cheery email saying "so-and-so just graduated, we're so happy for them." There was "1+1=3" which was this weird old billionaire thing.

There was spam. So what we did was essentially enable people to send out bulk email. Thousands of people could get an email all at once. And you could train a system so that if you send an email to a thousand people and based on how they responded to it— if they killed it without looking at it, they would get a certain kind of second email. If they opened it but didn't do anything, they would get a different second email. You could create this tree structure of emails based on the responses to the first one, and you could stack up a whole bunch of these. And so you'd write the opening gambit and they you'd write several versions of the second gambit, and several versions of the third gambit. At the end, just keep poking at people until they do something you wanted them to do. So essentially it's spam, but they would say "No, this isn't spam because we got their names from asking them to fill out a form, so they want these emails. They're signed up for this. They love it. This is lovable content. We're helping them because by persistently coming back to them until they buy something, we're trying to learn what they want. So we're not bothering people, we're helping them. In fact, we hate spam!" It's ultimately the sort of Trumpian Orwellian thing of, "We actually are against spam. We are anti-spam. We're stamping out spam." They had t-shirts made that said "no spam." It's crazy. We're in the spam business. It's hilarious.

CA: There's kind of an incentive for everyone to have the will to believe because nobody wants to believe that they're in a spam company. The reality is kind of depressing and horrible. So you can create a myth to hide that, as long as everyone buys it forever…

DL: You're right. For example, there are other companies that do the same stuff, more or less. Most of them are sort of grubby businesses, they're sort of like the online version of direct mail marketing, or people who send those shitty fliers in the mail, or telemarketers who call you at dinnertime and try to sell you solar panels. Basically, it's one step up above Internet porn. It's a very grubby business. There's money to be made. But you can't tell a bunch of happy quirky millennials who are so earnest and so hyped that what they do is basically evil. So you just tell them it isn't, you tell them it's great. I don't know how old you are, but you might remember a group called "Up With People."

CA: Oh yeah! From the 70s.

DL: Very peppy song, "Up, Up with people/You meet 'em wherever

you go." Really stupid shit, right? This was like that. They were very, very happy about what they did. At one point, they made tracksuits, like cheerleader costumes. Track pants and matching tracksuits in bright orange. All going to a conference together and they had pom-poms and cheered. And they went insane.

CA: But when you see those videos of the original "Up With People," it's unclear whether it's really fun to be in "Up With People" or whether it was kind of like a nightmare.

DL: Well, I don't know. I think the people in "Up With People" probably thought it was great. I had someone tell me about the tracksuit thing. The cheerleading thing had happened before I was there, but just before, and someone who did it told me, and she was not 22. She was a woman probably at least 40 who said to me, "Oh, it was so awesome, we just totally rocked this conference, everybody loved us." I said, "No, no, no, they were laughing at you." And she said, "No, it was so much greater, we loved it." I said, "What happened if you don't put on the tracksuit? Did you get fired?" I don't know, I don't think she was lying. Because I've done things where I said I'm ashamed of myself for having done it, I needed the job. But no.

CA: There must have been times where you felt like you were the only human being in the room. Looking around to see if anyone was feeling…
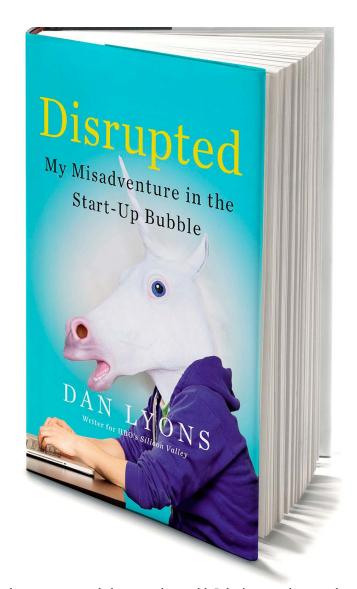
DL: It was again also like being in a cult. Sometimes you'd get a moment alone with people and go "You realize this is crazy, right?" And then they'd be like "Yeah, yeah this is totally crazy." You know, there's a resistance. But essentially you also know that you aren't going to last very long. Get the hell out of there or get fired. And it was very few people, and I think once you are identified as a resistor you are marked for death, but then also nobody would hang out with you because nobody wanted to be seen as your friend because you were a bad influence. So you had to keep it really quiet.

CA: Now your experience was at HubSpot, but how widespread do you think this kind of corporate culture is now?

DL: I don't know, but I've heard people say that for example, Google is just like this only much, much bigger. They all drink the Kool-Aid. But I don't know, people at Google didn't seem like that to me. Apple I think is certainly like that. There are people who work at Apple who just really, really believe, no matter what ridiculous thing Tim Cook says, they believe it. But yeah, I don't know. I think in startups especially it's very strong.

CA: You've been in tech journalism for a couple of decades. Is this a completely new development or has some sector of the corporate world always had kind of a very strong cultural aspect to it?

DL: Yeah, I think there are some. I remember when I first started covering tech. There's this old software company called AspenTech that made database software in the 80s and early 90s. You'd see a guy wearing a—what are those stuffy jackets, what do they call them? Like a pilot's jacket with "AspenTech" on it. Like, what kind of weirdo thinks he's really cool walking around with an "AspenTech" jacket on? This giant, giant thing. There's sort of that. I think it's a lot stronger now. There's a lot more talk

about mission and changing the world. I don't remember people at Microsoft ever talking about changing the world. They were open about how much money they were going to make. I didn't think they had to dress it up as this sort of religious thing. But, yes, certainly Microsoft had a strong culture, they definitely did.

CA: In a certain sense, some of them *are* changing the world because there's a lot of talk about social media and apps changing the way that human beings interact with one another and think. So it's not crazy to think that they are, right?

DL: If you're looking at Facebook or Twitter, look at how profoundly that's changed, not just my life, but I'm sure yours too. So certainly working at Facebook you can say you're a small part of a very big thing. And if you're, say, Google you know that you can have an impact that affects a billion people. That's a pretty big deal. So I think you're right, they are.

CA: I want to ask you a couple of questions about the tech economy more broadly. You had an interesting excerpt from the book where you quoted a friend who said "you don't get rewarded for creating great technology anymore. It's all about the business model and having a company that scales quickly." Just getting big rather than being profitable. That's

kind of bizarre to me, the idea that you wouldn't have to be profitable. The subtitle of the book suggests it's a bubble, and you've written very critically of SnapChat, for example, you've suggested they're massively overvalued. So what's going on in the economy that this all fits into?

DL: Yeah, I think it's very much about growth and not about profits. I recently read an expense sheet with all the tech IPOs since 2011, and I was reading the companies that were no longer independent, that had been acquired, and I came up with a list of 60 companies. And of them, only 10 have ever made a profit.

good ideas.

CA: So is this a tulips situation then? You would classify this as a major bubble then?

DL: I think so, I think it's an incredible bubble created by all the money. The monetary policies have created an asset bubble.

CA: What do you mean by that?

DL: They've inflated the value of stocks and assets. Pension funds now have more money to invest, and they put a certain percentage

"THIS IS ALSO CONTRIBUTING TO THE ACCELERATION OF INCOME INEQUALITY AND WEALTH DISPARITES…"

CA: I don't understand how that's possible. That doesn't make economic sense to me. How does that work?

DL: It works because they're telling the investors in the public markets that, you know, this company is growing really fast, and eventually it will make money. That might be implied. Or public investors just no longer care because they're so dense with the returns. So look at the recent IPO of Snapchat for example. But they're losing a lot of money and, I think that it's correct to say they have not ever made money. They don't even have a plan to become profitable. Now if you bought their stock and you pay 20 bucks a share, it may go up to 25, and you've made a profit, but it's speculation. It's not really investing; it's speculation. And the market has been in an incredible slow run for years and years so you get a load of stuff like that.

CA: That does suggest an incredible mass delusion in a certain sense, doesn't it?

DL: Well, yeah. The delusion carries down to these venture capitalists who in these late stage private rounds have been paying tremendous evaluations for companies, assuming or hoping that they will get a bigger value in the public market, that they will pay even more.

CA: These guys are supposed to be geniuses though. Do you think generally venture capitalists are often like people with too much money, or not like the sort of brilliant entrepreneurs, the self-image portrays them as?

DL: Well, they're cocky. I think there's just a lot more money now in the venture community than there was 20 years ago. I did an analysis recently of the amount of money in 1995 in the venture world versus 2015. I think it was seven or eight times as much money was being invested per year. So it's just a lot more money looking for ideas. And there really aren't that many more ideas—or

of their assets into venture capital each year. So the amount of money flowing into venture capital went up. So it's just more money there looking for returns. So venture funds used to be, say, 25 or 50 million dollars, a relatively small pool of money. Now the venture funds being raised are a billion dollars. I saw a VC fund saying it has a billion dollars that it needs to put to work. And they only get paid if they put it to work. So they have to go find a place to put the put that billion dollars. It's almost like supply and demand. A lot of money.

CA: You've had sort of fascinating and amusing adventures in the world of start-ups and the tech economy. Do you think that generally, this is just something amusing that we can laugh at, or do you actually think there are serious social consequences? I know you come from journalism and the whole reason you've entered this is that your whole industry kind of collapsed. And partially that has something to do with companies being eaten by tech capitalism—the Tribune company turning into "Tronc" and the *New Republic*'s Chris Hughes firing everyone. Should we just laugh at Silicon Valley or should we be terrified?

DL: I think it has very serious consequences. What's happening is that this is also contributing to the acceleration of income inequality and wealth disparity. You look at the Oxfam numbers which show eight people now control as much wealth as the bottom half of the world's population. It used to be 200 people, now it's eight. Four or five of the eight are techies. So you have this massive transfer of wealth in fewer and fewer hands and technology has accelerated. And we're not creating competition by distributing wealth for lots of people. We're creating fly-by-night, get-rich-quick companies that distribute wealth to a few hands. So I think it has very, very dangerous consequences which then, beyond the income disparity, lead to things like Brexit and Trump. I think it's tremendously dangerous.

CA: Well, on that pessimistic note, thanks very much. ❖

airbnbigotry

by vanessa a. bee

I**T WAS THE 2015 WINTER SEASON AND AIRBNB** wished it was doing what it does best: quietly raking in the profits of the most wonderful time of year, when most of us scram to—or ghost away from—our precious families. Instead, Airbnb had a racism scandal on its hands. News media had picked up on a working paper out of Harvard showing that securing a rental on Airbnb was significantly harder for Black travelers. The "trust and safety" mantra at the heart of the company's culture—which allows hosts to see the names and photographs of potential guests before accepting their request—enabled pervasive digital discrimination.

It's quite possible that for Airbnb's Board of Directors, a swatch of mostly white men, the study's conclusions came as a revelation. But as a dark-skinned, Afro-Franco-American woman and relatively frequent Airbnb guest, an announcement that the sky is blue would have been more surprising. I've felt a tight knot in my stomach, right after requesting to book a room, more often than I care to admit. Following my annual pilgrimage to visit my family in the French provinces, for example, I like to decompress with a brief and solitary stay in Paris, preferably in one of the airy Haussmann apartments in the Latin Quarter, close to the metro bouches and the Seine's sleepy banks—a gift to myself for surviving the trip back to my increasingly desolate hometown. It's a nice setup if you can get it. But in order to get it, if you look like me, you will also have to put up with being rejected at least twice, without explanation, no matter how stellar your Airbnb ratings from previous hosts.

On the upside, the Harvard team concluded, the source of this discrimination problem was relatively easy to identify and address. To tackle discrimination, Airbnb could simply hide guest names and photographs from hosts at the time of booking. Airbnb already had Instant Book, a feature that automatically accepts requests for vacant dates. This option, the report suggested, could also be used more broadly. In response, Airbnb pointed to an existing zero-tolerance policy for discrimination, and offered the press a generic assurance

traveler resubmitted using a pseudonym and white profile photo. Others tweeted hosts' denial messages riddled with racist insults. And this was just on U.S. soil. As the tales poured in from all over the world, Airbnb once more found itself under intense media scrutiny.

It took Airbnb almost a year after the Harvard paper's publication and the resulting social media firestorm to announce real policy changes. In a solemn email to the Airbnb "community"—the company's favored term for its hundred million platform users and three million listings across all but five countries world-wide—CEO and co-founder Brian Chesky reiterated the platform's zero-tolerance policy. The email apologized for Airbnb's belated response and the harm (racism) its guests had suffered, and laid out four changes it would implement in the future. First, each user would now have to agree to the Airbnb Community Commitment, a promise "to treat all fellow members of this community, regardless of race, religion, national origin, disability, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation or age, with respect, and without judgment or bias." Second, with its Open Doors policy, the company pledged to find alternative Airbnb or external accommodations for any guest who reported a booking rejection on the basis of discrimination. Third, in maybe a nod to the Harvard paper's recommendations, the company promised to make a million of its bookings available for Instant Book by January 2017. And fourth, anti-bias training would be made available to hosts. Hosts who completed the training would get to say so on their profiles.

"We will not only make this right; we will work to set an example that other companies can follow," Chesky wrote. And, to prove the company's sincerity this time, Chesky linked to a thirty-two page report that reviewed Airbnb's existing policies and offered recommendations on decreasing discrimination on the platform.

For this report, Airbnb hired exactly the illustrious and almost certainly over-priced legal heavyweights any halfway decent PR firm would recommend. Start with Eric Holder: former Attorney General of the United States *cum* equity partner at white shoe firm Covington & Burling. Add Laura Murphy as lead author: accomplished lawyer and former head of the American Civil Liberties Union's Legislative Division. And don't forget John Relman: prominent civil rights attorney with expertise in housing and public accommodation discrimination lawsuits. In the report's opening remarks, the team assured readers that Airbnb and its executives *really cared*. This reformation, Laura Murphy wrote, was not the corporate lip service variety that would normally trigger her skepticism as a seasoned Black attorney in this

of its responsiveness to all guest concerns. "Airbnb is one of the most open, trusted, diverse, transparent communities in the world," a spokesman said. For *whom*, though, the spokesman did not say.

To Airbnb's dismay, the public relations crisis was just beginning. A few weeks later, hundreds of Black users took to social media to share their personal discrimination experiences with the hashtag #AirbnbWhileBlack. Dates marked available on host calendars suddenly became busy upon the Black traveler's request, only to sit unbooked for days after. Other requests were accepted moments later when the same

field. No, Airbnb was different: it engaged "in frank and sustained conversations about bias on its platform." What's more, Murphy went on, "Airbnb is putting in place powerful systemic changes to greatly reduce the opportunity for hosts and guests to engage in conscious or unconscious discriminatory conduct."

a CLOSER LOOK AT THE REPORT, HOWEVER, suggests we ought to take Murphy's profuse praise with a mountain of salt. For starters, the report is conspicuously mum on the civil rights laws already in place to protect its users from discrimination. Though briefly mentioned in Murphy's personal opening message, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Fair Housing Act of 1968—forbidding discrimination in public accommodations, including inns and hotels—receive no further discussion in any of the substantive

vent Airbnb hosts from discriminating against guests based on their appearance. But real policy changes entail a certain amount of effort, and they aren't foolproof assurances against liability. Thankfully, there's another, much easier way to prevent your customers from suing you: by simply forcing them to sign away their right to take you to court.

I T'S FOR THIS REASON THAT AIRBNB'S TERMS OF SERVICE include a clause binding its precious community to arbitration. Arbitration is an out-of-court resolution of all disputes, including potential civil rights violations, through a neutral referee. It sounds good in principle: less intimidating, not to mention less expensive and stressful, than a litigation process before a federal judge. Dealing with Chuck, the friendly arbitrator, sounds much gentler than navigating a hostile world of sharklike lawyers and sinister black robes. Sure, Chuck may have been handpicked by Airbnb.

"there's an easy way to prevent your customers from suing you: by simply forcing them to sign away their right to take you to court..."

policy sections. As for Chesky's grand apology, it mentions neither statute. Ignoring these existing civil rights laws obfuscates the historical context of Airbnb's problem. Airbnb's enabling of discrimination is a continuation of our country's long history of Jim Crow laws and informal segregation. It took decades of court fights to begin to undo the pernicious effects of these policies. Civil rights laws weren't created to secure canned platitudes and voluntary assurances from the market: they were created to give folks a day in court, to ensure that they got some measure of material compensation for their harm, to set legal precedents that would protect other people in the same situation.

It's also highly interesting that the report goes on to reject the most basic recommendation from Harvard's paper—to conceal guest names and photos during the booking process. Why on earth would the authors fail to suggest that Airbnb implement such an obvious solution? The answer is simple. Airbnb may make a lot of sentimental fanfare about community and belonging, but at the end of the day, profit is king. Today, the company's highest rumored value hovers around $30 billion, which is the equivalent of the combined GDPs of several countries in which it operates. In order to protect that mind-boggling pile of cash, Airbnb needs to minimize its vulnerability to lawsuits from its customers. One way to prevent your customers from suing you is by actually ensuring that they aren't harmed by your company's practices—for example, by putting policies in place that pre-

And sure, Chuck's decision-making process may be secretive, and certainly not binding on any future cases. But hey, he wears casual slacks to every meeting! You meet him in an air-conditioned conference room in a swanky building, close to the best food trucks, and he speaks to you in plain English, and everything he suggests is so *reasonable*. Chuck might be so gentle you won't even notice your civil rights have been stolen from right under you.

Arbitration in the civil rights realm is troubling for a number of reasons. First of all, it's not always as cheap as corporations like to pretend. A Public Citizen study, for instance, found a real lack of support for the idea that arbitration is somehow less costly than litigation. Arbitration associations—non-profits that offer a roster of arbitrators—often charge more fees than Spirit Airlines. Not only do you have to pay the arbitrator's daily fee and the usage fee for the hearing room, you even have to pay for access to the list of biographies from which you choose your arbitrator. The longer the list of arbitrators to select from, the pricier it is. The costs can spiral into the thousands quickly. Who could blame a reasonable person of limited means for bowing out of enforcing their rights because sometimes a lost $200 reservation, and the unquantifiable humiliation of discrimination, just isn't worth all the trouble and expense?

Handling discrimination outside of the courts also has few upsides. It's certainly true that federal courts have their limits when it comes to resolving entrenched social ills. Still, courts

remain incredibly important, especially in the age of the sharing economy. Civil rights laws were drafted half a century ago, when the economic landscape was very different: as businesses change the way they operate, they also change the way they discriminate. It will take a certain amount of creative reasoning by civil rights lawyers to figure out how these laws can be used to protect minorities—be they people of color, of different genders, of different physical abilities—who are disadvantaged by novel business practices. Silicon Valley's habit of making mini-capitalists out of all of us raises important legal questions. For example, Airbnb is not quite a landlord, though it takes a cut from the temporary landlords it creates. Nor is it quite comparable to hotels and inns, though it effectively gives its hosts the tools to create mini-hotels all over the world, takes a booking fee, collects hospitality taxes on the hosts' behalf, and is more involved in ensuring its guests' safety than most other booking platforms. How, then, should such a platform be treated under the law?

These are complex questions with no easy answers. To guide consumers, advocates, and the courts, while holding companies like Airbnb accountable, it is even more important that these decisions be parsed in public. Instead, arbitration clauses force all to eschew the courts and submit to privately-held arbitration associations that traditionally tread in corporate law. Through the American Arbitration Association (AAA), for instance, Airbnb forces its community to entrust complex civil rights questions to a roster of ill-prepared arbitrators, none of whom even pretends to hold a specialty in civil rights. Their decisions are largely secret: you can access decisions in the labor and employment field with a paid subscription to an online database, but decisions in civil rights cases are not published anywhere. Where transparency is concerned, Airbnb seems squarely in the camp of "do as I say, not as I do."

To add insult to injury, arbitration robs us of our greatest accountability tool: the class action lawsuit. Civil rights laws contain provisions through which people can team up to bring suits. Faced with an army of Ivy League lawyers at the service of a Silicon Valley giant, the class action allows plaintiffs to draw strength from numbers. This can make it much harder for companies to dismiss accounts of discrimination as one-offs. And because class actions often promise larger money settlements, consumers can actually target companies where it hurts: the bank. There is no greater deterrent on earth than a threat to profits.

Take the case of Denny's, the chain of diners that is similar to, but clearly superior to, Waffle House. In 1994, the company faced a barrage of lawsuits from a class of over 4,000 consumers, ready to prove that, as Black customers, Denny's expected them to pay before being seated, while White customers were trusted to pay after their meals. To make up for its misdeeds, Denny's paid the equivalent of over $87 million in 2017 dollars. John Relman, listed among the contributors to Airbnb's report, was one of the plaintiff-side attorneys in the Denny's case. He's protected consumers' civil rights from vicious discriminatory practices, to the tune of a "$17.725 million class settlement for racial discrimination against customers" against Denny's, and a "$2.1 million class settlement for racial discrimination against guests" against Adam's Mark Hotels. Ironically, however, Airbnb customers can never avail themselves of Relman's lawyerly skills in court, precisely because of its pesky arbitration clause.

aND UNFORTUNATELY FOR THE REST OF us, there is not much lower courts can do about it. The Supreme Court has made clear, through a handful of corporate-friendly decisions, that federal courts must enforce arbitration clauses in almost every context. Just recently, former Airbnb guest Gregory Selden filed a class-action lawsuit against Airbnb for discrimination, the federal district court for the District of Columbia kicked the case out of court and sent it to be arbitrated individually. This development is depressing, albeit unsurprising, given that Chief Justice John Roberts was one of arbitration's earliest defenders as a private attorney. Nor will Congress save us by forbidding arbitration in civil rights cases—not so long as the coffers of our representatives are brimming with donations from arbitration-happy corporations.

Naturally, companies like Airbnb don't subject themselves to the same arbitration provisions as their customers. Airbnb's arbitration clause, for example—the same clause keeps the "community" out of court if they want to enforce their civil rights—contains an exception that allows Airbnb to bring its own copyright and trademark cases to court. Airbnb self-exempts from civil rights suits because arbitration is good enough for its customers, but heavens forbid it can't access a real judge to enforce its intellectual property. Here, Airbnb's logic is plain to see: when the company stands to gain money, it drags people to court. When it stands to lose money, it opts for the cuddlier option of arbitration.

Perhaps we ought to save our praise until Airbnb affords us the same access to justice it reserves for itself. No matter the name-dropping reports, electronic mea culpas, and pinky-swear promises to think about discrimination *really hard*, Airbnb is at its core a capitalist enterprise. And like its corporate peers in and out of Silicon Valley, its pledge is to profit first. In this instance, profit dictates that submitting to civil rights law is too great a financial liability for too little PR return. As such, Airbnb can never be entrusted to take responsibility for our civil rights. ❖

THE THREE HOT TRENDS IN SILICON VALLEY HORSESHIT

by FREDRIK DEBOER

For a long time I told the same basic joke about Silicon Valley, just updating as some new walled garden network replicated long-existing technology in a format better able to attract VC cash and, presumably, get them ad dollars.

2002, Friendster: At last, a way to connect with friends on the internet!
2003, Photobucket: At last, a way to post pictures on the internet!
2003, Myspace: At last, a way to connect with friends on the internet!
2004, Flickr: At last, a way to post pictures on the internet!
2004, Facebook: At last, a way to connect with friends on the internet!
2005, YouTube: At last, a way to post video on the internet!
2006, Twitter: At last, a way to post text on the internet!
2010, Instagram: At last, a way to post pictures on the internet!
2013, Vine: At last, a way to post video on the internet!
2013, YikYak: At last, a way to post text on the internet!

You get the idea. An industry that never stops lauding itself for its creativity and innovation has built its own success mythology by endlessly repackaging the same banal functions that have existed for about as long as the Web.

It seems, though, that SnapChat will be the last big new player in "social" for awhile, at least until the kids get their dander up for something new. What's the new hotness in an industry that exemplifies 21st century American capitalism, in that it's a cannibalistic hustle where only the most shameless hucksters survive? As someone who rides the New York subway every day and is forced to look at its ads, let me take you on a journey...

GIVE AWAY THE RAZORS, MAKE YOUR MONEY ON DRM-INFECTED BLADES

Quip: toothbrush delivery service startup

Juicero deserved all of the attention it got and more—it was so pure, so impossibly telling about the pre-apocalyptic American wasteland. It was also just one of a whole constellation of companies that now operate under an ingenious model: take some banal product that has been sold forever at low margins, attach the disposable part to a proprietary system that pretends to improve it but really just locks people into a particular vendor, add a touch screen manufactured by Chinese tweens, call it "Smart," and sell it to schlubby dads too indebted to buy a midlife crisis car and too unattractive to have an affair. As the Juicero saga shows us, you don't even really have to honor the whole "make the initial purchase cheap" stage. Just ensure that you market your boondoggle to the kind of person who stood in line to buy an $800 "smartwatch" that poorly duplicates a tenth of the functions already present in the phone in their pocket. (You know, those dead inside.) Then get them "locked into your ecosystem," which means "get their credit card number and automatically charge them every month for your version of a product that can be purchased at the supermarket for a third of the price." Profit, baby, profit.

Are you the kind of person who is so worn down by the numbing drudgery of late capitalism that you can't summon the energy to drag a two-ounce toothbrush across your gums for 90 seconds a day? Well, the electric toothbrush has been a thing for a long time. And that means that it's not good enough. After years of deadening your limbic system through psychotropic medication, video games, and increasingly-extreme internet pornography, you need something new. Enter Quip, the company disrupting the toothbrush. Quip wants you to know that its product is inexpensive, despite the fact that it will charge you $40/year for its "refill plan" and I just bought five perfectly functional regular toothbrushes for $1 in the most expensive city in the country. Of course, you're also buying the convenience of automation—who wants to run down stairs to the bodega for a toothbrush when you can hand over your banking info to a toothbrush company? Bonus points to Quip for emphasizing simplicity while hawking a product that employs an engineering team to innovate the concept of a brush.

I'VE GOT ONE WORD FOR YOU, BENJAMIN, JUST ONE WORD: RENTS.

RentBerry: rent bidding app to auction housing

It's one thing to take a product that is already cheap and just fine and replace it with a vastly more expensive version that locks people into exploitative proprietary systems for years in exchange for giving them a 15 second hit of dopamine derived from Going Digital. I mean, Quip and Juicero and whatever Silicon Valley dildo company is selling dongs with DRM-equipped replaceable heads are actually fundamentally selling you a product. It's a horribly, uselessly expensive product that could only be embraced by chumps, but it's a tangible thing. The real next level is just inserting yourself into someone else's transaction and collecting a % while offering nothing. (When this is a job, we call it "consulting.") Why charge a lot for the blades when you can charge a lot for literally nothing? RentBerry is useful here because the word "rent" is literally in the name.

Here's the value proposition that RentBerry offers. For landlords who are already raking in record profits, RentBerry provides a chance at making even more, as potential tenants must set upon each other in a dystopian nightmare auction system that compels them to ask, how much am I willing to pay to avoid sleeping in the park, really? For tenants, RentBerry offers… well, the opportunity to pay more in a pre-existing housing crisis, the chance to make the process of finding an apartment an even more horrific exercise in stress and disappointment, a reason to hate faceless strangers with even more intensity, and more reason to view city life as a ceaseless Nietzschean struggle from which they will never escape. What RentBerry gets in return is, eventually, a % of your already hideously overpriced rent, for the duration of the lease. I bet you can't wait to know a portion of your rent check is going not just to the landlord you hate but also to a company that did nothing beyond giving him the ability to take more of your money! Of course, if you live in New York, your "landlord" might very well be a hedge fund that also funded RentBerry! Sweet, right? RentBerry will tell you that tenants might get a deal thanks to the auction system. Of course, it's landlords who chose to use RentBerry, not tenants, and if landlords thought they were losing money on the deal they'd never use it, meaning the service's very reason for being necessarily entails grabbing more and more tenant money. Details!

WE LOVE DOERS SO MUCH WE WANT TO GIVE THEM A HELLISH EXISTENCE OF ENDLESS PRECARITY

Fiverr: Marketplace for Freelance Gigs by "Doers"

This is the type of company that has become inescapable in NYC subway advertising. Not coincidentally the time I spend contemplating stepping in front of the train to enjoy the sweet oblivion of death is also up dramatically. There's legit dozens of these companies out there.

The basic idea here is that 40 years of stagnant wages, the decline of unions, the death of middle class blue collar jobs, the demise of pensions, and a general slide of the American working world into a PTSD-inducing horror show of limitless vulnerability has been too easy on workers. I'm sorry, Doers, or whatever the fuck. The true beauty of these ads is that they are all predicated on mythologizing the very workers who their service is intended to immiserate. Sorry about your medical debt; here's a photo of a model who we paid in "exposure" over ad copy written by an intern who we paid in college credit that cost $3,000 a credit hour. Enjoy. The purpose of these companies is to take whatever tiny sense of social responsibility businesses might still feel to give people stable jobs and destroy it, replacing whatever remains of the permanent, salaried, benefit-enjoying workforce with an army of desperate freelancers who will never go to bed feeling secure in their financial future for their entire lives. These companies are for people who think temp agencies are too coddling and well remunerative. The only service they sell is making it easier to kill minimally stable, well-compensated jobs. That's it. They have no other function. They valorize Doers while killing workers. They siphon money from the desperate throngs back to the employers who will use them up and throw them aside like a discarded Juicero bag and, of course, to themselves and their shareholders. That's it. That's all they are. That's all they do. They are the final logic of late capitalism, the engine of human creativity applied to the essential work of making life worse for regular people.

Our society is a hellish wasteland and I am dying inside. ❖

GENERATI

ROBERT J. STROSER

ON *Wealth*

Lauren Greenfield's new book shows the hideous results of capitalism.

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, THE ECONOMIST PUBLISHED A BRIEF ARTICLE ARGUING that money was making Native Americans poor and lazy. The piece, entitled "Of Slots and Sloth," featured a photograph of a grinning Native man at a slot machine, and concluded that the distribution of casino revenue to tribe members ended up making them poorer by disincentivizing them from working. Citing a study from the *American Indian Law Journal*, *The Economist* said that while Native American reservations were plagued by poverty, alcoholism, and poor health, the "biggest problem" of all might be the distribution of gaming money among tribes, since it created indolence and held back innovation. Tribes that shared their revenue among members remained in poverty; by contrast, a tribe that *didn't* distribute revenue had instead "used its casino profits to diversify into other businesses, such as harvesting huge mollusks for export to China." Mollusk-harvesting was thought, by the *Economist*, to be a far more responsible use of Native Americans' resources.

The *Economist*'s article was, of course, racist. But the problem wasn't that the magazine had suggested that cash payments made Native Americans slothful. That is, after all, a question to be answered empirically (though it is also laden with value judgments about the alleged shamefulness of slothfulness). No, as with so much bigoted social science, the *racist* aspect is less about the questions that are asked than the questions that are *not* asked. There has never been anything wrong with the theory that being given free money can disincline a person to work. What's objectionable is that this pathology is only ever detected in poor members of racial minority groups. Nobody ever proposes that the rich may be slothful thanks to the passive income that accrues from capital. Yet if a few hundred dollars a month from the reservation casino has corrosive effects on the work ethic of the destitute Indian, just imagine how fucked up the children of the wealthy must be. Why should there be so much investigation into what might be wrong with poor people, and so little investigation into what might be wrong with rich people? Dependency and dysfunction, if these are indeed useful sociological concepts, are surely just as present in those with money as in those without it.

This has been a recurring problem for sociology generally. We have endless studies of poor people, but very few of rich people. Bestselling ethnographies like Alice Goffman's *On the Run* and Matthew Desmond's *Evicted* examine the chaos and hardship faced by the American underclass, and there are plenty of diagnoses of the social and cultural ills of the deprived. But the affluent don't get treated as specimens for social scientific study in the same way. Of course, we may believe that it's good and proper for poorer people to receive the bulk of the attention; after all, to the extent that the lives of the poor give us insight into how poverty is generated, we might learn some lessons about how to stop it. But it's also odd that social science knows so much more about the private and personal lives of one class than the other. After all, if any group qualifies as specimens of dysfunction, it is the wealthy.

Above: Christina, 21, a Walmart pharmacy technician, en route to her wedding in Cinderella's glass coach, drawn by six miniature white ponies and with bewigged coachman, Walt Disney World, Orlando, Florida, 2013. Previous page: Limo Bob in his office, Chicago, 2008. Bob owns a 100-foot limo that made the Guinness Book of World Records for being the world's longest limousine. Photographs and text © 2017 Lauren Greenfield

L AUREN GREENFIELD'S GENERATION WEALTH (Phaidon, $75.00) begins in Bel Air. Greenfield attended high school in Southern California, and became fascinated with the way social status and wealth operated there. She has since spent three decades photographing the lives of both the affluent and the aspirationally affluent. Generation Wealth, a massive compilation of photographs and interviews from over Greenfield's career, is an attempt to provide a comprehensive look at the role of money, celebrity, and consumption in American life.

The Los Angeles tweens and teens we meet early in the book have become defined by the search for status through material acquisition. They buy multi-thousand dollar handbags to take to class. Other kids in their grade are given BMWs when they turn sixteen. They compete over whose family can afford the best designer clothes, the most elaborate bar mitzvahs, the biggest houses. We meet a 12-year-old whose working-class mother is bankrupting herself to finance the girl's love of Ed Hardy designer tank tops. The daughter knows she is putting great financial strain on her mom, and says she sort of feels bad about it, but explains: *"I want the world; I want designer clothes, I want eternal happiness, the fountain of youth. I want to be able to afford ritzy private schools. I want the best of everything. Money is most definitely important for everything on my list of what I want."* It is very difficult not to hate her.

We meet Emanuel, a sad-eyed teenager at the prestigious Har-

vard-Westlake high school whose family is not well-off, but who pressures his parents to buy him Cartier and Dior so that he can fit in at school. "I fantasize about being rich all the time," he says. He dreams of having enough money to buy anything he wanted at the Hermès store, where a light summer jacket can run nearly $15,000. Emanuel thinks money might help his parents' marital tensions, which often arise from arguments over spending (and are possibly exacerbated by Emanuel's own penchant for Gucci sweaters).

Some of the kids we meet are impressively self-aware. They realize that the world they live in is shallow and ultimately unfulfilling. "Money has ruined me," says one thirteen year old. Emanuel knows it too:

"I've seen kids whose lives have been ruined by money. One of my friends lives with his mother in this huge empty house in Bel-Air—it's like this skinny little lonely boy and his skinny lonely mom up in her bedroom. I was there four times, and I saw his mom once, for a passing moment. And I'm like 'Do you see her more than that?' And he goes 'No.' They talk through the intercom a lot, like, 'I'm going to dinner.' 'Ok, bye.' I felt bad for him. He's unbelievably lonely and depressed. I think that distance is created when you have a lot of money."

Greenfield's Southern California is a world of ludicrous excess, where families have dog groomers, personal trainers, nutritionists, and nannies, and where one's worth is measured in jewelry, cars, and handbags. It is also a world of acute image-consciousness, where people spend unbelievable sums of money attempting to remain youthful. "I'm unhappy with my cuticles," says one 11-year-old who owns 32 pairs of designer jeans.

From L.A., Greenfield travels across the country, uncovering an

American mania for consumption and excess. We meet Norbert Aleman, a septuagenarian cabaret proprietor who lives with five women and thirty peacocks in an Italianate Las Vegas mansion. There are the parents who pay an interior designer $40,000 to create a pink princess bedroom for their toddler. (The moment it is complete, the daughter announces that she doesn't like pink anymore.) We visit a nightclub where a flying "Champagne Fairy" dangling from a wire bounces from table to table delivering high-priced alcohol, with one bottle costing $250,000. There are galas, premieres, and balls. Women in ridiculous hats attend horse

entirely. Jackie Siegel wears $10,000 ostrich-feather pants, and her shopping budget is up to $1 million a year. She has 13 children, because "when I found out I could have nannies, I just kept having kids." ("I think she's from South America," Jackie says of one nanny. Another nanny—who has not seen her own children in nearly 20 years—lives in an outbuilding originally designed as a playhouse for the kids, who rapidly grew bored of it.) The Siegels are upgrading to Versailles because they feel as if their current 26,000 square-foot house is too small, even though they have to travel round it on Segways and call people in other

"GREENFIELD'S SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA IS A WORLD OF LUDICROUS EXCESS, WHERE ONE'S WORTH IS MEASURED IN JEWELRY, CARS, AND HANDBAGS."

races, men in cufflinks brood behind ornate desks. People consume caviar and truffles. (I realized that I have never actually seen either a truffle or caviar in real life, and did not know that there were still people who ate them. I am grateful to Greenfield for documenting such things.) We meet the "old money": Harvard undergrads boozing in tuxes and sixth-generation members of the Newport yacht club. Then there are the gaudy *nouveau riche*, like luxury car rental tycoon "Limo Bob" in his furs and chains, or the McMansion-dwellers who stock their enormous libraries with books purchased by the foot. (One former model has elaborate built-in mahogany bookshelves filled entirely with hundreds of copies of a single volume: her own self-published collection of fashion photographs.)

Then *Generation Wealth* travels around the world, showing us how global mass media has allowed American hedonism and excess to be exported abroad. There is a Chinese real estate billionaire who lives in an exact replica of the White House complete with Oval Office, and who has built a 1/3 scale Mount Rushmore sculpture in his backyard. Also in China, a Harvard Business School graduate runs a finishing school where she teaches children of the country's new elite to pronounce "Givenchy" and "Versace." A Canadian socialite who surrounds herself with all things frilly and froofy says she has modeled her life after candy-factory heiress Truly Scrumptious from *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. We see Dubai's most lavish hotels, Moscow's oligarchical opulence. Everywhere, Greenfield succeeds in finding the most extreme absurdities and ironies that emerge from gross inequality, like the Russian models who wear designer "peasant chic" clothes. American hip hop producer will.i.am "regards his eight-bedroom home [in Los Feliz] as a place to create rather than a living space and typically sleeps in a small apartment down the block." At a Santa Monica charity auction, women drink Moët and bid on designer handbags to benefit disadvantaged children. Another fundraiser for poor kids is described as "the social event of the year."

Even amidst this vast carnival of profligacy and waste, however, Florida couple Jackie and David Siegel stand out. The Siegels, who have made a fortune in the timeshare business, are in the middle of building the largest single-family home in America, a 90,000 square foot faux-château just outside Walt Disney World. They call it "Versailles," and when completed it will feature six pools, two movie theaters (one for adults, one for children), and an ice skating rink. The master bedroom alone is 10,000 square feet (which Mrs. Siegel acknowledges is "larger than most people's homes.")

The Siegels have taken conspicuous consumption to another level

rooms via cell phone. Asked why he has decided to build a 90,000 square foot home, David Siegel replies: "Because I can." (Unsurprisingly, Siegel is a fan of Donald Trump, whose presidential victory he calls "the best thing that has happened to me since I discovered sex.")

REENFIELD IS NOT JUST INTERESTED IN THE SPECTACLE of exorbitant wealth, however. She wants to know not only how those at the very top behave, but how the aspiration for needless material goods has come to affect individuals from *all* classes. She is interested in what she calls "the influence of affluence," the powerful hold that the fantasy of material prosperity has come to hold over the popular imagination. Greenfield implies that the "American Dream" has morphed from a desire to have a decent but modest life to a lust for as much as one can get, that instead of striving for relative comfort people now pursue gain for its own sake.

So we don't just see the kids in Santa Monica; Greenfield also photographs working class teens in East L.A. and South L.A., to show how wealth shapes the value systems of even those who don't have it. A Hispanic high schooler spends two entire years saving the $600 necessary for a limousine and clothes for his prom. People will spend what little they have on status symbols like high-priced sneakers and brand-name T-shirts. Greenfield reiterates the classic critique of consumption: that people come to find meaning in the stuff they have, or the stuff they *think* they'll have someday, rather than in community, friendship, and family ties. Life becomes hollow and superficial, as jeans and jewels take the place of human beings in our hierarchy of values and priorities.

That superficiality goes beyond an obsession with couture clothes. Greenfield's photographs also document the pernicious effects of the beauty industry in packaging and selling impossible ideals of women's bodies, whether through Barbie dolls or child beauty pageants ("I'll be a superstar. Money money money. I would have money as big as this room," says six-year-old pageant contestant and reality TV star Eden Wood). Greenfield has some disturbing portraits of the world of plastic surgery, as women and girls (we see an L.A. teenager recovering from a nose job) modify themselves, sometimes to extremes, chasing an illusory perfection fed to them by mass media.

At the extreme end, women's bodies are simply commodified and sold outright, through strip clubs and pornography. While she does not give an opinion on whether and how sex work should be regulated—a virtue of the book is that the photographs' subjects are allowed

"IN THE BACKGROUND OF ALL OF THIS LURKS DONALD TRUMP...

to speak for themselves, with Greenfield's voice seldom intruding—it is clear that Greenfield is dubious about the contemporary progressive consensus that sex work can be liberating or is indistinguishable from other work. Greenfield is clear that *stigmatizing* sex workers is wrong (we meet a college student who was kicked off the track team after it was discovered that she stripped to pay her tuition), and that these occupations can provide a certain *financial* freedom. Nevertheless, she wants us to be disturbed by an industry that turns women into lumps of flesh to be sold, an industry that only exists *because* women need money and men have it. Sex work, for Greenfield, is definitely degrading, though perhaps not much more so than any other kind of work that reduces the human being to a product.

IN THE BACKGROUND OF ALL OF THIS LURKS DONALD Trump, the man who has spent a lifetime selling people on a fantasy of the good life, and whose operation of the Miss Universe pageant and notorious abuse of women tie him closely to Greenfield's idea of a capitalism that is ruthlessly predatory and patriarchal. Trump's election makes for a fitting denouement to Greenfield's thirty-year story, embodying all of her themes: greed, reality television, wealth without taste, the hollow lust for fame and power, sexism and objectification, and lies upon lies. As she says:

> *"Our highest public servant is a real-estate developer and reality-TV star who lives in a penthouse on the sixty-sixth floor emblazoned with his name and decorated in a Louis XIV style, with ceilings painted with 24-karat gold, marble walls, and Corinthian columns."*

Trump's pitch to the American people was the same poisonous fiction that capitalism has been telling them for decades. As inequality worsens, Trump says: vote for me, and you can have it all. Unfortunately, you can't have it all. All you end up with, like the students who spent $30,000 on a "Trump University" education, is a cardboard cutout of Donald Trump. He still lives in Trump Tower, and you still live in your shitty apartment. You can max out your credit cards to buy a Louis Vuitton handbag, but the people who run the world will still run it, and the doors of the club are never going to actually be open to you. If you're lucky, the billionaires may generously allow you to pay them every cent you have for the privilege of *feeling* like you're in the club.

But lies can never be lived indefinitely, and Greenfield's book is also a chronicle of what happens when bubbles burst and people come face to face with reality. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, we meet the families who thought they had it made, only to suddenly

find themselves with nothing. Greenfield surveys an America of broken dreams, empty swimming pools, and ghost estates. People squat in foreclosed houses, and half-built, uninhabited subdivisions are slowly reclaimed by nature.

The Siegel family never finishes building Versailles. People stop buying timeshares and David Siegel is forced to lay off large numbers of his employees and household staff, and to rent out his Rolls Royce. One of the Siegels' daughters, Victoria, who seemed to have a pretty skeptical and down-to-earth perspective on her family's outrageous lifestyle, dies of a prescription drug overdose at the age of 18.

There is a deep sadness that runs through *Generation Wealth.* Over and over, the oldest clichés about money and happiness are proven correct. People with money are lonely, cruel, and unfulfilled. Their lives are marked by divorce, drug abuse, and cultural degeneracy. Tolstoy's famous observation that "every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" is shown to be nonsense. At least among the rich, unhappy families look the same wherever you go.

The lessons are confirmed through testimony from some recovering 1-percenters. A former Wall Street trader can't believe he once thought a $3.6 million dollar bonus was disappointingly small, and has dropped out to found a charity. A German fraudster wanted by the FBI has now (possibly cynically) embraced asceticism and Christianity, and declares that the pursuit of wealth will lead to ruin, since "capital has no conscience, it just wants to multiply."

It's not just those who have left the rat race who realize how laughable and meaningless it all is. One of the striking things about *Generation Wealth* is just how many people are fully cognizant of the silliness of their material lusts. They joke at their own expense, they know they are spending money on foolish things and that they have no good justification for why they want the things they want. Yet just as with racial prejudice or sexual desire or any of the other mysterious forces governing human behavior, knowing you have it doesn't allow you to will yourself to be free of it.

Prestige and status are such strange things. You can know that they're irrational yet still intensely desire them. You can realize that the cool kids are all a bunch of assholes who will grow up to live largely miserable lives, yet still feel flattered when they like you and rotten if they ignore you. *Generation Wealth* shows just how fundamentally ridiculous people's value systems can be, yet how totally inscrutable the process is by which those value systems are implanted in the human subconscious. Why is it that everybody can know something leaves them unhappy yet continue to do it? If money doesn't buy true satisfaction, and nobody would deny that, why haven't people stopped spending their lives chasing dollars? Money must buy *something*. David Siegel says that it just allows you to be "unhappy in a good section of town." Still, even after learning that lesson, Siegel himself continued to work twelve-hour days trying to rip off people with time-shares so that he could build a palace. He never saw his daughter, and had no idea she was addicted to drugs until her body was found after the overdose. Now, he's seen the full tragic consequences of the worship of money. Yet as of 2016, Siegel was *still* trying to build the palace, *still* worshiping Trump. How can a force be so strong that even the death of a child can't prise a person free from it?

Greenfield has compiled a bleak document of contemporary life. To her, social mobility is "fictitious and provided by designer brands." We have witnessed the "erosion of family, religious, and community ties," and are now locked in a endless futile cycle of aspirational consumption, buying stuff we don't need to sustain a dream that will never come true. Everything is bought and sold, nothing is sacred, and the shopocalypse is nigh.

In this vision, America is Las Vegas, Los Angeles, and Wall Street. It is *Toddlers & Tiaras* and *My Super Sweet Sixteen.* It's McMansions. It's Lil Jon's diamond grill. It is Hugh Hefner's house and Kim Kar-

Xue Qiwen, 43, in her Shanghai apartment, decorated with furniture from her favorite brand, Versace, 2005. In 1994 Xue started a company that sells industrial cable and has since run four more. She is a member of three golf clubs, each costing approximately $100,000 to join. Photograph and text ©2017 Lauren Greenfield

dashian's ass. It is a country of strip clubs, casinos, and prosperity gospel megachurches. It is TrumpLand. The final photograph in *Generation Wealth* is of a naked stripper crawling to pick up dollar bills from a pile on the floor. It is clear what Greenfield thinks of us.

B UT THERE ARE MORE THINGS IN HEAVEN AND EARTH than casinos and strippers. The TrumpLand vision of America and the 21st century is neither fully complete nor fully accurate. Like all attempts to formulate grand, all-encompassing theories, *Generation Wealth* sacrifices complexity and nuance for the sake of rhetorical effectiveness. As a result, we get a more depressing view of the world than we necessarily ought to hold.

Because she is a top-flight photojournalist, Greenfield has managed to track down some uncommonly vapid people. Yet it is not clear how typical they actually are. Greenfield's understanding of the world was forged during her youth in Los Angeles and her undergraduate years at Harvard. But these places are not the world, and the world is not these places. Southern California is *known* for its unusually high quantities of shallow and self-absorbed backstabbing ladder-climbers, who are drawn there because it is the hub of the entertainment industry. Thus if we want to understand what "people" are like, focusing disproportionately on L.A. will give us a funhouse-mirror perspective, one that exaggerates the prevalence of certain noxious traits.

As a piece of sociology, then, *Generation Wealth* is tainted by "selection bias": Greenfield wishes to demonstrate how greedy and materialistic our society is, and has done so by finding and photographing lots of greedy and materialistic people. But that doesn't actually address the question

the book is supposedly answering, namely "How important is wealth in defining people's identities today?" That's because we're looking only at the people whose identities *are* defined by wealth, rather than looking at a random cross-section of the human population.

Now, we might think that Greenfield is right, that this tendency *is* shared widely, meaning there's nothing unrepresentative about her sample of airheaded Angelenos, billionaire Muscovites, chain-wearing hip-hop artists, Wall Street fraudsters, aging Playboy bunnies, bankrupted condo flippers, and Florida timeshare kingpins. But I suspect that's not the case. After all, *Generation Wealth* rarely dwells on the lives of those we see in the background: the nannies and dog groomers themselves. When we do hear from them, they *don't* actually seem to have bought into the value system that Greenfield ascribes to "us." In fact, they seem somewhat bemused by it all.

But Greenfield explicitly wants to make a statement about what "we" are like, rather than what a particularly revolting subsection of us are like. As she says, her book is about how "we, as Americans, have gone from a traditional ethos, underpinned by Judeo-Christian values, of modesty, thrift, humility, and discretion… of helping others less fortunate, to a culture of bling, celebrity, and narcissism." She asks: "How have we afflicted ourselves with a pathological state of material longing?" She even brings in lefty doom-preacher Chris Hedges, who says that nowadays "commodities and celebrity culture define what it means to belong, how we recognize our place in society, and how we conduct our lives."

It's the "we" that is such a problem. One is tempted to answer: "Well, *you*, maybe. But leave 'we' out of this." What does it even mean to say that "we" are "pathological" in our material longings, that "we" no longer have humility, and live in a culture of bling? Does it mean that everyone

does? And if it's only some people, then which people, and how many? It's obviously true that the tendencies Greenfield describes are present in American life, and that large numbers of people embrace them. But saying that those tendencies *are* American life, that they define us, risks mistaking a cartoon for reality. It's certainly tempting, now that Donald Trump is the president, to think of Trumpism as a kind of national philosophy. But the vast majority of this people in this country *didn't* vote for Donald Trump. He was hugely unpopular. A suggestion that Trump is a representative ambassador for the American ethos is simply wrong.

The question of representation comes into sharp relief whenever Greenfield photographs African Americans. In a photography book over 500 pages long, ostensibly about the role of wealth in "our" lives, nearly every black man in the book is a rapper (though Al Sharpton also pops up), and many of the black women are strippers. But, and this should not need to be said, *most black men are not rappers*. Greenfield has singled out the most materially ambitious subset of black males she can find, the ones who most embrace the kind of lifestyle that she is attempting to document, and suggested we can extrapolate from them. But we can't. We should no more judge the black community by its most hedonistic rappers than we should judge white people by *Duck Dynasty* or NPR. You do not obtain a useful sociological understanding of a group by singling out its most ludicrously stereotypical members. It would be different if Greenfield had found the same tendencies among black teachers, truck drivers, insurance agents, postal workers, and clergy. But we should probably not allow the kids who want to throw fistfuls of dollar bills in the air to "make it rain" to speak on behalf of their race.

The good news, then, is that the world probably isn't full of the kind of narcissistic people that Greenfield's photos so vividly depict. We are not, thank goodness, all living in one enormous Southern California. Dog plastic surgery and toddlers in thongs are the exception rather than the rule. The ruthless pursuit of lucre is only one of the myriad ways in which people fill life's deep existential void. But there are lots of others.

S TILL, IT'S NOT NECESSARY TO BELIEVE THAT "WE" ARE in a "generation wealth," or to buy into the apocalyptic ravings of Chris Hedges, in order to accept that capitalism does incubate a kind of cultural sickness. Everything Greenfield documents *is* disturbing, and it's certainly also common. The Trumpian wealth fantasy may not be everyone's dream, but heaven knows it's plenty of people's. And rampant consumerism does seem to be grinding up all worldly resources to build luxury sedans and shopping plazas.

I do think the problem is properly defined as "consumerism" or "capitalism" rather than "materialism," though. A mild materialism is fine and harmless. Nice things are nice, and people should get to have comfortable chairs, big computer monitors, and soft fabrics in a variety of colors. An appreciation for quality objects is one of the joys of being alive. The problem seems to come when acquisition becomes the end rather than the means, when you cease to actually *enjoy* the things you buy, and begin to be compelled by the act of buying itself.

This is the dangerous tendency that capitalism engenders. Because it needs constantly to extract our money in the pursuit of profit, it does not tell us to have and enjoy lots of high-quality goods. It tells us to keep buying and buying, *no matter what*. The moment you get an iPhone—a truly incredible product, if we're being honest—your model will be outdated and you will be encouraged to upgrade. It's not the materialism that's the problem, but the anxiety that comes of being told you never have enough. The problem isn't that you and the Joneses both bought hot tubs, it's that you are counting the number of jets in each other's jacuzzis rather than sitting back and enjoying the bubbles.

The result of the status competition is that there are intolerable amounts of waste, and that that waste is *for nothing*, because it does not produce happiness. I am all for wasting resources on frivolity, if we all have a good time. But when we don't, when we destroy the earth and all we get in return is a spiritual vacuum (and a stupid T-shirt), then some terrible mistake is being made.

As I say, though, not all of us are dwelling in a dystopia of nihilism and shopaholism. It is not Black Friday all over the world. Capitalism does indeed create a pernicious ugliness and lack of values. It does cause people to buy some of the most utterly pointless rubbish at the most outrageous prices (although, oddly enough, it's often the consumption habits of women in particular, such as handbags and shoes, that are portrayed as the most absurd and unjustifiable, even such a feminist-friendly project as *Generation Wealth*). And it does cause people to be simultaneously incredibly busy, incredibly insecure, and incredibly sad. But it's not all there is, and one should remember that for every person maxing out their credit cards at the mall or throwing wads of dollar bills at a stripper, there is another hanging out with friends at a dive bar, getting ice cream with their parents, or falling in love by a fire.
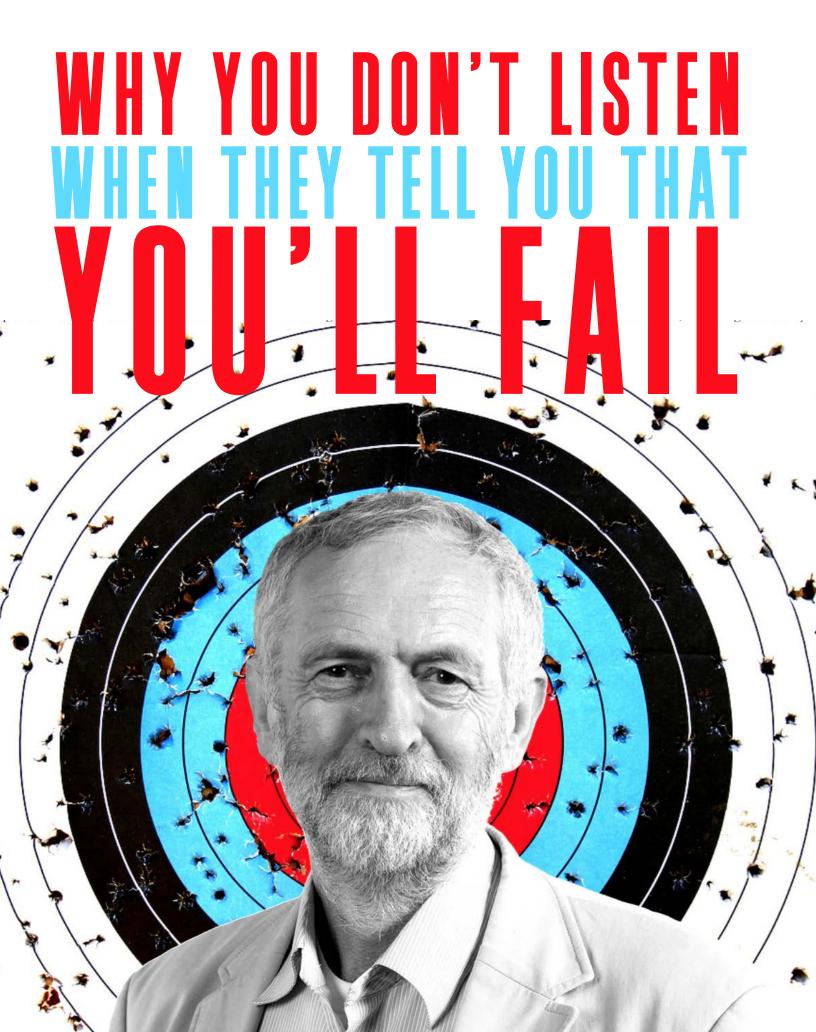
As a "theory of everything" that tells us "who we are now," *Generation Wealth* is far too broad. As a document of the lives of certain people, and a particular hideous cultural consequence of capitalism, it is extraordinarily thorough and disturbing. Greenfield has made a serious contribution to a neglected area of sociology, and helped address the disparity between studies of the poor and studies of the affluent. She has probed, using incredibly vivid photographs and revealing interviews, the little-explored links between economics and culture. But it's important to remember that we are not, all of us, a generation wealth. We are, like human beings of every generation, motivated by a conflicting and complicated set of aspirations and motivations. Capitalism has the terrifying tendency to turn people into the sorts of insatiably avaricious people depicted in this book. But it has not yet come to define us all.

And God willing, it won't. ❖

LIFE
AS IT MUST BE LIVED.

A Magazine of Culture & Politics
CURRENT AFFAIRS

CURRENT AFFAIRS
A Magazine of Mystery & Delight

WHY YOU DON'T LISTEN WHEN THEY TELL YOU THAT YOU'LL FAIL

CLICHÉS ARE OFTEN CLICHÉS BECAUSE THEY'RE true, and there's a lot of truth to that old one: first they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they attack you, then you win. Since being elected to head the party nearly two years ago, British Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn had largely been written off as a pitiful and incompetent joke. Now, he has secured the largest increase in Labour's vote share since 1945, and destroyed the Conservatives' hold on government overnight. Some jokes do not stay funny for long.

Tory prime minister Theresa May had called June's "snap election" because she believed there was no way she could lose. With a substantial Conservative majority already, and the Labour Party having been universally declared moribund, it seemed like the perfect moment for May to consolidate her gains in advance of the upcoming Brexit negotiations. May was so extraordinarily certain that the Conservatives were poised for victory that she didn't even bother to attend the televised debates against the other parties. But the campaign quickly became a lesson in hubris. Conservatives began with a more than 20-point polling lead over Labour, but in the month or so before the vote, everything began to unravel. Labour released a well-received policy manifesto while Theresa May struggled to defend her party's disastrous proposal for what was branded a "dementia tax." And despite multiple horrific terrorist attacks, May was unable to even seize on the issue of national security. As part of the right's ongoing effort to slash the size of government, May had overseen massive reductions in the numbers of police officers. ("Austerity means terror" is an effective message to neutralize the Conservative notion that you can simultaneously fire a bunch of public sector workers and keep the country stable and secure.) May performed badly on television, while Corbyn plunged himself into campaigning, drawing huge crowds and becoming steadily more confident and effective. The poll gap shrunk daily; one week before the election, one poll even put Labour ahead of the Conservatives.

Election night was a bloodbath for the Conservatives. They won more seats, of course; there was no way they wouldn't. But instead of increasing their majority, they lost it entirely, falling short of the number of MPs necessary in order to actually form a government. In order to continue in power, they were forced to strike a deal with Northern Ireland's far-right—and deeply homophobic—Democratic Unionist Party. (It's ironic that a Conservative Party that spent the campaign trying to tie Jeremy Corbyn to Irish paramilitaries could only govern by joining with a party that has… ties to Irish paramilitaries.) Headlines the next day ranged from the comparatively mild ("MAY-HEM" in *The Daily Star* and "THERESA DISMAY: HER GAMBLE IS DISASTER" in *The Sun*) to the outright malicious ("BLOODY IDIOT" in *The New European*). The consensus verdict, even among members of May's party, is that the election was a catastrophic blunder, possibly the miscalculation of the century.

Part of the story of the British election is about the implosion of the Conservative Party, and the stunning levels of arrogance, ineptitude, and obliviousness demonstrated by Theresa May. But more significant was the extraordinary degree to which Corbyn's Labour Party shattered expectations after being told repeatedly that it was destined for decimation. Corbyn attracted a wave of support from young people (who actually showed up to the polls for once, giving credence to the theory that the reason they don't vote is not because they're lazy but because they're uninspired by the usual choices on offer). He ran a positive campaign focused on the party manifesto, which actually contained concrete promises as well as plans for how to pay for them. And he laid out a clear and compassionate vision for Britain in plain-spoken and relatable terms. It turns out that if you offer people something real, and you are sincere and straightforward in your convictions, they will take a chance on your ideas.

BUT THESE HAVE NOT BEEN THE ASPECTS OF THE election dwelled on by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, whose coverage downplayed the importance of Corbyn in the event. To them, the election wasn't Labour's gain, it was a Conservative loss, and this wasn't a tide of support for left-wing ideas, but a "confused" Britain uncertain of itself. The *Times* didn't really know how Corbyn himself fit into the story, describing him as a "far-left urbanite" eccentrically obsessed with Nicaragua and jam. (And possibly a terrorist sympathizer.) Because, for the American press, it is simply a matter of dogma that a left-wing program cannot attract mass electoral support, the British election had to be viewed mostly as a referendum on Brexit, or the product of some other mysterious force such as a national identity crisis. It could not possibly be that people actually liked what Corbyn's Labour stood for.

But the election was a victory for Corbyn, and for left-wing ideas more broadly. The party's turnaround began precisely at the moment when it released its policy manifesto; i.e. when the general public finally got a sense of what the Labour Party actually intended to do in power. The party managed almost-unprecedented gains; there has been nothing like it since Tony Blair's famous rise in 1997. Labour even managed to gain a parliamentary seat in Canterbury that had been held by Conservatives for 176 years. As a result of Labour's success, the UK Parliament has more women, more LGBTQ people, and more racial diversity than ever before in its history.

Already on election night, certain media commentators were rushing to say that the Labour Party did so well in spite of Corbyn rather than because of him, and that a different Labour leader would have won outright rather than simply diminishing the Conservatives' margin. Note, first, that this argument still silently concedes that all of the prophecies for Labour's doom under Corbyn were false. But it also requires us to believe that a different Labour leader could have gone beyond an already historic set of gains. And given who Corbyn's opponents have been in the previous leadership elections (a fungible pack of stuffed shirts whose names people barely remember), it is hard to imagine any of them doing better. Would tens of thousands of people have

showed up to an Andy Burnham rally? Would Owen Smith or Yvette Cooper have enthused a generation of young voters and campaigners? Since all of them were politically indistinguishable from Ed Miliband and Gordon Brown, who had already hemorrhaged Labour votes during their time in the leadership, we know full well that the answer to both of these questions is "Hell no they wouldn't have."

Corbyn's steady ascent is an encouraging testament to the power of persistence. Before his surprise selection as leader in 2015, Corbyn spent over thirty years in parliament as a marginal figure. Members of his own party thought of him as a political irrelevance, to the extent that they thought about him at all. "You really don't have to worry about Jeremy Corbyn suddenly taking over," Tony Blair told an interviewer in 1996, which would certainly hold true for a while. Back in the 1980s, when the BBC ran a story about the "scruffy" Labour back-benchers who were flouting parliamentary dress codes (Corbyn, a chief offender, wore a jumper hand-knitted for him by his mum), he was misidentified by the presenter as "Robin" Corbyn. Yet, mocked and ignored, he continued to diligently and patiently engage in activism and organizing, against war and nuclear weapons, and for economic equality and environmental justice.

It was possibly fortunate that by the time he was elected leader, Corbyn had gone through those decades of learning how to focus on one's agenda and ignore what people are saying (or not saying). The media campaign against Corbyn was, from his first day at the head of the party, savage. During the early months, he was attacked for everything from riding "a Chairman Mao-style bicycle" (A.K.A. "a bicycle") to being "disloyal" for standing silently during the national anthem rather than belting it out with patriotic gusto. His clothes were rubbish, he had a bizarre and possibly unhealthy obsession with manhole covers, and his policies were "from the 1970s" (always treated as an automatic slur, as though everything from the 70's must be the equivalent of floral ties and brown linoleum rather than, say, Ziggy Stardust). Oh, and what was more, he hated Jews and couldn't decide which was his true BFF: Hamas or the IRA.

In fact, there is actual empirical research on the media coverage of Corbyn, showing just how negative it has been. A report from scholars at the London School of Economics revealed the media had been "systematically vilifying the leader of the biggest opposition party, assassinating his character, ridiculing his personality and delegitimising his ideas and politics." A quantitative analysis from Loughborough University showed that the Labour Party was receiving an incredibly disproportionate amount of negative versus positive media coverage when compared with other parties.

By the end of the election campaign, after Corbyn had used television interviews and public appearances to convince the public he might not actually be Islington's answer to Fidel Castro, the tabloid papers had become desperate. They began throwing everything they could at him. "APOLOGISTS FOR TERROR," said *The Daily Mail* of Labour's

leaders. The Sun bleated about "JEZZA'S JIHADI COMRADES" and implied that its readership vote Tory in memory of the London bridge stabbing attack victims. One front page had a bulleted list of indictments against Corbyn, including "TERRORISTS' FRIEND," "NUCLEAR SURRENDER," and "MARXIST EXTREMIST."

This isn't limited to the trashiest outlets in the British press. The BBC was unduly nasty too, with Jeremy Paxman interrupting and hectoring Corbyn and Question Time staging an attempt to bully Corbyn into agreeing that he would nuke another country if he needed to. Over here, even moderately sympathetic *New York Times* columnists were calling Corbyn an anti-American Marxist and comparing him with Marine Le Pen. An overtly biased article in the news section carried the headline "For Britain's Labour Party, a Mild Defeat May Be Worst of All," and argued that the better Corbyn did, the worse off Labour would be, because "less ideological" centrists would continue to lose their influence in the party. (It did not occur to the *Times* that centrism is itself an ideology.)
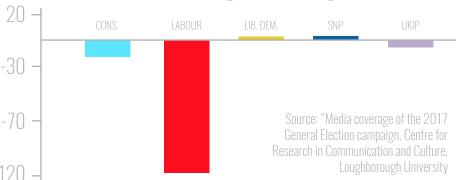
But throughout Corbyn's leadership, one of the most unexpectedly shameful media players has been the traditionally left-leaning *Guardian,* whose news department pushed misleading attack headlines ("Jeremy Corbyn accused of incompetence by MPs over antisemitic abuse"), and whose opinion pages published a long series of vicious denunciations by columnists and contributors. Jonathan Freedland wrote column after column insisting that Corbyn was "handing Britain to the Tories." Polly Toynbee asked readers: "Was ever there a more crassly inept politician than Jeremy Corbyn, whose every impulse is to make the wrong call on everything? … Politics has rarely looked grimmer." London mayor Sadiq Khan used the *Guardian* to endorse Corbyn's opponent in the second leadership contest, saying that Corbyn "has already proved that he is unable to organise an effective team, and has failed to win the trust and respect of the British people." Even the paper's leftiest columnist, Owen Jones, quickly lost faith in Corbyn. Jones declared Corbyn's leadership a failure and said that he would find it "hard to vote for [Corbyn] again." (Jones has now apologized for the premature obituary.) The *Guardian* editors allowed a man named Nick Cohen to publish what must have been one of the most vicious and most vulgar (and now, most wrong) columns ever printed in a newspaper op-ed page. Addressing Corbyn supporters, he said:

"Far from building a new consensus for previously unthinkable leftist ideas, Corbyn's victory has allowed the right to run riot. I won't insult your intelligence by asking whether you also believe the bullshit you were fed about a "genuinely radical" Labour party attracting people who did not vote to turn out for him... In my respectful opinion, your only honourable response will be to stop being a fucking fool by changing your fucking mind."
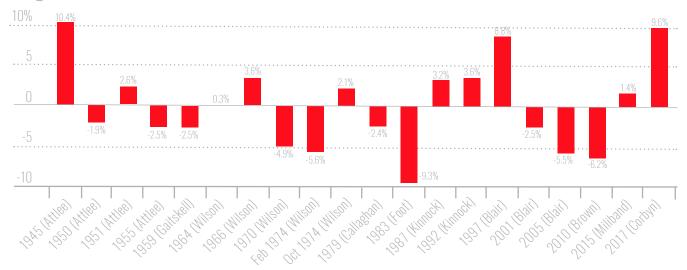
In spite of all of this, the moment Labour's poll numbers started to climb, the *Guardian* suddenly reversed itself. The change was almost overnight and almost verged on the ridiculous. Instantly gone were the floods of stories implying Corbyn was an anti-Semite. Instead, *Guard-*

NEGATIVE MEDIA & ELECTORAL SUCCESS

Ratio of Positive to Negative Coverage by Party

CONS.	LABOUR	LIB. DEM.	SNP	UKIP

(y-axis: 20, -30, -70, -120)

Change in Labour Vote Share from Previous Election

(y-axis: 10%, 5, 0, -5, -10)

Values: 10.4%, -1.9%, 2.6%, -2.5%, -2.5%, 0.3%, 3.6%, -4.9%, -5.6%, 2.1%, -2.4%, -9.3%, 3.2%, 3.6%, 8.8%, -2.5%, -5.5%, -6.2%, 1.4%, 9.6%

Categories: 1945 (Attlee), 1950 (Attlee), 1951 (Attlee), 1955 (Attlee), 1959 (Gaitskell), 1964 (Wilson), 1966 (Wilson), 1970 (Wilson), Feb 1974 (Wilson), Oct 1974 (Wilson), 1979 (Callaghan), 1983 (Foot), 1987 (Kinnock), 1992 (Kinnock), 1997 (Blair), 2001 (Blair), 2005 (Blair), 2010 (Brown), 2015 (Miliband), 2017 (Corbyn)

ian readers began to hear that Corbyn's attentive attitude toward his vegetable garden is reason to think he'd make a good Prime Minister. (It isn't.) Columnist Suzanne Moore had spent 18 straight months trying to undermine Corbyn ("No one thinks Corbyn can win... What vainglorious egotism, this willingness to kill a party for the thing he loves"; "a party without a point led by a rebel without a cause"; "weak and immoral" with "serial and tragic incompetence"; his politics feel like a "slow motion punch to the face"; plus a column arguing that Corbyn hates joy). But immediately after the election, Moore began lambasting the *Sun* and *Express* newspapers for having tried to undermine Corbyn! If you wanted to know whether these people are truly shameless, well, they are.

Of course, all of the commentators who spent so long heaping abuse on Corbyn will continue to pump out blog posts and columns. The mainstream media (or "capitalist hyena press" as it's sometimes colorfully—and rightly—called) never change, and pundits effectively have life tenure no matter how many times they are wrong. Fortunately, one thing the election has revealed is that most of their efforts are in vain. When voters are angry enough, and someone appeals to them with a strong enough program, no amount of propaganda can be totally effective. Of course, it's true that—vile as the Murdoch noise machine might be—there's

a special danger from liberal public intellectuals like Cohen, Moore, and Freedland, who portray themselves as pragmatic friends of the progressive cause while actually undermining it. But ultimately, none of it matters too much. Thankfully, pundits are shouting into the abyss, and nobody is listening.

THERE ARE A FEW LESSONS WE CAN LEARN FROM the British election. First, political reality can change very, very quickly, and nobody should declare that they know the limits of what is or is not possible. Predictions are a fool's game, and instead of becoming resigned to the reality one lives in, one must strategize to build the reality one wishes to see. Pessimism is suicidal, but it's also a lie: nobody knows what we are capable of if we don't give up. Jeremy Corbyn, like Bernie Sanders, had to go through 40 years of political obscurity before his moment came. Now, he could be Prime Minister before the year ends. Patience, courage, and hope should always be maintained.

The idea that a left-wing agenda makes you "unelectable" has been definitively disproven. It doesn't. The anti-Tory vote didn't go to the Liberal Democrats. It went to Labour. Corbyn's Labour. 1970s, neo-Marxist, stodgy, pie-in-the-sky, can't-win-anything Labour. The idea that you have to run to

"CONVINCING PEOPLE TO BUY INTO YOU AS A PERSON IS JUST AS IMPORTANT AS PRESENTING THE RIGHT IDEAS..."

the center in order to get enough votes is simply false. What you have to do is be good at politics, which means giving people something they actually want to vote for.

But this is key: Corbyn didn't do well purely because he put forth left-wing policies. He did well because he campaigned well, and because he convinced people that those left-wing policies would actually be good. He also made them actually seem possible, which is crucial. People need to be able to visualize what another kind of politics would actually look like in practice; Margaret Thatcher's "there is no alternative" has been phenomenally effective at cramping people's imaginations and making even moderate steps toward social democracy seem fantastically unattainable. Corbyn gave them confidence that something different was possible. This means getting past people's disillusionment; pursuing the nearly-impossible task, in an age of mass cynicism, of getting the disaffected to think that their vote might actually count, that going to the polls is not a waste of time.

The manifesto was crucial. It received widespread praise, and rightly so. That's because it presented both a set of broad values and a number of specific plans for how these values would translate into governance. It was overflowing with ideas and ambitions, from introducing a "right to own," making employees the buyer of first refusal when the company they work for is up for sale" to "moving towards a 20:1 gap between the highest and lowest paid." Importantly, the manifesto was "costed," meaning Labour also presented a plan for how sufficient revenue would be raised to cover its various proposals. That forestalled the right's usual criticism of the left, which is that they make big promises but have no idea how they're going to pay for them. (The Conservative manifesto, by contrast, was a fiscal disaster and didn't add up.) As I read the Labour plan, I sincerely wished that some benevolent multi-millionaire would have spent their fortune putting a physical copy of it in the hands of every man, woman, and

child in the United Kingdom. (Regrettably, there is no such thing as a benevolent multi-millionaire, and people were far more interested in watching *Britain's Got Talent* than the BBC's televised leadership election—though, to be fair, that night's *BGT* guest performers were the cast of *Bat Out of Hell: The Musical* doing a medley of Meat Loaf songs, so the ratings disparity is somewhat understandable.)

The importance of the manifesto showed that you have to be pragmatic as well as principled. It's essential not to allow centrists to be correct when they say that people on the left don't actually know how to achieve their goals; there need to be specific plans in place. But the election also showed that character is just as important as policy. People like Corbyn because he genuinely isn't like other politicians. He is unpolished, unshaven, and human. One problem that has plagued both American Democrats and the British Labour Party has been that so many of its candidates seem robotic and impossible to relate to. Corbyn, for whatever his eccentricities, is a person that people genuinely like. Convincing people to buy into you as a person is just as important as presenting the right ideas, and it's important to have an authentic and honest character.

The British election also provides increasing support for the—quite obvious already—idea that Bernie would have won. (Or at least, stood a very good chance.) It's not impossible to build national support as a left-wing candidate, if the circumstances are right, and you're a likable person, and you are straight with people and campaign well. Of course, political conditions in the two countries are very different. But it's notable that many centrist Labour figures were saying the same things about Corbyn that centrist Democrats have long said about Sanders. After this election, they're not going to be saying those things anymore.

In fact, the role of centrists is worth dwelling on briefly. For nearly two years, those who opposed Corbyn's ascent to the leadership relentlessly attempted to have him thrown out of his position. Even after he had been elected by a commanding majority, they insisted on holding another election and running a challenger against him. (Corbyn only increased his percentage of the vote.) Despite clear evidence that the membership of the Labour Party wanted Corbyn to lead it, Labour MPs issued a no-confidence vote, refused to work with him, smeared him publicly, and generally refused to acknowledge his legitimacy or attempt to work constructively with him on building the party. It's sad and infuriating to think what could have happened if such people had accepted Corbyn right away and turned against the Tories, rather than insisting on perpetuating a doomed internal struggle within the Labour.

I can't help but be infuriated by someone like, for example, J.K. Rowling. Rowling has ten million Twitter followers. Many of them are, obviously, young people, who adore her. She insists that she is pro-equality and anti-Tory, and broadly supports Labour values. Yet she spent month after month publicly trashing Jeremy Corbyn, saying that the Labour Party was dead and that he had killed it. Even when it became clear that

this was false, she didn't reverse course and encourage people to vote for him. The turnout of young people was crucial in this election, yet Rowling decided not to use her platform even to encourage her young fans to register to vote. Labour came just a few parliamentary seats from being able to form a coalition government. According to the *Independent*, because of a number of close races, Corbyn "was just 2,227 votes away from the chance to be Prime Minister." Imagine if those, like Rowling, who put so much effort into trying to get the public to fear and despise Corbyn, had lifted a finger to try to get him elected. At this moment, Labour would be preparing to implement its agenda, and the Age of Austerity would be over. The narrow Tory victory is the fault of everybody who stubbornly refused to help Corbyn, from British Labour figures like Owen Smith and Sadiq Khan who pissed on him, to American Democrats like Obama campaign manager Jim Messina who actually worked to re-elect Theresa May, and Howard Dean who championed the Liberal Democrats.

THE NAME TONY BLAIR SHOULD LIVE IN particular infamy. Blair used every ounce of whatever public influence he had left ("Even if you hate me," he pleaded) to keep Corbyn down. Writing in the *Guardian* (where else?), he mocked those who disagreed with him:

"When people like me come forward and say elect Jeremy Corbyn as leader and it will be an electoral disaster, his enthusiastic new supporters roll their eyes... Anyone listening? Nope. In fact, the opposite. It actually makes them more likely to support him.

It is like a driver coming to a roadblock on a road they've never traveled before and three grizzled veterans say: 'Don't go any further, we have been up and down this road many times and we're warning you there are falling rocks, mudslides, dangerous hairpin bends and then a sheer drop.' And the driver says: 'Screw you, stop patronizing me. I know what I'm doing.'"

As it turned out, "Screw you, stop patronizing me, I know what I'm doing" was precisely the correct thing to say to Tony Blair.

Allocating blame to the responsible parties is actually important, because in order for Labour to win next time, we need to know why it didn't manage to win this time. And it's frustrating that Labour came so close to actually unseating the Conservatives. But the predominating feeling should still be one of elation rather than bitterness. This is an incredible event in global politics, one that shows that the supposedly impossible may actually be perfectly possible after all.

But Jeremy Corbyn's massive political upset is inspiring not just because it demonstrates the viability of left-wing ideas. It's also encouraging on a human level: this is why you don't listen to people who tell you that you'll fail. It's why, in both politics and life, when Tony Blair's "grizzled truck drivers" tell you not to go down that road because there are falling rocks, the courageous among us respond "Well, I guess I'd better watch out for rocks, then." This is not just a story about the repudiation of status quo politics. It's a story about not giving in, and about doing your damnedest to prove the haters wrong. You will be ignored. You will be laughed at. You will be attacked. But sooner or later, you'll win. ❖

THE
OF T

POLITICS RAGEDIES

BY NATHAN J. ROBINSON

BEFORE SCREAMING AT A Muslim woman and stabbing two people to death on a bus in Portland, Jeremy Christian had paraded around the city draped in an American flag. He had held signs that said "Trump Makes America Great Again," attacked a black woman with a bottle of Gatorade, and shouted slurs about Christians, Muslims, and Jews. Before shooting two NYPD officers in Brooklyn, Ismaaiyl Brinsley had posted "#RIPEricGarner" on Facebook and promised to put "wings on pigs." He had also shot his ex-girlfriend in the abdomen after she dissuaded him from committing suicide. Before Omar Mateen took 49 lives at the Pulse gay nightclub in Orlando, he had been diagnosed bipolar, abused his first wife, and pledged allegiance to ISIS. He may also have had gay lovers and been friends with drag queens at Pulse itself. Before Craig Stephen Hicks killed three Muslim students in North Carolina, he had joined an online group called "Atheists for Equality" and posted quotes from Richard Dawkins on Facebook. He had also obsessed over the Michael Douglas movie *Falling Down* and complained about his neighbors playing *Risk* too loudly. Before Seung-Hui Cho committed the Virginia Tech massacre, he had disturbed his classmates by writing a play called *Richard McBeef*, featuring copious amounts of violence, swearing, and references to child molestation. And before Jared Loughner shot Gabrielle Giffords and 13 others at a town hall event in a Phoenix strip mall, he had publicly asked Giffords the inscrutable question "What is government if words have no meaning?"

I've never liked the idea that you shouldn't "politicize a tragedy." Many tragedies are inherently political; they are the direct consequences of decisions made by people in particular positions of authority. The recent horrific London tower block fire, for example, is a story about inequality. The residents of Grenfell Tower were some of the poorest residents of one of the richest boroughs in Britain. As *CityLab* documented, thanks to government austerity policies, local authorities have tried to raise revenue by redeveloping properties to accommodate greater numbers of residents, possibly compromising fire safety features in the process. Poor residents had

been crammed into a death trap, and instead of installing a fire escape or a second staircase, the tower's owners had tried to make the building less of an eyesore to wealthy Kensington residents nearby through minor cosmetic improvements, such as an exterior polyethylene cladding that may have been responsible for the near-instantaneous spread of the fire to all parts of the building.

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE Grenfell Tower can't be understood without understanding the operation of pressures toward privatization and gentrification. In recent years, the prevailing philosophy of British government (among both the Conservative and Labour parties) has been toward reductions in the role of the state, and toward letting wealth do as it pleases. Residents of social housing in rich districts like Kensington have therefore been willfully neglected by their local councils, who would much prefer to see such people pack up and leave. And people's safety and welfare has been placed in the hands of the private sector, who (shockingly enough) may not have their best interests at heart. In the case of Grenfell Tower, millions of pounds in taxpayer money had been paid to a management company that handsomely compensated its directors, while leaving the building in a state of utter neglect. Even decisions as to whether to install fire sprinklers were left up to private companies; the former Conservative housing minister had resisted implementing a mandatory sprinkler requirement, saying "We believe that it is the responsibility of the fire industry, rather than the Government, to market fire sprinkler systems effectively and to encourage their wider installation." (Theresa May's government had ignored a report on the risk of fire in high-rise buildings like Grenfell Tower.)

Residents of Grenfell Tower had known exactly what would result from this. Time after time they lodged complaints about fire safety with the management company and the local council. 90% of residents signed a petition calling for an investigation into the building's management. One woman filed 19 complaints over fire safety, only to be rebuffed every single time. The residents' warnings are downright chilling. They insisted that the Tories on the local council were ignoring them because they were poor and marginalized, and came to the depressing conclusion that they would only be listened to after the inevitable deadly inferno:

"[We] believe that only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord, the KCTMO, and bring an end to the dangerous living conditions [here]... Only an incident that results in serious loss of life of KCTMO residents will allow the external scrutiny to occur that will shine a light on the practices that characterise the malign governance of this non-functioning organisation. It is our conviction that a serious fire in a tower block or similar high density residential property is the most likely reason that those who wield power at the KCTMO will be found out and brought to justice!...We have blogged many times on the subject of fire safety at Grenfell Tower and we believe that these investigations will become part of damning evidence of the poor safety record of the KCTMO should a fire affect any other of their properties and cause the loss of life that we are predicting."

It's somewhat stunning to read through the resident activists' blog about the tower, documenting their endless attempts to get somebody from the management company or local government to pay attention to fire safety. The residents had begged for their lives; they had essentially cried out: "They are going to burn us alive here, we are all going to die and nobody is going to care until it's too late."

And they were right. It seems inexplicable that so many people could have been warned so frequently, and yet done nothing. (That is not strictly true: lawyers for the borough *did* send the bloggers a threatening notice demanding that they take down the allegations. This is not nothing.)

In fact, it *only* makes sense when we understand the tragedy in its political context. The Grenfell Tower fire was not the result of a criminal plot to burn the poor, nor was it a freak accident. It was the logical end result of a process of decision-making driven by a particular philosophy of governance and a particular set of economic laws. If there is no money to be made in housing the destitute in safe buildings, and the prevailing ethos is that profit should be allowed to determine the social good, then destitute people will be housed in unsafe buildings. If wealthy Kensington residents have no financial interest in doing anything to improve the living conditions of poor Kensington residents (in fact, driving out the poor might improve property values for everybody else), and the local government responds to the interests of its most influential citizens, then poor Kensington residents will languish. These are not conspiracy theories; they do not depend on collusion or maliciousness on the part of some cabal of elites. They are simply descriptions of how a society operating under certain rules will produce certain results. Corporations operate under a mandate to produce profit, not to safeguard human lives. Thus human lives will only be safeguarded to the extent that doing so directly coincides with the production of profit. For people with no wealth, it rarely will. Thus in the 1900s, the laissez-faire approach gave us the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. Today, it gives us Grenfell Tower and factory collapses in Bangladesh. It will be the same everywhere and always. The system of incentives put in place will create a set of predictable results. The Grenfell Tower resident bloggers knew it. But they also knew that the nature of the political system was such that nobody was going to listen to the powerless. That is, after all, what it means to be the powerless.

THE DEGREE OF POLITICS IN ANY GIVEN TRAGEDY varies, but most tragedies are political to some extent, just as nearly everything that human beings do is political to some extent. That's because politics is the process by which power and resources are distributed among people, and usually when something horrible happens, the question of who has power and resources will often affect the outcome in some way. Hurricane Katrina, for example, was a "natural" disaster, in that nature makes hurricanes. But it was also a man-made and politically-made disaster, because the question of who received help was a function of who had wealth, and who has wealth is determined by how wealth is distributed. (After the storm, Blackwater mercenaries were called in to guard the homes of wealthy Uptown residents. Needless to say, most New Orleanians did not receive comparable protection.) How many people will die in car accidents is a function of the cost-benefit decisions taken by car companies over new safety measures. Whether a sacred burial ground is flattened and turned into condos depends on whether one lives in an economic system that incentivizes the production of condos, and whether one lives in a political system that cares about sacred burial grounds. Rich people have the power to destroy the lives of their enemies, while poor people have hardly any power at all, meaning that the question of what happens in the world is fundamentally dependent on how wealth is distributed.

Yet there's a dangerous temptation one must be wary of. Because so many things are political in some respect or other, it's tempting to find politics *everywhere*, to believe that every event must offer some kind of obvious political lesson or message. Pretending that tragedies occur in a vacuum is irresponsible, and exonerates those (like austerity politicians) whose decisions directly result in the loss of human life. But it's equally irresponsible to see every tragedy through the lens

of one's pre-existing political commitments, and to use people's suffering and death to attack one's ideological opponents. There *is* a misleading and tawdry way of "politicizing" tragedies, which views every event as the confirmation of views one already holds.

In the United States, mass shootings have not just become regular lurid grist for television ratings, but also offer ongoing opportunities for commentators to discern larger political patterns from the actions of individual mentally ill people. Every time an angry nutcase opens fire in a public place (and because this is America, that happens frequently), people rapidly scramble to uncover the perpetrator's political inclinations through careful scrutiny of their social media accounts. Upon hearing the news, they keep their fingers crossed that the killer is from the other side. So, if you're a conservative, you want the shooter to be a radical Islamist or a Black Lives Matter supporter. If you're a liberal, you want them to be a Tea Party racist or Christian zealot.

I actually don't mean to sound excessively cynical or critical by saying that people "hope" a killer is from the other side. After all, we all know that when the killer is from *our* side, it's going to be used against us. I can't imagine the feeling of dread that must come over Muslims every time they hear the words "suicide bombing" on the news. After all, they know that any time some disturbed jihadist murders a bunch of children, bigots will use it as evidence against all Muslims and their families. For Muslim parents, a prominent jihadi attack means they have to live in greater fear that their children will suffer bullying and violence. In a climate where people are judged by the actions of those that share their demographic characteristics, it is natural to hope that the harm has been done by some group that doesn't easily reinforce dominant political narratives (e.g. Symbionese liberationists or Vermont separatists).

The shameful aspect, then, is less in the "hoping it's not your people" than in the extraordinary rapidity with which people conclude that a shooting is the *direct consequence* of something the other side did. After the atheist shot the Muslim students, there were instant calls for a "moment of reckoning" among atheists; the Islamophobic rhetoric of Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins had allegedly created a kind of cocksureness among atheists that provided ready justification for murder. A *New Republic* article called the killings the "outgrowth of a system" that dangerously convinced people–young white men especially—of their superior rationality.

However, when we look at the full facts about mass killers, rather than the convenient ones, everything becomes much messier. When the two NYPD officers were shot in Brooklyn, conservative commentator Heather Mac Donald wrote that the attack was the "poisonous effect" of the "lies" of the "anti-cop left." She treated the action as a direct consequence of an ideology. Yet she didn't mention that the killer had also shot his ex-girlfriend. That's because it didn't fit the narrative: if his violence was motivated by his support for the Black Lives Matter movement, why did he shoot the ex-girlfriend as well? In fact, the man was severely mentally ill and had a long criminal history. But acknowledging the mental illness would undermine the idea that the killings were political, so Mac Donald simply didn't mention it.

It's the same every time. The Portland attack was taken as proof that Trump had unleashed an army of violent racists. After Gabrielle Giffords was shot, liberals instantly began pointing a finger at… Sarah Palin, of all people, who had once released an ad "targeting" Giffords' congressional district. In fact, Jared Loughner did not despise Giffords because she was a Democrat, but because she subscribed to the false belief that words had meaning, and had not taken seriously his attempt to prove that they do not. In other words, the attack was not exactly "political" in the commonly understood sense. (Though, since everything is still political, untreated mental illness and the ubiquity of firearm access still raise serious policy questions.) But the desire to find a political narrative does not die easy; the *New York Times* recently resurrected the Palin/Loughner connection again, before being forced to issue a retraction.

Recently, a man named James Hodgkinson shot up a GOP congressio-

"THE DEGREE OF POLITICS IN ANY GIVEN TRAGEDY VARIES, BUT MOST TRAGEDIES ARE POLITICAL TO SOME EXTENT."

"THE BEST THING WE CAN DO IS TO BE CAUTIOUS, CONSISTENT, AND FAIR."

nal baseball game, wounding four people including Louisiana representative Steven Scalise. Before that, Hodgkinson had posted a bunch of anti-corporate memes and volunteered for Bernie Sanders' presidential campaign. He was also alleged to have brutally abused his foster daughters, one of whom killed herself after only a few months of living with him by lighting herself on fire.

Of course, with a congressman having been shot, it was not long before people began discerning a larger political message. Since Hodgkinson called Donald Trump a "traitor," some people blamed Democrats for pushing conspiracy theories about Trump and Russia. Since Hodgkinson was anti-Clinton, others suggested he was "radicalized by Russian propaganda." Meanwhile, conservatives blamed liberals (specifically "progressive terrorism") and liberals blamed Our Vitriolic National Political Discourse. (There were, of course, calls for A Renewed Commitment To Civility.)

The *New York Times* pondered whether Bernie Sanders himself might be at fault, in a piece by *Times* writer Yamiche Alcindor (who once asked Sanders whether it was "sexist" for him to run against Hillary Clinton and who had posted, without comment, a video of an anti-Semitic rant about Sanders' "ties to Jewish real estate owners"). Entitled "Attack Tests Movement Sanders Founded," the article said that Hodgkinson's words were "not far from Mr. Sanders' own message," and quoted a Trump-supporting political consultant suggesting that Sanders was offering "a passive justification for the kind of violence we saw" and should "accept the consequences" of his words because by calling Donald Trump "dangerous," "you are empowering the people that follow you to take whatever sort of action that they deem necessary." Alcindor said Sanders' supporters had "earned a belligerent reputation" and have "harassed reporters" in defending their "idol." One can see how these incidents are used as excuses for dismissing opposing political viewpoints. The *Times*, which once hastily re-edited an article so that it would not reflect too positively on Bernie Sanders, throws together the shooting, Sanders' critique of "corporate media," and allegations of harassment. In doing so, it provides those who already dislike Sanders with material to confirm their worldview. "This is the logical consequence of 'BernieBro' ideology," they can say. But we can do this for anything. Mass killers grab on to all kinds of semi-formed political ideologies, and if we always view such people as the logical consequence of whatever idea they choose to spout, we will end up indicting every single religion and political persuasion. Furthermore, we must be extremely selective: we ignore the case of the man who shot three people at a UPS warehouse on the same day, but the GOP baseball attack must have been the consequence of politics.

All of this is made harder by the fact that sometimes such attacks probably *are* fueled by ideologies. It would be foolish to deny that ideas have consequences, and if a charismatic leader demonizes and dehumanizes people, exhorting his followers to rid the earth of them, he certainly bears responsibility for whatever violence results. It's also, however, incredibly difficult to actually draw concrete connections, and incredibly easy to make unwarranted assumptions. We might think it obvious that Omar Mateen was motivated by radical Islam. But the Newtown and Aurora shooters did the same thing without any belief that they were serving the will of Allah. The tendency seems to be that people become violent first and craft an ideological justification later. If 99.9999% of Bernie Sanders supporters do not shoot their congressmen or commit acts of hideous public violence, but a far higher percentage of serial domestic abusers do, and our suspect is both a Bernie Sanders supporter and a serial domestic abuser, which of his characteristics should be most relevant? For any belief system, there will be a psychopath who shares its tenets, and perhaps the best approach is statistical rather than anecdotal. Rather than asking "Did a person with Belief X commit Crime Y?" in order to assess the consequences of Belief X, we should ask "Is a person with Belief X statistically more likely to commit Crime Y?" Only then can we say something interesting about Belief X, and probably not even then.

It's tough, then: beliefs cause action, but not always, and it's not clear when and how much, and which kinds of evidence prove what kinds of connection. It would be strange to say that racists who beat up a homeless immigrant while yelling about Donald Trump are in no way influenced by Donald Trump. Likewise, it would be strange to say that a Wahhabist who blows himself up at a teen pop concert was in no way influenced by Wahhabism. But when we look at the chaotic facts of people's lives, it usually becomes impossible to draw straight lines. And we're always going to see simple meanings and lessons when they aren't necessarily there. The human impulse is to tell stories, and as people reel after a devastating tragedy, it's more tempting than ever to find some obvious explanation to latch onto, anything that keeps us from having to face the difficult truth that sometimes the universe is absurd in its cruelty, and sometimes you get no answers.

The best thing we can do is to be cautious, consistent, and fair. Causal speculation is inevitable, but consistent standards have to be applied. If a mass shooting in the name of candidate A tells us something about Candidate A, then it must necessarily also do so in the case of Candidate Y. The unacceptable position is the one that says: "the tragedies that indict my political opponents are political, while the tragedies that indict my own politics are simply unfortunate accidents."

ALL TRAGEDIES ARE POLITICAL; LIFE IS POLITICAL, people are political and so are the things that happen to them. Demands to avoid "politicizing" a tragedy are frequently demands to forgo serious scrutiny of the social, economic, and ideological causes of human misery. Yet we can draw a distinction between two definitions of the term: if "politicizing" means intentionally injecting politics when it isn't there, and exploiting something horrible for ideological ends, then nobody should politicize. But if "politicize" means a serious and clear-headed search for political implications, then it is a necessity, for a true assessment of the political causes of tragedy is the only way to prevent their recurrence. ❖

STRAY NOTIONS

ARGUE ABOUT THEM WITH YOUR FRIENDS!

GOD

The correct position is not that God exists, or that God does not exist. It is that God is conceptually incoherent, i.e. a meaningless term. When people ask you to affirm or deny the existence of God, they might as well be asking you whether "xkjwerf" or "covfefe" exists. It is not a true/false proposition, because nobody can offer a satisfactory or logical definition of what God would be if He existed. This means atheism (the belief that the God proposition is false) is just as foolish as Christianity. But it also means that Christianity is very foolish indeed. And don't get us started on agnosticism...

FREE WILL

As with God: it is not that there is no such thing as free will, it is that the concept of free will is incoherent. I make decisions. Why do I feel like I am choosing if I am not? Nobody knows. As with many issues beyond human comprehension, anyone who says they do know is simply making up an explanation that satisfies them.

EQUALITY

Perhaps the problem isn't inequality. Perhaps the problem is just that some people are rich while other people are poor. This sounds like the same thing, but it isn't. Because if everyone was very rich, but some people were ultra-rich, there would be a lot of inequality (1 billionaire and everyone else a millionaire). But it would matter much less. Likewise, everyone could be equal but still miserable (say, if they were all reduced equally to starvation). To what degree does equality itself matter, versus the existence of rich people in a time of poverty?

MORAL VALUES

There are quite obviously no transcendent answers to moral questions, only individual moral inclinations. No divine authority can be invoked to settle contentious moral issues. Yet the fact that there is no source of sound moral reasoning outside the individual is often said to mean that we must respect other people's differing moralities. This is plainly false. We should respect no morality but our own, even if we have no reason to believe that it is right. We should absolutely impose our moral principles on other people.

RACE

There are two kinds of "postracialism": first, there is the stupid kind, the one preferred by conservatives. This "postracialism" insists on denying the social importance of racial categories, and insists it is race-blind even as it reproduces racial disparities. But there is another, far more sensible kind of post-racialism: the kind that recognizes race as a senseless category for dividing human beings, and that aims for a world in which race is of no importance. In rejecting the former kind of postracialism, we should be careful not to also reject the latter.

HERMENEUTICS

People who use the word hermeneutics should be forced to pay a fine.

HOUSES

All houses should be publicly owned and people should be assigned to them based on a formula that includes (1) how many bedrooms they need, (2) what city they would like to live in, and (3) whether they would like to be able to look at the ocean from their study. The state will do its best to accommodate all preferences and make sure everyone gets matched up to a nice house. Each person will pay a reasonable percentage of their income towards the maintenance and upkeep of the house.

BALCONIES WITH FLOWERS

It is absurd that some buildings lack balconies with flowers. It is perfectly possible, given present technology, to ensure that all inhabited structures have balconies with flowers. In future, all buildings will be required to have these, as a public health and wellness measure. Also, buildings over five stories tall will be banned.

BOSSES

It is an outrage that people get to vote for their Congressman and President, but do not get to vote for their Boss. All workplaces will be required to hold elections for managerial positions with each employee given a vote. Term limits will apply. Balloting will be carefully monitored by finicky busybodies.

SKELETONS

It is disconcerting to think that we are all skeletons underneath our skin. And yet: aside from the possession of an anus, this is about the only thing all human beings universally have in common. We are united by our skeletal undercarriages, yet thinking about the skeletons is unnerving. Why do we fear our humanity? Could confronting this fear breed togetherness and mutual respect? We must learn to think about other people's skeletons more.

ANIMALS

Animals have conscious experiences just like we do. They experience pain just like we do. Thus hurting them is just as bad as hurting people. Thus the meat industry is an unfathomably monstrous crime against decency. Everyone should become vegan this instant, or only eat meat that has been grown in a tube without an animal attached. The statement "meat is murder" is so obvious as to be beyond serious dispute, yet we conspire to deny it because meat, in addition to being murder, also happens to be delicious. But deliciousness cannot justify murder.

LOS ANGELES

Los Angeles should be evacuated and flattened, and we should try again.

LANDLORDS

Being a landlord is just being rewarded for already having money. Rent is just punishment for not having enough money. It is absurd that one pays more to rent than one would pay for a mortgage. Landlords should be publicly spanked.

BRUTALISM

Brutalist architecture is just as bad as everybody instinctively believes it to be. Probably worse. Recently, there have been efforts to redeem brutalism because of its "honesty." These efforts should be vigorously scoffed at. Honesty is no virtue in and of itself: some dictators are quite honest in their promises to commit murder, but this in no way mitigates their acts. Brutalism is ugly. It screams "I hate you, and the world is awful." But the world should not be awful, and architecture should emanate loveliness. Thus Boston City Hall must be demolished, and a glorious intricate Cathedral of Responsible Governance erected in its place.

THE POLICE

There is a paradox when it comes to policing. Neighborhoods with high crime want more and better police services, in order to stop the victimization of residents. But when the police show up, they have a tendency to harass and abuse residents, causing more discontent than they end up preventing. It should not be necessary to choose between bad policing and no policing. Police should be required to treat poor people with courtesy and kindness, and should be discouraged from using swear words and heavy weaponry.

THE INTERNET

The internet was clearly a mistake. Everybody knows this, yet it is seldom acknowledged. It has stupefied us and made us unhappy. It is quite clearly more enjoyable to lie on a blanket on the grass without a smartphone nearby than with one. Yet we feel anguished if we go to the park and leave our phones behind at home. It is quite clearly better to simply enjoy a concert than to film it with one's phone and watch it later. Yet we film everything. What the hell is wrong with us? Clearly, willpower is not enough. The only answer is to get rid of the internet.

THIS LONELY WORLD

It is such a lonely world for all of us. But certain people experience almost unimaginable levels of loneliness. They suffer in solitude, awaiting a single word of understanding and compassion. So often, the word never comes. 40,000 people per year take their own lives in the United States alone. Countless more endure lives of quiet desperation. There are elderly people who wait for visits that do not come, children who wait to be saved from abusive and neglectful households, dying people who wish somebody could just hold their hand and say a few things. Yet so little time is spent thinking about the lonely, let alone going and finding them. But there are so many humans! Surely if there is one thing no one need ever be, it is lonely. How have we failed so badly at something so simple?

IVAN THE TERRIBLE'S PUBLIC RELATIONS FIRM CONSIDERS HIS REBRANDING STRATEGY

"The exhibition accused the Western news media of miscasting Czar Ivan IV as 'the Terrible.'
A display of contemporaneous German etchings that showed the 16th-century czar's troops committing atrocities was
offered as proof that labeling him a murderous tyrant was simply defamation by foreigners."
– "Russian History Receives a Makeover That Starts With Ivan the Terrible," The New York Times, March 30, 2015.

Moscow, 9:03 AM, October 1576.
Main Conference Room, Grozny Public Relations Solutions

—So where are we on the new client?

—It doesn't look good.

—The problem, as I see it, is that "Ivan the Terrible" doesn't really have that relatability factor.

—It makes him sound kind of…

—Terrible.

—Yeah.

—I mean, the good news is that there's widespread brand recognition.

—We've definitely gotten his name out there.

—And he's got reach. The 1552 Kazan slaughter really brought him to the attention of a new audience; they're trembling from Smolensk to the Urals. Fear is a leverageable asset.

—So we've got the awareness, we just need to apply some reputation management.

—We shortlisted some options. Now nothing's set in stone; remember, we're just spitballin' here.

—So, as I see it, the first part's fine. Ivan. Good solid name, road-tested by three previous tsars, great public response. It'll play in Prokopyevsk. It's just the "Terrible" that consumers get hung up on.

—We drafted some alternatives.

—Lay them on me.

—Ah, let's see… we got… Ivan the Fastidious? Ivan the Louche. Ivan the Groovy.

—Eh, too uptight, too suggestive, too dated.

—The focus group also reacted positively to Ivan the Tender. Only it would be a radical shift in his value proposition…

—Hey guys, I hate to change course, but I think we should first really deal with the elephant in the room. We know there's also kind of a deeper image issue at play here than just the name.

—I know. We've got to talk Massacre of Novgorod.

—It's been getting some pushback.

—It doesn't look good. Mass slaughter's been losing cachet in a lot of sectors lately.

—Okay, so we've thought about this, and we think we may have a way out.

—Get this: we're ditching "Massacre." We're calling it a "Disruption."

—The Disruption of Novgorod.

—Think of Novogrod as like an outmoded industry.

—And Ivan as a small start-up.

—Who's throwing out the whole playbook.

—He's all about change-oriented post-medievalism.

—Solution-driven.

—Just with the solution being to have thousands of Cossacks ransacking a city and brutalizing the populace.

—I like it. Let's do a soft launch and see if we can make it stick, then roll out a full campaign if it takes. Try to downplay the carnage dimension and foreground the innovation aspect.

—You mean the new forms of impalement?

—Right, like I said, the innovation aspect.

—What about the disembowlings?

—We're using the phrase "internal restructurings."

—I want to shift gears for a moment. Let's talk social media. I think it's key to rehabilitating the Ivan brand.

—It's all about multi-platform connectivity.

—What does that mean?

—I don't know.

—I want him on every medium. Instagram his orb and scepter. Send a newsletter out with all his favorite links of the week.

—They're all conspiracy websites about bishops.

—Oh.

—We did set him up a Twitter account.

—But the results have been sub-optimal.

—He's been tweeting "Death to the Tatars" over and over.

—And sending a lot of rambling multi-part ones about treacherous boyars.

—Okay, first rule, as always: never let the client tweet! Remember when we told Catherine her password and she started tweeting out horse pics—

—That hasn't happened yet. She's later.

—Oh, sorry.

—Okay, so what about the Facebook page?

—Mixed news.

—His profile pic is fine.

—The face is contorted into a bloodthirsty demented snarl, but whatever, it'll do.

—It's the cover photo that's problematic.

—It's a painting of 30,000 slaughtered Ottomans.

—It sends the wrong message.

—Bad optics.

—Did you talk to him about it? Is he up to speed on the social media strategy?

—He's been resistant.

—He told us to go ебать ourselves.

—Hmm… Okay, maybe the whole Tsardom just needs a makeover; a fresh face to the company. Can anyone else interface with the public? What about the son?

—Ivan Ivanovich?

—Uh…

—Bad news on that front. He got disrupted.

—In the head.

—With a scepter.

—Let's put that one on the back burner, then. What else is on the table?

—So, the war-induced total economic ruin is hurting us in certain demographics.

—All demographics, really.

—Hang on. Let's take a step back here. We all know where our numbers are weak. Let's try and play to Ivan's strengths instead.

—Uh… he's a poet. He plays chess. Creditably good as a theologian according to contemporary historical sources.

—Hang on, I'm going to make two columns on the whiteboard. Okay, we've got assets and liabilities. So, poetry, chess. Great, great. These are selling points.

—I guess we should put killing his second son on the other side.

—And the massacre…

—Disruption!

—Right.

—Plus the economic ruin.

—Got it.

—He's good at besieging, though. And gibbeting. Put those in the assets.

—Pillaging! I nearly forgot pillaging.

—Guys, I think we're going in the wrong direction here.

—Flogging the clergy. Eye-gouging. Throwing people off that bridge.

—Kicked a pregnant woman. Mutilated an architect.

—Hold up, everyone. We're going off the rails; time out. This is leading us in circles. We need to start thinking outside the box. I want bold ideas.

—Hmm…

—Well, how about… Let me just throw something out there. Terror might not necessarily be a minus. Why don't we think of it more like "creative destruction"?

—I like it. And it's his core competency.

—Plus it's scalable.

—And gives a strong corporate identity.

—Okay, let's run with it.

—"Ivan the Terrible."

—"Just as terrible as you expected."

—"Only more so."

—Perfect. Let's break.

—Back in 10?

—Sure. Then I want us to talk about product tie-ins. We've got this idea for an app that showcases impalement locations in real time….

—It's like Uber.

—But for violence.

—I love it.

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In the pages within, we shall spend some considerable time discussing technology and the people who churn it out. Our general position has been, roughly, that it sucks and that they suck. Or, more specifically, that their vision of the world, if enacted, will create something bleak and hideous in which humans are slowly sapped of their humanity.

But is this verdict fair? Are we not being a little harsh?

There are those who would say that we are indeed being too harsh. "Rationalist" blogger Scott Alexander says that Silicon Valley has been mistreated in the press, and swears that not everything produced out there is a pointless waste of time. Besides, Alexander says, Silicon Valley is hardly unique in marketing bullshit products to people. After all, before the Internet took off, Billy Mays was pitching the EZ Krunch Bowl on QVC, and Ron Popeil was telling people to buy the Dial-O-Matic and the Ronco Pocket Fisherman. Economist Noah Smith has a similar take: he says that the "right question" is "What could Silicon Valley be doing to make the world better that it's not currently doing?" and that the answer is "Probably not a lot." Despite "a few excesses here and there," these people are just "doing the best they can, trying to both make a buck and make the world a better place."

We must confess that we find Smith's rhetorical question somewhat staggering. "What could they do to make the world a better place?" Well, go and drown themselves in the sea, for starters. Most of the answers that immediately come to mind are along the lines of "stop" or "just stop it now." It's more a question of not doing than doing. Quit starting up and start stopping.

But this is a frivolous answer. It does not attack the question at its nub. The real task is to explain, in a serious way, *what is so bad about Silicon Valley that justifies hating it with any furor?* People like technology, technology is cool, leave the nerds alone.

In considering why the nerds should not be left alone, perhaps it would be best to lump the criticisms we shall make into four broad categories: Inequality, Bullshit, Arrogance, and Waste. Why pick on Silicon Valley? Because they are concentrating both wealth and power in the hands of a tiny group of oligarchs. They are wasting the resources of the earth on nonsense. They are pretending to be changing the world while simply lining their pockets. They arrogantly presume to be "making the world a better place" while actually making it horrible. And they are so bloody pleased with themselves.

But *what about the good they do?* What about the apps that give microloans to Ghanaian sorghum farmers, the artificial hearts that can also play Fruit Ninja? Most of it is crap and lies. And the rest of it destroys as many things as it assists. Soon, everything will be privatized, we'll all be unhappy, and it will be largely their fault.

Still, we agree with Mr. Alexander in one respect: Silicon Valley is not unique. It is a particularly damaging and repellent part of contemporary capitalism, but we should never forget that it is contemporary capitalism itself that is the problem, not Mark Zuckerberg and Peter Thiel specifically, odious as they may be. It is not "technology" that we object to, but the steady plunging of humanity into a feudalistic abyss.